

CONNECTIONS

www.kettering.org

2014

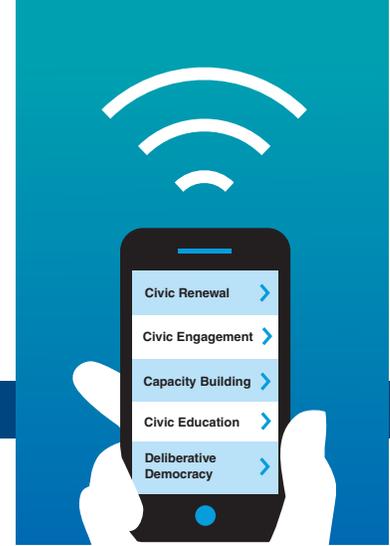


**TAKING
STOCK
OF THE
CIVIC
ARENA**

- Civic Renewal >
- Civic Engagement >
- Capacity Building >
- Civic Education >
- Deliberative Democracy >

CONNECTIONS

C O N T E N T S



- 4 **What's Going On Here? Taking Stock of Citizen-Centered Democracy**
David Mathews
- 8 **Yes, Our Democracy Is a Mess, and Yes, Our Opportunities Are Real**
Richard C. Harwood
- 12 **Philanthropy at a Crossroads**
Brad Rourke
- 16 **Lost—and Seeking Directions**
Steve Farkas
- 20 **When Communities Work . . . and Why Citizens Have Work to Do**
Keith Melville
- 27 **From Both Sides Now: A Field Report from New Orleans**
Lucas Díaz
- 30 **Democracy in the Balance: The Complex Dynamics of the Arab World
Make Outcomes Far from Certain**
Ziad Majed
- 33 **Twenty Years Later, Democracy Still Struggles to Take Root in South Africa**
Ivor Jenkins

When Communities Work . . . and Why Citizens Have Work to Do

In recent books, two Kettering board members see ways out of democracy's current dilemmas. Keith Melville, Kettering associate and founding executive editor of the National Issues Forums, talked with Suzanne Morse and Peter Levine.

Keith Melville

Much of the commentary about American public life is a recitation of what's wrong, a depiction of partisan slugfests, dysfunction in Washington, and public despair about a democracy that no longer works as it should. As former Senator Bill Bradley put it, "Politics is stuck. So many people in America want to improve their own and others' lives but don't know how."

At a time of civic despair, recent books by two Kettering Foundation board members are particularly welcome. Suzanne Morse's volume, *Smart Communities* (Jossey-Bass, 2014), and Peter Levine's *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (Oxford, 2013) have much in common. The two volumes are explorations of a citizen-centered politics, and what's needed for it to succeed. As indicated by the subtitle of Levine's volume—*The Promise of Civic Renewal in America*—these are hopeful and practical books about what happens when citizens address the problems facing their communities.

In *Smart Communities*, Suzanne Morse draws on her experience over more than two decades working with dozens of towns and cities to provide a profile of what happens when communities come together to solve their problems. As she writes, "Success is neither place nor size bound. It comes from a set of seven leverage points that help communities decide their futures."

In his book, Peter Levine examines why civil society has declined over the past half century. He acknowledges the challenge posed by the dysfunctions of the political system. "Plainly," in his words, "our institutions do not work." They are inadequate, he says, "to address our accumulated problems, and the prevailing ideologies offer no plausible solutions." At a time when many Americans feel like spectators, not citizens, Levine underscores the message in his title, *We Are the Ones. . .*: "The obligation to address our problems falls on us—American citizens—more profoundly than in the past." His thesis is that "people must change the norms and structures of their own communities through deliberate civic action—something they are capable of doing quite well." Throughout

his book, Levine describes the values, skills, and strategies required to achieve broad-based civic renewal.

I talked with Suzanne Morse and Peter Levine about their prescriptions for civic renewal, and civic practices that provide, in Levine's words, "the building blocks with which a new civil society can be constructed."



Suzanne Morse: Revealing the Habits behind Successful Communities

KM: You have worked with many different kinds of communities, large and small, including communities that seem to have few resources but turn out nonetheless to be "smart" communities that are able to come together to address common problems. You point out that there are no "one-size-fits-all" solutions. Still, some places, as your title suggests, are much

When Communities Work . . .

better than others at making good collective decisions and acting on them. What are some of the readily apparent characteristics of "smart" communities?

SM: This is a great question. Some communities have a "resilient" gene built into the community DNA. That is, they seem to have community members who can bounce back no matter what. I would suggest that Pittsburgh and Minneapolis are those kinds of places. Both communities have active multisectoral leadership, strong academic institutions, and a broad nonprofit network. However, you also find smaller places such as Almena, Wisconsin, and Chimney Rock, North Carolina, that continue to revitalize their communities. What are the common threads? Small groups (or not so small groups) of people and organizations that are committed to taking risks, trying new things, and not giving up. They have these community characteristics, I would argue, because they have practiced good habits: talking together, working together, and believing in their communities. When a downturn or upturn happens they know how to get things done and not be stymied by the situation.

KM: You mention that "collaboration" and "partnerships"—two words that are commonly used—are critical elements of successful communities. As you write, "Collaboration is more often talked about than actually done." You refer to effective collaboration as both a process and a goal. Tell us about effective community collaboration and what it requires.

SM: The short answer is that you have to give a little to get a lot. In far too many instances, community organizations feel

that giving up control or the spotlight will cost them in dollars raised and in visibility. They don't see the payoff in working with others. Actually the more impact that organizations can have together, the more visibility they all get. I am particularly impressed by broad-based collaboratives that come together for different reasons and with different skills. Collaborations supporting better outcomes for young people tend to have people from all sectors but have a different entry point for their interests. Rarely do collaboratives, or any of the family of organizing structures, have only one type of organization. The really

Some communities have a "resilient" gene built into the community DNA. That is, they seem to have community members who can bounce back no matter what.

successful ones have framed the purpose broadly enough to meet the interests of a range of stakeholders. They essentially ask the question our Kettering colleague Ed Dorn posed once: Who do we need in the room [or collaborative] to solve this problem or meet this opportunity?

KM: You refer to seven "leverage points" that comprise the "smart communities" process, which are necessary to produce better decisions, build a strong sense of community, and a sense of inclusion. Why are all seven necessary, and what happens if one or several of them are missing?

SM: The answer is partially embedded in an earlier answer. What if instead of referring to the seven as leverage points, I called them "habits"? We would all be hard pressed to decide which good habit we could do without. All are required to move communities in the right direction. It cer-

When Communities Work . . .

tainly won't hurt to practice one or two and not the others but it definitely will not get a community where it wants to go. Think of any improvement process from losing weight to constructing a building. Each one requires a combination of factors to accomplish the goal. It is the same here. A community that really wants to take charge of its own future has to be

Communities that use their collective wisdom to decide together have better results. While different vehicles are used to accomplish this, there is a recognition that we know more together than we do alone.

engaged in doing all seven. Otherwise, you get predictable results, not transformative ones. The combination of the seven is the secret sauce of community well-being.

KM: *One characteristic of the community success stories you write about is that they aren't single-project initiatives. Rather, they involve a set of civic habits, the ways communities organize around common problems and take action. These habits—a set of practices applied in a series of situations—enable some communities to succeed over the long haul. Can you give us an example of how effective communities rely on certain civic habits when they confront new challenges or problems?*

SM: One of the best examples is Chattanooga, Tennessee. Cited by the EPA in 1969

as the city with the worst air quality in the nation, Chattanooga is now considered one of the urban success stories. Having landed a Volkswagen manufacturing facility a few years ago, it continues to build its success record. Looking at Chattanooga today it would be hard to identify which of the seven points has made the most difference. But they are all there. The EPA

designation was a wake-up call. The processes and procedures initiated to address the environmental issue began decades-long practices of working together on issues of common concern. First institutionalized in an organization called Chattanooga Venture, the practices of building on assets, practicing deliberative democracy, working collaboratively, and imagining a new

future are now business as usual in Chattanooga. The early environmental clean-up success fueled a broad-based commitment to community building, investments, and resilience that has paid enormous dividends.

KM: *In several places in Smart Communities you emphasize the importance of a certain mind-set in effective communities, which starts with recognizing a community's assets—both individual talents and collective resources—and bringing them to bear on shared problems. How do communities gain this mind-set and get to the point where they recognize shared assets and draw on them as important resources?*

SM: An addition to the tenth-anniversary edition of *Smart Communities* was the Broadmoor neighborhood in New Orleans.

After Hurricane Katrina, Broadmoor was one of the neighborhoods that received a green dot from the local administrators—which, as the residents learned, was not a good thing. Early in 2006, neighborhoods that were “dotted” were given four months to prove their viability to come back or risk becoming a park or green space. The “dot” mobilized Broadmoor to action. That meant bringing home owners and renters back to rehabilitate their homes, craft a strategic plan, and build on the assets of the neighborhood. Over a four-month period leading up to the deadline, people in the neighborhood stepped forward with ideas, talents, and expertise on ways to make the neighborhood even stronger than before Katrina. Today, Broadmoor has new infrastructure, new leaders, and new possibilities as a neighborhood.

KM: *Both you and Peter Levine write about the importance of deliberation as a way of coming to agreement about the problems communities face, and discussing what course of action is in their best interest. Tell us why this phase of talking-together-before-acting is so important, and why it seems to be a key ingredient in community problem solving.*

SM: The problems communities face are very difficult. Many are wrestling with poverty, disinvestment, and challenges brought on by a changing economy. The solutions to these “wicked” problems are not singular or short-term. They require, almost by definition, multipronged, sustainable approaches. Communities that use their collective wisdom to decide together have better results. While different vehicles are used to accomplish this, there is a recognition that we know more together than we do alone. National organizations such as the National Issues Forums Institute and Everyday Democracy's Study Circles provide a methodology and materials to allow communities to discuss difficult choices. Local initia-

tives such as the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (JCCI) have developed strategies to bring people together to “decide and act.” Whatever the vehicle, the ability to deliberate and think together about an action plan puts communities ahead of the game.

KM: *In your final chapter, you write, “Smart communities are smart because they have made tough decisions, included more people in the process, built on their assets, and learned to adapt.” When you are invited to communities that are struggling, what is your advice about where they should start, and how they can acquire the skills and habits that are apparent in smart communities?*

SM: The most important first step for communities is to open their eyes and their minds to their own capabilities and resources. After many years of working with communities, I would say that the biggest problem most communities face is that they do not know what they have. This is the key to imagining a new future. Most places have many more assets than they realize. The second step is to open opportunities for more people to engage in the leadership of the community. This requires various skills, such as the ability to build partnerships, create new vehicles for communication, and devise strategies for action. It also requires a willingness to widen the circle of leaders. Finally, people often don’t know which projects they should prioritize to revitalize their community. I encourage them to think about what they have always appreciated or enjoyed about their community and how that might be recaptured and supported in new ways. Recognizing community assets provides a way to focus their energies. It offers a positive start, helps fashion goals and strategies, and guides actions that are authentic to the place.

KM: *Thank you, Suzanne.*

Excerpt from Suzanne Morse’s *Smart Communities*

Americans don’t always agree. We have strong feelings about athletic rivalries, political parties, and religious beliefs. There is one thing, however, that receives almost universal agreement: working together is better. In a survey, *What Will It Take? Making Headway on Our Most Wrenching Problems*, commissioned by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change in 2003, Americans said overwhelmingly (93 percent) that working together more closely on community problems leads to better results. When asked what would *most* improve the quality of life in the community, 40 percent said “working together” versus 14 percent who said “voting.” These responses define our challenge—how to make working together business as usual.

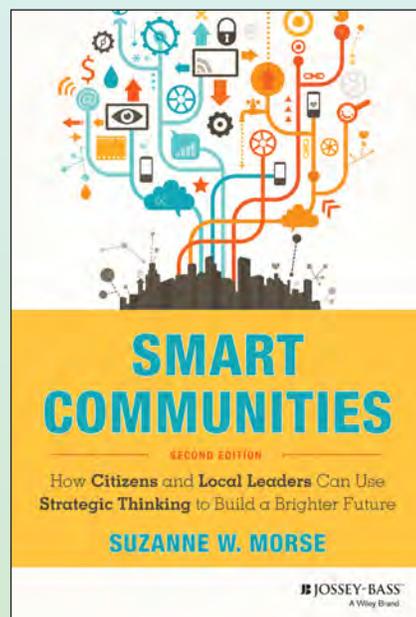
The search for explanations of success for communities leads to the most predictable answer: groups of community members work together across sectoral lines. The expectation and the evidence is that people tackle the good times and bad more effectively together.

People join together on a myriad of projects, interests, and concerns. The world has witnessed enormous outpourings of support and generosity in times of crisis—floods, hurricanes, and tragedies of all types. The evidence is clear that people can link arms and join hands with the proper motivation. The key to community success, however, is the *habit* of working together, not the *incident* of working together. Democracy itself hinges on the ability of citizens to hang together and hang tough on the critical issues of the day.

Our communities no longer have the luxury of “going it alone.” The complexity of the problems facing every corner of the world requires that people and organizations be willing and able to come together to craft strategies that are effective in good times and bad. In places where genuine joint action has occurred, results happen. These are not just pie-in-the-sky experiments, but rather gritty processes that bring citizens, educators, organizations, governments, and businesses together to create a different outcome. . . .

Communities have the capacity to meet important challenges directly and multilaterally if they organize themselves to act. However, rarely is it just structure that is the key to success. Americans choose to work together in different ways and for different reasons. However, it is clear that sustained efforts—those developed for a purpose and that work over time—must have a structure for working together that has broad implications for building social capital, creating unusual partnerships, and taking action on systemic issues, but also the public will to act.

Excerpt from Suzanne Morse, Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 55-56. Copyright © 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.





Peter Levine: Calling a Million Citizens to Action

KM: *You have written a bold book. We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For is a call to action, a how-to book with an ambitious goal, “to organize one million active citizens into a self-conscious movement for civic renewal.” Given all the obstacles and deterrents to public engagement, which you acknowledge, it takes a leap of faith to believe that such a movement can become the fulcrum for changing the nation’s civic culture. How do you respond when skeptics say it’s not realistic, given the systemic nature of our public problems? At a time, in your words, when “our political institutions are inadequate to our problems,” why should we believe that a substantial number of citizens working mainly at the local level can change the nation’s political culture?*

PL: Hope is a scarce but renewable resource. Stocks of hope are low right now. In *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, I propose a reason for optimism. Even though the large-scale trends

in civic engagement are downward, we are living at a time of impressive civic innovation. I estimate that at least one million Americans are deeply committed to civic work at the local level, not only taking on issues but also making space for others to engage. One million dedicated people is enough for a movement. Right now, they work in separate geographic communities, policy domains, and streams of civic work, such as community organizing, deliberative democracy, or citizen journalism. But they have common interests. The task of organizing them (or I should say, “organizing us”) into a movement will not be easy. But networks are already forming, and civic activists seem to be receptive to the message that a movement is necessary.

KM: *What strikes me about your book is that its premise is so different from most commentary about public problems. Most political discussion is about government, in particular the federal government, and what it should or should not do. Yours is an argument for a citizen-centered politics. Your thesis is that citizens “must change the norms and structures of their own communities through deliberate civic action.” Moreover, you say that “deliberate civic action is something people are capable of doing quite well.” You describe promising civic innovations and instances of effective civic engagement. But often these seem like islands of democratic action in a sea of civic indifference. What’s necessary to spark the coalescence of civic activists and achieve a critical mass of engaged citizens?*

PL: You summarize my view well. I think government is a tool that people may decide to use or not. It is not an end in itself. We generally get the government we deserve; it is a reflection of our civil society. Nevertheless, I call our political institutions corrupt and argue that their

corruption has become a substantial barrier to civic engagement. The response I propose is to organize a large and demographically diverse group of civic leaders to fight against corruption and for civic renewal.

KM: *You describe the half-century decline in genuine civic engagement and discuss its causes. It’s not so much, you say, that motivation to engage has weakened, but that institutional support for engagement has declined—the kind that unions, political parties, and national organizations that recruited civic actors formerly provided. What do you regard as the best prospects for rebuilding institutional support for active citizenship?*

PL: The old civil society was by no means ideal. It was segregated and hierarchical. But institutions like unions, parties, activist religious congregations, and metropolitan daily newspapers had certain advantages that we have largely lost. They had means to recruit large numbers of people who initially lacked civic motivations, and they had incentives to develop their own members’ civic capacities. Today’s civil society is almost exclusively voluntary—reliant on individuals’ prior interests in civic engagement—and often dependent on philanthropy. I don’t think we can go back, but we must develop alternatives that can solve the challenges of recruitment and funding. We can build on community development corporations, land trusts, congregations, and other small but thriving community organizations. The new digital media have cut the costs of organizing by automating many tasks, such as maintaining membership lists and printing and mailing publications. But I do not believe that civil society can become completely free and voluntary as a result of the Internet.

KM: *You make a strong case—it’s the core of your theory of change—for*

acting collectively rather than as individuals, by identifying, joining, and influencing networks of civic organizations. Indeed, your book is chiefly addressed to members—or potential members—of civic renewal coalitions. But isn't it the case that the most civically active people are the most partisan and that many civic networks have a partisan agenda? Do you see many examples of civic networks that reach across partisan differences?

PL: One way organizations differ is in terms of ideological unity versus diversity. Some groups deliberately enlist people who share common views, whether on the left or right. Others try to bring people together for discussions across ideological differences. Both are valuable. Another way organizations differ is in terms of scale versus depth. For instance, Scott Reed, who leads the faith-based community-organizing network known as PICO, recently described to me the deep and transformative work that PICO does with its grassroots leaders. But “scale is what we are trying to figure out,” he said. “How do you get to scale? Today, we are nowhere near where we want to be.” Meanwhile, MoveOn’s leader, Anna Galland, told me that her organization has “tremendous scale and little depth.” MoveOn’s goal, she said, is to “move from a list of eight million to horizontal connectivity.” If you think of these as two dimensions— ideological unity versus diversity, and scale versus depth—it produces an array of four kinds of organizations. I can name examples of three of the four types. There are deep and unified groups, deep and diverse groups, and large and unified groups. But I do not believe we have any large and ideologically diverse groups. The National Issues Forums network is diverse and fairly large, but small in proportion to a national population of 310 million. This is a gap we need to fill.

Excerpt from Peter Levine’s *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*

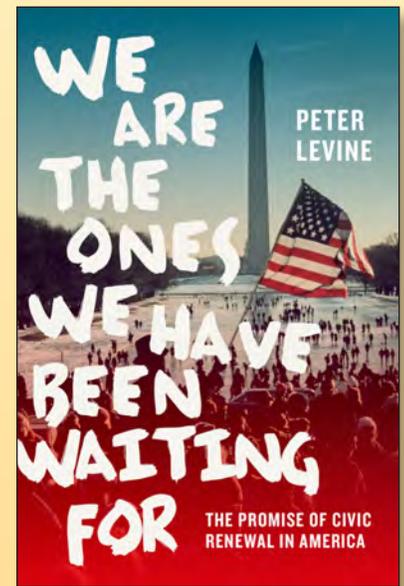
Good citizens deliberate. By talking and listening to people who are different from themselves, they enlarge their understanding, make themselves accountable to their fellow citizens, and build a degree of consensus.

But deliberation is not enough. People who merely listen and talk usually lack sufficient knowledge and experience to add much insight to their conversations, and talk alone rarely improves the world. Deliberation is most valuable when it is connected to work—when citizens bring their experience of making things into their discussions, and when they take ideas and values from deliberation back into their work. Work is especially valuable when it is collaborative: when people make things of public value together. They are typically motivated to do so because they seek civic relationships with their fellow citizens, relationships marked by a degree of loyalty, trust, and hope. In turn, working and talking with fellow citizens builds and strengthens civic relationships, which are scarce but renewable sources of energy and power.

A combination of deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships is the core of citizenship. If we had much more of this kind of civic engagement, we could address our nation’s most serious problems. Indeed, more and better civic engagement is a necessary condition of success; none of the available ideologies or bodies of expertise offers satisfactory solutions, which must emerge instead from a continuous cycle of talking, working, and building relationships. Unfortunately, genuine civic engagement is in decline, neglected or deliberately suppressed by major institutions and ideologies and by the prevailing culture. Our motivation to engage has not weakened, but we have lost institutionalized structures that recruit, educate, and permit us to engage effectively.

Nevertheless, we live in a period of civic innovation, when at least one million Americans, against the odds, are working on sophisticated, demanding, and locally effective forms of civic engagement. These Americans see the need for citizenship and are building impressive practices and models. Their work remains scattered and local because it is contrary to mainstream national policy. Civic engagement cannot achieve sufficient scale and power without reforms in our most powerful institutions. The way to achieve such reforms is to organize the one million most active citizens into a self-conscious movement for civic renewal.

Reprinted from We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For by Peter Levine with permission from Oxford University Press USA. Copyright © 2013 by Peter Levine.



When Communities Work . . .

KM: *Although you say that “talking alone rarely improves the world,” you underscore the importance of citizen deliberation and enumerate its benefits: It enlarges people’s understanding, makes them more accountable to each other, and builds a sense of consensus or common ground. In brief, in your words, “It helps solve problems.” What do you regard as particularly promising ways of expanding the occasions for citizen deliberation and ensuring that elected officials are listening?*

PL: I would encourage proponents of deliberation to think beyond the organizations that intentionally organize events at which diverse people come together to talk. Those organizations are important

diversity and make common cause with organizations that have some deliberative impulses. To name one example, Organizing for America is obviously (although not officially) partisan. Its Web address is BarackObama.com. But OFA’s leaders are proud of moments when they collaborate with truly nonpartisan local organizations, and they want to build a broader agenda. I would recommend trying to nudge groups like that (from both the right and left) in somewhat more deliberative directions, rather than trying to build a deliberative democracy based on nonpartisan experiments.

KM: *You mention that books about politics and public life feature provocative accounts of specific problems, but they end with weak and unpersuasive prescriptions about what should be done—and especially what we as citizens could do. In this respect, your book, like Suzanne Morse’s Smart Communities, is a notable exception. Your final chapter on civic strategies includes a series of proposals about how to accomplish civic renewal. Among the items on your list, which do you regard as the most promising, in the sense that certain initiatives have the potential*

to significantly change the nation’s political culture?

PL: I list policy proposals at the end of the book as examples. A book is a static

medium, and I recognize that the policy agenda for civic renewal will shift rapidly and will vary by community. We most need a durable movement whose policy agenda can evolve over time. That said, I don’t believe we can make much progress on civic renewal without curtailing the power of money in politics, and therefore I would put campaign finance reform at the top of the list. Campaign finance reform at the national level is not realistic in the next five years, but local reform remains possible and important.

KM: *The word citizen is often used, but people don’t necessarily agree about the role of citizens in the life of a democratic nation. When you use the phrase “good citizenship,” what do you mean?*

PL: The most valuable forms of civic engagement combine deliberation (discussing what to do in a community or group), collaboration (actually working and acting together on public problems), and relationship building. Not only do exemplary citizens participate in these ways, but they make it possible for others to participate as well. As Everyday Democracy’s executive director, Martha McCoy, told me recently, good citizens “enable other people to have a voice.” They “make sure that democracy allows people to deliberate,” to participate in “dialogic, empathetic, problem-solving work, connected to the community as a whole.” They pay attention to the mega-structures that allow everyone to participate. Civic engagement, so defined, benefits the individuals who participate; it pays economic, social, and environmental dividends for their communities; and it improves governance. Civic engagement may not be a sufficient solution to our nation’s problems, but it is a necessary component.

KM: *Thank you, Peter.*

The most valuable forms of civic engagement combine deliberation (discussing what to do in a community or group), collaboration (actually working and acting together on public problems), and relationship building. Not only do exemplary citizens participate in these ways, but they make it possible for others to participate as well.

to me personally. But they are too small and politically marginal to turn the United States into anything resembling a deliberative democracy. I would relax our standards of neutrality, civility, and ideological