

# 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*

**W**ith 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](http://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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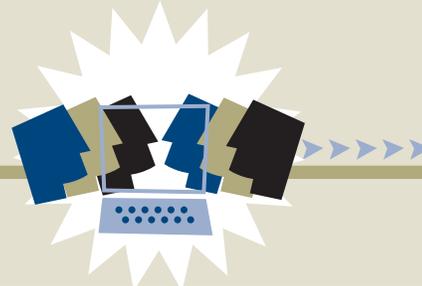
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# Politics from the Perspective of Citizens

By David Mathews

As noted on page 2, *Connections* will now be published annually rather than twice a year because we are devoting a full year to reviewing the foundation's research in each of the three areas that Kettering does studies. The change has helped us improve our identification of research opportunities. And the extra time has allowed us to get more information from our readers, as you will see in the new section of *Connections* called "Readers' Forum."

Our principal finding from all the research done on the way citizens see our political system is that people from all walks of life in the United States are

saying much the same thing about the political system: "we can't make a difference." Whether citizens are talking about elections, their communities, or the major institutions in the country, the refrain is the same. Citizens believe there is little chance that they or "people like them" can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. They blame professional politicians and moneyed interests. They also blame their fellow citizens for being too self-serving.

Having heard many of these same complaints since the 1970s, researchers are now reporting some exceptions to the usual complaints. More people are

saying that they can make a difference in their communities—at least sometimes—although they quickly add that their influence doesn't carry over to what they refer to as "democracy." Researchers have also heard more people saying that they *should* be making a difference. Consequently, our research in this area has gradually shifted from diagnostic studies to pursue the logical follow-up questions: What do people think it would take in order for them to make a difference? What would have to change, and what would be needed to bring these changes about?

This last finding about people's desire to make democracy work better raises a related issue for the foundation: how do we come up with useful insights about what would be required for democracy to work as people think it should? The simple answer is that insights come from the way research organizations go about interrogating their evidence. But what must that interrogation be like when democracy is concerned? Recently, we have spent a good deal of time discussing that challenge, and I'll say a bit about where we are at this point.

Research when democracy is the subject is trickier than research about something when there is a fixed objective and progress toward meeting it can be measured. In the latter case, researchers can assemble evidence about the progress being made and evaluate it against the goals. Democracy, however, is a moral ideal applied to political practice. As an ideal, its proper application is always open to debate. In other words, studying democracy forces us to look at both what *is* happening and what *should* be happening. But what *should be* is constantly being redefined. So the research has to be open-ended, that is, open to ever-changing answers about what should be.

What research on democracy does share with research on other subjects is the necessity of raising questions. The better the questions, the more we learn. But the most useful questions, in the case of research on democracy, don't lead to definitive answers; they should lead to insights that allow people to imagine what democracy might be. In sum, the direction research takes is determined by the questions that are brought to bear on the evidence. And the pay-off, or "products," for Kettering are insights that are available to others.

The foundation has discovered that good questions are often provoked by looking at contradictory evidence. The contradictions may be indications of a deeper problem behind the more obvious problem. For example, conversations in one community indicated widespread concern about the quality of the public schools. Conditions were so bad that the buildings were unsafe, yet people were dead set against a tax levy for the school system. The contradiction was obvious. At that point, someone seeing the apparent discrepancy asked whether both findings might be valid. So by probing beneath the surface, researchers discovered a hidden logic. People had decided that the school system was such a poor manager of tax funds that they couldn't depend on new funds being used effectively. Passing a levy wasn't going to be enough. This perception was the problem behind the problem.

We have spotted a similar contradiction in the findings about citizens' frustrations with the political system.

People who said that they could make a difference in their community seemed to contradict themselves by adding that what they did locally didn't make a difference in "democracy." This contradiction prompted a question worth considering for future research: what do people really mean when they say that the work they do in their communities isn't part of democracy? After all, in the United States, democracy is rooted in communities, from local school boards and juries to municipal elections. What is behind this seeming contradiction? Is what we are hearing just a matter of semantics or something far more serious?

The interrogation of evidence in the instances just cited doesn't necessarily go on in an orderly fashion in a research environment. Discussions may appear chaotic (although chaos theorists assure us it is just a different type of order). Comments made in Kettering meetings, for instance, travel through the foundation; the thinking grows and mutates as more people are drawn into the conversation. Both in meetings and after, one comment sparks another. Someone makes an observation that doesn't seem on track until another person makes a connection. If we are lucky, insights emerge along the way.

In each year's review, we try to create an environment that will prompt the questioning that leads to insights. In this issue of *Connections*, you will find the contradictory evidence grouped around four options that might allow citizens to make the difference they say they want to. There is one other reason for using this kind of framework. Kettering's research is highly collaborative, and we can't move ahead, even in a direction that seems promising, unless there are organizations on the ground that have a self-interest in integrating Kettering's insights and those

of others who have similar insights into their own work. As we explain, the foundation studies aerodynamics; we don't fly airplanes. We depend on these collaborations to find out how our research is interpreted and what impact it has. And the questions raised by looking at contradictory evidence often bring to mind other organizations or institutions that may have a self-interest in furthering the research. Exploring the hidden logic behind the opposition to the school levy was very important to the local school board. *Connections* readers help the foundation by pointing us to potential collaborators.

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**People who said that they could make a difference in their community seemed to contradict themselves by adding that what they did locally didn't make a difference in "democracy." In the United States, democracy is rooted in communities, from local school boards and juries to municipal elections. What is behind this seeming contradiction? Is what we are hearing just a matter of semantics or something far more serious?**

In this issue, you will find background articles, interviews, and studies that flesh out options that might allow citizens to make the difference some say they should. The four options are (1) to try to make national politics more like community politics, (2) to make institutional bureaucracies truly accessible and accountable, (3) to open more entry points into the system, other than just voting booths, perhaps by starting with citizen boards, and (4) to demonstrate that citizens can do things collectively that will indeed make a difference in our democracy.

Certain articles on these options strike me as especially informative, and I'll try to explain why. Take the question of whether what works locally can be transferred to national politics. Some scholars argue that the national political system was—and still is—dependent on citizens making a difference locally, that the “little republics” (communities) have always been and still are essential to the viability of the big republic. For instance, communities promote the banding together that allows people to make a difference by acting collectively. From this perspective, the values and ways of doing business that are found in the best of local politics *must be* reflected in national politics.

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## When people recognize that water coming into the far end of the boat is eventually going to reach them, they will welcome anyone who has a bucket for bailing, regardless of who he or she is. Maybe future research should be about what causes people to recognize common dangers and interrelated interests.

Other evidence suggests that the lessons from local politics will never be accepted nationally because, some say, communities have proven to be narrow-minded, filled with prejudices, and prone to corruption. Small towns, local neighborhoods, and placed-based or geographic communities fell out of favor during the civil rights/states' rights clash. Rather than bedrocks of democracy, they came to be seen as a major source of the country's problems. Consequently, as Martha Derthick reports in her research, “the place of place,” or the positive role that communities might play, disappeared as a serious consideration in national politics. Lara Rusch's summary of Derthick's findings in *Keeping the Compound Republic* explains how this has happened. (In reading her summary, keep in mind the difference

between the case for returning local control, which is made by both governmental and nongovernmental agencies, and the argument for states' rights, which is made largely by governmental agencies.)

On the issue of institutional accountability, see Brian Cook's analysis of the accountability movement. He is among those scholars who worry that the measures intended to ensure transparency and citizen access are doing just the opposite: they are driving a wedge between citizens and the institutions created to serve them. The counterargument is that accountability measures are working and are popular with citizens who believe that government agencies, schools, and even nongovernmental organizations must be held more responsible for what they do. The only problem with the requirements is that they aren't strict enough.

Paloma Dallas reviews the broad-ranging literature on citizen boards. Some articles make the case that these boards are vital instruments of democratic governance, and several cite Kettering research being used by boards

to engage communities more effectively. Phillip Boyle, at the University of North Carolina, argues that a board's legitimacy depends as much on *how* decisions are made as *what* the decisions are. Jane Urschel calls for school boards to look beyond the conventional governing parameters set by law and meet their obligations to democracy.

For evidence that citizens themselves are responsible for many of the problems they complain about, note Alan Wolfe's latest book, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* He believes Americans use their cynicism about the political system to avoid taking responsibility. On the other hand, scholars like Harry Boyte and community activist groups like the Industrial Areas Foundation have come to a different conclusion: they have found that a

sense of responsibility grows as people begin to work together to solve problems that affect their self-interest. Citizens will work together out of self-interest even if they don't particularly like or trust one another. When people recognize that water coming into the far end of the boat is eventually going to reach them, they will welcome those who have buckets for bailing, almost regardless of who they are.

Still other evidence suggests that citizens aren't working with each other because our highly professional/technical society doesn't believe that much can be accomplished by citizens. Maybe that's the problem behind the problem. The conventional wisdom is that citizens, as individuals, can pay taxes, obey the laws, and vote, but that is about it. The rest is up to professionals. For example, at the taping of the *A Public Voice* program last year, the problem of rebuilding New Orleans was described as depending primarily on restoring the levees, which can only be done by engineers. Certainly there are problems that can only be solved by professionals. Yet studies, such as John Dittmer's book on the role that local people played in the civil rights movement, show that there are other problems that can't be solved without the work of citizens. (Read a review of Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* on page 41.) That said, perhaps the most potent counterargument against writing off the contributions of citizens is being made by the persistent people we heard in the research—those who insist they must be able to make a difference.

The new section in *Connections* reports on the “Readers' Forum,” a new venture for disseminating our work and engaging others in considering its relevance to their own work. This “forum” isn't of the usual sort found in magazines and letters to the editor. Participants in this forum aren't speaking off the top of their heads. They have had an opportunity to look at the evidence we have collected and bounce ideas off one another. We hope the “Forum” will add to the evidence and help refine it more. You may not have participated yet, but the floor is open on the Kettering Web site: [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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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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