With this issue of Connections, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change Connections from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering’s review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation’s research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering’s hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

- citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
- communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
- institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing Connections once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation’s research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you’ll find throughout the following pages, this issue of Connections reflects the foundation’s research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the “Readers’ Forum.” As its name implies, the new section features reactions and comments by Connections readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the foundation’s hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The “Forum” is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true “Readers’ Forum,” the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—Connections. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation’s Web site, www.kettering.org. On the Web site you’ll find a new section devoted to this issue of Connections and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online “Readers’ Forum” is an attempt to help readers better connect to Connections—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

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the country’s leaders, but they overlook the fact that those in power are a product of the system and the society in which they live. “The common man in the street has not looked at himself as being part of the corruption problem,” she explained. “Whereas he is part of it because, indirectly, those who occupy political positions are goaded into corruption by their relations and friends,” she said. “They tell them, ‘This is your opportunity to make money. If you come back empty-handed you are a fool.’”

The Challenge of Democracy—Transforming People

Nigeria is hardly alone in its struggles among the world’s emerging democracies. In 1900 just 15 percent of the world’s population lived in democracy. Today it is the world’s most prevalent form of government and most of those governments are relatively new—part of the so-called “Third Wave” of democratic reform that swept across Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. There was no plan to all of this, and for many the triumph of democracy seemed all but inevitable. By the 1990s, in country after country, that early euphoria was soon replaced by a growing sense of despair as old ethnic conflicts and new economic problems mounted.

While outside experts and observers stress the importance of changing systems and laws in emerging democracies—guaranteeing free and fair election and reforming institutions—those working on the ground believe that the real key to building a vibrant and stable democracy is engaging and empowering its citizens. Before one can transform a government they say, one has to transform its people. Empowering citizens is not the end point of political reform, but its starting point. The insights and beliefs of these international workers in democracy offer food for thought—not just when it comes to addressing the concerns of emerging democracies, but also when it comes to addressing the concerns of established democracies like our own in the United States. Because their problems are so strong and their struggle with democracy is so new, they are more ready to consider new approaches and question old assumptions.
Citizens and Local Politics

Russia—Changing Citizen Mentality

“I was a product of my system and my country. I didn’t think I would ever be interested in politics because for people of my generation politics was like a swear word, sort of like trash,” explained Svetlana Gorokhova with the Russian Library for Foreign Literature and a former international fellow with the Kettering Foundation.

In the early 1990s jubilant crowds took to the streets of Moscow to celebrate when the newly elected government of Boris Yeltsin withstood a takeover attempt by Communist hardliners. Little more than a decade later, that early enthusiasm for the possibilities of democracy has worn thin in the face of continued economic difficulties and an increasingly violent ethnic struggle with Chechen rebels. Above all, however, the implications of Russia’s new democracy are still sorting themselves out.

“People are very disillusioned because they cannot find their place in the political system,” Gorokhova said. In her work with the library’s substantial community outreach and education program, she has made extensive use of deliberative forums to address issues like race relations and Russian-American relations. Those forums are useful, she explained, not just for understanding the public’s values, but also in getting people to work through their differences together and think about politics in a new way.

This is what we are always trying to explain to people—that this is politics. This is politics. Politics is not the elite sitting somewhere making decisions for you. You can make a difference. People at first say, “Oh no, no, no.” Then they start changing. This is one of the highest challenges in Russia: to change the mentality. It’s not enough just to change the system. The system should be changed. But, again, it’s all inside us. It’s inside our heads and hearts.

Argentina—Who Frames the Issues?

Like Nigeria and Russia, Argentina has also had its own struggles with democracy. Once the most prosperous nation in Latin America, since the early 1980s the country has been hammered by a series of economic and political crises that began during military rule in the 1970s and grew steadily worse during its transition to democratic rule in the 1980s and 1990s. Citizens, however, are still determined to give democracy a chance, says Roberto Saba, one of the Kettering Foundation’s first international fellows, but they are still struggling to define just what that idea of democracy means. “Much of our work in the community takes the experiences and ideas that underlie deliberative democracy,” said Saba, now head of a civil society group in Buenos Aires.

The political system and the party system are totally discredited, but they are still hanging on to power. I feel that the community has begun to understand that it cannot leave everything in the hands of the politicians—and that real change is possible if they get involved.

Defining just how and when citizens should be involved with government, however, is not an easy task, nor an exact science. Citizen participation does not necessarily mean a public takeover of the legislature or presidency, nor sitting in on every policy decision.

A good place to start, Saba believes, is finding ways for citizens to be the ones who set the political agenda for their communities and their country.

I think part of the frustration in all our democratic systems is related to the fact that citizens feel alienated from the agenda—an agenda set by somebody else. By the media, by the government, or by the political parties.

He explained:

The problem is that we, as citizens, do not pay much attention [to] who names and frames the issues. And I think that the naming and framing of issues is half of the political struggle. It is the first step in making citizens more powerful in democracy.

Kenneth A. Brown is an associate with the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at kbrown@kettering.org.


To America’s great credit, democracy exists, and any American can take advantage of its benefits. And to America’s great shame, all too many Americans have become passive spectators in the hurly-burly of democratic politics, unwilling to play much of a role in its operations, yet ever ready to complain when it fails to meet their needs. . . .

Ultimately the American public’s lack of information about politics stems neither from cognitive limitations hard-wired into the brain, nor from the failure of such institutions as the media to provide them with the information they need, nor from the traumatic experience of having politicians disappoint them. Information gaps exist for one reason only: Americans have the choice to care about politics and have chosen not to. They may think that withholding their support from politicians is a way of punishing them. But it is not; their failure to inform themselves allows their political leaders tremendous leeway to get what they want. . . . When it comes to politics, Americans rely on their cynicism to escape from their obligations, and they trust their naïveté to counter their ignorance.
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. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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