A REVIEW of KF Research:

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Reviewing a Review

David Mathews

Every three years, the Kettering Foundation reviews its overall research on democracy. This time, at our January retreat, we gave ourselves the added challenge of piecing together the "whole story" of politics that we believe is emerging from our research. By a whole story, we don’t mean the entire story of democracy. We mean a coherent story, one that shows how the various subjects we study are interrelated and come together to create a dynamic account of self-government. The focus of this story, like the focus of our research, is on the public and the role it can—and must—play.

This review was productive because participants at the retreat began by examining what it means to assess the whole body of Kettering research. To review means “to look back” or “to see again,” so the group of staff, associates, and guests at the retreat wanted to go beyond the particulars of specific studies and get far enough above the work to look at it from a different vantage point. As someone put it, a good review should put people high enough in the stadium stands so they can take in the entire field and understand the whole game, not just see individual plays. Given that objective, participants read studies of long-term trends in democracy and discussed the challenges democracy faces around the world. Books like Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg’s *Downsizing Democracy*, which is the subject of an article in this issue of *Connections*, provided a larger context for reviewing Kettering’s studies.
Another goal set at the retreat was to look at the work of others that is related to Kettering research. The objective was to locate new opportunities for collaborative studies, which are a hallmark of the foundation. Our third and final goal was to carry out this review in the company of “fellow travelers”; that is, the citizens and institutions that have joined us in studying how to make democracy work as it should. What scholars say about democracy is useful to keep in mind, and the opinions of leaders doing related work is important to know. But the foundation looks primarily at what people do every day to meet democracy’s challenges in order to keep its research on target.

Kettering has done its research in tandem with thousands of people and hundreds of organizations in every quarter of the world. Some, like the civic and educational groups in the United States that began holding National Issues Forums (NIF) deliberations, have been active for 25 years. So there is a rich history to recover by looking back, though it is a history of more than forums alone. Many of the organizations sponsoring NIF forums have gone on to take what they have learned about citizens from these forums into education, public administration, philanthropy, journalism, community-building, and government. Those who have been involved sense that what they are doing—even though they are in different fields—is related and part of something greater than their individual projects. They are gaining insights into the whole story of democracy, into the interrelated practices that make self-rule possible. As one community noted after using deliberative forums to make decisions on health care issues, we didn’t just learn another way to talk—we learned there was another way to do politics.

After having laid out these three objectives, the retreat group took up each one in turn and went into greater detail. I’ll summarize the gist of what was said; and, as you will see, the group realized that what it had come up with was not three different kinds of reviews, but rather three characteristics that a single review should have.

**Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy**

When stepping back to look at the long-term trends of democracy, the first thing retreat participants cautioned was that the exercise might give the erroneous impression that Kettering was attempting to address all the challenges to democracy or thought it could solve centuries of big problems in a few decades. Even more worrisome, guests at the retreat warned, the foundation should not be drawn away from what it knows and does best. With these cautions in mind, stepping back to look at long-range trends was useful in distinguishing between different types of problems confronting democracy. Some problems are serious but circumstance specific; they grow out of contemporary conditions, which are constantly changing. These problems can have significant consequences, as in the case of the hanging chad in Florida during the 2000 presidential election. Other problems are fundamental; they threaten the very lifeblood of democracy. These aren’t the same as problems like natural disasters that confront a democratic nation; they are intrinsic to democracy. For instance, highly charged moral disagreements can polarize a political system and, if unchecked, may lead to violent conflict. Yet, in another article in *Connections*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson are cited for showing that moral disagreements are inevitable in politics. Political questions are, at their core, moral questions because they deal with what “should be” and, in a free country, people will always come to different conclusions about the “right” answers. Dealing with moral disagreements is a fundamental challenge in a democracy and, as events in the Middle East painfully demonstrate, these disagreements make it extremely difficult for democracy to take hold.

A research organization has to be focused to build up strength, and the Kettering Foundation’s focus has been on the fundamental problems of democracy. That is where retreat participants thought Kettering studies were most useful—in identifying “the problem behind the problem” of democracy. Looking at long-term trends is one way to bring these fundamental problems into sharper focus.

In order to understand how citizens themselves experience fundamental problems of democracy, the foundation is, in addition to reviewing the academic literature, launching a new study of public attitudes. A new discussion guide, *Democracy’s Challenge*, will be used in meetings around the country, and the foundation will collect the outcomes. We hope to learn a great deal more about which problems are most important to citizens as well as exactly how people describe or “name” these problems.

**Analyzing Today’s Civic Movements**

While looking at the major challenges to democracy is useful in providing context, a number of retreat participants suggested that the proper focus for the review should be on the positive countermeasures that are now attempting to reverse downward trends. Following their advice seemed the best way to meet our second objective. The countermeasures we discussed are reviewed in a paper by Peter Levine, which has been adapted for *Connections*. As you will see, all the measures are civic in intent; that is, they have to do with citizens even though they are being promoted by professional associations, major institutions, and governments, as well as civic organizations. They fly under a variety of banners: dialogue and deliberation, public scholarship, civic
engagement, public journalism, deliberative democracy, public work, and civic philanthropy. The very presence of these initiatives could be a sign that something significant is happening—or at least trying to happen—in American democracy. Kettering research is already being used in many of these movements, and they may offer opportunities for joint learning agreements in the future.

Looking more closely at these civic movements as a whole has already revealed some things that weren’t obvious when we looked at particular initiatives individually. While all have worthy goals and all describe themselves as little “d” democrats, each is focused on a different problem and is driven by a distinct concept of democracy. These differences are illustrated in an analysis done by Derek Barker, which is summarized for Connections. (His full report can be found in Higher Education Exchange, published by the Kettering Foundation, 2006.) Barker found five problems being addressed by five different projects in just one movement in higher education. For example, one project had to do with improving communication between colleges and universities and the public, another with providing more access to expert data, and still another with increasing diversity on campuses.

Differences in how the public is understood in these various initiatives were especially striking. While all have worthy goals and all describe themselves as little “d” democrats, each is focused on a different problem and is driven by a distinct concept of democracy. These differences are illustrated in an analysis done by Derek Barker, which is summarized for Connections. (His full report can be found in Higher Education Exchange, published by the Kettering Foundation, 2006.) Barker found five problems being addressed by five different projects in just one movement in higher education. For example, one project had to do with improving communication between colleges and universities and the public, another with providing more access to expert data, and still another with increasing diversity on campuses.

Differences in how the public is understood in these various initiatives were especially striking. In some projects, citizens are to be informed individuals, much like consumers of goods and services; they judge what officeholders do on their behalf. In other initiatives, citizens are expected to be more active, to volunteer for service to others. And in still other projects, citizens have collective responsibilities for collective action. The dissimilarities in what citizens are supposed to do aren’t inconsequential; as Alexis de Tocqueville is reputed to have said, the health of a democratic society may be measured by the kind of functions performed by private citizens.

No one at the foundation was surprised by the diversity in the civic movements or alarmed to find divergent concepts of democracy. Differences over what democracy means are characteristic of democracy, which has always been a coat of many colors. Still, looking at the countermeasures as a whole and not just one by one was instructive. Today’s civic movements are shaping the character of twenty-first century democracy. We need to understand whatever shape is emerging from the divergent influences that these movements are bringing to bear.

Gaining Insights about What It Takes to Make Democracy Work

A final objective set at the retreat was to do the review in the company of as many of Kettering’s fellow travelers as want to participate. They have had insights about how democracy works that have been useful to them—and invaluable to the foundation’s research. These insights are more than the discovery of better ways to solve problems or of solutions that work. They go to the core of what democracy is about. They are revelations about how citizens can make a difference—how they can make a place for themselves in the political system. Because these are insights about politics, they are about power—not power over others but power with them.

After the retreat, Kettering research workgroups began to pour over case studies written by the people involved in some type of civic renewal or public engagement effort. It didn’t take long to realize that where insights had occurred, they had far-reaching influence and the potential for lasting impact. Also, we noticed that the best case studies were not written for the foundation but rather for the communities involved. That may be why they were rich in insights.
Insights reveal things that are fundamental though not obvious, so people are often surprised by them. For instance, one case was about citizens who began working together to make their community a better place to live, only to realize, a year later, that working together had already made the community more livable—even if they hadn’t solved all their problems.

To be sure, not every experience generates insights, not even the experience of success. As often as not, the insights came out of failed projects. A city on the Gulf Coast reported on a school levy that had been defeated, despite an extensive public engagement effort. This defeat, however, prompted an unusual insight. After the balloting, the sponsors of the levy came to see their work as more than persuading an electorate; they decided their larger objective was to rebuild a sense of public responsibility. With this insight, they reached even the smallest group of neighbors was important. Eventually a new plan for the public schools emerged, and a levy to support it passed. But the real victory didn’t come from the election; it came much earlier with the insight that democracy’s roots go deeper than voting. They reach down into a sense of shared ownership and responsibility.

The case study analysis has led the foundation to an intriguing research question: What do we know about how insights occur? Clearly, they don’t come from Kettering; insights occur all the time without any relationship to the foundation. Yet, in some cases, the foundation has been implicated because the citizens involved were familiar with our findings and had visited us. Insights are often generated by bringing in new perspectives or ideas that allow people to reimagine what they can do. Perhaps the greatest significance of Kettering reports is not in the information they provide but in the perspectives they offer and the insights they generate.

We have also wondered if there is a way of interrogating experiences that generates insights. Or does approaching a project as an experiment create a learning environment conducive to gaining insights? I can’t report more than what I have just written because we are still trying to understand what generates insights about democracy. And that is exactly what we hoped this review would do, not result in summary judgments to discard some studies and add others, but point the way to better research questions.

Continuing the Review

Reviews normally end with conclusions—often definite ones like this movie wasn’t any good but that one was a smash hit. Conclusions from the 2006 review were not summary judgments, but were more important. We left the retreat even more convinced that telling a whole or coherent story of how democracy works and the public’s role in it is essential. We also left the meeting with a sense of urgency about telling a coherent story. Democracy is proving to be quite fragile, and authoritarianism is already threatening to reverse gains made in the 1980s and 1990s. Even in stable democracies like the United States, citizens are increasingly worried that we are losing our sense of community and that our political system is so polarized that it is becoming dysfunctional. People say that they don’t know what to do or where to go in order to act on their concerns. Even more serious, the belief that they can and should make a difference is being contested everywhere. That means that the main assumption behind the foundation’s research—the assumption that citizens are capable of self-rule—will have to be justified in future research. It can’t be taken for granted.

Because of this sense of urgency, this year’s review is still going on. The three objectives set in January are being incorporated into the way the foundation operates. We have come to appreciate the necessity of keeping a constant eye on what is happening to democracy around the world, not just giving it a glance every 36 months. The countermovements promoting various forms of civic engagement are proving to be more than just potential collaborators: The various concepts of democracy they promote are helping us understand the long-range consequences of various options for strengthening our political system.

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Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy

Objective One

Stepping back to look at long-range trends is useful in distinguishing between different types of problems confronting democracy.

Sidelineing Citizens, Privatizing the Public

Keith Melville

At a time when many people are reasonably well off and better educated than ever—two conditions that have long been thought important for a robust public life—how do we explain America’s less-than-robust civic life, the pervasive sense that the public has been relegated to the sidelines? Why are so many people disengaged and disenchanted with government, and dispirited about public life generally? At a time when the United States is aggressively trying to champion democratic regimes around the world, why is our own form of democratic life so thin that it is hard to recommend to others as an example?

As I look at many of the writings that address nagging questions about American public life, I am struck by the variety of answers to these questions. Writings that come immediately to mind include E. J. Dionne’s Why Americans Hate Politics, Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone, and some older and still relevant titles: Robert Wuthnow’s Loose Connections: America’s Fragmented Communities, a report from the National Commission on Civic Renewal called A Nation of Spectators, a book by James Davidson Hunter and Carl Bowman called The State of Disunion, and a famous essay by Robert Lane, “The Joyless Polity.”

There is also Joe Klein’s Politics Lost: How American Democracy Was Trivialized by People Who Think You’re Stupid, a no-holds-barred account that places the blame for our public malaise squarely on the shoulders of professional political managers and consultants.

A familiar line of explanation in many writings about the public malaise is that citizens—as a result of their apathy, the fact that they are generally poorly informed, and can only rarely be stirred from private pursuits—are to blame. One of the more dour commentators, Anthony Downs, notes that because most citizens do not take the time to learn what politicians actually do, they’re unable to cast votes that reflect their self-interest or any conception of the common good. Many Americans acquiesce in their passivity by choosing not to vote at all.

Beyond the fact that speculating about the sad state of democratic life has become a kind of parlor sport, these different explanations of what has gone wrong are important, because each diagnosis of the principal challenges to democracy in the early years of the twenty-first century points the way to quite different prescriptions about what ought to be done to regain a more robust public life.
One of these books, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public*, is particularly valuable because of the distinctive diagnosis it offers and, by implication, its prescription about what needs to be done. Written by two political scientists at Johns Hopkins, Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, the book is unsparing in its portrait of the decline of public life. Far from blaming citizens for the demise of democratic participation, however, Crenson and Ginsberg call attention to the ways in which institutional processes—both government and nonprofit groups that act in the public interest—encourage or undermine democratic practice. The demise of public life, as they see it, is not the result of a conspiracy to chase the public to the sidelines. It is instead the result of fundamental institutional changes that have led to a paradoxical result: a form of politics and public life, claiming to be democratic, that doesn’t really need the public.

The central question they explore is the one David Mathews poses in his introduction to this issue. It is one of the most practical questions you could ask about democratic governance: What, exactly, are citizens expected to do? Beyond voting and paying taxes, what is their public role and what are their responsibilities? Crenson and Ginsberg’s analysis leads to this central insight: it is not that most people today are disinclined to act in the public interest, but rather that they are no longer asked to do much.

**The Way We Were**

As Crenson and Ginsberg see it, it is no romantic fantasy to assert that American society, a century or more ago, was more democratic than it is today. Judging by how engaged people are in a variety of public functions, it was more democratic for the simple reason that more was demanded of citizens. Political leaders, parties, and candidates all had to mobilize publics in the collective work of campaigns and governance. “In the 19th century,” they write, “America was exceptional for the vitality of its democratic institutions—especially its political parties.” Until roughly the beginning of the twentieth century, they note, “American elites encouraged popular participation because they needed the active support of non-elites. . . . Popular support was the currency of power.” People became active, they explain, “because vigorously competitive leaders marched them into the public forum.”

Crenson and Ginsberg’s analysis is supported and extended by sociologist Theda Skocpol’s observations about a parallel development in nonprofit groups. “Classic American association-builders,” she notes, “took it for granted that the best way to gain national influence, moral or political, was to knit together national, state, and local organizations that met regularly and engaged in a form of representative governance.”

Whether in the realm of government and elective politics, or in national associations, ordinary citizens played a crucial role. “They were gathered there,” write Crenson and Ginsberg, “because they mattered. Because the people were essential to the development and functioning of the state, elites could not govern without them.”

But this has changed in ways that profoundly modify the roles and responsibilities of citizens. “Not only has government found new and non-participatory ways of doing business,” as Crenson and Ginsberg note, “but the competing political elites that once activated and organized popular constituencies to influence or run the government have found other ways to achieve their ends. . . . We are approaching the end of a political epoch, one in which citizens jointly inhabited a public sphere.”

The transformation in American public life they describe started early in the twentieth century and has become more apparent ever since. In terms of the institutions of government, political leaders have found ways of doing business—more efficiently, but not necessarily more effectively—with much less direct public participation.

By the late twentieth century, the new pattern was fully apparent. In Crenson and Ginsberg’s words, “Government today cultivates satisfied customers rather than mobilized citizens.” The central task of government is now often described as one of offering “customer-friendly” public agencies that deal with the public as clients and customers, not citizens. This disaggregation of the citizenry into a personalized democracy is in some ways fairly benign.
The point is that this reorientation has had the important consequence of marginalizing citizens as political actors.

Citizens, for their part, have returned the favor. Instead of joining their neighbors and mobilizing to redress grievances or thinking of collective action as the most effective means of exerting political pressure, it is more common today to address grievances as individuals through the mechanism of legal action. What has diminished if not entirely disappeared is the sense of citizens who are part of political communities with common concerns and public purposes.

Similarly, the nongovernmental organizations that represent various groups, such as children or the disabled, consumers or retirees, have changed the way they do business. In Theda Skocpol’s phrase, we have seen the fraying of civil society in the sense of “unraveling from above.” Rather than taking part in local chapters that were tightly linked to national organizations, today’s nonprofit and advocacy groups tend to operate headquarter offices administered by professionals, which are often based in Washington. Reliance on local grassroots chapters or organizations has sharply diminished. Their strategy is to resort to litigation, not mass mobilization. They depend on wealthy donors, foundation funding, and direct-mail fundraising.

“Contemporary elites,” write Crenson and Ginsberg: have found that they need not engage in the arduous task of building popular constituencies. Public interest groups and environmental groups have large mailing lists but few active members; civil rights groups field more attorneys than protesters; and national political parties activate a familiar few rather than risk mobilizing anonymous millions.

The ironic outcome of these developments, in their words, is that we have become “a nation of emphatically private citizens—customers and clients who find it difficult to express coherent common interests.” In an age of politics that no longer needs a public, citizens are relegated to the sidelines. The word citizen is itself increasingly an honorific, a role with little substance.

It is not so much that the public isn’t interested in engaging in public life or responding to crises and common concerns. The overwhelming public response both to the 9/11 tragedy and, more recently, to Hurricane Katrina, demonstrates a wellspring of public concern and generosity, and a widespread willingness to act out of public concern. The point is that, even after 9/11, the public isn’t asked to do much. “Today,” conclude Crenson and Ginsberg, “leaders seldom call, and they ask little when they do. Citizenship has withered as a result.”

Reviving the Democratic Public

Crenson and Ginsberg’s analysis of the democratic malaise has been praised by reviewers as an antidote to the prevailing habit of blaming citizens for the demise of public life. It is a valuable insight to point out that the citizen’s role has eroded in large part because leaders have less use for citizens than they did a few decades ago. One implication of this analysis, in the authors’ words, is that “measures designed to encourage the vigorous exercise of American citizenship must be aimed at least as much at political leaders as at citizens themselves.”

Among other things, their analysis explains why we shouldn’t expect to deal with the core problems of democratic life today by focusing on raising voter turnout. It is not, of course, that voting is unimportant. But if democratic citizens regard voting—which is at best a way of holding ruling elites accountable through periodic elections—as the main element of their public role and responsibilities, we are left with a diminished public life.

To revive public life, we need to devise new ways—or revive old ways—for citizens to join together around common concerns to regain a sense of collective agency.

That situation is not hard to imagine. Indeed, this passage describes a widely shared experience that explains the current sense of public malaise and disengagement. If the health of a democratic society can be reckoned by the kinds of functions performed by citizens, Crenson and Ginsberg’s description of America as “a nation of emphatically private citizens” is both a warning and a call to action. What’s essential for those of us who have engaged in this work is not just to assert that citizens are capable of self-rule, but to help reinvent places where self-rule happens.

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As globalization makes the world smaller, we seem to rub up against people with whom we disagree all the more frequently. Towns that were once relatively homogeneous now contain people of multiple backgrounds, persuasions, and views. Yet oddly, as the world becomes more heterogeneous, many of us find ourselves in a cocoon of like-minded folk. We’ve become proficient at assessing at a glance what a stranger thinks. We’re quick to draw a picture, perhaps too quick. With high probability we can surmise—from someone’s clothes, from where she buys her groceries, from the kind of car she drives, and even the kind of garden she plants—what her values are and for whom she voted in the last election. Or, better, we’ll just check out the stickers on her car bumper. If the picture we draw from her is discomfiting, we probably won’t bother talking to her.

What’s the point, it’s easy to think, we’d probably only disagree.

On the cover of their now classic book, Democracy and Disagreement, first published in 1996, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, include an interesting subtitle: Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics, and What Should Be
Done about It. This may have been apt in 1996, but it is not so fitting in 2006. The truth now is that politicians and citizens alike seem to be doing a good job of avoiding moral conflict, mostly by avoiding each other.

Many residents of the new exurbs say they moved to them because they figured that their neighbors would share their conservative values. Young urbanites stick to the cities for opposite, but similar reasoning. We have become so adept at avoiding disagreement and each other that we have imagined myriad ways in which those “other” people are evil, corrupt, irresponsible beings.

Yet the reality is that we are really not so different as we imagine. And even when we hold rather different values, someone else’s values, if one hears them out, can be remarkably appealing.

Gutmann and Thompson wrote Democracy and Disagreement only a decade after “the culture wars,” when the cultural and political elite were busy trying to tell each other why they were wrong. We were still a nation that reveled in conversation and disagreement. But five years after their book came out, 9/11 happened, and “the other” became not an interlocutor but a mortal enemy. Even domestically, if you were not “with us,” our attorney general said, “you were against us.” The new “sign” of one’s values, of where one stood in the war on terror and other wars, was the presence or absence of certain stickers and flags on your car or home. More signs, less need to talk. If your signs are like my signs, then we needn’t deliberate because we already agree; if they’re diametrically opposed to mine, then deliberation would probably be fruitless—and terribly unpleasant—anyway. Likes stick with likes to minimize political quarrelling, but the outcome is a nation diametrically divided. By 2004, polarization had fiercely set in and with it a new national self-understanding, one nation, divided between red and blue.

Against that backdrop, consider this op ed published in the New York Times last December, titled, “No ‘red’ or ‘blue’ in the green room.” The author, Anne Kornblut, begins the op ed thus:

DONNA BRAZILE calls them green room conversions.

One of her more recent went something like this: Ms. Brazile, the garrulous Democratic strategist, found herself in the waiting room—known in the world of television talk show as the green room—with Senator Rick Santorum, the conservative Republican from Pennsylvania who campaigned to defeat her candidate, Al Gore, in the 2000 presidential campaign.

The two, awkwardly thrown together with little to do except contemplate the pastry spread, started to chat politely.

“Santorum and I, we’re both Catholic, we’re both from large families and we just struck up a conversation that ended up continuing, and I went over to his office one morning and had breakfast,” Ms. Brazile said, ticking off the issues, from AIDS to faith-based institutions, on which the two have consulted since. “I have met a lot of people I would normally not even talk to,” said Ms. Brazile, a regular on the talk show circuit. “Somehow in the green room you put all that aside. It’s time for small chatter.”

Kornblut recounts a number of green room conversations. “In an earlier, less polarized era—in the days when senators in opposing parties played poker, when partisan fund-raising had not yet become a blood sport—the camaraderie inside green rooms might not have been so noteworthy,” Kornblut writes.

But as the tenor in Washington has grown more rancorous over the last decade, bipartisan socializing has dwindled. With Republicans in control of both houses of Congress and the White House, there are ever fewer reasons for the two sides to exchange views, or even pleasantries.

These conversations lead to “conversions” in a fascinating way. These conversations don’t really lead to people changing their own views on issues; those with whom we disagree are less than human, the more impossible civil politics becomes. And the more we configure ourselves on a polarized landscape. And the more we avoid each other.

We need more “green rooms” for democracy, spaces in which we can stop avoidning moral conflict and work through our disagreements. I suspect that one of the first things we’d find is that we don’t disagree as much or as deeply as we imagine—and the signs we rely on are not very reliable.

Gutmann and Thompson orient their books as a way to deal with the problem of moral disagreement—which they say...
is “formidable,” and which they say that democratic politics has so far not been able to cope. Democracy and Disagreement adopts deliberative democracy as a way to deal with these disagreements because it “secures a central place for moral discussion in political life.” Where other forms of politics allow members to avoid difficult conversation, deliberative democracy puts such conversations squarely at the center of politics.

The authors note that salient features of moral disagreement match central qualities of deliberative democracy. Our moral disagreements are, on the whole, disagreements about how policies can be designed so that they apply to everyone equally and are fair to all. And they involve people in public office—including the “public office” of citizenship—deliberating publicly with a view to mutual accountability. Deliberative democracy nicely responds to these features of moral disagreement. Our moral disagreements lie in the depths between simple misunderstanding and immutable irreconcilability.

Deliberative democracy can only get off the ground if there is something uncertain and contested that we as a community need to decide, but also only if there are limits to uncertainty and contestedness. It also only gets off the ground if we are inclined to take part.

This is where many deliberative theorists falter. Their account for why people join deliberative public forums rests on the notion that citizens are amateur rational philosophers who love deliberation because “they are motivated to find deliberative agreement.”

Now, I ask any and all who have convened deliberative forums to say whether this is the reason that people attend. My sense—based on much observation—is that people attend forums because they are worried about what is happening to their communities and because they want to have a say in setting things on the right course. They want to make sure that their own concerns and perspectives are taken into consideration, even if that mucks up the chance of everyone agreeing on a course of action.

Moreover, only a small portion of deliberation follows the course of rational argument and the give and take of reasons. For the most part it proceeds with people explaining how they came to have the views they have and what their experiences are that shaped their sense of the world. In the course of these conversations, much like in green room conversions, participants change their views of others’ views. They enlarge their understanding of problems and begin to appreciate the complexity of how issues affect other members of the community. Sometimes, instead of reaching agreement, participants leave saying that they are more uncertain than ever. Deliberations can be very sobering as people learn more about the unintended consequences of their favorite policies. At the start, they may have had simple views of the problem and the solution, but at the end, this simplicity is devastated.

The salient feature of these deliberations is not a search for agreement; rather it is a sensitivity to others. To quote Harold Saunders, “politics is about relationships.” In a deliberative conversation we change the way we relate to others and we revise our views of policies because of what they will do to these others.

A decade after Democracy and Disagreement, we might change the phrase on the cover from “why moral conflict cannot be avoided” to “why we need to stop avoiding moral conflict.” The polarization we’ve sought to keep us safe from danger has only exacerbated the central political danger of damaging relationships, broken ones that let us demonize other people and their views.

Fortunately, we have an inclination that is stronger than the one of seeking safety by retreating into enclaves. It is the inclination to have a hand in shaping and healing public life, an inclination to participate in the whole. There’s the key to a green room for democracy.

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A civic renewal movement that aims to revitalize democracy in the United States has emerged over the past decade. By working to renew and modernize our civic and institutional infrastructure, the movement seeks to foster self-government in the broadest sense. Civic renewal entails more than reforming elections and campaign finance, increasing voting, or making our system more inclusive of the great diversity of Americans. To be sure, these are unfinished projects that warrant much attention. But civic renewal also entails investing in civic skills and organizational capacities for public problem solving on a wide scale and designing policy at every level of the federal system to enhance the ability of citizens to do the everyday work of the republic.

The civic renewal movement—alternatively the “democracy movement,” “community-building movement,” “civil society movement,” or “communities movement”—builds upon the work of activists and innovators in many different arenas. Watershed associations engage various stakeholders in water quality monitoring, collaborative planning, and hands-on restoration of complex ecosystems, often with the support of innovative state and federal policy. In many low-income communities, congregations work together in ecumenical, faith-based community coalitions that partner with business leaders and educators for school reform and state-of-the-art job training. Neighborhood associations, often organized into citywide systems with substantial funding and...
Objective Two

The Civic Renewal Movement

Community-Building and Democracy in the United States

Carmen Sirianni
Lewis A. Friedland

Our research indicates that much of this innovation is of a piece. Many common themes and practices are emerging across distinct arenas. These innovations develop in response to the perceived limits of the usual ways of doing business, whether in revitalizing neighborhoods, restoring watersheds, or improving health. In many instances, innovators borrow from best practices in other arenas and justify their work by appealing to the lively public and scholarly discourse on social capital, civil society, and deliberative democracy. If we look more deeply, we often see a shared vocabulary, despite much variation in practice. Common terms include relationship building, consensus seeking, community asset mapping, community-building, collaborative problem solving, community visioning, public work, and the coproduction of public goods.

In some cases, self-identified movements within specific arenas envision themselves as transforming basic paradigms and practices in their field. Thus, we see a “watershed movement” that emphasizes place-based and citizen-driven approaches to protect ecologically integrated watersheds, as well as an overlapping “community forestry movement” and a “grassroots ecosystem management movement” that insist on the need for collaborative governance of natural resource systems. These movements challenge not only unilateral corporate power but also the command-and-control, pollutant-by-pollutant regulation favored by many Washington-based environmental groups. The “environmental justice movement” adds a further challenge by insisting on the empowerment of poor and minority communities, albeit with an increasing emphasis on collaborative problem solving to prevent pollution and reduce risk. These movements bring a renewed civic dynamism to the larger environmental movement and new tools for accomplishing what the usual forms of regulation often cannot.

We see similar movement and leadership networks to revitalize and modernize core institutional and professional practices in other arenas. The self-described “movement to renew the civic mission of higher education” develops new models of service learning and community-university partnerships that actively involve students, faculty, administrators, and staff in the work of broad community development. The “community youth development movement” engages young people in creative civic action through their 4-H clubs, YMCAs, youth commissions, and myriad other youth groups, while the movement to renew the civic mission of K-12 schools combines teaching principles of constitutional democracy with service learning and other opportunities for active engagement in communities and school governance. Responding to the distinct gender concerns of youth, the “new girls movement” empowers girls and young women through YWCAs and school groups to create safe spaces, free of violence and intimidation, and to contribute to community development through ethnic and tenant associations. In the arena of public safety, the “community policing movement” and broader “community justice movement” aim to transform the practices of professionals in creating safe communities in partnership with citizens who help define problems and imple-
The “healthy communities movement” engages community organizations as vital coproducers of health in partnership with traditional professional, public health, and medical institutions. Tens of thousands of citizens have been trained to resolve disputes through collaborative problem solving as part of the “community mediation movement”; its local centers and institutes work with a broad range of other civic organizations. The “civic journalism movement” has generated new professional and organizational practices to enable citizens to deliberate and problem solve more democratically. In addition, the “information commons movement” is inventing ways to utilize new technological and information capacities as a common pool resource for community problem solving and the creation of a democratic commonwealth.

The civic renewal movement’s leaders have emerged from innovative organizations within all these arenas. They have elaborated and exchanged new vocabularies of civic practice across various arenas and networks, for example from assets-based community development and community visioning to environmental justice and community forestry. In doing so, they have contributed to the development of a “social movement master frame,” which scholars have increasingly come to view as critical to the development of movements.

The civic renewal movement attempts to weave these various movements and innovations into a larger tapestry that can enable democratic work to become broader and deeper, as well as more complementary and sustainable in the decades ahead. Without a broad movement linking democratic work across institutional systems, innovation may progress in some arenas, but it will likely stall or remain invisible in others and fail to inspire action on the scale needed to revitalize our democracy. Unless we can bring these discrete movements and leadership networks into more dynamic relationship with each other, it is unlikely that we will be able to counter those powerful institutional and cultural forces in our society that tend to undermine citizen power and capacity for self-government.

Of course, not all or even most of those active in innovative community-building networks identify explicitly with a broad civic renewal movement at this point or share a fully common vocabulary or set of practices. This is not unusual; however, in the history of movements, which almost never begin with a well-defined identity or widely accepted label. Rather, social movements emerge over years, even decades, from many forms of local action that only gradually—and often begrudgingly—begin to utilize a common language and form broader networks. And even then, they almost never fully eliminate contentious internal struggles over identity and mission, not to mention favored practices and policies. This pattern holds for the civil rights, women’s, and environmental movements of recent decades, for the labor movement over a century, and, indeed, for movements of all kinds around the world. The civic renewal movement is not exceptional in this regard.

To include varied renewal initiatives under the rubric of a “movement” is an analytic choice, as well as a political argument. We can draw upon the analytic concepts of social movement theory to clarify why it makes sense to think in terms of an emergent movement with a common identity. We can also analyze the ways in which the civic renewal movement distinguishes itself from recent “rights” and “justice” movements, even as...
Democracy is much more diverse and raucous than any one movement—even one with very broad purposes, such as the civic renewal movement—can ever hope to encompass.

We recognize that many civic activists, ourselves included, also maintain specific partisan identities and advocacy agendas that are not shared by others in the civic renewal movement. But people can be partisan Democrats or Republicans and still collaborate to revitalize civic education in our schools, partner with congregations to revitalize neighborhoods, work with traditional adversaries to restore ecosystems, and engage diverse stakeholders in community visioning for an entire city or region. Indeed, citizens not only can do these things, they already are doing them in many settings that defy neat political categories. Citizens can advocate different agendas regarding a specific set of federal regulations or social programs and still believe that it is possible—indeed indispensable—to remain in dialogue about the civic fundamentals of policy design. They can be deeply committed activists in various rights and justice movements and still be part of a broad civic renewal movement that attempts to enrich community-building practices.

The civic renewal movement seeks to enrich and modernize democratic practice and civic learning so that, in the famous phrase of America’s greatest democratic philosopher, John Dewey, democracy becomes “a way of life,” not just a “form of government.” The civic renewal movement also seeks to enhance “public policy for democracy,” so that the design of policy at every level of the federal system increases citizens’ capacities for responsible self-government, rather than treats them merely as passive clients, aggrieved victims, entitled claimants, or consumers ever-ready to use the exit option. The civic renewal movement does not presume to displace or substitute for all the other ways in which individuals and groups organize, advocate, or protest. Democracy is much more diverse and raucous than any one movement—even one with very broad purposes, such as the civic renewal movement—can ever hope to encompass.

In the wake of the highly polarized 2004 presidential election, civic collaboration might seem a bit quaint. After all, some would say, activists mobilized very effectively to turn out partisans on the basis of very targeted messages to their respective bases. New political organizations, some tailored specifically to the Internet age, raised enormous sums of money and mobilized volunteers in unprecedented ways. The media portrayal of a country bifurcated into “blue states” and “red states”—and blue and red “states of mind”—leaves little room to imagine citizens collaborating across deep divides of party, policy, even morality. Yet many scholars and public opinion analysts have cast doubt on this image of a citizenry so deeply polarized on core values. Much of the innovation we portray in this book points to a citizenry that cuts across these and many other forms of civic collaboration, even as we will undoubtedly do battle on some critical policies, prefer different parties to represent our interests and ideals, and mobilize vigorously through various other movements and organizations. Broad democratic self-governance in a complex world is simply not possible without expanding the fields of innovative civic collaboration. The election of 2004 polarized—and, in some ways, impoverished—our imagination of how citizens can contribute to the everyday work of our republic and make democracy a way of life. But it also demonstrated how much we need forms of civic collaboration that are distinct from the new forms of political mobilization.

The civic renewal movement faces many barriers and has no guarantee that it will transform American civic and political life. Innovative civic practice confronts serious obstacles within each institutional and policy arena in the form of entrenched bureaucratic, corporate, political, and professional practices and distributions of power. Some general social and cultural trends erode community connections and civic engagement, thus making a broad movement that much more difficult to build. A movement thatforegrounds collaborative problem solving and democratic deliberation does not have available the same repertoires (mass protests, sit-ins, freedom rides) that have enabled various rights and justice movements, or fundamentalist values-based movements, to galvanize the public on a broad scale. While innovations have spread in most arenas we have examined, in several they have stalled and a number of important networks have been disbanded. Civic innovations and movements provide much room for optimism, but they also face very serious challenges.

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The Civic Renewal Movement: Community-Building and Democracy in the United States can be ordered through E.C. Ruffolo, e-mail: ecruffolo@ec-ruffolo.com, call: 1-800-600-4060, or FAX: 1-937-435-7367.
Our formal political system is coarse, unproductive, and short-sighted. Outside of formal politics, however, a robust movement is beginning to renew civic engagement in America. In *The Civic Renewal Movement*, Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland describe the major currents of that civic work. This article provides a similar account, although it is based on an independent set of observations.

The heart of today’s civic renewal movement is a set of concrete, practical experiments, including the following:

**Practical deliberative democracy.**

For some 30 years, nonprofits have been organizing groups of citizens at a human scale (say, 5 to 500 people) to discuss public issues, typically providing background materials and offering some kind of moderation or facilitation. Some of the important organizations in this field include the National Issues Forums (mainly self-selected adults deliberating face-to-face, with published guides), Study Circles (a similar process, but usually more embedded in community organizing), Deliberative Polls (randomly selected citizens who meet for several days), and online forums, such as E-The People.

**Community economic development.**

Deliberation also occurs within nonprofit corporations that aim to create jobs and income and that are formally tied to neighborhoods or to specific rural areas. These corporations include co-ops, land trusts, and community development corporations (CDCs), among others.

One of the biggest weaknesses of democracy today is the mobility of capital. As Gar Alperovitz, University of Maryland professor of political economy, argued recently, a corporation can influence political decisions in multiple ways, including the “implicit or explicit threat of withdrawing its plants, equipment, and jobs from specific locations.” What is more, “in the absence of an alternative, the economy as a whole depends on the viability and success of its most important economic actor—a reality that commonly forces citizen and politician alike to respond to corporate demands.”

However, the success of CDCs, land trusts, and similar innovations proves that viable alternatives to the standard corporation exist. It is possible to increase wealth in poor communities by creating economically efficient organizations that are tied to places and unable to threaten to disinvest.

**Democratic community-organizing work.**

The Industrial Areas Foundation (which has created and worked with many CDCs and other neighborhood corporations) represents a form of community organizing that builds the political capacity, as well as the wealth, of poor people. Instead of defining a community’s problems and advocating solutions, IAF organizers encourage relatively open-ended discussions that lead to concrete actions (such as the construction of 2,900 townhouses in Brooklyn, New York), thereby generating civic power. Though IAF is a major force in this field, it is not the only one. Asset-Based Community Development emphasizes the importance of cataloguing and publicizing the assets of communities as a prelude to development. The goal is to shift from thinking of poor communities as baskets of problems, to recognizing their intrinsic capacities. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change is also a hub for this kind of work.
Work to defend and expand the commons. The “tragedy of the commons”—that tendency of any resource not privately owned to be degraded as people over-use or fail to invest in it—is real. Consider the collapse of global fish stocks due to overexploitation. However, many unowned resources actually flourish for generations or even centuries because they are nurtured by strong communities with appropriate habits and values. New examples of commons include land trusts and co-ops as well as cyberspace, understood as a whole structure, not as a series of privately owned components. Scholars, such as political theorist Elinor Ostrom, who works closely with communities, have begun to understand the principles and practices that underlie effective commons—whether they happen to involve grasslands, computer networks, or bodies of scientific knowledge.

Although the network for civic renewal faces daunting challenges, it is a multifaceted, innovative, and increasingly coherent political force in its own right.

Practical work to protect and enhance commons is underway within the American Libraries Association, because librarians see themselves as defenders of public artifacts (the books, maps, databases, and Web pages in their collections), public facilities (library buildings, meeting spaces, grounds), and public ideas (including all human knowledge that is not patented or copyrighted, plus copyrighted books that people can borrow and read). Librarians believe that these public goods face numerous threats, ranging from patrons’ abuse of library books and budget cuts to corporations’ efforts to overextend copyright law. However, the ALA fights back in the courts and legislatures.

Meanwhile, librarians encourage constructive public participation in local libraries to enhance the value of these commons. An example is the September Project, an impressive series of discussions, art exhibitions, readings, and performances that now take place in thousands of public libraries every September 11th, as a democratic response to the terror attacks. Collaborative efforts to restore and protect natural commons (ecosystems) are often undertaken under the name of “civic environmentalism.” Because the keys to robust, sustainable commons include public deliberation and the wide dispersal of civic skills and attitudes, commons work must be viewed as closely related to civic renewal.

Work on a new generation of public media. “Public media” is much broader than conventional public broadcasting; it includes any communications medium that promotes the creation and sharing of ideas and cultural products relevant to public issues. So defined, the most compelling public media today originate from thousands of grassroots groups that create Web sites, e-mail-based discussions, and audio and video segments.

J-Lab, the Center for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland, for instance, makes grants to grassroots groups to conduct “micr news” projects. All across the country, people are producing community “blogs” (Web sites on which citizens post short news items and comments), elaborate “content management systems” that allow citizens to contribute news to local Web sites, and “podcasting” projects (short audio clips of news or music that can be downloaded and heard on cell phones and other portable devices). While most of the material created for these new technologies has nothing to do with politics or social issues, it includes a substantial amount of real community news and deliberation.

Newspapers are also venues for relevant work. In the 1990s, many professional journalists were interested in writing the news in ways that would better support public deliberation. That movement is no longer a political force, but it has left an important imprint in newsrooms. Furthermore, because of the Internet, newspapers are keen to become more “interactive.” Although interactivity can be a mere gimmick or a way to enhance an individual’s experience on a Web site, some journalists now experiment with interactive features like blogs for democratic purposes.

Public media production and work to defend the commons come together in the field of positive hip-hop. Youth of all races now produce music and poetry that confronts serious social problems and depict themselves as three-dimensional human beings, not as thugs. Hip-hop culture usually involves borrowing, quoting, and parodying snippets from mass media. Because this is a powerful democratic activity, there should exist a commons composed of cultural products available for such “fair use.” Unfortunately, over-restrictive copyright laws threaten the growth of this commons. Young people in the hip-hop world are increasingly aware that they have a stake in dry issues like copyright.

Development of social software. I mentioned blogs in the last section. They are one example of a new behavior enabled by software. Many developers are working on other software to enhance discussion and collaboration. A good example in a geographical community is the Bakersfield, California, NorthWest Voice, which consists entirely of material written by citizens. People submit news items that are automatically sorted by location and topic. The result is a Web site that looks exactly like a professional online newspaper, even though it is created by volunteers. Copies are printed with advertising supplements and distributed to every household.

While some of this frenzied innovation is driven by purely technical interests and goals (and by the prospect of making money), many in the subculture of “hackers” are committed to the commons and to norms of voluntary collaboration.

The engaged university. Colleges and universities have great civic potential as producers of knowledge, sites of deliberation, and powerful nonprofit economic institutions, rooted in communities. However, William Sullivan, a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues that post-World War II universities were mostly committed...
to the idea that experts “solved problems” by bringing the latest technical knowledge to bear on matters which, it [was] widely presumed, the public as a whole was too limited to understand, much less address.” This attitude could lead to the overvaluation of certain forms of technical knowledge and the denigration of public deliberation. It also sharpened distinctions among research (defined as sophisticated scholarship assessed by academic peers), teaching (the transmission of expert knowledge to students), and service (the application of expertise to community problems). In competitive universities, teaching and service were generally valued less than scholarship. All three enterprises suffered from the understanding of research as strictly technical.

Today, however, one finds many countertrends, including various impressive scholarly research programs that require close and mutually respectful interactions among scholars, students, and geographical communities, social movements, or professional groups outside the academy. For example, the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania provides opportunities for distinguished scholars to advance their own disciplines by conducting research that benefits (and takes direction from) residents of West Philadelphia, where the university is situated. Penn has also used its economic leverage in constructive ways, collaborating with community partners.

The Center for Community Partnerships exemplifies several civic trends in higher education: a move from “service” to collaboration; a rediscovery of geographical communities; a reflection on colleges’ power as employers, builders, and consumers; and a turn to sophisticated research that requires learning with and from nonacademics. Ostrom’s work on commons is another good example: It is theoretically original, yet it depends on her learning from lay partners. The Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland is a center for research and experimentation on the engaged university.

Civic education. From the 1960s through the 1990s, most scholars argued that explicit civic education had no lasting effects. In the same period (although not only because of the scholarly naysayers), schools tended to abandon civic courses and curricula. Major educational reforms, culminating in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, have made civic education a low priority.

Nevertheless, some nonprofit organizations have continued to provide textbooks, programs, and seminars for teachers. These groups include the Center for Civic Education, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Streetlaw, Public Achievement, Choices (founded at Brown University), and the Bill of Rights Institute, among others. Their programs usually combine a focus on perennial democratic principles with investigations of immediate issues relevant to students. They also tend to combine experiential learning (e.g., debate, community service, advocacy) with reading and writing.

Since 1999, these nonprofits, traditionally fractious, have come together to create the National Alliance for Civic Education (NACE) and then the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Campaign is an effective advocacy organization that brings together all the leading organizations that specialize in formal civic education, plus major nonprofits that have pledged to support their agenda, including the American Bar Association, both national teachers’ unions, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and 35 additional organizations. They are working to ensure that the next generation of educational reform will not again ignore civics.

Service-learning. A particular strand of civic education involves combinations of community service with academic study of the same topic. Service-learning is popular not only in K-12 schools (about one-third of which now offer it), but also in colleges. Much service-learning is nonpolitical; it involves acts of charity and service, such as cleaning up a park or visiting elders. Often the underlying theory derives from experiential education (whose proponents believe that students learn best from doing); this need not have anything to do with civic or political values. However, within the large field of service-learning, one finds avid discussion of how to engage young people in solving social problems—as a pedagogy. Careful, independent evaluations of some excellent service-learning programs have found that participants develop civic identities that last well into adulthood. The National Service Learning Clearinghouse and the National Service Learning Partnership are hubs for this network.

Community youth development. Much of the best civic education takes place not in schools but in youth groups that are concerned primarily with healthy adolescent development. Increasingly, adults in 4-H, the Scouts, and urban youth centers believe that engaging teenagers in studying and addressing local social problems is vital ways to develop their intellects and characters and to keep them safe. Much like proponents of asset-based community development, these people want to treat their subjects (in this
Objective Two

Five Emerging Practices in the Scholarship of Engagement

Derek Barker

This article is excerpted and adapted from his article of the same name in the Higher Education Exchange published by the Kettering Foundation, 2006.

More than ever, higher education professionals are starting to describe their work using the words participatory research, public scholarship, and community partnerships. In fact, words like these are being used in the titles and mission statements of centers, programs, and other initiatives to broaden the idea of scholarship and deepen the connection between higher education institutions and the public realm. For the past few years, I have been tracking these projects as well as the work of independent scholars who have similar approaches. I see an exciting group of academics trying to make the case that civic work makes for good politics—and good scholarship.

Civic work helps scholars generate more practical research questions, enables them to collect more data, and allows them to see their ideas working in practice. Engaged scholars are finding that their practices are not something they do on the side in addition to their academic research. They embrace different methods and emphasize varying aspects of democratic politics, but their work can be understood and assessed as a “scholarship of engagement.”

Five emerging practices are showing how higher education professionals can expand the idea of scholarship and enrich the political life of their communities. Each one is animated by a specific theory of democracy, and as a result each one uses its own methods to address a specific set of public problems. What drives these practices is the intent of the scholar, not the methods they employ. While academic scholarship is often driven by the training and expertise of the scholar, engaged scholars are driven by what they intend to accomplish. By thinking about the scholarship of engagement along these dimensions, my intention is to provide a clear and systematic framework through which to understand and assess the work that makes up this movement, while also recognizing its diversity.

The scholarship of engagement concept was first stated in the work of the late Ernest Boyer. Boyer’s work was dedicated to expanding the idea of scholarship beyond research published in peer-reviewed journals, in order to recognize and value all the things that academics actually do. One of Boyer’s later works took a further step to argue that the idea of scholarship could be further broadened to include the scholarship of engagement: practices that overlap with the traditional areas of scholarship but also incorporate practices of collaboration with public entities.

So what does civic work have to do with scholarship? What is “scholarly” about the scholarship of engagement? By linking civic work to scholarship, this terminology reflects a growing awareness that civic work can further academic as well as political goals.

Practices of civic work can also make a difference in what Boyer calls the “scholarship of teaching.” For a long time, the service-learning and experiential-learning movements have been showing that students can benefit from seeing the ideas discussed in the classroom applied practically in the outside world. What the scholarship of engagement adds to these pedagogies is a conscious effort
at building deeper relationships with communities beyond the idea of “service,” which does not always lead to more enduring forms of engagement. The scholarship of engagement attempts to provide students with greater insight into the nature of public problems by asking students to practice more intense forms of democratic citizenship. Although these practices are often present implicitly in service and experiential-learning programs, they are explicitly and consciously cultivated by the scholarship of engagement. In these ways, far from compromising their seriousness and rigor, engaged scholars are making the case that their work meets or even exceeds traditional norms for assessing scholarship. Scholars are making the case that their work contributes to democratic citizenship. Although these practices are often present implicitly in service and experiential-learning programs, they are explicitly and consciously cultivated by the scholarship of engagement. In these ways, far from compromising their seriousness and rigor, engaged scholars are making the case that their work meets or even exceeds traditional norms for assessing scholarship.

So what do engaged scholars do? How does their work contribute to democracy? The scholarship of engagement is distinct from traditional approaches because it integrates practices of civic work into the production of knowledge. It is different, for example, from traditional academic scholarship that simply has to do with civic work. The scholarship of engagement is also distinct from public intellectual scholarship, which takes traditional academic literature and attempts to give it greater visibility in the media. Rather, the scholarship of engagement means finding creative ways to communicate to public audiences, work for the public good, and, most important, generate knowledge with public participation.

To accomplish these goals, engaged scholars are embracing a number of methods and the terminologies that go with them. (See chart.) First, public scholarship is most often used to describe academic work that incorporates practices of deliberative politics to enhance scholarship. Public scholars are usually informed by some combination of the “deliberative” or “participatory” theories of democracy developed by thinkers like John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas. Public scholarship generally emphasizes deliberation over participation—the quality of the discourse rather than the quantity of participants. A common public-scholarship practice is the open public forum. Forums typically address issues of wide concern, and, in particular, they address complex issues that require actual public discussion rather than simply voting or taking a public opinion poll.

The second emerging practice, very closely related to public scholarship, is participatory research, also referred to as action research or participatory action research. Like public scholarship, participatory research stresses the active role citizens can play in the production of academic knowledge. The main difference I see between the two stems from the relative emphases on participation versus deliberation. While public scholars are more concerned with enhancing the quality of public participation in research, for participatory research the emphasis tends to be on promoting participation itself. Participatory research tends to respond to problems of exclusion by reaching out to a marginalized or previously excluded group. Like public scholarship, participatory research is showing that good politics can make for good scholarship. Participatory research and public scholarship are not so much opposed as responding to different problems in democratic politics. Situations may call for building bridges to specific groups to bring more participants into the process, or they may call for improving the quality of discourse of existing groups.

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<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Theory of Democracy</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Participatory Research</td>
<td>Participatory democracy</td>
<td>Exclusion of specific groups</td>
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<td>Public Information Networks</td>
<td>Democracy (broadly defined)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civic Skills &amp; Civic Literacy</td>
<td>Democracy (broadly defined)</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge about democratic processes and institutions</td>
<td>General communications to the public</td>
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Engaged scholars are finding innovative ways to blend these approaches in response to specific problems.

The third practice is referred to as community partnerships. Public participation and deliberation may be key components of community partnerships, but the primary emphasis in this field tends to be on cultural transformation. As a result, one might say that community partnerships are animated primarily by a conception of social democracy. In contrast to other forms of engaged scholarship, community partnerships are especially concerned with power, resources, and building social movements. While community partnerships often overlap with public scholarship and participatory research practices, this approach tends to emphasize the end result of social transformation over the process and its political qualities.

Fourth, many of the scholarship of engagement centers are creating public information networks. These networks typically help communities identify resources and assets by providing comprehensive databases of local activists, advocacy groups, and available services. While these programs do not always stress the iterative and deliberative quality of the forms of engaged scholarship, they use university resources to better inform public judgments and enrich the quality of discourse. Public information programs are best suited to deal with situations in which the resources already exist in a community to solve a problem but they are not being utilized effectively due to a lack of organization or communication.

A final approach emphasizes civic skills and/or civic literacy. Regardless of one’s specific conception of democracy, any healthy democracy requires at least a minimal competence in knowledge of political institutions, economics, and science and technology to make educated and informed decisions. Scholarship conceived as an expert practice reserved for a few specialists further undermines the public’s capacity for effective participation. Engaged scholars in this field are helping to enhance democratic processes by ensuring that their disciplines are supplying publics with the knowledge necessary for reflective judgments on public issues. This approach again aims at deepening practices of engagement with the specific aim of reducing the separation between expert specialists and the lay public, as well as by its specific emphasis on skills that are relevant to political participation and democratic decision making. At the same time, civic literacy approaches differ from other forms of engaged scholarship by targeting relatively broad and long-term trends in general public knowledge rather than specific and immediate problems.

One sign that these practices are catching on as both good politics and good scholarship is the development of specific criteria for the assessment of engaged scholarship. Assessment work may impose challenging standards for the scholarship of engagement movement, but it helps make the case to promotion and tenure committees that practices of engagement are central to the research and teaching goals of the profession. Although assessment is not itself engagement (and I do not include it among the five practices), this work is a critical component of the engaged-scholarship universe.

The reality of the scholarship of engagement universe is, of course, fluid and complex and cannot be easily reduced into boxes. The terms I have identified do not have settled definitions. They are closely related and easily confused with one another and, at times, are even used interchangeably. Moreover, these practices are by their very nature—and by the nature of democracy itself—experimental and in constant flux. Engaged scholars are not trying to set up a universal rule for the “best” method of engagement, but rather to respond to particular problems in democratic politics.

Still, a degree of clarity can help other scholars replicate these emerging practices, and shared meanings would help the field establish both intellectual and political legitimacy. In tracking the activities of higher education civic work centers, I have been finding that the concept of the scholarship of engagement has been catching on. On the one hand, it is focused enough to capture the distinct qualities and contributions of engaged scholarship. The scholarship of engagement is not something that academics do on the side as opposed to “serious” scholarship. Rather, the scholarship of engagement has developed specific methods and criteria for assessment, and it is making identifiable contributions to academic disciplines on their own terms. On the other hand, the scholarship of engagement is an inclusive concept that reflects the great diversity in the theory and practice of this growing movement. The scholarship of engagement includes an exciting array of theoretical approaches toward the renewal of democratic politics, and it recognizes that teaching, research, and any of the traditional scholarly functions can be broadened to incorporate practices of democratic politics. Most of all, the concept is catching on because it is both scholarly and political, capturing both aspects of a distinct, growing, and exciting movement.

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Traveling in the Company of Others

Insights are often generated by bringing in new perspectives or ideas that allow people to reimagine what they can do.

Bridging the Divide
Between the Public and Government

By Phillip Lurie and Alice Diebel

What have we learned about public administrators? The Kettering Foundation makes three assumptions about what a healthy democracy requires: responsible citizens who can make sound choices about their future; communities of citizens acting together to address common problems; and institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening society. Research in the Public-Government program area addresses the third assumption.

Democracies require institutions that recognize the need for citizen involvement and strengthen civil society while enjoying the confidence of citizens. Unfortunately, many of our major institutions do not enjoy the public’s confidence.

Public administrators who see little value in engaging citizens are distanced from a public that holds high levels of cynicism and negative perceptions about government. This gap between public administrators and citizens threatens our democratic system of governance because it results in a lack of citizen participation.

This article pulls together insights from public engagement efforts to bridge the gap between the public and the administrative institutions of government. By insights, we mean the cross-cutting ideas that we see repeatedly. Within this research, we share experiences and perspectives public administrators have about “key democratic practices,” such as naming and framing issues in public terms, making decisions through public deliberation, and implementing decisions through public acting. To this end, the foundation has entered into a number of joint-learning agreements with public administrators and researchers in this arena; this report is a summary of research completed during the past three years.

Traditionally, administrators carry out the policy decisions made by elected representatives. However, there is considerable leeway within policies that require public administrators who are not elected by the public to make substantive decisions. For instance, environmental regulators on site make local decisions within a larger policy framework that require judgment. This creates a tension in the role of public administrators and suggests the need to pay attention to the relationship between this branch of government and the public.

The gap between public administrators and citizens is defined by factors related to the way public administrators approach their work. First, for nearly 20 years, public administrators treated the public as customers. This approach defined the citizen as a receiver of services rather than a participant in democracy. Unfortunately, this increased the gap within the relationship rather than closed it. Second, public administrators are results driven and view themselves as decision makers, thus they are unaccustomed to
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turning to the public for help. Third, they are nonpartisan by virtue of their professional standards and are often uncomfortable with the responsibility of deciding between competing values expressed in policy disputes. Finally, administrators are most comfortable when guided by rules and structures and measure their success by compliance, as opposed to situational flexibility.

Methods to evaluate public engagement are still in their infancy. Therefore, experimenting with public engagement puts public administrators in unfamiliar territory as they struggle with how to make it work. Deliberative practices can be confusing to administrators who are accustomed to crisp, measurable outcome evaluations and interesting technical problem solving. The depth of this problem is illustrated by the difficulties caused when agencies and administrators are confronted with issues of shared control, time constraints, and entrenchment in traditional ways of making decisions.

Insights

The foundation’s studies, both those continuing and those completed, include work by public administrators and other researchers. Mike Pompili works with public health directors in Ohio to address environmental health issues, such as air quality. During foundation workshops, Pat Bonner reflects on her experience in public engagement with environmental regulators at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The National League of Cities works with major cities across the U.S. and has studied democratic governance. Alice Diebel interviewed public administrators in Michigan about the value they place on public deliberation. Michael Briand helped a city government in Longmont, Colorado, engage the public in land-use planning. The Harwood Institute completed three case studies about city administrators who are experimenting with new approaches to public engagement.

These researchers and practitioners help us better understand the gap between the public and public administrators. The key insights from these fellow travelers have to do with defining the nature of public engagement, the timing of engagement efforts, the structure of relationships with the public and between government branches, and the means to determine the level of success or failure of the engagement.

Defining Public Engagement

Public engagement means many things to many people. Mike Pompili’s research revealed the public hearing process is the standard approach used by many public administrators. In contrast, The Harwood Institute reports that in communities like Clark County, Nevada, it means an ethic of relating to citizens as partners rather than as customers. The way public engagement is framed can change the relationship between administrators and citizens and influence the nature of the interaction and its relationship to the work of citizens and government.

For some public administrators, public engagement is defined as a democratic principle. They believe strongly in the right of the public to have a voice in government policy. However, this value is an ideal that is seldom realized in large part because of the relationship between the public and the
government. Foundation research shows public administrators have had mixed success with public engagement. The National League of Cities reports public administrators feel they work hard but are “personally abused and maligned” by self-interested citizens. The Harwood Institute finds public administrators recognize the need for better approaches to public involvement but feel little public demand for “better” participation. Without the public demand for involvement, government is left to define the terms of engagement.

Further research shows that most often, administrators attempt to engage the public because they must. Either they are meeting a regulatory requirement or they realize that in order to do their job effectively, they need public support. However, the public recognizes when public participation is intended just to seek buy-in and the effort usually ends in failure. The actual community problem becomes secondary to the engagement when the focus is on participation for participation’s sake. Without identifying the real need for citizen engagement, citizens are brought into the process late, leading to public anger and greater distance from government when people believe decisions have already been made.

Timing

The issue of timing continues to be a major problem for administrators who seek to involve citizens in the political process. Implementing these democratic practices requires lengthy amounts of time to be effective. But policy timelines seldom match the public’s awareness of the problem or its capacity to solve it. It is important to engage the public early in order to allow space for the issue to be named in more public terms. However, early and extended involvement carries the risk of wearing out the public.

One of the concerns public administrators express about public deliberation is how to time the effort so it is most valuable. For example, Michael Briand believes that public forums about growth held in Longmont, Colorado, did not adequately address the long-term impact of the plan the government was discussing. Briand concludes that the issue could have been framed to express greater urgency and severity, which might have increased participation. In the minds of the public, the tensions associated with growth were too far in the distance to trigger the public naming required to bring sufficient participation.

However, if public administrators wait too long to engage citizens, they can face an outraged public. Alice Diebel, in her study, finds that administrators perceive the public as emotional, uninformed, and self-interested. Unfortunately, that perspective is built on encounters with a public that has been brought into the decision-making process too late to have the opportunity to fully grasp the issue or participate in the choice.

Earlier timing is used by some in the EPA when beginning a hazardous waste cleanup. Pat Bonner reports that a community assessment can raise regulator awareness of a community’s history, cultural norms, and relationships. Even a quick assessment can provide a better process with a clearer purpose. Developing relationships through the assessment process builds greater promise of public participation and better timing of these efforts.

Structuring Relationships

How should relationships be structured so the timing is more effective? Public administrators are concerned about how the public “fits” within the administrative structures. Both The Harwood Institute and Mike Pompili report finding that public administrators need the support of upper-level administrators in public engagement work. They also believe it is important to be clear about the goals of public engagement when they delegate these activities to their staff. Both of these concerns reflect the constraints of bureaucratic structures. Such structures can create barriers to public engagement. Pat Bonner’s experiences indicate the perceived barriers limit the creative potential of public engagement staff to design innovative public involvement activities. For example, most of the laws the EPA implements require review and comment or public hearings, and nothing more. Innovative processes require an entrepreneurial spirit with staff and administrators willing to take risks. These risks leave them vulnerable for uncertain outcomes when they stray from the established regulations set in policy.

Key insights have to do with defining the nature of public engagement, the timing of engagement efforts, the structure of relationships with the public and between government branches, and the means to determine the level of success or failure of the engagement.
Helping administrators understand what they can expect from citizens and giving citizens the space to engage the issue can lead to better relationships between the groups.

How administrators evaluate their success in these relationships and structures is the final challenge.

Expectations and Evaluation

Evaluation and standards are major sticking points for agencies seeking more and better public engagement. For example, Michael Briand’s research reveals public administrators were committed to gaining early public input on growth planning. However, these administrators were disappointed in the kind of input they got from the public. They had hoped for greater detail. This finding suggests public administrators lack an understanding of the public’s role, in part because of their training. Pat Bonner tells us that scientists-turned-administrators are uncomfortable with the uncertainty of making complex decisions on tight deadlines. The scientific process stands in contrast to reaching decisions that incorporate public values. They are trained to work until the science is “right” rather than working through messy collaborative processes that attempt to make choices that more people can live with.

Similarly, Mike Pompili, Alice Diebel, and The Harwood Institute all report public administrators sincerely desire quality public engagement but lack the tools to demonstrate the effort is worthwhile. Furthermore, administrators who experiment to achieve better engagement can put their jobs at risk. Trying new things can produce uncertain outcomes that might affect traditional evaluation measures, such as cost-benefit analysis.

Conclusions

The insights from this research have significant bearing on future foundation work. We continue to struggle with the question of how agencies that engage in this work can evaluate their practices. Narrow evaluation standards do not work well when a public with diverse interests engage together. In these situations, specific outcome questions go unanswered resulting in a poor evaluation—not what a professional wants! Therefore, in order to properly evaluate public engagement work, public administrators need to change their questions and adopt a civic-learning style. Civic learning occurs when administrators examine how their actions and behaviors affect the larger community not in terms of financial costs and the achievement of predetermined goals, but rather in terms of the civic effort, that is, who got involved, why, what they did, and what they learned together.

For example, by taking a civic learning approach, public administrators may begin to understand the public has different names for the problems. They may begin to understand that professional names control the discussion, define what is valuable, and exclude the public so that the public does not believe they have a role in solving the problem. This insight leads to an important research question: Do the values of deliberative politics and the values of an agency need to be complementary in order for a successful evaluative process to occur?

Government agencies are challenged to recognize that public deliberation is part of a process, not an “add on” or tool, to gain public support. The public should be seen as partners in the work, not as a group to provide input. Providing input is not the same as wrestling with hard choices and deciding where to spend resources of time and effort. When the public has no opportunity to deliberate about resource tradeoffs, the public administrators retain decision-making authority and the public is effectively excluded.

Once public administrators begin to understand how a community names a problem, they are more likely to be able to work together to solve it. However, aligning professional routines with public work is a key struggle. It may be that creating regular opportunities for public engagement—or public space—would provide a way to establish more effective timing and relationships between the public and the government.

Our research shows discomfort with changing relationships to be an important consideration in administrator tentativeness to engage the public. Capacity-building all around can help address some of the tensions between professional routines and deliberative practices. Helping administrators understand what they can expect from citizens and giving citizens the space to engage the issue can lead to better relationships between the groups. Such a relationship has the potential to align the work the government does with work the public can do, thus helping them to address the problems facing the community—together.

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What Do the People of Owensboro, Kentucky, Know about Deliberation?

It’s a reasonable question to ask. This city on the Ohio River in western Kentucky has been convening public deliberations since the fall of 1998 to address issues like kids and crime, race, law enforcement, changing families, community visioning, a proposed city-county merger, Social Security, land use, and health care. At least three nonprofit groups have been launched to facilitate this deliberative effort. Suzanne Morse wrote about Owensboro’s efforts at deliberation in her book, *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) and in an article for the Kettering Foundation in the Winter 2005 issue of *Connections*. Currently, David Ryfe is examining the efforts of one of these nonprofit groups, Community Conversations, Inc. The following is an interim report based on Ryfe’s notes and interviews.

A Brief History

A survey in 1995 by the Owensboro Chamber of Commerce and the local newspaper, Ryfe says, “showed that a majority of town citizens [was] deeply alienated from the political process.” Robert Putnam, Michael Sandel, Richard Harwood, and many others would tell you that this is a problem not confined to Owensboro. Ryfe reports that for some years people had felt the town was run by “a small group of white men.” The community apparently had been satisfied with that arrangement. But in the mid-1990s, as the challenges posed by health care, a growing immigrant population, and a changing economy mounted, pressure for a different kind of politics increased. Citizens found that to deal with their problems, they needed a public that could not form in their political environment. Searching for alternatives, they decided to try deliberation. But the change only became possible when citizens reached a point of readiness, an openness to change. When conditions were right, the urge to deliberate found fertile ground.

Deliberation Is an Ongoing Political Act

Taylor Willingham, an Austin, Texas, moderator of deliberative forums, said once, “The act of engaging in a deliberative forum [is] a political act, not just a conversation.” She calls deliberation “the act that came before the act.” The citizens of Owensboro are actively exploring that line of thought. Ryfe calls the Owensboro experience an act of imagination. The people of Owensboro are imagining themselves as citizens—and if that sounds somewhat gloomy, think of the alternative too often seen in the United States, people who do not imagine themselves as citizens.

The Owensboro citizens who first began to learn about deliberation, Ryfe says, began “to see deliberation as a way of untangling
Object Three

Deliberation Is Not Just a Precursor to Action, but an Essential Parallel Activity

What we see in Owensboro is a recognition that deliberation is never completed, there is never a time when deliberation is no longer necessary. Consider how the community has dealt with two different outcomes. Over the last several years, the region has repeatedly explored some kind of city-county merger of local governments, and deliberation has been employed repeatedly. Kathy Christie, former executive director of CCI, said of one such effort, “One of the group told the newspaper that the group had gotten further in this one meeting than the two governments had gotten in the last 10 years on the issue. Another participant said this was his fourth meeting at trying to make a decision and this was the closest they had ever come.” Ryfe notes that some of those attempts, while making progress, have not yet resolved the inherent tensions. Yet the community did not regard this as a failure and walk away. The merger deliberations continued.

On the other hand, the People’s Health Project produced concrete results: two new studies of health care in the area, a task force on the issue, and the creation of a new position in the hospital to address some of the issues raised. Most significantly, the community did not regard this success as a “case closed.” Rather, the community formed CHCA to perpetuate deliberation on this topic. Owensboro, then, may be developing a habit of deliberation, recognizing it not simply as something on the way to action, but as work with its own rewards.

The habit of sustained deliberation must overcome nondeliberative routines. If we celebrate Owensboro’s successes, we must be forthright about the challenges it faces as well. Ryfe reports that CCI has struggled to establish a culture of deliberation in the face of those who consider it “too time consuming, too academic, . . . too much talk, not enough action.” In addition, many in the CCI organization felt the process was ineffective. They wanted to do something with the information gathered in the deliberation process. They wanted to “take the information and try to convince some state public policy or . . . influence what happens at the federal government or local government.” Obviously this attitude clashed with others who were more concerned about the process or who felt it was important to “just allow people to talk.”

Ryfe also raises issues of leadership, teaching, and inheritability as relevant to this point. At CCI, after several of the original eleven members cycled off the board and were replaced, new members began to say that deliberation, as NIF understands it, was too laborious and process-focused. They wanted to move more quickly toward solutions. “New Board members tended to see the process as an impediment to ‘getting things done,’ though of course they often disagreed about what, precisely, ought to be done.”

While it appears that a critical mass of citizens in the community has adopted deliberation as a habitual political act, it is by no means certain. Old routines, such as limiting political talk and action to a few people, and expecting tangible results and explicit civic change are seductive because they offer efficiencies that deliberation cannot always match. If citizens return to deliberation again and again as a new form of politics, they can overcome such routines. That may be happening in Owensboro. Experience indicates, however, that the organizations they have formed to invigorate public life cannot take it for granted just yet.

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The people of Owensboro are imagining themselves as citizens—and if that sounds somewhat gloomy, think of the alternative too often seen in the United States, people who do not imagine themselves as citizens.

At the same time, the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO) began the “People’s Health Project,” a longitudinal effort to explore issues of inequity in access to health care. According to Suzanne Morse’s research, this effort was “an opportunity for citizens from all parts of the community to identify their chief concerns and priorities and to gauge the kinds of action steps the community would be inclined to support.” PLFO organized 52 forums throughout the city and county in 2001-2002. That effort in turn produced the third Owensboro nonprofit group, Citizens Health Care Advocates (CHCA), which works to sustain deliberation on health issues.

the knots tied by decision-making done in the mode of ordinary politics.” This, of course, defines deliberation in relation to “ordinary politics,” but it does get at the idea of “sorting through,” one of the most valuable elements of deliberation. Using such skills in the community may be more difficult to quantify than “ordinary politics,” but it is a profound change.

In 2000, Community Conversations, Inc. was founded as a means to promote deliberation. According to Ryfe:

The eleven founders of CCI . . . drew early and often from their participation in a 20-month community politics initiative. . . . Over these 20 months, the group engaged in a series of exercises that had it organizing and facilitating forums, and naming and framing issues.

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My first introduction to deliberative democracy came as an undergraduate student in the mid-1990s. As part of a course on diversity, my classmates and I participated in a deliberative forum on affirmative action with inner-city high school students at their school in the local neighborhood. The conversation with these local high school students—who were mostly students of color—made me think more clearly about the policy choices we must make to overcome the pervasive racial injustice in American society; it also helped me see the power of a different kind of politics to address contentious issues like racism.

I grew up in a political family, worked on political campaigns all of my life, and was a political science student in college. Yet, like many students from my generation, I had become cynical about conventional politics and weary of the partisan nature of “politics as usual,” perhaps embodied best by the shutdown of the federal government in late 1995 and then the impeachment of President Clinton. I also felt discouraged and somewhat powerless about what I, as a young person just getting started in public life, could do to change these overwhelming forces of incivility, partisanship, and unresponsiveness.
At the same time, I was on a campus that was promoting my intellectual curiosity and my desire to change the world, while also just beginning to take seriously its commitment to the local neighborhood, which was the type of poor, urban community that surrounds many American colleges and universities. My experience with deliberation at the local high school, along with my ongoing organizing and community work in the neighborhood, gave me an introduction—and insights, or practical wisdom—into a type of politics that was new to me.

I began to see that politics could be about building relationships across diverse cultures, races, ages, languages, and economic classes and then working together to solve public problems.

A Different Kind of Politics: Ordinary People Engaged in Reciprocal Learning and Collaborative Work

My introduction to citizen politics in college led me to the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship for an immersion in this political approach. I became most deeply involved in the center’s community-based education initiative, the Jane Addams School for Democracy, which partners immigrants with college students in inter-generational public work projects on the West Side of St. Paul, Minnesota.

“Everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner,” is the motto for Jane Addams School, and it serves as a touchstone for all of the activities of the community learning center. The school started in the summer of 1997 with the simple insight that democratic education involves creating public spaces for reciprocal exchanges among a diverse group of people addressing real community concerns. “We thought we should get started and let people teach us what it is they want to learn,” explains Nan Skelton, one of the founders of Jane Addams School. “We’d then figure out what we needed to learn to address those issues.” On the very first night of the school, for example, John Wallace, another founding participant began: “None of us are expert teachers, so we’re all going to have to become experts in learning.”

Today, hundreds of people meet two nights per week on the West Side of St. Paul in “learning circles” partnering new immigrants from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and East Africa with American-born English speakers. While many immigrants come to Jane Addams School with the immediate need to pass the U.S. citizenship exam and to practice speaking English, most gain an essential insight about their own civic capacities and the power of creating a broader culture of civic learning. “Jane Addams School has taught me that I have the power to help my community. There is a power when people share ideas and work together,” reflected Koua Yang Her, a Hmong immigrant involved with Jane Addams School. Yang Her then concluded, “One thing is for sure: one person can’t do it alone.”

Thus, the idea of democracy as the collaborative work of ordinary people is central for this approach to politics.
A Long Tradition

My experiences with a different type of politics—while still somewhat marginalized given the continued challenges to our democracy described by Keith Melville and Noëlle McAfee in this edition of Connections—are by no means unique. There is an emerging movement for citizen-centered democracy in an array of fields, as Peter Levine and others in this volume have identified. What might be less apparent, however, is that the work at Jane Addams School, like the research done by the Kettering Foundation, is part of a long tradition of citizens working to build democratic communities in a different way.

The Jane Addams School, for example, takes the “citizenship schools” of the civil rights movement, developed by civil rights pioneers like Myles Horton, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins, and then expanded throughout the South by Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton, and Martin Luther King Jr., as the basis for its reciprocal education and democratic practice. These democratic, community-based schools enabled thousands of blacks to claim their roles as first-class citizens in the segregated South of the 1960s.

When asked about his ideas on democracy, Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School and the citizenship school idea, responded that his notion of democracy came from, among others, Jane Addams and her then 40-year experiment with democracy through America’s most well-known settlement house, Hull House. Horton met with Addams at Hull House in Chicago as a young man in the 1930s to get ideas and examples for what would become the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee. Addams, of course, won a Nobel Prize and helped inspire a generation of reform movements. But perhaps her greatest legacy is her unique understanding that “none of us can stand aside” in the important work of democracy.

Addams wisely advised Horton that democracy means that the people have the right to make decisions. She gave an example: If there is a group of people sitting around a country store and there’s a problem they’re talking about, there are two ways to address it. The group can go out and get some official with expertise to tell them what to do; or the group can talk it out, discuss it themselves, and then solve the problem in the best way they can. Democracy, by this definition, was the approach in which the people solved the problem themselves.

Addams also realized that this conception of a citizen-centered democracy went back much further than the settlement house movement. When Myles Horton asked Jane Addams how she developed this idea of democracy—an idea practiced at Highlander Folk School, Hull House, Jane Addams School, and countless other places around the world—Addams said that she heard it from her father who had served in the state legislature with, and was a friend of, Abraham Lincoln.

With an awareness of this tradition connecting people like Martin Luther King Jr., Myles Horton, Jane Addams, and Abraham Lincoln, I realize that at the Kettering Foundation, we are asking timeless questions about what it takes to make democracy work as it should. We do not have a blueprint for what should be done by every citizen, community, or institution—not would we want one. However, we do have the wisdom of 25 years of research on this “different kind of politics” informed by centuries of public work.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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