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Reviewing a Review

Every three years, the Kettering Foundation reviews its overall research on democracy. This time, at our January retreat, we gave ourselves the added challenge of piecing together the "whole story" of politics that we believe is emerging from our research. By a whole story, we don't mean the entire story of democracy. We mean a coherent story, one that shows how the various subjects we study are interrelated and come together to create a dynamic account of self-government. The focus of this story, like the focus of our research, is on the public and the role it can—and must—play.

This review was productive because participants at the retreat began by examining what it means to assess the whole body of Kettering research. To review means "to look back" or "to see again," so the group of staff, associates, and guests at the retreat wanted to go beyond the particulars of specific studies and get far enough above the work to look at it from a different vantage point. As someone put it, a good review should put people high enough in the stadium stands so they can take in the entire field and understand the whole game, not just see individual plays. Given that objective, participants read studies of long-term trends in democracy and discussed the challenges democracy faces around the world. Books like Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg's Downsizing Democracy, which is the subject of an article in this issue of Connections, provided a larger context for reviewing Kettering's studies.
Another goal set at the retreat was to look at the work of others that is related to Kettering research. The objective was to locate new opportunities for collaborative studies, which are a hallmark of the foundation. Our third and final goal was to carry out this review in the company of “fellow travelers”; that is, the citizens and institutions that have joined us in studying how to make democracy work as it should. What scholars say about democracy is useful to keep in mind, and the opinions of leaders doing related work is important to know. But the foundation looks primarily at what people do every day to meet democracy’s challenges in order to keep its research on target.

Kettering has done its research in tandem with thousands of people and hundreds of organizations in every quarter of the world. Some, like the civic and educational groups in the United States that began holding National Issues Forums (NIF) deliberations, have been active for 25 years. So there is a rich history to recover by looking back, though it is a history of more than forums alone. Many of the organizations sponsoring NIF forums have gone on to take what they have learned about citizens from these forums into education, public administration, philanthropy, journalism, community building, and government. Those who have been involved sense that what they are doing—even though they are in different fields—is related and part of something greater than their individual projects. They are gaining insights into the whole story of democracy, into the interrelated practices that make self-rule possible. As one community noted after using deliberative forums to make decisions on health care issues, we didn’t just learn another way to talk—we learned there was another way to do politics.

After having laid out these three objectives, the retreat group took up each one in turn and went into greater detail. I’ll summarize the gist of what was said; and, as you will see, the group realized that what it had come up with was not three different kinds of reviews, but rather three characteristics that a single review should have.

Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy

When stepping back to look at the long-term trends of democracy, the first thing retreat participants cautioned was that the exercise might give the erroneous impression that Kettering was attempting to address all the challenges to democracy or thought it could solve centuries of big problems in a few decades. Even more worrisome, guests at the retreat warned, the foundation should not be drawn away from what it knows and does best.

With these cautions in mind, stepping back to look at long-range trends was useful in distinguishing between different types of problems confronting democracy. Some problems are serious but circumstance specific; they grow out of contemporary conditions, which are constantly changing. These problems can have significant consequences, as in the case of the hanging chad in Florida during the 2000 presidential election. Other problems are fundamental; they threaten the very lifeblood of democracy. These aren’t the same as problems like natural disasters that confront a democratic nation; they are intrinsic to democracy. For instance, highly charged moral disagreements can polarize a political system and, if unchecked, may lead to violent conflict. Yet, in another article in Connections, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson are cited for showing that moral disagreements are inevitable in politics. Political questions are, at their core, moral questions because they deal with what “should be” and, in a free country, people will always come to different conclusions about the “right” answers. Dealing with moral disagreements is a fundamental challenge in a democracy and, as events in the Middle East painfully demonstrate, these disagreements make it extremely difficult for democracy to take hold.

A research organization has to be focused on building strength, and the Kettering Foundation’s focus has been on the fundamental problems of democracy. That is where retreat participants thought Kettering studies were most useful—in identifying “the problem behind the problem” of democracy. Looking at long-term trends is one way to bring these fundamental problems into sharper focus.

In order to understand how citizens themselves experience fundamental problems of democracy, the foundation is, in addition to reviewing the academic literature, launching a new study of public attitudes. A new discussion guide, Democracy’s Challenge, will be used in meetings around the country, and the foundation will collect the outcomes. We hope to learn a great deal more about which problems are most important to citizens as well as exactly how people describe or “name” these problems.

Analyzing Today’s Civic Movements

While looking at the major challenges to democracy is useful in providing context, a number of retreat participants suggested that the proper focus for the review should be on the positive countermeasures that are now attempting to reverse downward trends. Following their advice seemed the best way to meet our second objective. The countermeasures we discussed are reviewed in a paper by Peter Levine, which has been adapted for Connections. As you will see, all the measures are civic in intent; that is, they have to do with citizens even though they are being promoted by professional associations, major institutions, and governments, as well as civic organizations. They fly under a variety of banners: dialogue and deliberation, public scholarship, civic
engagement, public journalism, deliberative democracy, public work, and civic philanthropy. The very presence of these initiatives could be a sign that something significant is happening—or at least trying to happen—in American democracy. Kettering research is already being used in many of these movements, and they may offer opportunities for joint learning agreements in the future.

Looking more closely at these civic movements as a whole has already revealed some things that weren’t obvious when we looked at particular initiatives individually. While all have worthy goals and all describe themselves as little “d” democrats, each is focused on a different problem and is driven by a distinct concept of democracy. These differences are illustrated in an analysis done by Derek Barker, which is summarized for Connections. (His full report can be found in Higher Education Exchange, published by the Kettering Foundation, 2006.) Barker found five problems being addressed by five different projects in just one movement in higher education. For example, one project had to do with improving communication between colleges and universities and the public, another with providing more access to expert data, and still another with increasing diversity on campuses.

Differences in how the public is understood in these various initiatives were especially striking. In some projects, citizens are to be informed individuals, much like consumers of goods and services; they judge what officeholders do on their behalf. In other initiatives, citizens are expected to be more active, to volunteer for service to others. And in still other projects, citizens have collective responsibilities for collective action. The dissimilarities in what citizens are supposed to do aren’t inconsequential; as Alexis de Tocqueville is reputed to have said, the health of a democratic society may be measured by the kind of functions performed by private citizens.

No one at the foundation was surprised by the diversity in the civic movements or alarmed to find divergent concepts of democracy. Differences over what democracy means are characteristic of democracy, which has always been a coat of many colors. Still, looking at the countermeasures as a whole and not just one by one was instructive. Today’s civic movements are shaping the character of twenty-first century democracy. We need to understand whatever shape is emerging from the divergent influences that these movements are bringing to bear.

Gaining Insights about What It Takes to Make Democracy Work

A final objective set at the retreat was to do the review in the company of as many of Kettering’s fellow travelers as want to participate. They have had insights about how democracy works that have been useful to them—and invaluable to the foundation’s research. These insights are more than the discovery of better ways to solve problems or of solutions that work. They go to the core of what democracy is about. They are revelations about how citizens can make a difference—how they can make a place for themselves in the political system. Because these are insights about politics, they are about power—not power over others but power with them.

After the retreat, Kettering research workgroups began to pour over case studies written by the people involved in some type of civic renewal or public engagement effort. It didn’t take long to realize that where insights had occurred, they had far-reaching influence and the potential for lasting impact. Also, we noticed that the best case studies were not written for the foundation but rather for the communities involved. That may be why they were rich in insights.
Insights reveal things that are fundamental though not obvious, so people are often surprised by them. For instance, one case was about citizens who began working together to make their community a better place to live, only to realize, a year later, that working together had already made the community more livable—even if they hadn’t solved all their problems.

To be sure, not every experience generates insights, not even the experience of success. As often as not, the insights came out of failed projects. A city on the Gulf Coast reported on a school levy that had been defeated, despite an extensive public engagement effort. This defeat, however, prompted an unusual insight. After the balloting, the sponsors of the levy came to see their work as more than persuading an electorate; they decided their larger objective was to rebuild a sense of responsibility for “those” public schools. The insight was that democracy isn’t just about voting; it is about restoring the community ownership that breeds a sense of public responsibility. With this insight, the sponsors went at their work in a different fashion. Rather than asking people to respond to a plan written by outside experts, they invited people to identify the problems facing the schools by drawing on their own experiences and concerns. And rather than trying to bring people to their meetings, they went to them, neighborhood by neighborhood. The new strategy took months to implement; reaching even the smallest group of neighbors was important. Eventually a new plan for the public schools emerged, and a levy to support it passed. But the real victory didn’t come from the election; it came much earlier with the insight that democracy’s roots go deeper than voting. They reach down into a sense of shared ownership and responsibility.

The case study analysis has led the foundation to an intriguing research question: What do we know about how insights occur? Clearly, they don’t come from Kettering; insights occur all the time without any relationship to the foundation. Yet, in some cases, the foundation has been implicated because the citizens involved were familiar with our findings and had visited us. Insights are often generated by bringing in new perspectives or ideas that allow people to reimagine what they can do. Perhaps the greatest significance of Kettering reports is not in the information they provide but in the perspectives they offer and the insights they generate.

In the past, we have also wondered if there is a way of interrogating experiences that generates insights. Or does approaching a project as an experiment create a learning environment conducive to gaining insights? I can’t report more than what I have just written because we are still trying to understand what generates insights about democracy. And that is exactly what we hoped this review would do, not result in summary judgments to discard some studies and add others, but point the way to better research questions.

**Continuing the Review**

Reviews normally end with conclusions—often definite ones like this movie wasn’t any good but that one was a smash hit. Conclusions from the 2006 review were not summary judgments, but were more important. We left the retreat even more convinced that telling a whole or coherent story of how democracy works and the public’s role in it is essential. We also left the meeting with a sense of urgency about telling a coherent story. Democracy is proving to be quite fragile, and authoritarianism is already threatening to reverse gains made in the 1980s and 1990s. Even in stable democracies like the United States, citizens are increasingly worried that we are losing our sense of community and that our political system is so polarized that it is becoming dysfunctional. People say that they don’t know what to do or where to go in order to act on their concerns. Even more serious, the belief that they can and should make a difference is being contested everywhere. That means that the main assumption behind the foundation’s research—the assumption that citizens are capable of self-rule—will have to be justified in future research. It can’t be taken for granted.

Because of this sense of urgency, this year’s review is still going on. The three objectives set in January are being incorporated into the way the foundation operates. We have come to appreciate the necessity of keeping a constant eye on what is happening to democracy around the world, not just giving it a glance every 36 months. The countermovements promoting various forms of civic engagement are proving to be more than just potential collaborators: The various concepts of democracy they promote are helping us understand the long-range consequences of various options for strengthening our political system. Reading the case reports of insights is giving us a better idea of what we ought to be listening for and reporting on. Perhaps most important of all, we have recognized that review and reflection have to be ongoing if we are to make sense of the whole of our work. And so we have prepared this issue of Connections to invite you to join us in this effort.

David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached by e-mail at dmathews@kettering.org.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving 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. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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Editors
David S. Frech
Libby Kingseed

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

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