A REVIEW of KF Research:

The challenges of democracy—getting up into the stands

The range of our understanding of democracy—civic renewal

Insights about democracy—insights about changing practice
Reviewing a Review
The challenge is to piece together the whole story emerging from Kettering research.
David Mathews .................................................. page 3

The View from Above: Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy
By getting up into the stands, it is possible to take a broader view, note long-range trends, and distinguish between different types of problems confronting democracy.

Sidelining Citizens, Privatizing the Public
Keith Melville .................................................. page 7

The Problem of Moral Disagreement and the Necessity of Democratic Politics
Noëlle McAfee .................................................. page 10

A Proper Focus: Analyzing Today’s Civic Movements
By looking at the positive countermeasures that are now attempting to reverse these downward trends, civic renewal can expand the range of our understanding of democracy.

A Movement to Revitalize Democracy in America
Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland .................................. page 13

Civic Initiatives in American Democracy
Peter Levine .................................................. page 17

Five Emerging Practices in the Scholarship of Engagement
Derek Barker .................................................. page 20

Gaining Insights: Traveling in the Company of Others
By bringing together the insights of others about changing practice, the pieces begin to interlink into a whole story of democracy.

Bridging the Divide Between the Public and Government
Phillip Lurie and Alice Diebel .................................. page 23

Owensboro Revisited
Tony Wharton .................................................. page 27

A Different Kind of Politics, with a Long Tradition
Nicholas V. Longo .................................................. page 29
Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy

Objective One

Stepping back to look at long-range trends is useful in distinguishing between different types of problems confronting democracy.

Sidelineing Citizens, Privatizing the Public

Keith Melville

At a time when many people are reasonably well off and better educated than ever—two conditions that have long been thought important for a robust public life—how do we explain America’s less-than-robust civic life, the pervasive sense that the public has been relegated to the sidelines? Why are so many people disengaged and disenchanted with government, and dispirited about public life generally? At a time when the United States is aggressively trying to champion democratic regimes around the world, why is our own form of democratic life so thin that it is hard to recommend to others as an example?

As I look at many of the writings that address nagging questions about American public life, I am struck by the variety of answers to these questions. Writings that come immediately to mind include E. J. Dionne’s Why Americans Hate Politics, Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone, and some older and still relevant titles: Robert Wuthnow’s Loose Connections: America’s Fragmented Communities, a report from the National Commission on Civic Renewal called A Nation of Spectators, a book by James Davidson Hunter and Carl Bowman called The State of Disunion, and a famous essay by Robert Lane, “The Joyless Polity.”

There is also Joe Klein’s Politics Lost: How American Democracy Was Trivialized by People Who Think You’re Stupid, a no-holds-barred account that places the blame for our public malaise squarely on the shoulders of professional political managers and consultants.

A familiar line of explanation in many writings about the public malaise is that citizens—as a result of their apathy, the fact that they are generally poorly informed, and can only rarely be stirred from private pursuits—are to blame. One of the more dour commentators, Anthony Downs, notes that because most citizens do not take the time to learn what politicians actually do, they’re unable to cast votes that reflect their self-interest or any conception of the common good. Many Americans acquiesce in their passivity by choosing not to vote at all.

Beyond the fact that speculating about the sad state of democratic life has become a kind of parlor sport, these different explanations of what has gone wrong are important, because each diagnosis of the principal challenges to democracy in the early years of the twenty-first century points the way to quite different prescriptions about what ought to be done to regain a more robust public life.
One of these books, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public*, is particularly valuable because of the distinctive diagnosis it offers and, by implication, its prescription about what needs to be done. Written by two political scientists at Johns Hopkins, Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, the book is unsparing in its portrait of the decline of public life. Far from blaming citizens for the demise of democratic participation, however, Crenson and Ginsberg call attention to the ways in which institutional processes—both government and nonprofit groups that act in the public interest—encourage or undermine democratic practice. The demise of public life, as they see it, is not the result of a conspiracy to chase the public to the sidelines. It is instead the result of fundamental institutional changes that have led to a paradoxical result: a form of politics and public life, claiming to be democratic, that doesn’t really need the public.

The central question they explore is the one David Mathews poses in his introduction to this issue. It is one of the most practical questions you could ask about democratic governance: What, exactly, are citizens expected to do? Beyond voting and paying taxes, what is their public role and what are their responsibilities? Crenson and Ginsberg’s analysis leads to this central insight: it is not that most people today are disinclined to act in the public interest, but rather that they are no longer asked to do much.

**The Way We Were**

As Crenson and Ginsberg see it, it is no romantic fantasy to assert that American society, a century or more ago, was more democratic than it is today. Judging by how engaged people are in a variety of public functions, it was more democratic for the simple reason that more was demanded of citizens. Political leaders, parties, and candidates all had to mobilize publics in the collective work of campaigns and governance. “In the 19th century,” they write, “America was exceptional for the vitality of its democratic institutions—especially its political parties.” Until roughly the beginning of the twentieth century, they note, “American elites encouraged popular participation because they needed the active support of non-elites. . . . Popular support was the currency of power.” People became active, they explain, “because vigorously competitive leaders marched them into the public forum.”

Crenson and Ginsberg’s analysis is supported and extended by sociologist Theda Skocpol’s observations about a parallel development in nonprofit groups. “Classic American association-builders,” she notes, “took it for granted that the best way to gain national influence, moral or political, was to knit together national, state, and local organizations that met regularly and engaged in a form of representative governance.”

Whether in the realm of government and elective politics, or in national associations, ordinary citizens played a crucial role. “They were gathered there,” write Crenson and Ginsberg, “because they mattered. Because the people were essential to the development and functioning of the state, elites could not govern without them.”

But this has changed in ways that profoundly modify the roles and responsibilities of citizens. “Not only has government found new and non-participatory ways of doing business,” as Crenson and Ginsberg note, “but the competing political elites that once activated and organized popular constituencies to influence or run the government have found other ways to achieve their ends. . . . We are approaching the end of a political epoch, one in which citizens jointly inhabited a public sphere.”

The transformation in American public life they describe started early in the twentieth century and has become more apparent ever since. In terms of the institutions of government, political leaders have found ways of doing business—more efficiently, but not necessarily more effectively—with much less direct public participation.

By the late twentieth century, the new pattern was fully apparent. In Crenson and Ginsberg’s words, “Government today cultivates satisfied customers rather than mobilized citizens.” The central task of government is now often described as one of offering “customer-friendly” public agencies that deal with the public as clients and customers, not citizens. This disaggregation of the citizenry into a personalized democracy is in some ways fairly benign.
The point is that this reorientation has had the important consequence of marginalizing citizens as political actors.

Citizens, for their part, have returned the favor. Instead of joining their neighbors and mobilizing to redress grievances or thinking of collective action as the most effective means of exerting political pressure, it is more common today to address grievances as individuals through the mechanism of legal action. What has diminished if not entirely disappeared is the sense of citizens who are part of political communities with common concerns and public purposes.

Similarly, the nongovernmental organizations that represent various groups, such as children or the disabled, consumers or retirees, have changed the way they do business. In Theda Skocpol's phrase, we have seen the fraying of civil society in the sense of “unraveling from above.” Rather than taking part in local chapters that were tightly linked to national organizations, today’s nonprofit and advocacy groups tend to operate headquarter offices administered by professionals, which are often based in Washington. Reliance on local grassroots chapters or organizations has sharply diminished. Their strategy is to resort to litigation, not mass mobilization. They depend on wealthy donors, foundation funding, and direct-mail fundraising.

“Contemporary elites,” write Crenson and Ginsberg:

have found that they need not engage in the arduous task of building popular constituencies. Public interest groups and environmental groups have large mailing lists but few active members; civil rights groups field more attorneys than protestors; and national political parties activate a familiar few rather than risk mobilizing anonymous millions.

The ironic outcome of these developments, in their words, is that we have become “a nation of emphatically private citizens—customers and clients who find it difficult to express coherent common interests.” In an age of politics that no longer needs a public, citizens are relegated to the sidelines. The word citizen is itself increasingly an honorific, a role with little substance.

It is not so much that the public isn’t interested in engaging in public life or responding to crises and common concerns. The overwhelming public response both to the 9/11 tragedy and, more recently, to Hurricane Katrina, demonstrates a wellspring of public concern and generosity, and a widespread willingness to act out of public concern. The point is that, even after 9/11, the public isn’t asked to do much. “Today,” conclude Crenson and Ginsberg, “leaders seldom call, and they ask little when they do. Citizenship has withered as a result.”

**Reviving the Democratic Public**

Crenson and Ginsberg’s analysis of the democratic malaise has been praised by reviewers as an antidote to the prevailing habit of blaming citizens for the demise of public life. It is a valuable insight to point out that the citizen’s role has eroded in large part because leaders have less use for citizens than they did a few decades ago. One implication of this analysis, in the authors’ words, is that “measures designed to encourage the vigorous exercise of American citizenship must be aimed at least as much at political leaders as at citizens themselves.”

Among other things, their analysis explains why we shouldn’t expect to deal with the core problems of democratic life today by focusing on raising voter turnout. It is not, of course, that voting is unimportant. But if democratic citizens regard voting—which is at best a way of holding ruling elites accountable through periodic elections—as the main element of their public role and responsibilities, we are left with a diminished public life.

To revive public life, we need to devise new ways—or revive old ways—for citizens to join together around common concerns to regain a sense of collective agency.

**Objective One**

That situation is not hard to imagine. Indeed, this passage describes a widely shared experience that explains the current sense of public malaise and disengagement. If the health of a democratic society can be reckoned by the kinds of functions performed by citizens, Crenson and Ginsberg’s description of America as “a nation of emphatically private citizens” is both a warning and a call to action. What’s essential for those of us who have engaged in this work is not just to assert that citizens are capable of self-rule, but to help reinvent places where self-rule happens.

Keith Melville is a senior faculty member at the Fielding Graduate University, an associate at the Kettering Foundation, and author of more than 70 books and articles. He can be reached by e-mail at KEMelville@aol.com.

To revive public life, we need to devise new ways—or revive old ways—for citizens to join together around common concerns to regain a sense of collective agency.
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.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a $250 million 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 trustees, or its officers.

Editors
David S. Frech
Libby Kingseed

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Graphic Design and Production
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.