

Taking the Work to Rebuild Our Democracy Seriously: Developing a Strategy and Getting Organized

It is time for us to get realistic and recognize the limits of the Obama administration's ability to advance democracy. The facts are now there for us to see: Organizing for America has been made into an organization to mobilize support for administration policies, a Google expert in Internet communication has been appointed to lead the effort of involve citizens, the administration's overall policies have taken a technocratic approach to solving problems with no significant role for citizens, and the White House Office for Civic Engagement has, for all purposes, disappeared. While the efforts of the Administration, including the administration's stimulus policies, will certainly produce significant and positive change, they will not all add up, by any stretch of our imaginations, to the citizen-centered democracy that we are looking for. It has been unrealistic for us to have expected more. If we are truthful with ourselves, we can recognize that many, if not most, of the democratic reforms we propose are still not mainstream enough to have been highlighted in the campaign or adopted as policy by the administration. The most we could have hoped for was an administration that would use its bully pulpit to put some ideas for rebuilding democracy on the table for discussion in the nation. But, as it turns out, neither Obama nor his team have yet to demonstrate that they have the understanding needed to put a democratic content into the "new politics" that they were, at least in part, elected to implement.

These limits of Obama and his team do not, in any way, detract from the great contribution that they have made to democracy. Both the campaign and the inauguration called clearly and inspiringly for a new and engaged citizenship. The practice of the campaign and the spirit of "Yes We Can" did more to shake our cynicism and open the door to democratic change than anything in recent memory. It is not the inability of the administration to move further that we should be focusing on; we need to acknowledge these limits and focus, instead, on the remarkable opportunity that they have given the nation to take up the work to build a new politics. We need to take Obama at his word when he says that real democratic change needs to come from the bottom up and seize this opportunity to do the work to transform our politics. The ball is now in our court. The democratic forces in our nation have a unique opportunity to take the next steps in rebuilding democracy. To do that means we have to take seriously the possibility of fundamentally transforming our politics and figure out what we need to do to move this work forward.

Thoughts on Our Tasks

So what do we need to do? We know that there are many organizations and individuals across the country working to reform politics and strengthen democracy. We also know that our weakness is that all these strands of democratic reform --from the neighborhood organizations

in Seattle to the local school boards in Chicago, from America Speaks to the IAF, from progressive mayors strengthening neighborhoods to federal programs supporting community-based work-- remain largely unconnected and unaware of each other. The first step is for each of us to begin looking beyond our individual organizations and projects and find ways to connect with each other.

We might find that we already agree on the overall goal of any joint effort that we might organize. We share an understanding of the need to help citizens find and create opportunities to reengage and demonstrate the power and the value of their full engagement in politics. We need to show that a democratic politics that places citizens at the center of work is both essential to solving our nation's problems and central to rebuilding the kind of politics and society we value. We also share an understanding of the need to help build the conviction in all of us as citizens that we can and need to retake our politics and restore our democracy.

But the reality is that despite agreement on these general goals, we don't really have a consensus on what democracy would look like in the modern world. Citizens know that they need and want a new politics but there is neither a widespread understanding of what this means in any kind of detail, nor any clear idea of how we might get there. The absence of this broad consensus on the goals and process for rebuilding democracy is ultimately the reason that the Obama team is not prepared to take us any further. That means that we all need a period of time to engage citizens across the nation in as many ways as possible in the work to fill in the missing details and create the models for a new democratic politics. We have great examples and models for this work already, but we have not developed effective ways either to share or to develop these practices so that they are broad and strong enough to provide the basis for the broad consensus we need for our new democratic politics.

Expanding our democratic practices and building consensus will take a departure from business as usual. We will need to coordinate our work across organizations and locations so that we can carry out broad experiments; we will need to be more inclusive than we have ever been so that we can bring all of our citizens into this work; we will need to create an effective means for sharing ideas and learning from each other; we will need to find ways to deliberate together across the nation to build the broad consensus on the shape of our politics that we need. All this together means, in essence, that we will need to create a democratic politics that exists and thrives alongside our existing political system. And we need to build these democratic spaces until they have the scope and the strength we need to retake our politics. And that means that we will have to get ourselves organized. This is the work that might, if we were further along, have been taken up by Organizing for America, but must now be our task. Figuring out how to create the organization and the democratic process that we can use to work together to accomplish all this and seize this opportunity is that task we now face.

Getting Started

Democracy can only come from a democratic process, so we need to begin this effort to get our selves organized by starting a broad national discussion on our next steps. Both the opportunity and the disappointments of the Obama campaign and administration have set the stage for this discussion. We could focus this discussion by posing the key questions we face and asking a broad range of individuals and organizations to consider and respond to these questions –questions like:

- Where are we at in the work to build democracy? How have recent political developments affected the work to build democracy?
- How can we take advantage of the opportunity presented by the recent political developments and the widespread desire for building a new politics to advance the work to build democracy?
- What would a democracy that meets our ideals look like in the modern world?
- What do we need to do to build the forces for democracy and get to the point where we can fundamentally transform our politics?
- Do we need better organization and coordination to move this work forward? What would this organization and coordination look like?

To promote and help facilitate this discussion, we will need to form some kind of a broadly representative group. This should not be too difficult to organize; we have the resources we need if we just focus and share this responsibility. Needless to say, it will be important for us to clearly put our democratic principles to work to ensure that this group does not use its central role to steer the discussion in any particular direction.

A broad national conversation on our next steps would directly address our key weakness, the lack of connection and awareness among all the individuals and organizations interested in rebuilding democracy. But to do this, we will need to make this discussion as inclusive as possible, reaching out in a non-partisan way to include as many people and organizations interested in rebuilding democracy as possible. As we know, the list of those we need to include will be quite long. We need to reach the elected officials struggling to find ways to build democracy, the environmental justice groups working on building community capacity, the campus-community partnerships, neighborhood association leaders, academics, federal agency staff, community organizations, foundations and not-for-profits, student and youth organizations, natural resource collaborations –the list goes on and on. Just the act of engaging

this broad range of organizations and individuals in this discussion would do a lot to build awareness and move the work to rebuild democracy forward.

Organizing a broad and inclusive national conversation on the next steps for building democracy will require us to do two things. First, to get the broad scope of people we need to participate, we will need to convince them that they really do have the power to fundamentally change our politics and create the democracy they want. The recent campaign did a lot to overcome the cynicism that has prevented many people from participating in politics, but getting people to recognize that they can rebuild democracy even without the support of our current political leaders and parties will not be easy. We have to convince citizens and community and organizational leaders that they, and not our current politicians, hold the key to restoring democracy and that all of us working together can actually make this happen. Unless people understand this possibility, and even responsibility, they will never commit the time and energy needed to make this happen. The second, and related, task that we have to engage people in a national conversation and in the work to rebuild democracy is to convince them that taking some time from their current work to focus on the work of rebuilding democracy is actually the best way to make progress on the issues that they care about and are committed to addressing. Most of the large number of people engaged in the work to strengthen our communities and address the challenges we face as a nation are working, and working overtime, to meet our most immediate and pressing needs --health disparities, unemployment, crime, and climate change to name just a few. People will take time from the work to meet these pressing community and national challenges to work on rebuilding democracy only if they are convinced that rebuilding our politics is the real key to progress in meeting all of our national challenges. Most people engaged in the work to address national and community concerns understand that their work would be much more effective if our political system worked to engage and empower citizens, but the combination of not believing that they have the power to change things and not seeing a clear path forward to transform our politics has kept them from tackling the problem that lies at the heart of our ability to address all of our concerns. Finding ways to effectively address these doubts about the work to rebuild democracy will be at the heart of our work to build the inclusive conversation we need.

Turning to more practical concerns, we could set a period of time for this discussion, maybe a year, and use a range of face-to-face local meetings, televised meetings on local media, and Internet forums to create a rich and open discussion on the next steps for rebuilding democracy. This nation-wide deliberation on democracy could culminate in some kind of a broad national meeting to provide the opportunity to pool the ideas developed in the national deliberation and reach agreement on a plan for rebuilding our democracy.

The process of organizing and holding this national conversation would, itself, dramatically advance the work for democracy. It would make us all aware of the broad range of organizations and individuals interested in democracy, begin to develop the connections we need to move the work forward, and demonstrate, through the process we use, how democracy can work to help us find the common ground we need to work together to shape our world. Perhaps most importantly, it would make us all realize that we actually do have the potential to create the democracy that we need and want and convince us that getting our politics right is the key to creating the world that we need.

What a Plan for Rebuilding Democracy Might Look Like

Because the discussion of developing a plan or strategy that we can all use to rebuild democracy may seem too abstract, it may be useful to look at some concrete ideas for the first steps we might take in the work of rebuilding our politics. These ideas are offered here only as illustrations to help advance this discussion. There would no doubt be other and better ideas developed over the course of the national conversation proposed above.

The example of a plan described below has four parts. Implementing it would require broad coordinated work across all the organizations working to rebuild democracy. It would call on us to consciously take on the tasks of both creating democracies in our local communities and also demonstrating the value of democracy in key areas of our national life. It is an ambitious plan that would engage citizens and their organizations to move forward now to create the democratic spaces and practices that would set the stage for the broad transformation of our politics.

Maybe the plan discussed below is too ambitious and unrealistic. While we will all have our ideas about what we can do, we won't really be able to decide on the limits of our abilities and make realistic plans until we join in a national conversation to explore this question. If our real problem is that we have not been ambitious enough, then maybe we will decide that something like this plan is what we will need. For now, these ideas are designed primarily to make a contribution to our discussion.

Part One: Rebuilding our Neighborhood Democracy

Democracy, ultimately, depends on action from the bottom up –citizens holding the power, and exercising it responsibly, to shape their lives and their communities. Neighborhoods, the places where citizens learn civic skills through the face-to-face meetings and joint public work, are the foundation for a strong democracy. Strong civic capacity at the neighborhood level is also the foundation for the promise and power that democracy has to mobilize citizens to meet national challenges. But we have, to a very large degree, lost this most important level of our democracy. This loss was not an accident. It was the result of a deliberate and sustained effort

in the name of scientific management to strip power from the neighborhood level and concentrate it in centralized city, state, and federal governments. So, a concentrated national effort to rebuild neighborhood democracy and the local politics to support the re-empowerment of our neighborhoods is the first element of this four part national plan for our next steps. And, while this loss of power and responsibility harms all of our communities, there is a growing recognition that rebuilding democracy is especially important to poor and minority communities. The work we do to empower all communities, in addition to advancing our democratic work, will contribute immediately and directly to work to address social justice issues.

This task of rebuilding our local democracy is, remarkably, one that we have the ability to take up despite the fact that our current national politics will ignore or oppose this effort. Some of our cities have already made significant progress in the work to rebuild neighborhood civic capacity. Seattle, for example, has developed a great model including a branch of city government established to help build neighborhood capacity, and Chicago has begun this effort by returning power to control schools to neighborhood boards. We can learn from these and other efforts, as well as the major effort underway in the UK to return power to neighborhoods.

We could start this national effort to rebuild neighborhood democracy with a call for broad groups of citizens in communities across the nation to come together to talk about the democracy they would like to see in their community and to develop a plan for rebuilding their local democracy. It is easy to see how this task of rebuilding local democracy would get the enthusiastic support of a broad coalition of neighborhood leaders, students and schools, environmental justice groups, foundations, not-for-profit service providers, civic associations, and business groups, all working together to rebuild the neighborhood institutions and civic skills needed for responsible local democracy. National organizations like AmeriCorps, the American Democracy Project, Everyday Democracy, National Civic League, the Kettering and Annie E. Casey foundations could work together to provide support to this effort and help facilitate the communication among communities that will be needed to share ideas.

The work to rebuild neighborhood democracy will also, over time, transform local politics. Central city governments will shift, as they have started to do in Seattle, from providing services for neighborhoods to providing the support that neighborhoods need to work together to solve problems. We can, through this initiative, retake our democracy city by city, building the democratic foundation we will need to transform our national politics.

Part Two: Demonstrating the value and possibility of citizen-centered policy development

As important as it will be, rebuilding local democracy will not be enough to create the full picture of the democracy we are trying to create. We also need to demonstrate the value and

the practicality of engaging citizens in the important task of developing and deciding on the national policies that will shape our nation. The idea of citizens playing the central role in policy development seems ridiculous to most of the players in our current political system. They believe that citizen input in policy development is not practical in a large and modern society: the issues are too complex and our societies too divided. Opening up broader citizen involvement would result, in the common view, in either chaos or bad policy, or both. So we rely on experts and professional politicians to set our agendas and our policies. Citizens look unsuccessfully for a chance to participate in this work and are frustrated by the gridlock and by the inadequate policies produced by the current system.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration is continuing the reliance on experts for policy development. The administration's requests for online input on policy have not changed this reliance on experts. Instead of helping to develop policies, citizens are usually asked to react to developed policies. And the fact that only the administration is positioned to see and analyze the input means that citizens are not fully participating in the process of policy development.

This reliance on experts continues despite the fact that we have demonstrated that we know how to engage citizens in the deliberative work of policy development. The value and success of this kind of citizen engagement has been demonstrated many times both in the US and abroad, mostly on the regional or metropolitan scale. Now it is time for us to demonstrate, as the second part of the proposed plan, on a broader national scale both the value and the possibility of citizen involvement in policy development. To do this, we will need to pick a key issue facing the nation, with health care policy as the most obvious candidate, and pool our resources to organize and conduct a careful national deliberation on this issue.

A national deliberation on health care could take up to two years to complete. In the broadest outline, this process would include pulling together a panel of citizens and experts to develop a fair presentation of all the options, preparation of the educational materials needed to describe these options, training of discussion leaders, and the organization of small face-to-face deliberations in every venue possible across the nation. To consolidate local insights and decision, the local discussions would be followed by sharing of ideas among communities and then broader regional and state meetings to consolidate ideas, culminating in some kind of national conference designed to develop a broad consensus for our national health care policy. Organizing and facilitating this kind of national policy deliberation will be a major undertaking. But the resources are available for this if we can engage all those deeply interested in the resolution of our health care policy, including businesses, health care practitioners, foundations, churches, schools, citizen organizations.

Organizing this national deliberation would provide invaluable education for citizens, provide timely and important input into the current political process, and fill in a very large detail of the

understanding of democracy that we are building as the basis for transforming our politics. It is in the work to engage citizens in policy development, as well as in the work around policy implementation, discussed next in third part of this plan, that we would clarify and develop a new understanding of the role of science and experts in a democracy, shifting their current privileged position in our technocratic society to one of informing and supporting citizens as they work to develop and implement policies. The democracy we want to build will need as much science and expertise as possible, but the scientists and experts who produce this knowledge will support the deliberation and work of citizens, not substitute for them.

Part Three: Demonstrating the value of citizen-centered work to address our challenges

In addition to the work to rebuild our local democracy and to demonstrate the value of citizen participation in policy development, a full picture of democracy would not be complete without clarifying the crucial importance of fully engaging citizens in the work to address the challenges we face. We need to demonstrate the inadequacy of current attempts to meet our challenges through centralized government action and technological solutions alone and show in practice both the value and the effectiveness of engaging citizens at the center of our public work.

Just as it does not reject a role for scientists and experts, the model for citizen engagement that we need to develop for our new democratic politics does not reject a role for our governments; it transforms this role from one that is burdened with the unrealistic task of trying to solve problems without citizen engagement to one in which governments partner with citizens, providing the support they need to solve problems. In this approach, neither technology nor government expertise is ignored; they play the essential role of informing and supporting citizen action.

As part three of our strategy, let's demonstrate the new model for citizen engagement by focusing our efforts to mobilize citizens to address one of our key national challenges, global warming. Global warming would be a good choice for the focus of this work because it is clearly the kind of complex challenge that can only be addressed by a broad movement of engaged citizens. It is also a concern that already has engaged the attention and commitment of many communities and organizations, so we will be able to build on this existing energy and engagement to show the power of organized citizen action. In addition to the organizations already focused on climate change, a broad citizen-centered effort to address climate change will also be able to engage many of the vast array of organizations that engage and work with our citizens and communities—our churches, neighborhood associations, foundations, non-profits, colleges and universities, student organizations, and civic groups.

Focusing on global warming in our strategy has an additional very important advantage to the work of rebuilding democracy. The new sustainable community and green movements

developing in our nation as an alternative to our current consumerism and technocracy recognize the link between democracy and sustainability. By focusing our work to build democracy on the effort to address climate change, we can deepen democracy's connection to these movements and strengthen the development of a combined movement for eco-democracy.

To demonstrate the full potential of this kind of broad citizen action, we will need to develop the infrastructure needed to support this community-based work. Communities will need technical support and information to inform their efforts to find creative ways to address climate change; they will need the opportunity to share ideas and learn from advances as they are discovered, and; they will need help measuring results and identifying benchmarks as they are developed in the course of the work. Providing this kind of support for citizen action will be central tasks for governments in the democratic model we are creating. But until we can transform our politics, we will need to fill this need for support through the combined efforts of our climate change organizations and our democratic forces. Our colleges and universities can work to provide the training and technical support to communities; our organizations and foundations can work together to facilitate communication among communities and to help communities develop measures and benchmarks. If we work with those governments and agencies already supporting the work to address global warming and divide up work to support a broad citizen movement, we have a great opportunity to both demonstrate the potential of engaged citizens and to learn more about the support that citizens will need to be effective in a new democratic politics.

Many communities and organizations across the nation have already demonstrated the effectiveness of citizen action around climate change. The nation is ready to take on this challenge and demonstrate the effectiveness and the power that citizens have when they are engaged. We have demonstrated the power of engaged citizens many times in the history of our democracy. Let's demonstrate again, as the foundation for the democratic politics we are creating, the potential that citizen initiatives from the bottom up have to change the world.

Part Four: Working from within to reform our governments and remake them as civic enablers

Our current governments are not organized to promote democracy. They have become, from the local to the federal level, instruments for a technocratic approach to politics. Instead of facilitating citizen involvement, our governments, for the most part, work for and in place of citizens. For generations, our universities and colleges have reinforced this understanding of government by preparing students for careers in government with a philosophy of scientific management that validates expert authority over democracy. Our governments have become obstacles to, not promoters of, democracy.

The result of this centralization of power in our governments has been a backlash against government in general. Because governments play an essential role in a democracy, this backlash poses a real challenge to our work to rebuild our democracy. In a democracy, government and democratic politics are the means citizens use to reach consensus, make decisions, and organize public work. This democratic understanding of the role of government found a very helpful expression in the Obama campaign as “Government is us”. Clearly part of our effort to rebuild our democracy must include a renewal of the democratic understanding of government and a reform of our existing governments so that they promote rather than replace the work of citizens. Getting this work underway to reshape our governments for the role they must play in our democracy is the fourth part of this proposed strategy for rebuilding our politics.

This work to reshape our governments fits perfectly with the other three aspects of this strategy. The work to rebuild democracy at the neighborhood level can not develop far without running into the reality of current local politics. So rebuilding our neighborhood level democracy and reshaping local governments to support and empower our neighborhoods will have to go hand in hand. Similarly, we by working with willing governments and government agencies in our work to organize a national deliberation on health care policy, we can use that effort can demonstrate the role that governments can play in the support of citizen deliberations. Many parts of our governments will also be willing to support the citizen initiatives to meet the challenge of global warming and we can also use this work to help us fill out the model for the democratic government that we need.

But we can do more to reclaim and reshape our governments and we will need to pull together a coalition of groups and organizations to work together to do this. This coalition can work to publicize, perhaps including a national award for democratic governance, the existing breakthroughs in democratic reform such as Seattle’s reorganization of city government to support neighborhood empowerment, Oregon’s effort to support collaboration to solve community problems, or the work of federal agencies to promote and support community-based work. The coalition could also help to organize and support a national organization of government employees and elected officials interested in pushing for democratic reform from within their governments, providing support and visibility to these efforts. The coalition could also work to develop and provide training for the governments and government agencies that are reforming to promote democracy, including the local governments reorganizing to support neighborhood democracy.

It will be especially important to include colleges and universities in this coalition for democratic government reform. They can work together to develop and promote a new approach for preparing students for careers in government that will provide them with the skills

they will need to join and lead the effort to reform our governments. This work will engage the energy and enthusiasm of our students for a new politics and help them create the new government we will need for democracy. All this work will help us to demonstrate the new role that government will play in our democracy, filling in one of the key pieces in our effort to shape a new politics and prepare the way for the transformation of our politics.

What we can accomplish

The four part plan described above serves primarily as an example to help get the conversation on next steps underway. But, just imagine what we could accomplish if we got ourselves organized and worked together to carry out this or a similar strategy. Over the course of the, hopefully, eight years of the Obama administration we could engage millions in the work to rebuild our democracy. We could make major progress in rebuilding our neighborhood level democracy and reorienting our town and city governments towards democracy. We could also clearly demonstrate both the value and practicality of involving citizens in the development of policy and the work to address our concerns. We could also make significant progress in developing models for the new kind of governments that we will need for our democratic politics. All this would add up to real progress in the work to fill in the missing details of the new politics that we all are looking for. Our work would move democratic ideas and practices into the mainstream making a democratic transformation of our politics achievable.

Carrying out a strategy like this might be more possible than we realize. All of the work described in the four part strategy described above is already underway. If we can “just” get all of us engaged in this work see our connections to each other, to see how the restoration of our democracy is the foundation we need for all of our work, and understand that together we have the potential to create the new democratic politics that we need, we are truly poised to mount the first real challenge to the undemocratic politics that has dominated our nation for the past 100 years. Democratic ideals run very deep in our culture. All of us who have had the opportunity in the varied work we do to help citizens get engaged in the work of democracy have seen, firsthand, the proof of this. If we take up this challenge, chances are we will all be surprised by the enthusiasm and energy that the work to rebuild our democracy will create.