CHAPTER 3
WAYS TO CONTRIBUTE

The opportunity to make an impact for good is the main reason people feel called to civic tech projects, even choosing them over better-paid private-sector tech. In my experience, there's so much useful work that needs to be done that it can be hard to choose what to do.

Where you begin will depend on your values as well as your capabilities. Do you want to strengthen a status quo you believe to be good, or are you more intent on shifting something fundamental in an institution or in society at large? Different approaches and partnership styles, as well as specific missions, will better serve these different goals. Exploring your motivations more deeply can help you decide whom to work with.

As you think broadly about your motivations, these questions may help guide you toward specific mission areas:

- What do you think of as "good" in society?
- What is currently in the way of that good happening?
- What change do you want to see in the world as a result of your and others' civic work?

There are multiple ways to get involved; many types of project goals, topical domains, and levels of government and NGO institutions can use the help of civic technologists. In this chapter, I'll discuss the most successful models for sustained work that have emerged in the past decade. Each of the models I'll present has transactional aspects, but I want to emphasize that all of them are political. Not partisan, but necessarily political.

Trying to effect change in the relationship between the public and the government, regardless of means you use, is an act of politics. The methods you use and the partnerships you enter either reinforce or change existing power dynamics—and their beneficiaries. Power-shifting may or may not be among your motivations for entering civic tech, but it will always be a potential consequence of your work.

STEPPING FORWARD: VOLUNTEER COLLABORATIONS

Joining a volunteer civic group is probably the best way to start doing civic tech part-time. There are no entry requirements; civic groups are specifically set up to onboard newcomers, and usually all that is required is registering for a meeting. Depending on their capacity, funding structure, and length of service, the groups may have all kinds of onboarding materials, shovel-ready projects, and mentors available to new members. They don't require a specific commitment of time, and are very flexible and open to project proposals—but of course as pro bono volunteer work, this work is unpaid (except for a few leadership positions in well-funded groups).

The civic tech movement in the United States began on the municipal level with a few small internal groups and thousands of volunteers. Cities were quick to embrace the idea of community hackathons and the open-data movement in the early 2010s, and this led to the establishment of regular tech volunteer meetings in many large and medium-sized cities. Code for Tulsa, for example, has been meeting weekly since 2011, even running remotely during 2020's COVID-19 quarantine. Many of these

groups formalized through Code for America's Brigade program or became independent nonprofit organizations.

These groups partner directly with local government agencies. In many cities, the Chief Data Officer (if the city has one) is a regular attendee, and department staff who want to engage the group's help will bring their challenges (and their data) to meetings. Related community organizations often bring their knowledge and understanding of challenges as well. Members self-organize and commit to working on specific aspects of development or design challenges. Members can also propose work to local agencies.

Many volunteer groups have a particularly strong practice in opening data; they depend on it for their project work, and they're often culturally aligned with both the open-source and open-data movements.[1] You're likely to meet people who feel passionate about all types of open data, especially maps—cities and states have enormous amounts of interesting geodata. Advocacy for more data, more transparency, and more partnership at the municipal level has made a huge contribution to the strength of civic tech in the United States.

Over the long term, things that start out as prototypes created by these trusted groups of volunteers are often adopted and brought into a city's internal tech stack. Once a service becomes important to a government's operations, they want to pay for it to ensure that they'll be able to get support. Therefore, a city might ask a group to spin up a start-up in order to sell the software to them. Standout volunteers have also been hired directly by cities to continue and expand the work they do, and dedicated volunteer groups have several times convinced cities to establish data positions or internal digital groups.

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1 There's a strong thread in civic tech from the open-source movement and a closely allied government-transparency movement. The Sunlight Foundation was one of the first institutional players in US civic tech, and its focus has always been transparency.

THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT TECH: STARTUPS AND OTHER VENDORS

There is an entire ecosystem of companies that have government as their intended primary customer. Some of these companies are set up to serve specific government use cases (recording public meetings and making the recordings available online, for example), while others offer goods or services that are optimized for government purchasing and processes.

Much of the start-up ecosystem in this field is focused on city and county governments. This is a substantial market, as there are about three thousand counties and some twenty thousand cities and towns in the United States. Many cities and counties have procurement authorities that allow them to engage with (relatively) small companies for (relatively) small engagements, via request for proposal (RFP) processes that are relatively informal. You don't necessarily need an entire department to win government business at these levels, but you do need someone in your company to become expert at it, and you need to be able to work with a slower sales cycle

Playing at the federal and state level, compared to the municipal level, calls for more specific focus on positioning your business within the community of government vendors (known as "industry" in the federal tech community). If you become certified as a Small Business Administration 8(a) Small Business, a Woman-Owned Small Business (WOSB), or a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB), just to name a few, there are many opportunities to compete for federal and state business.

If you want to start a company focused on governments or institutional NGOs, you will need to design your product-development processes around an institutional sales cycle, and you'll need to vet funders carefully to make sure they understand the differences in runway and growth curve. If you want to work for such a company, you'll need an understanding of government needs and an alignment with the mission, but the hiring process will be much like a typical private-sector process.

GOING ALL IN: INNOVATION LABS AND DIGITAL SERVICE TEAMS

In the past ten years, the United States federal government and many large city governments have established internal digital groups directed by the executive. State governments, somewhat later, are doing the same. These come in two types—innovation labs and digital service teams—but they are often a first and second stage of the same initiative, so it's worth talking about them together.

Innovation labs are set up to bring ideas and talent from the private sector into special spaces in government that have a higher risk tolerance than usual.[2] They correspond closely to the "showing what's possible" demonstration strain of civic tech, often focusing on opening data, prototyping, and working with members of the public and volunteers to test new ideas. They're small, nimble, and (if successful) often succeeded by a digital service group.

Digital service groups distinguish themselves from innovation labs in that their mission is typically building production-grade software and service designs rather than prototypes (the "doing what's necessary" side). Their work may include migrating legacy systems to new tech stacks, as well as introducing new design methods. Most model themselves after the UK's Government Digital Service, a high-level team with executive sponsorship, working with significant organizational power on executive priorities.

The term "digital service" or "digital team" is common for these groups. They also often refer to the work they do as "building digital services" (another GDS-ism), so the language can be a bit confusing. In contrast

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2 Innovation labs have a lot of history. Programs like the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics in Boston and Philadelphia, and the Mayor's Office of Civic Innovation in San Francisco, led the charge for civic technology inside of government. The federal Office of Personnel Management had an early innovation lab in the 2010s as well, and Todd Park, then US CTO, had his advisors working on an "entrepreneur in residence" idea that led to the Presidential Innovation Fellows program. At the same time as these were being founded, the federal General Services Administration (GSA) was running its Office of Citizen Service and Innovative Technology.

to an innovation lab or a volunteer group, a digital service group typically requires employees to work on projects that have been chosen by the executive and funded by the legislature in advance. The missions are broad, and the cultures open, but the specific project work may offer little opportunity for pet initiatives; the model for these teams is truly service, and members are expected to follow directives.

WHAT ABOUT 18F?

One of the best-known digital teams in the United States also happens to be one of the more accessible ways to join federal civic technology: 18F, an organization within the General Service Administration.[3] Its activities are similar to the United States Digital Service (USDS), which reports to the White House chain of command, but its structure is different. Like almost every other GSA office, it operates without its own congressional budget appropriation and gets its funding from customers.

Most of these customers are federal agencies, along with a few state agencies. And because it's operating as a paid service, 18F priorities are those of government customers rather than the White House (though the White House is occasionally a customer as well). If you join USDS or one of the state-level digital services, you can guess based on administration priorities what you might be working on, but 18F works on needs agencies themselves identify and collaborates intentionally with agencies that want to advance their digital practices.

Thanks to GSA's forward-thinking policies on remote work, 18F is a distributed organization that people can join from anywhere. Its application process is similar to that of innovation labs and digital service teams, but the whole thing is likely to be conducted remotely.

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3 The curious name refers to the location of the main GSA building (18th and F Street in Washington, DC).

FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE:
CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND MUTUAL AID

You don't actually have to partner directly with government to be part of civic tech. There are any number of worthwhile efforts that focus on bringing communities together and holding their governments accountable. *Citizen engagement* projects give constituents channels to understand and express opinions about public debates, while *mutual aid* projects help individuals help each other without government or institutional participation. Many of the NGOs in both of these spaces need help from technologists.

Most developed examples of this category are incorporated as nonprofits, either 501(c)3 charitable organizations or 501(c)4 educational organizations. This allows them to accept foundation funding (and individual donations for a 501(c)3). Some operate entirely on membership contributions and volunteer labor.

One interesting example is Recovers.org, a nonprofit that helps communities communicate and share resources after natural disasters. Founded as a civic start-up in 2012, it later incorporated as a separately named, formal 501(c)3 that accepts donations. It lets people set up specialized websites with the formula [city].recovers.org, and has been used by both community groups and government agencies. This isn't something that is likely to attract VC money, nor would it be easy for a local community to build well in a time of need. It's not something the federal government has a program to provide to states or cities, either—it's a true mutual-aid model.

Streetmix.net, a citizen engagement app that lets people design streetscapes for collaborative planning processes, ran as a volunteer project for several years. It began at a Code for America hackathon, and the creators eventually obtained foundation sponsorship that sustains it as an open-source project and keeps it free to use. To date, it has been used to create more than a hundred thousand plans, but it has never had paid staff or direct revenue.

Financial sustainability over time is the biggest challenge for projects like this, as they don't generate direct revenue and both foundation grants and individual donations take time and persistence to pursue. These skills are less common in technology founding teams, but if you have them, starting something like this is a path worth considering.

These projects have in common that they aim directly at a specific civic good, without necessarily trying to restructure the practices of an entrenched bureaucracy. As such, they follow different paths to adoption (word of mouth, direct community marketing or advertising). Some focus specifically on a local community, without an ambition to expand. This is a fine model, although the broader civic tech community will welcome stories about successes and permission to imitate.

If you want to start a community project, you'll need community connections. This will be easy if you're already part of the community you hope to serve; if you're not, don't underestimate the work this requires. Do your homework (are you *sure* no one else is already working on this problem?), approach people with humility, and listen deeply.

Also, like any project, these very valuable efforts need a model of sustainability past the prototype stage. I don't say a business model here, because the successful projects in this category are not all organized as traditional businesses. This may on the surface make them seem easier, but that's deceptive—a properly structured charitable non-profit or a robust open-source project that is sustainable over years is at least as challenging from an administrative perspective as a for-profit business.

MAKING PARTNERSHIPS AND SPACES INCLUSIVE

All of the above types of partnership need more Black and brown technologists, and more people with varied language capacities and disabilities. Whatever your own status, but especially if you're a majority person, you can help. As you look for teams to join, or if you decide to start your own initiative, pay attention to the composition of the group and what norms it follows. If your network mostly contains people like you, it's

very easy to set up or reinforce exclusionary spaces. It can also be easy to act inappropriately when you go to spaces where other sorts of people are dominant. Act as a guest, and a good guest, if you are invited to spaces for vulnerable people. Demonstrate your respect and offer your skills.

To make sure your group or project is safe and welcoming for underrepresented people (particularly if you yourself are from an overrepresented group), these are some actions you can take:[4]

- Have a diverse founding or leadership team.
- Say publicly (and mean it) that you're actively seeking underrepresented collaborators for key roles.
- Make your online and offline meeting spaces accessible to all.
- Prominently post a code of conduct (especially if this is a hackathon, open-source project, or volunteer meetup) saying that harassment and discrimination won't be tolerated.
- Make sure any code of conduct includes how the group will respond if problems occur.
- Consider anonymous first-round submissions if you're putting on a conference or other event where you ask for proposals.

All of these measures are easier to implement from the beginning of a project or company, but it's never too late. Teams gain both perspective and capacity by being inclusive, and this should be a baseline for any civic technology effort.

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The change you're able to effect will depend on the political factors at play—and all of the models I've discussed here are political to some degree. Working on core mission-critical systems as a volunteer is just very hard to arrange, for example—and creating speculative prototypes as a government employee is equally hard most of the time. Attempts

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4 There are many references on this that go into far more detail; I share a few in Further Readings.

to transmit good software models from city to city as free open-source offerings have failed multiple times; companies have generally worked better. Getting fully certified as a federal vendor is difficult, but if you want to work on federal problems without joining, it's the right thing to do—so build it into your plan.

You should also consider how ready your potential partners are to work with you.

- Have their leaders shown an interest in modern technology or innovation?
- Have they backed any of that with budget or staff time allocations?
- In conversations with them, how open-minded are they to feedback about their goals and plans, and how ready are they to give direct feedback to you? (Keep in mind: partners who put private-sector tech on a pedestal can be just as hard to collaborate with as those set in their ways.)
- Do they have hiring or contracting authorities ready, through which they can work with you (or your business or group, however it's constituted)?

Some of these, at least, are preconditions for success in any of the above models. It would be ridiculous only to work with partners who are already practicing exactly how you'd hope they would, but it's a recipe for misery to sign on with those who are fully committed to practices you think are antithetical to the change you aspire to drive. Finding or creating the right situation to do the work you want isn't always easy, but having a template for engaging should help.