

# CONNECTIONS

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**INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY**

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](http://www.kettering.org).

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# The Work of the Kettering Foundation: Challenges and Changes Ahead

By Sharon L. Davies



In 2027, the Kettering Foundation will celebrate its 100-year anniversary. It was founded in 1927 by Charles F. Kettering, one of the world's most prolific innovator-inventors. He invented the automatic self-starter for automobiles, and he also helped to invent things like Freon for our refrigerators and our air conditioners, a mechanism for cash registers that made them automatic, and many, many other things. Indeed, Charles Kettering had an innovator's mind, and his greatest philosophy in life was to embrace change and innovation as the path to progress and a better future.

For the past 40-plus years, the Kettering Foundation has focused on the question, What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Since its shift to democracy-focused work, the Kettering Foundation has been an important contributor to the field of public deliberation, guided by the philosophy that democratic societies progress through rights and mechanisms that enable citizen engagement, citizen deliberation, and concerted citizen action. Over the last few decades, the foundation has very intentionally built a rich body of research and resources; however, we made these important contributions in the context of a changing world. In recent years, democracies around the world are under threat, and it is



*Charles F. Kettering*

important for those of us who are committed to defending democracy to take notice of those threats, understand their seriousness, and, when necessary, evolve and adapt our work in response to them.

If democracy watchdog organizations like Freedom House and others who create respected democracy indexes are correct, after years of ascendance, conditions for democracy around the globe have worsened over the last 16 consecutive years. Almost nightly, we hear distressing reports of growing authoritarian threats, and we see leaders fomenting division in their societies, instilling fears of others instead of encouraging the cross-cultural understanding

and consensus-building efforts that bolster democracies. These are leaders, Freedom House writes, who “once in power” suggest that “their responsibility is only to their own demographic or partisan base, disregarding other interests and segments of society and warping the institutions in their care so as to prolong their rule.”

In some countries, including the United States, antidemocratic rhetoric about increasingly diverse demographics have been used to stoke fear and anxiety. In fact, recently, the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, denounced “mixing races,” saying that places where European and non-European



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people intermingled had essentially forfeited their nationhood and were “no longer nations,” as if some imagined form of racial purity should be Europe’s goal. That mindset for many harkened back to the days of Nazism. It even caused a longtime staffer of Orbán’s to resign in protest. Orbán’s remarks attracted rebuke from leaders worldwide, but he shrugged off the criticism claiming to be misunderstood and, just weeks later, he received a hero’s welcome at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in Texas.

So, unfortunately, we are living in a time when such events are being normalized, and it is important for all defenders of democracy to be attentive of those political leaders who play on voters’ fears of diversifying populations. Rather than recognizing the potential and promise in that diversification—and all the creative and innovative power that diversity holds—leaders with antidemocratic and authoritarian tendencies do the opposite, spreading fear and division.

There are other threats to democracy about which we are rightly concerned. In many nations we see an erosion in the rule of law, which democracies rely upon to constrain the impulses of authoritarian-minded leaders. We see waning public confidence in democratic institutions, and the erosion of democratic norms, the soft guardrails of democracy. In the United States, we have seen hard-won rights, like voting rights, imperiled by new efforts to make voting more difficult, particularly in localities where minorities reside. We have seen attacks on the independence of our press, in its role as watchdog.

There is also concerning evidence of the fraying of the checks and balances that our framers designed to guard against tyranny. The United States Supreme Court is increasingly accused of ideological activism. It has enhanced the rights of personhood

enjoyed by corporations, stripped rights of reproductive freedom from women, eroded voting rights, and sanctioned the expansion of gun rights at a time of exploding gun violence. The legislative branch is largely gridlocked along partisan lines, with historically low public approval ratings.

An assault on the ways in which certain topics are being taught in our public schools is afoot as well. Underway in the United States is a sweeping effort to restrict how teachers explore the topics of race and gender in public schools. More than 35 of the 50 states have taken steps to restrict classroom discussions of the nation's history of racism and how

the toxic fruits of that history might continue to constrict opportunities today. There are bills in a number of state legislatures forbidding teachers from offering instruction that “promotes division” between the races, or “promotes resentment” of members of a particular race, or teaching that causes student “discomfort,” “guilt,” or “anguish” due to their race. In Iowa, lawmakers proposed that teachers be banned from describing the United States as “systemically racist or sexist.”

Critics of such bans have made the argument that, among other things, the new restrictions would prohibit a teacher from assigning her students to read the collection of Pulitzer



Prize-winning essays published by the *New York Times* called *The 1619 Project*, which reframed the history of the United States by putting the enslavement and contributions of Black Americans at the center of our national narrative. Once such bans are in place, violations can lead to teacher termination or cuts to school funding. Online forms have been created to enable parents of students who resent being taught about race or gender in ways they find objectionable to complain. Teachers have already reported decisions to self-censor out of fear of the consequences. Other bills and governmental restrictions have targeted teaching students about

sexual orientation or instruction that promotes “gender fluidity.”

It is significant that these restrictions will apply to public school systems in the United States that continue to be largely segregated by race, at a time when suicides and suicide attempts among the young are disproportionately high in the LGBTQIA+ community. Recently, a Texas school board near Dallas voted to limit discussion on gender identity and nonbinary pronouns. Other schools have limits confining students’ identity to the biological sex listed on their birth certificates or confining students to restrooms that correspond to their biological sex. One state ban broadly prohibited educational materials that “promote, normalize, support or address” LGBTQIA+ issues.

These new assaults on democracy ring familiar. For much of our history, democracy was more of an idea than an actual practice, and in many ways, we’re still in the stage of becoming democratically minded people. When our founders described our democracy as a system of governance by “We the people,” they used the word *people* in a very expansive way—far more expansive than they actually meant. Women—half of the population—were not included. Certainly, African Americans were not included. They were enslaved and



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not even considered full people to begin with. The native people of the land were also totally neglected. A part of the democratic project from the very start has been to become a democracy, and major movement toward that goal was made during the civil rights era. Unfortunately, we have entered a new period of backlash, despite all the progress that we made in the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s.

On January 6, 2021, for the first time in the history of the United States, we witnessed an attempt to prevent the peaceful transfer of presidential power. It was not a military coup, but a congressional commission has made the case that the attack on the US Capitol was the result of our past president's effort to remain in power after the vote of the people had gone against him, and that he did that by sowing distrust in the integrity of the vote counts of the states he did not carry, against all credible evidence to the contrary, and by encouraging violence to prevent the certification of the election results in favor of his opponent. This was a new experience for the people of the United States—and a threat to democracies worldwide. Although Donald Trump's effort did not succeed, it must continue to concern us because, more than a year into President Biden's administration, many of

his predecessor's supporters continue to repeat the lie that the election was stolen, and many elected officials in his party in Congress refuse to refute that falsehood.

Work in support of democracy in the 21st century has to confront the realities of inequality in our systems. If you read some of the major works of scholars who are writing about democracy today, extreme levels of inequality in our community are often cited as one of the major threats to democracy. Democracy should mean, at minimum, that we have a system that is providing shared opportunities for self-actualization of all our citizens. Democracy works when all members of a community are free to engage in the project of self-governance as civic equals, when they are encouraged to listen to each other with a desire to understand their different lived experiences and different points of view, and where they search for ways to achieve some mutually desired good or collective course of action that is in the service of all. Leaders committed to democracy understand the value of such an engaged community, embrace the strength of their community's diversity, and are prepared to protect the rights of all to participate in the project of democratic self-governance. Yet, if we have citizens who are that dramatically different, living



dramatically different lives, are they equally situated to engage in the kind of deliberation that has been such an important focus of the Kettering Foundation?

At the foundation, we have long recognized the critical role of citizens—of an engaged public—at the center of American life. Our work has centered around the essential role of citizens actively engaged with one another in the work of self-governance and the shaping of our own communities. Not passive

subjects of our government, but the active directors of our own affairs. And, while it is important to be able to deliberate across lines of difference among citizens who are committed to democracy—not all persons are. A *New York Times*/Siena College poll recently reported that a large percentage of Americans believe that democracy is under threat, but not all are moved to defend against that threat. We don't know why, and we must take steps to better understand this phenomenon. We also will make a very big mistake, as defenders of democracy, if we do not accept the difficult truth that not everyone believes that all voices are equal or need to be equally heard.

Since I joined the foundation, we at Kettering have been in deep reflection about our work and our place in the landscape of organizations that seek to advance democracy. This reflection has led us to a series of critical questions that will drive our next steps. How can we as a foundation go beyond the expertise that we have developed in the field of deliberative democracy to think about inequalities and how those inequalities are threatening our democracy? What does the prodemocracy movement demand of us? What is our role in bringing about an inclusive and equitable democracy? How might we contribute to the dismantling of



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barriers that serve some but disserve others?

Now is the time for us to harness the strengths and resources of this foundation to support those things that we cannot afford to deliberate about—the absolute requisites of democracy. In the days ahead, our world will depend on all of us to safeguard and to build the kind of inclusive democratic systems that make space for all. ■

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