

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Cover art: Carol Vollet Kingston and Joan Harrison collaboratively created the cover image, *I Have Work To Do* (2017). This digital photomontage homage to Robert Kingston was created using scans of a painting by Carol Vollet Kingston, *Summer Doldrums* (oil, 1993), vintage engravings, and text from Robert Kingston's writings.

Making Sense of the Political World through Everyday Talk

An Interview with Katherine Cramer

Informal political conversation is uncomfortable at times, but it enables people to figure out how issues matter for people like them. In other words, it helps people make sense of the political world and integrate themselves into it.

Nicholas Felts, coeditor of the *Kettering Review*, recently spoke with Katherine Cramer, faculty director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service and professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Cramer's research focuses on how people make sense of the political world and their place in it. She does this by inviting herself into the everyday conversations had by groups of people in local coffee shops, gas stations, and other informal meeting places. We wanted to learn more about what she has been hearing from these discussion groups and what it might mean for democracy.

Felts: *If you ask them, a lot of people will say that they hate politics, and most are taught that it's best to avoid discussing politics in polite company. Yet in your work, you find countless examples of groups of individuals who, while not setting out to do so, ultimately end up discussing politics quite a bit as they go about their everyday lives. Are more people doing this than we think? What is the importance of this everyday talk?*

Cramer: Yes, I think more people are doing this than we think, but there is reason to think that is changing in our current context. Some of our understanding of how much of this occurs is from survey studies asking people to report how often people attempt to persuade others how to vote. That kind of behavior is just a fraction of the political talk that goes on, and frankly, I have found that people do not call what they are doing political conversation even when it has important and direct political implications. For example, when people talk about how they feel about funding for their public

schools, I would call that political talk. But many people do not call a topic political unless it has to do with a political party or elected politicians.

However, even though people seem to underreport how much they talk about politics,

These are not academic deliberations, but they are the act of people doing their best to make sense of the crazy world around them.

a great survey study published in the early 2000s by Faye Lomax Cook, Michael Delli Carpini, and Lawrence Jacobs found that a full 68 percent of the US adult public had engaged in face-to-face conversations about public affairs at least a few times per month.

I say that it is possible that the level of talk is changing, however, based on work that a group of colleagues and I at the University of Wisconsin-Madison just published on conversation in contentious settings. Here in Wisconsin, the Marquette Poll found that 32.1 percent of the public stopped talking to someone close to them in the wake of the divisiveness people experienced after the election of Scott Walker to the governorship.

Informal political conversation is uncomfortable at times, but it is important because it conveys information, enables people to figure out how issues matter for people like

them. In other words, it helps people make sense of the political world and integrate themselves into it.

Felts: *In general, how would you describe the tenor and content of the political discussions you've observed over the years? Are these mostly surface-level, polite conversations? Is it just a venue for people to vent or blow off steam? Or are people really wrestling with big problems and trying to figure out what we might do about them?*

Cramer: The tenor of these conversations has changed over time, primarily in reaction to the political world. Their intensity varies from group to group, but for the most part these have been polite, easygoing conversations in which people express opposing points of view from time to time, but in a good-natured way. The exception have been conversations after Governor Scott Walker's proposal of Act 10 in Wisconsin, in early 2011, and the protests and recall elections that ensued, and right now, in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. In these cases, the tone has been more pained, with people clearly being defensive and cautious to bring up political topics.



The part of your question about whether people wrestle with big issues or not is important and intriguing. I have never seen these conversations take the form of deliberation in which people set ground rules, and then carefully consider multiples sides of an issue, and take the time to challenge the conclusions they are reaching with alternative points of view. However, I would say that, yes, they nevertheless are wrestling with big issues. The topics arise because people care about them. They express concern. They ask questions of each other. They wonder how someone could hold a different opinion and then someone who does gets the nerve to tell them. These are not academic deliberations, but they are the act of people doing their best to make sense of the crazy world around them.

Felts: *A lot is made about nonattitudes or the baseless opinions of the masses. How do you square these critiques with what you've observed? Is there an underlying logic to the opinions that you hear expressed in everyday talk? Where do values fit in?*

Cramer: It is a well-documented finding that people in the United States on average do not know many facts about public affairs. That is an issue, and I do not wish to make light of it. In addition, we also know that the vast majority of people do not base their opinions on an underlying ideology or consistent belief system. But there is an underlying logic to the way people make sense of politics, and I would label it social identity. By social identity, I mean the psychological attachments that people have to social groups, such as Republicans, Chinese Americans, women, and even “people around here.” Social identities may not be what many



people think of when they refer to “logic,” but it is powerful and pervasive. Here’s how I see it working: our sense of who we are in the world—what kind of a person we are, whom we are for and whom we are against—operates like a filter or a lens through which we interpret life, including political life. This underpins the narratives about cause and effect that we believe and pass on to each other. It underpins which candidates seem to be for “people like me.” That is not ideology, but it is in its own respect an organizing framework.

Felts: *You hear a lot of disagreements described as instances where the other side “doesn’t have their facts straight” or “if they only knew x,y,z they would see things my way.” Your work suggests though that identity is the primary means by which people make sense of the political world—not facts and political information. Yet, a lot of prescriptions for what ails the American body politic involve better information, more information, etc. What do you make of this impasse?*

Cramer: I start with the fact that the United States is a democracy whose institutions were designed to allow for deliberation and

the creation of sound public policy. At the same time, they were designed to both capitalize on the fact that different people have different perspectives and to prevent the divisiveness that can arise from those differences in perspectives. In other words, facts and science must have a place in how we create public policy and how

All the information in the world will make no difference if people receive it in a form that makes no sense given their lived experience.

we decide which candidates should be elected to office to make that policy. But we must also remember that people interpret information through perspectives. All the information in the world, the most rigorous science in the world, will make no difference if people receive it in a form that makes no sense given their lived experience, or is delivered by a messenger or in a manner that shows no respect for that experience. Any prescription for healing our democracy has to involve both the delivery of solid facts and attention to the fact that it is human beings who will be receiving them.

Felts: *In your recent book, you talk about the idea of a rural consciousness or rural identity that shapes the way rural Wisconsinites think about politics and their place in the political world. This identity was composed of: 1) a feeling that*

important decisions affecting rural residents were made by city dwellers without consulting rural residents; 2) a sense that rural residents have different values than other groups; and 3) a perception that rural residents were not getting their fair share of resources relative to city dwellers. You make the case that this identity helps to explain the sense of powerlessness and alienation that you saw in your research. Is it possible that the component parts of rural identity are more widely shared beyond whites who live outside of major cities? It seems like a feeling of having no say in decisions that affect you, a feeling that your group has different values, and a sense that you are not getting your fair share relative to others would be fairly common sentiments. Could this help to explain the general feeling of political malaise that we see all across the country or even the world?

Cramer: Yes. Absolutely. The most remarkable thing about the various ways in which I heard people in small communities telling me that they were not getting their fair share is just how similar it is to what we hear from



people in other walks of life in the United States. If you scrape away the details and the manner in which people were seeing their injustice as a function of the type of place in which they live, it sounds remarkably similar for example, to

The big issue is not that people in rural communities feel left behind, but that so many different people in our country do.

what we hear from low-income communities of color in our urban areas. They were saying, in general, that people in power were not paying attention to people like them, in communities like theirs; that they were not getting the basic resources they needed to get ahead;



and that the people making the decisions that affected their lives didn't know them, had no familiarity with the challenges they faced, and at root didn't respect them. So yes, the big issue is not that people in rural communities feel left behind, but that so many different people in our country do.

Felts: *A big part of Kettering's research is focused on how people become engaged as citizens and make sound decisions on the problems that confront them and their communities. Can your recent research shed any light on the extent to which citizens are able to become engaged and make sound decisions? What are some of the primary obstacles to this?*

Cramer: I am repeatedly confronted with people who read my work, or hear me speak and nevertheless wonder how can it be that people vote against their interests. Those comments and questions have placed front and center for me just how seldom we recognize the role of perspectives in political decision making. When people make political choices, those choices are a function of how they see the world. Those perspectives influence what information they pay attention to, how they digest it, and how they use it down the line to interpret subsequent information. What looks like a stupid decision or a "vote against one's interests" to some people turns out to often make sense when you learn about the perspectives which led them to that choice.

To answer your question, we need to define what we mean by a "sound decision." If by "sound" we mean a decision that is most clearly consistent with a person's interests, we can't know that without knowing how people define

their interests for themselves. Or perhaps we mean the decision that is most likely to maximize a person's welfare. That's a probabilistic judgment, about which it seems rather arrogant to assume we can judge that better than people

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can for themselves. Could we perhaps define "sound decision" as a decision that is true to who a person believes themselves to be? That's a departure from the typical treatment of the phrase, but is a bit more empirical, meaning a bit more descriptive of the way I have observed people making political choices.

We are often witnessing these days an expression of belief in something other than democracy, but an elitist democracy that regards broad swaths of the population unfit to make choices for themselves. It is quite important I think that such condescension has not fallen

on deaf ears, but has been recognized by the people being labeled unfit to participate, and for them, is the kind of attitude that much of their resentment is reacting to.

Felts: *Given all the tumult in American politics, pessimism seems to be the order of the day. In your recent observations of citizen discussion groups, is there anything that stands out as promising or anything you've seen that bodes well for the state of democracy?*

Cramer: Yes, there is one thing that gives me a great deal of hope, and that is the level of concern about our democracy. Heightened anxiety is not necessarily a good thing, but if it leads to action it is. I have had the unusual experience of suddenly receiving a great deal of correspondence from people I do not know, who are feeling the need to express their concern and looking for answers about how we heal our democracy. It's been truly remarkable to see up close that level of concern. Most of what I am receiving is correspondence from people who are wanting to understand others in the United States and looking for ways to pressure our elected officials to put more attention on the common good, rather than on us vs. them, zero-sum politics. This may all come to nothing, but in the moment, I am hopeful.

Katherine Cramer is faculty director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service and professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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