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

5 Editors’ Letter

Robert J. Kingston 9 Shared Experience and Collective Understanding . . . the Outcomes of Public Deliberation

Martín Carcasson 16 Why Process Matters: Democracy and Human Nature

Linell Ajello 23 Out of the Shadows of Polarization

Katherine Cramer 30 Making Sense of the Political World through Everyday Talk

Lewis R. Gordon 36 Cities and Citizenship

Benjamin R. Barber 44 Political Institutions Old and New: Cities Not Nation-States

David Mathews 49 . . . afterthoughts

Cover art: Carol Vollet Kingston and Joan Harrison collaboratively created the cover image, I Have Work To Do (2017). This digital photomontage homage to Robert Kingston was created using scans of a painting by Carol Vollet Kingston, Summer Doldrums (oil, 1993), vintage engravings, and text from Robert Kingston’s writings.
Editors’ Letter

For millennia many have doubted the capacities of ordinary people to productively participate in public life—even during times that call themselves democratic. The story often goes that citizens are too disinterested, too polarized, and too lacking in knowledge to talk productively with their fellows, much less to collectively make sound decisions. As such, the “business” of democracy is better left to those who supposedly know better. In the wake of the recent elections, this refrain has increased in intensity. While problems persist on many fronts, blame increasingly falls on citizens.

But is this blame really warranted? We wonder what our longtime editor, Robert J. Kingston, who passed away as we were completing our previous issue, would have to say about this. So we decided to dedicate this issue to him, and we asked his wife, Carol Vollet Kingston, to create an original work of art for our cover. She obliged us and, along with Joan Harrison, created a work that depicts Bob in his informal musings, whatever the setting, thinking through the larger questions that continue to interest us. This issue, then, is a special tribute to his inestimable contribution to the work of the Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Forums, and democratic life more broadly. One of the keenest observers of public thought that we have known, Bob was both sober and optimistic, noting that while “democracy demands a deliberative citizenry” it is still up to “an elective government” to effect or, sometimes, frustrate “what that citizenry wills.” Through his many years of closely observing deliberative public forums all nationwide, Bob came to discern that, while citizens do not ultimately decide matters, they have a crucial role in setting the stage.

Nonetheless significant obstacles, ready to short-circuit a truly deliberative public, often stand in the way. For example, as Martín Carcasson notes, people tend to be “cognitive misers,” avoiding tough choices and processing information with an eye towards upholding preexisting beliefs. Moreover, Carcasson notes that many features of our political and media environment tend to exacerbate these features of the mind. And as Linell Ajello reports, some people enter deliberations expecting “to face disagreement and anger.” Further, Katherine Cramer even notes that a surprising number of people have stopped talking with someone close to them in the wake of recent, divisive elections. To such problems Carcasson argues that “we need processes that spark creativity and innovation, and ultimately lead
to cocreation and collaborative action.” And Ajello finds that in properly crafted deliberative settings, people with very different partisan views can actually come to shared understandings of problems. The very same people who had grown accustomed to anger and disagreement were surprised, she notes, at how productive political conversation, in spite of our many differences, could be.

Tracking political discussion groups “in the wild,” Katherine Cramer finds that, despite the common refrain that most people dislike politics and avoid discussing it in polite company, Cramer conveys here findings that there is far more informal political conversation occurring than we might expect even if those involved might not consider it “political” talk. Cramer finds numerous small groups of people who gather together at local gas stations and coffee shops to talk about what’s happening in the community, the country, or the world. More than just idle chit-chat, Cramer makes the case that these informal conversations are important as they help people to make sense of the political world around them.

Taken together, what we hear from both Cramer and Ajello suggests a public willing to have tough, but necessary, conversations with others. The groups are not perfect, all-knowing bodies, but as Cramer notes about the discussion groups she has observed, “These are not academic deliberations, but they are the act of people doing their best to make sense of the crazy world around them.”

Our authors show us that in communities of all sizes, from agrarian to suburban and urban, people are finding ways to talk across differences. In fact, politics and cities themselves arose out of the need to do this, or as Lewis Gordon puts it, “The initial logic of citizenship, if we return to the polis, from which the political emerged, was one of discursive conflict, communication, and, thus, interaction.” Though we tend to think of cities as places where politics may need to occur, Gordon writes that “it was the production of citizenship, a complex and constant negotiation of power emerging from human beings living together, that produced the demand for spaces, transformed into places, for their continued cultivation. This meant, in principle, that citizens produced cities wherever such practices emerged.”

We took a piece by another longtime friend, the late Benjamin R. Barber, to close out this issue. Excerpting from his last book, Cool Cities, we find Barber arguing for the power of what can be achieved through the exercise of democratic citizenship at the city level. Where the countries of the world have fixed borders that distinguish
one from the other, many of the world’s most pressing problems know no bounds. Thus, to tackle these borderless problems, Barber states that we must, “restore democracy to its deliberative roots,” which he argues is most achievable at the level of the city.

Taking all the pieces as a whole, what we are left with is a picture, not of what the public thinks, but of how and why a public thinks. The “how” picture is far messier in that it does not convey a unified voice or a singular judgment. What it does convey though is public thinking that is actively struggling with difficult decisions, full of nuance, and reflective of the things that people deeply care about. As for the “whys,” Bob writes, when a goal of deliberation is to respond effectively to a social problem, then

our interest is not merely in what individuals in groups want to do, but in why they want to do it. What citizens’ deliberations have always revealed—if we hear them fully enough and consider them carefully enough—is the relationship between the “whys” rather than merely a tension between the “whats.” The “what” and the “why” are each related in their proponents’ eyes, those of the deliberators, but acknowledgement of the tension that attends any action is valued variously by different individuals—and recognizing that is the means, the indispensable means, toward the making of citizens’ relationship as a community. The achievement of that relationship—of a community that consciously shares its destiny—embodies the concept of government to which democracy aspires.

Noëlle McAfee and Nicholas A. Felts
Public deliberation is not well fashioned to make policy or frame legislation but it sets the stage, turns up the lights, and sometimes itself becomes the overture of the show.

The blessing, and perhaps the curse, of history is the easy wisdom of hindsight that it offers. We know that times change; and when we examine that change it may be comforting to see it as rooted in the genes of national history. If we have a sense, too, of how public judgment on a given issue or problem in our collective life might (or should) relate to the institutional judgment of our leaders, we will find it illuminating to track the ways that public dialogue has reflected, or was confused by, or failed to anticipate what in fact subsequently happened. But when Yankelovich describes, in his book about public judgment, the exercises of intellectual discipline by which a public may come to an actionable judgment, it is only for convenience that he cites them as stages through which the public awareness will pass in sequence (from becoming aware of an issue to making a responsible judgment), as though in a relay race where only the handing off of the baton gives license to proceed along the next lap, toward a finish line already known and accepted. The real truth of public deliberation—and it is implicit in the psychology that informs Yankelovich’s work—is that people move back and forth between the stages that he identifies: one stage may virtually “embrace” another, so that to have passed through one may accomplish the work of two. Further, as these pages may suggest, a given dilemma as understood by any one person may itself change over time: its features may
“morph” into another’s dilemma, and any “judgment” we may think we have come to may turn out to be merely a temporary reprieve, or a turn in the road. Perhaps more significant, the “finish line” is not known but emerges from the deliberative work of the participants.

Public deliberation reveals not a verdict but the making of a public.

To understand this particular phenomenon of public deliberation, approaching a judgment, is to contrast it with that of a jury that has to decide firmly between innocence and guilt, and even sometimes to measure the sum of penalties that its judgment should determine as appropriate. Public deliberation, for those who see and hear and analyze it—and for all of us who depend upon it—in effect reveals not a verdict but the making of a “public,” the formulation of a public will that can be described and put to use, even though it may not be measured in the sense that a public survey or poll may measure public opinion.

The survey analyst asks a series of questions (all of them based upon extensive research) of participants to be surveyed, then analyzes the responses as they relate to the predetermined purpose of the questions asked, reporting the outcome as agreement or disagreement, metrically. In analyzing public deliberation, however, having already identified a handful of different kinds of citizen that we think will be, overall, not unrepresentative of the nation or the community whose judgment we are seeking, we search out, in the course of a group deliberation, the various aspects of the substantive problem that participants have seemed to be interested in addressing, discovering both the range of their interest in those aspects or subtopics and the motives or values or risks that appear to have driven particular dissensions or agreements as the subtopics have become, by turns, the focus of discussion. An ultimate distinction between the two ways of capturing public attitudes—polling and deliberative conversation—is that while the first approach (the survey) pursues established points of difference, or conflict, in knowledge and opinion and intent, then reports on them metrically, the second (the deliberative forum) is a means of revealing—for commentators, politicians, or other citizens to pursue and capture narratively—substantive points of interest and concern that people think they might usefully address collectively as citizens. In public deliberation such concerns are modified, expanded, even merged into each other, recurring, or fading, as groups of people talk judiciously together for sustained periods of time.

Both the likenesses and the differences between findings from the two approaches are of course ultimately of interest to us in the pursuit of democracy, or self-government. But in pursuing an inquiry, we always have to remind ourselves that the questions asked in a survey are dictated by something other than “the public”; the survey, although it is informed by focus group research, ultimately is designed to illuminate and understand the likely public outcome of expert, official, or special-interest attitudes toward a substantive and already defined problem at issue. The public deliberative approach,
by contrast, is intent upon finding out what it is that interests people, broadly, and why it is that they are interested in—or quickly cease to pursue—particular aspects of the problem or its consequences. What we have to report, ultimately, from public deliberation, to policymakers or various leadership elites, is not “what they (the policymakers) ought to do” (although that may be implied), but what aspects of the problem at issue people are interested in; and why—this is most important—why they are interested in those aspects of the problem, and in what has been suggested might satisfactorily be done about them. What we have to report from the public’s deliberations is not what action or policy the people appear to favor, as pollsters might, but how (or to what degree) the people have come, collectively, to understand the demands that a recognized dilemma may make upon themselves, collectively.

This is an enormous step forward, for this kind of public judgment is an essential aspect of a democracy’s political practice that is simply not included in the formalities of our Constitution, nor much noted in the present institutional realities of our American democracy. Yet, as a collective dialogue among citizens—like the demos of the ancient Greeks—it is fundamentally what democracy presumes to characterize the community that is called “democratic.” Democracy demands a deliberative citizenry; an elective government is merely thereafter instrumental in effecting (or sometimes, alas, frustrating) what that citizenry wills.

Different as it is from conversation or argument among family or strangers at a table or along a bar, public, political, face-to-face, group deliberation is inevitably and of its nature significantly different also from both deliberation through the newspaper, or by mail, or online. Fundamentally, it seems that mail, print, or online kinds of communication tend to take shape as question or statement invoking or implying an answer, the varying responses being direct, oppositional, or sometimes ingeniously diverting reactions to a stated question or “position.” In deliberative groups, however, each successive respondent seems inevitably to add to or modify the nature of the original question.
The core of a group deliberation is the unfolding of a shared story.

participants. (That on-paper, on-wire, or online respondents are not physically recognized as participating nonverbally—by gesture, notion, murmur, or intriguing changes in physical reaction)—may further exacerbate the difference.)

Such deliberatively offered considerations are important in varying degrees on different occasions, of course; yet we do well to remember that the core of a group deliberation, as we have traditionally valued it, is the unfolding of a shared story among a modest-sized group of individuals, with some shared values but differing experiences, as they consider a common (or shared) “public problem.” This is not to say that our experience of the problem is shared: the healthcare problem strikes me differently if I am a stockholder in an insurance company than it does an uninsured teen-aged mother. But in public political deliberation, as citizens, we recognize similarly the problematic nature of our mutually affective individual interests. Public communication among strangers who do not assemble as a community, however, even if it can be realized online with a visible component, tends to reflect a focus on immediate responses, or answers. And even if a range of individual narratives of discomfort in search of answers comes readily in some instances, the one-at-a-time accumulation of individual responses—rather than a continuing sequence of experience and interaction—remains a significant difference between the deliberative group and the casual or one-at-a-time read news-sheet, online communications, or in audited argument. This is perhaps why there are so few examples of written literary deliberation; even great collections of correspondence, like that between Paul Claudel and George Bernard Shaw, turn out to be, in effect, debates among researchers—carefully thought and highly opinionated ones, at that!—rather than deliberative searches for shared understanding. In a deliberative conversation a shared story unfolds, taking the place of argument, while in the debates of legislators or partisans, predetermined interests are argued and attacked.

Public deliberation does not need a teacher or an umpire, and certainly not the kind of moderator we are familiar with in news programs, where, typically, hosts and reporters tend to adopt consciously (and sometimes condescendingly) the pattern of professional commentators. Popular domestic news media, deliberation online, and formal political campaign activities all tend to be valued among individuals who consciously represent a given interest. They are favored instruments of government and elective politics. Public politics, however, takes place within groups whose members must come to share an understanding strong enough to generate action by means of an extended exchange.
of experience. The value of public democratic deliberation, then, is that it opens the way toward shared understanding and thence collaborative action. Experience tells us that this is a difficult process, however, that requires extensive exchange among citizens. And public politics, in this sense, is never a conflict of interests, always a shared endeavor. The recognizable deliberative process of democracy is one whereby we citizens, in groups or as group, together exchange (and to varying degrees change) our understandings of problems that confront us all, as a people. We appear to value the options that such conversations offer us, and so recognize the trade-offs that the various options will inevitably require.

To assume that the outcome of public deliberation is, ultimately, the making of a decisive quasi-legislative decision may actually undervalue the public’s distinctive role in the political life of a contemporary democracy. To government, always, belongs the task of framing and enforcing law; and in a fully functioning democracy, it will do so in response to a manifest public understanding—if you will, to an expression of public will. The image of the classical agora, as a place of relatively well-centered concern, comes to mind; but, in a vast and diverse country like the United States, where the business of one interest often seems necessarily to depend upon the exclusion of another, the notion that this kind of harmonious will can be satisfactorily achieved by the skills of representatives, elected by those interests, is open to question. The formulation of a coherent public will—indeed the taking shape of a public, itself—depends on the process of its citizens, collectively, coming to judgment.

Except that the outcome of public deliberation is not ever quite a “judgment” of the kind we associate with courts of law, or professional examiners, or ideologically driven legislators!

In the very early years of the National Issues Forums, we learned quickly that individual participants in a deliberative forum very often did not change their minds (or their opinions) on the question at issue, but that they did change their judgments of the opinions of others. The voices that they heard in the public forum were voices recognized as responsive to a shared dilemma, even though they might tend toward different courses of action, reflecting the somewhat different circumstances or prior concerns of individual participants. The more we have heard these public voices, confronting more (and sometimes more complex) issues, the more clear it has become that, in deliberative
In this sense, whenever we listen to, or participate among, a deliberative public—no matter that the issue be complex, the deliberation together all too brief—we become a part of that public, coming to (or at least moving toward) judgment about what should be done, in the context of our shared problem and a shared sense of others’ experience of it. It may often be that in deliberative politics—as in psychiatric medicine—relative to the time available and the complexity of the rooted problem, the ultimate “cure” remains elusive. Nevertheless, what is achieved, what is learned or “worked through,” session by session, may be critical in determining what follows. And the patient (we, the people, in this case) may progress therefrom! Politically, the psychological metaphor of “working through” is particularly illuminating to those whose interest is in the question David Mathews is wont to ask, “What will make democracy work as it should?”

Such deliberative dialogue is itself what makes democracy work: deliberative citizens are doing the work of democracy. In a culture like ours—that tends to think of “government to which democracy aspires.

When our goal, then, is an actionable, collective response to a societal problem, our interest is not merely in what individuals in groups want to do, but in why they want to do it. What citizens’ deliberations have always revealed—if we hear them fully enough and consider them carefully enough—is the relationship between the “whys” rather than merely a tension between the “whats.” The “what” and the “why” are each related in their proponents’ eyes, those of the deliberators, but acknowledgement of the tension that attends any action is valued variously by different individuals—and recognizing that is the means, the indispensable means, toward the making of citizens’ relationship as a community. The achievement of that relationship—of a community that consciously shares its destiny—embodies the concept of government public politics, the movement is always toward a closer, collective understanding, both of shared dilemmas and of the kinds of trade-offs that must be considered in deciding how those dilemmas might best be handled. And more clear becomes the effort that needs be made to that end if we are genuinely to share our life as a people!

Citizens’ deliberations have always revealed the relationship between the “whys” rather than merely a tension between the “whats.”
of the people” as essentially associated with a representatively elected institutional government which, once chosen, governs pretty much as do other kinds of hierarchic governments—it is not conventional to accept that a people talking to itself is ultimately setting the terms within which effective policy is designed and legislation shaped. Yet although these deliberative citizens … may still not know quite what to do or who should do it with respect to any given issue, it is nonetheless their dialogue that leads us to an awareness of what should be done, and why. In the last resort, public deliberation is not well fashioned to make policy or frame legislation, but it reveals to all of us the concerns that policy and law must embrace. It sets the stage, turns up the lights, and sometimes itself becomes the overture of the show that we look forward to. As Daniel Yankelovich says, it sets “the boundaries of public permission.” As a deliberative public, we may not actually decide upon which actions might be taken by ourselves, individually or collectively, and which by our governing institutions. And contrary to sentimental expectations, the deliberative public forum seldom leads directly to individual citi-

zens’ actions. It is, however, the people’s politics —as distinct from the politics of elections and legislation—in the functioning democracy.

Robert J. Kingston was a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation and editor of the Kettering Review for more than 30 years. Before joining the Kettering Foundation, Kingston was deputy director of the National Endowment for the Humanities under three US presidents. He was also the executive director of Public Agenda in New York. This essay is drawn from his 2012 book, Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics.
We are recognizing more and more that humans are inherently creative, pragmatic, and collaborative problem solvers. Indeed, this is perhaps the defining feature of our species. The question is, to what extent and within what contexts do we tap into that collaborative potential?

H uman nature and democracy have always been intertwined. Political philosophers since Plato and Aristotle have debated political systems based on the question of whether humans can govern themselves or whether they require some sort of stronger authority to ensure appropriate behavior. With the advent of the Internet and the increasing political polarization and animosity of our times, concerns about democracy and human nature have once again risen to the forefront. Deliberative democracy offers a particular response to these concerns, one that is rather optimistic, ambitious, and process oriented. A key assumption of those of us that support a more deliberative democracy is essentially that process matters. We optimistically believe that humans are certainly capable of self-governance, on the key condition that quality processes are utilized, which help bring out their best thinking. Alternatively, we realize that bad processes can bring out the worst in our fellow humans, and make democratic living untenable.

As a result, a key question arises: what mechanisms can be employed to best tap into the positives of human nature and avoid the bad?

With that question in mind, and armed with 10 years of experience running deliberative processes at the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation, I decided to do a deep dive into the recent literature on social psychology and brain science to develop better answers to that increasingly critical question. This essay summarizes my key findings. The short answer is that my belief that process matters has exponentially been strengthened, based both on my realization that many of the
Many of the public processes we tend to rely on the most are exceedingly problematic (i.e., they tap into and reify the worst in human nature) as well as the argument that when done well, deliberative practices have great potential to avoid or overcome those tendencies and unleash our inherent empathy, creativity, and sense of purpose.

This essay is organized in four parts. I first summarize the research on and explain the impact of the unfortunately more dominant negative aspects of human nature, which I label “detrimental motivated reasoning.” I then summarize the less dominant but still critical potential positive aspects of human nature. Considering both, I then argue that our most common public processes—a two-party system; winner-take-all elections; politicized, for-profit media; public hearings and citizen comment time; most social media engagement; letters to the editor; etc.—unfortunately overwhelmingly tend to activate and exaggerate the negative and rarely tap into the positive. I then move to the more hopeful argument that deliberative processes can flip that script. To close, I qualify my argument with the recognition that the shift to a more deliberative political system will be exceedingly difficult at the national level, however, the possibility of supporting this shift at the local level is not only possible, but urgently necessary.

Negative Motivated Reasoning and the Vicious Cycle of False Polarization

My research into social psychology and brain science highlighted five key features of how our brains are, unfortunately, individually wired for polarization. Each of these features are primarily subconscious and inherent. The first, and perhaps most important, is that we crave certainty and consistency. We are “cognitive misers” that want easy decisions. Once we make decisions—such as what party to identify with—our brains work overtime to fortify that decision and protect it from attack. This thirst for certainty is in many ways the primary driving force for the remaining conclusions.

Second, we are suckers for simplistic good versus evil narratives. We are naturally storytellers, and our favorite stories cast “our side” as the heroes, and those that disagree with us as the villains. We use these stories to help organize all the facts and opinions we confront, twisting them to fit our preferred narrative. And once those that disagree are successfully identified as “evil,” their arguments are that much easier to dismiss, particularly because we are so convinced of their ulterior motives. Third, we are tribal creatures that prefer to gather with the like-minded. As Jonathan Haidt has argued, we are “groupish” not “selfish.” This does provide some positive potential, which I highlight later, but too often this tribal nature establishes the “us” by negatively defining the “other.” Gathering with the like-minded also then works to
others. Combined, these stages help explain the phenomenon of why facts don’t seem to change minds or even contribute positively to a debate. People naturally seek out, highlight, distort, and remember the facts and examples that fit their perspective, and avoid, dismiss, distort, or forget those that do not. The backfire effect even teaches us that the stronger the argument made against our perspective, the more our brains must work to overcome it, leading to the scary thought that high-quality data is somehow actually even more detrimental to the debate. The bottom line is that people don’t change minds and come together based on data. Due to these various factors, being more “informed” too often actually means being more significantly misinformed, and the mix of confidence and bias can be very dangerous.

The final feature simply highlights that because of the first four, we inherently avoid value dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices. We inherently avoid value dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices.

discern good data from bad. Then, we make egoistic attributions and tell stories about the evidence that organizes them unfairly, leading to decisions that utilize simple heuristics and a self-serving bias. Finally, after our decisions, our memories are often biased, holding on to consequences and examples we prefer and ignoring

We inherently avoid value dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices.

Fourth, and perhaps most relevant to deliberative scholars, we prefer to filter and cherry pick evidence to support our views. In my full report on which this piece is based, I walk through five sequential stages in which this happens. First, we are guilty of selective exposure in terms of what sources we rely on, then we interpret evidence in a biased way, utilizing much tougher rules of evidence for information that runs counter to our current perspective. This is known as confirmation bias, which is perhaps one of the most important concepts overall to understand and defend against, and the primary culprit fueling the development of a “post-fact” society in which we have seemingly lost the ability to

Fourth, and perhaps most relevant to deliberative scholars, we prefer to filter and cherry pick evidence to support our views. In my full report on which this piece is based, I walk through five sequential stages in which this happens. First, we are guilty of selective exposure in terms of what sources we rely on, then we interpret evidence in a biased way, utilizing much tougher rules of evidence for information that runs counter to our current perspective. This is known as confirmation bias, which is perhaps one of the most important concepts overall to understand and defend against, and the primary culprit fueling the development of a “post-fact” society in which we have seemingly lost the ability to

The final feature simply highlights that because of the first four, we inherently avoid value dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices. We see the world through more simplistic lenses. Unfortunately, in a world of wicked problems, dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices underlie all the big issues we care about.

These five features of negative motivated reasoning lead to individuals with strongly developed biases, which essentially serve as blinders that narrow their thinking. When these individuals subsequently enter the political arena, things quickly escalate into what I’ve called the vicious cycle of false polarization. I emphasize
the “false” because I truly believe our differences are significantly over-exaggerated and manufactured (which later leads to the promising impact of better processes). Nonetheless, when these biased individuals interact with others with opposing blinders, it does not go well. Negative interaction effects occur that only exacerbate their biases. These unproductive clashes leave them both more polarized, sure of themselves, and convinced of their opponent’s depravity. Then, you can add in what I’ve termed the “Russell effect,” named after philosopher Bertrand Russell and a popular Internet meme featuring a quote attributed to him that states, “The whole problem of the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people are full of doubts.” This phenomenon further exaggerates the polarization because the loudest and most frequent voices are often the most biased, while those that see nuance in political issues and hope to bring people together often are often silent. They simply do not see a place for their perspective in the political battlefield. The polarization further increases with the impact of social media (which intensifies all the mechanisms of bias, such as selective exposure and confirmation bias), the strategies of adversarial politics (which thrive on simplistic good v. evil stories), and the typical tactics of the media (which know that conflict and spectacle drives interest). This negative cycle ultimately fuels rampant polarization, cynicism, and, to growing levels, animosity and even contempt.

A Look on the Bright Side

To bring us back from the brink, my research on human nature also revealed some core positive aspects of human nature that can be tapped into to overcome the false polarization highlighted above. First of all, while the negative features are well documented, they are not overwhelming, and, thankfully, many scholars are beginning to focus more and more on why they happen and how they can be avoided or mitigated. New subfields focused on “debiasing” and “debunking” are developing. We are learning more about the conditions of when these quirks of human nature are strongest and weakest, critical information for process designers, public engagement specialists, and deliberative practitioners.

Beyond the ways to minimize the negative quirks, we are also learning more about the potential strength of alternative features of human nature, such as the fact that we are inherently social beings who seek purpose and community. The growing field of positive psychology teaches us that people are often at their happiest when they are doing hard things well, and, as Daniel Pink argued in Drive, we crave autonomy, mastery, and purpose in ways that can be directed to community and the com-
mon good. Our tribal nature, in other words, doesn’t have to be divisive. We can construct tribes that are more inclusive, particularly in local contexts. Nationally, it is difficult to get away from the Democrat, Republican, or perhaps the “cynically detached” tribes, but locally, perhaps your tribe is your city, bringing people together in important ways. Local tribes can put more focus on the “us,” rather than the other, and more naturally take on the tough choices inherent to living in community together. Similarly, we are learning more about our natural empathy, which pushes back on assumptions of simple self-interest. A vibrant debate is forming regarding the scope of empathy, and whether a global notion of empathy is possible.

Perhaps most important, we are recognizing more and more that humans are inherently creative, pragmatic, and collaborative problem solvers. Indeed, this is perhaps the defining feature of our species. The question is, to what extent and within what contexts do we tap into that collaborative potential? It is clear that wicked problems call for creativity and collaboration, in ways that the simplistic good versus evil political frames do not (the “good” need to simply vanquish the “evil,” as all the Disney movies of our childhood taught us). But to what degree do our political conversations spark, support, and rely on collaborative creativity?

Last, the research shows, as Aristotle argued 2,000 years ago, that while we are clearly impacted by the quirks of our brains, we can certainly overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits. We can create a culture of collaboration. We can withstand the inherent push toward polarization and certainty, adopt a wicked problems mind-set, and learn to work through tough issues. There are two primary connected and complementary factors to accomplishing this. One is education, and the other is process. We can revamp our educational systems to focus more on collaborative problem solving and managing our wayward brains, and we can rely more on processes specifically designed to bring out the best in us and avoid or mitigate the worst. While both factors are critical, the rest of the essay will focus on the latter.

Sadly, based on the developing knowledge of social psychology and brain science, we fall woefully short in terms of the public processes we primarily rely on to support public decision making. Indeed, if I were to purposefully design a system to ensure polarization and division, I would likely conjure up a two-party system with winner-take-all elections that are so exceedingly expensive that they require absurd amounts of fundraising and that are heavily influenced by both unproductive social media interactions and a politicized, profit-focused media. Such a system takes the inherent features of negative motivated reasoning, and exponentially multiplies their effects. Unfortunately, democracy is often mostly associated with presidential elections, which quite literally represent democracy at its worst in terms of the quality of public discourse.
Beyond elections and party politics, many of the other basic features of our political communication and public engagement apparatus, when seen through the lens of social psychology and brain science, are clearly counterproductive. A dominant majority of public processes focus on allowing individuals or groups to express their opinions, but rarely provide genuine opportunities for productive interaction, shared learning, or cocreation. Whether at the microphone at city council, in the letters to our editors, on our posts on social media, or through chanting during a protest march, we predominately hear an extended collection of individual or like-minded opinions. Based on our human nature, those are likely simply a collection of rather biased views, rocketing past each other, leading to, at best, no real engagement, and, at worst, further polarization.

Based on our knowledge of wicked problems, we know we need much more from our public engagement. Providing opportunities for people to express their opinions is simply the first step. Beyond that, we need our public processes to allow people to develop mutual understanding and trust. We need processes that help us elevate quality arguments and expose weak or manipulative ones. We need processes that incite learning and the refinement of opinions. We need processes that spark creativity and innovation, and ultimately lead to cocreation and collaborative action. These are all possible despite our mental peculiarities, but they call for different ways of engaging.

The Deliberative Alternative

Within this context, we can reconsider the basic components of deliberative engagement, and how when utilized well, they can create genuine opportunities to get past the negative and activate the positive. Full consideration is beyond the capacity of this essay, but consider just a few of the key components of deliberation: a wicked problems mind-set, issues named and framed for deliberation rather than persuasion, ground rules, and small diverse groups gathered together face to face and arranged in a circle with a facilitator equipped to help them engage. These components, both individually and collectively, clearly work to mitigate negative motivated reasoning. When combined well, they can create an environment where the need for certainty is out of place, the simplistic good versus evil narrative is more easily dismissed, our tribes are broadened, cherry picking is frowned upon, and our aversion to paradox and tough choices is overcome. We can move away from a political climate in which bad arguments are rewarded and good arguments punished to
election and the continued hyperpolarization that followed. My optimism has an important limiting condition, however. Shifting from our dominant, bias-inducing processes at the national level will be exceedingly difficult. The adversarial forces tied to the current system are simply too strong. At the local level, however, my optimism finds a home. Following the argument of the late Benjamin Barber and, more recent, the authors of *The Metropolitan Revolution*, I believe cities will (and must) step up to save our democracy. Mayors and city managers can’t play political games as much; they must find ways to work together to address their wicked problems. At this smaller, but still very significant level, key leaders and organizations can build capacity for deliberative engagement processes designed and proven to help create the collaborative cultures that work against the tide of polarization. As we work to create more and more of these wise, deliberative cities, our long-term hope is that people will see that process matters, will build the habits, and will ultimately demand more from our national systems as well.

Martín Carcasson is a professor of communication studies at Colorado State University and the founder and director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation. This piece is a summary of a larger report completed for the Kettering Foundation entitled, *Process Matters: Human Nature, Democracy, and a Call for Rediscovering Wisdom*. 

one that inspires and rewards quality thinking. Most important, we can avoid the vicious cycle of false polarization and work towards a virtuous cycle of authentic engagement, in which genuine interaction leads to more trust and mutual understanding, which in turn supports learning and refinement of opinion, and then ultimately to cocreation and collaborative action, all of which is mutually self-reinforcing.

To close, based both on my 10 years of practitioner experience and my extended foray into the literature on social psychology and brain science, I have renewed optimism of the possibility of a robust deliberative democracy. That optimism is obviously tempered by the growing polarization, exhibited by the ridiculous tenor of the 2016
Out of the Shadows of Polarization

By Linell Ajello

The forums allow goals that have broad support across party lines to come to the fore, values and goals that have been buried in the zero-sum contest between parties.

Before a National Issues Forums (NIF) forum in Jacksonville, Florida, a woman in her 70s told me that, as a Democrat, she’d always felt a bit out of place in Jacksonville. Even still, she said, “There were Republicans with whom I could have a good discussion.” This has changed over the past few years she said. In the months before the presidential election, any reference to politics seemed to become more fraught. Her church is visibly politically diverse, with Republican public figures (including the state attorney general and several judges) as well as progressive activists in its pews. Members were finding it impossible to avoid or speak past blasts of disdain and righteous indignation whenever conversation veered to any political issue. The dean of the church characterized the feelings around an increasingly steep political divide between parishioners as well as family members, friends, and colleagues as “anxiety” and “grief.” In response, she reached out to Gregg Kaufman, who often convenes NIF forums in town, and together they hosted a forum on political dysfunction (called “Political Fix”), in August 2016.

The evening’s program began with Kaufman, as moderator, inviting each participant to speak of a personal stake they have in the issue at hand. The most repeated statement in our little circle was: “I don’t like the way things are going,” along with “I don’t know how to talk,” or “There has to be a way we can talk” and “Don’t we have some common values?” A woman in her 50s said she had tried, several times and in a few different ways, to speak up when someone said something that offended her, but “now I just let it slide by.” Several
onism. There seemed to be immediate, broad agreement on the need to curtail campaign donations to bring corporations and the very rich more in line with the average citizen.

The discussion went so well that several people assumed that the event had failed to attract a diverse group. “I think we were talking to the choir,” one woman remarked as she left. “There was less diversity of opinion than I anticipated,” someone noted and asked, “Are we all similar politically?” Helpfully, though, each member of the group had stated something about their political affiliation in a questionnaire I collected after the forum. And several I spoke with afterwards were very surprised to hear that they had in fact been a diverse group: about half identified as Democrat, and the rest as Republican or Independent.

A lawyer who has participated in several forums said he thinks the stated purpose of the forum brings out people’s capacities to talk to, and even learn from, each other: “We’re all gathered here for that purpose, so we’re all on our best behavior for open discussion. There’s no other time we do this, except in a social set-

people were close to tears. Kaufman reviewed some quick ground rules for the forum, such as prioritizing listening and respect, along with—and this was of primary importance—no talk of Trump/Pence or Clinton/Kaine.

Kaufman directed everyone’s attention to an issue guide, which outlined a range of approaches for tackling the issue, itemized areas of concern (for example: lobbyists, campaign donations, term limits), and gave an overview of existing law/policy. Someone spoke up about the influence of lobbyists and special-interest money. An actual lobbyist shared her perspective that lobbyists provide a service, giving politicians solid information about issues that concern people. But industries, corporations, and ordinary people don’t have near as much power, someone countered. Insights were offered and countered. As participants picked their way from one focus area and set of options to another, the tenor of the group quickly changed—speech that was like shaky steps on thin ice began to take on the feel of a driveway basketball game, moving steadily, with serious focus and mutual challenge, but without antag-
regulated. In this case, the forum didn’t build a bridge across disagreement but instead revealed an area of common ground that has been overshadowed. In the zero-sum contest of Democrat versus Republican, such issues receive little attention because they do not reaffirm a partisan divide: there is no contest over reforming money in politics that will benefit or harm only one party. But another National Issues Forums topic, violence and policing, involves perspectives and experiences that differ, largely, by race. In Jacksonville, this antipathy played out at the local level. This past winter, local news used the terms *epidemic* and *wave* in relation to recent gun violence, much of it involving young African Americans, much of it occurring in a heavily policed part of the city. In February, Kaufman, the dean of the downtown church, and a reverend of another Episcopal church, this one with a majority of African American parishioners, hosted a forum titled “Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?” In attendance were several members of an organization that had advocated against criminal charges for minors and first offenders. Also at the forum were two former police officers, a sheriff, and the former state attorney general with whom they’d had more than one public clash. Moderator Kaufman began the evening by asking each person to share something for which they are grateful. A range of

**Many participants expressed shock at how quickly the electric charge of political disagreement can vaporize mutual respect. But political commentary and entertainment around the presidential campaign was often anything but respectful, and often infused with disdain. Writing in the* Atlantic, *Alec MacGillis surveyed the “barely suppressed contempt” of lower-class whites by both conservatives and liberals. Jennifer Rubin, a self-identified conservative at the* Washington Post *wrote, “Let’s name and shame Trump’s enablers.” But this is certainly a two-way street: Internet comments are peppered with insults to Democrats and progressives as well.**

Given the portrayals of some voters as deserving pity or shame for their incompetence, and others as worthy of disdain and mockery for their effeminacy, it makes sense that the ground of mutual respect across political difference has disappeared beneath our feet. One participant’s observation, that listening respectfully and attentively is a key goal of the forum, highlights how little space there is for this kind of engagement in political discussion, especially around the zero-sum contest of the presidential election and the discourse surrounding it.

At the same time, the issue of money in politics might be an easy win—there is broad, bipartisan agreement that it should be more

**We sit in our own little pocket, refuse to listen.**
rather than identify them as someone to turn to for help. Other people spoke of negative experiences with law enforcement: “Often people will call police, report a relative ‘acting up,’ police don’t know how to deal with a mentally ill person, next thing you know—dead.” One woman said that what a grieving relative, or traumatized witness, does not need immediately after a violent event is to be interrogated by a police officer (or a reporter); what they need is a counselor.

In the midst of these different perspectives, people at the table soon found themselves voicing desires for the same thing—for police to be prominent in the community—especially at schools. One of the more striking things about the talk was the amount of learning that took place. Indeed, both during the forum and afterwards, in interviews, participants said they didn’t know about certain programs that were mentioned. Towards the end of the evening, many people said that they were only getting part of the story from the news.

Parishioners from both churches said the event was not what they expected. One man said that he had prepared himself to hear the term *overpolicing* and “the Black Lives Matter perspective.” And he imagined that, at the forum, through listening to other people’s experiences, he would understand how someone would come to see policing as a problem. While no one I spoke with changed their mind about the actions and policies they’d opposed, they learned new things about the judicial system in their town as well as the people who administer it: they saw a fuller picture. After one man
In some respects, the differences between people in both Jacksonville forums were obvious: conservative and progressive/liberal, black and white. While there were some participants in their 30s and even 20s, the majority were over 60. All were Episcopal parishioners. At a public college in New York City, a small “Safety and Justice” forum included mostly younger participants—college students and recent grads along with two professional women, one in her 20s and one with two grown children. Unlike Jacksonville, there was no prayer to begin the forum, no reminder that “the Holy Spirit is present.” Instead, Professor Don Waisanen asked, “If you usually talk, try to listen more, and—vice versa—if you’re someone who usually listens, try to talk more.” The point, he said, is neither to debate nor to reach

They came prepared to face disagreement and anger.

said that his neighborhood had become militarized, many people were affected by hearing one police officer say that he not only wants riot gear so that he can get close to the danger (to better protect others), but also because he wants to live to see another Christmas. “We want to go home to our kids, just like you do.” This humanizing aspect of the event, while it didn’t seem to change anyone’s position on programs or policy, enabled people to learn from each other, and—like the earlier event on money in politics—brought common ground to the fore. One woman, a former principal, spoke of the need for greater investment in poor, high-crime areas. Other people mentioned the need to put public money into education and job programs in the neighborhoods that need it most; there was no opposition to this.

Towards the end of the night, after the former state attorney general and others had spoken of their confusion as to why people turn to violence—one man answered that question from personal experience: “Tired of seeing my mom struggle, with six boys and one girl, I took it upon myself to be of some assistance. Struggle is like a hitchhiker, it won’t get off you. Once you go into the facility, you’re 16, 17, you’re in with dangerous men, 50-years-to-life killers. Without education you’re lost, easy to be used and manipulated. Ain’t easy, knives in there, guns in there.” It was striking how much discipline, will, and sheer loneliness it took for him to get out of prison, and stay away from a community of people that would enmesh him in crime. The forum built a sense of shared goodwill along with a sense that this problem requires all the information, experience, insight, and expertise that we have to share.
Perhaps the forums provide opportunity for political engagement for those whom polarization has marginalized.

consensus, but to listen. Still, perhaps because of the college setting, the forum often veered towards debate, especially between one woman, who has managed an alternative sentencing program for young people and was concerned with overpolicing, and one man, a finance major who several times offered what he described as a somewhat libertarian point of view. Throughout the course of the forum, this man and one other often stressed the high levels of violence in the United States as evidence of a need for arming and empowering police. One cited the 2011 London riots as evidence that, without heavily armed police, protests will turn to riots. “That’s incidence over prevalence,” the young woman countered. Their back and forth was a prominent part of the evening. But, as in Jacksonville, in the midst of divisions, participants agreed on the need for greater funding—into schools, job training, and mental health programs—in poorer, high-crime neighborhoods.

As in Jacksonville, some New York City forum participants had more direct, negative experiences with police than others. One woman said her children and husband had been stopped and frisked in ways that made them feel harassed. Her daughter, at 12, was stopped and frisked by plainclothes police who she said took so long to identify themselves that she at first thought she was being kidnapped. A young man who lives in the Bronx described the traumatic effects of gun violence at school, on his block, in his apartment building. He described how heavy police presence contributes to a sense of being under siege, and to trauma. To him, guns are the problem no matter who has them and what’s needed most is PTSD treatment for all involved.

As was the case in Jacksonville, people were most affected by the first-person accounts they heard. At the beginning of the event, Waisanen asked everyone to rank the issue of violence and policing in terms of importance, from 1 to 10. The answers ranged from 4 to 10. At the end of the evening, the lowest number was 7. Someone who saw the positive impact of police in his own neighborhood of Corona, Queens, was struck by a fellow participant’s descriptions of his life in the Bronx. When Waisanen asked
why his number changed, he turned to the young woman and said, “Your line of work opened my eyes, we need more resources.”

The interaction of many factors forms and sustains polarization: a zero-sum game between parties, an entertainment and social media culture that casts either disdain or pity on those we differ from, the lack of shared trust in news sources. Several forum participants said they expected to hear extreme and narrow views, but to get a chance to hear them in person, and perhaps with more background and context than what comes in news segments and social media. They came prepared to face disagreement and anger. They were right to expect this, because those who are most engaged in political life, and who talk about politics more than others, tend to be more ideologically extreme, more fearful, and angrier than those who don’t (according to the Pew Research Center). Yet, after the forum, one participant stated that they were “startled by the degree of agreement.” Another said that they felt different about political discussion and the potential for a way forward. And a third said the forum “expanded my view of hopeful solutions and I was surprised by the hopeful (potential) willingness to change things.” The format of the event is surely part of what enables this result.

But it may also draw a certain kind of person into political dialogue outside their private lives, one different than the more “ideologically extreme,” the angry and the fearful. Several people asked me whether I thought that the people who come to these forums were more open, more likely to consider the other side, less extreme. That may be. If so, perhaps the forums provide opportunity for political engagement for those whom polarization has marginalized, enabling them the space to do the sort of speaking, listening, and learning they wish to. At the same time, the forums allow goals that have broad support across party lines to come to the fore, values and goals that have been buried in the zero-sum contest between parties.

Linell Ajello teaches in the Expository Writing Program at NYU and has published on democracy and public dialogue in both academic and nonacademic venues.
Informal political conversation is uncomfortable at times, but it enables people to figure out how issues matter for people like them. In other words, it helps people make sense of the political world and integrate themselves into it.
them. In other words, it helps people make sense of the political world and integrate themselves into it.

**Felts:** In general, how would you describe the tenor and content of the political discussions you’ve observed over the years? Are these mostly surface-level, polite conversations? Is it just a venue for people to vent or blow off steam? Or are people really wrestling with big problems and trying to figure out what we might do about them?

**Cramer:** The tenor of these conversations has changed over time, primarily in reaction to the political world. Their intensity varies from group to group, but for the most part these have been polite, easygoing conversations in which people express opposing points of view from time to time, but in a good-natured way. The exception have been conversations after Governor Scott Walker’s proposal of Act 10 in Wisconsin, in early 2011, and the protests and recall elections that ensued, and right now, in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. In these cases, the tone has been more pained, with people clearly being defensive and cautious to bring up political topics.

These are not academic deliberations, but they are the act of people doing their best to make sense of the crazy world around them.

A great survey study published in the early 2000s by Faye Lomax Cook, Michael Delli Carpini, and Lawrence Jacobs found that a full 68 percent of the US adult public had engaged in face-to-face conversations about public affairs at least a few times per month.

I say that it is possible that the level of talk is changing, however, based on work that a group of colleagues and I at the University of Wisconsin-Madison just published on conversation in contentious settings. Here in Wisconsin, the Marquette Poll found that 32.1 percent of the public stopped talking to someone close to them in the wake of the divisiveness people experienced after the election of Scott Walker to the governorship.

Informal political conversation is uncomfortable at times, but it is important because it conveys information, enables people to figure out how issues matter for people like
The part of your question about whether people wrestle with big issues or not is important and intriguing. I have never seen these conversations take the form of deliberation in which people set ground rules, and then carefully consider multiple sides of an issue, and take the time to challenge the conclusions they are reaching with alternative points of view. However, I would say that, yes, they nevertheless are wrestling with big issues. The topics arise because people care about them. They express concern. They ask questions of each other. They wonder how someone could hold a different opinion and then someone who does get the nerve to tell them. These are not academic deliberations, but they are the act of people doing their best to make sense of the crazy world around them.

**Felts:** A lot is made about nonattitudes or the baseless opinions of the masses. How do you square these critiques with what you’ve observed? Is there an underlying logic to the opinions that you hear expressed in everyday talk? Where do values fit in?

**Cramer:** It is a well-documented finding that people in the United States on average do not know many facts about public affairs. That is an issue, and I do not wish to make light of it. In addition, we also know that the vast majority of people do not base their opinions on an underlying ideology or consistent belief system. But there is an underlying logic to the way people make sense of politics, and I would label it social identity. By social identity, I mean the psychological attachments that people have to social groups, such as Republicans, Chinese Americans, women, and even “people around here.” Social identities may not be what many people think of when they refer to “logic,” but it is powerful and pervasive. Here’s how I see it working: our sense of who we are in the world—what kind of a person we are, whom we are for and whom we are against—operates like a filter or a lens through which we interpret life, including political life. This underpins the narratives about cause and effect that we believe and pass on to each other. It underpins which candidates seem to be for “people like me.” That is not ideology, but it is in its own respect an organizing framework.

**Felts:** You hear a lot of disagreements described as instances where the other side “doesn’t have their facts straight” or “if they only knew x,y,z they would see things my way.” Your work suggests though that identity is the primary means by which people make sense of the political world—not facts and political information. Yet, a lot of prescriptions for what ails the American body politic involve better information, more information, etc. What do you make of this impasse?

**Cramer:** I start with the fact that the United States is a democracy whose institutions were designed to allow for deliberation and
important decisions affecting rural residents were made by city dwellers without consulting rural residents; 2) a sense that rural residents have different values than other groups; and 3) a perception that rural residents were not getting their fair share of resources relative to city dwellers. You make the case that this identity helps to explain the sense of powerlessness and alienation that you saw in your research. Is it possible that the component parts of rural identity are more widely shared beyond whites who live outside of major cities? It seems like a feeling of having no say in decisions that affect you, a feeling that your group has different values, and a sense that you are not getting your fair share relative to others would be fairly common sentiments. Could this help to explain the general feeling of political malaise that we see all across the country or even the world?

**Cramer:** Yes. Absolutely. The most remarkable thing about the various ways in which I heard people in small communities telling me that they were not getting their fair share is how similar it is to what we hear from the creation of sound public policy. At the same time, they were designed to both capitalize on the fact that different people have different perspectives and to prevent the divisiveness that can arise from those differences in perspectives. In other words, facts and science must have a place in how we create public policy and how we decide which candidates should be elected to office to make that policy. But we must also remember that people interpret information through perspectives. All the information in the world, the most rigorous science in the world, will make no difference if people receive it in a form that makes no sense given their lived experience, or is delivered by a messenger or in a manner that shows no respect for that experience. Any prescription for healing our democracy has to involve both the delivery of solid facts and attention to the fact that it is human beings who will be receiving them.

**Felts:** In your recent book, you talk about the idea of a rural consciousness or rural identity that shapes the way rural Wisconsinites think about politics and their place in the political world. This identity was composed of: 1) a feeling that
people in other walks of life in the United States. If you scrape away the details and the manner in which people were seeing their injustice as a function of the type of place in which they live, it sounds remarkably similar for example, to

The big issue is not that people in rural communities feel left behind, but that so many different people in our country do.

what we hear from low-income communities of color in our urban areas. They were saying, in general, that people in power were not paying attention to people like them, in communities like theirs; that they were not getting the basic resources they needed to get ahead;

and that the people making the decisions that affected their lives didn’t know them, had no familiarity with the challenges they faced, and at root didn’t respect them. So yes, the big issue is not that people in rural communities feel left behind, but that so many different people in our country do.

Felts: A big part of Kettering’s research is focused on how people become engaged as citizens and make sound decisions on the problems that confront them and their communities. Can your recent research shed any light on the extent to which citizens are able to become engaged and make sound decisions? What are some of the primary obstacles to this?

Cramer: I am repeatedly confronted with people who read my work, or hear me speak and nevertheless wonder how can it be that people vote against their interests. Those comments and questions have placed front and center for me just how seldom we recognize the role of perspectives in political decision making. When people make political choices, those choices are a function of how they see the world. Those perspectives influence what information they pay attention to, how they digest it, and how they use it down the line to interpret subsequent information. What looks like a stupid decision or a “vote against one’s interests” to some people turns out to often make sense when you learn about the perspectives which led them to that choice.

To answer your question, we need to define what we mean by a “sound decision.” If by “sound” we mean a decision that is most clearly consistent with a person’s interests, we can’t know that without knowing how people define
their interests for themselves. Or perhaps we mean the decision that is most likely to maximize a person’s welfare. That’s a probabilistic judgment, about which it seems rather arrogant to assume we can judge that better than people can for themselves. Could we perhaps define “sound decision” as a decision that is true to who a person believes themselves to be? That’s a departure from the typical treatment of the phrase, but is a bit more empirical, meaning a bit more descriptive of the way I have observed people making political choices.

We are often witnessing these days an expression of belief in something other than democracy, but an elitist democracy that regards broad swaths of the population unfit to make choices for themselves. It is quite important I think that such condescension has not fallen on deaf ears, but has been recognized by the people being labeled unfit to participate, and for them, is the kind of attitude that much of their resentment is reacting to.

**Felts:** Given all the tumult in American politics, pessimism seems to be the order of the day. In your recent observations of citizen discussion groups, is there anything that stands out as promising or anything you’ve seen that bodes well for the state of democracy?

**Cramer:** Yes, there is one thing that gives me a great deal of hope, and that is the level of concern about our democracy. Heightened anxiety is not necessarily a good thing, but if it leads to action it is. I have had the unusual experience of suddenly receiving a great deal of correspondence from people I do not know, who are feeling the need to express their concern and looking for answers about how we heal our democracy. It’s been truly remarkable to see up close that level of concern. Most of what I am receiving is correspondence from people who are wanting to understand others in the United States and looking for ways to pressure our elected officials to put more attention on the common good, rather than on us vs. them, zero-sum politics. This may all come to nothing, but in the moment, I am hopeful.

Katherine Cramer is faculty director of the Morgridge Center for Public Service and professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
Political life is relational, which means it reaches outward. Anti-politics seeks the break down of relations in an effort to force, at least certain groups of people, into the prison of non-relations.

An area of philosophical research on the rise is philosophy of the city. When many hear about this field, they often think immediately about environmental responsibility and urban management. There is, however, much more offered in this area of study if we reflect on what cities actually are and their intimate relationship to politics and, as a consequence, power.

Most contemporary people confuse urban centers with cities. They have, in effect, confused architectural structures with what was hoped to take place in them. The citizen, however, historically preceded the city. It was the production of citizenship, a complex and constant negotiation of power emerging from human beings living together, that produced the demand for spaces, transformed into places, for their continued cultivation. This meant, in principle, that citizens produced cities wherever such practices emerged. It also means that we, contemporary humanity, could in principle produce different kinds of cities instead of the urban organization of life that we have come to think of as such.

The historical circumstances leading to urbanization emerged in antiquity through a series of factors linked to citizenship. The first was the emergence of city-states in forms that led to what Greek-speaking peoples called the polis and in turn to what they called politics. The *polis* created a structure of “within” and “without,” wherein the compression of citizens entailed population density. Though it doesn’t follow that citizenship requires compression, the social world, as we know, is interactive. Keeping others outside, however, carried a price of limited space, and thus ceasing to spread
outward, some dense populations expanded upward. Others reached outward to the point of cities becoming countries. The upward became part of the outward in concentric fields of political activity.

An addition is the set of norms linked to urban places of citizenship, which led to the notion of “civilization,” which referred to the ability to live civilly—in short, in cities—where “the civilized” became another way of saying city-dweller. As cities became confused with urban centers, this term led to the urbane standing in for the civilized and the citizen. An urban-dweller need not, however, participate in practices of citizenship.

Cities and urban centers have historically been plagued by the simultaneous presence of people who embody citizenship and those who don’t. A strange phenomenon of inside and outside thus followed historically with regard to those who are physically located in urban centers yet outside because of a lack of political belonging. In short, cities without citizens emerged.

The citizen historically preceded the city.

In some cases, the lack of citizenship is voluntary, where dwellers are simply passing through or freely choose to step outside of public life. Ancient Greek-speaking people had a disparaging word for the latter: ἴδιοτης. It referred to a private person, one not concerned with public affairs, in a word, as the reader has no doubt surmised from its obvious English cognate—an idiot. The word has even more ancient origins. Think of the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2030 BCE–1640 BCE) Egyptian word idi (“deaf”). The presumption, later taken on by the ancient Mediterranean Greek-speaking peoples, was that a lack of hearing entailed isolation. The implications are manifold where many people could be packed together without ever listening to each other. Such a society, from the perspective of the ancients, would be one of idiots.

A different problem emerges, however, where there are people committed and willing to participate in practices of citizenship—speech and listening—but are barred, ignored, or deliberately thwarted from doing so by the powerful in their society. Race and racism in avowed democratic republics, for instance, are exacerbated by shifts emerging from the management of cities. Republicanism, the position that citizens should not live under arbitrary laws, had the consequence of rendering no one above the law but also, unfortunately, some people below it. For those within the law, there was (and continues to be) an implicit equality of access. This implicit egalitari-
anism of republicanism raised the inevitable question of scope. The history of race under republican systems was premised on an avowed legitimate exclusion of certain people from the system on the grounds of systemic integrity. This meant that their inclusion represented violation. The circumstance is similar to what theologians call *theodicy* ("god’s justice"), where evil and injustice are presumed external the all-good god. If we replace *theo* with *civic*, we would have *cividicy*.

The logic of cividicy depended on a logic of contraries instead of contradictions. Contraries separate elements in a consistent system of inclusion and exclusion. It is, in other words, perfect for racist states with imposed systems of apartheid or segregation. Contradictions, however, are dialectical; they require interaction, negotiation, and the crossing of zones. The initial logic of citizenship, if we return to the polis, from which the political emerged, was one of discursive conflict, communication, and, thus, interaction. Differences are presumed at least at intellectual and, in today’s parlance, ideological levels.

Citizens don’t always work things out, however, and the collapse into violence would mean civil war, where opposing insides and outsides result. Discursive opposition is abrogated, and the opposite of citizenship rules. Cities, then, as places of citizenship, were places of agency and shared power—in short, political places—fundamentally, though not often explicitly stated as such, democratic spaces. This was so in spirit or aspiration even when not often achieved.

Race, in this story, offers peculiar reflection. When urban spaces in Euromodern countries were those in which only whites were afforded access to and the benefits of full citizenship, the structure was, like Ancient Athens, one of a complex relationship of citizens with those (noncitizens) who served them. Those were historically women and slaves. In Euromodernity, however, citizenship was racialized, which meant the appearance of citizenship, whether in urban or rural places, became white. Given the population density of urban centers, the possibility of crossing the line, as it were, were high, and thus policing them became crucial, which is why discussion, often hysterical, on law enforcement became peculiarly urban. It is also why urban centers became increasingly characterized as places of “crime.” They became such because the expectation was for such populations to be available when their labor was needed but not “seen.” They faced, then, the violation of appearance.

Euromodern urban centers historically divided themselves into places of citizenship (white) and those of criminality (colored and
illegal presence). The stage was set for dialectical struggles over expanded citizenship, where the activities of the struggle were actual manifestations of citizenship. There was (and often continues to be) thus the ironic situation of noncitizens

The imposition of so-called law over citizenship meant that urban centers such as New York increasingly became places called “cities” without citizenship.

such as immigrants (documented and undocumented) often embodying citizenship with legally designated citizens either not doing so or actively blocking the path of political appearance through investments in law enforcement and order.

Consider the example of New York City. It could serve as a metaphor for many contemporary urban centers in the United States. A vibrant place of political activity, once burgeoning with institutions focused on civil society as an expression of possibility and the checking of governing institutions, a shift emerged in two moments. The first was white flight (that is, the flight of citizenship with capital) and then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s draconian campaign for law and order. Because citizenship and whiteness were isomorphic, this meant that citizenship moved to the suburbs and rural areas while the remaining populations of color’s efforts at democratic resistance suffered crackdowns from state brutality. The imposition of so-called law over citizenship—where rule subordinates political appearance in a continuous erosion of civil liberties—meant that urban centers such as New York increasingly became places called “cities” without citizenship.

Urban centers dominated by rule instead of citizenship meant their sociological and political functions shifted. Readers may be familiar with what urban centers such as Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Miami, New York, San Francisco, etc. became for whites since the 1980s. For suburban whites, they became places of entertainment. Like Disneyland or Disney World, they became managed places of consumption instead of production. Younger whites, armed with capital, would play in such places until they decided to produce citizens and exercise citizenship, at which point they
took that capital elsewhere. In some instances, black mayors inherited these urban spaces devoid of capital, as seen briefly in such cities as Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Newark, New Orleans, and New York, for instance.

In the time of play, however, the analogy with Disney World offers a consideration. One could enjoy Disney World ironically because it is, at closer look, a totalitarian state. Private, premised entirely on management of consumption, pleasure, and all movement, it is a harbinger of what the fetish of privatization offers under neoconservative and neoliberal models of social and political organization. There is much consumers don’t actually see at such theme parks, just as there is so much brutality proverbially hidden in plain sight in today’s urban centers, except, of course, for those receiving the wrath of cybernetic management.

What this means, as University of Michigan professor of architecture Milton Curry has shown in his writings on urban centers, appearance as consumption transforms disruption of reverie into criminal behavior. There is, as well, the complicated matter, as the martyred anti-apartheid activist Steve Bantu Biko showed in South Africa and the revolutionary psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon showed in his analysis of colonies and postcolonies in the Global South, that racist states, in fighting against the appearance of certain peoples, also wage a war on politics. The continued relevance of their insights is borne out in empirical research in the United States offered by Amy Lerman and Vesla Weaver’s *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequence of American Crime Control*. The authors should have perhaps made the subtitle: “The Undemocratic Consequence of American Crime Control.” In effect, it means many urban centers, increasingly drained of political efficacy and participation, are no longer cities.

As human beings are not gods, we must find alternative ways of building society and living together.

Real cities, in other words, are political. What, however, does it mean to be political? For one thing, the political makes no sense without power. An odd feature of much Anglophone political philosophy is a tendency to reflect on political issues in mostly moral and eventually moralistic terms. The presumption at work is that if people were to become more moral, then the organization of society would be “just.” We have already seen, however, that such a presumption could easily be thwarted through forms of cividicy, where “justice” depends on a systems integrity protected from those who may sully it. Further, the moralistic appeal fails to address crucial concerns of social change for those who would like to appear as citizens, as agents, as legitimate members of the society. For them, transformation becomes a concern, which would be at odds with a system that considers itself intrinsically just. Their efforts would be the imposition of, supposedly, injustice. Such people face the problem of illicit
appearance. A third problem with the moral applications model is that they make sense if people really can, individually, implement what is right. The problem there, however, is that that would make sense if they were gods. As human beings are not gods, we must find alternative ways of building society and living together. To do that requires fostering and negotiating what is often not explored in the forms of political philosophy that dominate at least Anglophone Western societies such as the United States—namely, power.

Politics makes no sense without power. But what is power? Often used or spoken about, it is a word rarely defined and thus becomes a source of mystification and suspicion. The concept simply means the ability to make things happen with access to the means of its implementation. Eurocentric linguistic accounts often point to the Latin word *potis*, from which came the word *potent*, as in an omnipotent god, and the divine significance offers a clue. If we return to Middle Kingdom Egypt (actually called KMT), we would find the word *pHty*, which means “godlike strength.” Going still farther back to the Coffin Texts of the Old Kingdom (2686 BCE–2134 BCE), we find the word *HqAw* or *heka*, which activates the *ka* (sometimes translated as “soul, spirit,” or, in a word, “magic”) that manifests reality. The *pHty* is achieved only through HqAw, which amounts to a straightforward affirmation of power as the ability with the means to make things happen.

We could retell this story of power and its relationship to politics this way. Our initial abilities and means are our bodies. Where our physical reach is our only means, our impact on the world is limited to force. We directly touch or push things. The human world adds, however, the gift of language, where, through our understanding and production of meaning, we can expand our impact on the world through reaching each other. Add our technologies of communication, and we now reach to the stars. Our ability to affect each other builds the social world and the negotiation of that ability in it. Among human achievements is culture, which

The initial logic of citizenship, if we return to the polis, from which the political emerged, was one of discursive conflict, communication, and, thus, interaction.
Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, aptly calls “a prosthetic god.” Recall my reminder that human beings are not gods. But the social world of cultural meanings enables us to encumber many of the tasks originally bestowed on gods. We develop ways of controlling our environment, extending our health, and we develop rules and regulations to mitigate our conflicts with each other. For the last, we have developed institutions, such as governments, in which we divest some abilities for the expanded benefits of others. Expanding those capabilities is “empowerment.” But where those are horded by the few or a select group, there is a whittling away of power for others to the point of their being locked into the reach of their bodies. Pushed more inward, they implode. That is oppression.

Racist societies promulgate states whose purpose is disempowerment. To lock certain groups into the physicality of their bodies requires rendering impotent the capacities of speech. In effect, such people cease to affect their social world; they become the equivalent of sounds that are not heard. Silent, they become inconsequential. Anti-black racism, as an example, is antipathetic to the meeting of blackness and power. Restricting that rallies forces against the expansion of speech, power, and, by extension, politics. That is why all racist societies eventually become antipolitical ones. It is no accident that the struggle against racism isn’t simply moral (about how we should treat each other) but also political (about the expansion of freedom and capabilities). The additional consideration is interactive. As involving communication, interaction, political life is relational, which means it reaches outward. Antipolitics seeks the breakdown of relations in an effort to force, at least certain groups of people, into the prison of nonrelations.

The human world adds the gift of language.

Where political activity flourishes, so do citizenship and a fierce defense of democratic institutions. There are people in a variety of urban centers in the Americas (North and South) and Europe working at the rejuvenation of citizenship without the racial equivocation of it with whiteness. This involves persistent democratic practice and struggle. I’ve focused on urban centers here because they’re places with large concentrations of people of color. Rural areas, though not only capable of but also increasingly manifesting cit-
izenship, become structurally less so the extent to which they collapse into the ultra-rural—that is, places in which interaction is so remote that the reference point is not to sociality and community but solely to the self. In the United States, the increased structuring of impact in such areas, as seen in the 2016 presidential election, is, in effect, an extension of the war on citizenship. The effect is an effort to subordinate politics to rule.

The 2017 protests, the largest of which thus far was the global Women’s March the day after the US presidential inauguration, marks the beginning of an expanded epic struggle for citizenship. The many public protests from undocumented workers also mark an unusual feature of true citizenship in the face of adversity: courage.

The plight of those who suffered from an imposed invisibility and illegitimacy of their efforts to assert their humanity and potential as citizens offers much from which defenders of citizenship today could learn. One message is that politics should also be understood as the expansion of options by which meaningful choices mark the flourishing of freedom. Another could be called politically tragic. It demands commitment to a struggle the success of which benefits all, despite opposition, and the failure of which is also a responsibility, unfortunately, shared by the same.

Lewis R. Gordon is professor of philosophy at UCONN-Storrs; European Union visiting chair in philosophy at Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès, France; core professor at the Global Center for Advanced Studies; and honorary professor at the Unit of the Humanities at Rhodes University (UHURU), South Africa.
Our most ancient and enduring political bodies—our towns and cities—offer an alternative to dysfunctional nations.

National governments rooted in sovereignty, trying to shape global politics across their borders, are no longer positioned to govern effectively, either singly or in common. Top-down centralized democracy is confronting a world in which, as Thomas L. Friedman noted in 2015, “all top-down authority structures are being challenged,” and in which there is greater opportunity for pluralistic societies that can govern themselves horizontally. These conditions challenge the authority of monolithic governments that believe their societies can only be “held together top-down with an iron fist.” Even if democracy were less compromised than it is, even if it didn’t so often seem like a rationalization for plutocracy, it would remain trapped inside the box of national sovereignty.

Hence, our dilemma of bordered and blinkered independent states confronting borderless, interdependent problems. Every challenge we face today crosses borders. Climate change, terrorism, refugees in flight from genocide, civil war and economic meltdown, labor, commodity, and capital markets in turmoil, pandemics, crime, drugs, weapons of mass destruction, and the anarchy of our ubiquitous digital technology—all are global in their causes and consequences. No Chicago warming, only global warming; no Tokyo Internet or Paris Web, only the World Wide Web; no state-based war, but malevolent NGOs like Al Qaeda and quasi-states like ISIS, accompanied by endless civil wars. States like Libya and Iraq have effectively ceased to exist.

We confront these brutally interdependent challenges with antiquated nation-states,
interdependent, borderless challenges, and thus to our inability to address climate change through nation-state democracy, by changing the subject. From states to cities; from prime ministers and presidents to mayors. Our most ancient and enduring political bodies—our towns and cities—offer an attractive alternative to dysfunctional nations. Let interdependent cities do globally what independent nations no longer can do: let mayors and their neighbors, the citizens of the world’s cities, address climate, regulate carbon, and guarantee sustainability through cooperative action. Let mayors cool the world.

There are good reasons why cities can effect changes that nations cannot. We have always wrapped in the very sovereignty and independence that leave them incapable of meeting the new perils. We have HIV without borders, war without borders, immigration without borders, a digital Web without borders, but we do not have citizens without borders or democracy without borders. Who do we imagine can contain global warming without borders if there is no government without borders? On this devastating asymmetry between problems and responses, turns our future. Unless we find ways to globalize democracy or to democratize globalization, humankind will be in ever greater peril.

The institutions we think of as global or international are all state-based: the United Nations and the international financial institutions associated with the global system (the World Bank, the Asian Bank, the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank); the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. We depend on them as international entities to help achieve solutions to cross-border problems. The UN secretary-general’s office and the European Parliament do try to assume transnational leadership in pursuit of sustainable goals. Yet the nation-state was conceived in an age of independence, where national jurisdiction circumscribed human problems, leaving them amenable to amelioration only from within. The borders delimiting state action are irrelevant to such global perils as climate change. This makes COP21 [the 2015 meeting of the Paris Climate Change Conference] a dubious “success.”

I want to suggest, then, that we can find an answer to the dilemma of independent, bordered nation-states wrestling ineffectively with
been what Edward Glaeser calls “an urban species.” Today, more than half the world’s population lives in cities; in the developed world, more than three-quarters do. China is growing new cities of more than a million at a dizzying rate. A few decades ago, Shenzhen was a town of perhaps 20,000; today it is a megacity of more than 18 million. Meanwhile, burgeoning conurbations in Africa and Latin America are making New York and London look provincial. Cities, as I have mentioned, generate nearly 80 percent of GDP and 80 percent of greenhouse gases. And because they create much of the problem, they can contribute significantly to the solution, if they have sufficient resources and can act with sufficient autonomy. As Michael Bloomberg reminds us in his provocative article “City Century,” cities can act more quickly than states and are less likely to be “captured or neutralized by special interest groups.” For mayors, reducing carbon pollution “is not an economic cost; it is a competitive necessity” that manifests the “congruence between health and economic goals.”

While asserting that “the world’s first Metropolitan Generation” is just now coming of age, Bloomberg notes that the city stands at the beginning of our history. Human civilization was born in cities, and democracy was first nurtured in the polis. Cities are our most enduring political bodies. Rome is much older than Italy. Istanbul older than Turkey, Boston older than the United States, Damascus older than Syria. Cities are where we are born, grow up, go to school, marry, and have children; they are where we work, play, pray, grow old, and die. Concrete and palpable, they draw their existence from their concrete, organic growth rather than from boundaries drawn on a map; from the art of communal life rather than the science of public administration. Cities define our essential communication habitat in a way nation-states cannot.

Let interdependent cities do globally what independent nations no longer can do.

Nations are too large for participation and engagement but too small to control the global centers of power. Too big for community and association but too small for the world economy. Cities are closer to us, more human in scale, more trusted by citizens. Fewer than half of Americans trust the president or the Supreme Court, and less than 10 percent trust the Congress they themselves elect, but 70 percent or more trust their mayors and municipal councilors. The same is
true worldwide: local government is deemed more trustworthy than national government except in a few nations, such as China, where local government isn’t local but is controlled from the center. (To the degree that they trust anyone, the Chinese appear to trust the party and the central government more than their local leaders, whom they consider impotent pawns.)

To respond effectively to climate change, we need to restore democracy to its deliberative roots in competent citizenship at the municipal plane. It is easier in the city to reinstate popular government as a domain of deliberation, accountability, and citizen participation. The neoliberal assault on “big government” has little traction in cities, where government is small and focused on sewers, schools, policing, housing, traffic, and jobs. Nations stare out suspiciously across fortified borders at neighboring countries, while tribal nativists call for higher walls and prime ministers appeal for higher defense budgets. Antagonism is the modus operandi, and war is its final recourse.

Cities are open and transactional, defined by trade, culture, and commerce. Nations are often in a zero-sum game: when Germany grows larger, Poland grows smaller. Yet Berlin and Warsaw can both flourish without thinking that the success of one must entail the other’s failure. Indeed, their relations in trade, culture, transportation, and environmental sustainability are necessarily interdependent. Success requires cooperation.

We can address climate change, then, by talking about cities and asking that their mayors talk to one another. Environmental sustainability will be achieved when we secure sustainable democracy, and democracy is sustainable today mainly in the municipality.

Cities have an enormous potential for ecological cooperation, engaging their citizens directly in climate action (through, for example, pedestrian zones, recycling, and mass transport) even as they act on a global scale through collective action. They are already actively seeking sustainability across national borders through urban networks, such as the C40 Cities [a network of megacities committed to addressing climate change], ICLEI [Local Governments for Sustainability], and Energy Cities Europe. These networks, undergirded by larger, less specialized associations like the US Conference of Mayors and the United Cities and Local
Governments network, are not very well known. But they are hugely effective intercity associations allowing cooperating cities to do what nations have failed to do.

If presidents and prime ministers cannot summon the will to work for a sustainable planet, or even live up to the modest agreements they so reluctantly negotiate, mayors can. If citizens are defined by nations as spectators to their own destinies who think ideologically and divisively when they think at all, neighbors and citizens of towns and cities are active and engaged. They tend to think pragmatically and clearly, which is to say publicly and cooperatively; they think in the way theorists of democracy have always said they would in a well-constituted civil society that empowered them as members of a commons.

Benjamin R. Barber was a world-renowned political theorist who died earlier this year at the age of 77. At the time of his death, Barber was a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Fordham Law School Urban Consortium. He was also the founder of the Global Parliament of Mayors, and the author of 18 books including the recently published Cool Cities: Urban Sovereignty and the Fix for Global Warming.

Permission to reprint this excerpt from Cool Cities is granted by the Yale University Press. Cities is granted by the Yale University Press.
The key is recognizing that people don’t have to be alike one another or even to like one another to work together. They just have to recognize the obvious—they need one another.

There is widespread concern these days about the challenges democracy faces. Four fundamental problems or challenges stand out:

1. Citizens are roundly criticized, even by other citizens, for being inattentive, uninformed, and, even when attentive, easily manipulated. Many are believed to be incapable of making sound judgments, particularly in elections. Citizens, on the other hand, feel estranged from the government and pushed out of the political system, which they say includes the media. Americans often doubt they can make any real difference in the system beyond voting and writing their representatives.

2. Frustrated by the problems in the national political system, people are turning more to their communities to solve problems. Yet communities may be too divided in all sorts of ways for citizens to work together effectively. Furthermore, people may not recognize the resources they have or the opportunities in everyday community routines to use their assets to make the difference they would like to make.

3. Public confidence in major institutions, not just governmental but nongovernmental as well, continues to stay at a historic low—despite numerous initiatives in citizen participation, accountability, and community engagement. These measures may even add to citizens’ loss of confidence. Partisan gridlock and polarization in Washington probably further contribute to this declining confidence.

4. While there is evidence of vitality in civic life at the grassroots or local level, there
is little connection between this, the politics people refuse to call politics, and the politics of elections and government. This disconnect was noted in reports that I will elaborate on later.

In our work addressing these concerns about democracy we have found that much depends on how we understand the very concept of democracy. For most people, democracy means representative government created through contested elections. But Kettering uses a broader lens that looks at what some might call citizen or civic democracy and its relationship to electoral politics and government. From that perspective, the challenges democracy faces look a bit less daunting.

Since the 1980s, the foundation has been tracking the public’s attitude about the political system through analysis of public deliberations in National Issues Forums (NIF), along with other sources. Whatever the issue being addressed in the forums, they have often involved questions about the role that the government should play. In 2012, John Creighton analyzed the results of a number of NIF deliberations concluding, “It would be difficult to overstate the cynicism people feel toward elected officials.” Other studies of citizens’ perceptions of government agencies, and the reactions of the agencies, show that the cynicism and distrust is often mutual. People may have little confidence in the government, and the government sometimes has little confidence in the people.

A key piece of research for Kettering came in 1991. In *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, Rich Harwood found that contrary to the then conventional wisdom, the American people were not apathetic about the political system. Many were “mad as the devil.” Significantly, the Harwood study went beneath the usual popular dissatisfaction with government and politicians to discover an abiding sense of civic duty, which is why people were so angry about being pushed out of what they considered their rightful place in a democracy.

Since that report, we have seen more evidence of this civic spirit, despite negative feelings about government. To be sure, people express doubts about their fellow citizens. Nonetheless, we continue to hear stories about citizens joining forces to solve problems and assist one another. This has been especially evident recently in cities that have been hit by natural disasters. And there have been studies showing that the politics of neighborliness and civic life are not dead but flourishing in some locales—so much so that it brings with it a sense of opportunity, even optimism.

Many studies show that public distrust of government is not confined to the United States. One of the more interesting studies, *The Democratic Disconnect*, was published by the Transatlantic Academy in May 2013. The report pointed to a “yawning” gap separating citizens from the institutions of government. Although recognizing that “internet-empowered social activism of a new generation has never been more vibrant,” the study found that “little of this participatory mobilization from civil society seems effectively to connect with formal structures [of government] and institutional processes.” Yet they also found that “strong potential exists for renewal.” They argued that “the key” to revitalizing democracy is “enhancing the participatory vibrancy that represents the cornerstone of high quality democracy.” The report concluded that, “visions of top-down
problem solving are insufficient. Open-ended and vibrant democratic deliberation is needed.”

This suggests that if democracy is taken to mean only representative government, it is in very serious trouble. However, if democracy is also understood to include the work citizens do with citizens, the outlook is less grim. The difficulty, as this report argued, is that representative government and civic democracy, although often estranged, are nonetheless interdependent. What citizens do with citizens is the oldest form of democracy, even older than ancient Greek democracy. This civic or citizen democracy is like the wetlands of the political ecology; it is where political life begins. If the legitimacy of institutional democracy is to be restored, efforts have to begin in these wetlands.

We have found it useful to focus on the people and organizations that will need to respond to the challenges facing democracy: the citizenry, communities, and institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental. The four fundamental problems facing democracy today, with which I began this piece, affect all the actors in various ways.

Citizens

As implied in the word democracy, the role of the demos (“the citizenry”) is central. “We the People” are sovereign in the US Constitution, yet, as noted, people have often been criticized for not exercising sound judgment. That criticism has been sharper recently because of the decisions people have made as voters. One conventional remedy is to provide citizens with more factually correct information. That’s fine; however, the most important political decisions are often about what is right or should be done.

These normative questions can’t be answered with facts alone. They require the exercise of human judgment. When this distinction isn’t recognized, the political debate is carried on with dueling facts that degenerate into polarizing wars over solutions rather than addressing what is behind the problems.

The highly adversarial tone of political discourse today can prevent common efforts needed to solve shared problems. Encouraging people to be more civil is fine; however, there is no substitute for doing the hard work of making shared judgments. Such “choice work” changes relationships, making them more pragmatic and less adversarial. Choice work is also called “deliberation.” Unfortunately, conventional definitions of deliberation may make no mention of deliberation as the exercise of human judgment.

Lack of civility is often a result of ideological polarization. This can be reduced by deliberations in which people weigh possible solutions against what is really valuable to them, what they hold most dear. Most of us want to be secure from danger, to be free to act as we think best, and to be treated fairly. The source of the conflict is not that we don’t share these concerns but that people give different priorities to what they value because of differences in their circumstances. Recognizing this distinction can change the tone of the disputes. This helps combat polarization because even though people still differ on what should be done, it is easier for them to find ways to move ahead—despite lack of full agreement.

Research on deliberation and public judgment speaks directly to concerns about citizens and the soundness of their decision making. This research needs to extend to political discourse online. At Kettering, we hope to learn more
Concerns about the ability of people to be responsible citizens also have obvious implications for civic education. People aren’t born knowing how to be citizens; they have to learn to carry out the duties that come with citizenship. But how they are to be educated has been a subject of continuing controversy. One school of thought considers familiarity with historical documents like the Constitution to be essential. I’m a historian by training, so I would agree. Others would add familiarity with the operations of government, such as how a bill is passed. Having served in government, I would also agree. However, I’ve been a teacher, and I know how hard it is to get young people to pay attention to things they consider unrelated to their day-to-day experiences. They may see the functions of government as irrelevant and the history lessons dry. As a student once wrote in his textbook, “If the world is filled with waters high, dear teacher, this book will still be dry.”

Fortunately, there are now experiments that help animate civic education by giving students actual experience with doing the most basic work of citizens—making decisions with others. These experiments are happening in colleges, secondary schools, and even elementary classrooms. Museums have also been trying this same approach to civic education in order to make their exhibits more meaningful. For example, trying to make the choices being debated in adopting the Constitution makes that document come alive for students. Given the problems our political system is having now, rethinking civic education couldn’t be more urgent.

**Citizens and Communities**

The places where people live, work, raise their families, and deal with everyday challenges are at the center of the political world. This is what I mean by “community,” although I recognize there are other valid definitions.

As I said, communities are also susceptible to the divisions that can make it difficult for people to work together. But at the same time, the foundation is seeing many examples of the politics of neighborliness. For example, see Nancy Rosenblum’s book *Good Neighbors* and James Fallows’ article “How America Is Putting Itself Back Together” in the March 2016 *Atlantic*. Communities are more pressured than ever to come together and combat their problems, and many of these problems are the kind that only citizens can solve because the remedies are in the human interventions that only people can make. Community institutions, hospitals for instance, can care for you but only other people can care about you. And that care is powerful medicine.

Perhaps the spotlight has shifted more to our communities because people have lost confidence in national institutions. I’m not saying that people don’t value what the federal government does or that it is as ill executed as it sometimes may appear. Nonetheless, the frustration with inaccessibility of many centralized institutions is real, and that frustration appears to be pushing people to look for local solutions. Research on how people in communities can come together, despite their differences, and do the work of producing things that make life a bit better for everyone is critical in today’s circumstances.
People describing problems in terms of what they hold dear is not the way professionals are trained to name problems, which, as it should be, is in expert terms. One example I have often used is that citizens want to feel that they are safe in their homes, and this feeling of security is less quantifiable yet more compelling than the statistics professionals use to describe crime. Politicians name problems taken from a partisan agenda, which may not speak to people's experiences. Partisan names capture what a politician hopes will be a winning argument. The challenge is to recognize all the names, even those that aren't scientific or objective but rather experiential.

In each of the other aspects of civic work that I have listed, there are opportunities for citizens to make a difference—if they recognize the opportunities. Seeing them, however, is difficult because the way citizens do their work is different from the way professionals do theirs. For instance, the options for action taken by citizens are different from the options for professionals. For instance, if the problem is a rise in street crimes, which people see as a threat to the safety they value, one option for action might be citizens setting up neighborhood watches. When people name problems in terms of how the problems affect them and their families, it can prompt them to be civic actors.

The way citizens go about decision making in their communities is distinctive as well. Citizen decision making is seldom just a technical process of cost-benefit analysis. As noted earlier, public decision making at its best involves the exercise of public judgment. The resources people use to act are also different; so too is the way people organize themselves and evaluate...
results. At each point in community work, from the time a problem is named to the time the work is evaluated, there are opportunities for citizens to empower themselves. When people don’t see these opportunities it contributes to a sense of powerlessness, which damages people’s sense of responsibility. How can they be held accountable for what they cannot affect?

More research needs to be done on how people can recognize empowering opportunities. The same can be said about officials and administrators recognizing that citizens do their work in distinctive ways. The challenge isn’t to get citizens to do what professionals do but for them to appreciate what they themselves can do.

**Citizens and Institutions**

Among all of the problems in our political system, none is more glaring than the public’s declining confidence in our major institutions, not only governmental but also nongovernmental. More effective measures to bridge the divide separating the public from government and other institutions are badly needed.

One reason is our large institutions can’t be optimally effective without assistance from the productive work of citizens. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for demonstrating that. Unfortunately, there are obstacles standing in the way of what should be a win-win for both the public and institutions—governments, schools, hospitals, and so on. One is that people don’t always see opportunities to make a difference. Another, just mentioned, is that the way institutions usually work may not align well with the way citizens usually work. The result of this misalignment is that the potential for collaboration between the citizenry in a community and the community’s institutions often remains unrealized.

Our institutions are effective technically because they are staffed by competent professionals who contribute their considerable expertise. The downside is that these professionals may see citizens the way some physicians see citizens, which is as patients, rather than as workers or coproducers of the things hospitals, schools, and government agencies need.

A study by Monica Schoch-Spana et al. on the way professionals could better engage with citizens during disasters and epidemics is revealing. According to the authors, “The prevailing assumption is that a panic-stricken public, blinded by self-preservation, will constitute a secondary disaster for authorities to manage. Some emergency authorities also have mistakenly interpreted citizen-led interventions in past and present disasters as evidence of failure on the part of responders.”

Or take the case of colleges and universities that have admirable community outreach programs, conduct publicly beneficial research, and give their students opportunities for public service. What do these commendable efforts imply about the role of citizens? It is easy to think of citizens simply as people who need information and services. This perception does not recognize that citizens also have resources and the capacity for action. The crucial question is, how can institutions of higher education relate to citizens as coproducers?

Government agencies and nongovernmental organizations face the same challenge. Working with citizens doesn’t mean that professionals have to compromise their expertise.
or give up their power. It does mean, however, that professionals and their institutions have to open up space for citizens to act on their own—and be more than volunteers. Although professionals can’t do the work of citizens, they can encourage and precipitate it, if (and that’s a big if) they can be comfortable with sharing control.

Given the public criticisms of institutions and the danger of losing their legitimacy and authority, rethinking the role of professionals and exploring the possibilities for what has been called a more civic professionalism is necessary.

No strategy for overcoming the problems of democracy, whether they have to do with citizens, communities, or institutions, is likely to be effective unless it serves the self-interests of those who have to carry out the strategy. And carrying out any strategy imposes responsibilities. Some of these self-interests are obvious. Citizens want to make a difference in shaping their future, but that requires doing work that can be taxing like the choice work needed to confront and then work through the tensions associated with difficult decisions. Will people do this kind of work? Some already are. More should. In the United States, there are now a number of nonpartisan organizations sponsoring public forums on difficult issues that could promote not just informed dialogue but also deliberative choice work.

Communities benefit when their citizens join forces to combat common problems. However, that requires dealing with the myriad differences that put people and groups at odds with one another. Is there any perfectly harmonious community? Of course not. Still, there are some communities that benefit from greater levels of collaboration. That is often evident after natural disasters, but cooperation isn’t limited to tragedies. It could happen more often in more places. And that isn’t just wishful thinking.

Despite doubts about what citizens can and will do, there are signs of renewed civic vitality in our communities. The key is recognizing that people don’t have to be alike one another or even to like one another to work together. They just have to recognize the obvious—they need one another.

Who might benefit from bridging the divide separating the public from the government and other public-serving institutions? In the case of governments, it might help to give officeholders ways to connect to a public that is more than interest groups, constituencies with demands, or the statistical public in polling data. What about connecting to a deliberative public? A citizenry that deliberates has something in common with officeholders who have to exercise their best judgment on issues that can’t be decided by data alone. As I mentioned earlier, these are matters where the issue is what is the right thing to do; these are normative should questions, and they are difficult decisions for officials to make. Officials have reason to want to understand how citizens go about making up their minds on such difficult issues.

Another obvious benefit: as I mentioned, governments have already made a number of efforts to combat declining confidence through public participation initiatives, civic engagement projects, and demonstrations of accountability. Yet confidence has continued to fall, which suggests a need to go beyond current engagement practices to strategies where institutions...
work more with the public than just for the public. Kettering has found that when people are involved in collaborative work with institutions—when they are agents, not just subjects—they are more likely to have confidence in the institutions. A February 2017 white paper published by the World Economic Forum suggests a similar strategy:

The 21st century needs a new model of government, a government with the people. Olli-Pekka Heinonen, Director General of the Finnish National Board of Education, writes that this revolutionary shift happens if we, instead of providing public services to citizens, learn to achieve results with citizens. This means a fundamental change in how the identity of citizens is seen; a shift from consumer-citizens to value creator-citizens.

We live in a time when democracy faces challenges on a number of fronts, and no one knows all that needs to be known about how to meet them. We need more experiments by governments, schools, communities, neighborhoods, civic organizations, and citizen associations to combat these challenges. We can shake our fist at our problems, but there has seldom been a time when these problems were more obvious to more people who realize that something has to be done. This opens the door to invention. And that’s the good news.

David Mathews is the president of the Kettering Foundation.