

# CONNECTIONS

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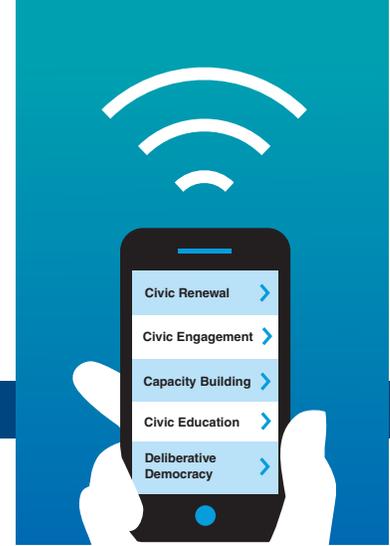
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# CONNECTIONS

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# Yes, Our Democracy Is a Mess, and Yes, Our Opportunities Are Real

*Richard C. Harwood*



**A**s part of the Kettering Foundation's efforts to take stock of trends affecting citizens and communities, I have recently held 10 in-depth conversations with leading thinkers and practitioners in the areas of democracy and American life.

In these discussions, we talked about the current condition of the country and the forces that are shaping it today. I asked those I interviewed about the positive trends they see among people engaging and working together in communities. I also asked how widespread these positive developments are, what is driving them, and how we can accelerate and deepen them. And I explored with these individuals what they believe resulted from the so-called civic renewal movement of the 1990s (the attempt to build new civic capacities and practices among organizations, leaders, networks, and citizens) and the implications of that movement for us today.

## Yes, Our Democracy Is a Mess

When I combine these conversations with what I have seen and heard working in communities over the past few years, it seems that the 1990s movement was simply too shallow and narrow in scope to withstand larger economic, political, and social trends, such as the Great Recession and the September 11 attacks. While the leaders I interviewed differed in their interpretations of what exactly happened, there was general agreement that the ideas behind those civic activities did not penetrate American society widely or deeply enough. The innovations simply failed to be adopted and embedded into the necessary structures, processes, and organizations. Indeed, the civic renewal movement didn't succeed in permeating our collective sense of how we want to connect with one another, work together, and get things done.

Harry Boyte, codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, told me, "In some ways the civic impulse spread in spaces that were less structured and bureaucratized, where the politics of knowledge was not as hierarchical and rigid. But that was also the weakness because it was quite vulnerable."

Carolyn Lukensmeyer, executive director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, highlighted many of the positive elements of that earlier period while suggesting that the efforts did not go far enough. She observed that while the civic renewal work "was incredibly important on shifting professional practices . . . it didn't get embedded into ongoing mediating organizations in the communities it was attempted in."

What I kept hearing, in other words, is that the civic renewal movement faded away. Without question, it made a difference at the time: it changed how people, organizations, and communities worked and helped establish a foundation for many of the positive actions we see today. But it did not firmly take hold.

### A Fragile Opportunity

So what now? How do we build on the good efforts that were made? How do we regain some of that positive momen-

tum? How do we ensure that the important work happening in communities today does not, once again, dissipate?

My sense is that the nation is at a major inflection point—a pivotal moment of change. I believe we are in the early phase of a new era of engagement among people and organizations, but it is nascent, fragile, and occurring in small pockets. Understanding this stage of development is crucial because only then is it possible to identify the right strategies to move forward. To be successful in this, we must determine how to harness, accelerate, and deepen positive movement.

And that brings us to examine another important juncture: the current national narrative tells us that we simply cannot get things done together. We hear this day after day on the news as well as from various leaders and among ourselves. Diana Aviv, president and CEO of Independent Sector, explained, "Government [is] more partisan than ever before, more cynical and more out of touch with the citizenry." This negative narrative drives our mind-set, attitudes, behaviors, and actions. "The public space," Aviv observed, "is rife with all of this divide."

I have been hearing this narrative over and over again as I travel the country on the Reclaiming Main Street campaign—an initiative of The Harwood Institute to engage people in making community once again a common enterprise. I launched the campaign on the heels of the government shutdown, going to communities such as Oakland, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Murray, Kentucky, to talk to people about their shared aspirations.

People believe we as a nation—and as individuals—can do better. People are tired of business-as-usual. They don't believe leaders have their best interests at heart. They believe too many people and

organizations are in it for their own good at the expense of the common good.

There is too much finger-pointing and blame-placing. And when good things do happen, there is too much jockeying to claim turf and not enough sharing of credit. The toxic discourse and political acrimony seep into our daily lives. As a result, we are overcome by dysfunction and division.

The sense of frustration is great, but I have also seen that the will within the nation to take a different path is even greater. In my conversations with the 10 thought-leaders, I repeatedly heard

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a sentiment articulated by people such as Allison Fine, author of *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age*. People feel "bipolar" about the state of politics and public life today. In her view, "People individually are doing some phenomenally interesting and energetic things . . . [but] traditional advocacy and organizing groups are doing a miserable job of tapping into that kind of energy." Echoing that sentiment, Diana Aviv said she feels simultaneously "optimistic and anxious." On one hand, we confront a bevy of obstacles to moving forward as a country. On the other, there is a deep hunger among the American people to engage and accomplish things together. We must tap into this energy to build positive momentum.

## Yes, Our Democracy Is a Mess

### It's Happening in Communities

After all, America is a nation of builders. Throughout our history, we have proven that we are capable of so much when we set goals and get moving—together. And people are doing just that every day in communities across the country. Ben Barber, author of *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*, rests his hope for the future of our country—and indeed, our world—on progress and innovation happening at the local level. “Cities,” he told me, “have re-instilled my hope for the possibilities of democracy.” He said he was encouraged by “watching what cities, when they work together, can do to solve problems that increasingly were looking

ernment more effectively.” She continued, “It’s happening in places, but we just haven’t figured out as a country [how] to make it the routine part of how we do our work.”

Still, while some of the people I spoke with believe that further strengthening local conditions can serve as a counterforce to change our country’s politics and narrative, most warned that particular attention also must be paid to the national level. As former Congressman Jim Leach said, “There’s a breakdown in civility . . . but the bigger issue is the pattern of decision making in which both parties are indebted to certain groups and everybody at the [national] elected level has to pay attention to their party’s general position and

their own vulnerability within their party.” This is a challenge of the inflection point: while there are positive signs of change in pockets across the country, there is a danger they can get overwhelmed by a dangerously broken national system.

## It’s time to restore our belief that we can get things done, together.

### If we don’t, communities will continue to be stuck, unable to move forward.

to be insoluble in a world of bickering sovereign nations and states that refuse to cooperate.”

Despite stagnation at the national level, there is positive movement on the ground. John McKnight, codirector of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, pointed to such positive signs as people creating more community gardens and neighborhood watch groups. In doing this work, residents are asserting themselves as citizens. They are connecting around their shared aspirations, engaging in meaningful ways, and tackling challenges together.

We need more of that work. As Martha McCoy, executive director of Everyday Democracy, put it, “We’ve learned a fair amount in our field about what’s possible in terms of people coming together in ways that they can actually form relationships, make a difference, work with gov-

### Shared Problem, Shared Solutions

So what do we do? There is no quick fix, nor should blame be placed solely on government, elected officials, the business community, nonprofit organizations, or even citizens. This is a shared problem that can only be addressed if people and institutions from all sectors step forward in a fundamentally different way. They must collectively take some small but important steps to build conditions that enable people to come together to get things done and make our communities and country thrive. After talking with these thought-leaders and reflecting on my work around the country, I believe there are three areas we must concentrate on in order to put the country on the right path:

- **Focus on shared aspirations.** Everywhere I travel I find that Americans share many of the same desires and goals for their communities and the

country. While people don’t agree on everything, there is enough that unites us that we can build upon. Our work at The Harwood Institute rests on this very assumption. But our leaders, organizations, and citizens must use these shared aspirations as a guidepost—a starting point for making decisions together. By focusing on our shared aspirations, we can change the frame of the public conversation from one of “problems,” “deficits,” and “blame” to “what we stand for” and “what we seek to build together.”

- **Work together to get things done.**

Leaders, organizations, groups, and citizens must come together to get things done. People must cross dividing lines and work together on common problems—even if in small ways. This will unleash a sense of shared responsibility and instill confidence that change is possible. John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic Enterprises, called these “hope spots.” He said we need to focus on the question, “Where is the country actually successful in taking these issues that are often thought to be chronically unfixable and successfully moving them?” These hope spots exist, but they need to be multiplied and connected. And they must be illuminated for all to see. This step is pivotal to getting the country moving in the right direction.

- **Change the stories we tell about the country and ourselves.**

In my own work, I have found that the narrative we tell about our communities and ourselves is the greatest hidden factor that determines whether communities and people move forward. As I have said, right now the predominant narrative in the country is that we can’t work together. To move forward, it is essential that we tell stories that show how people are joining together to work for the common good. Such stories must be rooted in real actions—not public relations and hype. This is not about telling more stories. The goal must be to connect different accounts of success over time and weave them into a coherent narrative that enables us to see that we are moving on a new trajectory. This

## Shared Problem, Shared Solutions



**1. Focus on shared aspirations.** Change the frame of the public conversation to “what we stand for” and “what we seek to build together.”



**2. Work together to get things done.** Illuminate “hope spots” for all to see—multiplied and connected.

**3. Change the stories we tell about the country and ourselves.** Connect different accounts of success that enable us to see that we are moving on a new trajectory.



narrative must highlight leaders and people so they can see that they can indeed help to create change through their daily actions. On the Reclaiming Main Street campaign, I am constantly motivated by the need to remind the country—and reclaim the practical idea—that community is a common enterprise.

It’s time to restore our belief that we can get things done, together. If we don’t, communities will continue to be stuck, unable to move forward. The country as

a whole will remain mired in partisan gridlock. And people’s faith in institutions, leaders, and our collective ability to address pressing concerns will further erode. This early phase of a new era of engagement will dissipate, just like the civic renewal movement of the past.

There are clearly challenges ahead. Maya Enista Smith, former director of Mobilize.Org, voiced the choices we face: “From this moment of doubt and search for a better alternative may come really great things. . . . Hopefully we keep believ-

ing in our ability to do something better, elect someone better, or create a better system—but I’m actually not sure where the chips are going to fall on that one yet.”

It is up to us to decide where the chips will fall. It is up to us to make the most of this pivotal moment and prove that we can get things done together. I remain ever hopeful that we will.

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