“Democracy is not something you have, but something you do. It is a verb. And we are creating it, or un-creating it, all the time.”

-Marshall Ganz
Critical threats to democracy surface almost daily throughout the world. Yet, democracy is not something we “have”, but something we do – a practice that, like all practices, can be taught, learned, and mastered.

Confronting these threats, then, requires a response driven not only by immediate reaction, but also by developing our power to practice democracy – a power not only to block but to build, not only to mobilize but to organize, not only to win but to govern – so we can create a world in which we flourish as individuals, families, communities, and nations.

Fortunately, we have begun learning how.

Our Mission

The Practicing Democracy Project, led by Marshall Ganz at the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, enables people to work together to develop the leadership, grow the community, and build the power to fulfill the democratic promise of equal, inclusive, and collective agency.
Fulfilling the democratic promise requires the ongoing, renewed participation of an “organized” citizenry able to formulate, articulate, and assert its shared interests effectively.

In a democracy, DeTocqueville observed, this “knowledge of how to combine,” or associationism, is the mother of all other forms of knowledge. Associationism enables people to learn together – to transform individual interests into common interests, individual commitments into shared commitments, and individual resources into collective power.

Organizing, in turn, requires leadership. We understand leadership as a practice, not a position: accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty.

Organizers identify, recruit, and develop leadership; grow community around that leadership; build power from the resources of that community. They sustain, grow, and renew that power by structuring organizations, movements, and institutions.

An organizer’s first question is “Who are my people?” followed by, “What is the change we need?” then, “How can we turn our resources into the power to achieve that change?”

This approach reaches far deeper than protest, deeper than resistance, to the creative practice of democracy itself.

And practicing democracy well, like any practice, requires learning the craft of that practice.

Our pedagogy enables people to turn what we naturally learn to do implicitly, into practices we can teach, share, and develop explicitly: sharing motivational values through storytelling, building civic relationships rooted in shared values; turning resources into power by strategizing; turning strategy into outcomes by taking action; and structuring campaigns and organizations to develop leadership, build organization, and win.

Our theory of change is rooted in the experience that mastery of the micro-practices of democracy is required to organize the power to influence macro-level political, economic, and cultural outcomes.

By equipping people with the collective capacity to contest political, economic, and cultural power – that is, by enabling ourselves to organize – we can, in turn, realize the promises of democracy: people, power, change.
Practicing Democracy Project Faculty Director Marshall Ganz holds the Rita E. Hauser Senior Lectureship in Leadership, Organizing and Civil Society at the Harvard Kennedy School. He has a long history in democratic leadership and organizing, beginning with leaving his Harvard undergraduate studies in 1964 to participate in the Mississippi Summer Project, followed by 16 years working alongside Cesar Chavez with the United Farm Workers.

During the 1980s he worked with grassroots groups to develop new organizing programs and designed innovative voter mobilization strategies for local, state, and national electoral campaigns. In 1991, he returned to Harvard, where he completed his undergraduate degree, then an MPA and a PhD, and laid the intellectual and pedagogical groundwork for what is now the Practicing Democracy Project.

Through the Practicing Democracy Project, and working in concert with organizations like the Leading Change Network, WiLD, re:power, Haiyya, Ahel, and others, we have designed and implemented online and in-person courses, diverse practice workshops, and action research projects, all of which are rooted in a pedagogy of practice in which learners become teachers and followers become leaders, creating a kind of “cascade.”

In this way we have directly developed more than 5,700 people in our courses and some 10,000 more municipal, health care, educational, and social movement leaders in our workshops and trainings throughout the US and the world.

As of 2016, we knew of at least 23,080 additional people who had been trained and coached in leadership and organizing by alumni of our programs, in over 200 workshops and campaigns across 24 countries and those numbers have only grown in the years since. Many of our alumni are making a real difference across the world, especially as they engage others in further cascading leadership to achieve the scale we need for change.

We contributed to the grassroots organization of the 2007-2008 Obama campaign; to coaching and facilitating the Dreamer Movement; and to seeding organizing practices in cultural, political, and economic venues in the American Midwest, Arab Middle East, Nordic countries, the Balkans, Japan, Australia, and parts of Africa, India, and China to fight climate change, increase literacy, organize trade unions, reform education, end child marriage, stop gender-based violence, build political parties, and support young people opposing gun violence and fighting for climate justice.

Our range of experience has taught us that organizing can work, that people are eager to learn how to do it, and that it can work across an incredible diversity of cultural, political, and economic contexts.

At our first workshop in Jordan, Amman-based Samar Dudin exclaimed: “I get it! This is not a blueprint. It is a road map.” It is. Practicing democracy is a way to discover in our own identities, cultures, and histories the sources of the hope, solidarity, self-respect, and wisdom at the heart of the demos.
The Practicing Democracy Project organizes our work into three domains: leadership development, praxis development, and organizational capacity development. These domains focus on different and interdependent outcomes:

Leadership development: We enable people to develop the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacity for the exercise of democratic leadership.

Praxis development: We develop effective tools, methods, and processes – including technologies – to creatively support adaptation of five core practices to effective collective action.

Organizational capacity development: We support the development of organizations, movements, and institutions that can initiate, sustain, and renew democratic practice across diverse domains.
Understanding Our Impact

Across each of these domains, and in all of our work, we are driven by the following core questions that underlie democratic practice:

1. Shared identity: Who are we to each other? What does it mean to be in a civic relationship with other people? What commitments must we share to create the shared identity required for a robust multi-racial, diverse democracy? (individual)

2. People-centered power: How can we ground our power in people as its primary source? Social movements have been a powerful engine to mobilize ourselves collectively in large enough numbers to trump veto power concentrated by wealth or unequal representation. Our work with organizations, campaigns and movements across constituencies aims to transform urgent but often fragmented enthusiasm into organized energy that can begin to generate the power to embed democracy in our institutions. (institutional)

3. Self-governance: How do we govern ourselves? When so much of our lives is spent in contexts that are governed top-down, in which we own nothing and have no agency, rebuilding collective agency must begin at the micro-level. We root our structure, strategy, and action work in teams as the fundamental unit of collective agency. (collective)

We understand our impact by the extent to which our work creates, grows, and sustains pathways for people to answer these questions as they learn to master the practice of democracy.
In this moment, there are calls to reimagine, revitalize, renovate, protect, and even mind democracy. The risk is that these efforts remain siloed, exacerbating our already chronic social fragmentation. We believe that by combining leadership development, praxis development, and organizational development in a common effort, rooted in shared and basic human values, and committed to strengthening democratic practice, we can create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

We invite you to join us.

For more information about the Practicing Democracy Project, please contact Emily S Lin, Program Director, at eslin@hks.harvard.edu

Links and Resources

- Practicing Democracy Project | Center for Public Leadership - Harvard Kennedy School
- Marshall Ganz
- Organizing Obama: Campaign, Organizing, Movement by Marshall Ganz
- Famed organizer sees history in the making | Los Angeles Times
- The Dreamers’ Movement Comes of Age | Dissent Magazine
- Reclaiming Civil Society
- Who Are Your People? | Harvard Kennedy School
- Building a Community Organizing Organization: Serbia on the Move | HKS Case Program
- Haiyya - Help Young Leaders Lead Next Wave of Change | Milaap
- Bringing grassroots community organising to Japan: Meet Kanoko Kamata | MobLab
- The Sunrise Movement Actually Changed the Democratic Conversation. So, What Do You Do for a Sequel? | POLITICO Magazine
- Crafting Public Narrative to Enable Collective Action: A Pedagogy for Leadership Development | Academy of Management Learning & Education
- Leading Change Network
- Wild Project
- Ahel
- re:power