

KETTERING REVIEW



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

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*“Focusing on citizens,
we concentrate on
problems that seem
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I n these “. . . afterthoughts” to each issue of the *Review*, I try to bring our readers up to date on concerns that are informing the Kettering Foundation’s research. Ideas “fund” our research—in the sense that, if our understandings resonate with the concerns of other people and organizations, then this resonance may help build a network of “fellow travelers” who enrich what we are exploring with their own experiences and insights. This network then may generate more new ideas to fund or inspire new research.

The foundation tends to look at a particular line of its research each year, asking the *Review* to present some of the ideas that are informing what we are doing. This year, our focus has been on the roles of citizens in a democracy—specifically on what they do with other citizens; what they do in communities to address problems and what they do in relation to institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental. In all of these studies, we draw from ideas about what citizens may need to do, if democracy is to work as it should.

This said, I should note that Kettering’s research has to do with political practice, not with political theory. So when I say that ideas fund our work, I don’t mean we engage in theoretical discussions. Rather, we look at how ideas play out in practice. By focusing on citizens—as the essays in this issue do—we are able to concentrate on problems that seem to keep citizens from playing effective roles in politics; and we also can see what practices are helping them. We look for people and organizations that are experimenting with ways to combat such problems. We learn from one another.

Democracies face all kinds of problems, and we have some ideas about what they are. We see differences among the kinds of difficulties democracies encounter. Some problems are circumstantial. As worldwide economic recession sweeps down, poverty rates soar. That's terrible. But every country is affected, democratic or not. Other problems cause democratic systems themselves to malfunction. They are fundamental or systemic. We call these "the problems behind the problems," or problems *of* democracy.

These Kettering has on its radar.

Americans are quite aware of circumstantial problems in our democracy because they hit us in the face every day: mortgage foreclosures; the high price of medical care (including the little pills that cost big bucks); the factory that had been in the community forever but is being dismantled to go overseas. We may suspect that there is more to these problems than meets the eye. Behind the obvious difficulties are often more fundamental problems that cripple our ability to respond: these problems of democracy are like the pollution that kills the microorganisms of a pond or bay; they foul the inner workings of the political system.

Systemic problems aren't always eye catching. They don't provoke the emotional reaction that circumstantial problems in democracy do. Laid off and no job prospects! Homes lost; couldn't pay the mortgages! Children going to school hungry! Those are the circumstances that get our blood boiling. Underlying problems, on the other hand, may lack this visceral oomph. Nonetheless, the less obvious problems behind the problems cripple a democratic system and its ability to respond to the more visible, "in-your-face" problems. People have less control over their future, and this frustrates them.

Many Americans feel about the political system the way they feel when the remote to their TV set no longer controls the screen. The battery seems to be dead or some kind of bug has invaded the electronics. Their frustration with politics can be heard in comments like "The system is out of whack"; "The rules have changed—and I don't know what they are anymore." Jean Johnson, reporting recently on research by Public Agenda, described a discussion where citizens talked at length about their frustrations. When asked what would help, Johnson found that people "immediately started talking about citizens taking a stronger role." Concerned Americans want more control in their own hands, not in the hands of those who say they will take care of their problems for them: such reassurance isn't reassuring.

"Getting a stronger hand" is a practical application of a powerful idea—the idea that we should rule ourselves, the idea of democracy itself. So far, Kettering has identified a number of problems behind the problems that keep citizens from having the control they would like to have over a future that they see as increasingly dangerous and uncertain.

The first of these systemic problems strikes at the heart of democracy: citizens aren't engaged; they are on the sidelines. Some people are clearly reluctant to get involved in conventional electoral politics or even civic efforts with other citizens. The low turnout at polls suggests this. But another example is revealed in community projects that fail because citizens—except for "the usual suspects"—don't show up to do the work. Maybe people don't see their concerns, or what is most valuable to them, being addressed. Maybe there is little space for them to reason together without expectations of a predeter-

mined conclusion. Maybe the political system has pushed them to the sidelines by gerrymandering their voting precincts so their ballots don't really count. Or maybe they've sidelined *themselves*—by retreating to small enclaves out of frustration or cynicism. Whatever the cause, the absence of people who think of themselves as *active citizens* is a serious problem of democracy.

A second problem comes on the heels of the first. Problems are discussed in ways that promote divisiveness and polarization. All of the options for acting on a problem may not be considered. Or only two options, which are polar opposites, are addressed, leading to an unproductive debate. Or the inevitable tensions among different options, and the necessity for trade-offs, are not recognized. And sometimes the fear of disagreement produces merely bland discussions. And a third problem follows suit: people may get involved, yet make very poor decisions about what they should do, or which policies are in their best interest. Hasty reactions, fueled by misinformation and emotional biases, rule the day! Morally charged disagreements aren't worked through—as they must be, for example, when there are clear differences over what is right, or when already scarce resources have to be redistributed. The resulting lack of *sound public judgment*—is a serious problem of democracy.

A systemic problem has to do in effect with citizens' perception that they can't really make a difference in politics because they don't themselves have the necessary resources to combat the problems that are at issue. Lack of money is a common-enough obstacle; yet certain kinds of in-your-face problems can only be solved if the citizenry does act. Issues involving keeping young peo-

ple out of harm's way provide an example: institutions like schools and social service agencies are essential, yet they can't do the job alone, and people have often unrecognized resources that aren't monetary.

Citizens, indeed, may act, yet their efforts sometimes go in so many different directions that they are ineffective; they aren't mutually supportive. And the standard remedies for this lack of coordination can themselves be equally debilitating when a central agency is put in charge and creates burdensome rules and regulations that drain the energy out of citizens' various initiatives. This can happen following natural disasters when the spontaneous actions of volunteers fail to mesh with the efforts of professionals. When there is no shared sense of purpose for citizens' initiatives—or if bureaucratic control takes away people's own sense of control—then democratic self-organizing is undermined. This, too, belongs on the list of systemic problems.

These problems of democracy are perennial because they are rooted in the human condition. They never go away. That is why democracy is called a journey, not a destination. We are prone to try to get off the field and onto the comfort of the sidelines, prone to make poor decisions, prone to underestimate our resources. Where democracy is concerned, we can't declare victory and go home. To keep up the necessary momentum for dealing with systemic problems, democracies depend on constant collective learning, which promotes both experimentation and persistence. The absence of shared learning, itself keeps democracy from working.

So a further problem—to round out our list—has been acute for some time. It is the mutual distrust that burdens the relationship between citizens and many institutions: schools,

government agencies, even civic organizations. Institutions seem to doubt that citizens are themselves responsible and capable. And citizens see institutions as unresponsive as well as ineffective. Yet the problems behind the problems of democracy can't be solved without citizens. So exactly what role are citizens supposed to play? Is being voters, taxpayers, advocates, or volunteers enough?

It all depends on what kind of democracy you have in mind. The concept of democracy that has informed much of Kettering's research is that of a political system where citizens are producers; they work with other citizens to solve common problems and make things that benefit society as a whole. The examples I use of the things people make range from those

that are ordinary and local—such as building a playground to get children off the streets—to those with both local and national significance, like organizing mothers to stop drunk driving. In a range of other publications, the foundation reports in more detail on what we are learning about how people actually do the work of citizens, not only to make things, but also, more important, to give themselves a stronger hand in shaping their future. And the *Review* serves to contribute reflections on the ideas that have helped Kettering understand the roles citizens have to play for democracy to work as it should.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.

