



DEMOCRACY AND THE NEW FEDERALISM:

Report from a National Workshop

June 22-23, 2000
New York City

Dēmos A Network for Ideas & Action

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FORWARD

On June 22 and 23, 2000, *Dēmos* convened a national workshop in New York City on “Democracy and the New Federalism”. The workshop was comprised of a diverse group of elected officials, community organizers, researchers, and policy analysts. The goals of the workshop were:

- ◆ To understand how American federalism and state-level democratic institutions are affected by globalization, the information and technology revolutions, and demographic shifts—and how these trends should be taken into account in efforts to assess and strengthen democracy in the 50 U.S. states.
- ◆ To learn from previous efforts to assess state-level democracy in order to make future assessments useful to community-based organizations and policymakers.
- ◆ To debate a set of principles of democracy that can serve as benchmarks for assessing democracy and guiding policymaking.
- ◆ To help shape a long-range policy and action agenda for strengthening democracy in the states.

In this report, we summarize and reflect on the insights that emerged during the workshop. We hope it will be useful to a wide range of people engaged in efforts to strengthen American democracy.

The *Dēmos* Democracy Program

The June 22-23 workshop was part of a multi-year project that *Dēmos* initiated in 1999 aimed at strengthening U.S. democratic institutions at the state level and creating a better informed national debate over devolution and federalism.

This project is driven by a profound concern over the health of American democracy. In 1996, only a minority of eligible voters cast ballots in an election year that set new records for special interest campaign donations. This trend continued in the 1998 mid-term election, when turnout was 36 percent, with fully 115 million eligible voters – poorer Americans foremost among them – not participating. In another indicator of America’s impoverished democracy, public distrust of government remains at levels unthinkable a half century ago.

Estrangement from political life is particularly acute in low-income communities and among people of color, reflecting the view that our public institutions have yet to fully address historic economic and civic inequities. Meanwhile, a growing number of people in the United States, including millions of recent immigrants and many convicted felons, do not have voting rights.

The crisis of U.S. democracy is vividly apparent at the state level. Even as state governments have been granted

new responsibilities as a result of devolution, democratic institutions and processes in many states are extremely weak. Both enduring structural barriers and informal obstacles to equal participation and representation skew policy outcomes, along with resource allocations. Many states lack the accountability and capacity that we now take for granted at the federal level. A third of states do not have professional staff in their legislatures. Rules governing the ethics of lobbying and special interest influence are notoriously lax in most states. And many states do not have independent oversight agencies akin to the federal General Accounting Office.

While most *de jure* exclusionary measures have been abolished, deep *de facto* civic inequities persist. At the same time, public and media attention to state policy-making processes remain limited. A majority of Americans cannot name their state representatives, substantive media coverage of state politics is sparse, and many states lack effective independent watchdog groups to monitor the activities of state governments.

Over the past year, *Dēmos* staff has had extensive conversations with state-level policymakers and advocates in six key states: Alabama, California, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, and Wisconsin. Again and again, we have heard similar comments: On the one hand, that there are exciting new opportunities for political, economic, and social reform at the state level; and, on the other hand, that state democratic institutions and processes are highly uneven and often unfair or capricious. Most

troubling is the way in which state governmental institutions often help maintain historic power disparities, with low-income communities and people of color those most likely to be marginalized from key decision-making processes.

These disparities in political power are especially worrisome in an era in which the states have assumed ever greater control over social policy programs that disproportionately affect low-income communities.

Dēmos is now beginning a long-term effort to help strengthen American democracy in the 21st century, with a focus on state-level democratic institutions and processes. Goals of the project in 2000-2002 include:

Research

Dēmos is compiling and developing new research data that illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of democracy at the state level.

One of the most troubling aspects of the devolution revolution is that federal responsibilities are being devolved to state governments of wildly varying capacity. Some state governments are professional, transparent, and accountable. Others have changed little over the decades, and have embedded institutional arrangements that perpetuate historic power imbalances, particularly marginalizing low-income communities and people of color. Currently, only limited data exists that documents the gross disparities in the health of state-level democracy. There is also limited information that compares best practices for strengthening state-level democracy across different states.

Dēmos seeks to address this information deficit by creating a 50-state

database on the health of democracy in the states, as well as examining democratic institutions and process in-depth in six to eight states. We are partnering in this effort with DemocracyWorks, a reform group founded and headed by former Connecticut Secretary of State Miles Rapoport.

Another dimension of our research on the health of state-level democracy is an examination of welfare reform in several states. Differences in the capacity, professionalism, and accountability of state-level governmental institutions help account for major differences in welfare policies and programs across the country. But researchers have yet to systematically assess the relationship between democracy—or the lack thereof—and welfare reform. *Dēmos*' welfare research is aimed at insuring that the capacity and accountability of state-level democratic institutions is taken into account when welfare reauthorization comes before Congress next year.

New Linkages

Dēmos seeks to improve linkages among state-based democracy reformers—including policymakers, advocates, and scholars—and add new resources to state reform efforts.

Dēmos is in the process of creating a State Democracy Building Network (SDBN). The SDBN's purpose is to create a more robust national infrastructure for developing, refining, and enacting reform measures that strengthen state-level democracy in different areas. This initiative responds to a problem identified by many reformers in the field: that there are inadequate linkages among democracy

advocates, both within and across the states; and also, that there is a scarcity of financial, organizational, and analytical resources to support democracy reform work at the state level. At our June 22-23 workshop, participants from ten states—including elected officials, representatives from community-based organizations and advocacy groups, and several scholars—agreed to contribute to the work of creating a State Democracy Building Network (SDBN). In addition, *Dēmos* has begun laying the groundwork for the SDBN by establishing contacts with advocates and policymakers in our six target states.

Best Practices

Dēmos seeks to identify and promote a set of best practices for strengthening state-level democracy and enhancing the democratic inclusion of low-income people and communities of color.

Dēmos is beginning an effort to identify and examine democratic best practices of two kinds. First, we are looking at best practices with state-wide application. These include practices for strengthening state legislatures, increasing transparency in executive branch agencies, increasing voter registration and turnout, and enhancing civic education in the schools. A second set of best practices are community-based efforts to mobilize democratic participation and representation in low-income communities. *Dēmos* will promote best practices through the State Democracy Building Network, through our published work, and through our contacts with policymakers in state government. In time, we hope that the SDBN website will include

descriptions of a full range of best practices, empirical research that demonstrates their efficacy, model legislation to facilitate replication in other states, and extensive links to resources for those who seek more information or wish to locate new allies to help them advance a best practice in their community or state.

Democracy and the Challenges of the 21st Century

As a foundation for its work to strengthen democracy in the states, *Dēmos* seeks a better understanding of how major 21st century forces are changing life in America. Three main trends stand out:

Globalization. With global economic actors such as transnational corporations and international trading organizations more powerful than ever, U.S. democratic institutions have lost some of their power to insure the living standards of all Americans. At the same time, globalization has brought new opportunities to strengthen democracy in the United States as local practitioners and national groups become participants in an emerging “global civil society.” *Dēmos* has already begun an in-depth look at how globalization is affecting American democracy with a study by Columbia University Associate Professor Mark Gordon entitled *The Impact of Globalization on American Federalism*.

The information and technology revolutions. Among the implications of this change for democracy are growing tensions between the ideals of direct and deliberative democracy. In addition, citi-

zens now have far more access to information about government and new forms of political organizing are possible. But technological change also has the potential to detach citizens even further from politics and civic life.

Demographic changes. Changes in the age and ethnicity of Americans are literally recasting the face of our society. Baby Boomers are aging and the non-white population, now at 25 percent, will become the majority within 60 years. These trends, and the responses to them, will dramatically change our cultural and political landscape.

Major 21st century trends have profound ramifications for the current debate over federalism, devolution, and the challenge of reforming state-level democratic institutions. These trends, it should be noted, will have their impact at a time when today's young people—the most civically disengaged generation in U.S. history—are taking on the stewardship of the American democratic experiment.

The report that follows is a record of the extraordinarily rich discussion that occurred at the June 22-23 workshop. The report is organized according to key themes, and is not intended to be a

sequential record of the discussions or a set of minutes from the workshop.

This workshop was *Dēmos*' first public event. It provided a wonderful opportunity to share values, beliefs, and preliminary thinking among a diverse and committed group of people. It also afforded a framework to plan next steps and develop an action agenda that will be relevant and useful to community activists, policymakers, and researchers working on issues of democracy reform. *Dēmos* is committed to building a vibrant, dynamic network that seeks and values many different ideas. We welcome thoughts and suggestions about this report or about *Dēmos* in general. Please feel free to get in touch with me or other *Dēmos* staff by mail, fax, telephone, or email.

We are extremely grateful to the participants who joined us at the workshop. We are also grateful to the funders who support the work of *Dēmos* and who made this workshop possible: the Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

Stephen B. Heintz
President
Dēmos

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WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Hon. Spencer Coggs
State Representative
Madison, WI

Dayna L. Cunningham
Associate Director
Working Communities
Rockefeller Foundation
New York, NY

Janice Fine
Organizing Director
Northeast Action
Ph.D candidate, MIT
Boston, MA

Cynthia Gibson
Program Officer
The Carnegie Corporation
New York, NY

Mark C. Gordon
Associate Professor
Columbia University School of
International and Public Affairs
New York, NY

Jessica Gordon Nembhard.
Director of Research
Preamble Center
Washington, DC

Patrice Keegan
Director, Civic Health Initiative
Codman Square Health Center
Dorchester, MA

Michael Lipsky
Senior Program Officer
The Ford Foundation
New York, NY

Beatriz Lopez-Flores
Vice President of Community
Education and Public Policy
MALDEF
Los Angeles, CA

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer
President and CEO
AmericaSpeaks
Washington, DC

john a. powell
Director
Race and Poverty Institute
University of Minnesota Law School
Minneapolis, MN

Hon. Sharon Priest
Secretary of the State
State of Arkansas
Little Rock, AK

Miles S. Rapoport
Executive Director
DemocracyWorks
Hartford, CT

Howard Rifkin
Deputy Treasurer
State of Connecticut
Hartford, CT

Democracy and the New Federalism

Irma E. Rodriguez
Associate Director
The Forest Hills
Community House
Forest Hills, NY

Joel Rogers
Professor of Law, Political
Science, and Sociology
University of Wisconsin
Madison, WI

Mark Schmitt
Director for Governance and
Public Policy
Open Society Institute
New York, NY

Dianne Stewart
Director
Center for Public Policy
Priorities
Austin, TX

Tracy Westen
Chairman
Grassroots.com, Inc.
San Francisco, CA

Iris Young
Department of Political Science
University of Chicago
Chicago, IL

Dēmos Staff

David Callahan
Director of Research

Steven Carbó
Research Consultant

Ron Hayduk
Research Consultant

Jeannette Hedgepeth
Research and Program
Assistant

Stephen Heintz
President

Anne Kornhauser
Research Consultant

Sarah Kroll-Rosenbaum
Research and Program
Assistant

Joseph Lowndes
Research Consultant

Mary Nakashian
Senior Fellow

I.

DEMOCRACY AND 21st CENTURY CHALLENGES

A major focus of the workshop was an examination of three significant 21st century trends that are reshaping American society and dramatically affecting U.S. democratic institutions and processes, including those at the state level. These trends include: globalization, the information and technology revolutions, and demographic shifts.

Three presenters offered in-depth comments on these “mega-trends.” Mark Gordon spoke on the challenges that globalization poses to U.S. democracy, focusing especially on how globalization affects the debate on American federalism. Gordon is an associate professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs and author of a *Dēmos* study entitled *The Impact of Globalization on American Federalism*.

Tracy Westen looked at the dramatic impact of new information technology on U.S. democracy. His comments focused on the rapid moves now underway to direct electronic democracy and the implications of this trend. Westen is founder and chairman of Grassroots.com.

Finally, Iris Young examined how demographic changes are affecting American society, along with U.S. democratic institutions and processes. Young is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago.

GLOBALIZATION AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Summary of a Presentation
by Mark Gordon

Globalization is a process characterized both by a wide range of deepening interactions among different players around the world and by a fundamental shift in how these players see the world. These deeper interactions are occurring across a range of arenas, including economics, politics, technology, and culture.

Globalization presents a series of new challenges and opportunities for the 50 U.S. states. Many of these challenges and opportunities affect states directly. For example, states have a larger role to play on the international stage than they have in the past, they have opportunities to form new international coalitions, and they are well positioned to serve as advocates for more sensible national policies. At the same time, however, globalization has restricted state autonomy, flexibility, and scope of authority.

Globalization can also affect federalism by influencing values themselves. What follows is an initial attempt to assess potential positive and negative impacts of globalization on five different values that are widely associated with American federalism:

Liberty and democracy

Positive implications. To the extent that liberty is protected by a diffusion of power, globalization can further that diffusion. Similarly, globalization adds different players to challenge the power of governments, including transnational advocacy networks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Globalization can be a vehicle for the spread of liberal democracy around the world, and can have positive effects on democracy at home.

Negative implications. Diffusion of power created by globalization can weaken the ability of states to influence federal rules or counter federal threats to liberty. As power becomes more decentralized, states may no longer be powerful enough to check abuses. The international system of decision-making lacks a framework for creating competing forces that characterize democratic debate and protect liberty. Globalization makes it more difficult for domestic systems to cushion losses resulting from international decisions, thereby undercutting the legitimacy of those domestic systems; and it brings increased pressures to remove responsibilities from the public realm and transfer them to the

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marketplace, non-governmental organizations or other interest groups.

Citizen participation

Positive implications. Globalization can expand the amount of information available to people, and can remove many of the geographic boundaries that limit the ability of people to participate in decisions that affect them. Furthermore, globalization has already enabled people to develop new coalitions that have broader impact, and it can offer more ways for people to participate in civic life. Indirectly, globalization can enhance participation by undercutting the entrenched powers of local and national elites.

Negative implications. The rules of many new international regimes such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) remove policymaking from the public and place it in the hands of technical experts. Because it is impractical to achieve meaningful participation by individuals in the immense international arena, public participation has become increasingly mediated through groups, which can bring many of the negative attributes of special interests. Globalization and its focus on

economics has highlighted people's roles as consumers over their roles as deliberative citizens, thereby undercutting a core democratic value.

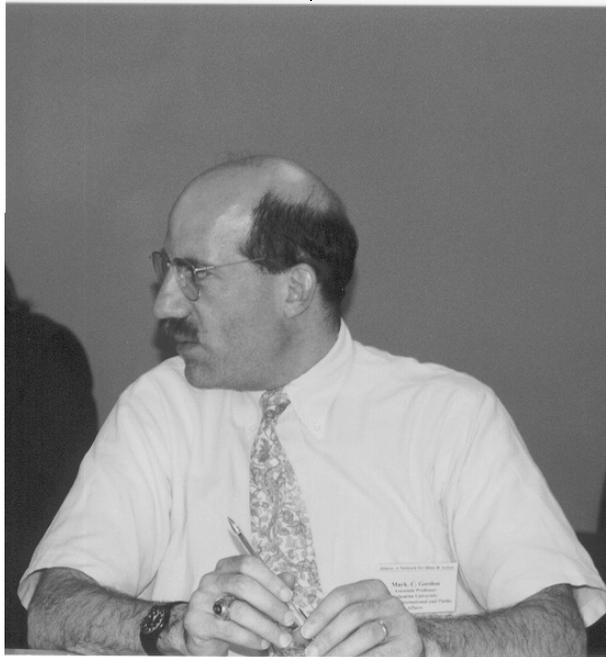
Accountability

Positive implications. Globalization can increase the visibility of corporate or government abuses, making more people aware of them. To the extent that globalization increases the transparency of government, non-government, or corpo-

rate institutions, globalization can enhance accountability of these institutions as well.

Negative implications. State laws may be weakened or overridden by decisions made by supranational officials. Who should the public hold accountable for state laws enacted to accommodate international rulings that are

either imposed on or agreed to by the federal government? Globalization has also been used as a rationale for shifting governmental responsibilities to corporations, NGOs and the marketplace in general. After these shifts occur, decisions that were previously made by accountable elected officials are instead made by unaccountable players. In



Mark Gordon

addition, the explosion in electronic communications that has accompanied globalization has involved more people in voicing opinions about policy decisions. As more people become responsible for decisions made by direct democracy, it becomes harder to hold an individual or institution accountable for those decisions.

Maximizing choice/mobility

Positive implications. Globalization may lead to increased immigration and awareness of options regarding places to live. The telecommunications advances that allow some types of work to be performed away from a central corporate office may make it easier for people to make decisions about where they live that are not solely tied to work. The growth of job opportunities around the world offers people more options regarding where they live and work.

Negative implications. To the extent states are forced to accommodate to supranational standards, their ability to differentiate themselves lessens, thereby limiting the variety of options people have within their own country. Therefore, the pressures of globalization may lead to diminished diversity caused by the imposition of standard international rules. Because these pressures narrow the framework within which states can debate policy options, they may also lead to a more fundamental convergence in states' approaches to policy issues.

States as laboratories of democracy

Positive implications. To the extent that globalization brings new issues to the public agenda, it expands the realm of possible areas in which states can innovate, and it facilitates exchanges of in-

Who should the public hold accountable for state laws enacted to accommodate international rulings that are either imposed on or agreed to by the federal government?

formation about the lessons from those experiments. It may facilitate replication of successful experiments into other domestic and international jurisdictions.

Negative implications. Standards imposed on states by supranational bodies may limit the capacity of states to innovate. Wide differences across states could represent what trading partners feel are inappropriate barriers to trade.

Areas for state action

States have three kinds of opportunities to address the negative implications of globalization. In the first set, they can become persuasive advocates for a more expansive and nuanced federal approach to globalization. They can become centers for pressuring the federal government to address the problems of globalization in a way that will further domestic legitimacy. States are geographic entities that encompass a broad spectrum of different views, and they have the capacity to galvanize large segments of the nation.

In the second set of opportunities, states can draw on their capacity to experiment with approaches that could then be applied nationwide. They can

become laboratories for job retraining, portable pensions, developing approaches to include their more vulnerable residents in the opportunities of globalization; and they can provide protection for those who suffer under the effects of globalization.

Third, states can take steps to shape globalization and its impact on their own residents. States can undertake analyses of how globalization may affect their residents and communities. They can use

the results of these analyses both to react to and shape globalization policies that affect states. States can also develop infrastructures that are geared toward specific markets that will be expanded due to globalization. Finally, states will most likely face the possibility of developing regulations for new activities brought about by globalization. For example, states will have to develop policies and regulations to protect the privacy of information about residents. ❁

ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY: READY OR NOT, HERE IT COMES

Summary of a Presentation
by Tracy Westen

Technology is transforming American democracy in a way that will move our country away from traditional representative democracy towards newer forms of direct democracy such as electronic, instantaneous, online ballot measures. Assessments of democracy in the states need to measure how technology is used to inform people about public issues, whether all segments of the state's population have access to technology, and whether there are adequate checks and balances to counter the threats to democracy raised by technology.

Two trends are converging to create these changes in democracy:

- ◆ *The rapid emergence of interactive communications technologies*, beginning with the Internet, but ultimately expanding to include seamless digital combinations of voice, data, audio, graphics and video, all distributed instantly via optical fiber and wireless global networks;

- ◆ *Growing frustration with institutions of representative government* coupled with emerging forms of direct democratic participation, and driven by a mounting desire to affect political systems directly and immediately.

These trends are creating a framework of electronic democracy that cannot be stopped. The challenge for local, state, and federal government is to find ways to manage electronic democracy, to use it for democratic goals, and to impose electronic checks and balances that protect democratic principles and values.

The First Trend: Interactive Digital Communication

Computing power has expanded exponentially in recent years, making way for the advent of interactive digital communication. The world's first major computer, built for the Pentagon in 1946, contained 18,000 tubes and weighed 80 tons. The thousands of glowing tubes attracted so many insects that they short circuited the wiring and had to be removed by hand (thus, "de-bugging"). By comparison, today's thumbnail-sized microchip has more computing power than all of the Pentagon computers in the 1940s combined. A Ford Taurus automobile has more computing power than the Apollo space program's lunar landing module.

No technology has had such a rapid impact on society as the Internet. In 1993, the Internet's world wide web barely existed, but as of January 2000 more than one billion web pages were in existence. America Online (AOL) had

one million subscribers in 1994 and more than 22 million subscribers in 2000. More people now get their news from AOL than from the top five daily newspapers combined. In 1999 alone, Internet users generated nearly one billion instant messages a day, far more than the entire mail volume of the United States Postal Service.

This new communications technology will not simply affect democracy; it will transform it. Because democracy it-

This new communications technology will not simply affect democracy; it will transform it.

self is an interactive form of government, the revolution in interactive communications will inevitably have its greatest effect on government itself.

The Second Trend: From Representative to Direct Democracy

The debate about how people should govern themselves is an old one. The United States created a system of representative government in which elected representatives act as intermediaries between citizens and the powers of government. During the past 200 years, our system of representative government has endured but evolved, generally in the direction of more direct democracy.

Frustrations with representative democracy. The institutions of representative government have exhibited more acute signs of distress during the last 30 years. One manifestation of distress is a precipitous drop in public confidence in government and in public officials. In 1964, sixty-two percent of people polled trusted government to "do the right thing

most of the time.” In 1998, only thirteen percent agreed.

Television has played an active role in intensifying distrust of government. A May 1999 study of prime time television conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs revealed that since 1975,

Electronic democracy requires strong electronic checks and balances to preserve our democratic traditions of debate.

three-fourths of all TV episodes involving the U.S. political system showed officials to be corrupt; public officials on TV commit crimes twice as often as characters in other occupations; and not one episode on prime time TV in the 1990s showed government serving the public interest.

Finally, a poll conducted by *The Washington Post* in 1996 found that public cynicism toward government was directly correlated with ignorance about government. The less people knew about government, the more distrustful they were.

Signs of Emerging Direct Democracy

Growth of ballot initiatives. Ballot initiatives circumvent the opinions and actions of elected representatives altogether, they are growing in popularity, and they have had particular influence in state elections. Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted the ballot initiative process for passing laws, and four additional states are considering adding ballot initiatives. In the 1980s, the number of initiatives reaching

the ballot jumped by 400 percent over the number that had been on the ballot annually since the initiative option started in 1900.

Growth of campaign contributions. Campaign contributions, particularly in the off-years between major elections, reflect the contributor's desire to affect legislation without waiting to cast a ballot in the next election. Instead of voting for candidates, contributors cast a “check-book ballot” for or against particular legislation.

Growth of term limits. Term limits are an indirect attack on representative government, in that voters believe that representatives will inevitably become “corrupted” (instead of becoming more “experienced”) by the government process. The term limits movement itself has depended significantly on another form of direct democracy—the ballot initiative.

Elimination of intermediaries. Formerly, political parties served as intermediaries, performing functions such as selecting candidates for office, raising money for candidates, and designing platforms. Today, candidates often bypass political parties and take charge of such activities themselves. Elected representatives are intermediaries between the public and political power. The public is seeking ways to eliminate these intermediaries as well, seeking to exercise political power

directly. The Internet offers them that possibility.

Interactive digital communications and an emerging hybrid of representative and direct democracy.

It is unlikely that pure forms of direct democracy will be used by voters to decide every legislative question. It is more likely that voters will vote directly on major public policy questions, leaving representatives to act on smaller decisions. Early efforts in electronic direct democracy will take place at the state or local level, rather than at the federal level. One of the first experiments with Internet voting took place in Arizona in March 2000, tripling from 12,000 votes cast in the 1996 Democratic presidential primary to 35,000 cast this year.

In states where the ballot initiative process already exists, electronic direct democracy could evolve in three steps. First, a paper ballot initiative could be drafted specifying that future circulation and qualification of ballot initiatives could take place online. Second, if ballot initiatives could be qualified online, an initiative could be drafted to permit future voting on ballot initiatives online. Third, if ballot initiatives could be voted online, people could pass a ballot initiative that allowed voting on ballot initiatives at any time, rather than only on specified election dates.

Creating New Electronic Checks and Balances

The American system of democracy includes a complicated set of checks and



Tracy Westen

balances designed to slow democracy, and to create time for deliberation and reflection. Electronic democracy requires strong electronic checks and balances to preserve our democratic traditions of debate. Some ideas that have been put forth to create these checks and balances include:

- ◆ Requiring voters to sign electronic ballots twice, at different times;
- ◆ Presenting pros and cons that appear on pages before the signature page;
- ◆ Including online questionnaires that must be answered before voting;
- ◆ Creating web pages that include a summary of the initiative, a list of supporters and opponents, and a list of pros and cons;

- ◆ Setting a higher standard of approval for electronic initiatives than for standard voting practices.

It will take much deliberation to decide policies regarding electronic participation and appropriate checks and

balances for electronic democracy, but those deliberations need to begin. The deliberations must assume that the trend toward increased reliance on information and technology and the trend toward increased interest in direct democracy will continue to converge. ❁

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Summary of a Presentation
by Iris Young

Changes in the demographic landscape of our country have taken several forms. In considering the implications of these changes on our democracy, and in developing methods to assess democracy in the states, people need to think about demographic changes in several ways, including the dimension of *space*.

Changes in the Racial/Ethnic Composition of Our Population

The proportion of the U.S. population that is white, African American, Latino, and Asian is changing. Racial/ethnic groups have never been evenly distributed across the country, and changes in their proportions are also not evenly distributed. Therefore, some parts of our country are multicultural

while others are much less so, so that people living in different parts of the country may have few mutually shared experiences.

Some regions of the country with significant native born populations are receiving many new residents, and will require more support in adapting to new populations than other parts of the country that are less affected by the influx of people. There is a danger that these racial and ethnic changes can worsen problems such as exclusion of immigrants, discrimination against African Americans, and inattention to Native Americans.

A related emerging demographic change is the significant increase in numbers of people with mixed parentage. There may be good reasons to con-

clude that counting people in terms of single "boxes" is a mistake, but failing to do so also raises questions about how to identify policies that exacerbate economic inequality or political exclusion.

Urban Demographic Changes

More people live in suburbs than either central cities or rural areas, creating a "metropolitanization" of America. The traditional image of poverty in central cities and affluence in suburbs is rapidly growing out-of-date. This demographic fact has important political implications. Suburbs are often political and administrative districts of other jurisdictions and their residents may identify very little with their district or their jurisdiction. New developments create new jurisdictions that are often run by cronies of developers.

Metropolitan areas have grown in population and have changed the density of regional interaction. For example, jobs are often found throughout a metropolitan region and are no longer concentrated in the urban core. Still, political jurisdictions proliferate, lack coordination, and compete with each other, leaving residents isolated from any core community and from decisions that affect their lives. Some of these jurisdictions have administrative bodies, but for the most part they are not democratic.

Income Spread

The distribution of wealth in our country has changed, so that more children are living in low-income households and the proportion of people in the middle or solid working class is declining. Our society is polarizing into those

who are well off and secure, and those who do not earn a living wage, even though they are employed. Some regions of the country are significantly more affected by disparities in income than others, and have to provide more services to lower income residents.

Female Workforce Participation

Mothers are in the workplace to stay, but our society has not caught up with arrangements that need to be in place in order for both parents to work.

If different parts of the country are affected differently by demographic changes, then it is appropriate to develop policies that distribute resources more equitably.

These arrangements include flexible work schedules or leave policies, child-care capacity during non-traditional hours, and home care options for elderly parents. Widespread participation of women in the workforce has also created different patterns of travel that involve more than direct commuting to and from work. A "triangle" of sorts has been established, with parents driving from home, to childcare settings, to work, back to childcare centers, and then home again.

Elderly People as a Proportion of the Population

The proportion of the population over age 65 is growing. Elderly people often live in their own residences, frequently in suburbs, where there is little activity around them and limited public transportation or other services to help them remain independent and engaged in civic life.

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These observations on demographic change raise questions about whether a new emphasis on democracy in the states is the most productive focus. They also raise important questions for those who want to assess the health of democracy in the states. Devolution from the federal government makes redistribution of resources and services across the country more difficult. Yet, if different parts of the country are affected differently by demographic changes, then it is appropriate to develop policies that distribute resources more equitably. This is easier to do at the federal level where government can formulate coordinated efforts.

Moreover, if it is true that our country is becoming more fragmented, with suburbs that are only loosely connected to core urban centers, it is not clear that stronger and more democratic state government can resolve the feelings and realities of isolation caused by those changes. In general, people do not identify with their states politically as much as they identify with the federal govern-

ment or with their locality. The most difficult problems tend to be passed on to local government, and the activities of participatory politics are local, whether their target is national, state, or even international.

Within the context of demographic changes, federalism has to mean more than the relationship among federal, state and local governments. It has to include ways to link municipalities at a regional level with participatory institutions even across state borders; and it has to promote ways for people to identify with and care about each other across broad regions of the country. State governments are key institutions in both of these dimensions of federalism because they can regulate activities within their states, they have authority to make decisions about allocating resources within their states, and they have a capacity to facilitate communications across regions and between the states and the federal government. ❁

**PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROBLEMS AND
OPPORTUNITIES OF DEMOCRACY**

Workshop Discussion

The presentations on 21st century challenges to American democracy, as well as a presentation by Arkansas Secretary of State Sharon Priest, triggered a far-reaching discussion among workshop participations. Comments and debate among participants reflected three general themes.

**The Importance of Defining
Democracy**

How should democracy be defined? Should a more accurate definition include both voting and other means of participation? Democracy includes both formal procedures and underlying power relationships. Formal democratic procedures, such as public hearings or voting hours, make it easier or harder for people to participate. Many of these procedures were originally established based on wealth or property ownership and served to protect the interests of a ruling elite. Inequities created by these formal procedures have to be addressed.

People and organizations focus on voting because it is easy to measure, even though voting patterns might not tell the complete story about the health of democracy in a state. Why is it important to increase voter participation? Would the outcomes be different if more people voted? Would the system have more legitimacy if more people voted? In fact, it would be possible to take a

random sample of the population, record the votes of that sample, and obtain a more representative and accurate assessment of the opinions of the public in general. But something would be lost – commitment, community involvement, and deliberation. There are ways for people to participate in their governance other than voting, and these ways should be incorporated into definitions of democracy.

**Underlying Power Relationships
Shape and Influence Democracy in
Profound Ways**

In addition to the formal procedures of democracy, there are also profound informal factors of power, such as persistent discrimination and the influence of money, that deeply affect the extent to which people participate in their governance. These underlying dimensions of democracy often exclude poor people and people of color while at the same time providing special access or positions of power to those who are white or wealthy.

Attempts to assess the health of state democracies have been more successful at measuring formal procedures than underlying power relationships. However, those power relationships may have even more influence over how residents decide whether to participate in their governance. Assessments of

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democracy need to include of these power relationships as well.

“Deliberation,” or the ability to debate and discuss ideas and points of view, is an essential element of democracy. The importance of deliberation has been blurred by heated debates about representative vs. direct democracy and by an over-reliance on one-shot opinion polls.

In many ways, our system of democracy is “hard wired” to limit deliberation. Our rules make it hard for new parties to form and get on the ballot, thereby restricting the variety of ideas that can be presented and the diversity of people who have an opportunity to express their views.

In light of these complexities, how do community activists, policymakers, or researchers begin to develop an agenda for reforming democracy and how do they assess how well they are doing? How much emphasis should be placed on encouraging serious deliberation and addressing inequities caused by underlying relationships based on power, and how much attention should be paid to the more formal processes and institutions of government?



Carolyn Lukensmeyer, Spencer Coggs, Mary Nakashian, Beatriz Lopez-Flores

Democratic reform cannot be solely the responsibility of the states.

There are compelling reasons why states are an important focus of attention. For example, states are charged with managing or funding some of the nation's most essential systems and institutions: education, law enforcement, and social services. Furthermore, the federal government has recently devolved significantly greater responsibility, authority, and funding to the states. In recent decades many states have pursued important democracy reforms and experimented with innovations to enhance civic engagement. And, obviously, citizens are more proximate to state level political and governmental institutions.

However, it is unrealistic to expect that every state will have the capacity to adequately manage its own affairs and also tend to the effects of globalization,

the changes brought about by the information and technology revolutions, and demographic trends. Many people, especially poor people and people of color, have no historical reason to believe that states will be responsive to their concerns. Moreover, power may lie at the “city-state” level, with residents of one state identifying politically and economically with cities in another state. Cross-state regions then become political entities in their own right. For example, for many people in Arkansas, the relevant city-state is Memphis, Tennessee.

In reality, there are multiple opportunities and points of entry for improving democracy, and people or organizations need not feel that only one is the appropriate entry point for reform. Assessments of democracy at the state level can also point to areas in which other levels of government are better able to address problems of democracy, whether federal, regional, or local. Fortunately, some successful attempts have already been made, such as the initiative in Connecticut, described in the next chapter. ❁

II.

TALES OF TWO STATES: REPORTS FROM ARKANSAS AND CONNECTICUT

The workshop explored in depth the experience of two states in coping with the shortcomings of democratic institutions and processes. First, in the workshop's keynote presentation, Arkansas Secretary of the State Sharon Priest described the challenges of strengthening democracy in her state. Secretary Priest currently serves as President of the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS). In 2000-2001, NASS is focusing on two main issues: increasing civic engagement and the challenges of digital democracy. Secretary Priest's remarks reflected the intense concern that many secretaries of state have about the health of state-level democratic institutions and processes.

On the second day of the workshop, Miles Rapoport described his experience of conducting an in-depth assessment of Connecticut's democracy while serving as Secretary of State of that state. This assessment, conducted in 1996 and 1998, during Secretary Rapoport's term, produced two reports entitled *Report on the State of Democracy* in Connecticut, as well as numerous insights into the challenges of accurately describing the strengths and weaknesses of democracy in a given state.

These insights were shared by Rapoport, who recently founded DemocracyWorks, a democracy reform group in Connecticut.

**THE ARKANSAS EXPERIENCE:
QUESTIONS BUT NO ANSWERS**

Remarks by Arkansas Secretary of Secretary Sharon Priest

May 23, 2000. The State of Arkansas gave a million dollar party and hardly anyone came. Do you think no one got their invitations? Or perhaps the invitation wasn't clever enough. I do know that only 23 percent of eligible voters went to the polls to participate in the exercise we call democracy.

For the past six years I have strived to help the people of Arkansas realize that their votes are important and that they can make a difference.

In 1996 we stole from my friend Miles Rapoport, who was then Secretary of State of Connecticut, his project: "Feel the Power – VOTE." In 1997 we kicked off "Honor a Vet with a VOTE." And last year we launched "Talk Back...VOTE" geared toward 18 to 24 year olds. With each year, instead of gaining voters we seem to be losing them.

Common Explanations for Non-Voting

What is keeping our people away from the polls?

Mobility: Are we moving around too much and never in town to vote or have just moved to or from somewhere close to election day?

Life is good: The economy is great and there is no reason to vote;

One vote won't make a difference: Yet in 1998, three Arkansas election outcomes were determined by just one vote.

Too busy: The polls open after I leave for work and close before I can get home. They should make voting easier—Internet voting, weekends.

They're all crooks: What difference does it make, I'm just choosing the lesser of two evils. Cynicism, scandals.

Candidates over-promising and under-delivering.

Well, you know how it goes and goes and goes. We, as Americans, hold ourselves out to be the greatest democracy in the world. I'm having a harder and harder time saying that with a straight face. However, it seems that the U.S. isn't the only country with this problem. Russia, as you will recall had a very low turnout in its latest presidential election and the world's citizens seem to be becoming more and more apathetic.

Technology and Democracy

In 1995, I was giving speeches about how technology was going to change the way we do things. In a 1995 speech to the Eudora, Arkansas Chamber of Commerce, I talked about on-line shopping and on-line democracy.

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Okay, folks, it's time to vote on the budget. Everyone grab a beer or a glass of wine, get comfortable or get naked and pull a chair up to your T.V. set (which is also your computer screen). The director of finance is going to make a presentation and you can vote on what you want. True empowerment? Digital democracy? Is representative democracy dead? We've talked about on-line voting. Is this something that will really work? What about the privacy issues?

Actually in Arkansas, our votes currently are not secret. A February 2000 Arkansas Supreme Court ruling requires that all ballots be traceable. Now with only 23 percent of eligible voters voting and a survey telling us that 11-20 percent of the voters are less likely to vote because their ballots can be traced—we've further slashed democracy. Are we willing to give up secrecy for convenience? Or are we further disenfranchising voters?

Currently, the 55+ age group is the voter who consistently votes. The age group who doesn't vote is the 18-24 year olds. In 1998 only 20 percent of 18 – 24 year olds voted nationally. (I'm pleased to say that in Arkansas, that number was 26.5 percent and 33 percent for first time voters in that age group.) Add to the equation that a voter divide is develop-

ing. A divide based on education. College educated citizens are more likely to vote. If it's true that only 20 percent of Americans get a college education, 80 percent of the population could be disenfranchised. What happens when voting drops to below 10 percent or 5 percent?



Sharon Priest, Arkansas Secretary of State

Will we lose our right to vote? Maybe not in the next decade but maybe in our children's lifetime.

The Changing Face of Arkansas

We, and more importantly, our children are living in a more diverse America. Demographics are rapidly changing our country and clearly changing in Arkansas.

The U.S. Census Bureau Projects for 2020:

- ◆ Whites decline from 74 percent today to 53 percent in 2050.

- ◆ Hispanics grow from 11 percent to 16 percent and 25 percent in 2050. In 2010 Hispanics are projected to be the largest minority group. After 2020, Hispanics are projected to add more people than all others combined.
- ◆ Blacks grow from 12 percent to 13 percent in 2020 and 14 percent in 2050.
- ◆ American Indians remain at less than 1 percent.

In my home state of Arkansas, Hispanics are the fastest growing population. The 1990 Census numbers showed a total of 20,000 Hispanics and the 2000 Census estimates 80,000. Every county in our state has at least doubled their Hispanic population. The governor announced at the Cinco de Mayo celebration a meager \$50,000 grant for cultural assimilation.

So how does this effect democracy? How does this effect the democracy in our legislatures? I serve with the Attorney General and Governor on the Board of Apportionment. I'm facing a dilemma with the northwest corner of the state. The Hispanic population leans to the Democrats. They live in a Republican part of the state. Legitimately partisanship plays a role in the redistricting process. If there is no concentration of Hispanics in the census tract information, how do we keep from forcing them to become Republicans?

Hard Questions About Democracy

And so, to democracy. What is it? How do we use democracy for the majority while protecting the rights of the minority? What role do term limits play? What will it take to keep special interests from driving this democracy? What will it take so that a few are not making decisions for all of us? Are we delegating our democracy to the courts? What role do the local governments play, state governments? Do we need to revise our Constitution? What about our laws and how they relate to a fast paced, rapidly changing world. What to do with the digital haves and have nots: How can we re-engage the people? Is this bottom-up or top-down? Is the strength of democracy also its weakness? Is this just a cycle we're going through? This speech is a politician's dream, "Questions But No Answers." What I hope to gain from this workshop is some way I can make a difference.

I know that there are more of us who are interested in preserving our democracy than are here today. I hope to take what I learn to the National Association of Secretaries of State and build a policy network of Secretaries in each state who can build statewide policy networks. I, for one, am tired of throwing million dollar parties that no one attends. Our next party is November 7th.

I will work on my invitations and my invitation list. However, like weight, we don't gain it overnight and we won't lose it overnight. But we must be persistent and know our persistence will pay off. Our task is daunting. Our democracy is worth it! ❁

**ASSESSING DEMOCRACY:
THE CONNECTICUT EXPERIENCE**

Summary of a Presentation by Miles Rapoport

Assessing democracy is a difficult task, involving not only understanding and clarifying what democracy means, but also how to measure democracy and evaluate findings. A 1996 effort to assess democracy in Connecticut, undertaken by the Office of the Secretary of the State, was a comprehensive attempt to analyze democracy within the state. It sought to go beyond the routine indicators commonly used to determine whether people are engaged in their governance. A second report about democracy in Connecticut was issued in 1998. These reports were shaped by three important decisions made at the outset:

- ◆ To involve a broad advisory group of academics, writers, researchers, and community leaders in designing the report;
- ◆ To start with a definition of democracy, taken from Webster's dictionary:
 - (1) Government exercised directly by the people or through elected representa-

tives; (2) A political or social unit based on democratic rule; (3) Rule by the majority; (4) The principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community.

- ◆ To devise five benchmarks against which Connecticut's democracy would be assessed:

Citizen knowledge and interest in politics. Knowledge and interest is grounded not solely in facts and figures, but also in access and awareness, in confidence and trust, and in the availability of information needed to inform people about the processes of government. Knowledge and interest are also influenced by the education system, politics and parties, and the media.

Participation and commitment. Commitment to democratic principles often provides the foundation for seeking knowledge. Participation can include activities such as registration and voting, service to gov-

ernment by sitting on boards or commissions, and engaging in grassroots activities. People's commitment and participation are influenced by factors such as access to officials, the Internet, and the cost of running for office.

Social and economic equality and opportunity. Inequality is undemocratic in itself, and economic equality and opportunity are core elements of democracy. Moreover, inequality or the absence of true opportunity undermines people's belief in the system, and if people believe they are not part of the democratic system, that system does not function effectively. Social and economic equality and opportunity are reflected in the changing workforce, education and training opportunities, and wages.

Diversity and mutual respect. America's strength is embedded in the diversity of the people who live here, and our country is weakest when we

discount the rich cultures and traditions of people from many cultures. Building understanding and respect among people from different backgrounds involves education, attacks on hate crimes, and efforts to promote diversity.

Our commonweal. If democracy is to persist and flourish, there must be a sense of the common good that goes beyond individual self-interest. The values of a commonweal must be translated into active individual and collective efforts to build a common future. These efforts include volunteering for community service and philanthropy.

The Report on the State of Democracy in Connecticut drew from quantitative and qualitative information regarding how well Connecticut fared against each benchmark. It included data in several areas of interest and profiles

of individual people or programs that were making a difference. The Secretary of the State concluded that Connecticut needed improvement in the first four benchmarks, and that it was performing well along the fifth benchmark. The



Miles Rapoport (center); Howard Rifkin, Deputy Treasurer of Connecticut (left); and Michelle Holder, Dēmos staff member

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original report included an action agenda, suggesting steps that individuals, elected officials, and others could take to improve the health of democracy in Connecticut. The second report included a progress update on each item of the action agenda.

Once the report was completed, the Secretary of the State took steps to publicize and disseminate it. Most notably, the Secretary of the State convened a conference about Democracy in Connecticut at which Senator Bill Bradley was the keynote speaker. The conference included a panel presentation about the report and workshops during which participants explored each of the benchmarks in depth. This meeting provided Connecticut residents an opportunity to develop next steps to enhance the quality of democracy in the state.

The report also led to a yearlong series in *The Hartford Courant* (the state's largest newspaper) on the pulse of democracy in the state. Many schools distributed the report to students, and some schools incorporated the report into social studies curricula. Several towns held town meetings to examine how they fared according to the benchmarks in the report, and staff from the office of the Secretary of the State made numerous presentations across the state.

The report was generally well received when it was issued, but it was criticized by those who opposed some of its conclusions, particularly policy recommendations such as increasing minimum wage and reforming campaign finance laws. ❁

CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING STATE DEMOCRACY

Workshop Discussion

Miles Rapoport's presentation on assessing democracy in Connecticut generated a wide-ranging conversation about future efforts to assess the health of democracy in the states. Participants discussed the lessons of Rapoport's experience in Connecticut, including:

- ◆ Conduct a thorough literature review at the start of the project;
- ◆ Allow for adequate time to plan the project;
- ◆ Be systematic in the analysis, and document everything that is learned;
- ◆ Establish mechanisms to institutionalize the process and update the report;
- ◆ Don't focus exclusively on what government can do, but include roles for the private sector, educational institutions, and community groups;
- ◆ Devise a shared set of standards that are useful across states;
- ◆ Develop an action plan for how different sectors can use the report;

- ◆ Hold conversations about the report with communities.

The Connecticut experience also raises several important questions for people and organizations to consider in attempting to assess democracy in their states:

To what extent should an analysis of democracy be used to take positions on policy options?

In undertaking democracy assessments in the states, reformers need first to spell out factors they believe are critical for democracy, and these factors need to reflect the growing influence of structural changes such as globalization, advances in information and technology, and demographic shifts. Connecticut's decision to include benchmarks regarding tolerance and diversity, "Our Commonwealth," and inequality and economic opportunity, was an important one and provided a framework for the state to connect democratic goals with specific policies and programs. For example, in Connecticut, the Secretary of the State determined that lack of economic opportunity among residents threatened the state's democracy, and therefore concluded with a policy recommendation

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that the minimum wage be increased.

Positions such as these will be controversial, but ultimately they will help advance and shape people's opinions about democracy. Activists, policymakers, and researchers often fail to make clear the connections between democratic principles and tangible policy options. When this happens, residents believe democracy to be either an abstract concept or simply a set of formal procedures regarding voting. And, they conclude that policy options such as living wages, or asset accumulation, are economic interventions having nothing to do with democracy in general. To the extent that reformers are able to connect program strategies to principles of democracy, they will have made a powerful argument to advance democracy.

Is democracy the end or is it the means to an end?

Some feel it is misleading to consider economic indicators as means and democracy as the end. They believe that democracy itself is not an end, but is a means to the "good life," which includes social, economic, and policy dimensions. Whether democracy is a means or an end in itself, those interested in democracy must struggle with what qualities constitute the kind of life that society should aspire to create for its residents. These



Dianne Stewart, Michael Lipsky, Tracy Westen

qualities are important to measure in assessing the healthy of democracy in states.

Are organizations prepared to use the results of their work to take positions that might alienate people whom they want to engage?

Some who study democracy are also interested in building coalitions with people who may have opposing views on several issues, but who may also share views on some issues of importance. Is it possible to take positions that will upset people without precluding future collaboration, and without becoming simplistically labeled by a particular ideology? How much attention should be paid to developing broad coalitions to conduct and disseminate assessments of democracy?

In fact, community organizations make these decisions all the time. They have to forge coalitions with people who have different beliefs in order to succeed in an area where their views coincide.

These community groups have managed to make compromises in order to achieve high-priority goals without giving up deeply held principles.

How much responsibility for democracy rests with government, and how much rests with other sectors of society?

Connecticut decided that the degree and types of volunteerism and private philanthropy were important benchmarks for democracy. Similarly, others will have to decide how much responsibility to place on government in promoting democracy, and how much responsibility should be more broadly placed on community groups, businesses, or individuals. In particular, if principles of democracy include civic engagement, assessments of democracy will lead to positions on the roles and responsibilities of communities. However, while the health of democracy and the

health of communities are intertwined, it is not appropriate to place the burden of democracy on communities alone.

Assuming that principles of democracy include consideration of civic and community engagement, assessments of democracy have to speak to the extent to which communities have real power and influence over decisions that affect them. In some ways, communities have less authority than they have had in the past. For example, schools are more segregated and income gaps among residents are wider than they have been in earlier times. However, in other ways communities are leading the nation in solving some of our thorniest problems. Most of the true innovation is taking place at the community level, and resources that actually get to grassroots community organizations do make a difference to residents in those communities. ❁

III.

PRINCIPLES FOR STRONG DEMOCRACY

A precondition for assessing the health of democracy in the states is to define what we mean by strong democracy. During winter and spring 2000, *Dēmos* developed a set of six principles for strong democracy in the 21st century. These principles were a central topic of discussion at the workshop, with participants offering a range of ideas for how the principles can be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of democracy in a given state.

The impetus behind *Dēmos*' effort to develop principles of democracy was several-fold. First, as *Dēmos* began its multi-year effort to assess democracy in the states, staff and consultants felt the need to clarify our own understanding of what we collectively meant by "democracy". Second, we believe that principles can provide a useful way to frame an examination of democracy in the 50 states, allowing researchers and reformers to flag key democratic issues and to specify the ideal features of a strong democracy. Third, we hope that principles can eventually serve as a tool of advocacy for reformers working to strengthen state-level democratic institutions.

The workshop discussion on the principles proved enormously enriching. As a result of this discussion, *Dēmos*—working in collaboration with DemocracyWorks—has significantly revised its principles for strong democracy in the 21st Century.

**PRINCIPLES FOR STRONG DEMOCRACY
AND THE CHALLENGES OF ASSESSMENT**

Workshop Discussion

A discussion of principles for strong democracy took up much of the second day of the workshop. *Dēmos* staff began the discussion by describing the process that had been undertaken to develop an initial set of principles for strong democracy, along with the motives behind this exercise. There was widespread agreement among participants that efforts to revitalize American democracy in the 21st century must start with explorations of what democracy means and how it can be assessed, particularly in light of significant structural changes such as globalization, the information and technology revolutions, and demographic shifts.

There was also broad support for the view that principles could be potentially useful to researchers and reformers. Principles describe the features of a strong democracy and are benchmarks by which researchers, policymakers, and community activists identify issues that are important to enhancing knowledge and practice. Furthermore, they can become tools with which people advocate for stronger democratic institutions.

But the discussion over principles also raised a number of challenging issues. First, developing principles that effectively define core elements and major indicators of democracy requires discussion among many people from different backgrounds, professions,

geographic regions, and political persuasions. Absent such inclusive discussion, principles for strong democracy could exclude the political or cultural views and preferences of different groups, thus failing to serve as a comprehensive tool of analysis.

Another reason for inclusive discussions is to ensure the usefulness of principles as tools for assessment. One of the challenges in applying principles to real-world situations is developing indicators that can be measured and described, and that are meaningful to policymakers and community activists. Indicators, in other words, make principles real—they provide standards that people can use to assess or grade communities, states, nations, or supranational institutions. Indicators that are commonly used, such as voting rates or number of hours of volunteer activity, are relatively easy to obtain, but it is not clear that they are the most accurate or important indicators of how democracy is faring.

New efforts to measure democracy in the states must include both quantitative and qualitative data. Those leading assessment efforts should identify indicators that people and organizations believe are the most essential for getting to the core issues of democracy, and find ways to measure the presence or absence of those subtle, qualitative indicators.

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Discussion of the Principles

Workshop participants were given six principles of democracy and their indicators, in draft form. Participants were asked to meet in three small groups, each of which explored two principles and relevant indicators, guided by a set of questions.

Working groups were asked to comment on the language of the principles; and in particular, to list factors that could serve as indicators, emphasizing indicators that reach beyond the standard, quantifiable data sets already in use. The group reconvened as a whole to hear reports from the working groups and further shape the principles.

An abbreviated version of the draft principles given to the working group follows:

Equal opportunity for participation.

Everyone should be able to participate effectively in the public decisions that affect their lives.

Individual capacity for civic engagement. A minimum level of physical, social, and economic well-being is a

precondition for the ability of individuals to be able to engage in civic life.



Jessica Gordon Nembhard, Stephen B. Heintz, John A. Powell

Responsiveness. All institutions (public, non-profit, or private) performing public functions must be responsive to all members of the populations they serve.

Transparency. Public business should be conducted in public view except in clearly and narrowly defined instances when privacy better serves the public good.

Accountability. All institutions performing public functions must be accountable to the public.

Civil Society. Democracy requires a robust and democratic civil society.

Working Group Insights

Many important suggestions were made about how to refine and improve the principles, but three overarching themes emerged during the discussion of principles and indicators.

The importance of inclusion and diversity

The draft principles were seen by some participants as failing to give adequate attention to the importance of inclusion and diversity for democracy. A related point was the need many saw to highlight critical issues related to race, immigration, and disenfranchisement throughout the principles. The notion of inclusion, particularly, signals that *exclusion* is a problem and it also requires distinctive kinds of measurements. Only by measuring the reasons for and the extent to which certain groups are excluded from political processes and outcomes is it possible to advocate for policy changes that help rectify exclusion of various kinds.

A number of participants pointed to the large numbers of people who live and work in the United States but who cannot vote or who are otherwise disenfranchised. People of color, poor people, people with disabilities, immigrants, and people convicted of crimes are the most disenfranchised, their interests are least well represented, and they are the most disproportionately affected by weaknesses in our democracy. Therefore, all principles of democracy should attend to the interests of these groups.

The challenge of economic equity issues

There was considerable discussion of how to best make a connection between economic equity issues and democracy issues. A number of workshop participants stressed the need for *Dēmos*' principles for strong democracy to more forcefully make the point that democracy cannot truly exist unless people earn living wages for their work and have the right to organize on behalf of shared economic interests. Without economic democracy, there is no real democracy.

Good government does not necessarily equal good democracy

The draft principles were widely seen as too heavily weighted towards assessing how well government institutions perform their functions – how transparent, accountable, and responsive they are. Many participants felt that focusing so much on institutional performance misses the larger point that democracy is a means to help people achieve happy and productive lives, and that people—not just the institutions—are crucial to democracy's welfare. Principles of democracy, therefore, should go beyond statements about government institutions to posit more basic statements that address the inequities of individuals' lives and of the society in general. ❁

PRINCIPLES FOR STRONG DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dēmos staff, working in collaboration with Miles Rapoport and the staff of DemocracyWorks, revised the principles for strong democracy following the workshop. Below is the most recent working draft of the principles.

Providing Full Opportunity for Meaningful Participation

All residents of the United States should have an effective voice in the political processes that affect their lives. An effective voice includes, but is not limited to, voting. Public officials should develop new methods to increase participation, particularly for those who face special obstacles, such as persons of limited English proficiency, the illiterate, people convicted of crimes, and the disabled. Greater access to economic or technological resources should not confer privileged opportunity for participation, and government should adopt reforms to reduce the role of money in politics and to ensure the availability of quality information for all. Nor should government abuse its power in ways that constrain opportunity for participation in public life.

- ◆ As demographic shifts occur, special efforts must be made to ensure equal opportunity for participation.
- ◆ New technologies should be employed to enhance opportunity for participation rather than creating new civic inequities.

Promoting Economic and Social Well-Being

All members of society should enjoy at least a minimum level of physical, social and economic well-being, both for reasons of justice and because well-being is necessary for individuals to engage effectively in civic life. Among the resources that contribute to a basic living standard are: an adequate income or living wage; a good education; housing and universal health care. Public institutions should ensure that all people have access to resources such as these, and should work to decrease systemic social and economic inequities. People should be able to use their voice in policymaking to create policies that provide that basic living standard.

Ensuring Institutional Responsiveness to Public Interests

All institutions (public, non-profit, or private sector) performing public functions must be equally responsive to all members of the populations they serve. All such “public institutions” should have structures in place to handle in a timely and satisfactory fashion the needs of those affected by the institution, paying special attention to those in greatest need. Private sector government contractors must place the public's needs above market-driven interests and private corporations must be responsive to stakeholders, not just to shareholders.

- ◆ New technologies should be used to enhance responsiveness. But as these technologies are not universally accessible, care must be taken to ensure that technology does not create new barriers to responsive public service.
- ◆ Public institutions must make special efforts to be responsive to changes in the demographic composition of society.
- ◆ Efforts must be made to assure the responsiveness of public institutions in an era of globalization that challenges the authority of existing governance structures.

Ensuring Accountability and Transparency

All institutions (public, non-profit, or private sector) performing public functions must be fully accountable to the public. Public business should be conducted in public view except in narrowly defined instances when privacy better serves the public good. All such “public institutions” should be held to the same standards of accountability and transparency. They should be subject to independent audits and legislative oversight, and should widely disseminate clear and easily understandable information in order to facilitate this process. Private corporations and NGOs whose actions affect the public, should be held accountable to public scrutiny. The media and non-profit watchdog groups also have an essential role to play in assuring accountability and proactive efforts must be made to guarantee their free and independent functioning.

- ◆ Supranational institutions engaged in actions or decisions that affect the U.S. population should be held to these same standards of accountability and transparency.
- ◆ New technologies should be used to enhance accountability and transparency but as these technologies are not universally accessible, their use should not substitute for other forms of information dissemination.

Embracing Diversity and Fostering Mutual Respect

A strong democracy must actively embrace the full diversity of its people and foster respect for the rights of others. Public policies and educational curricula should be used to eradicate all forms of political domination and exclusion based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identification and/or spiritual faith. Diversity and mutual respect mean more than tolerance, however. Public institutions and political culture must always remain open to transformation by diverse perspectives and practices.

- ◆ Demographic changes are transforming the political realm as diverse identities make new demands. Americans must view these changes as an opportunity for, and not a threat to, strong democracy.
- ◆ As the digital divide demonstrates, older forms of racial stratification can be reproduced by new technologies. Efforts must be made to reverse this socially destructive trend.

Valuing and Strengthening Civil Society

A vibrant civil society is essential for a democratic polity. Membership-based NGOs, associations, clubs, neighborhood groups and faith-based communities that are focused on the common good can provide a healthy public realm where people deliberate and act together toward shared goals. In addition, they can strengthen community both within and across traditional boundaries. While neither the market nor the state should direct political action in civil society, government should create and sustain an enabling environment for public associations. Democratic political culture should encourage volunteerism, philanthropy and social entrepreneurship that connects participation in associations to the political process.

- ◆ New technology can be an effective tool to link civil society actors together and to bolster their voice, thus strengthening their effectiveness.
- ◆ Democratic civil society can and should help to counter the negative consequences of globalization and economic inequality and can be an important source of accountability to counter non-democratic decision-making in the supranational sphere.

VI.

NEXT STEPS: AN ACTION AGENDA

Considerable new energy surrounds democracy reform work at the state level. In recent years, significant gains have been made at the state level in promoting campaign finance reform, with several states passing reform laws. A number of states such as Connecticut, Minnesota, and Arkansas have also experimented with a range of initiatives aimed at increasing voter participation.

Nevertheless, the movement on behalf of democracy reform in the states remains in an early stage. There is a widespread perception among many state-level reformers that there are inadequate linkages among democracy advocates, both within and across the states; and also, that there is a scarcity of financial, organizational, and analytical resources to support state-level democracy work. One consequence of these shortcomings is that advocates have made very little progress in recent years on democracy reform issues outside the area of campaign finance reform.

A major goal of the workshop was to begin developing a more comprehensive democracy reform agenda at the state level, as well as a coordinated advocacy strategy and national policy infrastructure to advance reform. Our hope is that new research, new infrastructure, new policy proposals, and new financial resources will be developed over the next several years to support democracy reform in the states.

TURNING REFORM IDEAS INTO ACTION

Workshop Discussion

The slow pace of democracy reform in the states is a major concern of advocacy, policymakers, scholars, and others who work in this area. Workshop participants addressed the challenge of creating more effective strategies for advocacy that could successfully turn reform ideas into action. Participants offered many specific ideas and suggestions. Some of the larger themes include:

Find ways to be relevant to people's lives. With so many state-level groups concerned with democracy, economic justice, and community empowerment, national organizations must find ways to make their work relevant to people's lives in real, tangible ways. Research and advocacy has to be grounded in people's lives and must take into account the historical realities of the flaws in democracy that have existed since this country was founded.

Connect civic life and policy formation. Traditional thinking has not made strong connections between civic life and politics. It is more challenging, but more important, to develop ways to chart the links between civic life and how policy actually gets made and implemented.

Insure that research is useful. Organization doing research on democracy must make sure that they are packaging information and disseminating it in tar-

geted ways that are relevant to a wide variety of interested parties.

Conduct additional research. A number of critical areas related to democracy reform in the states remain poorly understood. Topics that might need more research include:

- ◆ Analyzing the connections between the non-profit sector and democracy by breaking the non-profit sector into groupings that better reflect the diversity of organizations that comprise this sector;
- ◆ Studying political organizing to learn more about elements of successful organizing strategies;
- ◆ Examining the role of public authorities, e.g. housing authorities, that have significant power and often function outside the rules of other public institutions;
- ◆ Examining the effect of redistricting on democratic processes and outcomes.

The State Democracy Building Network

Workshop participants agreed that there are inadequate linkages among democracy advocates, both within and across the states. State-level policy institutes and community-based organizations do not always work well together. Connections between advocates and policymakers are also often not as strong as they should be. An equally serious problem is that there is a scarcity of financial, organizational, and analytical resources to support democracy reform work at the state level.

In response to these problems, workshop participants agreed to help create a State Democracy Building Network (SDBN). As conceived by *Dēmos* staff over the past nine months, the SDBN will exist both as a virtual community on the Internet and as an informal association that sponsors regular meetings to strengthen ties among state-level reformers. We hope that the SDBN can also eventually evolve into a funding umbrella—similar to the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative—that strategically channels new resources to state-level organizations engaged in democracy reform work. The specific purposes and activities of the SDBN will be shaped by key partner organizations. When fully developed, the SDBN will likely serve several functions:

- ◆ *The SDBN will be a means to exchange information about best practices for strengthening democracy at the state level.* For example, the SDBN website will highlight different initiatives aimed at such

goals as strengthening civic education in secondary schools, increasing the auditing/oversight capacity within state executive branches, or raising voter turnout among historically disenfranchised communities. The SDBN site will offer resources for reformers who wish to replicate successful democracy reforms in their own states. In time, it will offer model legislation and other resources that directly support state-level policymakers who wish to advance best practices.

- ◆ *The SDBN will be a clearinghouse for information about state-level policy developments related to democracy reform—describing newly adopted policies as well as the status of pending legislative proposals.* For example, the SDBN website will catalog and track recent efforts in different states to implement reforms such as election day registration, constitutional revision, professionalization of legislatures, the easing of ballot access rules, or better state enforcement of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act. This information will be developed to be of immediate use to state-level policymakers and advocates working in, or with, state governments.
- ◆ *The SDBN will help keep state-level reformers abreast of major developments related to devolution and the federalism debate.* For example, the SDBN website will track devolution initiatives across a

range of federal policy areas, including healthcare, education, workplace regulations, and the environment. The site will also explain Supreme Court and lower court rulings on federalism and their consequences in different policy areas. The SDBN's federalism and devolution resources will be designed to help expand the role of state-level reformers in shaping the federalism debate within Congress and the Executive Branch.

- ◆ *The SDBN will be a forum for strengthening personal and institutional relationships among disparate democracy reformers.* Richer relationships among reformers—across different states, across different issue areas, and across sector boundaries – are critical for sharing new ideas and effective strategies for reform, as well as mounting collaborative efforts to shape federal devolution policies. We envision the SDBN sponsoring regular meetings that bring together state-

level reformers for intensive discussions and strategic planning.

- ◆ *The SDBN will eventually act as a funding umbrella to strategically channel new resources into state-level groups working on democracy reform.* Many state-level organizations bemoan the paucity of financial resources for research and advocacy on democracy reform issues—particularly outside the area of campaign finance reform. At the same time, these organizations have trouble attracting the attention of large national foundations. Creating a funding umbrella through the SDBN could provide a new way to boost the resources available to state-level democracy reformers. The most direct parallel to this effort is the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative, which has channeled millions of dollars to twenty state-level fiscal policy institutes since 1994. ❁