

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

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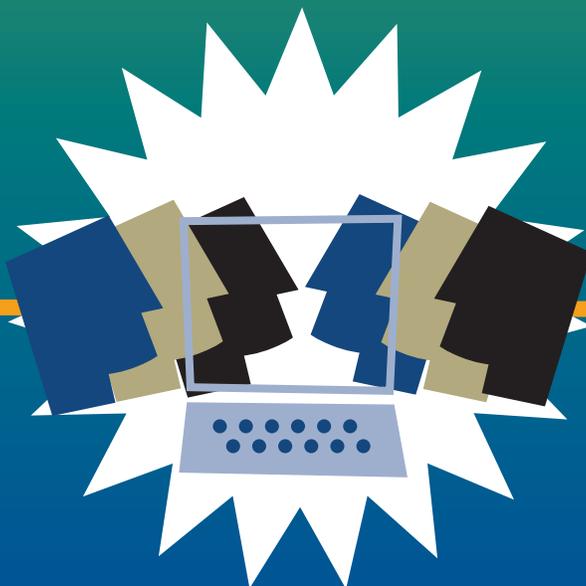
The role of
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By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach



The Challenges of Civic Life

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.



Relating Reason and Emotion in Democratic Politics

By Scott J. Peters,
Theodore R. Alter, and
Timothy J. Shaffer

In relation to the work of politics, Max Weber once asked: How can “hot passion and cool judgment” be “forced together in the same soul?” Weber’s question points to a critically important problem of democracy: to figure out not only how we might meld hot passion and cool judgment together in our work as political agents, but also why we should try to do so. To use slightly different language, the problem is to learn not only how to relate emotion and reason, but also how to understand their respective value and importance.

We’ve placed this problem at the center of an action research initiative we’re pursuing in partnership with the Kettering Foundation and cooperative extension professionals from several different states.

We hope to develop and learn from stories that illuminate how extension professionals and community members have encountered and dealt with the tensions between reason and emotion in their civic engagement work and experiences. The initiative is motivated and inspired by a hopeful possibility; extension is uniquely positioned to help people weave emotion and reason together in constructive and productive ways. As an institutionalized part of the national system of land-grant colleges and universities, extension has the capacity to generate, access, and engage a wealth of scientific and technical expertise and knowledge. But extension is not just a university organization. It’s locally grounded, situated, and governed, with offices in nearly every county in the nation. As a community-based organization, extension professionals and their community partners are positioned to tap into and engage people’s passions and emotions about the things they value and care for and the issues they’re interested in or concerned about.

We’re convinced that extension can help—and already is helping—people address the problem of relating emotion and reason in the work of democratic politics. But we’re also keenly aware that this rather simple (and at this point in this article, abstract) sounding task is, in a few key ways, profoundly countercultural. To see this, consider the following story.

During the 1990s, several farmers from Minnesota applied for permits to construct huge enclosed “feedlots” for large-scale hog production. In response, some people called on county governments in rural parts of the state to pass new laws that would regulate and restrict the location and size of these feedlots, if not ban them altogether. Other people urged government to stay out of the matter. These conflicting views raised a difficult public policy question: should county governments regulate feedlots for hog production, and if so, why, in what specific ways, and for what ends?

Community members had a potential partner that could help them answer this question: the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Its official mission statement at the time was “to involve people in improving the quality of life and enhancing the economy and the environment

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through education, applied research, and the resources of the University of Minnesota." While the feedlot question looked like it offered a good opportunity for extension staff to put this mission into practice, most were actually quite reluctant to get involved in it. The reason isn't hard to figure out. The struggle over what to do about the issue was explicitly politi-

some extension staff members did choose to become engaged in it. Most of them limited their role to providing information and scientific research findings on the technical aspects of animal agriculture. There were a few extension staff members who took the additional step of organizing and facilitating public forums. In opening up these forums, they laid down a key

ground rule. "Tonight when we discuss this issue," they would say to the participants, "we're going to leave our emotions at the door." The assumption behind this rule was that people were being blinded by their emotions and this was preventing them from being able to approach the feedlot policy question in a calm, rational way—a way that included a careful consideration of the findings of scientific research. If people were willing to leave their

hot passion about the issue at the door, they implicitly theorized, a space could be opened for cool, reasoned judgment.

From one perspective, this looks like a story about how to do things right. According to this view, extension staff correctly maintained the organization's official nonpolitical stance by limiting their roles to the provision of scientific information and to the creation of opportunities for people to put their passion and blinding emotions aside in order to reason together; in other words, to see and consider the facts. In doing so, these staff members demonstrated how extension—and the land-grant universities the organization is part of—can and does play a positive, constructive role in civic life: in the heat of passions and emotions, it helps make a space for cool and reasoned judgment.

From another perspective, however, the story looks quite different. Instead of exemplifying the role extension can and should take up in civic life, the story can be viewed as both a missed opportunity and as a problem. The controversy over the feedlot policy question provided an opportunity for extension staff to help

people learn how to relate and meld hot passion and cool judgment. Rather than seizing this opportunity, they missed it. Not only did they choose to keep emotion and reason separate, they also insisted that the former be out of the room altogether.

Beyond this missed opportunity, the call for people to leave their emotions at the door in order to clear the way for cool and reasoned judgment reflects the problem the Harwood Group recognized in its *Organization-First* report: that organizations embrace and pursue civic engagement in ways that privilege their interests, expertise, programs, and services. As a university-affiliated organization, the main things extension has to offer the world are scientific and technical knowledge and expertise, and skills in helping people understand and apply them. When extension staff told community members to leave their emotions at the door in order to focus on the "facts," they were—knowingly or not—putting their organization first by privileging their expertise. In doing so, they were effectively asking community members to leave one of the most important things they have to contribute to democratic politics out of the room: namely, their hot passion and emotion for the things they value and care about.

In addition to the organization-first problem, this story reflects the dominance of the prevailing views of what makes for "good" policymaking and "good" citizenship. In each of these, reason is not only celebrated and elevated above our passions and emotions; it is viewed as a corrective substitute for them. Emotions and passions are viewed as problems to be isolated and overcome, rather than potential resources to be drawn upon and utilized. While they certainly can be and often are a problem, they are not always so. And a strong case can be made that they are absolutely indispensable to the work of politics. Rather than being "left at the door" (if that were actually possible, which it really isn't), they need to be acknowledged and expressed. And they need—somehow—to be included in the work of reasoning together about facts and evidence.

To make this step, we need to rethink our understanding of the relative value

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cal, and extension staff and administrators routinely prided themselves on being "nonpolitical." It was also generating a great deal of "hot passion," to use Weber's phrase. It was stirring up intense emotions, including fear, anger, and even hate.

Those who were calling on county governments to regulate and restrict feedlots were afraid that huge hog farms would harm the environment, their health, and their property values. Those who wanted government to stay out of the issue were afraid that if the size of hog farms was limited, their productivity and efficiency would be damaged, and farmers would not be able to compete in the global marketplace; they would lose their farms and livelihoods, and the local and state economy would decline. Motivated by both fear and love (albeit of different things), each group was angry with the other. They were spending a lot of time yelling at, attacking, and even threatening each other at public meetings and in letters to the editor published in local newspapers.

Despite the political nature of the issue and the emotions it was stirring up,

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and importance of emotion and reason in politics and civic life. There is an emerging literature on this topic. Two of the points we find in this literature are particularly important for the work we are doing with cooperative extension:

- **Emotions should not only and always be seen as expressions of irrationality that endanger reason.** Rather, they can be and often are infused with intelligence and discernment, and should therefore be seen as critically important resources in ethical reasoning practices. Grounded in our life experiences, they often (but of course not always) reflect rich, detailed perceptions of the meaning and implications of events and actions. If we try to isolate them or leave our emotions and passions at the door, we lose a critically important ingredient in the process of making sound judgments about what ought to be done about the problems we face.
- **Emotions motivate us to act.** We typically don't choose to become engaged in political life and affairs only because we understand something in an intellectual sense. We choose to act because of how we feel about what we see and experience, and the things we stand for and care about—things that are either endangered or not yet fully realized.

These two points do not mean that we should elevate emotion above reason.

Rather, they should compel us to work to weave them together. We're well aware of how challenging this task can be and is. Our story from Minnesota teaches us that it is countercultural, both in a university-related organization that privileges technical and scientific rationality and knowledge, and in a larger society that continues to see emotion and reason in opposing rather than complementary terms. If we ask ourselves what the extension staff in Minnesota should have done to weave emotion and reason together in the context of deliberations about the feedlot policy question, we can begin to imagine how difficult and challenging such a task is. We all know that it is both difficult and risky to intervene in situations that are politically polarized and infused with passions and emotion. It's hard to create spaces in which different voices and perspectives can be respectfully heard and considered when emotions are intense, when various interests are in seemingly intractable angry conflict, and when people are personally threatened, as they were in the Minnesota story. It's hard to conduct civil, reasoned discourse that generates shared understandings of the "facts" about an issue when emotions are explicitly welcomed and invited into the room instead of being "left at the door."

How should the tensions between emotion and reason be handled in public

deliberation and discussion? How can the process of deliberation and discussion among disparate interests in a public setting be designed and framed so as to foster a learning environment that encourages and supports both emotion and reason, giving all voices a chance to be heard without any one voice or organization being given primacy? Should initiatives to engage hot-button political issues through broad-based deliberative discourse even be attempted? Are issues like the feedlot question in Minnesota too hot to handle? What should be the roles of "experts" relative to the roles of community members in discussing and deliberating about these issues? More generally, what should be the relative roles of "expert" and local knowledge? How can "experts" engage in these debates as respectful partners, bringing their own perspectives, but also acknowledging the passion, emotion, experience, knowledge, and wisdom of others? Beyond deliberative forums, are there other opportunities to weave emotion and reason together in collaborative public work initiatives? Where and when and how is this happening? How does or how might extension contribute to it?

These are just a few of the questions we intend to raise and pursue in our research. We hope and expect that the public work stories we're finding and developing will offer new insights into the ways cooperative extension might improve its efforts to help people address this problem of democracy. While some of these stories are about deliberative forums where the problem emerges openly and directly, others are about long-term relational work in which it emerges in veiled and subtle ways. From this recognition we're already learning to look in unexpected places for stories and lessons about the work of weaving emotion and reason together.

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SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

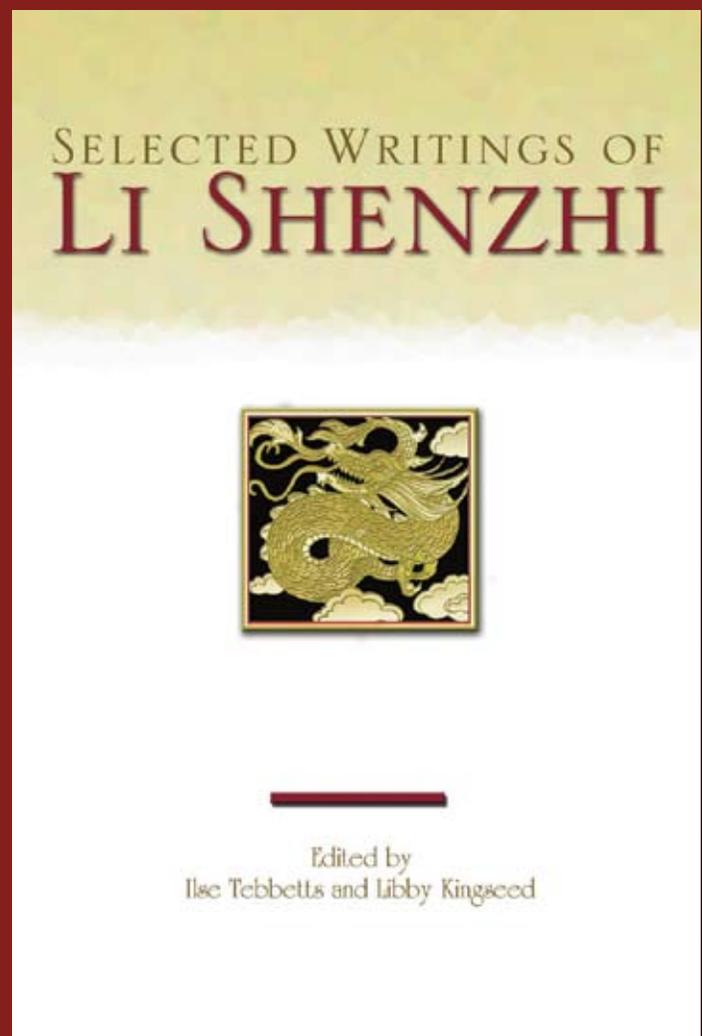
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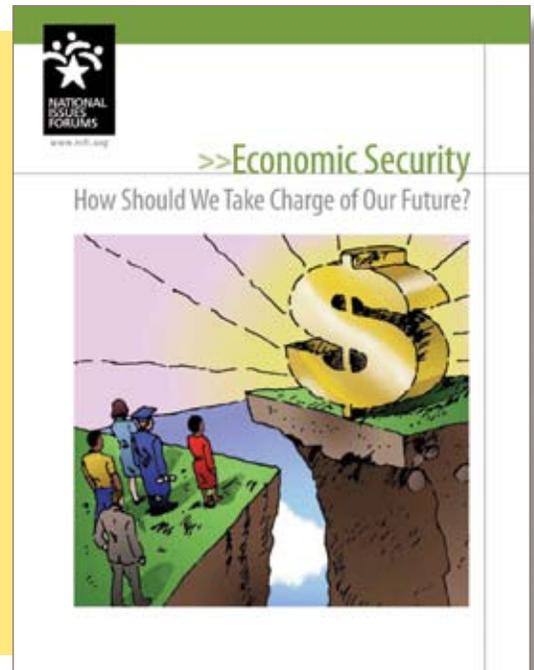
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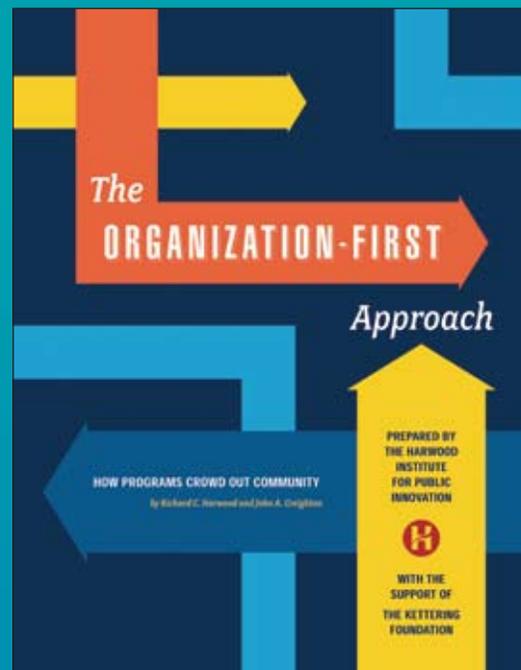
The Organization-First Approach

How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

"The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization's programs and agenda instead of the community's needs or aspirations."

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

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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.



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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.

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