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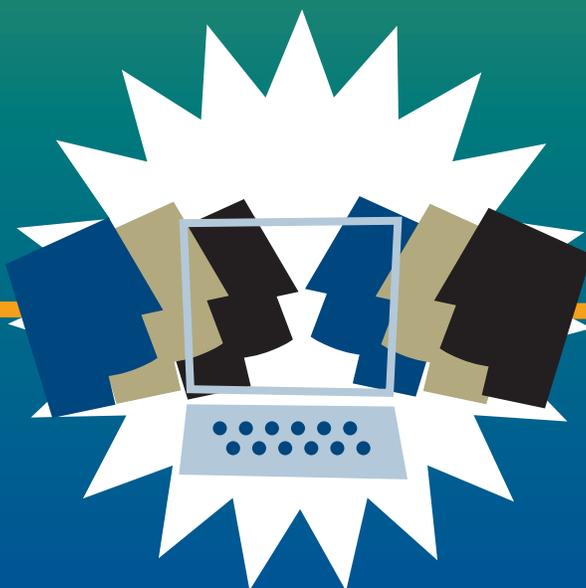
**Democracy
and
Economic
Change**

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How Citizens Talk

about Responding to Economic Change

By Steve Farkas

In the fall of 2008—just as the nation began feeling the enormity of the current economic crisis and the federal government began gathering its response—the Farkas Duffett Research Group was conducting a series of four focus groups with Americans on economic issues. The purpose of the research, conducted in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, was to understand: 1) how citizens name and talk about the economic issues that affect their lives and their communities; and 2) how people see the possibilities for organizing and acting with others to deal with economic challenges. Here's what we found.

When it comes to the national economic picture, citizens talk as if they are bystanders.

The focus groups were an unusual chance to track the evolution of an economic crisis in “real time” through the eyes of ordinary Americans. Core financial

institutions were experiencing meltdowns, the federal government responded with unprecedented initiatives to salvage them and press attention was intense. But ironically, the people in our focus groups talked about the situation as if they were bystanders. They were alert, they were worried, and they were already taking steps to prepare their households for harder times. But no one thought they had any say or influence over what was going to happen on the national stage. Most did not even understand the basics of what was happening.

I think it's to the point now where there's nothing anybody sitting in this room can do. We can change things years from now . . . but right now we're kind of just all along for the ride. All they're doing is arguing in Washington. I just think we kind of got to see what happens, and then decide where we go from there, just be ready to change what you need to change. (Centerville, OH)



How Citizens Talk about Responding to Economic Change

People make personal adjustments in hard times.

Certain aspects of people's immediate economic circumstances—for example, whether they have a job, what happens to their 401K plan—are beyond their control. A bit of fatalism is perhaps inevitable.

If I get downsized—if I get laid off, I get laid off. There's nothing I can do about that. . . . Just going to go. Do I worry about it each and every day? I probably could but I don't, because if the day comes, the day comes, you know? If it's going to happen, it's going to happen. (Westchester, NY)

But people do have some sense of control over their *personal* economic situations. In the focus groups they talked about saving more and spending less, for example, by taking fewer or more modest vacations, shopping more carefully or postponing major purchases. They may not be able to control whether they get laid off, but they can prepare in case it happens.

Citizens seem better equipped to understand local economic trends in their communities.

Citizens have their own take on the economic strengths and weaknesses of their communities, using their own leading economic indicators: How busy are the restaurants? How crowded is the mortgage company's parking lot? People also understand the interconnected nature of their local economy—knowing for example that abandoned property in their neighborhood will affect the value of their home or that the opening of a megastore will push out the local mom-and-pop retailer down the street.

In places like Sunnyvale, California, they refer to the role of talent, innovation, or diversity when talking about economic growth in Silicon Valley, making connections that are not obvious or simplistic. In Greenville, North Carolina, they traced the trends transforming their community in recent years.

Greenville was a farming community at one time, but because of the hospital, we have gotten all these different people from

everywhere. If you've got different people from different walks of life, and those people can come together, and communicate together, I mean that's what you want. You got different cultures, and it's more interesting. (Greenville, NC)

Values often drive citizen discussions of economic concerns.

Incidentally, we found that when people talk about local economic issues, values and core priorities are often behind the talk. For example, after discussing their resistance to a new stadium for a while, residents of a Raleigh, North Carolina, suburb revealed that beyond concerns about traffic was their sense that for several years their neighborhood had been losing its identity, that they were becoming a community of strangers. Meanwhile

others in the focus group pointed to the benefits that change had brought—better roads, rising property values, and greater diversity. In Centerville, two focus group participants contested what should be done with undeveloped property in their area: one thought it should be developed so that jobs and the tax base improve; the other wanted to keep the area wooded—green space and biodiversity were more important to her, she said. It may not be newsworthy, but it is worth keeping in mind: *questions of economic change are intimately tied to values in people's minds.*

Citizens look to leaders to respond to economic challenge—even when talking about the local economy.

In our focus groups, people found it hard to articulate how they could respond civically, together with others, to economic challenges. Even when the challenge is



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local, citizens often defer economic issues to leaders to handle.

You can't control any of this stuff. . . . I'm completely powerless. Not unless you're involved and you've been tasked with some sort of resolution on that, or you're an expert in the area, or you're some sort of contributor to the committees at the end of these things.

(Sunnyvale, CA)

In Centerville, when the conversation turned to what to do to help Dayton's downtown area, several participants began playing the role of "amateur experts"—what they would do if they had the responsibility and power to act. But they quickly returned the role of leadership—the real power, they believe, is in the hands of leaders.

You tell me to go dig a ditch, I'll dig the ditches as hard and fast as I can, but [we need] to have visionary people who have an idea of where they can leverage the community, leverage the Dayton area for the future. I don't think Dayton has had that type of leadership. (Centerville, OH)

Impressions from a Washington, D.C., roundtable

On March 11, Kettering convened a panel of discussants to talk about the problem of creating opportunities for citizens to engage economic challenges. Some of the issues raised echoed the focus groups findings:

- Several comments during the panel discussion noted that the most promising level for citizens to have an impact was the local community.
- Several discussants brought up the relationship between the American public and its leaders and organizations. One commentator rhetorically asked: "What do leaders need of us?" The point was that citizens have a role to play but that leaders need to call upon them—an echo of what we found in the focus groups.
- Related to the above was the sense that mediating institutions through which citizens would make an impact were necessary—local government agencies

or nonprofit or religious organizations. And indeed, when people reported civic action on economic issues in our focus groups, they talked about channeling their actions through their local church or a local governing board or homeowners association. Otherwise, it was very difficult for them to imagine having an impact in concert with other citizens.

- Part of the panel discussion revolved around the issue of moral culpability. Some felt that people needed to vent grievances before moving forward—"How did we get to this point anyway? Who is responsible for the economic mess?" Others felt that such a conversation would get muddled and that it was more important to talk about what to do next rather than how we got there. The "who-is-to-blame" conversation also surfaced in the focus groups we conducted. In Centerville, for example, some people talked about irresponsible neighbors who took on mortgages they could not afford, spent frivolously, and lost their homes to foreclosure. But others countered with personal stories about having to resist the entreaties of institutions—banks, mortgage companies, and credit card companies—that had been busy exhorting them to take on debt they could not afford.

Responding to Economic Change

Efforts to foster conversations among citizens need to be structured around two questions: what is the problem in our community? and what can we do about it? Research has identified some promising topics: sprawl and economic growth in communities; homes and foreclosures; jobs and unemployment; tax revenues and public services in local jurisdictions; saving and spending, consumerism and credit; and concerns about younger generations: their work ethic, capacity to endure hard times, and their American Dream.

But the research also points to a number of challenges to fostering public engagement of economic concerns. First, economic challenges shift from community to community, making the naming of concerns to be addressed a distinctly contextual problem. Moreover, economic issues are in many ways moving targets.

Citizens typically can feel like victims or bystanders, rarely like people who can act with other citizens to influence the economic destinies of their communities. The question, what can we do about it? can imply readiness to roll up your sleeves or a shrug of the shoulders.

In the fall of 2008, the downturn was mostly defined as a financial crisis. Now jobs are the key public concern. Indebtedness and overconsumption were a key topic of the discussions then—but experts are now more worried about cutbacks in consumer spending. It's not inconceivable that six months from now the context will shift again.

But perhaps the greatest challenge for citizens is to recognize that they have something to say in the economic realm, an issue where the ground has been ceded for so long to the experts. Citizens typically can feel like victims or bystanders, rarely like people who can act with other citizens to influence the economic destinies of their communities. The question, what can we do about it? can imply readiness to roll up your sleeves or a shrug of the shoulders.

All of this means that innovation and experimentation will be necessary and that the only guaranteed result is that there will be surprises. At the end, the most important question we will ask is, what do we learn from the process?

Steve Farkas is president of Farkas Duffett Research (FDR) Group. He can be reached at sfarkas@thefdrgroup.com.

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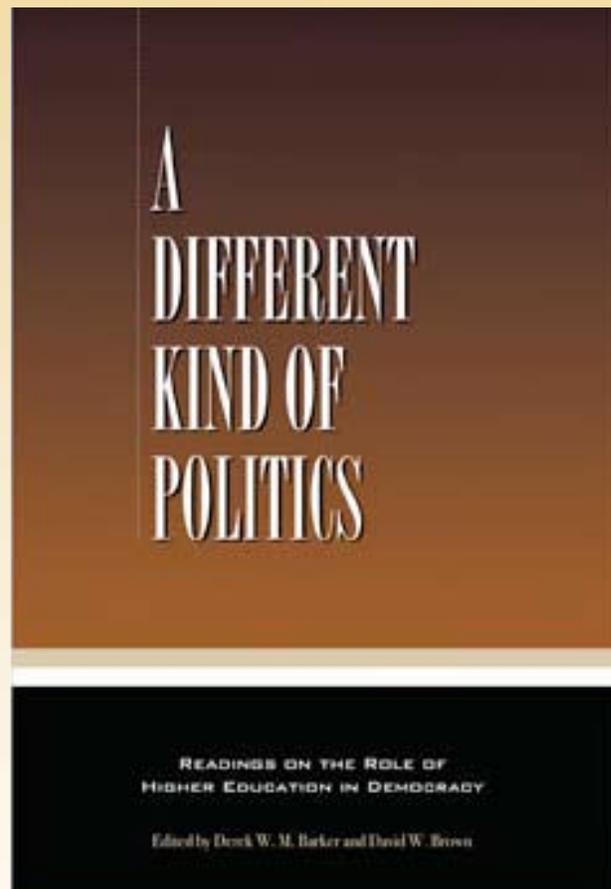
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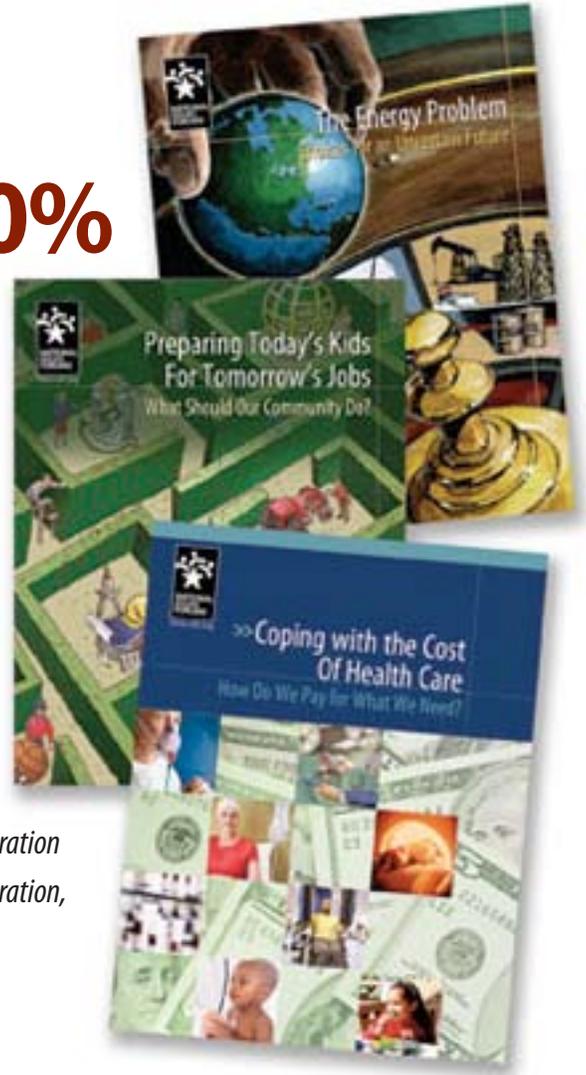
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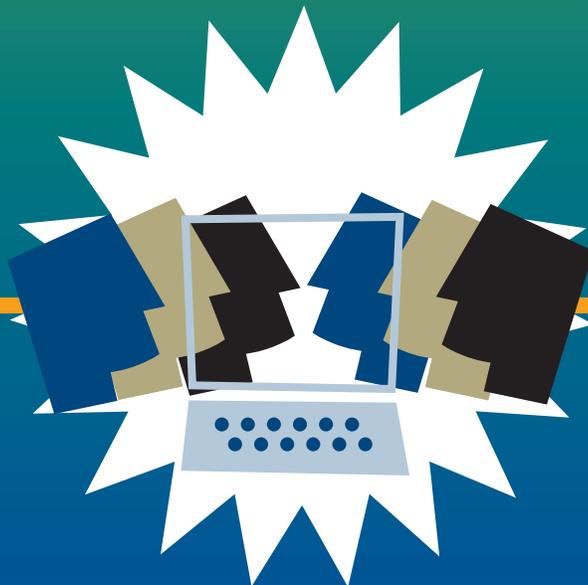
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