

KETTERING REVIEW



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

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Governing *with* the People

by David Mathews

Governments and the citizenry can work effectively together by realigning their efforts so that they are mutually reinforcing.

This year's review of Kettering research is on the relationship between the public and the government and other governing institutions (e.g., schools, civic organizations, and large NGOs). These relationships have become deeply troubled as people have lost confidence in these institutions.

Americans living in all parts of the country have different reasons for being concerned. Some fear that the country is in decline due to an erosion of our core values and failures in the way our political system works—or doesn't work. Others are troubled by the growing economic divide, which is exacerbated by racial and other forms of injustice. People tend to see many of our problems as the result of self-inflicted wounds, and they usually blame politicians. On the other hand, leaders in our governing institutions may blame what they see as an irresponsible citizenry. (Some citizens also have doubts about their fellow citizens.) Overcoming these problems is made even more difficult by today's tidal wave of toxic divisiveness.

Governing institutions have mounted numerous efforts, such as public participation and accountability initiatives, to counter the loss of confidence. But these haven't stopped the erosion, and some studies suggest they have been counterproductive. Something more has to be done to counter the destructive forces at work.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all lies in restoring faith in our democracy. But democracy has so many definitions today that it is difficult to have a coherent conversation; people talk past one another. When thinking of democracy, some may have in mind institutions ranging from the media to government agencies, which

are often seen negatively. Others may be focused on and critical of elections or the electoral system. Unfortunately, it is seldom that people talk about democracy as *us*, as *We*, the People.

Most often, when people say “democracy,” they mean our major *authoritative* institutions. “Authoritative” is the key word; these are institutions that have authority over us because they have the right facts or expertise or professional know-how. Yet these are the very institutions that people have been losing confidence in. Institutional democracy is in serious trouble. On the other hand, the organic or civic democracy found in communities is relatively healthy. But while civic democracy is the underpinning for institutional democracy, the two have become disconnected; they aren’t well aligned.

A *With* Strategy

There may be other strategies for countering this loss of confidence that need to be tested, but the one we have focused on is captured in the simple title of a forthcoming Kettering Foundation Press book, *With*, that proposes another way to think about the relationship between our governing institutions and the public. A *with* strategy is a way of creating a



reciprocal relationship, reconnecting the institutions of democracy with their civic foundations, with the democratic citizenry.

The title of the book, and the proposal, draw their inspiration from Abraham Lincoln’s ideal of a government *of, by, and for* the people in

Institutional democracy is in serious trouble.

the Gettysburg Address. Today, do Americans think our government is really “of” the people? That’s debatable. “By” the people? Doubtful. “For” the people? Perhaps for some, sometimes. So why not try another preposition—more government *with* the people?

A *with* strategy isn’t a set of best practices to emulate. It is simply a different way of thinking about the relationship citizens could have with their governing institutions. A different way of thinking could open doors to imagining new ways for governments to gain from citizens and citizens to gain from governments. *With* is just an idea intended to spark imagination.

With as Democracy

A *with* strategy is a democratic strategy. Saying that, of course, demands an explanation of what is meant by *democracy* because the word has many meanings. I think what we now call democracy began long before the word was coined. It grew out of lessons taken from the collective actions needed for human survival when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers living

in tribal enclaves and, later, villages. This was before there were kingdoms and nation-states. As humans spread out across the globe, they carried with them a “political DNA” developed in the struggle to survive. A principal lesson of survival was that cooperation was key because we needed collective efforts to stay alive. We had to work *with* one another, even with those from different tribes.

Much, much later, the Greeks captured some of this survival legacy in their language with new terms like *democracy*. As explained in other editions of the *Review*, this word has two roots: *dem*, “the people collectively,” as in a village or *deme*; and *kratos*, “sovereign power,” the capacity to act in a way that makes a real difference. Modern representative government rests on this earlier foundation of collective decision-making leading to collective actions for collective well-being.

From this perspective, democracy began and continues as a political system in which, at the most fundamental or organic level, citizens must work with other citizens to create things—“public goods”—that make life better for everyone. Our ancestors went on to form governments and other governing institutions to create more and different goods. These two political systems, one governmental or institutional and the other organic or civic, are interdependent in the ecosystem of democracy, which is the subject of an earlier book from the Kettering Foundation Press, *The Ecology of Democracy*. Unfortunately, this essential, symbiotic relationship becomes weaker if citizens don’t join forces to produce public goods, if they delegate much of what they must do to institutions and government

agencies, or if all forms of governmental institutions are influenced wholly by professional expertise and bureaucratic routines. All of these practices relegate citizens to the sidelines.

A *with* strategy is idealistic, yet it isn’t a pie-in-the-sky fantasy. The United States recognized the need for what citizens provide by enacting laws allowing tax exemptions for nongovernmental institutions serving public purposes. Public-government collaboration is, in fact, very common in some situations. Think about communities hit by natural disasters—fires, floods, and tornadoes. Before government relief arrives, people rush to help others—even those who may be strangers—possibly putting themselves in harm’s way. A *with* strategy fosters collective work, not only among people who are alike or who like one another, but among

Democracy began and continues as a political system in which citizens must work with other citizens to create things—public goods—that make life better for everyone.

those who recognize they *need* one another to survive and live the lives they want to live. While collaboration between citizens working together and government agencies does occur in extreme circumstances, it isn’t a well-established policy with broad applications.

What Isn't Being Proposed

I would caution against debating what is or isn't a true *with* strategy. Yet there are some already well-known and useful practices that aren't what I mean by *with*. A *with* strategy, for instance, isn't just another form of public participation. It goes beyond conferring with citizens who are beneficiaries of government programs. It isn't consultative democracy. At the federal level, *with* doesn't mean just partnering with state and local governments. And it isn't the same as transferring government responsibilities to nongovernmental organizations; it isn't devolution. Neither is *with* about volunteers serving government agencies, valuable as that is. And it is not the same as the partnerships that governments have with businesses and other institutions. While I am not critical of any of these efforts, I believe there is more to be done.

Reciprocity and Complementary Production

Working *with* is a reciprocal relationship. The best metaphor I have for this may be too dated to mean much today. Where I am from, pine trees grow so rapidly that they are treated as a crop, like corn. Seedlings are planted in neat rows so the trees can be harvested easily by machines. Before this equipment was available, however, the trees were cut using long crosscut saws, with two workers pulling the saw back and forth. Their reciprocal efforts produced a result that neither laborer could have achieved by working alone. They worked *with* each other.

A *with* strategy fosters reciprocity between what citizens do on their end of the saw and what institutions do on the other end. The strategy is based on evidence that institutions

can't do their jobs effectively without the complementary efforts of people working *with* people. That is because there are some things that can be done only by citizens or that are best done by them. Democratic governing needs working citizens. (I realize that saying there are

Working *with* is a reciprocal relationship.

some things only citizens working with one another can do invites pushback, and I will say more about that later.)

The case for the complementary efforts I am writing about now was made persuasively in Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning research on what she termed "coproduction." Citizens can't be left on the sidelines, she said, because their work is needed to reinforce and complete the work of governments, schools, and other institutions. In 1993, Ostrom presented her argument in the Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society's newsletter:

If one presumes that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and social workers are essential to the development of better public services. Ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of

these services means, however, that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account in the way that policy makers think about these problems. The term “client” is used more and more frequently to refer to those who should be viewed as essential co-producers of their own education, safety, health, and communities. A client is the name for a passive role. Being a co-producer makes one an active partner.

Products from the work of citizens can complete what institutions do because civic work is different from the work of institutions. I have in mind supplementary projects that make use of people doing the things professionals don’t—and can’t—do. That’s why I prefer the term *complementary production* rather than *coproduction*.

A good example of complementary production is captured in a story a colleague told me about an exchange between a group of citizens in her community and their local government. The citizens had started a cultural project, but when they met with municipal officials, they didn’t ask them to take over the



project. They simply said, “Here is what we have done; now what can you do?” People had taken the initiative, which was an important characteristic of what was happening. Town officials then offered assistance from a crew that brought in some equipment that the citizens didn’t have. That type of reciprocity is at the heart of a *with* strategy. Citizens take an initiative; they work together to make things (public goods). Then, the government adds the resources it has. Collaborating *with* one another is mutually beneficial.

Citizens as Producers

The greatest challenges to a *with* strategy, however, are not in the coordination. They have to do with the way citizens see themselves, act, and are seen by others. For a *with* strategy to be effective, people have to do their share of the work. If they are to be coproducers, they have to make things, both tangible and intangible. This concept of citizens as producers is novel because, even in participatory projects, citizens are more often seen as constituents or consumers of government services. They don’t necessarily make anything by working with others. However, I was intrigued when the World Economic Forum, an organization of business leaders, issued a report in 2017 that recognized the value of citizens being treated as creators and producers rather than consumers or clients. That is exactly how a *with* strategy sees citizens—as actors themselves rather than just objects of the actions of others.

Part of the Sovereignty of My Country?

Working together to produce public goods can give people a sense of themselves as agents

who make a difference. In 1780, Samuel Cooper, a Boston minister who was a leader in the resistance to the British during the American Revolution, gave a sermon in a ceremony recognizing the creation, after lengthy public debate, of a constitution for Massachusetts. The new

A *with* strategy could help restore a sense of democratic sovereignty.

constitution, he said, was “an established frame of laws; of which a man may say, ‘we are here united in society for our common security and happiness.’” He compared the laws that had been passed to the fruits that farmers produced by their own labor on their own land. He reasoned, “The regulations under which I live are my own; I am not only a proprietor in the soil, but *I am part of the sovereignty of my country*” (emphasis added). Cooper had a right to that sense of agency because he had, in fact, been instrumental in creating not just a state constitution but a new nation.

What I take away from this sermon is that, ultimately, the key to stemming the loss of confidence in institutions may be more in what citizens do than in what government does. That is because human beings usually have more confidence in what they’ve made, or helped make, than in what has been made for them. When people have worked *with* an institution to solve a problem, they tend to have positive feelings about that institution, provided it has been receptive and the work hasn’t just been

menial. When people have positive feelings about schools, for example, they often speak as agents, saying, “*Ours* is a good school.” Then, they add, “And we are involved in it.” Seeing this connection helped me recognize the possibility of restoring confidence in government by using a *with* strategy. This strategy can generate a sense of public responsibility because people tend to feel responsible for what they have made. A *with* strategy could help restore a sense of democratic sovereignty.

Starting in Communities

Much of the work citizens do begins locally. And more attention is now being given to the importance of communities and what citizens can do there. Writers James and Deborah Fallows toured communities across the United States from 2013 to 2016. In their 2018 book, *Our Towns*, they wrote that while many news stories gave the impression that the country is “going to hell,” the view locally is usually positive. “The closer [people] are to the action at home, the better they like what they see.” Perhaps this is a result of frustration with Washington, but, whatever the reasons, constructive change at the community level appears more likely.

Greater appreciation for what can happen locally has implications for a *with* strategy because citizens are able to see more clearly what can be accomplished when they join together. Municipal governments and local institutions can be their first allies. That said, community politics is not immune to the partisan polarization that infects national politics. And, although there may be greater opportunities locally for a *with* strategy, that doesn’t mean such a strategy doesn’t have potential at the federal level.

Things Only Citizens Can Do

As mentioned earlier, a *with* strategy is especially important because there are distinctive things to be done that only citizens can do. For example, institutions like hospitals care *for* people, but only family and friends care about them. (We now have evidence of how powerful a medicine that caring can be.) And citizens can supply the local knowledge that comes from living in a place 365 days a year. Using this knowledge, people understand how to do things that are different from what professionals do.

Among the things people uniquely contribute is their ability to form associations at the grassroots level. This was evident in Patrick Sharkey's 2018 study of what has allowed some cities to lower their crime rates when others couldn't. The *New York Times* wrote about the study, noting that researchers found that "every 10 additional [civic] organizations in a city with 100,000 residents . . . led to a 9 percent drop in the murder rate and a 6 percent drop in violent crime." Such organizations didn't necessarily regard their work as preventing violence, but "in creating playgrounds, they enabled parents to better monitor their children. In connecting neighbors, they improved the capacity of residents to control their streets. In forming after-school programs, they offered alternatives to crime." Even if not directly related to crime, these efforts helped turn negative emotions into positive energy.

Overcoming Obstacles

Up to this point, my objective has been to explain a *with* strategy and why it is needed, given the problems facing democracy now. However, as is always the case, there are

challenges a new strategy has to overcome. I am afraid what I have said so far won't be credible unless these barriers are acknowledged and something is said about overcoming them.

Citizens' Perceptions of Their Fellow Citizens

One obstacle has to do with the way citizens see their role and their fellow citizens. The unpleasant truth is that people don't always have confidence in one another. Surveys report that Americans believe selfishness is growing. And some people may be more comfortable with being consumers and clients than taking on the responsibilities of active producers. If involving citizens in carrying out a *with* strategy were easy to do, it would be commonplace.

Differences in Ways of Working

Other obstacles are differences between the ways citizens do their work and the ways governments and large institutions do theirs. Why are there differences? After all, the tasks that make up any kind of work are similar.



Most all work involves identifying problems, making decisions about what needs to be done, finding the necessary resources, organizing the efforts, and evaluating what happens; nothing exceptional about that.

However, the way citizens go about these tasks democratically can be quite distinctive. The differences begin in things as basic as who describes or names problems and the terms they use. People don't identify problems using the expert language common to professionals in governmental institutions. Citizens tell stories about the things that they hold most dear: security, freedom, and being treated fairly. These are the ends and means for life itself, which are universal. The options for actions to solve problems grow out of what people hold dear and go beyond the things that can be done by institutions, such as actions by families and the civic associations people form. Citizens also don't usually make decisions about which options are best by the methods favored by institutions, like cost-benefit analysis. In the best cases, people make decisions using the kind of deliberations that

exercise the human faculty for judgment. The resources citizens draw on to implement their decisions, like personal talents and the ability to magnify those talents through forming civic associations, are different from institutional resources. Citizens organize their work less bureaucratically than institutions do. And they evaluate results differently, using the things they hold valuable as standards rather than just using quantitative measures.

Public and institutional ways of working may not just fail to mesh, but the way governing institutions work may have adverse effects on what citizens do. For example, citizens typically work through small, informal, grassroots associations. These groups are quite unlike highly structured governing institutions. When large institutions try to work with these citizens' groups because they are good at what they do, the institutions may unintentionally remake them in their own image or "colonize" them. The result is that the citizens' groups lose their identity as authentic agents of the people, which is what made them effective.

Engaging the Government

To propose any kind of change in what the government does, like working more *with* the citizenry, it's useful to have some grounding in how the government actually functions. At the federal level, the agencies in the executive branch are in the best position to collaborate with civic organizations and citizens. They are staffed by able public servants who work in large bureaucracies, which are necessary given the scope and complexity of the programs they direct. Bureaucratization, however, brings with it certain mind-sets and values that can



be problematic for a democratic *with* strategy. While inevitable, these obstacles are not insurmountable.

As James C. Scott noted in *Seeing Like a State*, bureaucracies may not be as aware of local conditions and human concerns as citizens are. He holds that while bureaucrats can appear to lack common sense, it is because they “see like a state.” They are charged with enforcing rules uniformly and, in doing that, may not take into consideration extenuating circumstances. Even before enforcement, creating the rules without sufficient opportunities for the general public to weigh in, may alienate people. Adding to the alienation, rules are legalistic, and that can create a climate not conducive to collaboration between citizens and the government.

A Better Alignment

Kettering research suggests that governments and the citizenry can work effectively together by realigning their efforts so that they are mutually reinforcing. The way citizens go about their work has to be recognized in the way that governments do theirs. The challenge, as I have said, is that these two ways of working aren’t the same and can be seriously misaligned. As noted, citizens and governments alike give names to problems, but the terms aren’t identical. Yet it shouldn’t be too difficult for officials to recognize the names people use in their descriptions of issues. Officials also have to respect the way people see problems. When they do, alignment is possible. Of course, people’s experiences and the names that grow out of what people experience can be misleading. Still, officials benefit

from starting where people start. A better alignment between citizens and government actors doesn’t necessarily require government officials to do a great deal more, but rather to do what they are already doing a bit differently.

Ideally, government institutions and associations of citizens will collaborate for their mutual benefit. Here’s an example of what can happen: There have been exchanges between people deliberating on policy questions and government officials who then should deliberate to enact laws and make regulations. As officials deliberate among themselves, they have to weigh various policy options against their costs and consequences. They have to consider tensions among the things they consider valuable as they weigh pros and cons. This is their “choice work.” Citizens do the same thing, albeit in their own terms, when they deliberate. When government officials sit down with deliberative citizens to compare the outcomes of their respective efforts at choice work, they are collaborating *with* one another. And that has actually happened at both the state and federal levels.

Officeholders can benefit from hearing a deliberative public because it is a voice different from those that government officials are attuned to hearing. It isn’t the voice of polls or focus groups, of constituents, or even of interest groups. A deliberative voice can tell them how citizens go about making up their minds when there are costs and other trade-offs to consider. Legislators and public administrators can’t create this citizens’ voice, yet they can help create a climate in which

such a voice is likely to develop. When citizens have deliberated in forums on an issue that is also before the government, the outcomes of the public deliberations have been helpful to elected representatives by showing them routes they can take that are less likely to lead to polarization. Exchanges between legislative branches and a deliberative citizenry are excellent examples of a *with* strategy at work.

Then and Now

Now, as always, the most hotly contested issue is whether Americans are able to meet the responsibilities of citizenship. As you have read, I think there are ways for citizens to make some of the differences in the political system that they would like to make. But I don't have any doubt-eradicating proof. That acknowledged, and also recognizing that people collectively have acted foolishly and worse at times, democracies have endured because of a faith in "the people." I am reminded of one of the first tests

of that democratic faith, which occurred at the onset of the American Revolution. Would the people in the colonies support a war against England, one of the world's superpowers? Daniel Webster recalled that founders like John Adams had responded to the doubters unequivocally by insisting that citizens were not fickle but would stay the course in the resistance to British aggression. Perhaps influenced by his own era's democratic spirit in 1826, Webster imagined Adams rising to rhetorical heights to capture the spirit of 1776: "But we shall not fail. The cause will raise up armies; the cause will create navies. The people, the people, if we are true to them, will carry us, and will carry themselves, gloriously, through this struggle." This was the same citizenry that Abraham Lincoln would place his faith in at Gettysburg. And it is the same citizenry we must trust today.

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