



***KETTERING FOUNDATION DAYTON DAYS***  
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Speakers  
John Doble  
Harry Boyte  
Rich Harwood

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## Introduction

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The Kettering Foundation's research review this past year has been focused on what is known about the challenges currently facing democracy. While the research has been broadly based, it has been guided in large part by the sense that there is something troubling going on in the polity. We have been struggling to put our finger on exactly what that something is.

To help us with this task, we invited John Doble, founder of Doble Research Associates; Rich Harwood, president of the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation; and Harry C. Boyte, a senior scholar at the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College; to share with us what they are learning through their recent research projects. These distinguished researchers present three different ways of looking at what's going on in our polity. And, while trying to get a better handle on what's wrong, they have also been looking for evidence of what Harry Boyte calls a democratic awakening that might be under the surface of the polarization and rancor that we see every day.

Appearing here are lightly edited versions of the speakers' remarks as well as highlights of the ensuing discussion. Brief biographies of all three speakers appear at the end of this document.

## The Speakers

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**John Doble:** The genesis of this project was a comment by my friend John Unger after the election. John said, “There’s something going on in the country that I don’t understand, but it’s not necessarily evil.” And then the foundation, as it sometimes does, asked me to explore what’s going on. And, as it typically does, it said, “Just go out there and talk to people and see what you find.”

So I asked Paloma Dallas and Jean Johnson to be part of our team and they agreed, so this project was a group effort. We developed a two-part research design: three interviews with leaders who’ve demonstrated keen insight into the republic’s mood and four focus groups across the country in Cincinnati, Dallas, and Los Angeles, and one with union electricians in Middletown, Delaware.

Let me offer two quick caveats about the research method that we used. Kettering’s very familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of polling as a research method. So, for a variety of reasons, we rely more on focus groups. But focus groups have a major weakness. They’re more likely to be misleading or wrong—far more likely. The samples are small; they’re not random. The interpretation is subjective. So, as I go through this today, I’d ask you to keep in mind that what I present should be seen in the language of research as, strictly speaking, hypotheses, not definitive research findings.

A second caveat about focus groups: because of the small samples, some researchers say you should never rely on a head count when using focus groups. But we ignored that rule and we did it for a couple of reasons. First, when you have a small, diverse group, like a jury, and it quickly agrees on something—when it quickly agrees that someone’s innocent or guilty—we can be pretty confident that other juries will feel the same way.

The second reason is this: when doing this kind of research, it’s kind of like trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle. You’re trying to put people’s thinking together and it is something that has a logical coherence. And when that happens, you can be reasonably confident that you’re gaining insight into what we call, “the public mind.”

And so, keeping all that in mind, here are seven ways that what we heard differs from the conventional wisdom. The first goes like this: “The conventional wisdom is that

people think the country's on the wrong foot because of economic stagnation and growing income disparity." That's not what people said in these groups.

Over the past 25 years or so, there have been only three times when a majority said, "The country's headed in the right direction." The first time was from about 1998 to early 2001 when the economy was strong. The second time was around 9/11, and the third time was when the Iraq War began. Other than those three times, majorities—and often huge majorities—said the country was headed in the wrong direction.

In these groups, a huge majority—four to one—said we're on the wrong track. But the reason they gave was not the economy. The conventional wisdom is that people vote with their pocketbooks. Their dissatisfaction with their economic prospects led to their desire to upend the global economic agenda. But that's not what we heard. People in the groups said they were pretty happy with their personal economic prospects.

So, if it's not the economy, if it's not their economic prospects, maybe the problem is leadership. And the conventional wisdom goes like this: "The politicians are far more divided than the American people are." But that's not what we heard. We did hear that leadership division is a major cause of frustration, but it's not the main reason why people think we're on the wrong track.

They were frustrated with leaders in two ways. They bemoan leaders' unwillingness to come together to find common ground and solve national problems. And they said, "The gap between the interests of those in power and the needs of the people is equally, if not more, dangerous to the country." A Cincinnati man said, "We have a government ruling class that stays up there forever, Democrat or Republican."

In brief, people said, "The government fails to do its job. It's not responsive to our wishes. It does not represent us. It does not belong to the people. It's the government, not our government."

So then, another part of the conventional wisdom is that people are fed up with the government. They see government employees as incompetent. They see them as lackadaisical. They see them as perhaps even pursuing an agenda that's at odds with what most people want. But that's not what we heard.

People said that most government employees work hard; they know what they're doing. They care about serving the public interest. So, you might ask, "What is going on?"

If it's not the economy, if it's not leadership, if it's not government, why are people so unhappy with the country's direction?" People said, "The main reason we're on the wrong track is that the American people are so divided." And that's just the beginning of the story.

The conventional wisdom is that, to the extent that Americans are divided, the divisions are between those benefitting from the new economy and those who are left behind: the people in urban areas and those in rural areas; those on the coast and those in the rest of the country. But that's not what we heard. People everywhere said they encounter divisions in their lives, in their personal interactions. A Cincinnati woman said, "We used to be America as a whole. Now we're all like bits and pieces."

They named six factors driving the polarization. Some blamed the Trump administration. A Dallas man said, "We've got a guy—bless his heart, I voted for the dumb jerk—but if he's anything, he's a lightning rod for lack of civility." Others said, "People just have divergent goals and views these days." They blame talk radio. They blame cable news. They blame Facebook, social media.

We shouldn't forget Bill Bishop's "big sort." When Bill was here, he told us about the fact that in 1976, only about 25 percent of the people in this country lived in a county that went to one or another presidential candidate in a landslide. But by 2004, nearly half of us did. And finally, they repeatedly used the phrase "politically correct," saying it's a major cause of our divisions.

All three of the leaders we talked to brought this up. One said, there are issues he won't even take up with his immediate family. Another leader said this, "If you criticize someone once, they'll get upset but maybe they'll evaluate what you just said. But if you continue to criticize them, their reaction will either get demoralized to the point where they don't want to say anything and conversation shuts down, or they get angry and they say, 'I don't give a crap what you say. I don't care if you're insulted. Go jump in a lake.' And that," he said, "is what's been happening to us. People feel criticized and they're reacting."

What the third leader said, while acknowledging that political correctness can be a painfully divisive thing, was that he saw it as a measure of progress. He said, "Excuse me for living in a society that's improved from having black people sit at lunch counters, and

having coffee poured on them, cigarettes put out on their neck, people being called the *N* word like it was their name.” Concern about political correctness could have important implications for Kettering and for the National Issues Forums—implications that may warrant further study.

Number six. Conventional wisdom is that people in the country are enthusiastically dividing up into warring camps where their greatest desire is to impose their will on those with differing views. That’s not what we heard. People detest the divisiveness. They feel that we’ve lost our way. It’s no exaggeration to say that Americans feel bereft about their relationship with their fellow citizens.

Time and again in these groups, people bemoaned the inability of citizens with opposing views to respectfully talk with each other. In every group, people on both the left and right said they had either been dropped by a friend, or they themselves had dropped a friend, sometimes a long-standing friend, because of political differences. A Delaware man said, “I’ve had family friends who don’t talk to me anymore because they voted for someone. I’m like, ‘Really? Come on. I’d never do that to you.’”

In some respects, people’s anxieties about sharp differences of opinion and the prospects of being caught in a “Gotcha!” moment of being politically incorrect can undercut their ability to talk about tough issues and find common ground even where it exists.

Finally, number seven. Because divisions in the country reflect economic and demographic and geographic trends, the conventional wisdom is, “There’s no turning back. The divisions are permanent and they’re getting worse.” But that’s not what we heard. People said they’d rather get along better with their fellow citizens than get exactly what they want.

At the end of each group, we asked people to imagine if, by using a magic wand, they could solve one, but only one, problem facing the country. And their answers were, as you might expect, all over the map. They said, “eliminate the national debt,” “improve education,” “provide affordable health care for all,” “end racism,” “reduce racial tension,” “reduce illegal or undocumented immigration,” “reduce tensions with North Korea,” and so on. But then we asked them this: imagine that by using the same magic wand, we could reduce—reduce, not eliminate—the divisions among the American people and

simultaneously make sure that Americans talked with each other the way they did here tonight, with civility, with mutual respect, listening to each other, considering what each person said. Would they rather see that happen or would they rather solve their highest priority? Would they trade off solving the problem that they named as most important in exchange for less division and more civil discourse? The results were remarkable. Not everyone, but a solid majority in all four focus groups said they would make the trade. “Because if we did that,” one woman said to a lot of nodding heads, “we’d be able to unlock all the other problems. We’d be able to solve all of them.”

Let me sum up. The key question coming out of this research is how deep and how permanent these divisions are. Insights from the National Issues Forums, along with other Kettering research, suggest it’s possible to bridge the deepest divisions. In NIF forums, as in these focus groups, participants often say they feel better about those holding other points of view even when they continue to disagree with them.

But our research also identifies at least three significant challenges for leadership. If leaders dismiss concerns about political correctness as mere noise that will soon fade away, they may underestimate the urgency of finding better ways for Americans to talk about issues that divide them. If leaders reassure themselves with polls showing broad agreement on issues that are just beneath the surface, they may overlook the danger of continuing with politics-as-usual.

Our research suggests that the perception of deep division and irreconcilable differences has become a problem in its own right. And these divisions may take on a life of their own.

Finally, if leaders focus solely on economic factors to explain the divisions among the public, they may underestimate the longing of Americans for more cohesiveness and more constructive political dialogue. Even with a better and fairer economy, the divisions we’re experiencing could be a wound left open to fester and worsen—I hesitate to say it—with no end in sight.

**Rich Harwood:** Thanks John. That’s a hard act to follow. So as John was talking, I was thinking that, for me, the bottom line in all this, as John alluded to, is what people are wrestling with most: how do we restore a sense of belief in ourselves that we can get

things done together and renew a can-do spirit? And I think that runs throughout a lot of your comments, John. It'll run through a lot of my comments.

When I started working on this, there were two pieces to it. One was: what's gone wrong? Or what's ailing us? And the other is: what do we make of it? And, how do we move forward? And so let me start with the first piece, which is what's gone wrong.

As I started to look at this, what emerged for me is that there are fundamentally nine story lines basically controlling our debate about what's gone wrong in the country. Some of them overlap; many of them are independent from one another. And we have camps of individuals and groups and money that are pushing each one.

I won't go through all of them, but one storyline is from our party politicians: "If only people would stick with the mainstream political parties, we'd be all set. We'd be fine." If we hadn't voted for Donald Trump and had voted for Ryan's candidate or had voted for Hillary Clinton, a mainstream candidate, we'd more or less be okay. And their belief, and their problem is that "we just need to do better research on understanding what messages will work with the American public and how we capture their imagination."

The Democrats have poured millions of dollars into these research arms and the Republicans have done the same. They both come out with new plans. Those plans are basically dead on arrival, but nonetheless they believe that's the solution.

Another storyline is that we're separating at the seams. This is, in part, Bill Bishop's argument, but actually goes much further than that. It says we've separated at the seams in terms of the ways we construct our own news. We're separating at the seams in terms of the role of faith institutions and how divisive they can be in our society. We see that a lot in the communities in which we're working.

We're separating at the seams in terms of instant gratification—we want what we want when we want it. If we don't get it, we turn our backs on collective investments and collective things that we need to do.

There's another approach that I call, "Moneyball." You might remember Michael Lewis's book for sports fans. The notion here was that the Oakland A's, a professional baseball team, started a trend in hiring players that basically said, "Don't worry about your intuition. Don't worry about your experience. Just run the data." Sort of how I got

trained at Princeton in graduate school: “Just run the data and you’ll come out with the right answer.”

And that has now spread to every type of athletic endeavor, both professional and college. It’s also spread to politics. So, we have these rich Silicon Valley folks, some of whom fund some of the research activity in this room, and they believe that just by running the numbers and using their money, they can bypass politics and microtarget voters and microtarget ideas and issues, and they can influence the ways politics will work. “And that’s the solution to how we move forward,” they say.

And there’s a whole group of those efforts out there. There are others, which you know about. Storylines about the betrayed, right? The white, angry, working-class voter in Kentucky where we’re working, for instance—or in Eastern Kentucky or West Virginia. The story is that somehow or another, all of our problems relate to not understanding this segment of voters. And if we only understood these voters better, we’d be able to come together as a country and solve our problems.

Anyway, there are these and other storylines. The problem with them is that they are often mutually exclusive. They are a way to name what the problem is. And the way we’re going about this is duking it out for supremacy about whose storyline is going to win.

What that creates—and, for me, this is the more important point—what that creates for the American people is noise and confusion. It’s psychologically overwhelming, and disorienting. It makes people put their hands over their ears and eyes because they can’t quite figure out what’s going on.

And it’s all happening at a time when changes in society are occurring much faster, more deeply, and much more systemically than they did in the past, so that our norms and rules and mechanisms for dealing with these things have been overly stretched by the problems that we’re trying to deal with.

So, imagine, you’re in the Tower of Babel, where everyone’s speaking a different language. They’re all talking at each other. There’s all this noise and confusion; psychologically what does that do to you? Also remember that this is all happening against a backdrop that’s been developing for the last 50 to 70 years: the overprofessionalization of society, the mechanization of responses to civic challenges,

and the rise of consumerism. All of these trends have come to bear, not only on society, but on these storylines as well.

So, you've got a mess, and a mess that's so disorienting to people that they're not quite sure what to do. That's the first half of the story, this disorientation, this noise and confusion. Now let me just say really quickly, that there are merits to each of these storylines. And that, if we took action on some of them, we might, in fact, improve politics and public, and community life in the country. I'm not dismissing them out of hand.

But my argument is that even if we took effective action on some of these, or even all of them, we would not get to the core issue at hand in the country—that we would still miss solving the problem of noise and confusion for people. We would still miss those factors that are overwhelming and disorienting people. There seems to me to be something fundamentally different at work, and that brings me to the second half of this talk.

Here I'm drawing on 30 years of work, not just some research that I looked at for these storylines. Let's pick it up at *Citizens and Politics*, published in 1990. People felt as though the political process had been taken over. They were mad as hell. And they reached for people like Ross Perot and things like term limits and constitutional amendments around our debt. Right? Blunt instruments to regain control of American Politics. It was about American Politics, big *P* Politics.

Every three years, I took a walk across the country and reinterviewed people. Much of that was sponsored by the foundation, sometimes by other groups. The questions never changed. And what we have found over that 30-year span is that the discussion has moved farther and farther away from politics and institutions, and closer and closer to the ways we live our lives—the ways we relate to one another, the ways we're constructing communities and our community life. And the ways we have purpose and meaning in our lives.

So we've gone from politics to our inability to solve problems and lamenting that we couldn't solve those problem, to an uptick in 9/11, when we thought that maybe we could solve these problems, to retreat after 9/11, when people realized that that was a

hoax and we weren't going to solve these problems, to the belief that this is really about our lives, our concerns, and the ways we relate to one another.

And so, for me, what is at the core of our challenge today—and I say this with caution sitting in this room, with David Mathews sitting directly across from me—is that I don't believe this is about politics with a small *p*. I think the essence of our challenge is a human challenge. It is a challenge about whether people have some sense of control over their lives, which I know relates to politics but I think it goes much deeper than politics.

I think it relates to the fact that so many people have grievances. It doesn't mean that they don't want to come together, but our public discourse is so fragmented that those with grievances include everyone. Not just folks who might immediately come to mind like Black Lives Matter protestors or angry, white, working-class voters, but everyone—middle-class folks who can't send their kids to college because they can't afford it anymore, people who are losing their homes, the whole range. We are talking past each other and so people are digging into these grievances more deeply because they don't know what else to do. And when you are scared and under psychological stress, you dig in. I think that's a human problem.

I think the challenge here is that people do not feel seen and heard in our society—that they feel as though they are invisible. This is a human condition, not simply a political condition. People feel ignored, they feel pushed aside. They feel diminished.

I think they feel as though elites and professionals who are well connected are driving the rules. We've known this for a long time. What matters here is not simply that they're driving the rules, but that they've squeezed out room for people to live their lives and come together and restore their faith that we can do things together. That's a human condition. It's related to politics but fundamentally human also.

People have lost faith in their institutions. As David said earlier, this is not just about government. This is about all institutions. This is everything from government to United Ways to community foundations to the Catholic Church. I'm on a panel this weekend on "The Jewish Voice in the Public Square," which is going to deal with this issue. It's everywhere.

What happens—Charles Taylor, the philosopher, talks about this—what happens when we’ve lost faith in the institutions that are supposed to have a relationship with us in our lives? That’s no longer simply a political thing. That denies you the ability to live your life with a faith that you have the ability to do something.

Then there is fear. At every point in our society we are pointing our fingers and blaming the “other” for the problems that we face. And what’s interesting about this is we have all become the “other” depending on who you’re talking to. This is not exclusive to some folks, some colors of skin, some ethnicity, some religions. We are all the “other” in one way or another.

And finally, I think what comes into this—and I think this is the most fundamental human part of it—we have misplaced the notion of dignity in our society and what it means to honor people’s dignity. We have replaced it with the question of whether you’ve gained respect. But dignity and respect, as we know, are not the same thing at all.

Respect is earned over time. Dignity is afforded to you by dint of the fact that you’re alive. I think many people feel as though their dignity has been abrogated, abridged, tossed out. And when people’s dignity is tossed out, their sense of reality is tossed out, and when that happens we’ve got a major challenge on our hands, a challenge that far outstrips politics.

So I would argue that what we’re facing is certainly a political challenge but, more fundamentally, it is a human challenge, which is going to require certain types of responses in order to move forward.

So what does this mean? One of the questions was, “Do we believe that there’s some emerging narrative occurring in the country?” I do not believe that there’s a single emerging narrative. I do believe that there are signs of a narrative emerging that relate to Kettering’s work and the work of everyone else around the table. And I think it has six or seven key components and I’ll just mention them really quickly.

I think dignity sits at the core of it. I think when I hear people in communities who are builders of this new narrative, dignity is always at the core of what they’re talking about—honoring each other’s dignity.

Second, as we know, the other part of this narrative is that action is going to emerge from local communities. It's not coming from Washington, DC, or from any of our state capitols. We'll be dead before that happens. It's happening in communities and you can actually see it happening. Public Achievement's doing it. The work we're doing is doing it. Public Agenda is doing it. It's happening among those Kettering is partnering with.

Third, I think we need to build together. I don't think we're going to talk our way out of this. I think conversations—deliberation—are really important. But I think shared work is just as important. There are things you can learn about someone else only when you're doing things with them. I think we have to demonstrate to ourselves that we can actually build things together and do things together and I think that means doing work together in communities.

Fourth, we've got to make the good visible. As we all know, there are a lot of positive things happening in communities. They're not visible to everyone. They're only visible to those folks who see them and work with them. And when they are made visible to others on programs like NBC's "Making a Difference," they're seen as quaint stories from a bygone era. We like to talk about them as something that happened in the 1850s. But they're actually happening.

And so the question for us is, even if we're doing good work or know of it, are we working to make it visible? Because if it's not visible, it's not named. And if it's not named, it doesn't exist. So I think that becomes important.

Fifth, we've got to make the commitment to spread these new practices and approaches and not scale them. I've got a lot more to say about that. I know this is not a challenge here. But as you know, it's a challenge everywhere else and with every funder and with every civic group in America; "If it's not scalable, it's not worthy." That's a fight we've got to take on.

Sixth, we've got to give care to weaving a new story, a new narrative. It's not going to happen on its own. And then seventh, what I'll say is we've got to be intentional if this narrative is going to take root. As I said before, none of this is going to happen naturally. The forces against it are much stronger than the forces with it. The good things that do happen often get knocked down and dissipate.

And so, the question is, what are the ways different groups can put a stake in the ground? Because, at least in my 30 years of doing this work, I've really come to believe that this fight is about whether we can restore our sense of belief in ourselves and a can-do spirit. And that does harken back to the Revolution and the founding of the country. And I think it's something we ought to tap back into.

**Harry Boyte:** I've had a blast over the last two years in working on a book entitled *Pedagogy of the Empowered*. It began specifically about our Public Achievement youth civic empowerment Initiative. It's turned out to be about our public work networks and stories over 30 years.

So here let me make some summary comments. One place to begin, Rich, is where I agree and disagree with you. I agree with most of what you say about the work we do. I disagree that it is not connected with politics and also on the way you define "respect."

After Charlottesville, I offered a sermon at our church called "Nonviolence after Charlottesville." As some of you know, I was shaped by my involvement in the freedom movement when I was a young man. I grew out of a context where my family had been vilified and our relatives had disowned us when my father became active in school desegregation. Dad was almost killed by the Nazi party in Southwest Virginia. Ultimately, he had a career with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

So, I was a pretty angry young kid. I learned nonviolence both from the eloquent philosophies of Martin Luther King Jr. and others and, probably most important, from the dignity and courage of regular folks across the South. The message in the sermon was partly the irony that nonviolence, in common usage, has shrunk to mean a tactic. That's the dominant framework. The philosophy's evaporated, and with the philosophy has gone a crucial understanding of the human condition. I boil down the philosophy we need to recall to what I'd call "public love." This is different from private love. It's infused with a sense of agency and power, and a different kind of politics that has to do with cocreating our common world. That's how I define politics.

It's Aristotelian in the sense of working across differences but it adds a productive world-building, commonwealth dimension. This nonviolent philosophy involves a horizon of respect for *possibility*—not respect for what the person has already achieved,

or simply recognition of the other's humanity. It's seeing the potential immensity within others who you may think are doing evil deeds, who you may think of as your enemies, who you may think of in whatever category you want to describe—racist, homophobic, sexist, violent. It's seeing the horizon of possibility beyond the immediate.

This kind of respect is there in Martin Luther King Jr.'s concept of agape, which he describes as seeing that one's enemies have the aspiration to be "part of the best in the human family." Pay attention to that language. He's getting at the idea of public possibility. So, let me say what I think this means and how it is seen in our stories.

First, I want to raise the concept of public work with emphasis here on building our common or community wealth. Lawrence Cremin in *The Transformation of the School* talks about the work of citizens building schools as the heart of the American educational tradition. People built schools and they had ownership in schools and they had authority in the schools.

At least one-third of African American schools across the South—the Rosenwald Schools—were created by communities. And people had a sense of pride and ownership. Look at the rural heartland. Something like 40,000 local schools have been destroyed in America as part of the school consolidation movement driven by progressives. That goes a significant way toward understanding the despair and sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in rural America.

*[At this point, Boyte distributes a chart entitled "Citizenship in Different Frameworks of Democracy," which lists the frameworks in three columns: Liberal (government centered); Communitarian (community centered); and Public Work (citizen centered). The full chart appears in the Appendix]*

Calling attention to the chart, in *Public Achievement* we started out with the idea of citizen politics. We knew it was not partisan politics. Citizen politics is an Aristotelian notion of engagement across difference, engagement with plurality. This is the same as the concept that informed the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa, IDASA. You need to learn how to work with people who are different. But we also knew it was associated with the commonwealth.

We wanted unscripted politics for young people that served as an alternative to the mobilizing politics that they were learning: the manufactured hatred that comes out of

the formula at the heart of the door-to-door canvass and other citizen and media efforts in which one always finds an enemy and defines issues as good versus evil. And ironically, it's even become the center of the new theory of nonviolence. This really is crazy.

Nonviolence has become a tactic to use to mobilize your allies against your enemies.

In Public Achievement, young people choose a project. It needs to be nonviolent, legal (for obvious political reasons), and make a public contribution. Now this is different than learning about what government does or simply interacting with policymakers. It's also different from seeking justice. We've had a lot of pressure from the left that young people should do projects around justice. We said, "Well, justice can be part of it, but we say, 'public contribution' and leave that open."

What it's done over time is illuminate different paradigms of democracy and citizenship and politics that people operate in. These concepts don't have just one meaning. We think they can be described most simply in the three broad paradigms listed on the chart that overlap and mix to produce hybrids.

The first (Liberal) is the common and dominant definition: democracy is focused on government. This is the official definition on the U.S. AID website. Democracy means free elections. Every candidate last year, from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump, at some point defined elections in this way. Sanders in his announcement speech said, "Oh, we all know what democracy means. It means one person, one vote." Well, that's one definition. But it's not the only definition.

The second column (Communitarian) has come out of a critique of that view. People are not just rights holders and rights bearers, they're not just defined in relationship to voting and benefits. They're also members of communities. They're cultural beings. The whole communitarian theoretical framework informs that perspective. It's very rich. It's a good critique. It has tended to be marginalized and, ironically, this hope for a diverse pluralist understanding of community has changed into a tribal communitarianism in recent years. Anyway, it's part of a narrative and it's part of understanding democracy in the theoretical literature. It's associated with civil society.

There's another column in the chart which is about cocreating our common world. We call that the Public Work column. It highlights not only solving problems together—

which is language often used in the deliberative world— but also, creating things of general use and beauty together.

Schools are a great case in point in American history. But there are many other cases of the commonwealth. In 1999, I looked at about 150 groups of young people working as teams. And I looked at their choice of projects in terms of the three paradigms of politics outlined on the chart.

Interestingly enough, about a third were in the first column. Now, for young people, this means struggles around justice. We're getting mistreated, and so they're racial, gender, sexual orientation—you name it—they're struggles for justice, an important part of making a decent life together. That's 33 percent.

Interestingly—and I was surprised, given the fact that the communitarians have been responsible for the service-learning movement in America, from Robert Bellah on—17 percent chose service projects. They're important, helping the needy and poor and the homeless.

Fifty percent chose what I would call commonwealth projects (typical of the third column, Public Work). Those range from building a playground to planting a garden to organizing a recycling campaign, to culture change that doesn't have victims and oppressors. So, for example, anti-bullying campaigns. These are very common across all of Public Achievement, not only in the United States but in 30 other countries as well. Interestingly, in anti-bullying efforts young people really never say that those people are the enemies and we're the victims. They all see themselves as complicit. Culture changes around an issue like bullying comprise a variety of lifestyle choices. Cultural issues are seen as "All of us are in this together." And I would call those commonwealth building projects.

It's not as though commonwealth doesn't exist anymore, but it is shrinking. In general, in popular idiom, common things are seen as things provided by the government. There's a wonderful documentary on the New York Public Library that my wife and I saw the other day. It shows public work of all kinds creating this enormous network with a strong public-service mission for the library.

So what to do about the erosion of commonwealth politics? Our book *Pedagogy of the Empowered* tells the other side of the story in the form of stories that are

particularly powerful and they're different. It's putting "public" back in a particular kind of work. Here I want to draw attention to the central role of citizen professionals who are catalytic. It's the idea of working "with," rather than "for" or "on." Citizen professionals do three things.

First, and most important, they open what we would call free space for the reknitting of our civic fabric, and civic and public relationships. There are a lot of stories in the book of these free spaces and there are stories of how young people have shifted from righteous justice, rage at injustice, to a public-work space.

College students doing Public Achievement who are preservice teachers in special education have changed their view of the kids they work with. They come into special education with anger at injustice, racial injustice, economic injustice, the craziness of schools. As they coach teams of children and teenagers they change their views of kids to seeing kids as full of talent—what I would call public love. They never imagined these talents. They pitied the kids but they didn't respect their possibilities. They've also learned many ways to open free space in a classroom so young people can be self-determining and take the lead in their education.

Second, the citizen professional. We've seen great cases of this like Mike Huggins who's been here at the foundation several times. He is a leading partner in bringing public work into city management. Citizen professionals provide the way to reconnect institutions and the lay citizenry. that can take a lot of forms. It's a reconnection, bridge building.

And third, I would say citizen professionals are at work with others to rebuild our commonwealth, our community wealth. They see that as part of what it means to develop agency and empowerment. Empowerment for what? Empowerment for the world we share together. That leads to a notion of democracy not as something that we elect people to do for us, not simply a civil society, but actually a citizen-centered democracy, an ongoing experiment that we all create. A new narrative, but also an old narrative.

## Discussion

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**Connie Crockett:** A question for you Harry. Looking at your chart, under the Communitarian heading, you list the politics as “community harmony.” I wonder why you chose that term. Because from my reading of Etzioni and others, the politics would be more like “community order,” which is pretty different.

**Harry Boyte:** That might be a good term. I’m not wedded to mine. But I do think that the second column systematically avoids discussion of politics and questions of power. You notice, we think of power differently in these columns as well.

**Alice Huff:** Thank you, John, for talking as you did about political correctness. It’s something I’ve been thinking about. In terms of our work here at the Foundation, are we thinking about this as just a speech issue—a barrier to how people might be able to see each other and communicate across differences in deliberative situations? Or is it a condition for deliberation? Is being able to talk about people in ways that affirm their dignity something that is required?

**Jean Johnson:** You know, what I thought was so interesting in John’s report was a woman who talks about walking on eggshells. There’s a sense that people know some rules. But they don’t know all the rules. And there’s this sense that you might just say something you think is okay and it gets you slapped down.

But I think there’s something deeper there that is very important in the experience at NIF, particularly on this last Safety and Justice issue. What are people not saying? And is it, maybe, better that they don’t say it, or is that a problem? We don’t exactly know how people are self-regulating themselves.

**Harry Boyte:** I want to go back to nonviolence. I also think there are class issues here. Last Saturday, I gave a talk to the India Association of Minnesota, which wants to create a nonviolence movement. Afterwards, nine young people who have been active in Black Lives Matter, seven African Americans and two European Americans, wanted to talk.

And they said, “We’ve got to go beyond Black Lives Matter, it’s too hateful. And we’re not accomplishing anything.” I mean, they weren’t sorry that they’d been involved.

They think that they had raised the consciousness of shootings and other issues, incarceration in the Twin Cities. But, they said, “It’s too good-versus-evil.”

There’s kind of a Manichean culture of reductionism and we need to counter that with what I would call nonviolence, understood as the vast complexity and potential of people below the surface, whatever they’re saying. And I don’t think there are many opportunities for that. But we do see it all the time.

If I listen to young people in Public Achievement who are organizing discussions about racism, often led by African Americans, it’s completely different from the discourse on campuses about intersectionality and white supremacy or white privilege. It’s full of practice wisdom, lessons about how people grow and change and become familiar with each other.

**Rich Harwood:** What I’ve found is that if we can frame the discussions and the spaces that we’re in in a different way, it opens up the possibility for forward movement. That said, because I don’t want to sound naïve, those who are opening up the spaces, those who are in the spaces, need to recognize that there are going to be things that are said that they’re not going to like. That there are going to be things that are said that are hurtful. That there are going to be things that are said that question our history. We need to prepare ourselves to engage in those conversations and not pretend that’s not going to happen.

Because even under the best of conditions, these things need to be talked about. And I think otherwise we are fooling ourselves. That somehow we can just sort of move forward without any kind of hurt or pain or suffering that I think comes with a lot of the conversations, even those rooted in possibility. Because the more we talk about possibility, the more it opens up the space to actually talk about actual hurt and pain and suffering that I think we need to deal with.

So, I don’t think it’s an either/or. I think it’s, “How do we join these things together in a more productive way that gives people a sense of possibility and help that we can actually get things done together and creates more of a can-do spirit.”

**John Doble:** In the focus groups, we probably could’ve spent the whole time talking about political correctness. There was so much energy once that topic was raised. And I think this is a question for the foundation—possibly a topic for an issue book. I

fully agree with Rich, this could be talked about. But it has to be talked about carefully. And I think people really want to talk about it. I agree with Harry, fully. If it's framed appropriately, people want to talk about it. And they care about it deeply.

And as Jean said, they're walking on eggshells. They're not sure where the rules are. And what the boundaries are. What they can say, what they should say. I think this is something for the foundation to consider.

**Rich Harwood:** Can I just add one quick thing to that because it goes to something Jean raised: the norms and the rules for how we do things are up for grabs. And a lot of them no longer seem to fit. It doesn't mean that we've forgotten them. But somehow or other, they've been caked over or pushed aside.

We all know this and I suspect, Harry, this happens a lot in your work. It definitely happens in our work: like anti-bullying, there are some issues that are more amenable to getting people started, to building their confidence and capabilities, to having conversations and enabling them to feel as though they're moving forward. And there are other issues that inflame the grievances and the political correctness, and sort of divide us faster than others.

And so, a really practical thing I know we think about in our work all the time, and I suspect the foundation is too, are which issues enable people to come forward and engage and build their confidence and capabilities, and reset the norms and rules so that we can get to the harder and harder issues over time.

And I think again, too often, with a lot of folks that we work with, they want to take the hardest, most intractable, most divisive issues on first, and there is no reason to believe that we have the capabilities, competence, or norms or rules to be able to deal with them. And so we shoot ourselves in the foot, over and over again

**Bill Muse:** Tomorrow, John Dedrick and I will be traveling to a National Conference on Citizenship in Washington. And this will be a group of about 300 civic leaders all across the country. And on Friday morning, we have a journalist named Sam Quinones who has completed a study about the drug and the opioid epidemic in this country.

It's the most incisive study that I've seen. Last year, more Americans perished because of drug overdoses than died in the entire Vietnam War. More people under the age of 50 die from drug overdoses than for any other reason.

The epidemic has permeated every segment of our society. We tend to think of this as low-income whites without jobs who are going into drug overdoses. But the interesting dimension of this was how the rapidly emerging information technology has produced the isolationism and feeling of psychological pain on the part of many, many citizens. And the research specifically identified young people.

We cannot ignore this problem. We cannot sit around and let this go on in our communities and act as though it's not there. What I hope to do on Friday is to convince these 300 leaders to use our new issue guide on the opioid epidemic, take it back to their communities and conduct forums to begin the conversation that needs to take place.

It's an opportunity for Kettering and NIFI to have a significant impact in our society and I don't want to see us ignore it.

**Rich Harwood:** I'd really be interested in the results of those conversations. I think the opioid crisis is a perfect example of people doubling down on the types of solutions they think are going to work that will never address, for instance, those kids that feel abandoned.

Because the ways we are organized to work is that everyone wants to own their piece of the solution to this, seldom looking up and saying, "We actually need a whole constellation of actors to work on this in complementary ways in order to make any kind of progress.

And even if you can get people to think in that way, we don't have the mechanism or, the spaces that enable people to work in those ways in communities because we revert either to highly mechanized collaboration approaches or collective impact approaches that become highly professionalized and actually destroy the shared-responsibility approach that we need to address a problem like opioids.

So, while this is an unfortunate problem, it is a good place for those of us in this room to be in, because I think it's an opportunity to demonstrate alternative ways people and organizations and institutions can work on communities.

**Harry Boyte:** I really agree with you Rich. We have a story in our book about a rural area in northwest Missouri where a local foundation became worried about the outmigration of the area's young people. They had found from their research that the kids thought they were ignored. They didn't have a role. They were invisible. Nobody paid attention to their talents.

So the foundation hired a wonderful organizer who did Public Achievement for 10 years across the region. They have had tens of thousands of kids involved. They've changed the attitudes of kids towards things because they feel visible and valued and they're making a public contribution.

It involves also creating a kind of civic ecology of interacting people, from political leaders to church leaders to educational leaders, to civic and business folks who interacted with the kids. So that's a very good example of an alternative approach. And the result was pretty strong.

**Nick Felts:** The topic of our annual research review—nothing less than the state of democracy—is a very big one. And many of the prescriptions, as Rich points out, are equally big and broad and overwhelming. And so, I was struck by what you saw, John, in the likelihood that people would trade a silver bullet for a big pressing problem for a state of less division among each other. I think you used the phrase, “back to basics.”

That's what was striking in all of these presentations. In the context of these enormous problems, you have this phrase, “back to basics”—what Rich calls a sense of possibility, a can-do spirit. These stories of can-do work are not epics. They're just . . . basic.

**Rich Harwood:** It's interesting. When we work with groups or foundations and they start to engage in how change occurs, they inevitably make the discovery that it grows more ecologically and organically with intention than it does through a command and control point of view, which is sort of what these storylines are about or what a lot of foundation programs are about, or what a lot of large institutions do.

But I think one of the challenges is how we help people engage in thinking about frames for how change occurs—so that it actually has a chance. Thinking about the story that Harry just told about northwestern Missouri, I would imagine if I went to this

community and started to talk to people, I would discover all sorts of ripple effects that no one had ever anticipated.

And that those ripple effects may be even more important, or at least as important, as some of the core work because of the community wealth that was created.

**John Doble:** I would just quickly add, Nick, when we posed that question at the end of the focus group: “Would you trade off solving your problem for more civility and a narrowing of differences among the American people?” I think it highlights several things. One is hunger for something very different from what we’ve got now. People are very, very unhappy with where we are. Second is a sense of possibility of where we might go. A real reason for a “whole,” down the road.

**Keith Melville:** A number of us having been preparing a new issue book on immigration, and wondering what it is about what’s going on in American society today that makes this such a lightning rod? And I really think it relates to the comments and the diagnoses that the three of you have offered, particularly Rich’s finding that “people feel that they’ve lost a basic sense of control over their lives and communities.”

I’m thinking about how we want to frame the immigration issue. And what kind of discussion we want to frame. Clearly, right now, we have a terrible national discussion going on because it’s framed between two polar opposites. The people that I’m surrounded by in higher education are all about diversity and globalization.

On the other side, there are the, “build the wall” people. And even among the people who say that’s a good idea, they say, “Well, we don’t really mean that.” But what do they mean? I really think there’s a fundamental sense on the part of a lot of Americans that they’re out of control in their own communities. They’re changing too quickly; the young kids are moving out.

The people that are moving in are newcomers who are changing our way of life, and the underlying question that doesn’t get articulated except in some of these focus groups is, “Don’t we have a right to define our own community? And why are those people out there, those politicians basically, in the name of globalization, in the name of any number of things, why are they making decisions that change our communities?”

Clearly, we don’t want to frame an immigration issue in terms of policy options. There’s no reason to believe that anything policymakers could do—comprehensive

immigration reform or building a wall—would be a solution. So, what is the underlying issue that we're really trying to elicit?

Give us some advice and some thought about how to frame this issue so that communities can have a more productive discussion about things that are politically unsayable, politically incorrect to talk about.

**Rich Harwood:** As you know, better than I do, there's a need to have a discussion about "immigration." However, I think the sense is, it's not going to go very far. And so the question becomes, "How productive is that for NIF and for the country and for communities?"

One can make the argument that we ought to do it because there's all this argument. I happen to believe that a better, a more productive discussion that would be filled with more possibility is, "What does it mean, in essence, to live in community, and what are the assets we need in order to do that?"

So when I talk to people about their ability to solve problems in communities, inevitably what emerges, even in more homogeneous communities, is that they talk about working with diverse people. They talk about getting to know people who are different from them. In almost every instance it comes up. And so, if the question is, "How do we create a conversation that gives people a sense of possibility that they can shape their communities in a productive way and still have some control?" I would opt for going smaller with more fundamental issues rather than starting with the direct policy issues.

**Harry Boyte:** But interestingly, the most anxiety is actually in communities that adjoin diverse immigrant communities but haven't experienced immigration themselves. What that goes to is what you said: the way to lessen that feeling of loss of control, loss of agency, is to have diverse people work together on something of consequence and make a difference.

I just want to add one other thing. Our own concept of public citizen politics was informed by the experiences of two grassroots, church-based community organizations, one located in the Mexican American barrios of San Antonio. They didn't say, "the public world is someplace where you put aside your differences to follow civic virtue." They created the concept of public arenas as places of discomfort and diversity, where actually you cannot presume a common good.

They needed to develop a way of naming relationships with the Anglo business establishment which the Mexican Americans had hated for years. What they did was develop a language that said, “We’re going to put aside our personal feelings and see the possibilities of working together around common projects.” They began to see possibilities in people they had seen for generations as the enemy.

**Derek Barker:** I wanted to hear the three of you engage one another a little bit more as we’re trying to figure out what we think is happening among the citizenry. I think I heard some differences among the three of you, although I’m not sure. And I’m kind of curious to start with John because I think I heard the darkest narrative from him.

**John Doble:** I didn’t see it as totally dark. I saw it as hopeful, or having a sense of possibility. But certainly, if trends continue, things could be dark. One of the things that Rich said really struck a responsive core with me. He said, we need to make the good visible.

I think that a lot of the people that I spoke to in these groups don’t have a sense of what’s going on for want of a better phrase. And they feel estranged. And they feel estranged in their personal lives, which is very important. And they feel estranged when they look at the media. And so, in their family situation, people aren’t talking with each other.

That’s very different from where we once were. But I think there’s a hunger, a very, very deep hunger for something very different from what we’ve got. And a real sense of, “I’d be willing to trade even a solution to this issue that’s nearest and dearest to me, for something else if we could do it.”

**Harry Boyte:** I do think we have differences around politics. Our particular focus is on work and the commonwealth of communities that are created through work. I don’t think that in practice we actually ended up disagreeing about that.

**Rich Harwood:** I think the point I would probably elevate is what we mean when we talk in this room. At one point I said something and, Harry your response, which made total sense, was, “Well, that’s politics.” And that’s politics to those of us in this room. It’s not politics to most people outside of this room.

I think one of the things for those of us in this room to remember is that this notion of politics is fundamentally different and is more different today than it was five

years ago. I think that where the country is today is both a challenge and an enormous opportunity for all of us around things like opioids and other issues. But I think we have to keep reminding ourselves that, while we do this every day all day, this is the milieu we're in. This is not where most people are living their lives.

But, to John's point, I'll say this: intuitively this is where people do want to live their lives. And so how do you make those connections?

**David Mathews:** Just some notes. First, I was really impressed with the scholarly discipline that goes into the research that we heard about. A lot of these folks came out of the Public Agenda school for survey research. It's rigorous, it's thorough, it's good. And I was very much impressed by that.

Second, I wonder whether we need to make a distinction between partisan polarization on the one hand, and social political divisiveness on the other. Partisan polarization is a take-no-prisoners politics. There are no compromises. You hate your enemy.

Social and political divisiveness, on the other hand, can be overcome. And we see it in stories of people helping one another across those lines in disasters every day.

My third observation is that words are concepts that we use, allowing us to see things or obscure things. There is no word or set of words that will reveal all of reality. And so, when we say, "Politics is, or is not," we're saying, "If I use it this way I can see certain things. If I use it that way, I can't see them." So "politics," understood as government, allows us to see certain things but it obscures others.

Politics in a more basic sense allows us to see more, but it runs the danger of making everything politics. Rich's work has, over the years, helped us see—I'm looking for a word here; let's take his word—*humanity*: hope, feelings, dignity. Those are all dimensions to me of politics. I think of politics long before the Greeks as an effort of human beings to survive by collective measures.

But survival is not merely physical, it's psychological. It's of the spirit. So there is, as some would say, a soft side to it. And Rich increasingly has helped us see that dimension of it. I don't have any problems with it.

I think the word *work*, in its relationship to the word, *control*, stands out in this conversation. Work is what people do that gives them control. And it's working together that gives them a certain kind of control and power.

I wonder, though, about this notion of making it visible. Whether we mean by that good publicity or whether we mean making it visible to people in the discovery of their own agency. Those are two different things. A feel-good story in the papers, is that what we're talking about? Or is it people within themselves having a sense of agency?

The conversation today, most of all, is evidence of a small group of people working to educate themselves about the political world and what's happened to it.

## Contributors

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### **JOHN DOBLE**

Formerly senior vice president and research director at Public Agenda and the founder of Doble Research Associates, John Doble has worked with the Kettering Foundation since 1981. He has authored numerous reports for the foundation on subjects that encompass the relationship of the public and the public schools, the public understanding of science, and the results of public thinking in NIF forums. He has presented study results at the White House, on Capitol Hill, at the National Press Club, and to numerous organizations including the American Association of Public Opinion Research, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Institute of American Studies in Beijing, among many others.

### **RICH HARWOOD**

Rich Harwood is founder and president of the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, a nonpartisan, independent nonprofit organization that teaches, coaches, and inspires people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. Under his leadership, the institute's tools and approaches for deepening impact and change have spread to thousands of communities in the United States and nearly 40 countries, and through partnerships with some of the world's largest nonprofits, including United Way Worldwide, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the American Library Association, and AARP. He has authored a number of books and has spoken extensively on the subject of solutions to the divisiveness and acrimony that have taken hold of our politics and public life, and stand in the way of progress.

### **HARRY C. BOYTE**

Harry C. Boyte is founder of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, newly merged into the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, where Boyte now serves as senior scholar in public work philosophy. He is also a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. In 2012, he served as coordinator of the American Commonwealth Partnership, a coalition of higher education groups and institutions created by invitation of the White House Office of Public Engagement. Boyte's forthcoming book, *Pedagogy of the Empowered*, will be published by Vanderbilt University Press in 2018.

Appendix

**Citizenship in different frameworks of democracy**

Frameworks of political theory	Liberal (Government-centered)	Communitarian (Community-centered)	Public work (Citizen -centered)
Democracy	Free elections	Civil society	Way of life built through public work
Citizen	Voter, customer	Volunteer	Co-creator
Citizenship	Voting, rights holder	Community involvement	Public work, including citizen professionals (e.g. citizen teacher, citizen nurse)
Civic education	Civics	Service projects	Public Achievement
Project focus (survey, 1999)	Distributive justice 33%	Helping/serving 17%	Commonwealth 50%
Power	Power over	Power with	Power to
Politics	Who gets what?	Communal harmony	Work across differences, conflict and construction

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## About the Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan research organization rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Everything Kettering researches relates to one central question: what does it take for democracy to work as it should? Chartered as an operating corporation, Kettering does not make grants. The foundation's small staff and extensive network of associates collaborate with community organizations, government agencies, researchers, scholars, and citizens, all of whom share their experiences with us.

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