The role of Civic Organizations in today’s society
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    By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach
Editor's Note:

The foundation has a longstanding research interest in understanding some of the barriers to democratic practice. During the past year, we have focused our attention on the kinds of organizations that help promote civic skills and opportunities to address collective problems within communities. We are not alone in noting that a once thriving network of civic organizations has become less “civic” and more “organized,” limiting the opportunities for citizens to feel they can make a difference. The first section of this issue describes some of the challenges this change has had on collective self-rule. Derek Barker provides a brief history and literature describing the reduction in civil society. Martín Carcasson highlights the polarized nature of public discourse and describes a center for public life that is passionately neutral, and thus an honest broker of difficult conversations. Dorothy Battle describes the gap between what citizens might bring to collective problem solving and how organizations often fail to recognize these citizen resources. Scott Peters and others relate the need to connect different ways of communicating and how cooperative extension might weave connections among different perspectives. Finally, Dallas and Marin share a series of multinational perspectives on the need for an independent sector; without it, democracy fails to deliver its promises.
Each year, Kettering identifies a trend or challenge in democracy as a unifying focus for its research across program areas. This year, the research focuses on what appears to be a growing gap between citizens and organizations. Although organizations in the civic sphere have historically played a critical role in democracy around the world, they appear to offer few opportunities for citizens to play an active role in confronting the most vexing problems facing their communities. As organizations increase their efficiency in accomplishing technical tasks, are they enabling civic work to strengthen democracy? If not, what can citizens, communities, and organizations do to fill this gap?

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1832, he was struck by the vitality of its civic sphere and the associations through which citizens developed the habits and skills of citizenship. Through the early 20th century, chapter-based national membership organizations continued to provide public spaces for citizens to discuss politics, influence government policy, and establish social insurance programs and other benefits for their members. In the early 1990s, academic scholarship, political journalism, and democratic activists around the world recognized the powerful role that civic associations played in nurturing the democratic norms that led to the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, beginning with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Theories of “civil society” seemed to offer a solution to the polarization of the cold war, with nongovernmental associations understood as possible antidotes to both the repressive forces of authoritarian governments and the privatizing forces of markets. An explosion of organizations followed, using such labels as nongovernmental, nonprofit, community-based, and so on, and with missions related to every conceivable social problem. As the world of civil society organizations developed, proponents hoped that they combined the...
Despite great promise to provide citizens with public spaces through which they can make choices and shape their future, civil society now appears to have few distinctly democratic features.

virtues of both governments and markets, while avoiding their weaknesses. Organizations in the civil sphere promised the public mission of government without its bureaucracy, the entrepreneurial spirit of businesses without their profit motives, and collective power without the use of government legislation.

Nearly two decades later, organizations in civil society have continued to proliferate, provide valuable services, and advance technical knowledge. But have they created a distinct realm for collective civic action? Across civil society, civil society organizations are, like their government and corporate counterparts, subject to pressures toward centralization, specialization, and efficiency. Often dependent upon the federal government and a few key philanthropic foundations for their continued existence, civil society organizations must conform to the norms and agendas of large-scale entities that have little connection to any rank-and-file membership. Like the corporate world, nonprofit organizations evaluate their programs in terms of standardized metrics and measurable results, with little opportunity for citizens to name goals in their own terms. At the same time, the professional cultures of organizations tend to reinforce a technocratic ideal of providing services to needy clients, not unlike government bureaucracies. Although many use the language of civic engagement, their routines appear to be misaligned with citizens who might be seeking a greater sense of agency. Despite great promise to provide citizens with public spaces through which they can make choices and shape their future, civil society now appears to have few distinctly democratic features.

In view of these trends, conversations across a number of Kettering workshops and program areas will be talking about what can be done to fill the gap in civil society:

- What are the characteristics of organizations that are providing spaces for citizens to make choices on difficult issues? What is the role of leaders within these organizations?
- What are the most promising groups of professionals, within institutions or across fields, who are aligning their routines with the civic capacities of communities?

Please contact us if you know of organizations, groups of professionals, or individuals who might be interested in joining these conversations.

For Further Reading:


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NEW from Kettering Foundation Press

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by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

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— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation

Doing Democracy
A report for the Kettering Foundation
by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.

To order these publications, contact Agency for Instructional Technology at 1-800-600-4060. You can also FAX your order to 1-812-333-4218 or send an e-mail to info@ait.net.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research 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.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

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Design and Production
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.