

CONNECTIONS

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2007

A Year's Review
from the Perspective
of Citizens

WHAT IF?

IMAGINE THIS

COULD IT BE THAT?

MAYBE THE QUESTION WE SHOULD BE ASKING IS...

Introducing the
READERS' FORUM
See page 33

What You Need to Know about *Connections*

With this issue of *Connections*, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change *Connections* from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering's review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation's research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering's hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

- citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
- communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
- institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing *Connections* once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation's research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you'll find throughout the following pages, this issue of *Connections* reflects the foundation's research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the "Readers' Forum." As its name implies, the new section



features reactions and comments by *Connections* readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the

foundation's hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The "Forum" is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true "Readers' Forum," the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—*Connections*. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation's Web site, www.kettering.org. On the Web site you'll find a new section devoted to this issue of *Connections* and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online "Readers' Forum" is an attempt to help readers better connect to *Connections*—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

CONNECTIONS

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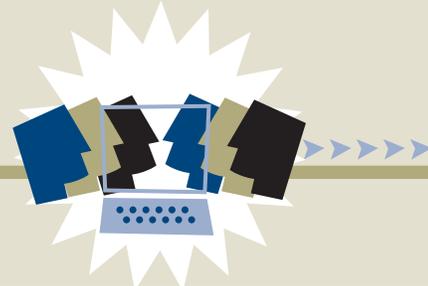
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Who Cares About the State of Democracy

... and What Is It They Care About?

By Edith Manosevitch

Many voices share Kettering's concern about the state of democracy. Yet an array of perspectives emerges as we try to unravel what these voices are saying. Some believe democracy is thriving and point to phenomena like blogging, increased youth volunteering and voting, and the impressive civic response to recent national crises, such as Hurricane Katrina. Others feel that our democracy is at stake, pointing to a general public sentiment of alienation from representative institutions and a sense that citizens have little say in politics. Following is a brief outline of four differing areas of foci within the study of democracy, with examples to illustrate each one. I hope this will provide some context and insight to Kettering's current work.

One area of focus is *institutions and public officials*. Here the concern is about decreasing voting turnouts, low levels of political interest and knowledge, and public trust in political institutions. For example, last year, the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies in the School of Public Affairs at the American University in Washington, D.C., initiated a biennial Conference on the State of American Democracy. The event centered on issues like redistricting, voting law, and

campaign finance reform. In the opening address, David Broder, *Washington Post* columnist, noted the importance of the conference:

Whether it's because of the way districts are drawn, the way campaigns are financed, or the ways in which parties are organized, it is almost impossible for individual members of Congress to live up to their own expectations. . . . Institutionally, we need the kind of change that will make it possible for politicians to begin to behave in a responsible way.

A related example comes from higher education. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) recently released data from a random sample of 14,000 students from 50 colleges and universities across the country, measuring their knowledge of American history and institutions. ISI has found that college seniors scored only 1.5 percent higher than freshmen and their overall average score was "failing" at 53.2 percent. The study also found that students at relatively inexpensive colleges learn *more* about civic education, on average, than their counterparts at

expensive colleges and that many Ivy League schools experienced "negative learning" whereby seniors scored worse than incoming freshmen.

A second area of foci underscores the importance of *social interactions* as the foundation of democracy. Here scholars view social ties and social networks as essential means that enable citizens to work together and bring about change and progress in their communities and country. For example, Robert Putnam, in his seminal book *Bowling Alone*, worries about the state of American democracy in light of declining rates of citizen involvement in social groups and institutions. A recent study by sociologists McPherson, Smith-Loving, and Brashears in the June 2006 *American Sociological Review* points to a dramatic increase in social isolation in the past 20 years. This study compares national survey data from 1985 and 2004 and finds that the number of Americans who say they have no one with whom to discuss important matters has more than doubled; and the number of people that Americans have in their closest circle of confidants has dropped from about three to two.



What Others Are Saying

CASE Foundation recently presented what might be regarded as a third area of focus—a *citizen-centered* approach to democracy which examines the extent to which citizens are taking part in the political processes that affect their everyday lives. This approach “views people as proactive citizens, rather than consumers of services . . . helps people form and promote their own decisions, build capacities for self-government, and develop open-ended civic processes.” CASE calls to:

move away from defining and viewing civic engagement as a set of tactics (voting, volunteering, service, or organizing) or outcomes (planting more trees or increasing the number of people who vote). Instead . . . focus on creating opportunities for ordinary citizens to come together, deliberate, and take action collectively to address issues that citizens themselves define as important, in ways that citizens themselves decide are appropriate and/or needed whether it is political action, community service, volunteering, or organizing. (7)

CASE agrees with Richard Harwood that Americans have been drifting away from the political arena due to the increasing sentiment that citizens have little effect, if any, on the health of their community and nation. (See *Connections*, Summer 2006.) They call on us to promote a cultural ethos of civic engagement that will give people a sense of public purpose and a belief that their voice matters in larger issues.

And finally, what about the Internet? With so many people blogging, consuming news online, using e-mail to mobilize citizens for public action, fundraising, boycotting, and more, it is only natural to witness widespread interest in the role of the Internet in democracy. Much research comes from the field of communication exploring an array of questions, such as the role of the Internet in citizens’ political knowledge, political participation, and engagement; as well as its effects on personal relationships, community development, globalization, and more. But other fields are also inquiring about the Internet and democracy. For example, an emerging area of interest in the public administration field is e-government: the use of information technology to promote citizen participation in the budget and

fiscal decisions of government at all levels. (See Justice et al., 2006 in *American Review of Public Administration*, 36:3.) Clearly the Internet is a broad concept that incorporates a wide array of usages and consequently varying effects. As it becomes an integral part of citizens’ everyday life, it has an enormous capacity to affect contemporary democracy, and we have yet to learn just how.

These voices about democracy do not contradict one another. Indeed, The National Conference on Citizenship recently launched *America’s Civic Health Index*—a comprehensive approach to assessing democracy. The index brings together most of the areas of foci illustrated above. It is comprised of nine categories for measuring citizenship, including connecting to civic and religious groups, trusting other people, connecting to family and friends, giving and volunteering, staying informed, understanding civics and politics, political participation, trusting and feeling connected to major institutions, and expressing political views. The index creators worry about the general decline in America’s civic health over the past 30 years. Specifically they point to a steady decline in trust in one another and in connections to civic groups, family, and friends. Also, the data suggest that more Americans are living alone, people are less informed about public affairs, and Americans’ trust of and connection to key institutions have been largely on the decline. But the data highlight some hopeful signs as well, in particular an increase in volunteering and voting among young Americans. Notably, this index also documents online behaviors. It reveals that while newspaper reading is on the decline, a steady rise appears in reading blogs. The data also show that the heaviest Internet users are “more aware of all kinds of political information, including arguments contrary to their own beliefs, than lighter Internet users or nonusers.” (24)

These findings are intriguing, but perhaps more intriguing is the index itself and the underlying statement it makes. Democracy requires establishing tools to assess it, and it requires ongoing pub-

lic dialogue about what it means. The authors draw a parallel with economic growth. Americans have well-established measures of economic growth (i.e., inflation, unemployment, gross domestic product, and more) and use them to evaluate economic policy. In the same way, the authors argue:

We believe that our nation can and should do a better job in collecting, reporting, and debating the implications of data. . . . For we know that when our civic health is vibrant, our communities and country are stronger, and our own lives are enriched.

Democracy requires establishing tools to assess it, and it requires ongoing public dialogue about what it means.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) makes a similar claim on the international level. IDEA finds that despite the mushrooming of democratic forms of government in many regions worldwide, there is declining support for democracy around the globe, which is due in part to citizens’ perception that democratic institutions have not effectively responded to citizens’ demands for economic and social progress. IDEA encourages others to assess democracy and monitor trends as a means of supporting and promoting democracy worldwide. It provides a comprehensive democracy assessment tool on its Web site for others to use.

The account above is far from comprehensive; a simple Google search will attest. Many more voices out there are engaging in dialogue about the state of democracy, too many to include in this brief outline. Kettering Foundation’s work is no doubt well situated in a broad context of national and international interest in researching democracy.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to "the problems behind the problems."

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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