

# KETTERING REVIEW

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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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# Using Citizen Democracy to Empower Institutional Democracy

By David Mathews

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*Institutional democracy is essential, yet its legitimacy has to come from civic democracy.*

**K**ettering's research review this year has concentrated on the troubled relationship between citizens and governing institutions, many of which have lost so much public confidence that their legitimacy may be threatened. As you may know, our research suggests that using a with-the-people strategy might help make this relationship more constructive. In 2020, I wrote about a "with" strategy in the *Review* and in our brief report, *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*, which is available online ([www.kettering.org/catalog/product/with-the-people-introduction-to-an-idea](http://www.kettering.org/catalog/product/with-the-people-introduction-to-an-idea)). We are now finishing a more detailed book on the topic, titled *With: A Strategy for Renewing Our Democracy*. The book has numerous case studies that explore when this collaborative strategy could and couldn't be used and why.

Because much has happened in the world since last year's *Review*, I welcome this opportunity to elaborate on what I wrote last year.

## **What Is Democracy?**

First of all, I want to reemphasize that a *with* strategy is, most of all, a strategy for strengthening our democracy. Saying that, of course, demands an explanation of what is meant by democracy. As I've said before, the word has many valid definitions. Yet few of them are shared by everyone. This isn't a problem that a dictionary can resolve. The common definition that we need is a practical, working definition that applies to what citizens do every day. It

has been said that this lack of an operational understanding makes it difficult to overcome the problems we face today, like the public's distrust of our major institutions—and their distrust of citizens. For example, there is little consensus on what citizens are to do in a democracy (beyond voting) or on what the relationship should be between the people and the governing institutions, both nongovernmental and governmental. A *with* strategy aims to clarify the roles of institutions and citizens and show how they are interdependent.

Conventionally, a democracy is a system of contested elections resulting in a representative government. Many people aren't sure this system works because they don't believe those who are elected actually do what they promise to do. We heard this criticism repeated in a recent multinational meeting. This suggests that democracy's problems in the United States were not created by one election and can't be solved by another. They are too deep-seated. I was encouraged to see that Louis Menand came to a similar conclusion in the August 16, 2021, issue of the



*New Yorker*. He recognized the limitations of US-centric explanations for the public's loss of confidence in government. Menand noted that "faith in government has been declining not only in America but also in the other advanced

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industrial democracies since the mid-nineteen-sixties." But does this focus on government equate democracy only with contested elections?

Another understanding of democracy is focused not so much on elections as on the institutions of government. People are affected by them every day in their personal lives, not just when the polls are open. In addition to elected bodies, these institutions include courts and administrative agencies, which are often criticized as bumbling bureaucracies. Sometimes this definition also includes nongovernmental institutions, such as schools, colleges, and the media.

Still another less precise and implied definition is that a democracy is just what we have in the US. And because some people don't like the way things are in this country, they say they

don't like democracy. As I wrote last year, what is most disturbing is that a good many people don't think of democracy as us. It's somebody else—maybe the politicians, maybe those who lead the institutions. But it's not you and me. Too many Americans, for different reasons, say that “people like us” can't make the difference that citizens should be able to make in the political system. Yet as understandable as this perception may be, a strong democracy has to be us. The refrain “we are the ones we've been waiting for” in the song *We Are the Ones* has always captured this imperative for me. In the most profound sense, *We the People are the democracy*. And that definition is at the heart of a *with* strategy.

To simplify this array of definitions, I've put them into two categories. Democracy seen as what governments, courts, and other formal agencies do is an institutional understanding. Thinking of a democracy as first and foremost in terms of its citizens and what they do is a civic understanding. Even though these two forms of democracy are interdependent, they don't often reinforce one another today.

How do I think of the relationship between these two forms of democracy? I start with the meaning of the word itself. It is made up of two terms. One, the *demos*, is the citizenry as in a village or community. This is a “body politic,” not just a collection of individuals. The other root, *kratos*, is power, the supreme power. A democracy, defined by this etymology, is a political system in which the citizenry is the supreme power. Institutional democracy came later with the creation of governing agencies, which allowed democracies to operate effectively in countries with many “villages.” I don't



think the origin of the word is irrelevant today because power still has to come from the people, and institutions are still required to deal with the multiple communities that exist.

Institutional democracy is essential, yet its legitimacy has to come from civic democracy. Voting by itself isn't sufficient. I mentioned this during this year's Deliberative Democracy Exchange. In it, we heard reports from people in organizations from some 49 different countries, and most all were alarmed by the troubled relationship between civic and institutional democracy in their countries. This disconnect between civic and institutional democracy is another problem not confined to the United States.

### **An Ecological View of Democracy**

A few years ago, to show the importance of the civic-government relationship, Kettering Foundation Press published *The Ecology of Democracy*. This year, the foundation is revisiting that report, which compares civic democracy to nature's wetlands. As in nature, the “wetlands”

of civic democracy provide the basic forms of political life that support and sustain institutional democracy. As in an ecosystem, the two strands of democracy are interdependent.

Like nature's wetlands, the political wetlands are teeming with life—in this case, civic life. The small cells of this life—various kinds of

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## The cells of civic life are made up of people working with other people to solve common problems.

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formal and informal associations—are made up of people working *with* other people to solve common problems. This work can be as simple as citizens taking the initiative to build houses for the homeless or coming together in their neighborhoods to assemble all the materials needed for making masks that will protect people from COVID. Making things together also helps turn frustration and anger into constructive energy. At Kettering, we have become more convinced that without a robust civic democracy to draw from, institutions can't regain public confidence and citizens can't make the difference they want to make.

### *Citizens as Producers*

Over this past year, there have been many readers of a draft version of *With*. One major reaction we noted is just how important it is to recognize citizens as producers, not just consumers. As voters, citizens delegate power; as producers, they generate power when they

make things together. And when this happens, they are *motivated* to vote, in part to protect and strengthen what they have created.

Because of widespread distrust of The People, Kettering has put more emphasis on the many things that can *only* be accomplished by citizens. In a democracy, public institutions can't create their own legitimacy. They can't unilaterally define their purposes or set the standards by which they will operate. Furthermore, governing institutions can't sustain, over the long-term, decisions that citizens are unwilling to support. Governments can build common highways but not common ground. And none of the governing institutions—even the most powerful—can generate the public will required to keep a community or the country moving ahead in addressing difficult, persistent problems. Also, only citizens have the local knowledge that comes from living in a place 365 days a year. Because of this knowledge, people know how to do things that are different from what professionals do.

We have found an ally in treating citizens as producers in Elinor Ostrom and her Nobel Prize-winning research. We have come to think of citizens as empowering governing institutions, not the other way around. Yet we have seen, too, how Ostrom's concept of citizens as "coproducers" is often misunderstood as people just doing the work of the institutions, not their own work with other citizens. As a result, we have doubled down on using our own term, "complementary production," to emphasize that citizens produce some things that institutions can't. What citizens produce complements, rather than replicates, what institutions produce. Kettering continues to see evidence of



this complementary production in education, health, public safety, social well-being, and economic development, even in the midst of today's challenging circumstances.

**The History of a Productive Citizenry:**

There is evidence of complementary production in US history. I often cite the early Civil Rights Movement before the government's game-changing legislation in 1963 and 1964. A friend and excellent historian, Wayne Flynt, and I were invited to attend a conference in Tuskegee, Alabama, commemorating the 1963 desegregation of the state's public schools.

There, Wayne argued:

Increasingly we are beginning to understand that the story was not about Martin Luther King Jr. and this story was not about the March on Washington. This story was about a thousand places where millions of people fought this battle in nameless, anonymous relationships with their hearts and their minds. And in a sense, the real story of the Civil Rights Movement, from a historical perspective, is now not about the generals and the

captains, but rather it is the story of the privates and the thousands of small battles fought for freedom and justice that were fought and are still being fought, not in Washington but here in the boondocks, in places like Tuskegee.

Earlier in the 1800s, citizens across the country worked shoulder to shoulder to establish towns, build schools, and raise militias. This was the America where Tocqueville noticed that, unlike Europeans, people were more inclined to go to their neighbors than to local authorities when there was a problem to solve. Americans went on to create civic associations, which did everything from working to abolish slavery to combating alcoholism. Historian Robert Wiebe wrote, "The driving force behind 19th century democracy was thousands of people spurring thousands of other people to act."

Among these driving forces for democracy, the common, or public, school movement stands out. Education was seen as the best means for change and progress. In doing research on edu-

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## Governments can build common highways but not common ground.

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cation, I was especially struck by how African Americans began founding schools for their children much earlier than is usually recognized—even in the antebellum South. This largely untold story is one of citizens working with other citizens to address a shared challenge. I should have added this story to *With*.

Democratic imperatives were also influential in establishing institutions of higher education. I cited the collaboration between academics and citizens outside of academe in the most recent edition of the *Higher Education Exchange* (HEX). What happened was a *with* strategy in action.

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## We have come to think of citizens as empowering governing institutions, not the other way around.

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Examples include the leaders of our new nation who worked with academics to found state universities like the University of Virginia. They wanted to prepare both leaders and citizens for a democracy, not the British monarchy. Farmers and mechanics wanted land-grant colleges to help ensure that people like them had a role in the new nation. Later, women, African Americans, and Native Americans created colleges to prepare the next generation for their rightful role in a democracy. Even private colleges and universities took on public missions. Institutional histories usually name these “outsiders”; Thomas Jefferson in Virginia is the most notable example. This history has given institutions of higher learning a strong sense of public purpose and identity, which translated into public respect and support. This respect and support are needed today as colleges and universities try to counter the effects of a serious loss of public confidence.

### Looking Ahead

It has been more than a year since we published the introductory version of *With*. In that time, relations between citizens and governing institutions haven’t improved much. The loss of confidence is still mutual. Many institutional leaders and professionals still see citizens as uninformed, biased, and too divided to govern effectively. And they are often right. But that isn’t the whole story. These same citizens have abilities and resources they can use to make a useful difference. Evidence of that is in the forthcoming, expanded edition of *With the People*.

Certainly, citizens can’t live the lives they want to live without the efforts of governing institutions in the economy, health, education, and on. But how much assistance there should be, how involved the governing institutions should be, and how much control the citizenry should have over those institutions has always been contested. And there can’t be a final conclusion about what a relationship should be when that relationship is always evolving as circumstances change. Decisions about this relationship have to be made issue by issue, hopefully through public deliberation.



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The good news is that there are small groups in some institutions and professions that recognize their relationship to citizens and communities has to change fundamentally. They aren't thinking about the kind of change that big data promises. Instead, they are trying to make changes that will strengthen the democracy implicit in their work—by treating citizens as producers. To be sure, these groups are very much in the minority. Still, they are forging the kind of “democratic professionalism” advocated by Albert Dzur in *Democracy Inside*. Harry Boyte and others in the Institute for Public Life and Work ([www.iplw.org](http://www.iplw.org)) are making similar efforts at developing a more civic professionalism. In addition, some student affairs professionals and faculty members, often with the support of their presidents, have been developing the civic skills students need to work together on campus and after graduation. Those skills include learning to decide together deliberatively, which is a prerequisite for working together. Experiences in deliberative decision-making are now available online at Common Ground for Action ([www.nifi.org/en/cga-online-forums](http://www.nifi.org/en/cga-online-forums)), as well as in person. More information about these initiatives can be found on both the Kettering and the National Issues Forums websites ([www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org); [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org)).

No one knows how a *with* strategy that treats citizens as producers should be used in various professions and institutions. As one librarian told us recently, “I don't know how to work with people other than as volunteers.” This librarian speaks for many other professionals. Learning how to relate to citizens as producers will require a lot of institutional as well as professional inventiveness and experimentation. Historically, this experimentation has sometimes flourished when democracy has been in trouble. For example, think of democratic innovation like the host of new civic organizations that were born in the first decades after the Civil War and Reconstruction. They range from the NAACP to the American Civil Liberties Union to the League of Women Voters.

Democracies have flourished and then relapsed over the long sweep of human history. But even when they have faltered, they have often proved to be resilient and bounced back. Democracies can't be perfect because human beings aren't perfect. Their strength is in their ability to evolve as challenges evolve. This may be beginning to happen now.

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