

KETTERING REVIEW



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

Editors	Noëlle McAfee and Nicholas A. Felts
Editorial Administrator	Sarah Dahm
Art Director/Production	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Copy Editor	Ernest Ray Walker
Formatting	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Illustrations	Carol Vollet Kingston

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Editors' Letter

This issue of the *Kettering Review* is devoted to a preposition: *with*. In contrast to its cousins—of, by, and for—*with* has been long neglected, especially in the connection between the people and their institutions. Here, we ask, How might democratic governance operate not just of, by, and for the people but *with* the people? In other words, what kind of relationship might institutions, including but not limited to governmental institutions, have to the people besides being made up of them, or authorized by them, or acting for them? How might people and institutional leaders work together toward their shared goals and ends? And how might they do this in a way that doesn't flatten out differences and disagreements?

The “people” seems like a simple enough word, but it hides a multitude of complexities. As Margaret Canovan parsed it in her 2005 book, *The People*, it can mean “the people as sovereign, peoples as nations, and the people as opposed to the ruling elite.” It might mean the sovereign people as one, a quasi-mythic body that can found and authorize new nations, or it might mean your everyday, run-of-the-mill people. It might stand for the elite, who supposedly embody the nation's virtues, or it could be the downtrodden, who have been denied their rightful place. The prepositions *of*, *by*, and *for* lead to these and other complexities since all three presume a people as a body that can be represented or a body with the power to legitimate or delegitimize governments.

This issue of the *Review* eschews quasi-mythical definitions and hews closer to seeing “the people” as that heterogeneous assortment of everyday folks who rarely exhibit anything like Locke's founding consent or Rousseau's General Will. But neither are they simply the population of people living within a polity's borders. Rather, as members of a democratic society, their views about what should or should not be done matter.

What though if the important role of the citizen is short-circuited? Cristina Lafont, whose essay “Democracy for Us, Citizens” opens this issue, makes the case that being able to participate in the process of charting society's direction should not be handed over to someone else or determined with some kind of shortcut. In the essay published here, drawn from her book *Democracy without Shortcuts*, Lafont calls for a robust view of participatory democratic politics, not the kind of shortcuts offered by deliberative polling or other methods that skirt the need for all citizens to be engaged. What democracy needs, Lafont argues, is

for “citizens [to] see themselves as participants in a democratic project of collective self-government to the extent that they can identify with the laws and policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own.” The more people can endorse those laws and policies, the more legitimacy they have.

But what happens when people find the laws of their society out of keeping with their own ends? When they don’t fit? When they seem just wrong? Here, a democratic project calls on another power of the people: the prerogative to say no to the prevailing order and to call for something else. At bottom, according to Nadia Urbinati, a political theorist at Columbia University, democracy has a streak of “antiestablishmentarianism.” At the heart of democracy is the paradox that the very systems that the public authors, the public can also in the next breath denounce, severing any *with* link between the people and their institutions. Instead of working with each other, they can become terribly fearful, anxious, and paranoid, even leading to the rise of populism beset by an us/them dichotomy. But where some might see populism as the expression of democracy at its most extreme, Urbinati sees it as a distortion of democracy. Whereas populists try to sever any link between the people and their institutions by putting them in separate groups, democracy is always a process of the civic and the institutional (to borrow David Mathews’ terms) working in tandem: *with* each other.

This kind of relationship is not an abstract one but something real and concrete, especially when people are working to address actual problems. Kettering’s longtime friend Daniel Kemmis explores this in an essay drawn from his latest book, *Citizens Uniting to Restore Our Democracy*. Focused on the problems that emerged in the wake of the *Citizens United* case, Kemmis explores the power of democratic deliberation and collaborative public work to ward off the ill effects of privatized power and supplement the limits of governmental power. Kemmis notes,

To put it bluntly, the problems that people have expected the government to solve have all too seldom been addressed in a problem-solving way. Rather than simply complain about this situation, or resign themselves to it, increasing numbers of people have been stepping up, engaging their neighbors (especially those with whom they have had significant differences), and doing the problem solving themselves.

The *with* question also emerges in connection to the relationship between the public and science, as Pepperdine University associate professor Jason Blakely notes in his essay. In the age of COVID, this relationship is at its most stressed. Blakely has twin worries: one about the lack of respect for scientific expertise and the other about the need to temper technocratic overreach. “Democracy and science can be mutually reinforcing only if there is a recognition of the limited authority of each.” In essence, Blakely is calling for a more complementary or *with* relationship in which we acknowledge and respect the vital role of scientific expertise without sacrificing the vital role of public deliberation and contestation.

The *with* relationship is also crucial for addressing climate change. As Michael Menser notes in our interview with him, “Climate chaos requires us to rethink the public and to do all we can to enhance democratic forms of agency.” As a philosopher and leader in participatory city politics, Menser responds to our queries about how a philosophy of “*with* the people” motivates his public work. “Public power is not just about civic engagement. It is about public ownership and input into the management of the system.”

We also find the *with* relationship helping address health policy. Reporting from Bangladesh, Shagufe Hossain takes up the central question of this issue of the *Review*: How can citizens and governments work with each other to solve pressing problems? Hossain discusses how the benefits of citizens’ participation, making full use of their intelligence and knowledge, has helped alleviate public health crises in dengue fever, coronavirus, and ensuing mental health issues.

The issue closes with more general reflections from Kettering Foundation president David Mathews, whose writings on “*with* the people” inspired this issue. There are two sides of democracy: institutional and civic. But the latter often gets overlooked and forgotten. This misses a crucial fact: Citizens empower democratic institutions, and only they can grant governments legitimacy. In modern, complex societies, “institutional democracy is essential,” he writes, “yet its legitimacy has to come from civic democracy.”

Noëlle McAfee and Nicholas A. Felts

Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459; (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478



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