

# Siloed Approaches with Synergistic Potential



Bridging

Organizing

Participatory  
Democracy

The **SHIFT Action Lab** brings together practitioners from the bridging, organizing, and participatory governance fields, based on a belief that these fields can enact more durable, representative, and transformative change when integrated than when operating separately. Through a **pilot project in Parkersburg, WV**, we seek to learn what can become possible when our approaches are brought together.

We have engaged a third-party evaluator to help us to learn from the Parkersburg pilot. This document is part of our effort to capture the baseline of how the fields of bridging, organizing, and participatory currently operate and relate. In the pilot, we aim to depart from the status quo by bringing our three approaches together.

To summarize the current state of our three fields, this document covers:

1. How we define these three fields and stories of “wins” that they each accomplish on their own,
2. Limitations we perceive and stories of “almost wins” that might have been more successful if the fields were integrated,
3. Our theory of what may become possible when our three fields are brought together,
4. Negative perceptions by the fields of each other, which currently get in the way of collaboration, and
5. A brief overview of the Parkersburg Engagement Project that will bring these three fields together.



# Story of a Win Approach Problem

## Bridging

People with different identities or perspectives view each other as an enemy, which gets in the way of conversation and connection.

Hold dialogues that bridge partisan, geographic, economic, racial or other divides.

The events of October 7th and Israel's response tore apart synagogue communities across the country, many of whom turned to Essential Partners' [free dialogue guides](#) on how to hold conversations on the divisive topic of Israel-Palstine. A member of one such Synagogue who had been trained by Essential Partners organized two dialogues in their synagogue. A participant shared: "This is the first time that we have felt like a community since October 7th."

## Organizing

People underestimate their collective power to solve the problems they face.

Empower a group of people with shared interests to participate in a targeted campaign for change.

In 2024 Make It Work Nevada canvassed on public buses, and had 225 one-on-one conversations with riders about a ballot measure that aimed to secure abortion rights for Nevada residents, as part of the campaign to pass that measure. The ballot measure passed (with 61% of votes). The goal was to compel residents to vote yes on the ballot measure and to build relationships and understand the specific challenges impacting people's daily lives.

## Participatory Democracy

People do not have a meaningful voice in decisions that impact them.

Support governments and communities to enact new models of involving the public in decision-making.

Grand Rapids, Michigan decided to use participatory budgeting to allocate \$2M from the American Rescue Plan Act. More than 2,000 residents across three wards voted to allocate funding toward mental health support, violence prevention, affordable housing, and childcare support, with the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) providing guidance on the process.



## Bridging

Building trust and relationships between people who hold different identities or perspectives.

## Organizing

Establishing a sense of ownership and building the leadership capacity of those who participate, such that they remain involved over an extended period and take on the responsibility to involve others.

## Participatory Democracy

Engaging the public in decision-making, demonstrating that everyday people can be trusted to make decisions that benefit their communities when supported by a good process.

- Lack of power analysis can lead to traditionally powerful voices getting more space.
- Limited appeal to those who are most polarized, who may not be drawn to bridging as an exercise.
- Often does not offer pathways to collective action.

- Policies passed may be overturned when “the other side” comes into political power or not implemented as intended.
- Often not interested in engaging with people who hold opposing viewpoints.
- Pressure from outside on the existing power structure can create backlash if not thoughtfully planned.

- Requires buy-in from government for follow-through on recommendations, which is sometimes lacking.
- Polarization can limit the ability of communities to make decisions together.

Power-blind kumbaya exercises that do not affect change, or worse, placate participants’ agitation, such that they are less inclined to take action on problems their communities are facing.

Immature protesters and ideological purists, fanning the flames of polarization by pushing people toward extreme views on issues and forcing through overly-simplistic policies that don’t create lasting change.

Technocrats who believe that all our problems will be fixed by a good process. Naively trusting that government will implement the public’s recommendations, which doesn’t always happen.

Strengths

Limitations

Critique



## Bridging

The Southwest Ohio Braver Angels Alliance decided to build on their typical red-blue dialogue approach by adding an action-oriented initiative, in the hope of bringing more political “Reds” to the table.

The ideologically-diverse group launched “No Ballot, No Buck” with the goal to disallow political campaign contributions coming from outside the district where the election was taking place. They gathered 150 signatures on an online petition and the effort did not get further traction. Access to organizing skills could have supported the group to “cut an issue” that they could move the needle on and then to build the needed power to do that.



## Organizing

The Participatory Budgeting Project worked with People’s Budget Cleveland in 2024 to get a ballot measure passed that would have created a charter amendment giving residents the ability to decide how 2% of the city budget is spent using participatory budgeting. The measure did not pass, but did come remarkably close, winning 49% of the vote, despite being outspent by 2 to 1 by groups opposing PB. Although the campaign used organizing techniques like deep canvassing, the issue became extremely polarized and contentious. More bridging work could have helped voters connect across differences and overcome polarization.



## Participatory Democracy

Temescal Neighbors, a neighborhood group in Oakland, CA, hosted a series of participatory democracy events in 2024 using digital tools like Pol.is as well as deliberative dialogue. Residents engaged deeply, generating thoughtful ideas for community improvements. However, without a plan for organizing or implementation, the momentum faded within months, leaving participants unsure of what came next. With stronger organizing support, the effort might have led to real action.

## Misperceptions of each other getting in the way of collaboration:

We sense that our fields' lack of or negative perceptions of each other are standing in the way of collaboration. Sometimes our fields are pulling in opposite directions or pointing fingers at each other as part of the problem. Within each field, we have observed that many of our peers either:



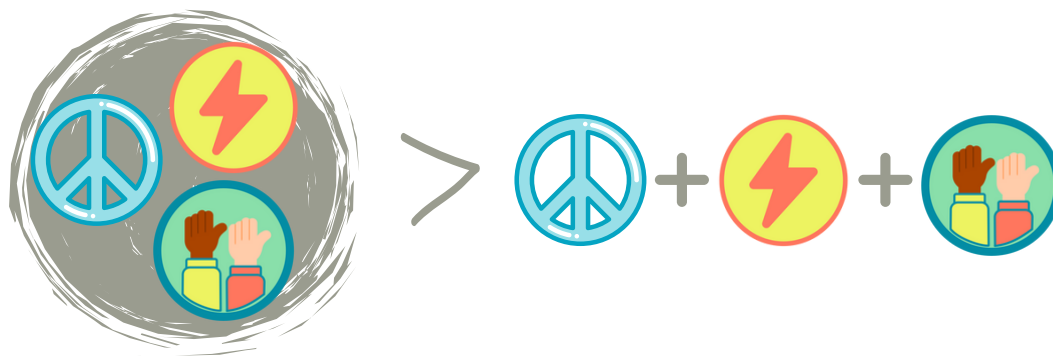
- Do not know that the other fields exist, at least not as a set of thoughtful organizations with shared goals and intensive trainings.
- Know the other fields exist, but have some misperceptions about their level of nuance.
- Know the other fields exist and have a sense of their work but see the others' work as naive or harmful.



## Each holding a key piece of the puzzle:

Given the strengths and limitations of these three fields, as the SHIFT Action Lab, we believe that each of them has the potential to “shine light in each other’s blindspots.” Achieving impact that lasts requires all of their strengths: incorporating diverse perspectives, empowering people to contribute time and energy toward making change happen, and supporting residents to design solutions that benefit the whole community. Ultimately we imagine this to be the role of democratic government.

The SHIFT Action Lab aims to test the hypothesis: **the bridging, organizing, and participatory governance fields can enact more durable, representative, and transformative change when integrated than when operating separately.**



## Experimenting with inter-field collaboration in Parkersburg, WV:

The SHIFT Action Lab has designed a pilot project to test our hypothesis. The Parkersburg Engagement Project will support the residents of Parkersburg to come together, pick a focus issue, identify a solution to the selected issue, and implement the solution. Key priorities of the project include: engaging a significant number of residents who represent the different demographics in the community; achieving material progress on the selected issue; working in collaboration with public officials; and improving residents' sense of agency, belief in the power of collaboration, and likelihood to participate in civic activities in the future. We are supporting Parkersburg leaders to implement the project on the ground.



**We are eager to exchange ideas with others about these concepts!**

To learn more and connect with us, visit [shiftcommongood.org/action-lab](https://shiftcommongood.org/action-lab) or contact Laura Rigell, SHIFT Action Lab Convener at [laura@SHIFTcommongood.org](mailto:laura@SHIFTcommongood.org).