

ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE

Democracy's Power Source



John L. McKnight

Edited by Paula Ellis and Wendy Willis

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FOREWORD

IN HIS FAREWELL SPEECH TO THE NATION, John McKnight's most famous student—President Barack Obama—turned his attention away from the vitriol of the 2016 campaign and toward the day-to-day lives of the people of the United States, urging them to “embrace the joyous task we have been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours. Because for all our outward differences, we, in fact, all share the same proud title, the most important office in a democracy: Citizen.” Obama then returned to his well-documented roots: “If something needs fixing, then lace up your shoes and do some organizing.”

President Obama's words came straight out of the John McKnight playbook. As McKnight himself said in a 2015 interview, “There's this idea, which really has grown hugely in my lifetime, that somehow if you surround people with enough services, that's what makes a good life. What makes a good life is being surrounded by friends who are mutually productive with you so that you have greatly diminished the services you need or use.”

As you will find in this collection of McKnight's writings, produced in partnership with the Kettering Foundation between 2016 and 2021, he is an evangelist for the power of associations. He believes that associations are both the secret sauce for individuals who want to get things done and the glue that holds communities together. Formal and informal associations—clubs, groups, organizations, and the like—are the “mother science” of democracy, as the famous 19th century French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville observed. And McKnight has spent his career proving Tocqueville's hypothesis.

The Kettering Foundation and McKnight were on a similar path of discovery when they found one another. The foundation had been experimenting with asset mapping in its education work as it explored how communities—drawing on their own assets—could help educate students rather than rely exclusively on formal school systems. The foundation also was exploring how people who were often labeled as impoverished or underserved could recognize their own power, identify their assets, and band together to solve problems.

Questions about how to identify and unlock the capacities of a community were proliferating when, in 1993, McKnight and John P. (Jody) Kretzmann published their groundbreaking book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. The book served as a guide for community organizers like themselves who wanted to experiment with the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute's ideas and practices. Since then, the institute's network of faculty, now known as stewards, has grown from 24 to 62, plus 12 emeriti.

Having found fertile and common ground, McKnight and Kettering formalized their relationship in 2011 after McKnight and Kretzmann presented their ideas at one of the foundation's monthly research sessions. Through learning exchanges and published articles, McKnight, now a Kettering senior associate, continues to develop and evolve his thinking and that of the foundation's staff and associates.

Today, McKnight's ongoing work helps inform Kettering research on how citizens and institutions can work together to produce public goods. Both McKnight and foundation staff members have argued that as the work of citizenship has become professionalized, citizens themselves have been crowded out—reduced to clients and consumers rather than active producers. Despite the increased professionalization of civic life, both McKnight and the foundation have connected with and amplified the work of hundreds of civic innovators who are connected to their neighbors in the mutual work of building and improving their communities.

With the recent release of his latest report, *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*, Kettering President Emeritus David Mathews has catalyzed a renewed interest in the practice of citizens, associations, and institutions working together, all fulfilling their own unique functions. Kettering and its vast network of researchers and experimenters are focused on finding examples of *with* at work and examining strategies that could be useful to others.

Working with Kettering over the years, McKnight has documented what he and his network of ABCD experimenters were learning from their work in communities. What they learned seems especially useful now as we explore the *with* strategies set forth in Mathews' book.

It has been our great pleasure to return to some of the most recent of McKnight's observations. In this book, each of the short pieces that McKnight came to call "learnings" was written as part of his partnership with the foundation. We have organized them with an eye toward the asset-based community development framework, beginning with individual strengths and moving through communities' relationships with institutions to how those relationships might be evaluated. The heart of this publication, however—like the heart of McKnight's work—lies in the associations that citizens form in their communities to organize their lives and conduct shared business.

In his piece entitled "The Base of Powerful Movements: Understanding the Role of Local Associations," for example, McKnight reminds us that social movements bent on seeking justice depend not only on inspirational leaders, but also on the associations that have shaped the leaders and their ideas. He offers the churches of the 1960s and today's Black Lives Matter movement as examples. In the final piece in this collection, McKnight proposes a major innovation in how governments might measure the impact of proposed programs and activities on the communities they intend to serve.

At this moment in American history, McKnight's cogent and grounded observations are available to inspire a new generation of organizers and community-based practitioners. It was our good fortune that the

Kettering Foundation asked us to put this collection together, and now it is our pleasure to offer it to readers who are joining their neighbors in work for the common good of their communities. That is a joyous task indeed.

Paula Ellis and Wendy Willis

Paula Ellis, a senior associate at the Kettering Foundation, is a journalist, former news executive, foundation officer, and member of numerous nonprofit boards.

A writer, an attorney, and a national leader in the field of civic engagement, **Wendy Willis** directs several deliberative democracy organizations housed at Portland State University.

ASSOCIATIONS



Why: The Core of Democratic Society

THE MOTHER SCIENCE

WHILE THERE MAY NOT BE any university departments of associational science, Tocqueville still commends us to study the nature and functions of associations because of their critical role in a democracy. Indeed, the practice of associational life is often viewed as a “school for democracy.” As we study associations, it is useful to begin by understanding the topography of the associational domain, the space not occupied by commercial, governmental, or not-for-profit institutions.

An association can be understood as a club, group, or organization of people in which the members do the work but are not paid. They may have a paid member or staff person, such as a convenor, organizer, or pastor. However, the essential work is produced by members who act within associations as citizens.

Associations are as varied as the human interests that lead people to create them. They include American Legion posts, book clubs, sports leagues, senior clubs, choirs, 4-H clubs, advocacy groups, and many more. These organizations are the core of a democratic society because they are the means by which free people make power by acting together. This is why the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights identifies our primary freedoms as free speech and free association and assembly.

The functions of associations are numerous and diverse. Primarily, they serve the interests of the members. People associate because they care about each other, care about the same things, or both. The glue that holds them together is mutual care rather than money, which is the glue that holds institutions together.

Beyond fulfilling immediate self-interests, associations are also schools for citizenship, providing space for practice in public affairs and civic life. This participation often involves the exercise of three powers: the power to decide what needs to be done, the power to create a method to do it, and the power to implement a solution either by themselves or by recruiting their neighbors and other associations and institutions to join their effort.

In engaging in these three powers, members are acting powerfully, experiencing the meaning of citizenship and their own efficacy.

Self-efficacy is further enhanced by those associations that have vertical structures that allow them to express themselves at the regional, state, or federal level. Examples would be the United Auto Workers, the American Legion, and the League of Women Voters.

These tiered associations are intermediary bodies connecting individuals and their associational concerns to institutions with other capacities and forms of power. In this way, the local associations become a magnifier of each member's voice and the concerns they raise.

The Efficacy of the Collective Work of Local Associations

While most associations provide some form of community benefit, the aggregate of their work is the infrastructure of communities. A study of the collective community benefits of local associations, which was conducted by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation in 2012, involved an extensive analysis of 62 associations in the small Wisconsin town of Spring Green (population 1,600). (A full text of *A Study of the Community Benefits Provided by Local Associations* can be found online at <https://bit.ly/37u51NQ>.) The following summary of this study illuminates the collective efficacy of multiple associations as they create (unintentionally) the infrastructure of community life through citizen decision-making and action. The summary outlines the collective impacts.

Parallel Functions of Associations and Service Institutions. Reviewing the data, one is impressed by the diversity and density of the associations as well as the multitude of functions and benefits they provide. One

hypothesis is that their frequency is related to the relative absence of local institutions providing social services. Spring Green is in the southwest corner of the county, while the county seat and many social services are physically located in the northeast. Consequently, there are almost no social service facilities and very few resident social service professionals. The result may be that the numerous associations providing services have emerged to fill the institutional absence.

The Associational Safety Net. It is clear from these data that the associations have created a dense system of service, providing personal and social support. The study makes visible the rich infrastructure of the associational production of well-being that is usually invisible to policy-makers or service providers. This invisibility limits both an understanding of the community safety net and the policies that could support, enhance, or expand the associational system and its productivity.

The Learning Functions of Associations. Associational benefits are often thought of as creating relationships that enable activity. However, it is significant that the most frequent reason given by interviewees for why residents join their group is classified as “learning.” When asked what is the major benefit residents get from their association, once again the most frequent classification is “learning.” With the exception of only one group (a book club), learning is the result of activities performed together. In this sense, the associations are providing experiential learning, a powerful pedagogy distinct from most classroom learning. This learning through association is a form of adult continuing education that deserves further study and recognition as a major source of community knowledge.

Fundraising and the Culture of Care. In many communities, the major fundraiser is the United Way. This agency gathers most of its funds through institutions that solicit their employees for contributions. In Spring Green, there is no United Way. This may be why one-third of the associations studied indicated that they engaged in charitable giving and drives. Contrasted with the United Way process, this associational giving involves the members in deciding who should receive the money as well as direct personal knowledge of or engagement with the recipient. This personalization

of giving supports a community culture of care that is not present with a system of annual contributions at the workplace.

Associations and Power. It is significant that only 8 of the 62 associations indicated that they have engaged in advocacy with some level of government regarding an issue. In a majority of these cases, the advocacy involved the village government. There is a theory that associations are mediating institutions, providing a means for local individuals to gain collective power in dealing with larger, distant institutions such as the higher levels of government. The data from this study indicate that this mediating function is not prevalent. Further study could focus on other means of advocacy that local people use to influence the state and national governments. However, it may be that the local associations are understood as tools for empowerment through the production of community benefits rather than vehicles seeking outside help. While power is often understood as the ability to effectively advocate for change, a power of equal importance is the ability to create change with the resources of the community—principally, the web of local associations.

Examples of Associations

In practice, associations may be formal or informal. An informal association could be a group of women who meet each Saturday morning at a diner where they have coffee. They are an association, but they have no public name.

The more formal associations are characterized by having names and, frequently, officers. The following is a useful typology of modern associations:

- addiction prevention and recovery groups
- advisory community support groups
- animal care groups
- anticrime groups
- block clubs
- business organizations and support groups
- charitable groups and drives

- civic events groups
- cultural groups
- disability and special needs groups
- education groups
- elderly groups
- environmental groups
- family support groups
- health advocacy and fitness groups
- heritage groups
- hobby and collectors groups
- men's groups
- mentoring groups
- mutual support groups
- neighborhood improvement groups
- political organizations
- recreation groups
- religious groups
- service clubs
- social groups
- social cause, advocacy, and issue groups
- union groups
- veterans' groups
- women's groups
- youth groups

The Web of Associational Relationships

The study reveals a complex network of relationships surrounding each association. First, each association creates a context for relationships that empowers each member. Second, the associations have relationships with each other when they engage in collective initiatives. Third, some associations have relationships with regional, statewide, or national organizations.

Fourth, many associations have relationships with local nongovernmental institutions, including businesses and not-for-profit groups. Finally, the associations have relationships with governments, primarily at the local level. This dense vertical and horizontal web is, in itself, a structure that provides several community benefits.

- The structure is a network that communicates information among the community actors; the information creates the basis for partnerships, coalitions, and joint activities.
- The network enhances the effectiveness of both the institutions and associations.
- The connections between associations and institutions facilitate bridging as well as bonding social capital.
- The entire structure is the community generator of social capital.

The Future

In Yoni Appelbaum's article, "Losing the Democratic Habit" (*The Atlantic*, October 2018), he observes that:

Like most habits, democratic behavior develops slowly over time, through constant repetition. For two centuries, the United States was distinguished by its mania for democracy: From early childhood, Americans learned to be citizens by creating, joining, and participating in democratic organizations. But in recent decades, Americans have fallen out of practice or even failed to acquire the habits of democracy in the first place.

The results have been catastrophic. As the procedures that once conferred legitimacy on organizations have grown alien to many Americans, contempt for democratic institutions has risen.

This dire warning urges us to develop the science of associations. We can do no less than understand and share broadly the associational habit that is the core of democratic practice and community well-being.

December 2018

the town a better place to live. The Nebraska Community Foundation has been so effective at precipitating these local groups that there are more than 250 of them, and at least half are in towns of under 700 people. At this point, these groups are a decision-making organization where new ideas come from effective local experiments rather than top-down programs. They are neighbors who have invested in their community while creating new ties that bind.

Conceptually, it is especially significant to learn that they are creating and then occupying the civic space in the community that is not filled by the town government. The space they fill is decision-making and investing for the long-term future. This contrasts with the type of work of local governments, which is largely dealing with immediate demands. In Nebraska, the experiment creates a complementary structure for citizen visioning for the long term.

The asset approach is creating a new means for being productive. Each way is an experiment in creating local ties that bind. Prospectively, both ways could be synthesized.

August 2016

ABCD, JAZZ, AND THE STRUCTURE OF POWERFUL COMMUNITIES

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, many neighborhood organizations and block clubs stopped their traditional face-to-face meetings. Nonetheless, in many locations these groups spontaneously initiated innovative community activities. In neighborhoods with no community groups, new and unprecedented initiatives were begun.

One example of these local innovations is a neighborhood of 800 households in the industrial city of Menasha, Wisconsin. A report on the pandemic responses in that neighborhood indicates that the following creative activities occurred:

- Forty residents responded to a telephone invitation to provide help to neighbors in need.

- An outdoor “jump-around” party on one block evolved into a parade on many blocks where residents were joined by neighbor-owned classic cars.
- Neighbors distributed 200 loaves of bread contributed by a food pantry.
- Neighbors recognized essential workers by tying blue ribbons around trees bordering the streets.
- A neighborhood Memorial Day parade was created because the city had called off its official parade.
- Neighbors built and stocked two mansion-sized outdoor food pantry houses.
- Six local businesses agreed to sell fundraising candy bars with the proceeds going to help keep the food pantries stocked.
- The annual Boy Scout Food Drive was cancelled, so local Boy Scout families organized a neighborhood food drive that collected contributions from nearly 100 local residents.
- On New Year’s Eve, there was a party in the local park for all residents that included bell ringing and neighbors making resolutions for the year ahead.

One active member in the neighborhood noted that all these activities occurred without any face-to-face, formal meetings and only one collective Zoom gathering.

While meetings are one method for making citizen decisions at the neighborhood level, at Menasha and many other places there have been very few or no in-person or virtual meetings. However, as the Menasha report indicates, there were many decisions made that led to innovative forms of citizen mobilization and action. If there were very few meetings of any kind, how can we explain the process by which the decisions that preceded countless local initiatives were made?

Perhaps an analogy can be useful. Consider a jazz club in a big city. It’s 2:00 a.m., and the jazz musicians’ work is done in most clubs. However, some musicians want to keep on playing, so they go to a club that is licensed to be open late, an after-hours club. Several jazz musicians gather

at the club and set up their equipment at the front of the room. Some players know each other; some players don't know any of the others. Despite the fact that they have no sheet music, suddenly they begin to play a wonderful jazz piece. How can this happen? They are creating music that is so free, innovative, open-ended . . . and yet perfectly coherent. The musicians play together and play individually with no apparent structure or order. In this, they are like the neighbors in Menasha, Wisconsin.

The innovation and improvisation that happens in jazz occurs because there is an invisible structure encompassing the players. The structure has three elements: a melody, a key, and a rhythm. That's why, before they begin, one musician says, "How about 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore' in B-flat?" The others nod and the drummer sets the tempo. The three-part structure is now manifest, and improvisation can take place within it.

Is there an analogous structure that can help us understand how the invisible innovative decision-making occurred in Menasha without decision-making meetings or apparent traditional leadership?

One way of understanding the invisible neighborhood structure is to focus on the context where the dispersed decision-making occurs. It is a context that creates a structure enabling innovative citizenship to emerge. That context has three elements:

- *Place-Based Commonality.* The residents in the area have a common affinity. Regardless of other differences or disagreements, these place-based common affinities can grow from the desire to enjoy, celebrate, or entertain. It can arise out of a crisis such as the pandemic. It can often be grounded in a possibility (e.g., we want to create a park). It may come about because of a fear, such as the threat of gentrification. It can also spring from the love of the place—our place, remembered in stories that capture successful neighborhood activities from the past.
- *Individual Capacities.* Every neighbor has a belief that he or she has some special and significant gift, talent, skill, or knowledge. This belief is often the core of their sense of self-worth. Residents are willing and often waiting to contribute those talents and gifts

to their own particular community. These capacities are the basic community-building tools.

- *Connectivity*. The local capacities of most neighbors are latent. There must be some precipitant that brings them to life. That precipitant is connectivity. Through the connection of neighbors' capacities, power is created, citizenship emerges, and democracy is lived.

The invisible structure of productive communities where decision-making and leadership are dispersed comes from a neighborhood with unique *commonalities*, unique *capacities*, and common *connectivity*. In these kinds of places where citizen creativity is visible, what is not usually present in any traditional form is a central leader or formal decision-making. Nonetheless, a focus on the structure needed for citizen productivity can provide an appropriate framework for understanding the beautiful civic music being played in the Menasha neighborhood and in millions more like it. Neighbors are creating leaderful and decisionful democracies.

June 2021

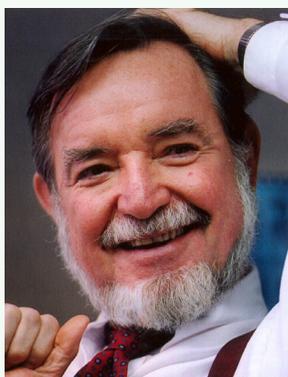
WHO REPRESENTS THE NEIGHBORS?

One way of understanding who represents the neighbors is to look to their elected representatives at the local, state, and federal levels. But other neighborhood groups and associations claim they also represent the neighbors. In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley was the leader of the municipal government and the city's Democratic Party. The party was organized with precinct captains at the most local level and then ward committee members at the ward level. These captains and committee members traditionally held jobs in the government and acted together as a part of what was popularly known as "the machine."

Mayor Daley believed that the neighbors were represented by the local party officials and their elected alderperson. He was unsympathetic to the idea of independent neighborhood organizations. When he or his

AS MORE AND MORE AMERICANS decry the state of affairs in their communities and in the nation, John McKnight reminds us that the ability to change things for the better lies in ourselves and our neighbors. Long an evangelist for the power of citizen associations, he makes the case that these local groups embody the means for individuals to get things done as well as the glue that holds communities together. His cogent and grounded observations of how citizen associations are formed, how they function to produce public goods, and how they relate to government and other institutions, make this a handbook intended to inspire a new generation of organizers and community-based practitioners.

John L. McKnight was raised in seven neighborhoods and small towns in Ohio in the 18 years before he left to attend Northwestern University.



Following a three-year stint in the US Navy, he returned to Chicago where he worked in, and directed, several civil rights organizations. In the 1960s, McKnight was recruited into the federal government to work in an agency that created the affirmative action program, and later became Midwest director of the US Commission on Civil Rights. He returned “home” to Northwestern in 1969 to help develop the Center for Urban Affairs. McKnight is currently co-director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD), which he helped found, and a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation.

This thoughtful collection of insights underscores the power of citizen associations, rightly motivated, to produce positive public goods.

—Sharon L. Davies
President and CEO, Kettering Foundation



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