

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2020

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The Work of
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make 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.

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The Citizen Workers of Democracy

By Harry C. Boyte

In the spring of 2020, the Kettering Foundation published *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea* by President David Mathews, with support from the Cousins Research Group. The book calls for a shift in relationship between government and citizens from regulation and service delivery to collaboration in the work of democracy.

The same season, the United States was convulsed by the triple crises of COVID-19, economic decline on a scale not seen since the Great Depression, and enormous and sustained demonstrations for police reform and racial justice in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a police officer in Minneapolis. These were inflamed by a fourth crisis, bitter polarization fed by what Trygve Throntveit and I call “the metaphor of war.” In an essay in *Eidos*, Marie Ström and I detail how, across the

world, the digital revolution is eroding democratic education while intensifying war narratives.

The war metaphor and other crises feed worries about the future. By June 2020, 80 percent of American voters believed the country was spiraling out of control. “Given the rise of social media, [it is] much easier to denigrate and attack than it is to have the kinds of thoughtful, hard conversations that are needed,” said Meena Bose at Hofstra University.

“Democracy as usual” is troubled. *With the People* is an important response. The book argues that the foundation’s proposal is “just a different way of thinking,” but Mathews acknowledges that it faces major obstacles, including the declining faith that citizens have in each other and the “bureaucratism and modern professionalism [that] have combined in today’s institutions, allowing the two cultures to reinforce each other.”

These are all significant problems, but the largest obstacle is today’s story of democracy itself, understood as mainly an electoral system. Such a view is expressed in a new report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*. The report, it is important to note, sees democracy as larger than elections alone (the



Democracy is a kind of work. Citizens are workers. Government is a collaborator with citizens. This is radical, not left or right but etymologically.

definition advanced by the USAID website in 2013) or than elections and other government-related activities (the definition used in the 2004 report, *American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality*, by the American Political Science Association). *Our Common Purpose* includes strengthening associational life beyond government in which citizens can “assemble, deliberate and converse with each other.” It finds signs of “a yearning to believe again in the American story” and “stories of surging participation and innovation, of communities working to build new connections across long-standing divides, and of individual citizens suddenly awakening to the potential of their democratic responsibilities.” Its lens is an import-

ant advance. But recommendations for government and election reform make up the great bulk of the report, which neglects work sites, workers, and professionally based systems such as higher education, health care, cultural industries, and others as places for democratic action.

A mainly government-centered view feeds a war metaphor in which citizens are most importantly voters, volunteers, or warriors for their issues (voting is the “most important” right according to the US citizenship test). In contrast, the Kettering book, drawing on ancient roots of the concept, defines democracy as “a political system in which . . . citizens must work with other citizens to produce things—‘public goods’—that make life better for everyone.” Democracy is a kind of work. Citizens are workers. Government is a collaborator with citizens. This is radical, not left or right but etymologically, returning to roots in which We, the People are the agents and architects responsible for the whole society.

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre observes, “I can only answer the question, ‘what am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” Societies are shaped by the stories they tell of their past, present, and future. *With the People*

tells a different story of democracy and implies a question: How can society tell such a story?

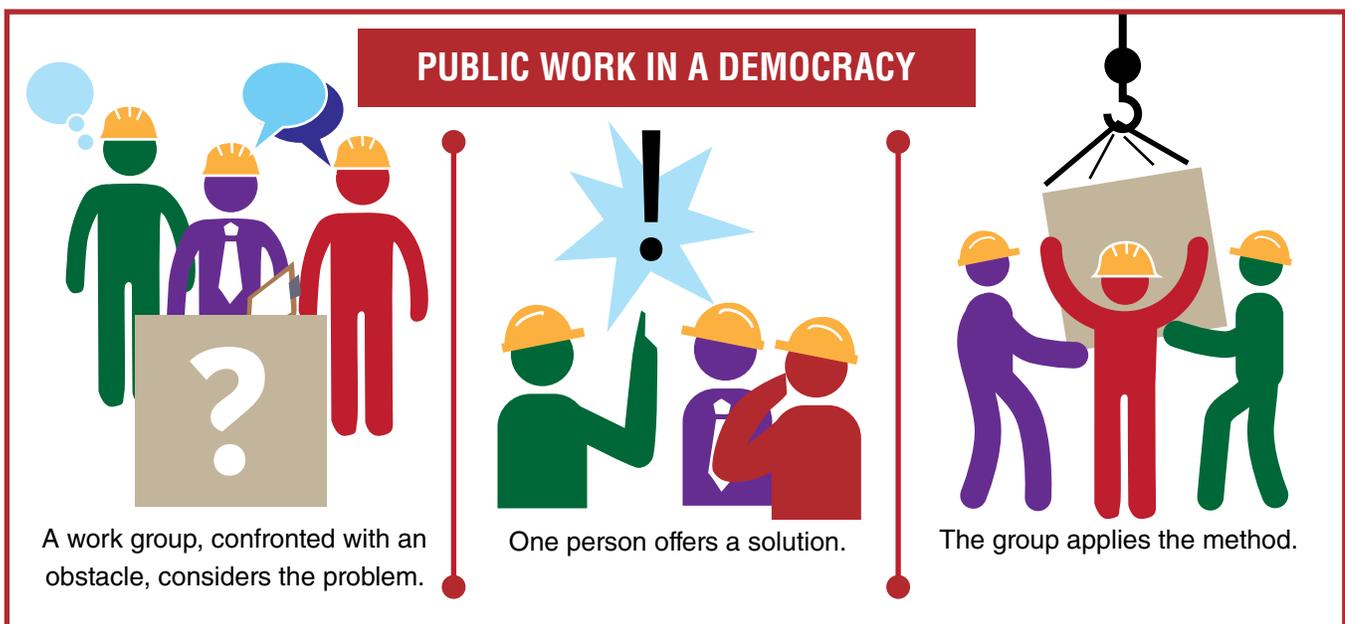
My forthcoming occasional paper for the Kettering Foundation, *Beyond the War Metaphor: Citizen Workers of Democracy*, offers several stories of citizenship as deliberative public work, work with public purpose that is visible and valued, in the United States and the story of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa. Many stories show the ties between the Black freedom struggle, democracy's advance, and citizenship.

A CITIZEN THERAPIST

Citizen professionalism emphasizes the civically empowering and educative dimensions of professions through which professionals learn to work *with* other citizens, rather than

on them or *for* them, very much in the spirit of Mathews' new book. In his book *Democratic Professionalism*, Albert Dzur has detailed how professionals' work can be catalytic and energizing when they "step back" from the cult of the expert, chronicling "unexpected" democratic trends in medicine, law, movements against domestic violence, and elsewhere that enhance the authority and efficacy of lay citizens.

William Doherty, who founded the Center for Citizen Professionalism at the University of Minnesota with Tai Mendenhall, Jerica Berge, and others, emphasizes "a new role for professionals in a democracy: catalyzing the efforts of ordinary citizens, with professional expertise 'on tap, not on top.'" Adapting public work concepts and practices to fam-



ily and health sciences, the approach begins with the premise that solving complex problems requires many sources of knowledge, and the greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well-being is often the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives. Most recently, Doherty has cofounded the Braver Angels movement, a “We, the People” effort to depolarize the United States, which also translates such ideas to public life.

The Citizen Professional Center has generated multiple partnerships embodying this civic philosophy. FEDS, a project on diabetes led by Indian elders in the Twin Cities, brings together community members and medical practitioners. It has shown strong positive health outcomes according to conventional assessments. Other partnerships include a movement of suburban families working to tame overscheduled, consumerist lives; a project in Burnsville, Minnesota, in which families are developing strategies to counter obesity among children; and an African American “Citizen Fathers” project fostering positive fathering models and practices, which birthed a Black Men and Police initiative in Minneapolis focused on police working in respectful ways

with communities on issues such as domestic violence. It was challenged by the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests demanding the end of police in Minneapolis, but it survived. Several of the arguments by the police chief and a group of Black leaders in the police department to recruit and train “officers, not warriors,” with strong community connections, are gaining national attention.

The efforts advocated by those at the forefront of police reform comport with the views of participants in more than 200 deliberative forums organized by communities across the country. In the 2020 report *Safety, Justice, and Policing: Insights from 2017 Forums That Speak to Today*, the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums emphasized that forum participants:

- pointed to “something fundamentally wrong” with the culture, training, and recruitment in many police departments.
- worried that officers often made snap judgments based on race or ethnicity rather than probable cause.
- saw an urgent need to increase understanding and mutual respect between police and people of color.
- recognized the need to tackle growing disrespect for law enforcement, especially among young people.

- called for increased mental health services in their communities.
- supported training police officers in de-escalation techniques.

CITIZEN WORKERS, NOT ONLY VOTERS, VOLUNTEERS, OR ISSUE WARRIORS

We need a nonviolent movement of democracy workers, not warriors for causes, to free our energies and spirits for the work ahead. Many people are legitimately alarmed about the chaos, threats, and poisonous atmosphere of the 2020 election. To respond requires a new birth of citizenship that renews our collective sense of civic responsibility for the work of democracy.

It is worth remembering the moments in living memory that have achieved such a civic rebirth. The nation remembers Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for the country to "make real the promises of democracy" by ending segregation. But the demeanor, dignity, and calm of the marches themselves, communicating an ethos of citizenship, are forgotten.

The program notes to the march called people to a larger identity of citizen. "In a neighborhood dispute, there may be stunts, rough words and hot insults," it read. "But when a whole people speaks to its government, the quality of the action and the dialogue need to reflect the worth



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of the people and the responsibility of the government." This civic identity had been cultivated by experiences in communities across the South, including hundreds of "citizenship schools" in sites such as church basements and beauty parlors, that taught nonviolence, literacy, skills of civic discussion and action, and a civic patriotism that expressed love for the country through efforts to change it toward "a more perfect Union."

Such stories of deliberative public work create foundations for a new citizenship and a renewed understanding of democracy as a way of life we all build together, with elections an important element, but not the heart and soul of the matter. ■

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