

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

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COMMUNITY POLITICS:

A Lens for Seeing the Whole Story of Kettering Research

By David Mathews

The piece I write for *Connections* usually lays out the options the foundation is considering for future research in one of its major areas of study. This issue, for instance, is about our research on Community Politics and Leadership. But I would like to do something a bit different this time. Before I describe the problems that might merit further study, I want to introduce a new project—one that sets out to tell what my colleague, Hal Saunders, calls the “whole story” that grows out of the major lines of Kettering research.

By “whole,” we don’t mean that the story includes everything that could be studied; we mean that it is an integrated,

coherent account of how “We, the People” can exercise our responsibilities as the sovereign authority in our democracy. It is about the problems behind the problems of democracy and the practices that empower the citizenry to deal with them.

There are several reasons for capturing the story that is the totality of Kettering research. A whole story or narrative should provide coherence in ways that a catalog of individual studies doesn’t. Just as the narrative or plot line of a good play gives meaning to particular events, the narrative that connects the major lines of Kettering research should reveal the full significance of particular findings. For instance, public deliberation, one of the practices the foundation has studied, can be seen as just another technique in group dynamics if it isn’t presented in the context of the whole of democratic politics. Deliberation can’t be understood apart from its role in redefining problems and producing sound decisions for action.

One of the ways a narrative provides context is by showing relationships. While practices that empower citizens, such as deliberation, can be distinguished from

one another, they are parts of a larger political process of self-government; they fit together the way Russian *matrëshka* dolls nest inside one another to make a single figure.

A whole story can also capture the cumulative effects of democratic practices just as the last act of a play shows the effects of events that occurred in earlier acts. The cumulative results of democratic practices sustained over time are new ways to solve problems and new relationships forged by the collective efforts of citizens. Finally, and most important, having a narrative should make it easier for the foundation to compare notes with those who have different stories to tell about democracy.

The story we are writing places citizens—the greatest untapped resource for meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century—on center stage. Of course, government remains important, but the great eye-opener of the past two decades of Kettering research has been this: There are some things that only governments can and must do, but there are other things that only citizens outside government can do—change political culture, modify human behavior, transform conflicts.

The way citizens make these changes is through deciding and acting together in what Harry Boyte calls “public work,” work done *by* not just *for* the public. We have tried to identify the practices that are needed to carry on this work. Citizens have to name problems in a way that captures the broad range of their concerns, frame the options for tackling the problem, deliberate on the consequences of different approaches, make decisions, and secure the necessary commitments to act. This may require people to develop a scenario for taking the steps needed to bring a variety of resources to bear on a problem. Throughout the process, public work involves learning from experience. These are the practices that empower citizens.

Because we believe the whole story is one of Kettering’s most significant products of years of work, we want to find better ways of telling it. We propose to do that, beginning with the current review of community politics and leadership research, by showing the interrelationship and interdependence of all of the studies

that contribute to our understanding of community. We think that community is one of the lenses that brings into focus the foundation’s entire research and highlights the whole story.

By “community,” we mean a diverse group of people who share the same geography and circumstances. Their daily lives are affected by floods and industries relocating to other countries. They are influenced by the history and customs of their place. Communities play an important role in the American political system. They allow people to experience democracy by participating in local elections, by serving on school boards and juries, and through opportunities to lay their opinions alongside the opinions of others who are outside their immediate circle of neighbors.

While community politics is a specific area of research, information about how communities function comes from all of the other areas of Kettering research. The chart below shows the research, both domestic and international, that is used in community politics. Note, for example, how much the study of community depends on the cluster of research called Citizens and Public Choice and the cluster

called Institutions, Professionals, and the Public. The research on public education has been an especially rich source of information on communities because of the effects communities have on schools and other educational institutions—and vice versa. To look through the lens of any of these other areas of study is to look at the whole of Kettering’s research.

Although I have only outlined the whole story in the broadest terms, I’d like to turn now to the discipline we used in reviewing the research on communities. We began this review, as we have all others, with surveys of the relevant literature and reports about what other research and community organizations are doing. Then, combining the results of these surveys with our findings, we identified the problems behind the problems that communities face. These fundamental problems aren’t the same as the immediate and urgent problems of the day. (Other organizations are better suited to provide research on those.) The problems we try to identify have the ability to shut down or seriously impair one or more of the primary operating systems of a body politic. If the electricity goes off in a building, it is a serious problem but not a



fundamental one. If the foundation cracks and the building becomes unstable, it is a fundamental problem. The building will collapse. Fundamental political problems are perennial because they are embedded in the fabric of society.

The next step in our review is to assess the capacity of the foundation to contribute to the work of communities that are grappling with fundamental problems. Although there are a number of fundamental problems in communities, Kettering doesn't have the capacity to respond to all of them. The foundation's strength is in research on problems that have to do with the role of the public.

Part of assessing the foundation's capacity to do useful research involves looking at what we have learned from our past studies. Sometimes we answered the question we were asking; sometimes we didn't. And sometimes (actually quite often), we learned we had the question wrong. When that happened, we had to dig deeper into the problem at hand. And going deeper added to our research capacity.

Once we are reasonably sure that we have the capacity to pursue a line of research, our review calls for us to consider two other issues: The first is whether new research will complement or support studies done in other areas. This overlap makes our findings stronger and more credible, and it contributes to a more comprehensive and coherent whole story.

Second, no matter how rigorously Kettering has followed its review discipline up to this point, the foundation can't go from diagnostic research to studies of remedies without finding organizations or institutions that have a self-interest in experimenting with a new approach to an old problem. Kettering wants to learn what real people do out of their own interests and resources. We can't claim citizens are willing to do something to make democracy work better if we pay them to do it, which is why we must find fellow travelers who are struggling with problems similar to those we are studying. Their willingness to participate is an important litmus test in the review process. For instance, deliberative forums are significant because Kettering does not conduct them or pay to have them conducted.

The review we have been doing this year on our studies of communities has generated a list of fundamental problems. The next step will be to identify opportunities that might arise from matching Kettering's strengths in research with these problems, which seem to fall into three categories.

Disengaged Citizens

Americans, it has been charged, are—for the most part—apathetic and uninformed. They are incapable of making sound decisions, even about their own best interests. Worse still, they are disinclined to make the effort to inform themselves. Shirking their own responsibilities, they blame their leaders and those in positions of authority for their problems. Citizens counter that they have been driven out of the political system by moneyed interests. Since they have little influence, there is no reason to invest their time and energy in political matters. So they remain largely disengaged, even when leaders and those in positions of authority promote civic participation.

Dysfunctional Communities

Some studies suggest that the very sense of community, of being connected to people other than family or friends, is waning. Most Americans are said to be concerned about their individual rights and well-being, rather than the common good. At most, they ally with those who agree with them, creating numerous factions that fragment towns and cities. People, on the other hand, argue that the only place where they can be secure is within small, close-knit groups. They regret the loss of a sense of community but say they really can't count on their fellow citizens. The result is too many dysfunctional communities. Local institutions attempt to rally people around a common good that proves to be elusive, while citizens try to find some semblance of community with those they feel they can count on. The net

effect is that common problems often go unsolved and stack up like uncollected garbage.

Distressed Institutions

Professionally directed institutions, not citizens, it has been argued, are best suited to solve the problems of a modern society. Citizens need only be informed consumers and give institutions considerable authority to ensure that sound policy is enacted and enforced. Citizens, however, have lost considerable confidence in all major institutions, even local ones. In the case of public schools, for instance, research shows that many Americans

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doubt the schools are really theirs or that they can make a useful difference in how these institutions perform. Yet if citizens are only consumers and take no responsibility, their institutions may not be able to educate, govern, or carry out any function alone. That results in even less public confidence in these institutions.

We welcome comments on these and other problems. We also welcome suggestions about where Kettering's strengths may be put to best use and information about communities that are struggling with the absence of a collective public.

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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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