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K.Sabeel Rahman , Hollie Russon Gilman
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CIVIC POWER

What will it take to restore American democracy and rescue it from this moment of crisis? *Civic Power* argues that the current threat to U.S. democracy is rooted not just in the outcome of the 2016 election, but in deeper, systemic forms of inequality that concentrate economic and political power in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Drawing on historical and social science research and case studies of contemporary democratic innovations across the country, *Civic Power* calls for a broader approach to democracy reform focused on meaningfully redistributing power to citizens. It advocates for booth reviving grassroots civil society and novel approaches to governance, policymaking, civic technology, and institutional design – aimed at dismantling structural disparities to build a more inclusive, empowered, bottom-up democracy where communities and people have greater voice, power, and agency.

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Civic Power

REBUILDING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IN AN ERA OF CRISIS

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Preface

In the fall of 2013, we had the good fortune of working with a group of remarkable scholars and organizers concerned about the state of American democracy. The Gettysburg Project, as we came to call it (in reference to Abraham Lincoln's defense of democracy in his Gettysburg Address), brought together leading organizers, democracy reformers, foundations, and academics to think deeply about how the crisis of American democracy could be addressed in the long term. Since then, we have continued working with an ever-growing network of inspiring and incredible leaders, across community organizations, policymakers, and foundations. A few years later, we convened a similar cross sector gathering of leaders at Open Society Foundations to discuss the possibilities for building more inclusive democracy in the United States of America, spurred by debates over the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Most recently, in the spring of 2017, we gathered a group of organizers, movement leaders, thinkers, and policymakers at New America, a think tank based in Washington, DC, to revisit this question of democratic renewal in the aftermath of the 2016 election.

These conversations connected us to a wide world of amazing leaders in democracy reform. They also underscored the importance of building communities of practice where such conversations can be conducted at a deep level – and where silos between research and practice, between organizing and policymaking, can be broken down to build genuine relationships and dialogue. While committed to the same core values, these different groups had rarely engaged with one another in a deep and generative way. Academics studying democracy often do not do so in dialogue with on-the-ground movement organizers. Advocacy groups, while adept at challenging governments, are not often engaged in collaborative and honest dialogues with policymakers about how to design different institutions and governance regimes. This

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project emerged out of a desire to build on the lessons learned from those discussions and to spur further dialogue.

The 2016 election intensified this motivation. For many Americans, the election of Donald Trump seemed implausible, a refutation of a sense of democratic progress toward ever-greater inclusion. Yet while we shared acute concerns about the future of American democracy, we were also deeply aware that many of today's concerns, though novel in some ways, are rooted in familiar and long-running challenges: inequality, racial and gender subordination, globalization, and the like. Indeed, while the election has spurred a powerful partisan battle over control of policy in Washington, there is a notable gap between this partisan fight and efforts at more structural reforms to address threats to democracy that have often arisen from – and been fueled by – policy decisions made by both major parties. At the same time, the urgency of these threats to democracy seemed at odds with some other democracy reform conversations based in the civic technology movement and emerging from Silicon Valley. The techno-utopian vision of a democracy optimized by apps and online tools appeared woefully limited in the face of such deep and chronic concerns as well as the critique of the distorting capacities of such technology that other scholars and activists have voiced since the election.

Our discussion in this book openly centers on the United States; this is not a book about the global crisis of liberal democracy. But that national focus enables us to highlight what we think are very real areas of innovation and creativity as well as potentially transformative work to enhance the power of communities from the bottom up and thereby radically transform our institutions of governance to be more inclusive, responsive, and democratic.

We could not have produced this volume without the support, guidance, and thoughtfulness of many wonderful colleagues, mentors, and collaborators. Thanks are owed particularly to Xavier de Souza Briggs, Anna Burger, Archon Fung, Marshall Ganz, Hahrie Han, and the participants in the Gettysburg Project convenings from 2013 to 2016. The Harvard Kennedy School's Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation helped incubate the earliest stages of this book as part of its support for the Gettysburg Project (and for each of us!) in those early years. Thanks are also due to the many academics, researchers, and practitioners whose work has inspired us and who have offered us generous feedback and support, including Susan Crawford, Michael Dawson, Claudine Gay, Jacob Hacker, Sarah Holloway, Merit Janow, David Karpf, Taeku Lee, Matt Leighninger, Zach Markovits, Tina Nabatchi, Beth Simone Noveck, Tiago C. Peixoto, Paul Pierson, Andrew Rasiej, Donata Secondo, Sonal Shah, Micah Sifry, Dennis Thompson,

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Portions of this manuscript draw on research that each of us previously published, particularly on our previous articles and papers: K. Sabeel Rahman, "Policymaking as Power-Building," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 27 (2018): 315–77; K. Sabeel Rahman, "(Re)Constructing Democracy in Crisis," *UCLA Law Review* 65 (2018): 1552–72; K. Sabeel Rahman, "From Civic Tech to Civic Capacity: The Case of Citizen Audits," *Political Science and Politics* 50 (2017): 751–57; Hollie Russon Gilman and Jessica Gover, *The Architecture of Innovation: Institutionalizing Innovation in Federal Policymaking* (Washington, DC: Beeck Center at Georgetown University, 2016); Hollie Russon Gilman, "Government as Government, Not Business," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, October 5, 2017, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/government_as_government_not_business; and Hollie Russon Gilman and K. Sabeel Rahman, *Building Civic Capacity in an Era of Democratic Crisis* (Washington, DC: New America, September 2017). We thank the respective editors and journals for their support for these earlier works and their permission to reproduce and repurpose them in this larger project.

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