

# CONNECTIONS

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2014



**TAKING  
STOCK  
OF THE  
CIVIC  
ARENA**

Civic Renewal >

Civic Engagement >

Capacity Building >

Civic Education >

Deliberative  
Democracy >



## Developing Materials for Deliberative Forums

by Brad Rourke

When citizens deliberate together about important issues, they can reach decisions and take action together on problems that confront them. An issue framework, or issue guide, is intended to support deliberation, as people wrestle with options, face trade-offs, and make decisions about how to act. *Developing Materials for Deliberative Forums* describes ways to approach naming and framing issues for public deliberation with the aim of creating an issue guide suitable to use in deliberative, public forums.

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The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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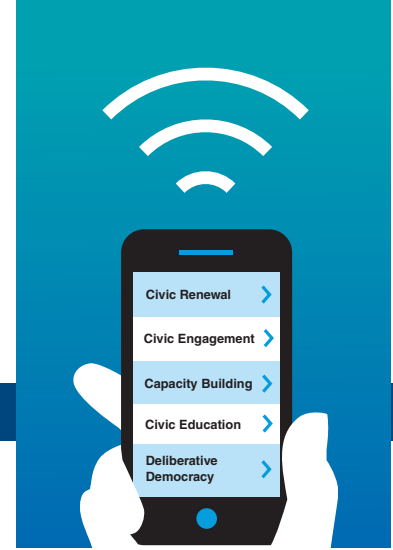
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# CONNECTIONS

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# What's Going On Here?



## Taking Stock of Citizen-Centered Democracy

David Mathews

As you may be aware, each year we look closely at one area of Kettering Foundation research, which turns out to be a review of all our research from one particular perspective. This year, the foundation is concentrating on what is happening in the civic arena, broadly defined. This arena includes organized projects in civic renewal, civic engagement, civic education, and civic capacity building in communities. It also includes what people who don't use the language

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of “civic engagement” see happening in the life they share with other people. We hope to learn not just what is going on but whether there is any stocktaking on lessons learned. And, if there is, what’s the focus of the stocktaking? Is it about the impact of what an organization has done, or is there a broader look at what is happening in democracy and its implications for what an organization should be doing? Is strengthening civic life necessarily strengthening democracy—democracy meaning the ability of people to shape their future? We haven’t finished this study quite yet, but I can share some of what we have been learning.

### What People Say and Do

Kettering’s studies of democracy begin with looking at what citizens are or aren’t doing and their opinions on the issues of the day. Dan Yankelovich, Kettering trustee emeritus, is worried. In a May 2014 blog post, he writes that the troubled state of public morale indicates that something has gone terribly amiss in our society: “By greater than two to one margins (58 percent to 28 percent), Americans believe that the country is on the wrong track. A 70 percent majority use words like ‘divided,’ ‘troubled,’ and ‘deteriorating’ to describe the state of the nation.”

Does the “state of the nation” include its civic life? Are people even concerned about it? Most people don’t use the term *civic life* (which shouldn’t be surprising), but what do they think about their fellow citizens? Some studies find a growing lack of confidence and trust. Other research by Rich Harwood, in *The Work of Hope*, paints a different picture, one that suggests people aren’t so dispirited that they’re unwilling to try to restore the sense of hopefulness they feel the country has lost. Lacking trust in large institutions, some people are looking to their fellow citizens to fix what is out of whack. They are investing in joint efforts to rebuild confidence; that is, to show that by working together, citizens can make a difference. For example, neighbors coming together to paint a school isn’t important just because the school building will be more attractive; the painting is valued as

a demonstration of what can be accomplished when people join forces.

In response to low morale, Harwood reports, people want “to kick-start a new trajectory where actions start small and local, . . . where clear goals are set and achieved, and where people can restore faith in themselves and one another and in the belief that Americans still can get things done *together*.” He quotes a Dallas woman who said that people can’t wait for others to act on their behalf. “If the change is going to happen,” she said, “it’s going to be grass roots.”

That response may be fine at the local level, but what about solving global problems? Those who believe in starting small say that without a sense of efficacy and shared purpose, people won’t be able to tackle larger problems. They see a connection between local issues and national resilience. As Harwood writes, “The purpose of starting small and starting local, and . . . meeting one achievable goal after another, is to rebuild the confidence and sense of common purpose in the nation.”

Yet even the most active of citizens struggle with doubts. As a woman from Idaho explained to Kettering researchers, “When I told the citizens I was supposed to work with that they . . . have more power than [they] believed, I think I believed it when I said it. And I believed it all the times that I’ve lived it. But I’m not sure it’s as true as it used to be.”

What we have found so far about what citizens see and feel is useful, but we need to go even deeper. We need to know, are people really less socially connected? Are they retreating into enclaves of the like-minded? If they are leaving traditional civic organizations, are they creating new forms of civic associations? And, if so, what are these associations like, particularly those formed through the new social media? Is Washington’s polarization spreading so far that Americans themselves are turning red and blue? Are citizens as pessimistic about the future of their communities and the country as

some studies suggest, or is something else going on that we are missing?

### What Civic Organizations Say

Whatever people are or aren’t doing, there are numerous signs of a growth in organizations dedicated to strengthening the civic realm. For instance, most institutions of higher education now have programs of community outreach, and the Kettering Foundation has ties with more and more campus centers trying to improve civic life. Some see this growth as evidence of a civic renewal movement; others may characterize what is happen-

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ing as an emerging civic industry managed by professionals.

What is the relationship between such organizations and a citizenry that is both convinced of the need for citizens to work together and yet uncertain about whether they can count on other people? That is an open question worth pursuing, as reported in *Ships Passing in the Night*? Kettering has seen some indications that institutional outreach in higher education may not be well aligned with what citizens are trying to do to gain greater control over their lives. And foundation research on the tendency of both government and nongovernmental organizations to colonize and unintentionally destroy the unique qualities of informal civic associations has been translated by Edgar Cahn into a clever online cartoon, “The Parable of the Blobs and Squares.”



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Civic organizations and grantmakers routinely do a kind of stocktaking when they look for measurable evidence of their impact. While the need to know whether their efforts are useful is understandable, a Harwood Institute study, *The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community*, has found that this kind of impact evaluation can turn the focus of foundations and civic organizations inward on internal matters rather than outward to communities and civic engagement. Ironically, this turn inward may be driven by citizen boards eager to prove the benefits of their work.

### **Kettering is trying to find out whether any of this civic stocktaking is looking at what is happening in democracy and assessing the implications.**

Kettering is trying to find out whether any of this civic stocktaking is looking at what is happening in democracy and assessing the implications. Two recent reports have concluded that democracy is in serious trouble: *The Democratic Disconnect* by the Transatlantic Academy and the *Economist's* "What's Gone Wrong with Democracy" (March 1, 2014).

The *Economist* article points out that only a short time ago it seemed that democracy, that is, contested elections leading to representative government, would dominate the globe. Now, the article says, the political winds have shifted: "Between 1980 and 2000 the cause of democracy experienced only a few setbacks, but since 2000 there have been many." Elections are not enough, absent the rights and institutions that are essential components of a democratic system. The conclusion: "building the institutions needed to sustain democracy is very slow work indeed." This spring, a gathering of

alumni of Kettering's international residents from 22 countries came to almost the same conclusion.

Democracy in the United States may be stronger than in other countries, yet the *Economist* article argues that "America's image—and by extension that of democracy itself—has taken a terrible battering." The problems: gridlock, gerrymandering, partisan extremism, an army of lobbyists amounting to 20 for every representative and senator. The diagnosis: "the machinery and institutions of parliamentary democracy . . . look increasingly anachronistic." The prospects for reform by conventional means: not very good. Party membership

is falling, as is voter participation. Not just in the United States, but in seven European countries, a majority of voters said they didn't trust their government.

The authors of the *Economist* article don't deal with the civic foundations of democracy except to note that democracies have hidden strengths and that there need to be other sources of power besides that of the state. Reference in the article to Alexis de Tocqueville's observa-

tion that local democracy is democracy at its best does open the door to consider what civic democracy can do to offset the disabilities of representative democracy.

The Transatlantic Academy report, which also finds democracy in trouble, poses somewhat different remedies for a "yawning" gap separating citizens from the institutions of government. The authors recognize that "Internet-empowered social activism of a new generation has never been more vibrant." Yet they argue that, "little of this participatory mobilization from civil society seems effectively to connect with formal structures [of government] and institutional processes." (This, by the way, is also what a recent Kettering/Public Agenda study of the institutional accountability movement shows.)

Democracy in the United States, the academy concludes, is "ailing, and badly in need of reform." But going beyond the *Economist's* analysis, the Transatlantic report insists that the key to revitalizing

democracy is "enhancing the participatory vibrancy that represents the cornerstone of high quality democracy." One way to do that: "Visions of top-down problem solving are insufficient. Open-ended and vibrant democratic deliberation is needed." The reason, a "sense of diminished citizenship is now pervasive across the socio-economic spectrum," meaning less of a sense of civic identity and reduced "participation in the creation and receipt of public goods." This observation, whether accurate or not, does reflect Kettering's understanding of what it takes to make democracy work as it should. And the two reports make the case for stocktaking done from a democratic perspective.

Other studies of American democracy aren't so pessimistic, suggesting there is much to build on in democratic stocktaking. Peter Levine, Suzanne Morse, and Matt Leighninger have found enough success stories to argue that a new civic form of democracy is emerging—one that Leighninger believes will eclipse expert rule. Certainly, the Kettering Foundation has a deep file on citizens learning how to make a difference in shaping the future. That said, however, I wonder whether there is much merit in a debate over whether the optimist or pessimist will prove right. If institutional reform is daunting and very long term, perhaps there should be, as the Transatlantic Academy recommends, more attention to what is happening to the civic underpinnings of a democratic society or what I've called the "wetlands" of politics in a new book on *The Ecology of Democracy*.

When I think about an ecosystem, I have in mind the Gulf Coast because I grew up nearby. Governments, schools, and other established institutions could be roughly analogous to oil rigs, docks, and large buildings on the shore. The things citizens do and the associations among them might be thought of as something like barrier islands and all that happens in the marshes of the wetlands. Political life begins in the wetlands of neighborhoods, informal associations, and kitchen table discussions. This is where citizens have the first opportunities to shape

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their future and regain the confidence that they can make a difference. Then institutions like representative assemblies, government agencies, and NGOs bring other resources to bear.

### More than Elections

An ecological context helps show that politics is more than what happens in elections and governments—without ignoring the importance of either. The analogy simply distinguishes the things that citizens do with citizens, which are

often informal or organic, from the things that politicians and government officials do, which are usually formal or institutional. But keep in mind that the wetlands aren't totally benign. There are prejudices and conflicts there just as there are snakes and alligators in nature's domain; all the more reason that stocktaking should begin by looking into the condition of the democratic wetlands.

One of the best examples of democratic stocktaking that we have seen appears to be emerging in the field of community development. Ted Alter at

Pennsylvania State University and several of his colleagues are looking into how community development can strengthen democracy. Maybe they will include what they see happening in the wetlands that can give citizens a stronger hand in shaping the future of their communities.

The foundation is starting to collect more stories of this kind of stocktaking. If you have examples, we would like to hear from you.

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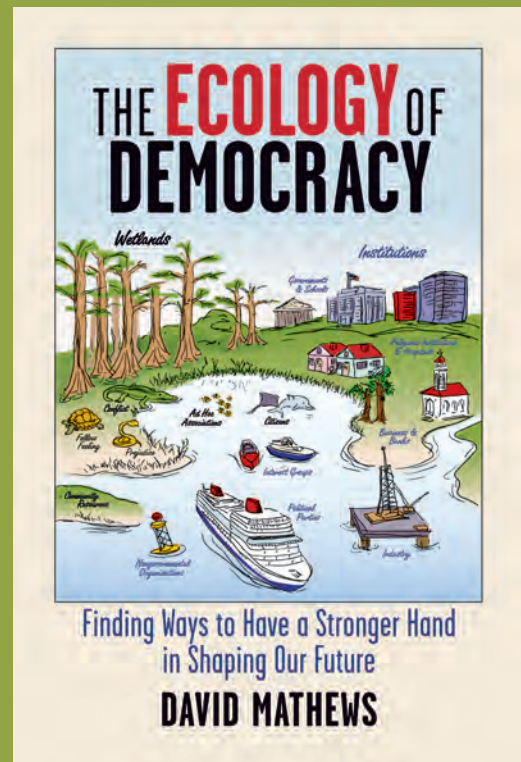
NEW from Kettering Foundation Press

# The Ecology of Democracy

## Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future

by *David Mathews*

Everyday life is filled with opportunities for citizens to make a difference, beyond just casting a vote or sitting in a meeting. *The Ecology of Democracy* offers insights into where these opportunities might be found and why the work citizens do is so important. The book examines how the work of democracy can be done in ways that put more control in the hands of citizens and help restore the legitimacy of our institutions.



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