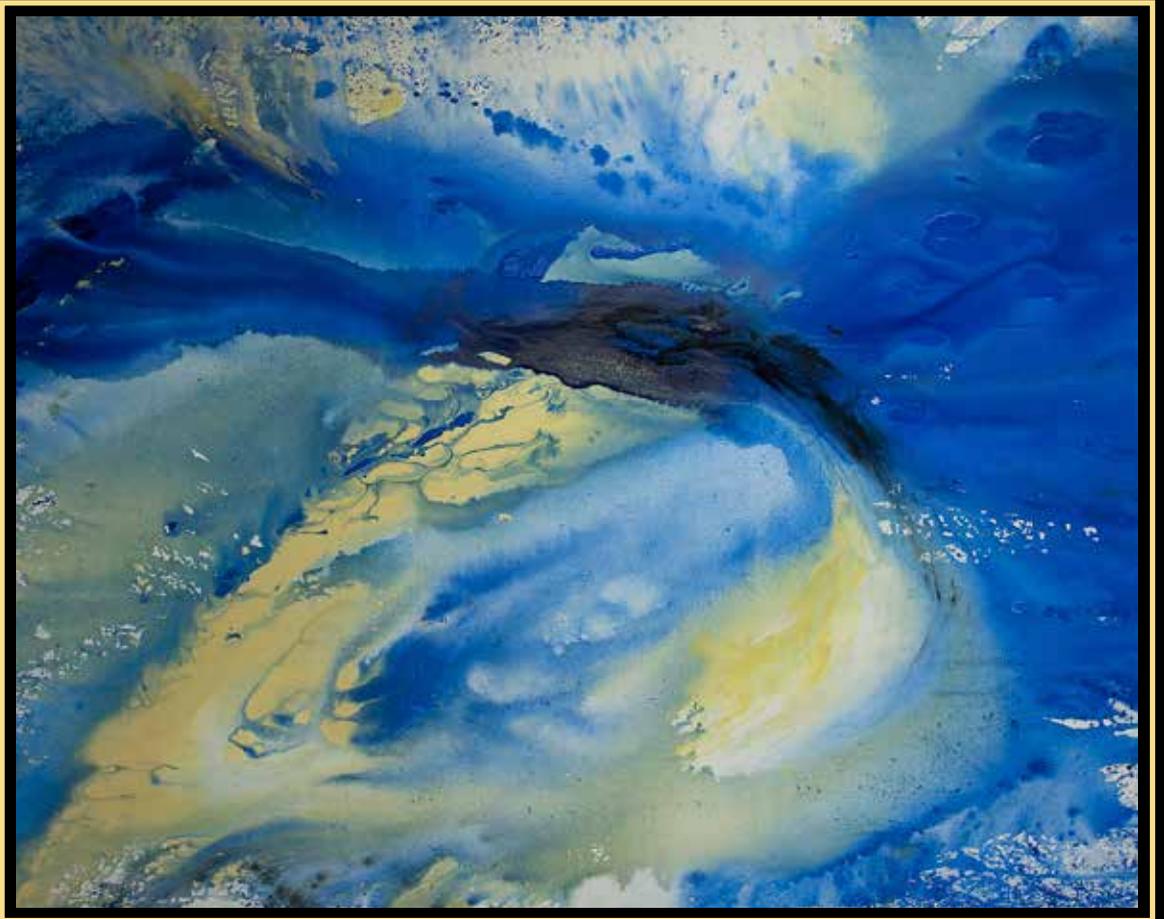


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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Editors' Letter

Readers of the *Kettering Review* are more than casual observers of democracy. They are intensely curious, interested and, we think, hopeful that regular people can have a powerful role in shaping the directions of their political communities. As editors, we share these sentiments.

So our readers are likely as alarmed as we are at the turns democracy has taken over the past decade. While we have yet to see a truly equitable, just, multiethnic, and multiracial democracy, previously there had been a discernible arc toward a better society. But in recent years, progress toward this ideal has not only slowed but has been reversed. In many countries and communities across the world, democratic culture, habits, and institutions have moved in the direction of authoritarianism. What is particularly troubling is that, by and large, authoritarianism has not taken hold via coups or overt power grabs. Rather, these changes are increasingly brought to us through erosion of democratic norms and even via the ballot box. Citizens in purported democracies throughout the world have elected leaders who systematically seek to dismantle democratic norms and institutions with the aim of winning, protecting the interests of the few, and maintaining power. This has not been a surprise to those who have supported these leaders. The leaders campaigned on it, promising to get rid of all their enemies on dry land and in the swamp.

This phenomenon has been happening abroad and at home, whether your home is in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Africa.

As the 2022 Freedom House report notes:

Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same. In countries with long-established democracies, internal forces have exploited the shortcomings in their systems, distorting national politics to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power. . . . The global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy's defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail.¹

When we set out to produce this issue, we were motivated by the question of why? Why are people turning to authoritarian rule? That question leads to others: Have people become disillusioned with democracy? Do they simply prefer someone strong to relieve them of their burdens? Have political processes become so

dysfunctional and polarized that there is scant hope for any kind of democratic resurgence?

To answer these questions, we scoured the literature—and there is a great deal of it on these questions these days. These pages bring you a sample of what we have found. Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman provide a name for the problem we are encountering: “democratic backsliding,” which they describe as “the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments.” We think that is well put.

David Brooks asks what the key factor is that “has made the 21st century so dark, regressive, and dangerous.” Is this an aberration or is it, as he suspects, a return to normal? Over the millennia, he points out, normal life has not been democratic. Democracy takes a lot of cultivation. It is not our natural state.

But it is more natural, Ezra Klein points out, when we attend to local politics, in places where we live, and when we stop focusing primarily on national political narratives. He reminds us that we need not only identify with a political party, or identities in the most narrow sense of “identity-politics.” Rather, we can identify with our community, our disposition as fair-minded or compassionate, or with those we care about. A more expansive notion of identity and a closer identification with the local will not fix the problems of democracy and should not be taken to extremes. But it can provide some space apart from the grind of national political battles where politics might be more humane and where everyday people might have more ability to influence the texture and habits of democratic life.

Next, Nikole Hannah-Jones’ essay dispels the myth of a pure or just democracy of the past that has only recently been corrupted. The rise of democracy has not been smooth or linear and it has often been constructed and engineered to exclude groups of people based on identity. Hannah-Jones highlights the ways that the story of democracy in the United States has been one of simultaneous hope and longing for something different, while, at the same time, shot through with concerted efforts at exclusion, dehumanization, and violence against Black people by White people. As Americans have been invited to grapple with this non-sanitized version of US history, the reaction to close off, shut down, deny, and silence has been swift. We include the essay here because we find it incredibly hopeful: that in the face of all that Black people in the United States have faced—enslavement, systematic exploitation, discrimination, and violence—there remains a hope, a resilience, and a determination to continue the work toward a just,

inclusive, and equitable US democracy. This determination and resolve can serve as a reminder that it is possible to keep trying and keep making progress even when the challenges of realizing a true democracy seem insurmountable.

Advocates of democracy and those who long for equality, equity, freedom, justice, and human well-being are in a difficult season. So we looked for essays that pointed a way forward. Amanda Ripley's essay, "High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out," highlights possibilities for new ways of dealing with the conflict that is inevitable as human societies seek to solve problems and live among each other amidst meaningful and deep differences. The challenge, she argues, is not to do away with divisions and conflict, but to find ways to work through them, to turn high conflict, in which it is hard to think, into productive conflict where people with different views can work to find a solution.

"Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality," by Danielle Allen, meditates on the textual foundations of US democracy and gives a convincing account of the ways that close readings of texts can be a meaningful practice for the formation of citizens. In a time when students and institutions of higher education are faced with a constant insistence on the importance of a practical, skills-based focus on education—essentially the call to create better qualified workers—Allen reminds us that practices of paying careful reading and interpretation remain an important part of what it means to be a free person. Yes, we must vote, talk to our neighbors, work across difference, and attend protests. But we also must find ways to understand, be shaped by ideas, and by each other, as we learn and relearn together.

We are pleased to close the issue with reflections from the new president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, Sharon Davies. She invites us to consider the work that lies ahead for the Kettering Foundation, and for all of us who are focused on strengthening democracy. Davies notes that "the timeline of the US coming into the fullness of its democracy was slow" and reminds readers of the importance of situating ourselves in the story of democracy's progress, or lack thereof. Democracy is not something that happens apart from us, but rather because of us.

Elizabeth Gish and Noëlle McAfee

Endnote

- ¹ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2022*, Freedom House, February 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf.

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