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On Democratic Organizing and Organization Theory

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Abstract

As threats to democracy endanger the rights and freedoms of people around the world, scholars are increasingly interrogating the role that organizations play in shaping democratic and authoritarian societies. Just as societies can be more or less democratic, so, too, can organizations. This essay, in honor of *ASQ*'s 70th volume, argues for a deeper focus in organizational research on the extent to which organizations themselves are democratic and the outcomes associated with these varied models of organizing. First, we provide a framework for considering the extent to which organizations are democratically organized, accounting for the varied ways in which workers can participate in their organizations. Second, we call for research on the outcomes associated with democratic organizing at both the organizational and societal levels. We build from research arguing that the extent to which workers participate in organizational decision making can spill over to impact their expectations of and participation in civic life. Moving forward, we argue it is critical to recognize that questions of democracy and authoritarianism concern not only the political contexts in which organizations are embedded but also how organizations themselves are structured and contribute to society.

Keywords: organizational theory, democracy, democratic organizing, worker participation, power

By many measures, democracy is in decline. Currently, the world is nearly divided, with 91 countries classified as democracies and 88 as autocracies (Nord et al., 2024). In recent years, democracy has faced increasing headwinds. The number of countries in which political rights and civil liberties are diminishing

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is higher than the number in which they are improving, and a growing proportion of the world's population lives in authoritarian states (Freedom House, 2024; Nord et al., 2024). These challenges are not new (Snyder, 2017). The 1920s and 1930s, for example, saw European democracies collapse into authoritarianism, while the Soviet Union spread its own authoritarian model across Eastern Europe. Today, as authoritarianism resurges, questions about how democracy is eroded, maintained, and rebuilt are taking on renewed urgency.

Democracy, as Abraham Lincoln (1863) famously characterized it, is ''government of the people, by the people, for the people.''[1] In its ideal form, democracy places power in the hands of citizens, treating them as equals and ensuring their participation in regular, free, and fair elections (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Nord et al., 2024). Beyond elections, democracy upholds citizens' civil liberties and guarantees their equal rights and opportunities to engage in political processes (Fuerstein, 2024). In contrast, authoritarianism concentrates state power in the hands of a single party or figure, threatens civil liberties, weakens institutions, and represses citizens (Gerschewski, 2013; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Adler et al., 2023).

In this essay, we take as a starting point that upholding and enhancing democratic society is essential to safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. As philosopher Philip Pettit (2014: xxiv) observed, metaphorically, democracy enables us to ''look others in the eye without reason for fear'' and to live as free people. Furthermore, research highlights the significant contributions of democracy to social progress. Certainly, the effects of individual democratic regimes can vary widely, and democracy is not inevitably a force for good. But its overall track record is impressive: Compared to authoritarian alternatives, democracies have engaged less often in war, advanced minority rights, reduced ethnic favoritism, and been associated with better health outcomes, greater life satisfaction, and economic prosperity (Acemoglu et al., 2019; Fuerstein, 2024).

Despite the contributions of democracy, economic, social, political, and technological forces are challenging its stability and contributing to the rise of authoritarianism. Economic inequality and stagnant living standards have fueled widespread social discontent and resentment, eroding trust in democratic institutions (Stiglitz, 2012; Piketty, 2014, 2020; Brown, 2019). Political polarization, amplified by misinformation and the exploitation of identity politics, has further undermined the civic foundations of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Sunstein, 2018; Lamont, 2023). At the same time, digital technologies have empowered authoritarian regimes to monitor and repress citizens while enabling the proliferation of disinformation that destabilizes democratic deliberation (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Bradshaw and Howard, 2019; McKay and Tenove, 2021).

In this context, recent scholarship has called for greater engagement with the role of organizations in shaping the decline and resilience of both

[1] There are many definitions of democracy, and democracy has many dimensions that are the subject of extensive scholarship and debate in disciplines such as political science and political philosophy. The Varieties of Democracy project, for example, ''distinguish[es] between multiple core principles of democracy: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian'' (Nord et al., 2024: 9). Following Fuerstein (2024: 27), we draw on a broad understanding of democracy as ''a system of government in which the authority to exercise power lies with all those subject to it ('the people') and should serve 'the people' considered as equals.''

democracy and authoritarianism (Haveman, 2022; Adler et al., 2023). As organizational scholars, we have a keen interest in how organizations—key pillars of modern society—actively shape the functioning of the societies in which they are embedded. Many organizations play a critical role in protecting, maintaining, and enhancing democracy; for example, a wide range of organizations support election infrastructure, and advocacy organizations seek to protect civil liberties. But as wealth and power become more concentrated, as has happened in many democratic societies in recent decades, those with the greatest resources increasingly use both corporate and political organizations to wield disproportionate political influence through a variety of activities, including lobbying and political campaign donations (Mills, 1956; Useem, 1986; Barley, 2010; Hacker and Pierson, 2010; Walker and Rea, 2014; Winkler, 2018; Cagé, 2020; Nyberg, 2021; Zavyalova, 2025). Taken together, these dynamics reveal that organizations are not passive actors but, rather, active contributors in shaping democracy's foundations.

Beyond organizations' active and direct role in reinforcing or undermining democratic society, individuals' experiences in organizations shape their beliefs about and expectations for democratic values and norms. The spillover hypothesis, influentially articulated by the political theorist Carole Pateman (1970), posits that the experience of democratic participation at work may increase participation in broader political democracy. According to this hypothesis, workplace participation has educative effects; in other words, it may help individuals develop skills and beliefs that foster civic and political participation (Pateman, 1970; Rybnikova, 2022). Along these lines, research suggests a link between workers' experiences of voice and participation in organizations and a range of outcomes, including their civic attitudes and their engagement in political and civic activities like voting and volunteering (Elden, 1981; Milliken et al., 2015; Budd, Lamare, and Timming, 2018; Wu and Paluck, 2020; Budd and Lamare, 2021; Rybnikova, 2022; Coutrot, 2024; Wu et al., 2024).

Scholars have also suggested that when workers experience workplaces as systems in which their voices carry little to no weight, they may come to accept similar dynamics in the broader political arena, such that non-democratic organizations may contribute to normalizing authoritarian governance (Anderson, 2017; Ferreras, Battilana, and Méda, 2022). This argument suggests that the distribution of decision-making power within organizations has not only organizational but also societal implications. Indeed, proponents of democratic organizing have argued that ''democratizing the workplace has beneficial effects on political democracy'' (Frega, Herzog, and Neuhäuser, 2019: 2; see also Brenkert, 1992). Yet, we have much more to learn about the complex relationship between workers' experiences in (non-)democratic organizations and their broader political attitudes and behaviors.

Non-democratic ways of organizing have been accepted as the norm since the rise of large-scale organizations (Perrow, 1991; Anderson, 2017). At the same time, more-democratic forms of organizing that structurally guarantee workers an equal right to participate in the governance of their organizations, such as worker cooperatives and codetermination systems, have long existed. To better understand democratic organizing and its consequences, we need to direct our attention to these contexts, building on decades of prior research on the varied forms of worker participation in organizations (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Heller et al., 1998; Wilkinson et al., 2010; Atzeni, 2012).

In this essay, we outline an agenda for future research to investigate how organizations can be structured in more- or less-democratic ways and the implications of (non-)democratic organizing for both organizational and societal outcomes. By exploring how democratic principles can be embedded in organizational design, we aim to chart a path for research that bridges organization studies with the urgent societal imperative to uphold and enhance democracy.

THE SPECTRUM OF DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZING

Research shows that there is a gap between workers' desire to have a say in what happens in their organizations and the voice they actually experience (Freeman and Rogers, 1999; Kochan et al., 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic instability catalyzed new support for employee activism, union organizing, and legislative proposals that aimed to increase workers' participation in corporate governance (Davis, 2021; Kochan et al., 2023). For example, highly publicized unionization drives at companies like Amazon and Google (Schiffer, 2021; Tarasov, 2022), as well as strike actions by auto workers, nurses, screenwriters, actors, and others (Isidore, 2024), reflect a resurgence of workers organizing to have a greater say in their working lives. The past decade has also seen movement toward legislative changes that intended to empower workers to participate in corporate governance in places such as France (Aubert and Bernheim, 2021) and the United States (Williams, 2018)—changes that would build on longstanding traditions of worker representation in corporate governance in places like Germany and Scandinavia (Turner, 1991). Along with concerns related to rising authoritarianism (see the discussion curated by Michael Lounsbury and Nelson Phillips in Adler et al., 2023), these shifting conditions have sparked a new wave of research and writing on democratic organizing, including in the field of organization studies (Davis, 2021; Battilana, Yen et al., 2022; Ferreras, Battilana, and Méda, 2022; Gilbert et al., 2023; Weber, Unterrainer, and Jønsson, 2023).

Next, we briefly discuss the history of non-democratic forms of organizing, as well as the diversity of democratic forms that exist today. We then outline considerations for assessing more- and less-democratic forms of organizing, emphasizing the strength of workers' right to participate in organizational decision making.

The Historical Dominance of Non-Democratic Forms of Organizing

For the past century, organizations in which decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a limited group of top managers and shareholder representatives have been dominant. To explain this dominance, scholars have focused on the economic efficiency of such forms of organizing (Coase, 1937; Weber, 1947; Ouchi, 1980; Williamson, 1981), their alignment with basic human psychological drives toward status orderings (Magee and Galinsky, 2008; Gruenfeld and Tiedens, 2010; Pfeffer, 2013), and organizational legitimacy considerations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Agency theory, too, justifies structuring corporate governance primarily to protect shareholders' interests (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), overlooking the broader responsibilities of companies to other stakeholders (Stout, 2013;

Veldman and Willmott, 2016). Because the concentration of decision-making power at the top (a non-democratic model) has become the default structure for organizing work across most contexts (Perrow, 1991; Anderson, 2017), workers in many organizations lack the right to participate in decisions that greatly affect their lives and well-being (Brenkert, 1992; Foley and Polanyi, 2006; Landemore and Ferreras, 2016; Ferreras, 2017).

Since the Industrial Revolution, social scientists have been concerned with the extensive control that owners of capital and their representatives wield over workers. For example, foundational thinkers (e.g., Durkheim, 1893; Marx, 1906; Polanyi, 1944) were deeply concerned with the societal implications of the alienation, exploitation, and commodification of factory workers, who had to sell their labor to capital owners to survive but had no say on critical topics such as safety, work hours, and pay. From this ''fundamental inequality'' of capitalism flows the disempowerment of workers (Adler, 2019: 32; Ferreras, 2017). Furthermore, the growth of business enterprises spurred the development of bureaucracy (Chandler, 1977), which relied on the principles of instrumental rationality, impartiality, and domination (Weber, 1947; Monteiro and Adler, 2021). Bureaucracy reinforced hierarchical and often authoritarian control of workers by owners and top managers (Perrow, 1991; Anderson, 2017). This approach has normalized workplaces as non-democratic spaces that tend to exclude workers' voices from meaningful governance (Landemore and Ferreras, 2016; Anderson, 2017; Ferreras, Battilana, and Méda, 2022).

Despite the dominance of non-democratic models, organizations have long experimented with alternative, more-democratic ways of organizing, such as cooperatives, unions, works councils, and codetermination, that ensure workers' participation in governance (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Turner, 1991; Heller et al., 1998; Wilkinson et al., 2010; Atzeni, 2012; Rubinstein and McCarthy, 2016). We turn to these next.

The Variety of Democratic Forms of Organizing

A critical difference between non-democratic and more-democratic forms of organizing lies in the extent to which decision-making power is concentrated in a small group of decision makers or more democratically shared among organizational members (Battilana and Casciaro, 2021). Workers' equal right and ability to participate in decision making is thus an essential criterion in assessing the level of democratization in an organization. We argue that this critical dimension of democratic organizing—the strength of workers' participation—merits special attention in the study of how democratic organizing works and its consequences, and we identify four additional dimensions along which democratic organizing can vary. Table 1 summarizes these five dimensions.

Workers' participation can range in strength from weak to strong; weak participation is informal and at the discretion of organizational leaders, whereas strong participation indicates that workers' participation in decision making is structurally guaranteed through formal governance systems. When workers' participation is weak, it is consultative, meaning that workers can express their views, but their input is not binding. For example, this is the case when workers exercise voice through the proverbial comment box that management uses to solicit their ideas. When participation is strong, it is embedded in an organization's design and structure. This is the case, for example, when workers in a worker-owned cooperative

Table 1. Dimensions for Consideration in the Study of Democratic Organizing

	Definition	Illustrative Examples
Strength of participation	Worker participation can vary in the extent to which it is structurally guaranteed by the organization's system of governance.	**Weak:** Worker participation is consultative, at the discretion of organizational leaders. **Strong:** Worker participation is formally incorporated into organizational design and, in some cases, structurally guaranteed by the organization's system of governance.
Scope of decision making	Workers can participate in decision making on a range of topics, from narrow to broad.	**Narrow:** Workers have the autonomy to make operational decisions relevant to their role. **Broad:** Workers participate in decision making on strategic issues.
Representation	Worker participation can be direct or indirect.	**Direct:** Workers directly participate in decision-making processes. **Indirect:** Workers elect leaders to represent them in decision-making processes.
Hierarchy	Democratic organizations can vary in the extent to which they are flat or tall.	**Flat:** Fewer levels of organizational hierarchy **Tall:** More levels of organizational hierarchy
Financial ownership	Workers may or may not have a financial stake in the organization, which can vary in size.	**Low:** Workers have no or limited financial ownership. **High:** Workers own most or all of the organization.

collectively make organizational decisions and when unions or works councils have a guaranteed right to participate in certain types of decisions.

Research in recent decades has focused predominantly on weaker forms of worker participation. For instance, research on worker voice, which is by definition informal and discretionary, explores what happens when workers share their views with the aim of bringing about improvement or change (for reviews, see Morrison, 2011, 2014, 2023). This work on weak forms of participation tends to draw on psychological approaches, often focusing on the predictors of voice (Liang, Farh, and Farh, 2012; Morrison, 2023) and exploring how the exercise of voice impacts individual- and group-level outcomes such as the risks and rewards for workers who speak up (Burris, 2012), workers' status (Bain et al., 2021), psychological empowerment (Seibert, Wang, and Courtright, 2011), and unit performance (Detert et al., 2013).

Research on internal social activism also explores how workers speak up and advocate for change in organizations, even in the absence of a guaranteed right to participate in decision making (for reviews, see Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Heucher et al., 2024). This research investigates how workers collectively organize around social issues such as gender equity or minority rights, and it often traces the processes by which employee activists advance change despite lacking formal decision-making authority on those issues (e.g., Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Kellogg, 2009, 2012; DeCelles, Sonenshein, and King, 2020; DeJordy et al., 2020; Buchter, 2021; Kessinger, 2024). While broader in scope, these forms of participation generally remain consultative, meaning that workers can raise concerns and advocate for change, but their power to affect decisions remains informal and thereby often limited.

Scholars have also examined settings in which workers' participation in decision making is stronger, i.e., formally guaranteed. Research has documented some organizations' structural experiments with self-managing teams and decentralized decision making (Barker, 1993; Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Lee, 2024) and has shown that decentralized forms of organizing can increase workers' autonomy and decision rights. In these contexts, the organizational structure ensures that workers have a significant degree of autonomy to make decisions related to their own work roles. Other research has examined organizations that go further by guaranteeing workers or their representatives the ability to exercise power via the organization's system of governance, as is the case in cooperatives and codetermination systems (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986; Young-Hyman, Magne, and Kruse, 2023). These organizations typically grant workers participation in a wide range of organizational decisions. For example, codetermination, which is prevalent in countries including Germany, Austria, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, grants workers formal representation on corporate boards, and workers' representatives then vote on strategic decisions that affect them, such as pay ratios and CEO selection (McGaughey, 2015; Scholz and Vitols, 2019; Jäger, Noy, and Schoefer, 2022).

Arguably, the strength of worker participation (from discretionary to structurally guaranteed) is the most important element of democratic organizing, as it determines whether workers have the formal right to exercise power in their organizations (Frega, Herzog, and Neuhäuser, 2019). Although we discuss a continuum of participation from weak to strong, many scholars would argue that a threshold of structurally guaranteed participation is necessary for an organization to be considered democratic. For example, scholars have defined ''workplace democracy'' and ''organizational democracy'' as involving ''widely and evenly distribute[d] . . . governance rights among workers'' (Young-Hyman, Magne, and Kruse, 2023: 1353) and ''broad-based, and institutionalized employee participation that is not occasional in nature'' (Weber, Unterrainer, and Jønsson, 2023: 1). As we continue to study worker participation in its many forms, focusing more on whether participation is weak or strong can help sharpen our understanding of how the strength of participation shapes different outcomes.

At the same time, organizations can also vary along several other dimensions that shape the nature of worker participation in decision making (Dachler and Wilpert, 1978; Heller et al., 1998; Wilkinson et al., 2010). We identify four additional dimensions that are important to the study of democratic organizing: scope of decision making, representation, hierarchy, and financial ownership.

First, the scope of workers' participation refers to whether workers influence narrow, task-specific decisions or broader, strategic ones. Workers' participation is narrow when they participate only in decision making related to their own tasks or daily work, such as when workers have a say in whether to install new equipment on a factory line or when they can choose how to structure their own work hours. Studies that have focused on a relatively narrow scope include those examining self-managing teams and decentralized decision making, which increase workers' autonomy and strengthen local decision rights (Barker, 1993; Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Lee, 2024). A broad scope extends workers' participation to a wide range of organizational strategic decisions, such as determining whether to lay off workers or adopt environmentally sustainable production methods. Examples of research on that kind of broader scope would

include studies of cooperatives and codetermination. The broader the scope, the greater the potential for workers to shape organizations' strategic direction.

Second, workers' participation in decision making can be either direct or indirect. Direct participation occurs, for example, in worker cooperatives and self-managing teams in which each individual directly votes or otherwise participates in decision making. Indirect participation happens through the selection of representatives. For example, in most labor unions, workers elect union leaders who advocate for their rights. Direct and indirect participation can both be democratic decision-making processes, each offering an avenue for workers to express their voices and influence outcomes.

Third, democratic forms of organizing may be more or less hierarchical. Though democracy is often associated with flatness, and authoritarianism is often associated with tall, hierarchical structures, democracy and hierarchy are distinct constructs (Battilana, Yen et al., 2022). On the one hand, democratic bureaucracy, which combines participation and hierarchical authority structures, is possible (Monteiro and Adler, 2021), as exemplified in codetermination systems and unions. On the other hand, some democratic organizations eschew hierarchical authority structures and embrace flatness; in collectivist organizations, for example, authority is shared by the collective and defined by egalitarianism (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). But less hierarchy does not guarantee strong worker participation; organizations can be non-hierarchical and have weak participation. This is the case in many startups, which may be flatter organizations in which workers can exercise a lot of voice but do not ultimately have a binding influence on decision making (Turco, 2016).

Fourth, democratic organizations vary in whether they incorporate an element of financial ownership. In worker-owned cooperatives, workers become decision makers because they own shares of the cooperative firm. Regardless of the size of each worker's share, the principle of one person, one vote is usually the norm, giving workers an equitable stake in both the financial outcomes and the strategic direction of the organization. In firms with an employee stock ownership plan, workers may hold shares but often lack substantive decision-making power because the total stake they own is not significant enough to give them more than a marginal presence in the general assembly of shareholders. These examples highlight the distinction between financial ownership and participatory governance (Ben-Ner and Jones, 1995). Though interest in worker ownership is rising (Blasi, Freeman, and Kruse, 2013; Dudley and Rouen, 2021), much of the research on this topic has focused on ownership as a way to redistribute financial resources (which is an important concern), without considering its implications for democratic organizing.

Thus, while democratic organizing always entails workers' participation in decision making (with some threshold of strong or structurally guaranteed participation necessary for an organization to be considered a workplace democracy), the other four dimensions are also important to explore when studying democratic organizing. Together, these dimensions can lead to many forms of organizing, with some being more democratic than others. For example, workers can consult on (weak participation) or have the structural right to decide on (strong participation) everything from the type of coffee in the break room to the mission statement, and they can decide on these topics directly or through representatives, in flat or tall organizations, and whether or not they own shares in the organization. In other words, scope of decision making (narrow to broad),

representation (direct to indirect), hierarchy (flat to tall), and financial ownership (none to full) on their own do not necessarily correspond to greater or lesser degrees of democracy. Instead, these elements can be combined with varying levels of strength of workers' participation in decision making, resulting in diverse forms of organizing that can be more or less democratic. These dimensions, summarized in Table 1, provide a rich set of considerations for future research on democratic organizing.

EXPLORING THE INTERNAL WORKINGS OF DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZING

We have much more to learn about the internal workings of various democratic forms of organizing, especially how organizations can create and sustain democratic governance structures and processes over time. Democratic forms of organizing are often critiqued for their tendency to become less democratic, though a recent review of qualitative studies showed that it is possible for democratic organizations to maintain and in some cases even rebuild democratic practices (Unterrainer et al., 2022). Questions regarding the sustainability of democratic organizing make it critical to understand which types of participation are most sustainable and how democratic forms may evolve (see, for example, Bretos and Errasti, 2017; Bourlier-Bargues, Gond, and Valiorgue, 2024; Lee and Young-Hyman, 2025). For instance, when and how do organizations move across the spectrum from weak to strong participation, or back again? Compared to weak forms of participation, are strong forms more resistant to change? And what roles do the other dimensions of democratic organizing play in sustaining participation? These are not static systems, so the mechanisms enabling their sustainability are important to explore.

Challenges Associated with Conflict Management

Better understanding how to sustain democratic organizing requires understanding how to manage its challenges. Foundational work in organization theory tells us that organizations are political coalitions of members with often-conflicting goals (Parker Follett, 1942; March, 1962; Cyert and March, 1963). Moreover, the challenge of managing intra-organizational conflict is especially salient in the literature on democratic organizing (Jackall, 1984; Darr, 1999; Slade Shantz et al., 2020). If unmanaged, excessive conflict can contribute to decision gridlock and even threaten organizational survival (Polletta, 2002; Harrison and Freeman, 2004). This potential for gridlock raises questions about the potential tensions between workers' participation, on the one hand, and speed and efficiency in solving critical problems, on the other. How might organizations foster deliberation and participation and also make timely and efficient decisions?

Organizational research suggests that organizational structures and culture that support deliberation can help organizations navigate the risk of conflict inherent in democratic decision making. Scholars have long argued that experimenting with both traditional and non-traditional organizing structures is needed to support participation and effective functioning in democratic organizations (Freeman, 1970). For example, research on several forms of democratic organizing finds that mandatory meetings, formal processes and roles, and rituals facilitate the resolution of conflict (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Battilana et al., 2015). Similarly, Lee (2024) found that embedding authority in formal, task-based roles rather than in individuals promotes more-egalitarian decision

making. Future research will need to explore the conditions under which different structures are most useful for the effective functioning of democratic forms of organizing.

The development and fostering of a deliberative culture is also critical for democratic organizing. Deliberation—a process of argument and persuasion through which diverse interests are formed into collective agendas—is a key mechanism for resolving conflict and reaching consensus in democratic settings (Cohen, 1989; Fung, 2005; Dryzek et al., 2019; Herzog, 2024). Effective deliberation relies on an organizational culture that enables people to use the voice rights they have, to navigate the challenges of conflict and compromise, and to collaborate constructively (Battilana, Fuerstein, and Lee, 2018). Taken together, this scholarship suggests that both (formal) structures and (informal) culture help organizations to contain conflict, manage it productively, and sustain democratic organizing—but there is much more to be learned.

Challenges Associated with Scaling

Another common concern with democratic organizing is that it is difficult to scale, especially when participation is direct (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986; Whyte and Whyte, 1988; Massa and O'Mahony, 2021). The rise of technologies like digital platforms (Davis, 2016; Davis and Sinha, 2021) offers new possibilities for extending the scale and scope of democratic decision making, as such platforms can be used to facilitate more people's direct participation in decision making on a wide range of topics. Some research has explored how companies use digital technologies to elicit employee voice (Turco, 2016), but we can also learn from other settings in which people use digital platforms and networks to facilitate participative decision making among a range of stakeholders. These settings include open source communities that experience the development of formal governance systems with democratic mechanisms (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007), online networks of self-organized activists (Massa and O'Mahony, 2021), democratically organized freelancers (Charles, Ferreras, and Lamine, 2020), platform-based communities in the gig economy, including platform cooperatives (Schor, 2020), and social innovation challenges that engage multiple stakeholders in tackling social problems (Mair and Gegenhuber, 2021; Fayard, 2024).

Many of these efforts at community organizing through digital platforms stand in contrast to hierarchical forms of organization, but that does not necessarily mean that these are democratic forms of organizing. For example, although the self-organized activists studied by Massa and O'Mahony (2021) are distributed in an online community, a participation architecture emerges that partitions activists such that ultimate control still resides in a small group of experts. In contrast, in the open source community studied by O'Mahony and Ferraro (2007), democratic elements, such as being able to amend the constitution as well as voting to elect and recall a leader, provide individuals with more-equal and stronger rights of participation. These examples suggest it would be fruitful to examine platform and community organizing more explicitly through the lens of democratic organizing (rather than as forms of decentralization, which may or may not be democratic; see Reineke, Katila, and Eisenhardt, 2025). It will also be important to consider the range of ways that people can participate in digital platforms, such as through creating, acknowledging, liking,

and commenting. How might these new forms of social participation shape and intersect with more-traditional ways of participating at work and in our communities?

In addition, it would be useful to explore the technologies underlying some of this organizing, such as blockchain technologies that support cryptocurrencies—technologies that have been touted as "democratizing," while simultaneously being described as dangerous. For example, decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) rely on blockchain as a governance mechanism to coordinate and facilitate collaboration through voting rather than through a central authority (Lumineau, Wang, and Schilke, 2021). Yet, the promise of DAOs for democratic organizing is still mostly theoretical, as tokens by which voting shares are determined can be concentrated in the hands of a few people and have been subject to fraud and hacking (Chayka, 2022; Liu, 2022). Instead of looking at such technological changes as either the solution to all problems or the source of all evils, we need more research: studies that explore the implementation of these tools, investigate how they may enable stronger and broader participation, and consider how they may be used to control workers, undermine participation, or consolidate authority (Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin, 2020). This work will require careful, nuanced research investigating the systems in which people use and interact with technologies (Anthony, Bechky, and Fayard, 2023).

In examining the challenges and opportunities of scaling democratic organizing, we also ought to learn from, and complement, research in political science that has explored large-scale participation of citizens and communities. For example, the work of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom highlights how local knowledge, community participation, and the development of institutional arrangements enable the management of common resources (without relying on top-down regulation or authority; see Ostrom, 1990). In addition, citizen assemblies—an important innovation in the civic realm—are increasingly used across the world both at the community and national levels to enable citizens to more directly participate in shaping the future of democracy (Fournier, 2011; Landemore, 2020). These assemblies have been used to gather citizens with the mandate to make recommendations and collective decisions on critical topics like public budgeting (Wright, 2010; Wu et al., 2024), marriage equality, and climate change (Landemore, 2020: xiv–xv).

Citizen assemblies also present another context in which to study the use of technology (Landemore, 2021). For example, algorithms have been developed to select participants for such assemblies (Flanigan et al., 2021), and digital platforms have been used to facilitate large-scale participation. In Taiwan, for instance, the government worked with a civic tech community called g0v (Gov Zero) to develop a deliberation process that enabled citizens to participate in key government decisions via an online discussion platform (Horton, 2018). As Hélène Landemore (2020), a political scientist who studies these citizen assemblies, suggests, such initiatives show that another form of democracy, a more participative one, is still possible, and they may have important learnings for other forms of democratic organizing.

Thus, in addition to advocating for research on the varied dimensions associated with democratic organizing, we call for future scholarship on how to manage the challenges that often arise in sustaining democratic organizing, including managing conflict and scaling participation. We advocate

particular focus on the roles of organizational structures and culture and of new technologies in these processes. Next, we turn to the organizational and societal outcomes associated with (non-)democratic organizing.

OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH DEMOCRATIC AND NON-DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZING

Democratic organizing is unlikely to produce uniformly better or worse outcomes; instead, its effects on different goals are likely to vary in diverse and context-dependent ways. In some cases, participation supports organizational goals like providing welfare services, generating renewable energy, and spurring local development, as well as broader emancipatory goals like the political empowerment of citizens (e.g., Blanco and León, 2017; Galera, 2017; Bauwens, Huybrechts, and Dufays, 2020). In other instances, participation supports traditional organizational goals like profit maximization or financial efficiency (e.g., Mazmanian and Beckman, 2018). Thus, we need to examine not only how and where democratic organizing manifests but also the mechanisms and conditions that shape its influence on individual, organizational, and societal outcomes.

Organizational Consequences of Democratic Organizing

Prior research shows that empowering workers to participate in decision making enhances psychological empowerment, trust, legitimacy, and commitment, which fosters a greater sense of ownership and accountability (Seibert, Wang, and Courtright, 2011; Battilana, Fuerstein, and Lee, 2018). Workplace participation can also improve workers' psychological well-being and job satisfaction, offering a powerful counterbalance to the alienation and disempowerment that workers often experience in traditional workplaces (Weber, Unterrainer, and Höge, 2020; Lovejoy et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2022). These findings indicate that participation is critical in and of itself, beyond any purported influence on performance or firm-level outcomes; well-being, empowerment, and engagement carry great benefits for people. To add nuance and extend our understanding of these outcomes, we need a more systematic examination of how the variable dimensions of workers' participation (e.g., strength and scope of decision making) shape whether these benefits of participation are realized. Furthermore, asking these questions may help to normalize the importance of outcomes such as well-being, empowerment, and engagement without requiring a business case that these outcomes support organizational performance (see Kaplan, 2020).

In addition to associating democratic organizing with empowered and more-committed workers, research has associated it with higher levels of productivity and better decision making. Young-Hyman, Magne, and Kruse (2023) found that in knowledge-intensive industries, workplace democracies are more productive compared to traditional organizations. This finding is consistent with research showing that diversity, democracy, and voice can all benefit learning, decision making, and unit performance (Ely and Thomas, 2001, 2020; Edmondson, 2003; Hong and Page, 2004; Morrison, 2011; Detert et al., 2013; Gerlsbeck and Herzog, 2020). It is also critical to uncover pathways through which workers' voice can be successfully implemented when their participation is consultative (Satterstrom, Kerrissey, and DiBenigno, 2021) and to investigate

how variation along the other dimensions of democratic organizing (i.e., scope, representation, hierarchy, ownership) shapes outcomes like productivity, innovation, and the quality of decision making. For example, when does indirect representation improve decision making, and when are direct forms of participation more beneficial?

There is also a need to explore the relationship between democratic organizing and equal rights and opportunities in organizations. Political democracy is not only about participation. In the words of political theorist Wendy Brown (2019: 24), ''democracy is moored by equality,'' and in its ideal form, democracy involves the full participation of *all* citizens and the equal protection of fundamental rights and civil liberties. Just as minority groups are not always protected in political democracies, we cannot assume that democratic organizing without careful attention to equality will protect the interests of minorities in organizations. As a wealth of existing research on inequality in organizations already shows, organizations—even those that are more oriented to participation—often reproduce inequalities and power imbalances (Amis, Mair, and Munir, 2020). Research has shown that cooperatives can reproduce demographically based inequalities (Meyers and Vallas, 2016), and recent research found that in flatter (as compared to taller) organizations, women are less likely than men to see themselves as fitting in and having career opportunities (Hurst, Lee, and Frake, 2024).

This research points to the importance of formal structures that enable and ensure the equal participation and the protection of all voices; without them, democratic processes can be used to undermine the rights and interests of minority groups or those who challenge authority (Freeman, 1970; Bourlier-Bargues, Gond, and Valiorgue, 2024). Future research ought to further investigate the conditions under which different types of democratic organizations and different organizing practices promote or inhibit equitable opportunities and outcomes.

Future research will also need to investigate how various kinds of worker participation shape which goals organizations adopt. In keeping with organization scholars' increasing focus on social innovation, sustainability, and the pursuit of multiple objectives (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Bansal and Song, 2017; Vedula et al., 2022; Beckman et al., 2023), we see an opportunity to examine the relationship between democratic organizing and an organization's social and environmental impact. Some research suggests that democratic organizations will further social aims. For example, Tracey, Phillips, and Haugh (2005) described how community enterprises, which have democratic governance structures, behave in socially responsible ways (see also Mair, Wolf, and Seelos, 2016; Galera, 2017). But while some have argued that empowering workers will encourage firms to embrace goals beyond financial performance and efficiency (Rothschild, 2009; Davis, 2021; Ferreras, Battilana, and Méda, 2022), others worry about conditions under which empowering workers may have the opposite effect. For instance, there may be scenarios in which empowering workers to participate in strategic decisions with broad scope will aid in the pursuit of environmental protection, such as when workers live near a factory and have an interest in curbing pollution. Yet, there may be other situations in which workers may resist or slow the implementation of environmental solutions, such as when transitioning to more-sustainable practices may threaten their jobs or their identities. Instead of speculating on what is likely to

happen, we should tackle these issues in a rigorous and systematic way. Future research will thus need to further examine when participation engenders the adoption of social or environmental aims alongside financial ones. This research will need to account not only for organizational dynamics but also for the role of the institutional context.

In considering the pursuit of social and environmental aims, another important question to investigate is whether, or under which conditions, democratic organizations are better or worse at managing the tensions and tradeoffs inherent in the pursuit of multiple objectives (Kaplan, 2019; Battilana, Obloj et al., 2022). As discussed above, political theorists have argued that democratic participation and deliberation can help to integrate multiple and conflicting goals in decision making (Landemore, 2012; Dryzek et al., 2019). These ideas may also apply in the pursuit of multiple organizational goals, but more research is needed to deepen our understanding (Battilana, Fuerstein, and Lee, 2018). In particular, we need additional comparative work contrasting more- and less-democratic forms of organizing (see Young-Hyman, 2017; Berti and Pitelis, 2022; Young-Hyman, Magne, and Kruse, 2023, for examples).

Finally, although we have focused on workers' participation, organizations have many different stakeholders who may also participate in organizational decision making, such as community members, suppliers, customers, shareholders, and governments (Crane, Matten, and Moon, 2004; Parmar et al., 2010). For example, some organizations are participating in multistakeholder initiatives on issues like corporate social responsibility and labor standards (Fung, 2003; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; Huber and Schormair, 2021; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021) or have created a board seat for a representative of the environment (Kaminski, 2022; Rose, 2024). In considering what happens when democratic organizations incorporate the voices of more types of stakeholders, we ought to consider whether we observe different outcomes, including those beyond the organization, such as societal benefits like civic wealth creation (Lumpkin and Bacq, 2019).

Societal Consequences of Democratic Organizing

The implications of (non-)democratic organizing extend far beyond the organization itself, influencing societal norms, values, behaviors, and other institutions. As discussed above, political theorists have long argued that the experience of participating in workplace democracy can spill over into broader civic engagement because workers who engage in participatory governance at work are more likely to develop the skills, confidence, and expectations necessary for active citizenship (Pateman, 1970). Research offers some support for this hypothesis, finding that greater employee voice and control at work are associated with higher rates of political participation, voting, participation in demonstrations and boycotts, engagement in local communities, and civic behavior (Milliken et al., 2015; Budd, Lamare, and Timming, 2018; Budd and Lamare, 2021; Geurkink, Akkerman, and Sluiter, 2022; Rybnikova, 2022). When workers are given greater local voice, they have less deference to generalized authority and are more civically engaged (Wu and Paluck, 2020; Wu et al., 2024). Although this work includes Wu's recent field experiments demonstrating causality, methodological challenges such as reverse causality and the challenge of conducting longitudinal studies remain a concern (Kim, 2021). In

addition, it would be useful to more systematically investigate how different dimensions and varying degrees of democratic organizing shape political and civic behavior (i.e., weak vs. strong participation, narrow vs. broad scope, direct vs. indirect representation, tall vs. flat hierarchy, complete vs. no ownership). For example, Palmieri (2024) investigated the effect of financial ownership on voting in presidential elections.

A preliminary examination of this research suggests that even weak and narrow participation can have positive societal spillovers. For instance, Milliken et al. (2015) discussed connections between employee voice, a weak form of participation, and active engagement in community. Lopes, Lagoa, and Calapez (2014) found an association between workers' autonomy over their own work tasks, a narrow scope of participation, and their participation in volunteer, political, and trade union activities. In a meta-analysis, Weber, Unterrainer, and Höge (2020) found that individuals' direct participation in decision making (regardless of its strength) was associated with their civic and democratic orientations. The authors speculated that direct participation, even if it is not structurally guaranteed, may be particularly important because personally experiencing direct participation may engender the feelings of autonomy and mastery most relevant to the spillover effects theorized by Pateman (1970). If structural bases of participation are indirect or not felt by employees—as may sometimes be the case, for example, in representative codetermination systems or unions—these spillover effects may not be as pronounced. At the same time, strong and broad participation may still be important in shaping whether workers' suggestions are actually implemented, the durability of workers' participation, and other organizational and societal outcomes. Recent work shows how working in cooperatives, which exemplify strong participation, can foster civic engagement both in and outside of work (Schlachter and Ársælsson, 2024). In a review, Kim (2021) found that many existing studies do not measure participation in decision making at the organizational level (broad scope), and when they do, they often collapse measures of narrow and broad scope into a single scale. More-nuanced and comparative research is needed to better understand the mechanisms at play and their implications.

Future research will also benefit from comparative studies across various political regimes and forms of capitalism, across different legal and regulatory contexts, and across time (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Soskice, 1999; Hall and Soskice, 2001). Many of the studies on the spillover effects of democratic organizing have been conducted in Western democracies, especially in Europe (e.g., Budd, Lamare, and Timming, 2018), but a few studies have been conducted in authoritarian contexts (Wu and Paluck, 2020; Wu et al., 2024). According to these studies, positive spillover effects, such as more civic engagement and less deference to authority, are observed as a result of workplace participation in both democratic and authoritarian societal contexts (even when workplace participation is relatively weak and narrow). Can such effects be sustained over time in an authoritarian context, or are they destined to be ephemeral, given that participation rights could easily be taken away if they threaten the authoritarian government (Zavyalova, 2025)? Investigating these questions across contexts will be particularly helpful in enabling us to connect organizational and societal dynamics and to better understand the conditions under which democratic organizing can contribute to the enhancement of democracy.

In addition to democratic outcomes, a societal outcome worthy of particular focus is how democratic organizing shapes broader patterns of inequality. Many scholars argue that non-democratic organizations have significantly contributed to democracy's decline by exacerbating economic inequality through wage disparities, exploitative labor practices, and the prioritization of financial value (Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2013; Piketty, 2014; Cobb, 2016; Fligstein and Goldstein, 2022; Haveman, 2022). We know that organizations shape the distribution of wealth and power in society (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt, 2019; Amis, Mair, and Munir, 2020) and that inequality is exacerbated when organizations use their resources to influence regulations and governance in ways that reinforce their power (e.g., Hacker and Pierson, 2010; Walker and Rea, 2014; Winkler, 2018). This raises interesting questions about whether the turn to democratic forms of organizing can reduce systemic inequalities and promote inclusive growth. For example, worker-owned cooperatives have been shown to reduce wage disparities within organizations and foster community development (Rothschild, 2009; Young-Hyman, Magne, and Kruse, 2023). Future research can consider how democratic organizing may intersect with labor market structures such as firm size and employment concentration (e.g., Davis and Cobb, 2010; Cobb and Lin, 2017; Cobb and Stevens, 2017) and organizational practices such as hiring and evaluation (e.g., Amis, Mair, and Munir, 2020; Abraham, Botelho, and Lamont-Dobbin, 2024) to shape wages and inequality.

CONCLUSION: STUDYING REAL UTOPIAS

As we write these lines, the challenges facing democratic societies around the world are increasingly salient and urgent. People live in increasingly authoritarian contexts. Political polarization continues to rise. Wealth and power are being deployed to further the interests of those at the top, reduce or co-opt the voices of those near the bottom, and increase inequality. Not to mention that the threats and impacts of climate change are rapidly intensifying. And amid these crises, some companies and governments are rolling back commitments to sustainability, workers' autonomy, and diversity, equity, and inclusion—commitments that were on the rise only a few years ago.

What do these circumstances mean for workers' participation and for democratic organizing? We know that leaders in non-democratic organizations can roll back popular practices over workers' vociferous objections, as has been the case with recent reversals of remote work policies (Elliott, 2024; Eaton, 2025). Experience shows that even when novel policies and practices have documented benefits for workers and organizations, top managers can ultimately use their discretion to retract them (Kim, Bailyn, and Kolb, 2017; Kelly and Moen, 2020; Yen, 2024). Moreover, some organizations today are reasserting control over workers and blocking their expressions of voice, in some cases seeking to reform cultures that had previously encouraged employee voice and dissent (Kessinger, 2024). High-profile technology companies, for example, have actively sought to suppress the discussion of political topics and have increased monitoring and censorship on internal platforms (Isaac, Conger, and Frenkel, 2025).

These past lessons and evolving circumstances suggest a troubling pattern: When workers lack strong participation rights in decision making, policies and

practices that support workers may be short-lived, and top managers ultimately have control over whether workers can participate in shaping their organizations. Even though both weak (consultative) and strong (structurally guaranteed) forms are associated with beneficial outcomes, weak participation alone may be insufficient to reliably generate positive outcomes over the long run—precisely because participation that is not structurally guaranteed can easily be taken away. The precarity of workers' participation in today's world raises questions that are difficult yet critical to study. We should not shy away from the challenge.

We close this essay with a reminder that alternative ways of organizing social life and systems may not be widespread, but they already exist and can teach us critical lessons that can help us envision and implement novel approaches to pressing organizational and societal problems (Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2024; Lechterman and Mair, 2024). In a world in which non-democratic forms of organizing dominate, focusing more of our attention on varied forms of democratic organizing—longstanding ones like cooperatives, unions, and codetermination, as well as innovations in other domains like open source software and citizen assemblies—can broaden our imagination of what is possible. Such studies of what Wright (2010) has called ''real utopias''—alternative settings and methods of organizing that can inform a transition to a fairer, more sustainable, and more democratic society—are essential because they highlight possible pathways for change and thereby challenge the assumptions underpinning existing systems. By studying democratic organizing, scholars can identify mechanisms and conditions that may contribute to more effective, equitable, and sustainable systems of governance, advancing both theoretical knowledge and practical insights.

As we face the rise of authoritarianism, resistance is critical and can take many forms. It requires agitation and coordination against the forces that threaten democracy and seek to erode individual rights and freedoms. Organizations and organizing within professional and other communities are essential to that resistance (Ganz, 2024). Our argument here has been that the study of real utopias like democratic forms of organizing can also play a critical role in shaping our future—by informing our understanding of the innovations to which more communities and societies may one day turn (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017). In other words, effective resistance requires not only knowing what we stand against but also developing a shared understanding of the plausible alternatives to which we aspire.

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