

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2017

Editors: Derek Barker and David W. Brown
Managing Editor: Joey Easton
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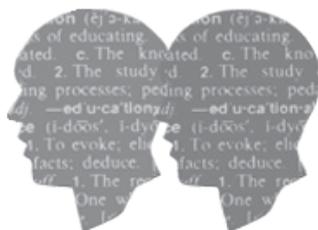
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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We dedicate this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* to Dan Yankelovich, who just passed away. His writing about public judgment has been critical to Kettering's understanding of deliberation. His seminal book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* is required reading for thoughtful scholars of democracy.

He was not only an emeritus board member of the Kettering Foundation; he was also a great friend. We will all miss him.

David Mathews

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BEYOND ADVERSARY DEMOCRACY

Jane Mansbridge

We begin this volume with an important precursor to the deliberative theory of democracy. As Mansbridge argues, in a large-scale democratic society rooted in elections, politics is likely to take on an adversarial character. However, a purely adversarial system risks losing the confidence of the citizenry. What is necessary is a different kind of politics that allows for disagreement, but enables a divided citizenry to understand political issues, reach decisions, and work together across their differences. The following is drawn from the Introduction (pages 3-7), Chapter 21 (pages 295-298), and Chapter 22 (pages 300-302) of Jane Mansbridge's book Beyond Adversary Democracy, published by the University of Chicago Press, 1983 edition.

The West believes that it invented democracy, and that institutions like Parliament, representation, and universal adult suffrage are synonymous with democracy itself. Every American schoolchild knows that when you set up a democracy you elect representatives—in school, the student council; later, senators, representatives, councilmen, assemblymen, and aldermen. When you do not agree, you take a vote, and the majority rules. This combination of electoral representation, majority rule, and one-citizen/one-vote is democracy. Because this conception of democracy assumes that citizens' interests are in constant conflict, I have called it “adversary” democracy.

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Every step in this adversary process violates another, older understanding of democracy. In that older understanding, people who disagree do not vote; they reason together until they agree on the best answer. Nor do they elect representatives to reason for them. They come together with their friends to find agreement. This democracy is consensual, based on common interest and equal respect. It is the democracy of face-to-face relations. Because it assumes that citizens have a single common interest, I have called it “unitary” democracy.

These two conceptions of democracy persist, side by side, in every modern democracy. The adversary ideal and the procedures derived from it have dominated Western democratic thinking since the seventeenth century. But unitary

ideals and procedures continue to influence the way legislative committees, elected representatives, major institutions like the Supreme Court, and local democracies actually act. In crises of legitimacy, citizens often revert to the unitary ideal, as young people did in the small participatory democracies that flourished in America in the 1960s and early 1970s.

These two conceptions of democracy are not only different, but contradictory. Yet those who talk and write about our democratic ideals never distinguish them. They assume either that adversary democracy is the only legitimate form of democracy or that unitary democracy is the ideal form and adversary democracy a compromise between the unitary ideal and the exigencies of practical politics. . . . [B]oth the unitary and the adversary forms of democracy embody worthy democratic ideals, although each is appropriate in a different context.

The adversary ideal and the procedures derived from it have dominated Western democratic thinking since the seventeenth century.

If decisions are legitimate only when they are “democratic,” it is important to recognize that democracy can come in these two different forms. When interests conflict, a democratic polity needs adversary institutions. When interests do not conflict, unitary institutions are more appropriate. The most important single question confronting any democratic group is therefore whether its members have predominantly common or conflicting interests on matters about which the group must make decisions.



My argument is that we actually mean two different things when we speak of “democracy” and that we will not be able to deal effectively with crises of legitimacy until we recognize that neither conception is appropriate under all circumstances. The task confronting us is therefore to knit together these two fundamentally different kinds of democracies into a single institutional network that can allow us both to advance our common interests and to resolve our conflicting ones.

Lessons for the Nation-State

[One] approach to the unitary ideal . . . assumes that the nation’s major problems are susceptible of technically correct solutions, so that the polity can be concerned with the “administration of things, not the government of men.”

While Mao, Marx, and Engels use the language of “correct solutions,” progressives in American national politics and “good government” organizations on the state and local level make the same assumption, expecting elected officials to act only as facilitators, technocrats, and efficient managers of the business of government.



It would be absurd not to recognize the value of these goals. [Yet the] depressing conclusion is that democratic institutions on a national scale can seldom be based on the assumption of a common good. . . . The method of overlapping private interests becomes the fantasy of “me-plus”: you and you and all others add to my experience, take me out of and beyond myself, deepen my sensations and my thoughts, and take nothing away. Everyone adds; no one subtracts. The self expands, meeting no obstacles. So too with the method of making the good of others and the whole one’s own. No individual can be completely and solely altruistic or wrapped up in the corporate good. A rhetoric, propaganda, or fantasy that praises altruism or reason of state while disparaging all self-regarding interests will make it much harder for those who believe in it to sort out their actual interests.

Because of the size and complexity of any modern nation-state, many citizens’ interests will inevitably conflict. Yet a democracy based solely on the cold facts of national conflict will encourage selfishness based on perceiving others as opponents and discourage reasoned discussion among people of good will. The effect is particularly noticeable in the realm of ideals. Adversary democracy, which derives from a fundamental moral relativism, transforms the pursuit of ideals from a dialogue into a bargain. In an adversary system, one person’s belief is no more right than any other’s; ideals are no different from other interests; the way to deal with ideals is therefore to weight each person’s ideal equally and sum them all up, letting the numerically preponderant ideals prevail. When a collectivity treats ideals as interests and decides to settle such issues with a vote, it has given up on the hope that discussion, good will, and intelligence can lead to agreement on the common good. Few politicians and even fewer ordinary citizens find these consequences acceptable. To avoid them, most people apply to the nation unitary assumptions and a unitary rhetoric that even they themselves do not quite believe. The resulting conceptual and moral confusions help undermine the legitimacy of what is, in fact, a primarily adversary polity.



But a national polity can also try to make some forms of the unitary experience available to its citizens. The safest place to do this is on the most local level, either in the workplace or the neighborhood, where the greater information each citizen can have about any decision helps guard against false unity. With such decentralization, a nation operating primarily as an adversary democracy need not condemn its citizens to selfishness and amorality, anymore than a state with no established church need condemn its citizens to atheism.



In short, by fostering decentralized and highly participative units, by maintaining a few crucial remnants of consensus, by instituting primarily cooperative economic relations, and by treating adversary methods not as an all-encompassing ideal but as an unavoidable and equitable recourse, a nation can maintain some of the conditions for community, comradeship, selflessness, and idealism without insisting that on most matters all its citizens have a common interest.



The subversive effect of adversary procedure on unitary feeling makes it essential that the necessary dominance of adversary democracy in national politics not set the pattern of behavior for the nation as a whole. The effort to maintain unitary elements in the nation in turn depends on widespread rejection both of the cynical doctrine that interests always conflict and of the credulous assumption that they can always be harmonious.



[I]f we want to make our institutions conform more loosely to our democratic ideals, we must first sort out the contradictions in these ideals. Specifically, we must distinguish ideals appropriate to situations where we all have common interests from ideals appropriate to situations where we have conflicting interests. In the real world, we always have both. Thus, for a polity to embody our fundamental conceptions about democracy, it must deal with both common and conflicting interests in ways consistent with our ideals. As we have seen, a polity that purports to be either exclusively unitary or exclusively adversary cannot do this. To maintain its legitimacy, a democracy must have both a unitary and an adversary face. It must intertwine the unitary thesis

and the adversary antithesis, embracing both unitary and adversary forms, becoming neither and absorbing neither, but holding them together so that when circumstances warrant, the constituent forms continue to appear.

On the national level, such a democracy must be primarily adversary. But it must be an adversary democracy that truly seeks to protect interests equally and consequently judges itself on its ability to produce proportional outcomes in moments of conflict. Very small democratic organizations must be primarily unitary. In small workplaces and neighborhood democracies, a citizen could learn the communal virtues . . . and at the same time, learn to adopt different democratic procedures for dealing with common and conflicting interests.

To state that people sometimes have common interests and sometimes have conflicting interests is to state the obvious. Yet most people's day-to-day thinking is dominated either by the assumption that interests always converge or by the assumption that they always conflict. The idealistic anarchist, the committed Marxist, the president of a corporation, the engineer, the city manager—none will let go of the notion that in the well-managed world (or organization) there will be no genuine conflicts of interest. They all assume that most, if not all, decisions can be genuinely in the best interests of all members of their polity.

The average political scientist is equally reluctant to give up his conviction that the combative forms of adversary democracy provide the only guarantees of freedom. In his eyes, unity is always a fraud. Proponents of the adversary model—in political science, in politics itself, and outside both these professional arenas—often love conflict. They enjoy making coalitions, calculating odds, forming strategies, and defeating their opponents. If they win, they try to extract as much as possible from their opponents. If they lose, they calculate ways of giving as little as possible. They reject consociational solutions that yield proportional outcomes or allow for taking turns, partly because such solutions drain the excitement from the battle. It was not just paranoia that made former President Nixon compile an "enemies list"; it was the spirit of adversary democracy.

As a people, we in America are starved for unitary democracy. Because our public life so often consists in the soulless aggregation of interests, we like our national leaders to raise our unitary goosebumps for a moment ("Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"). But our adversary training has also made us cynical about such appeals, so in the end we mostly ignore them. Unitary appeals fall into an institutional void. Most Americans experience democracy only in the voting booth. Citizens file

into a curtained box, mark a preference, and file out. In special circumstances, if a big-city political machine is at work or if the community is small, they may see someone they know on the way in and out of the box, smile, and exchange a triviality. Most voters see no one they know. They sit in their homes; they consume information; they determine a preference; they go to the polling place; they register the preference; they return to their homes. Small wonder that the preferences so conceived and so expressed should tend toward the private and the selfish.

Yet in a polity with as few unitary institutions as ours, an effective national unitary appeal might well be dangerous. Our citizenry is not educated to know its interests. Adversary issues that would raise consciousness often do not enter the realm of public decision. And even when we have some idea of our self-regarding interests, we have not usually tested this idea against either our ideals or our feeling for others to determine what our “enlightened” choice would be. Because we have had little experience in deciding when our interests converge and when they conflict, we may hunger for a unitary appeal that we cannot wisely evaluate.

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A few philosophers have recently sounded the alarm against the increasingly self-interested focus of public life. They call for a return to preadversary conceptions of the common good, to public discussion and debate, and to relations of fellowship and community. Some demand a reform of the economy; others urge the return of politics to small face-to-face forms of debate where citizens can be political actors rather than consumers. To achieve these goals, such thinkers often advocate Socialism, decentralization of state functions, workplace democracy, or all three. Yet their chorus has had virtually no impact on our actual political behavior. Government grows steadily more centralized, the economy not greatly more cooperative, and workplaces remain as undemocratic as ever.



[T]hese recommendations are not just reactions to specific abuses but to the entire conception of adversary democracy. In many cases the recommendations implicitly call for unitary democracy without recognizing the difficulties and limitations of unitary institutions. My aim, on the contrary, has been to show

that preserving unitary virtues requires a mixed polity—part adversary, part unitary—in which citizens understand their interests well enough to participate effectively in both forms at once.



CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With a background in political theory, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, and journalism. Barker is the coeditor (with David W. Brown) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*, and has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. Barker is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (SUNY Press, 2009), and articles appearing in *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

RONALD BEINER is a political science professor at the University of Toronto and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has authored seven books, including *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), *Civil Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), and *Liberalism, Nationalism, Citizenship* (UBC Press, 2003). He has edited or coauthored seven additional books, including *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics* (with Jennifer Nedelsky, Roman and Littlefield, 2001), *Canadian Political Philosophy* (with Wayne Norman, Oxford University Press, 2001), *Theorizing Nationalism* (SUNY Press, 1999), and *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

HARRY BOYTE Harry Boyte is the Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg University. He is the leading architect of the center's public work approach to civic engagement and democracy, and the creator of Public Achievement. Boyte served as a senior advisor to the National Commission on Civic Renewal. In the 1960s, he worked for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a field secretary with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the Civil Rights Movement. He is the author of nine books on citizenship, democracy, and community organizing, and his writings have appeared in more than 100 publications.

LORI BRITT, is director of the Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue at James Madison University. Her work focuses on understanding how communities and organizations go about the business of charting future courses of action, and how different communicative structures and participatory practices can aid in making those plans more inclusive and representative. She facilitates deliberation, dialogue, and visioning processes for governmental and nonprofit agencies, and teaches a service-learning course in which students facilitate dialogues for community organizations.

DAVID W. BROWN is coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* and coedited two recent Kettering publications: *Agent of Democracy* and *A Different Kind of Politics*. He taught at Yale's School of Management and New School's Milano Graduate School. Brown is the author of *Organization Smarts* (Amacom 2002), *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* (Praeger 2011), and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014). Brown's recent book, *Assumptions of the Tea Party Movement: A World of Their Own*, was published in 2016 (Palgrave Macmillan).

MAURA CASEY, a Kettering Foundation senior associate, wrote commentary and editorials for four newspapers, including the *New York Times*. Over a career spanning 30 years, she won 45 regional and national awards, including a shared Pulitzer Prize. She holds a master's degree in journalism and public affairs from the American University, has two adult children, and lives in Franklin Connecticut with her husband, Peter J. Panzarella, who she is warming up to after 34 years.

JANE MANSBRIDGE is a Charles F. Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values at the Harvard Kennedy School. She is the author of *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Basic Books, 1980; University of Chicago Press, 1983) and the award-winning *Why We Lost the ERA* (University of Chicago Press, 1986). She is also editor or coeditor of four volumes, including *Beyond Self-Interest* (University of Chicago Press, 1990) and *Negotiating Agreement in Politics* (with Cathie Jo Martin, American Political Science Association, 2013). Her current work includes studies of representation, democratic deliberation, and everyday activism.

DAVID MATHEWS, president of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, and *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*.

NOËLLE McAFEE is a professor of philosophy and director of the Psychoanalytic Studies Program at Emory University. Her books include *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* (Columbia, 2008), *Julia Kristeva* (Routledge, 2003), *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship* (Cornell, 2000), and coedited volumes on democratic theory, including a special issue of the philosophy journal *Hypatia* and an edited volume titled *Democratizing Deliberation: A Political Theory Anthology* (Kettering, 2012). She is currently completing her next book, *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and the Work of Mourning*. She has worked closely with the Kettering Foundation for nearly 30 years, including serving since 1990 as an editor of the *Kettering Review*.

DAVID McIVOR is assistant professor of political science at Colorado State University and the author of *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Cornell, 2016). He has published articles on contemporary democratic and political theory in a variety of journals, including *Political Theory*, *Constellations*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, *The James Baldwin Review*, and *Agriculture and Human Values*. He served as coeditor for the book *Democratizing Deliberation: A Political Theory Anthology* (with Noëlle McAfee and Derek W. M. Barker, Kettering Foundation Press, 2012).

DANIEL YANKELOVICH (1924–2017) was an American public opinion research pioneer and renowned social scientist who studied social change and public opinion in America for more than 40 years. In 1958, he established the marketing and research firm Daniel Yankelovich Inc., which was later renamed Yankelovich, Skelly, and White. In 1975, Yankelovich founded the nonprofit Public Agenda with former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. More recently, he founded Viewpoint Learning, as well as the Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research at the University of California, San Diego. A former trustee at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education, the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, and Brown University, he was author or coauthor of 12 books, including *Toward Wiser Judgment* (with Will Friedman, Public Agenda, 2010), *Profit With Honor: The New Stage of Market Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 2006), and *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), which was awarded the 1999 Common Ground Book Award for Achievement in Conflict Resolution.



Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 434, Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
www.kettering.org
