

KETTERING REVIEW



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

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Editors' Letter

For decades this journal has explored the question, What does it take for democracy to work as it should? A reader might ask, Why has it taken decades to answer such a simple question? Our reply: we have had to belabor this question because this journal runs up against a larger culture with a decidedly different answer. Where we have argued that making democracy work means making the public's role more deliberative and robust, the larger culture focuses on improving structures of governance, electing better officials, and fixing a broken political system. All valiant aims, but, to date, not terribly effective as problems deepen and confidence in major institutions lags. This question is especially pressing as we approach the 2020 election season, when people will decide on all number of elected positions. Elections always bring excitement, with the promise of a new day or the affirmation of a job well done. Yet history tells us that all of this excitement and promise might ultimately ring hollow. For while the names and faces of those in office might change, our sense of discontent will likely remain if citizens and elected officials continue to relate to one another in the same old way.

All the while, things seem to be just getting worse. Not only does the political system now seem more broken than ever, the problems that beset us have grown more ominous. We could have settled the matter decades ago if political problems were simple. But problems that become political are hardly ever simple. They are, in fact, what philosophers and planners have called *wicked*. Whereas a regular problem, like a broken toaster, can be fixed simply and directly, a wicked problem, to the contrary, has a number of distinctive features that make it hard both to define and to address: it is hard to pin down, has no definitive formulation or explanation, involves a lot of different people with multiple views on the matter, and overlaps with other problems but is at the same time unique. A classic wicked problem is immigration. It bleeds into matters of national identity, employment, globalization, and values.

So, this issue of the *Review* is focused on a variation of its original question: What kind of politics can solve *wicked problems*? Can they be addressed by better governance alone, or is a more robust public role needed? For much of the 20th century, politics was the province of elected leaders and expertise, aiming to fix problems without the public's messy input. But what if the relationship between elected officials and constituents were recast as one of partners or coproducers?

Entities that *must* work together, not because they necessarily like each other or agree with each other, but because making any progress on the problems of the day *demand*s such a relationship.

There are many reasons that wicked problems are difficult to solve. For one, it's unclear when or where the problem ends for there is lack of clear criteria for a good solution; also wicked problems radiate out to other problems and so any solution will also have indeterminate and possibly irreversible consequences. So, those involved in addressing wicked problems shoulder immense responsibility. Because each wicked problem is unique, there are no "best practices" to borrow and use.

Valerie Lemmie addresses the challenge head on. When she was working as a city manager, she began "to realize that the key to fixing wicked community problems was role redefinition: elected officials were going to have to learn how to share power with citizens; citizens had to move from spectators to participants; bureaucracies had to learn to value deliberation and collaboration in equal measure to its value of efficiency."

Wicked problems need deliberative attention from politicians *and* citizens, especially through deliberating and grappling with the roots of problems and the kinds of trade-offs that any possible course of action entails. "Citizens should not be regarded only as consumers who 'buy' policy by contributing money to organized interest groups or votes to political parties," write Michael Neblo and his colleagues. "Rather, they should have a direct role in advising and evaluating the reasoning and policy actions of their representatives."

Former Congressman Glenn Nye, now working to improve the political process by looking for ways officeholders can engage with people, shows that this is not just for the sake of more democratic inclusion but in order to help grapple with the nuances and trade-offs in issues. Claire Snyder-Hall, herself a veteran of electoral politics, echoes Nye, noting the need for public officials to engage citizens in making hard choices.

In a lecture he gave 60 years ago, Joseph Tussman argued for the centrality of the "office" of the citizen. Not only is it just that citizens, those affected by policies, also be those who help make policies, citizens and all officeholders in a democracy

need to carry out the tasks of making judgments about what is in the public interest. Focusing on expertise misses the point: political problems, especially wicked ones, don't have a right or wrong answer; they call for judgment about what actions we should carry out, about *what we should do*. And as Noëlle McAfee observes, the informal public sphere takes up this task regularly, not only making direct suggestions but also filtering and making judgments about what officials propose.

This is a vision of politics with which David Mathews closes the issue, what he calls a “with” strategy, in which government is not just in the public's name but *with* the public itself. Or as Sheldon Wolin puts it, the public should be seen as more than agitators; they can be accomplices to democratization.

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