The role of Civic Organizations in today’s society
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in the Readers’ Forum on
www.kettering.org
4  Tocqueville in 2030?
   David Mathews

The Challenges of Civic Life

7  Citizens, Organizations, and the Gap in Civil Society
   Derek Barker

9  Developing Democracy’s Hubs:
   Building Local Capacity for Deliberative Practice through Passionate Impartiality
   Martín Carcasson

12 Uncovering Organic Community Politics: A View from the Inside
   Dorothy Battle

15 Hot Passion and Cool Judgment: Relating Reason and Emotion in Democratic Politics
   Scott J. Peters, Theodore R. Alter, and Timothy J. Shaffer

18 Multinational Perspectives on Civil Society
   Paloma Dallas and Ileana Marin

New Forms of Organizations

21 How the “Body Politic” Thinks and Learns: The Roles of Civic Organizations
   Randall Nielsen

24 The Evolution of Centers for Public Life: NIF and the Return to Civil Society
   Alice Diebel

26 Collaborating for Education: The Dynamic Citizenry
   Connie Crockett

28 Governmental Agencies as Civic Actors
   Phillip Lurie

30 Finding a Different Path
   Janis Foster

32 Books Worth Reading
   Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civil Engagement
   By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach
Kettering has a long history of working with organizations around the country that are trying to build a more deliberative culture and a more public form of politics. Many of these “centers for public life” first came into contact with the foundation through holding deliberative forums and using National Issues Forums (NIF) materials. And over the course of 25 years, Kettering has learned alongside them; our research has benefited greatly from their work and our shared reflections on the practical challenges of public life in a democratic society.

By Alice Diebel
Over time, the centers have played different roles in their communities, including providing basic civic education, bridging differences in difficult conversations, encouraging community problem solving, and informing elected officials about public thinking. Many of the centers fill a combination of these roles, as has been documented in Scott London’s report, tentatively titled Doing Democracy (forthcoming).

In an attempt to better understand how these different centers understand their work, Kettering brought them together in 2009 for a series of small workshops to explore core challenges. We got a strong sense that the centers have become comfortable with the ideas that Kettering describes and have moved beyond seeing a deliberative forum as an end in itself, to seeing it as part of a larger practice of a more public and deliberative kind of politics. They adapt the ideas to fit the interests of their communities.

The value of deliberation

The centers recognize deliberation as a different way to practice politics. They use deliberation in many aspects of community life—personal, professional, and vocational. That said, they also see that people view public deliberation as a means of communicating that is not particularly natural and that forums can be useful ways of modeling how to deliberate together about a shared problem. And they understand and value how difficult it can be to moderate difficult conversations, especially in a polarized political climate. Developing three options for deliberation and avoiding polar choices is a valuable tool for these discussions. The centers perceive this work as critical to changing today’s political discourse.

The role of tensions in issue framing

The centers understand the importance of bringing out the tensions among the things people hold valuable, and they see “weighing” as the heart of deliberation. By highlighting the tensions, participants actually become a little less certain of their own positions, opening up their willingness to hear other perspectives.

Kettering has long recognized that a center for public life is an important addition to the constellation of community and civic organizations, but this idea seems to be gaining currency elsewhere as well. We see many forms of this work across the country taking shape in the growth of organizations that promote dialogue and deliberation, generally. Yet as Scott London’s report reveals, this network of centers with its long history and reflective practice has something important to offer. NIF has proved a valuable entry point into deliberative public politics—particularly when it is understood as just that, an entry point, rather than as an event or as an end in itself. We see the work of the centers as an important antidote to trends of polarization and to a general weakening of the civic sphere that pose grave threats for our democracy. As organizations, they are tackling these threats through a variety of approaches, and they are making a difference.

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1 Kettering has referred to them as public policy institutes as well, but this name no longer seems to fit. Of course, each center names itself according to how it thinks about its work.
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shenzhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China’s liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

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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

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.
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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