

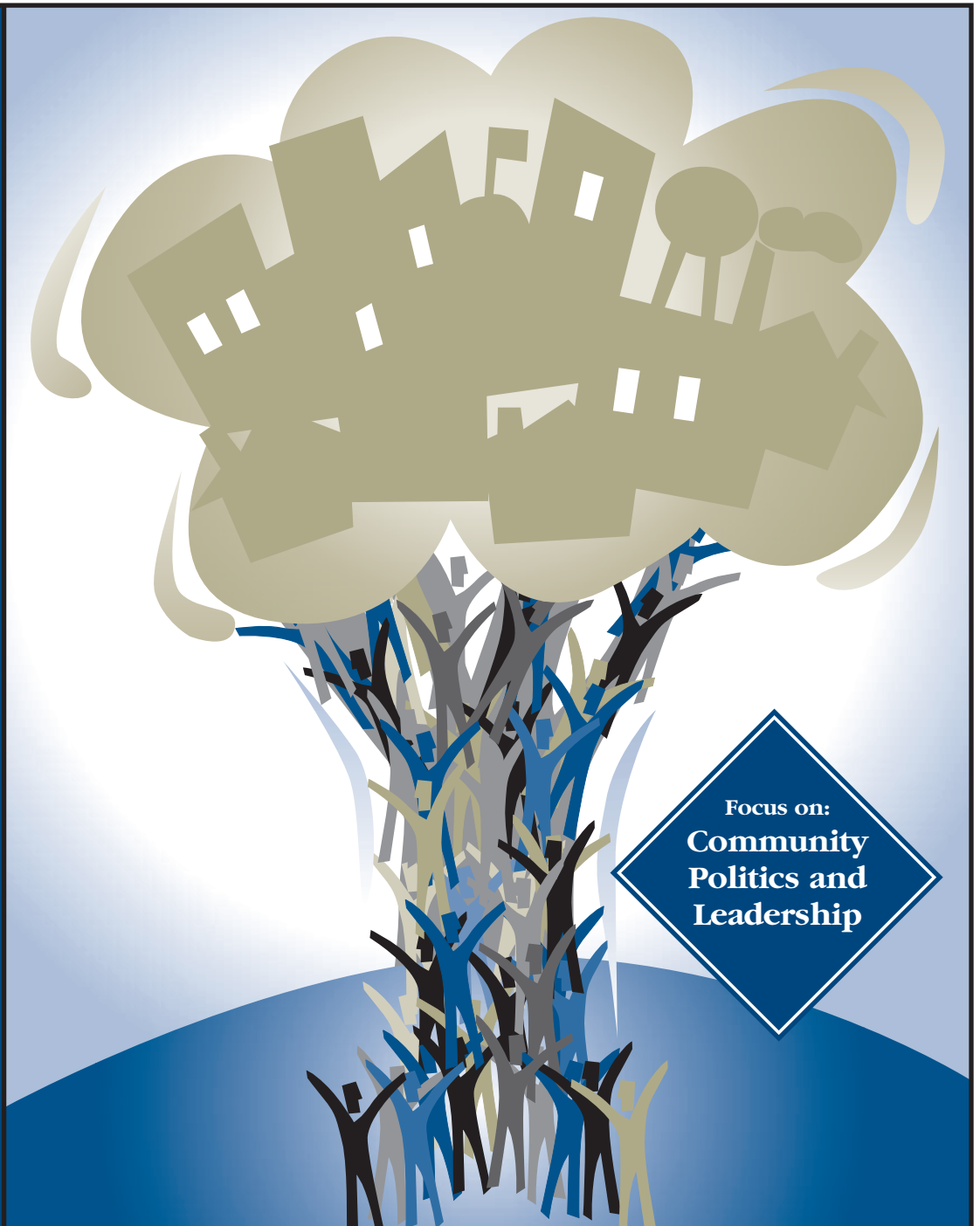
CONNECTIONS

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- **The Little Republics of American Democracy**
.....page 2
- **A Question Revisited: What's in a Name?**
.....page 7
- **Reflections on the Practice of Community Politics**
.....page 9
- **Inactive Communities: Lessons from Rebuilding**
.....page 13
- **Shared Learning with Uniontown: Lessons in Community Development**
.....page 16
- **From Dialogue to Action in Tajikistan**
.....page 19
- **Catalysts for Change: Toward Leaderful Communities**
.....page 23
- **Make the Leap**
.....page 26
- **Books Worth Reading**
.....page 29



The Little Republics of American Democracy

By David Mathews

Communities occupy a prominent place in the American conception of democracy. It is no wonder that Kettering's research on how democracy can work as it should includes studying how communities might work as they must. This issue highlights examples of communities where citizens are attempting to govern by engaging publicly in order to deal with problems. It also offers insights on why some communities are, or are not, able to govern themselves effectively.

Our research is practical — it is about what is currently happening, or not happening. Yet it is grounded in history. Here is some of what we are learning about the intimate relationship between community and democracy since our country was founded; our conclusions are, of course, still tentative.

The Place of Place in American Political History

American democracy is based on Thomas Jefferson's premise that the big republic — the nation and the federal government — rests on a foundation of little republics — communities and local governments. The reasoning is straightforward: If democracy isn't practiced where Americans live, we can't expect it to be practiced in Washington.

Community self-government has given American democracy its distinctive character, which took shape between the Revolution and the first

decades of the new nation. Popular rule wasn't everyone's first choice for our system of government. Even though the Founders rebelled against the British Crown and Parliament, they valued many of the same things British society valued. After a brief period of loose confederation, America's leaders expected the country to be ruled by a strong central government, with citizens doing little more than giving their consent. Some explicitly rejected the argument that the country should be a democracy; perhaps recalling the excesses of the French Revolution, they denounced democratic governance as madness.

By the early years of the nineteenth century, those who feared democracy were horrified to find that the country was, in fact, becoming a democracy. Robert Wiebe explains that the change was driven

less by leaders or political parties than by citizens themselves. He describes the historical public of nineteenth-century America as "thousands spurring other thousands to civic action." Public life was boisterous and nondeferential. People entered it without anyone's permission; they simply acted as though they belonged, which is the original meaning of "participation." Citizens built roads and schools just as they erected forts and formed militias. The American public was a working citi-

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zenry; it was far more than a body of consumers or clients, more even than an aggregate of law-abiding voters and taxpayers. This was a citizenry in motion — people doing things with other people, not still but dynamic. That motion defines the public; in a sense, it *is* the public. To appreciate how much the public is a force, rather than just an object, think of electricity as opposed to a light bulb.

Public work was typically carried out in and for communities. Turning frontier settlements into civilized space where a valued way of life could take hold was a major industry during the formative years. The “American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life,” John Dewey reminds us, arguing that “unless local community life can be restored, the public cannot resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.”

Unfortunately, traditional democracy rooted in communities began to weaken around the middle of the twentieth century. This may have happened because two world wars made communities seem irrelevant in what we came to recognize as a global society. For whatever reason, the word “community” (meaning a place) had little place in national policy after World War II, as Martha Derthick of the University of Virginia has pointed out. And, when it did appear, it frequently carried a negative connotation. Communities were often havens for prejudice that bred injustice; their governments were considered corrupt and inefficient. So the federal government began to intervene, often with justification but at the expense of home rule. As George Fredrickson, one of the country’s leading scholars of public administration, has observed, Americans spent most of the twentieth century building large institutions while ignoring small communities.

In the 1970s, the pendulum began to swing back. The federal establishment had grown large, costly and, some argued, unnecessarily intrusive. Many of the “systems” established during the first half of the twentieth century — the welfare system, the health care system, the Social Security system, and so on — began to show signs of structural failure. That didn’t mean that Washington could do nothing right, but the government’s competence, even its legitimacy, was being questioned.

The public’s change in attitude was dramatic. In the 30 years from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the number of Americans certain that the government would do the right thing fell from 75 to 25 percent of the population. Confidence in the President declined from 41 to 12 percent, and faith in Congress dropped even more — from 42 to only 8 percent. These trends were only part of a widespread dissatisfaction with all authoritative institutions.

Historians now see that, beneath the loss of confidence and system failure, a significant transformation was occurring. Bruce Schulman thinks that the 1970s “marked the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time.” One of the most important things that occurred during this period was that Americans began to look for better ways to solve problems, and they turned to their communities, which had local institutions they could enlist. They also began to organize themselves, once again, into a working public. As the leader of one of the many community associations that were being established said, “There’s a new recognition that the country’s not going to be saved by experts and bureaucrats. It’s going to be saved by some moral vision and some moral hope coming from the grassroots and the neighborhoods.” There is no better example of the new type of organization that was emerging than the neighborhood watches springing up without either centralized direction or federal funding. The watches grew as citizens in community after community realized that the police would be unable to stop crime if they took no responsibility.

In the 1990s, America was on the verge of entering a new democratic era. But it had a lot of unfinished business, much of it having to do with making communities work as they now had to.

For Communities to Work

We’ve all wondered why some communities are reasonably effective at making needed changes while others, apparently not that different, aren’t. Or, why a given community is sometimes able to manage its problems and sometimes not. Communities of every size and type face similar problems. The only difference is that some are able to exercise a degree of control over those problems, whereas others become dysfunctional under the stress

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of their difficulties. Simply put, some communities come together; others come apart. The foundation's task is to offer some plausible explanations and find out what makes for a high-achieving community.

We have noticed communities that have acted effectively to gain greater control over their futures have usually made fundamental changes in their politics. They haven't just solved problems; they have changed themselves by changing the way they go about their collective business. The key to that change has been to build a stronger public life, or civil society. Said more plainly, these communities have put the public back into the public's business.

Why is a public necessary? Because, to use an overworked expression, it takes a village to solve our most serious problems, the ones that don't seem to go away — racism or deeply entrenched poverty, for example. These "wicked" problems are neither discrete nor easily defined. They are as tricky as they are aggressive and vicious. Their causes are so intertwined that it is difficult to arrive at a diagnosis. Each problem is a symptom of another, in a never-ending chain. While bridges are built and diseases eradicated, wicked problems persist. Success in dealing with them can't be determined in the same way as the reliability of an engineered structure or the curative power of a laboratory-developed drug. No single institution, agency, or segment of a community is able to solve the problem on its own.

When faced with wicked problems, reaching a shared understanding of the approximate nature of what people are contending with is more important than deciding on a "solution," which may prove misguided. In fact, scholars have argued that dealing with wicked problems depends on *not* reaching a fixed decision early on about what type of solution is best. The ability of citizens to exercise good judgment and experiment in the face of uncertainty is more important than the often-illusory certainty of experts.

If the public is dynamic, it will be found in activities, in the things people do, in their practices. Kettering has compiled these practices, and its community politics research deals with all of them — how people become involved, how they determine what they have to do, how

they make collective decisions, how they implement those decisions, how they act as a public, how they evaluate their actions, how they maintain political momentum. Other issues of *Connections* have examined one particular practice, public deliberation, which is the talk and reasoning that goes into collective decision making. But through public deliberation, choice work is only part of the work citizens have to do.

Future Research

The foundation is trying to learn more about a number of barriers to developing a working public in a community: Why do people get involved — or not? How great is their involvement, and how long does it last? What does it take to create a vibrant public life? Some argue that this isn't possible in poorer communities because people have no financial resources and are preoccupied with their personal survival. These "realists" argue public life is impossible under these circumstances. Is that really the case, we wonder? Do communities where people have money and leisure necessarily have publics that work effectively? Most of all, we want to know how a community changes itself. Some say it is all a matter of leadership. But what kind of leaders are needed?

Engagement

Kettering might focus its research on how people become engaged to the point that they exercise their capacity to take collective action. Those who believe their communities must work better — whether the goals are to eliminate injustice, improve race relations, or promote healthy communities — often put lack of citizen involvement at the top of their list of barriers to progress. But why aren't people involved? Is the conventional judgment that the uninvolved are unconcerned a sound one? There are a host of unanswered questions.

Richard Harwood's research found that engagement is chaotic — full of false starts, lapses, and reversals. His report entitled *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns* reveals that engagement is a multifaceted process not limited to an isolated activity or practice. Such a process can't be measured or evaluated easily. It involves an interactive dialogue that encourages participants to ask how a problem affects them personally and



what they can do, individually and collectively, to solve it.

Most people appear to talk their way to involvement with community problems, perhaps across a backyard fence or at a kitchen table. Something happens, and people talk about it — why it occurred, what it means, what should be done. The literature of public engagement suggests that citizens will get involved only if the initial conversations demonstrate two things: first, that the problem relates to something people care about and affects them or their families personally and, second, that citizens can do something about the problem. It isn't enough to show that an agency or organization can do something; people have to be satisfied that they themselves, can — and *must* — act in a way that will make a difference.

The foundation is asking whether there is anything that might trigger or expand people's involvement. Betty Knighton, of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, is convinced that the terms used to name community problems and the opportunity to rename them are the key to engagement. Who defines a problem and the name it is given determine the number of people available to solve it, the kind of response that will emerge, and the level of engagement that will be possible. Too often, problems are named by officeholders or professionals who use language that reflects favored solutions, rather than public concerns. Problems may also be named by ideologically driven advocates, who recognize that controlling the name is a public relations advantage. When citizens participate in naming public issues and deciding on the terms to be used, they are likely to become, and remain, engaged.

Inactive Communities

Another research approach grows out of a conviction that the real problem isn't individual involvement. Any number of studies show that volunteering and personal acts of kindness are quite common, especially since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Not so for actions that make use of our collective capacities. A year later, Americans are still asking what they can do. We aren't at all sure of our ability to do anything significant about terrorism. This uncertainty is particularly



evident among young people, as William Galston, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, points out. He notes that they are willing to volunteer for personal acts of charity (perhaps because they can see immediate results) but lack a sense of themselves as a collective force. A recent survey by Robert Putnam shows that we have become more trusting of government and our neighbors since the attacks. But it remains to be seen whether the shifts in attitude will translate into long-term increases in civic activism.

Personal service is certainly useful, but it is not civic action. In order to make

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a significant difference, we need to come together and combine our abilities. And, here, the argument that not everyone has sufficient time or resources becomes relevant. As I mentioned, some argue that to be realistic, we have to admit that certain communities will never have a public life; they are so dysfunctional that self-rule is impossible. Perhaps the foundation should look for local groups contesting that conventional wisdom.

Community organizer and scholar J. Herman Blake says the assumption that there are “inactive” communities is dead wrong. He contends that every community has at least a latent civic life. Those who aren’t convinced by Blake’s claim hold that even if communities have latent capacities, no one knows how to initiate civic renewal. People may respond to specific problems, but they are unable to change the way the community as a whole functions. That takes a broader understanding of what needs to happen and a willingness to carry out more than one project; it also requires an inclination to experiment and a lot of patience. Those characteristics are rare, critics say.

Kettering has a hypothesis about what might counter impatience, a narrow focus, and lack of long-term political will. We suspect that the degree to which a community is engaged in ongoing collective learning and the degree to which it can keep up its civic momentum are correlated. By “civic learning,” we mean the process whereby a community assesses the effects of its efforts to solve problems, and then modifies its actions to take into account what it has found out both about itself and about the nature of its problems. We know that individuals who are lifelong learners lead more satisfying, more productive lives, and we suspect that the same may be true of communities. Perhaps communities have characteristic learning styles, which, once recognized, can be adjusted so that they are able to learn in more inclusive and more fruitful ways.

Civic learning may be stymied when success is determined by measuring progress toward preestablished goals or benchmarks that the community doesn’t constantly modify as experience dictates. Community learning is also hindered by external assessment. In order to judge the worth of actions, citizens themselves have to look at what happened and, simultaneously, at the effects on what

they consider valuable, which no one else can decide for them. Their notions of the outcomes they want usually change as they act.

Leadership

A third research strategy would be to follow the conventional wisdom that “it’s all about leadership.” Although that may be true, the prevailing conception of the leader may not be the one that is most likely to result in effectively functioning, self-governing communities.

Kettering has reported elsewhere on a study contrasting leadership styles in two adjacent communities. The more dysfunctional of them actually had the best leaders, as traditionally understood. The leaders were well-educated, well-connected, personally successful, and civically responsible. Yet what stands out in the high-achieving community is not so much the characteristics of the leaders as their number, their location and, most of all, the way they interact with other citizens. The high-achieving community had ten times more people providing leadership than communities of comparable size. This community is “leaderful”; that is, nearly everyone provides some measure of initiative. And its leaders function not as gatekeepers but as door openers, bent on widening participation. With so many providing leadership, the leaders are not clearly distinguishable from other citizens.

More recently, the foundation has wondered whether the politics that new leaders are taught is consistent with the politics practiced in high-achieving communities. The Harwood Institute is currently attempting to answer that question.



In this issue of *Connections*, as in the past, we lay out our thoughts about future directions in the hope that readers will alert us to work we should be aware of and opportunities we may have overlooked.

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