

CONNECTIONS

www.kettering.org

2007

A Year's Review
from the Perspective
of Citizens

WHAT IF?

IMAGINE THIS

COULD IT BE THAT?

MAYBE THE QUESTION WE SHOULD BE ASKING IS...

Introducing the
READERS' FORUM
See page 33

What You Need to Know about *Connections*

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.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

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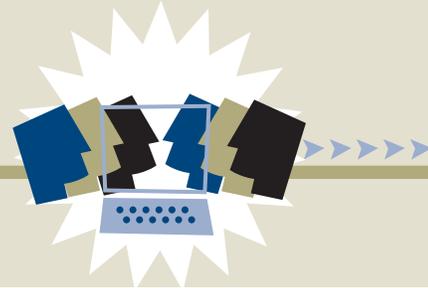
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Citizens and Collective Action

Demonstrating Results

Democracy's Challenge

Reclaiming the Public's Role

*By John Doble
with Janay Cody*

Something's Wrong

In scores of NIF forums across the country in 2006, small groups of typical Americans met to deliberate about the role of citizens in a democratic society. As they did, people repeatedly said something is wrong in the country, things are off track. But beyond their sense that we are headed in the wrong direction and their diminishing confidence in both political parties, participants saw something more fundamental, something deeper, below the surface that is far more troubling. During these forums, they grappled to identify what troubled them, its causes, and what might be done about it.

The Roots of Our Trouble

Public engagement has sharply declined over the past few decades, people said, so that Americans have become spectators in the democracy instead of its citizen-proprietors. Americans have pulled back, retreated, withdrawn from the public square and public life. In spite of all the blogs and the ardent involvement of activist groups, most do not feel connected or believe their voices are heard. Some felt differently about the local level, including a Florida woman who said, "I'm a participant in my community, but I'm not sure that's necessarily being a participant in democracy in America. Beyond the community, I'm a spectator." Nearly all felt alienated beyond their community.

As they deliberated about the forces driving people away from public life, some talked about a culture of consumerism and a focus on status symbols. A woman from San Diego, California, added, "We're a culture [that's] super-sizing! Get a bigger house, get a bigger car. And you get all wrapped up in that." Others cited a loss of public space, including subdivisions without sidewalks, fewer places where

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people can meet informally and talk about public issues, and more and more gated communities that segregate the privileged from the larger community. A man

because of technology including the Internet, more and more Americans, including children, are withdrawing, cocooning, staying home instead of being active in community life.

Some blamed the media, saying they undermine core values by broadcasting inappropriate messages, sensationalize the news, and exacerbate people's alienation through cynical or superficial reporting, which increases people's cynicism. Others argued that leadership is culpable. Students in Mission Viejo, California, said policymakers are happy to keep people in the dark because

an uninformed, uninvolved citizenry does not cause problems. Still others blamed a lackadaisical citizenry, focused on the

superficial. "We had more *American Idol* voters than [in] any presidential vote in the history of the country," one man said. In Montgomery, Alabama, people said it is a citizen's responsibility to be involved in the democracy, not the government's responsibility to "entice people to get involved."

But whatever the causes, people feared the effects, including what some saw as a spiral downward, a vortex of ever increasing alienation that could mark the end of the American Dream—a comfortable home and secure future in a safe, desirable neighborhood. A Dayton, Ohio, area man said, "They say that in 2020, there won't be any more middle class. [But] we're not raising our voices; we're not doing anything about it."

Three Tensions Emerge

As they deliberated, three central tensions emerged in these forums, tensions involving democratic values, democratic practices, and democratic government. Many struggled with the relationship between politics and government versus their most deeply held religious values. For example, some said values instruction had no place in the public schools while others said there may be little alternative.

Whatever the causes, people feared the effects, including what some saw as a spiral downward, a vortex of ever increasing alienation that could mark the end of the American Dream—a comfortable home and secure future in a safe, desirable neighborhood. . . . "They say that in 2020, there won't be any more middle class. [But] we're not raising our voices; we're not doing anything about it."

in Orange County, California, explained, "Communities [are] designed to be tucked away so that people can't find it." Partially



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"If you only put [values education] in the church and home, some families don't have either. So at what point do you get the values if you're not in church and your home is dysfunctional?" asked a woman in suburban Seattle, Washington.

Many saw tensions between service and involvement and the demands of private life. They said that Americans focus far too much on their rights and not enough on their responsibilities, adding that taking responsibility through civic involvement breaks down barriers, improves communication, and reduces people's isolation and what an Iowa moderator called today's "me-mindedness." On the other hand, they saw social forces pulling people toward "the private" including more single parents, more households in which both partners work, longer workdays, longer commutes, and more relocations for employment-related reasons, all of which make it difficult to be as involved as people were a generation or two ago.

Many wanted to make the political system more responsive to the general public interest instead of just narrow, special interests. Participants felt that citizen involvement increases citizens' ability to hold officials accountable, adding that greater accountability can affect far-reaching changes. A man in a Los Angeles, California, forum said, "When you have small groups of people taking action locally, you can make a big difference." But many questioned whether any change would be long-lasting, saying that money, like water, would inevitably seep into the political system.

Moving Forward

In spite of what might seem like their rather grim assessment about the state of the democracy, including their unresolved struggle with an array of core tensions, many participants, by the end of these forums, concluded that their initial take was not quite right. Initially, they saw the issue as beyond their control—moral values, a decline in community life, and an unresponsive political system were things they are powerless to affect. But by the end of the forums, people were making connections—saw how community life relates to values education, how values and community connect to national

Ernesto Cortes Jr., "Toward a Democratic Culture," *Kettering Review*, Spring 2006, pp. 48-50.

The organizing process is about putting a relational concept of self-interest in tension with being concerned for others. It enables people to understand that sustaining and developing their own self-interest requires them to be concerned with the self-interest of others. This doesn't happen naturally, but only through the institutions that develop the relational context in which people begin to understand that for their children to do well in school requires a public education system that enables other people's children to succeed as well. Or, as Benjamin Franklin so prosaically put it: If we don't hang together, we all hang separately. . . .

For Aristotle, politicalness had nothing to do with politicians, but rather with our disposition to seek the company of one another and form *philia*—or what he called political friendships. Such friendships emerge among people who collaborate, work together, fight together, hold each other accountable, and care about each other's mutual development. . . . *Philia* is not about intimacy, or warmth or affection; it is about the disinterested capacity to be concerned about the Other's well being; the Other who has become your comrade, with whom you are in solidarity, but not necessarily always in agreement. *Philia* requires both face-to-face engagement and the capacity to step outside of oneself and see the Other as having a claim on us. It requires recognizing the Other's dreams, aspirations, hopes, and anxieties, as well as his or her depth and complexity. To put it another way, for *philia* to begin to develop you must know *the Other's story*.

affairs, and how all three add up to something greater than any one of them.

Not everyone felt this way, of course. Some went out as cynical and dispirited as when they came in. Others left the forums "stewing" about the issue—more likely to see how the pieces fit, more aware of the trade-offs, working through their feelings about conflicting values: religion in politics, the role of the schools, community involvement, rights and responsibilities including public service, and what to do about money in politics.

On the whole though, these results suggest that national dialogue focused on public involvement about this troubling issue might be key to reducing the alienation, mistrust, and cynicism, which are so widespread. Public deliberation just

might rejuvenate the hope and public-mindedness that typify the nation at its best, because by the end of the forums, some participants—some, but far from all—concluded that they, after all, had a significant role to play in dealing with the issue. After their long deliberation, some claimed the issue as their own: this is "our" problem, they said, not the government's problem, not "their" problem. Democracy's challenge, they said, is a challenge facing citizens like ourselves.

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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. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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