CHAPTER 3

New Politics Emerging at the US Social Forum

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The World Social Forum process represents an important innovation in political practice that can help democratize national and global politics. The potential and promise of the Social Forum Process lies in its ability to mobilize people into global politics – counteracting the depoliticizing tendencies of neoliberalism – and in its role as a laboratory for experimentation in new forms of political identity and practice. The social forums emerged from a widespread notion that economic globalization has made existing forms of representative democracy increasingly irrelevant to people’s needs.

Changes in the organization of the global economic system have contributed to the fragmentation of local communities and the depoliticization of citizens. Transformations in the workplace and in the organization of politics have expanded the distance between citizens and governments. In the workforce, increased competition and the deindustrialization of western economies have meant reduced wages, declining unionization, and greater job insecurity. Workers often work longer hours or multiple jobs simply to maintain their income levels, thereby reducing the amount of time and energy they have to devote to their roles as citizens. This has undermined traditional social institutions, as people spend less time working to build community and articulate and advance common aims. In government, more decisions are framed in technical rather than political

1 See Whitaker 2003.
2 We are grateful to the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts and the Office of Research at the University of Notre Dame for financial support for Smith’s and Hausmann’s research.
terms, thereby justifying rule by experts rather than by the more democratic processes of public deliberation by informed citizens. The depoliticization of citizens enables powerful corporate actors to advance their interests in economic globalization at the expense of other social goals.

Norris argues that transformations in how political parties organize have contributed to declining rates of political participation in many western democracies. As parties rely more on the mass media to promote candidates, they spend less time cultivating local constituents and more time raising large contributions to pay for media advertising. At the same time, however, she observes that social movements and protest politics have been helping to “reinvent” democratic participation at a time when public confidence in established representative democracies is waning. Social movement actors – including organizations, informal networks, and individual leaders – help make democracies dynamic by educating the public and creating opportunities for political engagement where formal policy-making institutions are lacking. Markoff illustrates how social movements have shaped the evolution of democracy since the 18th century, arguing that they continue to be vital players in ongoing struggles to defend democracy against the constant threats from anti-democratic forces.

The World Social Forum Charter of Principles explicitly frames the forum as a multi-level process for creating “open spaces” where participants can “introduce onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new world in solidarity” (World Social Forum 2007). Not surprisingly, then, many activists in the social forums discuss their efforts as contributing to new forms of politics. Organizers frequently use the phrase “World Social Forum process” to signify that they are not simply organizing episodic meetings, but that they are developing conversations and organizing strategies across the various times and places of WSF-inspired gatherings. Regional, national, and local social forums and global “days of action,” are important mechanisms through which the WSF process has both diffused around the world and evolved as an “experiment in global democracy.”

The interconnected and long-term nature of the process allows participants to develop political identities and relationships to the process over time. This process-orientation is important to helping the WSFs re-engage

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5 Norris 2002.
6 Markoff 1999.
7 See Sen and Saini 2004.