

CONNECTIONS

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Reassessing the Relationship between The Public and The Government

More citizens do not believe in a democracy so direct that they do without a central government.

By David Mathews

Introducing Kettering Foundation research on the relationship between the American people and their government requires some historical context because the relationship in this country is different from that in most other countries. The people created the government in America, which as James Morone points out in *The Democratic Wish*, was not the case in Europe.¹ In most countries, the state was in power before there was a measure of popular sovereignty, and the liberty of citizens was based on a dispensation from the state. The American government, on the other hand, derived its power from citizens who exercised their liberty to constitute a state. Given this unique relationship, Americans have always been a bit wary of their own government out of concern that it might encroach on the power of the people. Morone sees the yearning for self-rule as

our most basic political instinct and the source for the historic dislike of central administrative authority, which perhaps began with antipathy for King George III's ministers. As the Kettering Foundation has conducted studies of the public-government relationship, it has kept this history in mind and has never expected citizens to be uncritical of their government. But even though some may say that the federal government is the source of many of its

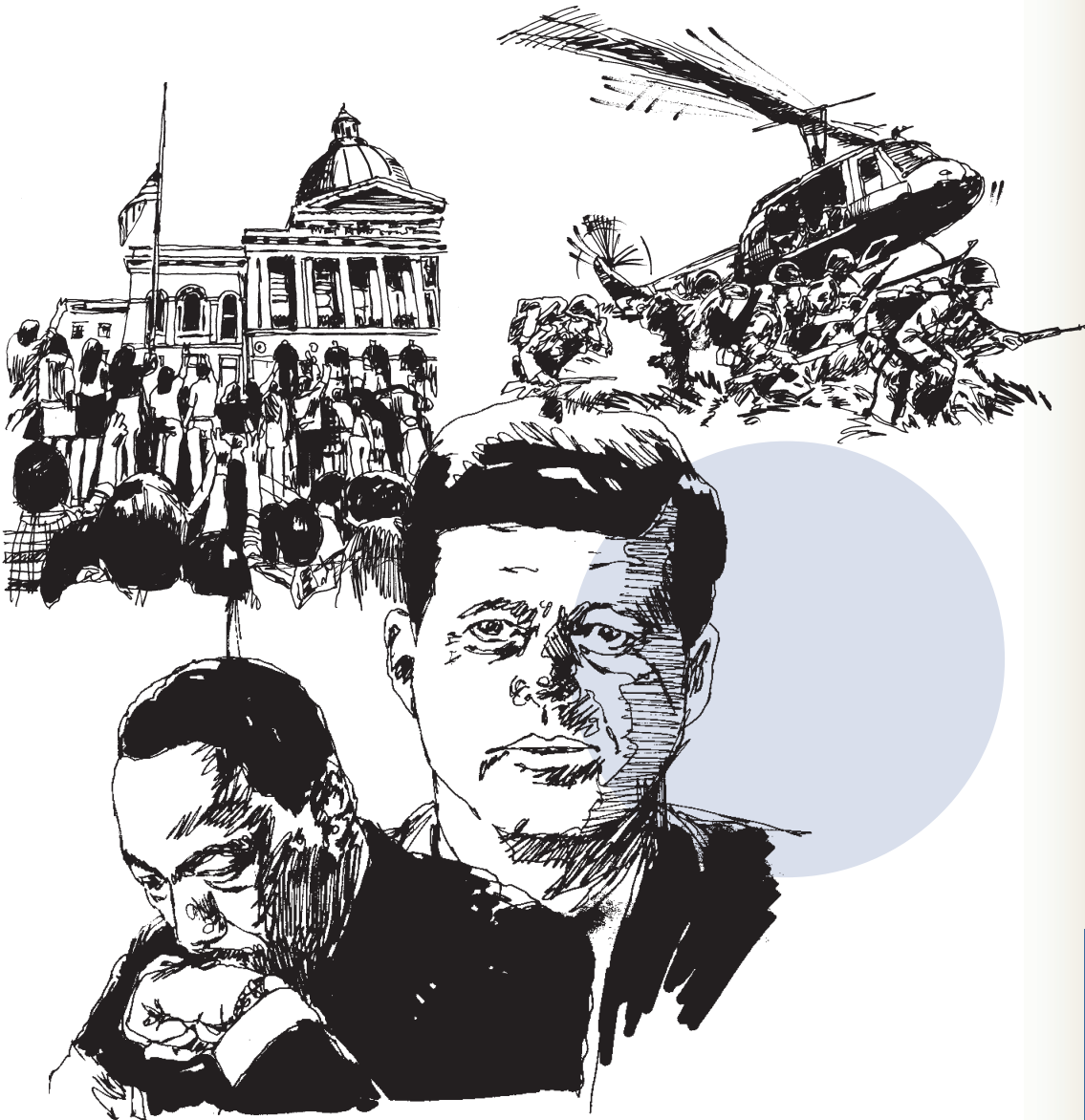
own problems, most citizens do not believe in a democracy so direct that they can do without a central government.

Throughout most of our history, Americans have lived by the Jeffersonian maxim that the best government is the least government. That precept began to erode in the Progressive era and was almost eclipsed by the Great Depression. Franklin Roosevelt admired local responsibility and a small government, but his overriding concern as President was social justice for a country that he defined by its needs, one whose citizens were "ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished." He believed that those needs could be met only through the federal government, which he spurred to action. The Great Depression might have been even more disastrous if the government had not broken with tradition.

After World War II, Americans became accustomed to an activist government. Centralizing power in Washington made sense in wartime, and there was little reason to object during the postwar era when, as Bruce Schulman explains in his history, "America enjoyed unchallenged international hegemony and unprecedented affluence."² An economic boom "ushered ordinary working Americans into a comfortable middle-class lifestyle; millions of blue-collar workers owned their own homes, garaged late-model cars, and sent their children to college."

New federal programs assisted the most vulnerable citizens, particularly the elderly, and reduced the overall level of poverty from a high of 20 percent in the late 1950s to 12 percent in the early 1970s. Pleased with these results, Schulman concluded, nearly everyone "accepted the activist state, with its commitments to the protection of individual rights, the promotion of economic prosperity, and the establishment of some





rudimentary form of political equality and social justice for all Americans.”

Washington influenced people’s everyday lives to an unprecedented degree, “guaranteeing civil rights and voting rights for African Americans ... subsidizing farmers, regulating air travel, and uncovering the dangers of smoking.” We drove on federally funded highways, attended school with the help of government loans, and lived in homes with federally subsidized mortgages.

Although Lyndon Johnson’s ambitious Great Society program brought the federal government to unprecedented prominence, new challenges had already begun to emerge from the expectations that developed during World War II. Frustration followed disappointment when African American veterans returned to a country still unwilling to extend the promises of democracy to those who had fought for its cause. The struggle for civil rights began in courthouses and

soon moved to lunch counters, buses, schools, and the streets. The assassination of President Kennedy shocked the nation’s self-assurance, and though major civil rights and voting rights laws were passed in 1964 and 1965, the disturbance in Watts presaged an intensification of social unrest that the federal government would prove unable to resolve. Urban riots flared across the nation in the days following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Protests mushroomed into political movements, and by 1969, with a stalemate in Vietnam that would linger for several more years at the cost of thousands of American lives, the country faced a bewildering array of difficulties and divisions, all of which were exacerbated by a declining economy. The Watergate scandal would shatter much of what was left from the era of optimism.

Somewhere between the protests of the 1960s and the frustrations of

New challenges [began] to emerge from the expectations that developed during World War II.

Citizens don't have a voice ... lobbyists, special interests — they have a voice.

the 1970s, the notion that the national government was the ideal place to advance the commonweal became contested, if not discredited. The public didn't reject activism, but people began to suspect that there were limits to what the state could do, particularly without the use of other instruments for self-rule. The change in attitude was dramatic and long lasting. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s, the number of Americans who believed that the government would do the right thing fell from 75 to 25 percent. Confidence in the President declined from 41 to 12 percent, and faith in Congress dropped more — from 42 to only 8 percent.

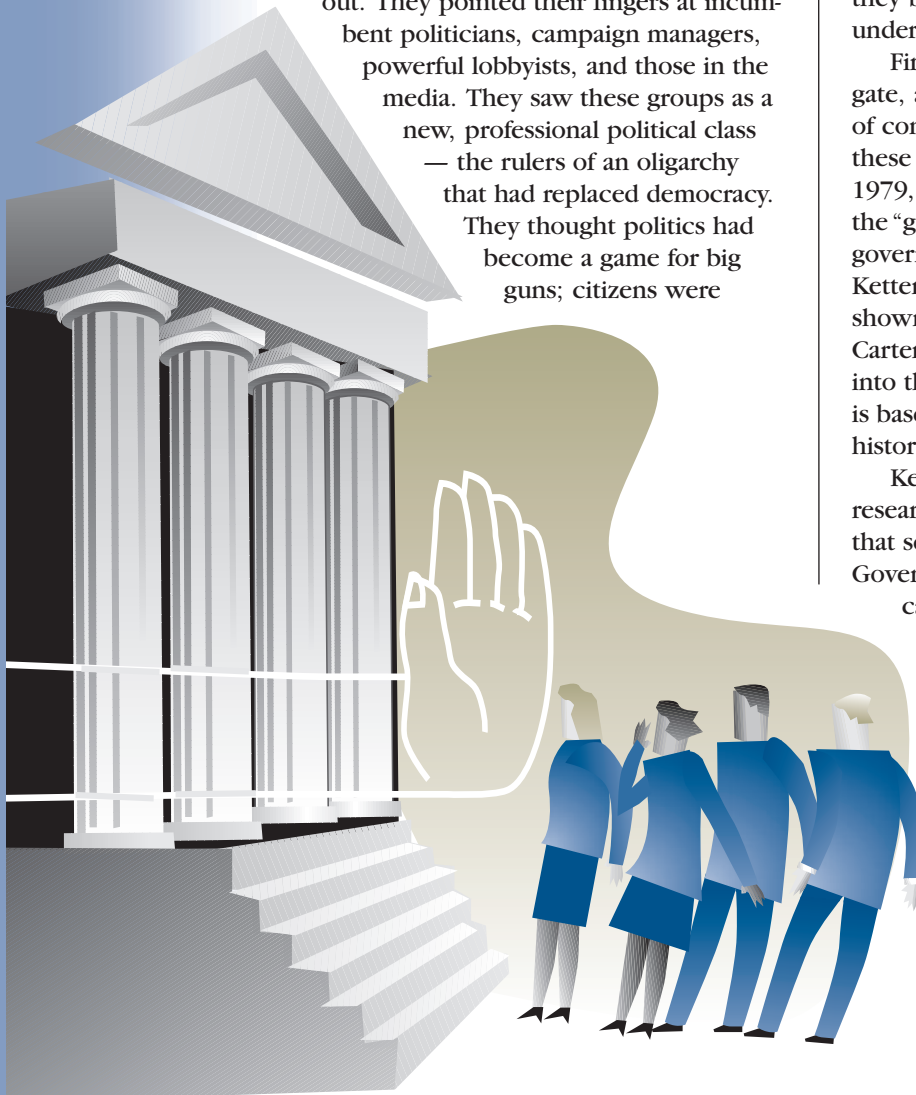
Even more than the government, the political system was in deep trouble. In a 1991 report on Main Street attitudes done by The Harwood Group, citizens talked about being shut out of politics. Metaphorically, it was as if they had come home one evening to find the house locked and someone else inside wearing their clothes and eating their food. And Americans knew who locked them out. They pointed their fingers at incumbent politicians, campaign managers, powerful lobbyists, and those in the media. They saw these groups as a new, professional political class — the rulers of an oligarchy that had replaced democracy. They thought politics had become a game for big guns; citizens were

relegated to the sidelines, where they stood unable to influence either the players or the rules of the game.³

Americans came to believe that the real representatives weren't those they elected but powerful lobbyists such as leaders of political action committees or single-issue organizations. "Citizens don't have a voice," people said; "lobbyists, special interests — they have a voice." What Americans saw happening didn't square with their notion of democracy. "The original concept was for elected representatives to represent your interests," one citizen explained, adding "that is no longer true. It is now whoever has the most money can hire the most lobbyists to influence representatives." Someone else insisted, "The country should come first — before specific constituents." In studies drawn from deliberations based on National Issues Forums (such as "Governing America"), the Kettering Foundation found that people didn't expect lobbyists to go away but they wanted more consideration for the general interest, which they believed had become seriously underrepresented.

First attributed to Vietnam, Watergate, and economic decline, this loss of confidence continued long after these crises faded from the news. In 1979, President Carter lamented that the "gap between our citizens and our government has never been so wide." Kettering Foundation research has shown that the disconnect President Carter spoke about has persisted into the twenty-first century. And it is based on more than Americans' historic wariness.

Kettering is now considering new research on ways to bridge the divide that separates The People from The Government. We don't expect Americans' concerns about state power to go away, but closing the gap seems essential. We are looking at the four main intersections where the public encounters the government: (1) when prospective officeholders meet the citizenry in campaigns, (2) when people cast their ballots, (3) when citizens attempt to influence legislation, and (4) when Americans encounter government bureaucracies and their regulations.



Problems occur at each intersection. Negative campaigns increase cynicism. Candidate images that are carefully scripted on television give citizens little contact with those who would represent them. Americans are less and less likely to show up at the polls because they believe their vote isn't as influential as the vast sums of money donated by powerful interest groups. When people do vote, it may be for initiatives that not only bypass legislative bodies but also bypass the public deliberation that should inform their choices. Relationships with the federal establishment have been equally problematic. Efforts to enact needed laws may end in stalemates as a result of hyperpartisan polarization. Then the courts fill the vacuum, though only after long and costly battles. And what about people's trouble with bureaucracies and their rules? Just ask anybody.

There is one bit of good news. The foundation has seen some indications that even though citizens are frustrated by their relationship with the government, they are becoming less resigned and more convinced they have to do something to bring about the changes they would like to see. We plan to document this trend in an update of the Main Street study.

In this issue of *Connections*, Kettering Foundation program officers and associates assess lines of research that might help clear out these intersections. As with every issue, we hope our readers will help us identify where the opportunities are greatest. We are particularly appreciative when we get reports on what others are doing, as was the case with the last *Connections*.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached by E-mail at dmathews@kettering.org.

1. James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

2. Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

3. David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).



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