

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

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# An Experiment Studying Experiments

By David Mathews



The year 2020 will go down in history as one of the most tumultuous in the modern era. Adding to the troubles, democratic institutions have been in serious difficulty for some time. Declining public confidence has weakened their ability to respond effectively. Because Kettering research is focused on democracy, the foundation has had to look more closely not only at what it studies but also how it goes about its research. We are trying to bring about the closest possible alignment between what Kettering is trying to understand and the way it conducts its research.

At our January 2020 retreat, the foundation's faculty and associates, along with other allied organizations



PHOTO BY KENNY S. MCGUANE

we work with, went over in detail the most recent account of what we do and how. In many ways, “Kettering” has become not just one organization but a conglomerate of many organizations and their networks, as you can see from the photograph below. The document, as reviewed and amended at the retreat, is the basis for what I am writing here.

One point of clarification if you are new to *Connections*: Kettering calls itself a “foundation.” People naturally expect it to make grants; it doesn’t. Kettering is a research institute, not a grantmaker, although its methodology is not that of social science. We draw on a range of scholarly disciplines. Our job is to *know* something useful; however, KF isn’t

a service organization either. What we contribute to knowing through our research is what we contribute to doing. We’ve been called an incubator for democracy. That fits.

### **A LEGACY OF DISCOVERY, INVENTION, AND RIGOROUS RESEARCH**

A bit of history from the 1920s will give you a background for understanding Kettering today. It is useful to put the foundation’s origins in the context of what was happening in the United States at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction was fading, and a new age of economic growth and invention was dawning.



These inventions were both mechanical and civic. For example, the 1920s saw the birth of many of today's major civic organizations, such as the ACLU and the League of Women Voters. A culture of discovery and innovation spread across the country and was exemplified by such people as Thomas Edison, Orville and Wilbur Wright, George Washington Carver, and Charles Kettering. It was during this time, 1927, that the foundation was founded by Kettering, who is known most notably for the self-starter used in automobiles.

I never met any of these inventors, yet they were, in a sense, our founders, whether or not they signed the foundation's articles of incorporation. These founders left the foundation great legacies. One of the most important was that they prized inven-

tiveness and conducted rigorous research. Their research was the practical kind that inventors do, which fostered useful discoveries. Yet while working toward immediate, practical ends (airplanes, light bulbs, and so on), these inventors looked behind the symptoms to locate the root causes of problems—the problems behind the problems. The foundation today draws heavily on this legacy.

#### *Into the World*

I believe the Kettering Foundation, as it is now, began with the presidency of Robert Chollar (1971-1981). Bob had a very helpful board, which included Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review*, as well as public opinion expert George Gallup. Trustees then and now have had in common a long-term perspective and an inventor's patience with experimentation. That legacy has continued to serve the foundation well.

#### *Searching for a Unifying Objective*

In the Chollar era, the foundation's research was organized into three divisions: science, schools, and urban government. Chollar wanted to bring those divisions together so Kettering's research wouldn't be just a collection of glorified bits and pieces. Doing that became a major objective in the 1980s. And it proved to be a continuing challenge.

**“ The year 2020 will go down in history as one of the most tumultuous in the modern era. ”**

## DEMOCRACY BECOMES THE CENTRAL FOCUS

A unifying concept did emerge, though not immediately. At first, we thought that “serving the public” would be the theme. Unfortunately, the word *public* doesn’t have a rich, etymological history to draw on. So, gradually, we substituted a term that did: the “*democratic* public.” In time, “making democracy work as it should” would become the unifying focus for all the research. (The *demos* in *democracy* is “the public” or, originally, the citizenry of a village.)

### *An Evolving Understanding*

Kettering’s understanding of democracy has continued to evolve. The other half of the word, *-cracy*, or *kratos* in the original Greek, means “sovereign power.” Power is taken to mean the ability to act, to produce something. That definition encouraged us to think of citizens as producers of power themselves, not just delegators of powers to representatives.

To enrich its understanding, the foundation went back to the origins of politics by drawing from paleo-political anthropology. That literature suggests that democracy is actually much older than the word itself. It may be based on lessons learned by our earliest ancestors from their primary occupation—survival. The first

lesson was that survival depends on cooperation. (We have seen this lesson in action during the coronavirus pandemic.) Cooperative, collective effort made humans more secure from ever-present dangers. Also, to survive when food was scarce, our ancestors needed to be free to forage for anything edible. And if they combined efforts to forage and hunt, the food had to be shared equitably or those who did not receive their share of the bounty would leave the tribe. That would make the group weaker and less secure.

It isn’t difficult to see how these lessons became the basis for democratic values such as justice and freedom. Along with them came a desire for the control needed to secure the things people considered most valuable for survival. Kettering has come to understand democracy, at its most basic, as collective decision-making for collective action, which gives people a measure of power and control.

For Kettering, understanding democracy has been, and still is, a journey. As the foundation continues to learn, its understanding of democracy continues to deepen.

### *The Problems of Democracy Itself*

Democratic countries are troubled by many difficulties, and a number of these, such as the current economic crisis, also threaten countries that



## Politics is about collective action, and collective action in a democracy requires collective decision-making.

aren't democratic. So as not to impair its effectiveness by trying to address all problems, the foundation has concentrated on the problems *of*, not just *in*, democracy. These are systemic malfunctions, such as the lack of civic engagement that prevents a democracy from working as it should.

Kettering research has also taken into account structural conditions like the causes of racial conflict and persistent poverty. They make it doubly difficult to deal with systemic malfunctions.

Some problems also have wicked characteristics that make them impervious to the standard problem-solving strategies. For example, people may realize that something is going wrong yet can't agree on what the difficulty is or what should be done about it. What *should* be done is not something experts can decide, although they may have useful information. People have to

exercise their best judgment. One of the first questions on the foundation's research agenda is how citizens can move from first reactions and impulsive responses to more shared and reflective judgment.

Another troubling characteristic of wicked problems is that there is no one cause. They are found in multiple sources located throughout a community. No one institution or group of people can be effective in countering them. Everyone has to work together, despite their differences. How is that possible, especially today, when we appear to be deeply divided? That is another important question on the foundation's research agenda.

*Connections* has carried stories on all of the research questions and what has been learned.

### [The Work of Democracy Is Work](#)

Given the centrality of the citizenry, it is very troubling when people today feel that they don't have the power to make a difference in our political system. So, Kettering began to look at the things people could do that are *self*-empowering, like their ability to form associations to combine individual skills and resources into more potent forms. We owe a debt to John McKnight, a Kettering senior associate, for that insight. In one of our meetings, senior associate Harry Boyte suggested that we think

of what citizens do as work. Working together empowers us. This led to the insight that the work of democracy is literally work. The things that people produce by working together are powerful in their own right, and they generate a sense of ownership, as well as a sense of being able to make a difference.

### *Major Themes Today*

While Kettering's understanding of democracy continues to evolve, the foundation has reached a point where the major themes in our research can be summed up like this:

Politics is about collective action, and collective action in a democracy requires collective decision-making. And that, as I've explained, requires the exercise of the human faculty for judgment. Early humans survived by making sound decisions about their future. Those who couldn't, perished. That danger helped develop the faculty for judgment. This faculty doesn't have to get up to scale; we all have it. However, and regrettably, we don't use all of our inherent abilities when we should; history is filled with examples of bad judgment. The foundation now is looking at the kind of decision-making that is being done to respond to multiple crises. Who is making these decisions, and how?

Another primary area of Kettering research about citizens and the work

they must do in communities has been with organizations using deliberative forums to encourage sound judgment wherever collective decisions are made. Deliberation, which has also been called choice work, has proven effective in countering the divisiveness that is so destructive today. Combating wicked problems that spring from multiple sources requires people who aren't alike, or who don't even like one another, to work together. Deliberating has been shown to create a pivot in the public's thinking. People become



more open to different points of view, and that changes the tone of the decision-making. Efforts to combat a problem can move forward even where there's not full agreement.

Still another current area for research is the troubled relationship between the public and many of our authoritative governing institutions. Democratic politics operates at two levels: one at the citizen or civic level and another at the institutional level in both governmental and nongovernmental forms. It doesn't take exhaustive research to show that institutional democracy is in serious trouble, having lost considerable public confidence despite attempts to show accountability and consult with citizens. And although civic democracy appears to be doing somewhat better, citizens have serious doubts about being able to have a meaningful influence on large, bureaucratic institutions, even the nongovernmental ones. The result is that the two levels don't mesh; they aren't aligned in ways that are mutually beneficial. Kettering reported on the importance of this in *The Ecology of Democracy*, which showed the ways in which civic and institutional democracy are dependent on one another.

The most recent foundation research report, titled *With the People*, suggests looking at this troubled relationship from a different perspective.

We got the inspiration for the report's title from President Lincoln's plea for a government *of, by, and for* the people. Because of evidence that we are falling short on all three, why not add another preposition—*with* the people? Maybe more collaboration *with* the citizenry would make use of the things that citizens can uniquely produce by working together, which would help the institutions be more effective. The late Nobel Prize-winner Elinor Ostrom showed that without reinforcement by the public goods that citizens produce, even our largest and most expert institutions can't be optimally effective. Maybe this coproduction could also help counter the loss of public confidence in our major institutions.

Ostrom believed that citizens had to be producers for coproduction with institutions to be possible. That reinforced what Kettering was learning about the role citizens must play for a democracy to be strong. As I said, people have to see themselves—and be seen by institutions—as producers, agents in their own right, not just the objects of the agency of others.

## HOW KETTERING WORKS

While our evolving understanding of democracy has been the principal influence on the way the foundation functions, Kettering has never imag-

ined that it, itself, is a democracy. Nonetheless, the foundation can't operate in a way that disregards what it is learning about democracy. And if the way Kettering does its work resonates with the spirit of democracy, that resonance can reinforce people's efforts to have a better democracy.

### *Working with Others*

The foundation employs fewer than 50 people full time, and of that number only about 35 are faculty directly involved in research. However, the work the foundation does reaches throughout the United States and to organizations in more than 100 countries around the world. That outreach would be impossible if only 35 people were trying to respond directly to citizens around the globe. Our outreach is possible because we work with intermediaries, organizations that work directly with citizens. These organizations have the credibility and legitimacy that an outside agency such as Kettering would not. Intermediaries have ranged from chapters of all types of national organizations to local libraries, schools, and religious institutions. Kettering research goes out through them when they find it serves their objectives.

### **Research *With*, Not *On* or *For*:**

Research is usually done *on* something or somebody. That is justified under certain conditions. Research



**If the way Kettering does its work resonates with the spirit of democracy, that resonance can reinforce people's efforts to have a better democracy.**

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is also done *for* some group or some cause. That can be beneficial. Kettering research, however, is done only *with* others. That is more consistent with the foundation's understanding of a democracy in which citizens are agents.

**Allies, Not Partners:** Kettering depends on intermediaries to test its research. They are allies with their own ways of working. Research with partners implies the joint ownership of a single business. The foundation's allies aren't those kinds of partners. Kettering shares what it is learning with a worldwide host of institutions, professionals, associations, and communities. Few of them are in the research business as Kettering is. So, there is no one "business" owned in common. Intermediaries are more like "fellow travelers." The foundation recognizes that it doesn't know much

about their businesses and structures its relationships with allies keeping that limitation in mind.

The research on democracy has continued to grow as a result of what the foundation has learned from these fellow travelers. They have concerns related to those of Kettering, although these concerns are not always about democracy. They are usually about the self-interests of the allies. And that isn't a problem. In fact, we've found that if the research we do with others doesn't relate to the problems they face, it doesn't have a lasting effect.

One of the first alliances Kettering made was with the network of local National Issues Forums (NIF). As many *Connections* readers know, these forums are organized mainly by local civic, educational, and religious organizations—even prisons—and are spread across the country. Later,

the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) was founded to assist these sponsors. There are also online forums that anyone anywhere can join.

Kettering's alliance with NIFI was, and still is, based on a division of duties, with each doing what it is best able to do—with benefits for both organizations. Kettering performs research, which is used in issue guides for the forums, and it analyzes the results. This analysis of how people make up their minds on contentious issues draws on what happened in the deliberative forums. For its part, NIFI recruits forum sponsors and builds a network among them.

Other types of alliances are with national organizations that contribute research or have a mission that complements what Kettering does. All of these allies are in a relationship with the foundation that's somewhat like the relationship among the settlers going to the American West in wagon trains. While all parties were responsible for their own wagons, they traveled together for mutual benefit.

**Networks:** Many allies are joined together in their own associations and networks. Relating to these networks has been both a special challenge and an opportunity for the foundation. To be in tune with the networks, the foundation learned it had to stay out of the center as an



**Kettering shares what it is learning with a worldwide host of institutions, professionals, associations, and communities.**

## HOW KETTERING WORKS

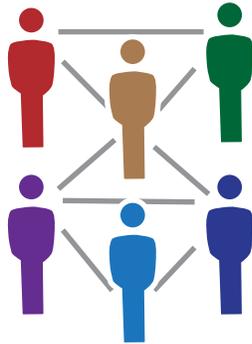
**Research with,**  
not on or for



**Allies, not partners,**  
are “fellow travelers”  
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ways of working  
who test KF’s  
research



**Networks**  
with a mutually  
beneficial  
relationship  
among indepen-  
dent parties



**Multinational  
research alliances**  
that enrich  
Kettering’s study  
of US democracy



authoritative figure giving all the answers or directing any actions. What the foundation hopes to create with networks is a mutually beneficial relationship among independent parties.

### **A Multinational Perspective:**

When Kettering discovered that there were organizations in other countries interested in its research, it didn’t create a separate division of international studies, as is done in academic institutions. The foundation doesn’t study other countries. Instead, Kettering forms multinational research

alliances that enrich what it does study—US democracy. To be clear, the foundation is not in the business of exporting this democracy. That is because the democracy that Kettering studies requires self-responsibility, which can’t be exported or imported.

A multinational residency, or visiting fellows, program at the foundation does bring people from organizations in other countries who want to see what Kettering does. They learn by becoming immersed in the foundation’s research. The fellows also help put what Kettering

is learning about the US in a larger context.

The foundation's oldest multinational research program is its study of the role citizens can play in improving international relations. Called Track II or Supplemental Diplomacy, by 2020, Kettering had worked with organizations in Russia for 60 years, with institutes in China for 48 years, and with foundations and civic organizations in Cuba for some 25 years. This continuity, plus that in domestic research programs, gives the foundation's reports a credibility that wouldn't be possible with a constantly shifting focus.

## DEMOCRATIC CHANGE AND LEARNING

One of the most powerful influences that Kettering's understanding of democracy has had on the way the foundation functions has come from realizing how democracies make changes. Without a supreme authority to dictate what should be done, people have to rely on their collective judgments about what those changes should be.

### *Learning Exchanges*

Consistent with this understanding of democratic change, as the foundation began to draw on what its allies were learning, we discovered that the learning went deeper and grew richer when several different kinds of

organizations, but with similar concerns, were in the same meeting. The chemistry was better if they weren't in the same fields. The integration discouraged the usual insiders' shoptalk. Participants could see what they were doing in a larger frame of reference, which was often insightful.

In order for different experiences from different actors to be shared, the meetings had to have a central focus on one of the fundamental problems of democracy that affected everyone—loss of public confidence, for example. That common focus made the exchanges coherent, even though the participants weren't from the same profession or organization. When there was a diversity of experiences in the room, everyone learned more, including Kettering. Participants weren't as prone to tell success stories. They talked about what went wrong in their work and what they were struggling with. They were learning, and Kettering, too, was learning.

### **Finding Your Own Answers:**

Learning exchanges don't depend on the foundation giving authoritative answers to questions, offering models to emulate, or prescribing best practices to follow. Consistent with the legacy left by the founders, those who benefit most from the learning exchanges are inventors in their fields. They like to challenge

their imaginations to find new ways to master old problems. Although Kettering may have relevant insights to share as appropriate, the goal of the exchanges is for everyone to learn how to find *their own* answers. Kettering tries to contribute to that discovery.

### INSIGHTS FOR DISCOVERING POSSIBILITIES

Kettering's research is ongoing. Almost everything we say is provisional because what we learn on Monday may change what we say on Tuesday. So, we avoid talking about "findings" because that sounds so final. Instead, we describe what we are learning as insights or different ways of seeing the political world and our place in it.

The insights that Kettering has to offer are about possibilities, which is why they are often stated as questions. What might happen if you thought of what you were dealing with as "X" rather than "Y"? For example, one of our insights is that, while citizens may appear to be politically apathetic, they are actually very concerned about the things that human beings consider deeply valuable. (Security from danger is at the top of the list.) The research question is: Is it possible that engaging people in worthwhile civic projects might be more likely if the effort started with what citizens hold dear? That insight



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has to be tested by institutions and organizations trying to engage citizens under different circumstances.

Another example: The power to make a difference in the political system, which many people would like to have, might come not just from getting officials in institutions to do their bidding but also from producing things that the institutions need in order to be effective, things that only citizens can provide. The example I often use to show something only citizens can do is in health. Hospitals can care *for* people, but only families and friends can care *about* them. Clinical studies have shown that this kind of care can help people who are ill. It is a powerful "medicine." The research question is: What happens in the health-care system if more use was made of the coproduction of health *with* citizens? A version

**“As the 2020 crises and the continuing crisis in democracy have shown, new challenges require new responses from civic associations and our major institutions. And while the current turmoil will subside, the need for lasting improvements will not.**

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of that question is relevant in journalism, in education, and in every field. It poses significant challenges to professionals in all these areas. But it is the right challenge to take on. We need the inventiveness everyone, everywhere, has within them.

### **NEW CHALLENGES/NEW ORGANIZATIONS**

As the 2020 crises and the continuing crisis in democracy have shown, new challenges require new responses from civic associations and our major institutions. And while the current turmoil will eventually subside, the

need for lasting improvements will not. That may require different kinds of organizations. This is one of the reasons Kettering has been experimenting with how it goes about its business. If a better, stronger democracy is the objective, then we must create more organizations that are in tune with democracy.

That is already beginning to happen. At a recent Kettering exchange, by Zoom, the United States and 44 other countries were represented. There, Tendai Murisa, an alumnus of the multinational residency program, talked about what was happening in Zimbabwe, his home, and in other African countries. He saw signs of “a new politics” of citizen solidarity trying to emerge in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The same seems to be happening in the US. John McKnight believes we are seeing associational life being reborn.

Kettering is trying to look ahead. Murisa and McKnight are among what we hope will be a growing number of civic and institutional inventors. That is why the foundation has continued to experiment on itself in a search for better ways to do what democracy requires. We are committed to being an experiment studying experiments. ■

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