

# KETTERING REVIEW

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

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# Editors' Letter

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This issue of the *Kettering Review* is devoted to a preposition: *with*. In contrast to its cousins—of, by, and for—*with* has been long neglected, especially in the connection between the people and their institutions. Here, we ask, How might democratic governance operate not just of, by, and for the people but *with* the people? In other words, what kind of relationship might institutions, including but not limited to governmental institutions, have to the people besides being made up of them, or authorized by them, or acting for them? How might people and institutional leaders work together toward their shared goals and ends? And how might they do this in a way that doesn't flatten out differences and disagreements?

The “people” seems like a simple enough word, but it hides a multitude of complexities. As Margaret Canovan parsed it in her 2005 book, *The People*, it can mean “the people as sovereign, peoples as nations, and the people as opposed to the ruling elite.” It might mean the sovereign people as one, a quasi-mythic body that can found and authorize new nations, or it might mean your everyday, run-of-the-mill people. It might stand for the elite, who supposedly embody the nation's virtues, or it could be the downtrodden, who have been denied their rightful place. The prepositions *of*, *by*, and *for* lead to these and other complexities since all three presume a people as a body that can be represented or a body with the power to legitimate or delegitimize governments.

This issue of the *Review* eschews quasi-mythical definitions and hews closer to seeing “the people” as that heterogeneous assortment of everyday folks who rarely exhibit anything like Locke's founding consent or Rousseau's General Will. But neither are they simply the population of people living within a polity's borders. Rather, as members of a democratic society, their views about what should or should not be done matter.

What though if the important role of the citizen is short-circuited? Cristina Lafont, whose essay “Democracy for Us, Citizens” opens this issue, makes the case that being able to participate in the process of charting society's direction should not be handed over to someone else or determined with some kind of shortcut. In the essay published here, drawn from her book *Democracy without Shortcuts*, Lafont calls for a robust view of participatory democratic politics, not the kind of shortcuts offered by deliberative polling or other methods that skirt the need for all citizens to be engaged. What democracy needs, Lafont argues, is

for “citizens [to] see themselves as participants in a democratic project of collective self-government to the extent that they can identify with the laws and policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own.” The more people can endorse those laws and policies, the more legitimacy they have.

But what happens when people find the laws of their society out of keeping with their own ends? When they don't fit? When they seem just wrong? Here, a democratic project calls on another power of the people: the prerogative to say no to the prevailing order and to call for something else. At bottom, according to Nadia Urbinati, a political theorist at Columbia University, democracy has a streak of “antiestablishmentarianism.” At the heart of democracy is the paradox that the very systems that the public authors, the public can also in the next breath denounce, severing any *with* link between the people and their institutions. Instead of working with each other, they can become terribly fearful, anxious, and paranoid, even leading to the rise of populism beset by an us/them dichotomy. But where some might see populism as the expression of democracy at its most extreme, Urbinati sees it as a distortion of democracy. Whereas populists try to sever any link between the people and their institutions by putting them in separate groups, democracy is always a process of the civic and the institutional (to borrow David Mathews' terms) working in tandem: *with* each other.

This kind of relationship is not an abstract one but something real and concrete, especially when people are working to address actual problems. Kettering's longtime friend Daniel Kemmis explores this in an essay drawn from his latest book, *Citizens Uniting to Restore Our Democracy*. Focused on the problems that emerged in the wake of the *Citizens United* case, Kemmis explores the power of democratic deliberation and collaborative public work to ward off the ill effects of privatized power and supplement the limits of governmental power. Kemmis notes,

To put it bluntly, the problems that people have expected the government to solve have all too seldom been addressed in a problem-solving way. Rather than simply complain about this situation, or resign themselves to it, increasing numbers of people have been stepping up, engaging their neighbors (especially those with whom they have had significant differences), and doing the problem solving themselves.

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The *with* question also emerges in connection to the relationship between the public and science, as Pepperdine University associate professor Jason Blakely notes in his essay. In the age of COVID, this relationship is at its most stressed. Blakely has twin worries: one about the lack of respect for scientific expertise and the other about the need to temper technocratic overreach. “Democracy and science can be mutually reinforcing only if there is a recognition of the limited authority of each.” In essence, Blakely is calling for a more complementary or *with* relationship in which we acknowledge and respect the vital role of scientific expertise without sacrificing the vital role of public deliberation and contestation.

The *with* relationship is also crucial for addressing climate change. As Michael Menser notes in our interview with him, “Climate chaos requires us to rethink the public and to do all we can to enhance democratic forms of agency.” As a philosopher and leader in participatory city politics, Menser responds to our queries about how a philosophy of “*with* the people” motivates his public work. “Public power is not just about civic engagement. It is about public ownership and input into the management of the system.”

We also find the *with* relationship helping address health policy. Reporting from Bangladesh, Shagufe Hossain takes up the central question of this issue of the *Review*: How can citizens and governments work with each other to solve pressing problems? Hossain discusses how the benefits of citizens’ participation, making full use of their intelligence and knowledge, has helped alleviate public health crises in dengue fever, coronavirus, and ensuing mental health issues.

The issue closes with more general reflections from Kettering Foundation president David Mathews, whose writings on “*with* the people” inspired this issue. There are two sides of democracy: institutional and civic. But the latter often gets overlooked and forgotten. This misses a crucial fact: Citizens empower democratic institutions, and only they can grant governments legitimacy. In modern, complex societies, “institutional democracy is essential,” he writes, “yet its legitimacy has to come from civic democracy.”

**Noëlle McAfee and Nicholas A. Felts**



# Democracy for Us, Citizens

by Cristina Lafont

*There are no shortcuts  
to make a political  
community better  
than its members,  
nor can a community  
achieve faster progress  
by leaving their  
citizens behind.*

The underlying fear, shared by citizens and academics alike, seems to be that the standard package of rights and opportunities for political decision-making that citizens enjoy in democratic societies are losing their political significance. These rights and opportunities no longer seem sufficient to secure citizens' effective capacity to both shape the policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own. In light of the political system's lack of responsiveness to the citizenry, citizens can no longer see themselves as equal partners in a democratic project of self-government. Even if they still enjoy all their legal rights of democratic participation, these rights are losing their "fair value"—to use Rawls's expression. From this perspective, it seems clear that reducing democratic deficits would require increasing the fair value of citizens' current rights and their opportunities to effectively shape the policies to which they are subject. And, from this perspective, institutional reforms should seek to increase rather than decrease citizens' ability to participate in forms of decision-making that can effectively influence the political process such that it once again becomes *responsive* to their interests, opinions, and policy objectives.

While this may seem like the intuitive meaning behind the "democratic deficit"-based complaints of citizens, political organizations, and even academics, such concerns are not properly reflected within the main debates of democratic theory. Indeed, when one turns to normative democratic theory for guidance as to how to strengthen democratic institutions or reduce democratic deficits, one encounters sharp disagreement over what the ideal of democracy

even requires in the first place, as well as attendant disagreements over the institutional reforms that would be most helpful for bringing current societies closer to that ideal.

Proposals to reform current democratic institutions are often put forth as helpful shortcuts

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## Taking shortcuts that bypass public deliberation about political decisions would further erode the fundamental commitment of the democratic ideal of self-government.

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to solve difficult problems of democratic governance. But, taking shortcuts that bypass public deliberation about political decisions would further erode the fundamental commitment of the democratic ideal of self-government, namely, to ensure that all citizens can equally own and *identify with* the institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject. In pluralist societies this is a fragile and quite burdensome commitment. Thus, there is a strong temptation to simply skip it, to take shortcuts that remove political decisions from debates in the public sphere in order to avoid problems such as overcoming disagreements, citizens' political ignorance, or poor-quality deliberation within the public sphere. However, the exclusionary and alienating effects of these proposed shortcuts would erode mutual empathy and civic solidarity among citizens, and these are resources

that democracy cannot flourish without. The democratic ideal of treating each other as free and equal depends upon being committed to convincing one another of the reasonableness of political decisions to which we are all subject, and that ideal withers if we simply coerce one another into sheer obedience. Only if citizens are in fact committed to convincing one another can they continue to identify with the institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject and *endorse them as their own* instead of feeling alienated from them. As the current rise in populism indicates, democracies ignore this concern at their peril. In addition, the proposed "shortcuts" naïvely assume that a political community can reach better outcomes by bypassing the actual beliefs and attitudes of its own citizens. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to make a political community better than its members, nor can a community achieve faster progress by leaving their citizens behind. The *only road* to better political outcomes is the long, participatory road that is taken when citizens forge a collective political will by changing one another's hearts and minds. Commitment to democracy simply is the realization that there are no shortcuts. However arduous, fragile, and risky the process of mutual justification of political decisions through public deliberation may be, simply skipping it cannot get us any closer to the democratic ideal. In fact, it will move us further away.

As a citizen who grew up under a dictatorship and made it through a hard-won transition to democracy, I do not take democracy for granted. I know that democratic rights are rarely given. They must be taken. They must be fought for, they must be claimed, and they must be

reclaimed whenever their effectiveness is undermined by the powers that be. Only citizens can do that. But this requires clarity as to what is worth defending and reclaiming, the proposals that may help us, citizens, regain democratic control and those that may seem promising but that would further alienate us from the political process. Clarity about the precise features of democracy that are worth fighting for could hardly be timelier, as both optimists and skeptics agree, the fate of democracy is hanging in the balance. We, citizens, must claim and own our political institutions if democracy is to survive at all.

My central aim is to articulate and defend a participatory conception of deliberative democracy. There is a lot being written on deliberative democracy, and my project is a contribution to this literature. But what seems to be missing from the literature is an emphasis on the participatory aspect of democracy as an ideal of self-government. In my view, this is partly due

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## We, citizens, must claim and own our political institutions if democracy is to survive at all.

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to the lack of an appropriate conception of democratic participation—in particular, a conception that is both sensitive to deliberative concerns and suitable for mass democracies. Trying to articulate such a conception in direct conversation with alternative conceptions of democracy requires, first of all, some clarity as



to what the democratic ideal generally involves. It cannot be reduced or equated to the ideal of political equality. Political equality is necessary but not sufficient for democracy. Some form of democratic control over political decision-making by the citizenry is essential to the democratic ideal. This may seem obvious. Strangely enough, the different conceptions of democracy that I analyze all tend to focus on the ideal of political equality to the detriment of the ideal of democratic control—the ability of citizens to shape the policies they are subject to as well as to endorse them as their own.

Granted, it is not always easy to pin down the difference between political equality and democratic control in practice. However, a helpful way to evaluate the impact of conceptions of democracy and their proposals for reform upon democratic control is to assess the extent to which they require or expect citizens to *blindly defer* to the decisions of others. Note that the question here is not whether citizens are required to *defer* to the political decisions of others. All representative democracies require citizens to do that. The question is whether they are expected



to do so *blindly*. In representative democracies citizens are expected to delegate political decisions to their representatives, officials, and so on. However, to the extent that citizens maintain some capacity for control over these actors, they are not doing so *blindly*. By contrast, deference is blind if there is no such capacity for control. The difference between the two can be explained as follows. In the first case, one has *some* (defeasible) *reason* to assume that the political decisions endorsed by the agent to whom one is deferring are those that one would have endorsed if one had thought through the issue with access to the relevant information. By contrast, in the second case, one has no reason to make this assumption. This is not to deny that we may have good reasons to blindly defer to the decisions of others. It is simply to point out that whenever we do so, we are no longer engaging in a democratic project of self-government regarding those decisions. To the contrary, what we have determined is that these decisions should track *their* considered judgments instead of *ours* and that we will blindly follow them, whatever they happen to be. An expectation of *blind*

deference is quintessentially incompatible with the democratic ideal of self-government. Thus, it provides a helpful yardstick for evaluating the democratic promise of different conceptions of democracy and their proposals for institutional reform. The more such conceptions expect citizens to blindly defer to the decisions of others and thus accept the possibility of a *permanent misalignment* between the beliefs and attitudes of the citizenry and the laws and policies to which they are subject, then the less attuned these conceptions and proposals are to the democratic ideal of self-government. Taking this yardstick as a guide is helpful for identifying democratic shortcomings among conceptions of democracy that, for all their differences, nonetheless endorse various shortcuts that would bypass citizens' public deliberation of political decisions. Such a yardstick is also helpful for articulating and defending a conception of democracy without shortcuts.

**T**he ideal that one should not be subject to the laws that one cannot see oneself as an author of is motivated by a concern to avoid being coerced into *blind obedience*. Differently put, the ideal seeks to avoid being coerced into obeying laws that one cannot endorse as at least reasonable upon reflection. Avoiding sheer coercion does not require that one literally be an author of the laws, but it does require that one can obey them based upon insights into their reasonableness. One has to be able to identify with the laws or to reflectively endorse them.

According to this idea, citizens can see themselves as participants in a democratic project of collective self-government to the extent that

they can identify with the laws and policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own.

A permanent *disconnect* between the interests, reasons, and ideas of citizens and the actual laws and policies that they are bound to obey would alienate them from the political community. It is this notion of political *alienation* or *estrangement* that we need to explore in order to articulate an interpretation of the democratic ideal of self-government that can be action-guiding for complex societies like ours.

No matter how interconnected they may be in practice, domination and alienation are different phenomena. The concern with political domination is a concern with the distribution of political power. I am politically dominated by others to the extent that they can (arbitrarily) impose their decisions on me, whereas I am not dominated by them (at least not politically) if I have as much power to decide as they do. Undoubtedly, the concern with political equality or non-domination is essential to the democratic ideal of self-government. However, political equality does not rule out political alienation. This is because the worry about being alienated from laws that one is bound to obey but cannot reflectively endorse is a concern with the *substance* of the laws and not just with the distribution of power among decision-makers. A substantive concern with the proper *content* of the laws and policies that I am bound to obey is different from, and interpersonal concern with, the proper *relationship to others* who also participate in the decision-making process. Political equality is necessary but not sufficient for democratic self-government. Whether or not I have equal decision-making power, I can be alienated

from laws and policies that I am bound to obey but cannot identify with or endorse upon reflection. Being required to *blindly defer* to political decisions that one cannot reflectively endorse is quintessentially opposed to the ideal of self-government. Indeed, being part of a collective political project that is not responsive to my interests and ideas, my ways of thinking, and my ways of caring is likely to lead to estrangement.

**I**n *The Constitution of Equality* Thomas Christiano provides a detailed account of the importance of avoiding political alienation or estrangement in terms of citizens' fundamental interest in "being at home in society."

This rich description of the idea of "being at home in society" indicates various senses in which citizens have an interest in avoiding alienation or estrangement from the social world that they live in. As he points out, there are two significant sources for citizens' fundamental interest to live in a social world that conforms to their judgments: citizens' sense of justice and their



capacity to experience the value of things around them. To put it in Rawlsian terms, we can say that the fundamental interest in avoiding political alienation is anchored in the two moral powers of citizens, i.e., their capacity for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good. Let's call the latter the *identitarian* and the former the *justice* aspect of political alienation.

With respect to the identitarian aspect, the importance of citizens being able to live in a world that conforms to their judgments partly has to do with their ability to develop a sense of fit and connection by seeing their values affirmed in the society they live in, their ideas recognized and reflected in their shared culture, and so on. It is important for citizens' identity and self-esteem to be able to shape the social world they live in so that they can find both meaning in what they do and value in their forms of life. However, there are limits to the possibility of shaping the social world in ways that conform to literally everyone's values and conceptions of the good. No society can affirm all values and ways of life simultaneously. Certainly, there can be no democracy without



loss in this particular sense because, in order to maintain democratic commitments to political equality, inclusion, equal standing, and so on, not all values that happen to be important to citizens or even all valuable aspects of differing forms of life can be reflected in the laws and policies to which citizens are subject. In addition, for many citizens, their social, cultural, or religious identities may be more important sources of meaning and value than their political identity. Some citizens may not be interested in forming a political identity at all.

However, it is a different situation when the laws and policies to which citizens are subject fail to conform to their judgments about *justice*. When citizens cannot endorse the laws and policies they are bound to obey as just or at least as reasonable, then they may see themselves as forced into acquiescing with injustice or directly acting against their conscience. Avoiding *this* kind of alienation is a fundamental interest of citizens independent of any relative importance that politics may have for their identity. Citizens cannot develop and maintain a sense of justice if they are being forced to blindly obey laws and policies that violate their own fundamental rights and freedoms or those of others. Thus, from the point of view of citizens, an alignment of their interests, reasons, and ideas with the laws and policies to which they are subject is an ineliminable part of *also* avoiding being forced into either wronging themselves or others. Whether or not citizens value politics or are politically passive, they have a fundamental interest in not being forced to *blindly defer* to political decisions made by others that they cannot reflectively endorse as reasonable but are nonetheless bound to obey. Undoubtedly, their

interest in avoiding political alienation is likely to be at its highest whenever the laws and policies they are bound to obey touch upon issues of basic justice or constitutional essentials—to use Rawls’s expression.

It is this *substantive* concern with the content of the laws and policies that citizens are bound to obey for which any plausible interpretation of the democratic ideal of self-government must be able to account. However, as noted, an account of the ideal of self-government that is articulated simply in terms of an ideal of political equality cannot capture the significance of democratic participation for ensuring that citizens can endorse political decisions as their own. Citizens are not simply concerned with their status as political equals. They are also equally concerned with the reasonableness of the laws and policies that they must obey. No amount of equalization of political power can compensate or substitute for citizens’ fundamental interest in preserving their sense of justice—their interest in avoiding being forced into wronging themselves or others by having to blindly obey laws that, by their own lights, violate their fundamental rights and freedoms or those of others.

**F**ocusing on citizens’ substantive concern with ensuring that the laws and policies that they must follow do not violate their fundamental rights or those of others helps to illuminate why the democratic ideal of self-government is not just an ideal of political equality, but also an ideal of political participation in decision-making, for only a democratic political system in which citizens can *participate in shaping* the laws and policies to which they are subject can ensure that these

laws and policies conform to their judgments about justice. Only in this way can citizens develop and maintain their sense of justice instead of being forced to blindly obey laws and policies that wrong themselves or others. Democratic participation in decision-making

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## Democracy must be participatory, but not in the sense of requiring citizens to be involved in all political decisions.

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is essential to preventing an *alienating disconnect* between the political decisions to which citizens are subject and their political *opinions* and will. A political system that requires citizens to blindly defer to political decisions made by others is quintessentially incompatible with the democratic ideal of self-government.

If this brief analysis of the democratic ideal of self-government is plausible, then we can identify a sense in which citizens’ participation in political decision-making is essential to democracy but which also does not rule out representative government. Democracy must be participatory, but *not* in the sense of requiring citizens to be involved in all political decisions. Instead, a democracy must be participatory in the sense that it has institutions in place that facilitate an ongoing alignment between the policies to which citizens are subject and the processes of political opinion- and will-formation in which they (actively or passively) participate. Citizens can *defer* a lot of political decision-making to

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their representatives so long as they are not required to do so *blindly*. So long as there are effective and ongoing possibilities for citizens to shape the political process as well as to prevent and contest significant misalignments between the policies they are bound to obey and their interests, ideas, and policy objectives, then they can continue to see themselves as participants in a democratic project of self-government. Understood in this way, the democratic ideal

remains both feasible and action-guiding for representative democracies.

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*Cristina Lafont is Harold H. and Virginia Anderson Professor of Philosophy and Chair at Northwestern University. This essay is drawn from her recent book, Democracy Without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy. It is used here with the permission of Oxford Publishing Limited through PLSclear.*

# Antiestablishmentarianism Is Democratic

by Nadia Urbinati

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*If antielitism means that populism is an ever-growing possibility in democracies, this is because democracy is rooted in an anti-establishment spirit.*

**P**opulism pertains to the interpretation of democracy, and democracy is a complex form of politics, with both institutional and extra-institutional elements. Particularly in its representative form—the form within which populism emerges—democracy is a diarchy of decision-making and opinion forming in which the practices of monitoring, contesting, and changing decisions play a role that is no less essential than the role played by the procedures and institutions for making and implementing decisions. Democracy is both the name of an institutional order and a name for the way citizens act politically or participate, in a broad sense, in the public life of their country. Structurally, it is never wholly accomplished because it is a *process* through which free and diverse citizens pursue plans that can be, and often are, different or even contrasting. Democracy, therefore, denotes political autonomy as liberty from subjection and of dissent. Even before autonomy came to be associated with fundamental rights, arguments supporting it were understood to be arguments for reclaiming equality of power and for guaranteeing equal consideration under law. These claims can be used to justify acts of public resistance and opposition—verbal or even violent—against those who disrupt democracy from within. Ever since it originated in ancient times, democracy has been both a call to and a practice of liberty because it has been a claim to political equality and a claim to freedom of dissent.

The democratic diarchy of decision and judgment is particularly important in representative democracy because this form of democracy pivots on a structural tension between politics as potentials and promises and politics as institutional actualizing, but it never relies on an

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It is not unreasonable to think of representative democracy as a political order that is based on a permanent tension between legitimacy and trust, decision and judgment.

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entrenched dualism between “the few” who are ruling and “the many” who are ruled. According to the political conception of representation, the activation of a communicative current between civil society and political institutions that derives its legitimacy from free and regular elections is not only unavoidable but essential, even constitutive. The generality of the law (which the artificial identity of the citizen represents) and the standards of impartiality epitomized by the rule of law (*erga omnes* being the criterion of legality) need not be achieved at the expense of the visibility of the citizens’ social conditions. What is needed is to avoid giving those conditions a “political” translation into the institutions, which—if it occurred—would break the status of equal citizenship. The

multiple sources of information and association that citizens activate through media, social movements, and political parties all make possible the *transformation of the social into the political*. We call this complex process of reflection “electoral representation,” which consists of filtering the inputs coming from social groups through political proposals and eventually legislation. Political parties are the agents of this process. We can thus say that the electors’ immediate physical presence (right to vote) and the citizens’ mediated presence (right to free speech and association) are inextricably intertwined in a society that is itself a living confutation of both the dualism between, and the merging of, the “inside” and the “outside.” Representative democracy is a law-making system that lives on a permanent attempt to bridge (without ever merging) the social and the political.

It is interesting to observe that in the chatter that historians consider to be the first document of the democracy of the moderns—*The Agreement of the People* (1649)—the Puritans listed both their democratic desiderata (individual



suffrage and electoral representation) and the potential risks coming from the new elected class. It was as if they wanted to alert their fellow citizens to the fact that having a government legitimated by their explicit and electoral consent would never guarantee them a secure political autonomy. Mistrust in those holding power was not even allayed by the advent of written constitutions: such constitutions confirm the fact that the contestation of the holders of power and their decisions are endogenous to democracy, not an accident, not a sign of dysfunction. The noncoincidence between institutions (state) and democracy (between the electors and the citizens) is a safety valve, and it is also the most robust thread in the rope that binds the political history of democratization. It is not unreasonable to think of representative democracy as a political order that is based on a permanent tension between legitimacy and trust, decision and judgment.

**D**emocracy thus includes the habit and thought of antiestablishmentarians, and this reminds us of the fact that it is “government by public discussion, not simply enforcement of the will of the majority.” Antiestablishmentarianism is ingrained in democratic procedures, which structure politics as contestation and discussion about decisions. Hans Kelsen situated the worth of the dialectic between majority and opposition exactly here. This dialectic, he explains, proves that democracy is not identifiable with unanimity because it presumes dissent and presumes a deliberative decision-making process that includes dissent. Such dissent is never expelled or repressed, even when citizens’ preferences converge on different

results or reach majority decisions. The central role that Kelsen accords to compromise has its roots here because the dissenters, when they agree to obey the decisions passed by the majority, make the first and most fundamental compromise—the agreement to suspend their

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Without this compromise, no political community of free and equal members in power would be possible.

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resistance, and to accept compliance, without feeling that they are being arbitrarily subjected. Without this compromise, no political community of free and equal members in power would be possible.

For all these reasons, the act of counting votes in order to achieve a majority decision presumes an antiestablishmentarian habit of judgment on the part of the citizens. It also presumes the idea that an opposition is possible and legitimate: It exists and will permanently exist. This reminds the majority that its majority is temporary and never completely established. If victory were permanent, it would erase the majority-minority dialectics and so erase democracy itself.

Antiestablishmentarianism is a constitutive quality of democracy thus, not a sign of crisis or weakness. A minority that knew, *ex ante*, that it would never have the chance to become a majority would not be a democratic opposition or minority. Rather, it would consist of some



few subjected to, or dominated by, the rulers. The opposition needs to conceive of itself—and be conceived of by the majority—as a legitimate, antiestablishmentarian threat in order to be democratic and to avoid becoming a subjected victim or a subversive force of destabilization always ready to rebel. The opposition needs to maintain the attitude (or habit of the mind) that it acts to dethrone the majority. Otherwise, democracy would be inconceivable.

To summarize, antiestablishmentarianism does not belong to populism but is a category that populism takes from democracy. The thing that makes *populist* antiestablishmentarianism distinctive, and makes it different from democratic antiestablishmentarianism, is the way in which it is constructed: according to the binary assumption that breaks politics and its actors into two different groups, defined according to the position they occupy in relation to state power. Democracy derives antiestablishmentarianism from its permanent majority-minority

dialectic; populism derives it from the assumption of the existence of predefined polarized groupings and enmity.

Democracy and populism thus prefigure two conceptions of the people and of a government based on people's consent. If the latter were to be actualized and become a ruling power, it would jeopardize the democratic permanence of antiestablishmentarianism. The reason lies in the populist interpretation of authority as a synonym for "possession" and—as noted earlier—for factional politics. But authority is the *condition of power* itself, and none of those who exercise its functions possesses it: certainly not an elected majority, nor even a leader whom a majority chooses to be representative of the supposed "good" people against the supposed "bad" people. Authority, derived from the people and owned by nobody, is the democratic combination of two contradictory principles that populism wants to sever by assuming, *ex ante*, that they correspond to two antithetical groups: the few (the establishment) and the majority (the people).

I have advanced two arguments about populist antiestablishmentarianism: (1) If antielitism means that populism is an ever-growing possibility in democracies, this is because democracy is rooted in an antiestablishment spirit that belongs to democracy and keeps the political game between the majority and the opposition alive. And yet, (2) antiestablishmentarianism is the thing that connects populism to a specific form of representation and proves that it does not exclude all elites but rather wants to institute a different kind of elite.

Populism can hardly claim originality as to the antiestablishmentarian argument; in fact, it does not propose solutions that are primed to overturn representative government altogether. But it can claim originality in the way it uses the antiestablishmentarian rhetoric. Let me explain this idea.

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be inconceivable.

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I have argued that the attack against the political establishment is the “spirit” of populism in power. Populism is a revolt against the pluralist structure of party relations in the name not of a “partyless democracy” but of “the part” that deserves superior recognition because it is *objectively* the “good” part (since its identity is not the result of ideological constructions or partisan visions). This argument reveals the enormous difference between party democracy and populist democracy. It is the pillar on which populism builds the political program that it will bring to completion if it achieves a majority, as we are already seeing in those countries in which populism rules today. Indeed, the populist people claim to be a simple and objective representation of the people’s needs here and

now, while parties and party leaders project their programs and solutions in a more or less distant future. Economists and political scientists have stressed “the pervasive connection between the short term protection characteristics of populists’ policies and the supply of antielite rhetoric.” The “irresponsibility” of the populist leader is the result of the antiestablishmentarian logic and translates into an irresponsible populist government because of its programmatic lack of concerns for future consequences of its political decisions. Paraphrasing Jürgen Habermas, I would call this phenomenon “populist short-termism.”

If there is a “utopian” (or dystopian) kernel in populism, this kernel is to be found precisely in the connection between antiparty sentiment and the politics of the “objective” reality of the people here and now. This connection resonates with the myth of politics as a domain of problem solving in which partisan personnel and visions are wrong and will become increasingly useless. It echoes a worldview that incorporates the epistemic ambition of the wisdom of the crowd as instinctively clear and originally sincere. This wisdom can be a guide to decisions at the government level that are wholly concerned with tangible “data” and issues, not



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with “predigested” interpretations made by some select few. Mistrust of the “intellectuals” and the “experts” of the establishment is like a tonic for populism. Indeed, anti-ideologyism and antipartyism have marked it since its early appearance in the United States in the late nineteenth century, and they are certainly what make it still attractive to many who treat it with benevolence as the sign that there is an

ancestral goodness in the people. The technological revolution has given this ancient myth or dystopia the certainty of actualization.

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*Nadia Urbinati is a professor of political theory at Columbia University. This essay is drawn from her recent book, Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy, with permission of Harvard University Press.*

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# Collaborative Democracy

by Daniel Kemmis

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*Citizen-driven  
problem solving  
across deep divides has  
become an emerging  
form of democracy  
nationwide at the same  
time that our larger  
governing institutions  
have become steadily  
more gridlocked  
and dysfunctional.*

Americans have always honored democratic deliberation, especially in our governing institutions. It's now a little hard to believe, but our ancestors took considerable pride in hearing the US Senate referred to as "the greatest deliberative body in the world." Indeed, in the days when Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun debated the nation's most pressing issues on the Senate floor, people packed the galleries to watch and listen. Unfortunately, those days are a distant and fading memory. However else we might describe the proceedings of the Senate these days, the word "deliberative" is not likely to come up.

Indeed, as the 21st century dawned, it sometimes seemed as if the power and effectiveness of democratic deliberation had entirely disappeared from the American political ecosystem. If nature indeed abhors a vacuum, however, it isn't surprising that this vacancy began to draw forth new life forms, very tentatively at first, and then with increasing urgency and vitality. Beginning in the early 1980s, organizations like Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation began to experiment with new mechanisms such as the National Issues Forums (NIF), to bring the power of citizen deliberation to bear on a variety of public issues. Eventually, NIF was joined in this deliberative arena by Study Circles (now Everyday Democracy), by James Fishkin's practice of deliberative polling, and then by the *Journal of Public Deliberation* in a cascading emergence of deliberative templates and forums. Among them, these organizations have by now involved millions of Americans in discussions of important public issues with

fellow citizens from widely varied backgrounds and perspectives. In fact, so many organizations are now doing such good work in this field that they have created a network of their own, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. The mission of the consortium is “to build knowledge, strengthen networks, and forge collaborations among researchers, practitioners, funders, and public officials at all levels of government in order to improve democratic practice and democratic governance.”

In October 2012, as the tsunami of negative campaign ads unleashed by *Citizens United* began to crest in that election cycle, I traveled to Seattle to attend the fifth National Conference on Dialogue and Deliberation. There I found hundreds of people from around the country who had gathered for an intense three days of sharing stories, lessons, and new ideas about

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how to engage steadily more Americans in meaningful democratic deliberation. Session topics ranged from “Making Wise Choices in Dialogue, Deliberation, and Public Engagement” to “When Governments Listen,” with stops in between at “Bringing Deliberation into



Public Budgeting” and “Expanding Liberal-Conservative Dialogue in America.” I was especially intrigued by one session’s description and analysis of the Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review, a process that had been formally instituted by the Oregon legislature for convening a random sample of voters to deliberate for several days on a ballot initiative and then present written findings and recommendations in the official state voters’ guide. I also heard how citizens in Ohio had just the previous week employed a similar “citizens’ jury” approach to inject a shining moment of genuine deliberation into that state’s most hotly contested congressional race.

At the very least, developments like these sustain the awareness among citizens that people of good will can almost always find more common ground when they engage in genuine deliberation than they might otherwise have expected. And activities of this kind also keep alive the memory of a fundamental fact of democratic deliberation that seems to have escaped the notice not only of the Supreme Court but of most of the rest of us. Decisions like *Buckley v.*

*Valeo* and *Citizens United* have been too focused on the protection of free speech to notice that democratic deliberation is never merely a matter of *speaking*; it is also, crucially, a matter of *listening*. Without active, attentive, responsive listening, there is no such thing as deliberation and therefore no opportunity for democracy to demonstrate its superlative problem-solving capacity. If our larger political culture has abetted the Supreme Court in forgetting that fundamental fact, the deliberative democracy movement has helped to revive that memory among the multitudes of citizens who have engaged in real deliberation under that movement's umbrella. That memory will prove vitally important as the work of democratic revitalization gathers steam. It has been cultivated even more actively by deliberative democracy's sister: the collaborative democracy movement.

**A**t roughly the same time that citizen-focused deliberative practices were gaining historical momentum and establishing a presence in our self-governing ecosystem, a related democratic life form began to emerge in the open spaces left by the increasing dysfunction of older, established forms of representative, procedural, and direct democracy. A phenomenon often called "multiparty collaboration" seems to have arisen primarily as a response to some of the shortcomings of the late-20th-century framework of procedural democracy. Whatever else public hearings might accomplish, they almost never create an opportunity for anything resembling democratic problem solving. Yet, with increasing frequency, stakeholders who for decades had battled each other in public hearings have begun

to engage in serious, face-to-face, problem-solving work.

What has moved so many people to take on this hard work of collaboration has been the widespread perception that, in all too many cases, the existing governing framework was proving itself incapable of getting the job done.

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## People of good will can almost always find more common ground when they engage in genuine deliberation

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To put it bluntly, the problems that people have expected the government to solve have all too seldom been addressed in a problem-solving way. Rather than simply complain about this situation, or resign themselves to it, increasing numbers of people have been stepping up, engaging their neighbors (especially those with whom they have had significant differences), and doing the problem solving themselves. This hands-on, citizen-driven, problem-solving species of democracy has appeared and gained strength all across the country, around all kinds of issues. I will use my own part of the country—the American West—and, in particular, collaborative efforts around public land and natural resource issues to illustrate the genesis, the promise, and some of the challenges of this collaboration movement.

Of the 2.27 billion acres of land in the United States, 28 percent is owned by the federal government and administered by a variety

of agencies, most notably the US Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture, and the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service, all in the Department of the Interior. This vast amount of public land is heavily concentrated in one

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## Democratic deliberation is never merely a matter of speaking; it is also, crucially, a matter of listening.

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region of the country. According to the Congressional Research Service, 62 percent of Alaska is federally owned, as is 47 percent of the 11 coterminous western states. By contrast, the federal government owns only 4 percent of lands in the other states. But while the reservation of millions of acres of forest and grasslands kept human habitation off those lands, it did not prohibit other human uses of the public lands. The prevailing public policy was succinctly stated by Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the US Forest Service, when he argued that the national forest reserves should be managed in such a way as to produce “the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run.” This formula eventually became enshrined in the national forest policy of “multiple use and sustained yield.” From the outset, this formula for public land management began to generate conflict between the conservationists, who had

provided the initial impetus to the reservations, and the logging, mining, and grazing interests that were invited to multiply the uses of these lands. The Congressional Research Service’s report on the concentration of public lands in the West continues with what to most westerners sounds like a study in understatement: “This western concentration has contributed to a higher degree of controversy over land ownership and use in that part of the country.” Conflict among competing interests is, of course, the raw material of democratic governments, and it is therefore not surprising that, in some ways, the “public lands West” became a case study both in a set of problems in democracy and in the emergence of some very promising democratic solutions.

The problems have arisen in no small part because the decision-making system that Congress put in place as the governing framework for public lands is breathtakingly complex. Key components include the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act, the National Forest Management Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act,



the Endangered Species Act, the Wilderness Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Federal Advisory Committee Act. These statutes (and several others) are fleshed out by a corresponding and even more voluminous set of agency regulations, by multiple layers of administrative appeals and frequent recourse to federal courts, and by the case law emerging from all that litigation.

Over several decades, the relentless struggle of “multiple use” interests within this byzantine governing structure has produced a level of gridlock that could neither be denied nor, apparently, resolved. The increasing problems with this governing framework have been extensively noted and analyzed. Former secretary of the interior Cecil Andrus described the public land governance system as “the tangled web of overlapping and often contradictory laws and regulations under which our federal public lands are managed.” Congressman Scott McInnis, former chair of the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, decried “a decision-making apparatus that is on the verge of collapsing under its own weight.” Former Forest Service chief Jack Ward Thomas simply called this governing framework “the blob.” In June 2002, Forest Service chief Dale Bosworth presented to Congress a report titled “The Process Predicament,” describing the effects of regulatory and administrative gridlock on national forest management, resulting in what he and his colleagues were experiencing as the agency’s increasing inability to fulfill its primary duties.

To oversimplify a complex historical development, we might say that collaborative democracy



has emerged slowly but insistently in this setting of governmental gridlock because increasing numbers of people with the most direct stakes in these landscapes have concluded that the existing decision system could not reconcile those competing stakes as effectively as could the stakeholders themselves, acting on their own initiative. It was against this background that the public lands in the West began to witness a steadily growing number of local agreements among environmentalists, ranchers, loggers, miners, and recreationists about how the public land or natural resources in their particular river drainage area or ecosystem should be managed. More and more westerners on both sides of the political fence have come to believe that they can do better by their communities, their economies, and their ecosystems by working together outside the established, centralized governing framework than by continuing to rely on the cumbersome, uncertain, underfunded, and increasingly irrelevant mechanisms of that old structure, which had taught them only how to be enemies.



Concentrated as it might have been in its early stages in one region of the country, with its natural focus on public land and resource issues, this emergent democratic practice of multiparty collaboration has been spreading steadily into other issue arenas across the country. In fact, I would argue that this kind of citizen-driven problem solving across deep ideological and interest group divides has become an important, but still emerging, form of democracy nationwide at the same time that our larger governing institutions have become steadily more gridlocked and dysfunctional. How might we account for this almost totally unexpected phenomenon? The one thing that has contributed most significantly to the steady expansion of the use of collaborative problem solving is that, in so many circumstances, *it works*, and it works better than any of the other available democratic mechanisms. In evolutionary terms, this is a straightforward example of natural selection: What works well survives and thrives. This element of adaptive-

ness becomes more striking when we consider the myriad factors that militate against collaboration, including the following:

- Most of the parties to collaborative efforts have spent years using more adversarial means of dealing with the kinds of issues they now seek to address collaboratively. This is a new, unfamiliar, and often intimidating way of proceeding.
- Dealing in a new way with people you have spent years treating (and thinking of) as enemies requires learning.
- Those who make this leap are subjected to suspicion, if not outright hostility, from other members of their own “tribe.”
- Successful collaborative efforts are almost always quite time-consuming.
- The established decision system rarely provides any space or encouragement for collaboration.
- Even highly productive collaborations are often resisted by the established system.

The survival, and indeed the spread, of collaboration against these barriers is a vivid testament to its effectiveness. And it is in the

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## What works well survives and thrives.

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context of this harsh, putting-to-the-test environment that the democratic credentials of collaboration have been established. People only go to all the trouble that collaboration entails because they have a real and substantial stake in the matter at hand and presumably “no better

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means of advancing their interest. Their work is therefore democratic in the most fundamental meaning of that word: it is the dead-serious, determined effort of people to shape the conditions under which they live, rather than leaving that shaping to someone else.

Against the background of the often-deepening failures of so many of our governing institutions, it becomes strikingly clear how valuable a democratic asset the collaboration movement is becoming. When the number of people who have partaken of this learning

are added to those who have experienced one or more of the activities of the deliberative democracy movement explored earlier, we begin to see the emergence of a truly potent constituency for a democratic renewal movement.

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*Daniel Kemmis is the former mayor of Missoula, Montana, and a leader in the Montana House of Representatives. This essay is drawn from his recent book, Citizens Uniting to Restore our Democracy, and is used here with the permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.*

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# Scientific Authority and the Democratic Narrative

by Jason Blakely

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*Deliberating over public policy requires identifying the moral weight and meaning—and indeed the broadest possible consequences—of certain actions.*

**I**n the second book of his enduring study of the early republic, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville began his discussion of what he called “the influence of democracy on the action of intellect in the United States” by noting the distinctive tendency of the individual to appeal to the “exercise of his own understanding alone.” Practical and pragmatic, trusting in the authority of their senses, thinking like good Cartesians without having read Descartes, Americans, Tocqueville continued, “readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained, and that nothing in it transcends the limits of the understanding.” Such self-reliance, he believed, was laudable in many respects, but it had an obvious, and potentially dangerous, corollary: Americans “fall to denying what they cannot comprehend.”

Mostly what Jacksonian-era Americans denied, according to Tocqueville, was “whatever is extraordinary” and “whatever is supernatural.” He noted as well that Americans were as respectful of learning, the fine arts, and science as one might expect of a pragmatic, commercially oriented people, even if the practical and applied sciences counted for more to them than the theoretical ones. Following Tocqueville’s lead, one might argue that Americans for the most part have long maintained a tempered respect for the authority of science, an attitude that has generally contributed to the country’s material progress and well-being.

That attitude has recently been tested. On a range of issues—from climate change and

vaccination to evolution and nutrition—America now teems with popular movements whose central aim is the rejection of one or another scientific finding or position. COVID-19 has further dramatized these tensions, driving antipathies between scientific experts and the sundry movements commonly referred to as “populist” out onto the streets.

Many of the protests in spring 2020 brought together a strange mix of citizens united by their rejection of measures recommended by medical scientists to curb the spread of the disease. This assortment of the discontented included conservative operatives, suburban entrepreneurs, paramilitarized nationalists, unemployed wage workers, and anti-vaxxers. One of the enduring images from those early days of the pandemic was a photograph taken in Denver of a lockdown protestor, in a star-spangled shirt, hanging out the window of a Dodge truck (a “Land of the Free” sign draped over the passenger-side door), staring down a medical worker in full scrubs and surgical mask standing in silent counterprotest in the middle of the road. The image struck a chord, circulating widely as a symbol of the confrontation between populist anger and scientific authority.

The same confrontation was also evident in conservative media. In a highly controversial series of posts, *First Things* magazine editor Rusty Reno exceeded his own usual hyperbole to denounce public health recommendations on curtailing business and all kinds of assembly, including religious services. “We live in a technocratic social order,” Reno fumed, condemning an “expert class . . . [that] impose[s] draconian measures of restriction and control.” Reno went on to quote the Italian philosopher

Giorgio Agamben, who has argued that the pandemic exposes the tendency of modern societies to value nothing more than “bare life” and “survival.”

But in subsequent weeks, the tension between surviving the coronavirus and other rival goods triggered an equally powerful reaction from the American left. This came dramatically to the fore after the murder of George Floyd and the mass mobilization of huge numbers of Black Lives Matter protestors across the country. In a stark contrast with their earlier rebuke of right-wing populists for flouting public health guidelines, many health professionals now seemed to countenance a less restrictive approach to social distancing and public assembly. In early June 2020, more than 1,200 health and medical experts signed a letter maintaining their opposition to a “permissive stance on all gatherings, particularly protests against stay-home orders,” but cited the “pervasive and lethal force of white supremacy” as an overriding threat to the “health specifically of black people”—and thus as justification for public protests.





In a widely cited follow-up piece in the *Atlantic*, Julia Marcus of Harvard Medical School and Gregg Gonslaves of the Yale School of Public Health reasoned that epidemiologists must “maximize the health of a population across all aspects of life,” arguing that “the health implications of maintaining the status quo of white supremacy” were “too grave to ignore, even with the potential for an increase in coronavirus transmission.”

To observers on the right, such responses only intensified the sense that scientific authority was being politicized in favor of some causes and not others. A representative response was voiced by *Hillbilly Elegy* author J.D. Vance, who remarked on how the “moral scolding ceased as soon as elite-favored protests began taking place.” The result, according to Vance, would be a further erosion of “trust in our country’s experts.”

More recently, some public health specialists have also expressed discomfort at what appear to be conflicting standards. As Nicholas Christakis, a Yale professor specializing in biosocial

science, told the *New York Times* in summer of 2020, “We allowed thousands of people to die alone. We buried people by Zoom. Now all of a sudden we are saying, never mind?”

How did we arrive at this crisis of scientific authority? And is there a way to repair the damaged relationship between democratic deliberation and science?

### **The Problem of Popular Revolt**

Grappling with the problem of popular revolt against scientific authority in the United States requires first distinguishing among different sources of the conflict. As historians have long known, much of the country’s exceptionally fierce antiscientific sentiment is attributable to certain peculiar cultural traditions. Works like Richard Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* and Susan Jacoby’s *The Age of American Unreason* have established major sources of resistance to scientific expertise, including the practical-minded distaste for theoretical reflection that Tocqueville noted in the nineteenth century, as well as forms of religious fundamentalism that acknowledge no authority beyond the truths revealed in sacred texts.

These traditional currents of resistance to scientific authority are likely to persist. Darwin’s theory of evolution remains generally secure in American public schools, but creationist and intelligent design alternatives continue to be on offer in fundamentalist religious schools and colleges. While these currents sometimes support and coalesce with the more recent and broader revolt against scientific and intellectual authority, they do not explain the more complex and partially justifiable reasons for the current populist backlash.

As I argue in my recent book, *We Built Reality*, much of the confusion surrounding scientific authority in modern society stems from either the exercise of fraudulent scientific expertise or the extension of scientific authority into areas where it does not belong. In particular, specialist claims of scientific authority in

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## Is there a way to repair the damaged relationship between democratic deliberation and science?

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matters of governance and social organization have come to be seen by more and more Americans as a bid for power by elite cliques contemptuous of the broader public. Furthermore, there is a connection between this dubious use of scientific authority (which is often based on research that violates the best practices of science or social science) to much that has gone wrong in contemporary America from excessive regulations and financial crashes to militarized and racialized policing, to overly biological and medicalized understandings of happiness and love, and even to scientific polling and surveys that misread the real needs and inclinations of American citizens.

Consider the 2008 financial crisis. Although most economists did not foresee it, many of them played a decisive role in encouraging the behavior and practices that ultimately brought on the recession, even to the point of denying the existence of a housing bubble and advising Americans to continue investing in real estate.

That such advice was proffered in terms of a supposedly neutral and predictive economic science (drawing on the allegedly rigorous approach of the dominant neoclassical paradigm) only deepened popular suspicions of number-crunching, model-building elites who were supposed to know better.

Indeed, one of the chief findings of the Dahlem Report, written by a group of economists uneasy with the neoclassical paradigm, was that their profession played a central role in generating the 2008 crisis by making exaggerated claims about the precision and scientific rigor of economic models and theories. Economists and financial gurus had bolstered unwarranted confidence in housing markets and complex financial products (including the infamous toxic assets), thereby inspiring forms of economic exuberance that accelerated the collapse.

The political ramifications of that disaster are well known. While ordinary Americans experienced life-altering losses of wealth, unpopular policies—often championed by the same experts who had contributed to the mess—



were enacted to bail out banks and financial institutions that economists deemed “too big to fail” (minimizing the losses of those in the upper economic strata, including most bankers). Not surprisingly, this targeted bailout helped energize both the Occupy Wall Street and Tea

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## The facts of how a disease spreads remain philosophically distinct from the question of how we ought to respond as a people.

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Party movements. As the journalist Chris Hedges, a prominent voice in the Occupy Wall Street movement, later observed, the regnant economic theorists prescribed policy “on the basis of myth” and ideology, not science.

The problem here is the abuse of scientific authority in what are clearly self-interested ways—a problem that is closely related to an even more fundamental misuse or misunderstanding of science known as scientism. A recurrent tendency in modern cultures, from the positivism of Auguste Comte to the reductionist zeal of many contemporary neo-Darwinians, scientism is the promotion of an excessive faith in the power of science to provide authoritative answers to, ultimately, everything, including all questions bearing on truth, meaning, right, and wrong. While repeatedly batted down by critics, including many thoughtful scientists and philosophers, the specter of scientism has

returned time and again in modernity, making overstated claims that bedazzle the credulous while heightening the suspicions of those who think the experts are going far beyond sound science and weaving just-so stories to advance personal, professional, or political agendas.

Scientism is clearly a political problem today—and the popular suspicions aroused by it are not merely the product of intellectual error, ignorance, or religious principle, though the present populist backlash has contributed to an alarmingly widespread attraction to outlandish conspiracy theories. More routinely, though, the dubious uses of scientific authority in public policy debates make more and more citizens feel excluded from the democratic process—rejected on the grounds of ignorance, stupidity, or general deplorability.

Americans today desperately need a way to discern the rightful role of scientific authority within the practices of democratic policy and deliberation—both for the sake of democratic legitimacy and of science itself. What are the proper limits of scientific expertise? And how do we decide when to follow the scientists and when instead to allow for the messy free play of democratic deliberation and contest?

### **Deliberating over Science**

Several factors have exacerbated the present clash between democracy and science. One is the declining quality of science education and the failure to instill in citizens a basic understanding of what science can and cannot do. Such failures are evident in the skirmishes and legal battles over the approach to evolutionary science in public school classrooms—as in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, a high-profile 2005 case

determining whether or not a Pennsylvania school district could require the teaching of intelligent design.

There is also the long-standing problem of communicating science's provisional character to a broader public. Specifically, scientists often have difficulty explaining that their discoveries are authoritative without being absolute. While science may provide a reasonable working picture of what is the case in the physical and biological worlds, this picture nonetheless remains contingent and open to revision. Unfortunately, this lack of absolute certainty can in turn be exploited by skeptics, amateurs, hacks, and ideologues who have their own special interests in mind.

But scientists, in turn, must also learn to better recognize the authority of democracy. A widespread failure to respect both the rightful domain of science and its clear limitations has been an important factor in the intensity of the clashes between populists and scientists over the

pandemic. In particular, genuine expertise in an area like epidemiology is too often expanded into authority over laws and public policy more generally. But the facts of how a disease spreads, for example, remain philosophically distinct from the question of how we ought to respond as a people—what goods ought to be valued, what sacrifices made, and what policies enacted.

Epidemiologists and other health officials should obviously be heeded on such matters as the origins and transmission of the coronavirus, risk factors, and the treatments and possible cures for COVID-19. The public should also respect what health officials have to say about practices that are likely (even if not always certain) to prevent the spread of the disease, including the wearing of masks and social distancing.

For laypeople to challenge epidemiologists on the science of such matters is dangerous and ultimately self-destructive (as is evident in the rising infection and fatality rates in the United States). Unfortunately, the irresponsible promotion of science denialism, alternative views, and conspiracy theories by opportunistic politicians and media figures, mostly on the American right, has only encouraged the spread of a deeply irrational and indefensible strain of anti-intellectualism. We are in deep trouble when people buy into unfounded and simply erroneous notions, whether it's that COVID-19 is milder than the flu, or that it will suddenly and magically disappear, or that it has some kind of secret, esoteric origins unknown to working epidemiologists.

Nonetheless, for all the dangers this populism poses, it should make us consider why there has been such a loss of trust in science and scientific authority. Populists are not wrong in



thinking that too much political decision-making today is dominated by cliques of ruling experts and lifted out of the sphere of public deliberation and concern. Too often, law and public policy are treated as the special domain of a small group of managers and wonks, speaking their specialist jargons and invoking their infallible metrics. But public policy is never the exclusive domain of scientific or technocratic knowledge. Maybe even more importantly, policymaking involves telling stories about what is politically and ethically significant. In fashioning the governing narratives of a democracy, the voice of science can be only one of many voices.

That point holds true from the simplest to the most technical public policies. Public plans and projects are always shaped and guided by a narrative complete with heroes and villains, backstories and subplots. Wars, infrastructure, regulatory laws, policing strategies—these are



crisis, this involves interpreting the significance of preventing the spread of the virus in balance with consideration of other public goods—including those of racial equality, education, livelihood, mental health, familial ties, and religious commitments, among many others.

Public health experts often helpfully inform citizens as to the technicalities of various findings and options, but the content or significance of the overall story that determines action should be the product of democratic dialogue and contestation. Although policy analysts and health experts are essential in informing the public about the various options, ordinary citizens retain a say in what story to tell about a given challenge or problem. Indeed, when it comes to the stories informing public policy in a democracy, scientists and nonscientists, experts and laypeople, must be on equal footing. Any claim to absolute authority over public policy by any group of experts is an illegitimate power grab.

This more interpretive and democratic approach requires that public health experts and analysts avoid the temptation to present themselves as having special insight or a greater say over what is ultimately the right policy. During

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## No specialist scientific knowledge can determine what goals are ultimately worthy or unworthy of sacrifice.

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born only within a narrative field, animated by some overarching notion of what is worthy. Deliberating over public policy therefore requires identifying the moral weight and meaning—and indeed the broadest possible consequences—of certain actions. In the case of the COVID-19

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the current pandemic, public health experts such as Marcus and Gonsalves unfortunately succumbed to that temptation, invoking their ability to “maximize the health of the population across all aspects of life” in order to determine which causes justified risking infection and death and which did not. One may agree with Marcus

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## Democracy and science can be mutually reinforcing only if there is a recognition of the limited authority of each.

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and Gonsalves’s support for Black Lives Matter (as I do), but there is a real political danger in justifying actions in support of the cause on speciously scientific grounds. No specialist scientific knowledge can determine what goals are ultimately worthy or unworthy of sacrifice.

The ironic effect of technocratic overreach is to discredit the real scientific expertise that public health specialists have to offer. Without always being able to articulate why, ordinary citizens feel that experts are unfairly excluding them from the political process. No longer will-

ing to learn from the experts, they fall prey to various forms of pseudoscience and quackery—abandoning that fundamental wariness of “whatever is extraordinary” that Tocqueville lauded in early-nineteenth-century Americans.

Democracy and science can be mutually reinforcing only if there is a recognition of the limited authority of each. Just as science is not the determiner of questions of self-governance and ethical sources shaping our culture, so democratic acclaim should not be the basis for the validity of the findings of science. In the face of a daunting global pandemic (and other immediately pressing threats such as climate change), citizens’ concerns about racial justice, livelihoods, education, religious observance, mental health, or other goods cannot be dismissed as having less standing or being less urgent simply because they cannot be validated through scientific testing and formulation. In the narrative that is constantly shaping a democratic society, and being shaped by it, the various voices advancing various goods must be given a fair hearing even if as a people we determine, provisionally, that some goods take precedence over others. The future of democracy rests on whether we learn to tell—and to live—the right stories together.

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*Jason Blakely is an associate professor of Political Science at Pepperdine University. This essay originally appeared in the Hedgehog Review, Volume 22, Number 3, Fall 2020; used by permission; hedgehogreview.com*

# Public Power for Resilient Cities

An Interview with Michael Menser by Noëlle McAfee

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*Public power is not just about civic engagement. It is about public ownership and input into the management of the system.*

**Noëlle McAfee:** In this issue of the *Kettering Review* we are taking up the question of how we might think of governing institutions not just working by, of, and for the people but also with the people. What comes to your mind when you hear this?

**Michael Menser:** Public power! So many people, places, and organizations are calling for the rapid adoption of renewable energy by 2030 to head off climate collapse, but the utilities and the public regulators are moving far too slowly. This has led some to call for the public takeover of private utilities and the further democratization of the public ones. I am part of a campaign in New York State and especially active where I live on Long Island. It's a deeply personal issue for me. My block lost power for two weeks after Superstorm Sandy, and after a very minor tropical storm a year ago, most of Long Island lost power for multiple days. People lost food, work, and time, and circumstances were dangerous. Indeed, a neighbor's lawn caught on fire from a downed power line that was not properly maintained. It turned out that the private utility lied about being prepared for the storm. So, not only do we need public power to hasten the adoption of renewables to meet those 2030 goals, also we need public power to increase the accountability and resilience of our system to make sure that it's prepared for the challenges of this new climate. As we've seen from Texas to California to the Gulf Coast, we are dangerously unprepared, and our governance and ownership model is a big part of the problem.

**NM:** Where in particular have you put your efforts as both a scholar and a practitioner? Why in these places?

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**MM:** As I stated above, this is a live issue for me and my community, and it also happens to be a research project that I am doing on the democratization of public services more broadly, especially water and energy but also broadband. I'm the founding board president of the non-

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## Participatory democracy or democratization here does not mean "everyone participates."

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profit Participatory Budgeting Project, and I published a book on participatory democracy (PD) in government and the economy in 2018. So, this is an area I've been active in for years as a researcher and a teacher. But with the climate crises and democracy crises intensifying, I've become much more attracted to the public services issues. I'm doing this project with the former deputy mayor of Paris, Anne Le Strat. When Parisians became upset with their private water utility's cost and performance, she led the operation to deprivatize it and municipalize it. But they realized that simply making it publicly owned again was not adequate. It needed to be governed in a way that included not just politicians and elected officials but people from the various communities of Paris who cared deeply about the water system, as well as experts in a variety of fields. These ranged from those concerned about cost to environmentalists concerned about conservation, and to users and households worried about quality and public

health. But also it included those concerned about ecology and biodiversity, as well as farmers outside of the city who have an impact on the quality and health of the watershed. Le Strat knew that the utility itself could not do this alone. So, she also led the creation of a partner organization called the Paris Water Observatory. This new type of organization goes beyond the typical watchdog and, instead, convenes diverse stakeholders to enable them to get the information to understand the situation, as well as to make proposals about how to manage the watershed and the water system in a way that is fair, just, sustainable, and resilient.

There are important lessons from what happened in Paris. For one, participatory democracy or democratization here does not mean "everyone participates." Lots of people are not interested. And others don't have the time. But some people are very interested. The key is to enable those people who are very interested meaningful routes of participation. The flip side is that the utility also needs to be able to reach out to people to make sure their needs are being met, from the vulnerable to low-income, to resource-intensive businesses, and so on. So, it is important—for the purposes of justice and

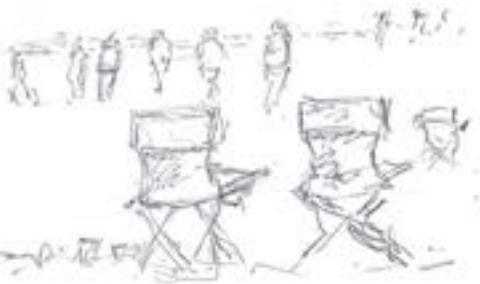


efficacy—to make sure that there is inclusive diversity of who participates, in particular with regard to how the agenda is shaped for the entity in question and for how the profits or the surplus are reinvested. Public power means energy justice as well.

Public power is not just about civic engagement. It is about public ownership and input into the management of the system. There are many difficult yet intriguing conceptual questions here, and we need more work by philosophers in this space. Consumers of energy are not just passive recipients anymore. If they have solar panels on the roof, they can also be generators of energy. Rate payers are then coproducers. So, how should they be understood with regard to governance? And if they have batteries as well, they can play a role in enhancing the resilience of the grid in times of energy shortages. But this requires the sharing of information and sharing control of one's household appliances to minimize use in times of peak energy use. Who owns that information? Who owns my air conditioner? Should we have new forms of collective ownership for these technologies? This is a different understanding of governance “with” the people. Indeed, it's

reminiscent of how traditional commons are governed, where users are also actively coproducing the resource in question and thus have a seat at the governance table.

Even if you don't have solar on your roof, what about households that conserve energy or water? They are freeing up resources for other people and for other uses, but for which ones? Should we free up water for Pepsi to make more soda as they do in California, even during droughts? And when there are rolling blackouts, as in Texas and California but also in New York City, why is it that by BIPOC neighborhoods (that is, neighborhoods of Black, Indigenous, and people of color) often lose power first and for the longest? Who is making these decisions? And what values shape the decision-making procedure? In New York City, the private utility, Consolidated Edison, makes a nice profit, so why don't they further enhance the resilience of the grid? Because they allocate those profits to upper management and as dividends to shareholders! Same thing happened in California with Pacific Gas & Electric. Public power and energy democracy means the public gets to decide what to do with the surplus, with the profits, with the other financial instruments that utilities have at their disposal. For example, where are our bonds for green infrastructure to cool neighborhoods and manage storm water? Where are our bonds to create community-owned solar installations on public buildings? There are examples of all of these but not nearly enough! This is where we need both energy democracy and energy justice, as Shalanda Baker argues in her book *Revolutionary Power*, and the democratization of public services is the way this actually can be realized.



**NM:** You've been a leader in an international "philosophy of the city" movement. In a nutshell, what is *your* philosophy of the city?

**MM:** My philosophy of the city is shaped by the concepts of socio-ecological resilience, climate justice, degrowth, and adaptive management, but also by a love of parks and playgrounds, streets and stoops, bars and restaurants, and unique public spaces that so many love and missed to varying degrees during COVID. Given COVID and climate change, we need to configure all of the aforementioned in a manner to redefine the public in order to promote and proliferate a new model of economic development that is sustainable, resilient, and racially just. We need to do this not through more traditional "growth"—which has failed—but through a reduction of material use and commodity production. For me, this "degrowth" involves a kind of undoing the urban. It used to be that advocates of the city spoke against urbanization. We have lost that thread, and the ecological crisis in particular requires us to think about a different kind of dwelling that is more bioregional and adaptive.

Many urban scholars are fond of the "right to the city" frame that originated with Henri Lefebvre and focuses on guaranteeing access to the goods and services of the city for all city residents. But there is too much political and economic inequality. We need more than just "access" and instead must redistribute power. This is the aim of the democratization of publicly owned goods and services of the city. By democratization, I don't mean just people having a voice, but shared ownership, shared management, shared power, shared authority not in the abstract, but in the reality of public institutions from universities and hospitals to the parks and

the streets. Making all these ours is what public power is all about, and cities can be venues for the collaborations, both antagonistic and protagonistic.

**NM:** At this moment, the world is plagued by both climate crisis and the COVID pandemic. These are such huge problems. How can

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## Public power and energy democracy means the public gets to decide what to do with the surplus.

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citizens and participatory networks possibly help address these?

**MM:** The first thing I would say here is that both need to be linked to the framework of racial justice and economic democracy. We cannot properly or fairly address either without the frameworks of both. Not surprisingly, when one looks deeply at the platform of the Movement for Black Lives, one sees economic democracy at the center of racial justice. It's not just a matter of "fixing" the police problem, but redefining public safety and investing in communities. But even "investing" is not enough to fix the problem. Who controls the investments? Who reaps the profits from these investments? We saw this issue above with private utilities.

As for participatory networks and the role they might play in this, I offer two examples. The first in the context of climate and references to a project I helped create and work on called "cycles of resilience." Too often, we have public engagement after the disaster, after the

hurricane hits or the fire wreaks havoc. We need engagement before the event, and we need it to be sustained engagement. In my work as associate director of Public Engagement for the Science and Resilience Institute at Jamaica Bay, we read much research and listen to a lot of

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## We need regularized channels of two-way communication between people and government that are efficacious and empowering for both.

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folks about what sustained engagement looks like and can do. Sustained engagement is not a public hearing or town hall, nor is it a one-off charette. All of these (may) have a role to play, but they are not adequate for the moment. What we need are regularized channels of two-way communication between people and government that are efficacious and empowering for both. What we did in New York City is based on the example of participatory budgeting (PB).

Originating in Brazil in the 1990s, PB is practiced in thousands of cities across the world, including a couple dozen in the US. Participatory budgeting is a process by which the public gets to decide how to spend some part of a budget that impacts them. In the US, PB typically has four phases: in the first, a diverse set of local leaders come together with the support of elected officials to design the process so that it is appropriate for the people, place, and pot of money.

In the second phase, those district leaders invite diverse folks from the political jurisdiction to talk about the goals of PB and how it works. They also invite those participating to dialogue with each other and brainstorm ideas to address their needs regarding the pot of money available. In the third phase, select members of the public are invited to step up and are trained to go through the proposals and create a ballot of those that are best to address the needs of the community, are vetted by the relevant governmental bodies, and fit the requirements of the pot of money. In the fourth phase, the public comes out to vote on their top projects. In most PB processes, the public has more than one vote, so it's not a winner-take-all situation. Instead, multiple projects receive funding and then are implemented by the city or political jurisdiction.

**NM:** It's been almost a decade since Superstorm Sandy, hasn't it? What a wake-up call about climate change! And now the storms and the fires keep coming. In what sense can regular citizens really do anything about these big problems?



**MM:** Demand participatory budgeting! Or some other sustained engagement process that promotes iteration and adaptive learning. The great thing about PB is not only does it grant the public actual power and money to spend, but it goes on year after year. Because it repeats, it can be iterative and the process is adjusted to correct for weaknesses or problems of the previous year. So, PB is what we might call an adaptive learning process, which hopefully leads to adaptive management. And that's big for trying to deal with climate change because we're going to experiment and make mistakes because of its wickedness and its complexity and intensity, so having an adaptive process is really critical. So, we've done a version of this in New York City with neighborhoods around Jamaica Bay. Here, the residents discuss their needs, but this time with respect to climate change and social and ecological resilience. They meet with scientists and other experts about ideas to address those needs and then return to their communities and, working with their elected officials or other government agency personnel, create projects to get movement on their priorities. Again, the process repeats and may take on a different focus the next year or go more in-depth or try to bring in a population that hadn't been participating in the previous year.

Another goal is to create more sustained relationships for government agency personnel and community members—this is again a “governing with” example—so that there is two-way communication not just for the community, but also for the government workers who many times struggle with community engagement.

Another example of an incredibly robust participatory network in Brooklyn is the Coalition



to Transform Interfaith Hospital, which is also connected to the Vital Brooklyn Project and anchored now by Brooklyn Communities Collaborative. (See <https://www.interfaithcasestudy.org/>.) This is formally a health-care initiative initially funded with federal money to address the social determinants of health in central Brooklyn, which is primarily BIPOC and low-income, and disproportionately suffers from poor health and a lack of safe and affordable housing. What's amazing about this effort is that not only does it interconnect stakeholders from government, hospitals, community-based organizations, and schools and universities—including my own Brooklyn College—it also trains and empowers diverse members of the public to participate.

Let me give you three examples. The first is that, in order to do the research to really dig deeply into the problems, their team utilized participatory action research, or PAR. PAR works so that the educators involved teach high school students about the issues and then train them to go out and do the surveys of the com-

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munity. Studies have shown that community members are more responsive to young people, and this also helps to create capacity building and employment opportunities for young people in the program, some of whom have gone on to jobs in the field. A second robust example

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## Climate chaos requires us to rethink the public and to do all we can to enhance democratic forms of agency.

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of participatory democracy in this initiative is business development. It doesn't just support business creation, it supports equitable business models, such as worker and consumer cooperatives and community land trusts. And a few have already been created (e.g., Brooklyn Packers and Brooklyn Sprouts) and others expanded (e.g., Brooklyn Queens Community Land Trust), and all are operating in the critical area of the food system. There are hundreds of people in these communities, and many lack healthy, affordable food options, so creating businesses in this space has been incredibly powerful for public health, community pride, and economic democracy. The third example is the university partnership. I am very proud that my own university and the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies have developed curriculum to support this

work both in the food system and in learning about economic democracy. We've even created a new program in Community Ownership and Worker Ownership and this fall I will co-teach Sustainable Urban Gardening. These kinds of collaborations and public partnerships among government agencies, hospitals, and universities and schools are critical for building a new model of political and economic development and a resilient, just city for the 21st century.

To sum up, climate chaos requires us to rethink the public and to do all we can to enhance democratic forms of agency. We've got to get beyond simply wanting to "have a voice" and instead demand the power to explore and support efforts to create justice-enhancing forms of shared authority, ownership, and management, especially when it comes to public goods and services (and I would include the internet and social media here as well, though we didn't talk about this today). We've seen incredibly bold movements demand versions of this from Black Lives Matter to those pursuing climate justice and energy democracy. As I see it, in our role as educators and researchers, we need to not just do our own personal teaching and research in these areas, but demand that our institutions, our schools and universities partner in this remaking of the public.

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*Michael Menser is an associate professor of philosophy and urban sustainable studies at Brooklyn College and on the faculty of the graduate center of the City University of New York (CUNY).*

# Citizens' Participation in Formulating Health Policies Can Be a Game Changer

by Shagufta Hossain

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*Citizen participation implies the concept of citizen responsibility, right, and governance, making full use of intelligence, knowledge, and information in formulating policy.*

**I**n the olden days, in the city best known as a democratic city-state, where, arguably, the concepts of citizenship and democracy emerged, there was something called Ecclesia. Here, eligible citizens would gather to have the final say on legislation and the right to call magistrates to account after their year in office. Unlike a parliament, the *Ecclesia's* members were not elected, but attended by right when they chose. Although these assemblies weren't always inclusive (i.e., of women, rural people, or the poor), I suppose it is a reasonable assumption that at least in certain matters, such as public health, the participation on these platforms would be meaningful.

The health-care system in Bangladesh is presently battling what *Al Jazeera* recently referred to as “a double blow,” with a sharp spike in dengue cases coupled with the worsening coronavirus crisis in the country. In addition, it was recently reported that mental illness is taking a silent toll on health-care workers. However, while we are all battling the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. In 2015, the Asia Pacific Observatory on Health Systems and Policies published a report that identified inequitable access to health services between urban and rural areas, including variable health financing mechanisms, as a key challenge. One wonders whether the response, or at least part of the response, to this challenge might involve greater citizen participation in policymaking.

**W**hile ancient Athenians would probably readily agree, we could, maybe, start with asking three questions. Firstly, would a more participatory process help the health-care system in Bangladesh, especially in this time of global health crisis? And secondly, how doable is it? And thirdly, if it eases the burden and is feasible, how much of an active effort exists to ensure that the health policymaking in the country is participatory?

To attempt to answer the first question, we have to clarify what we mean by citizen participation. Citizen participation implies the concept of citizen responsibility, right, and governance, making full use of intelligence, knowledge, and information in formulating policy. It can ensure that the policy represents the views that are shared by the majority.

Now, to answer the question, Does a participatory process help the health-care system in Bangladesh? Theoretically, the answer would be yes. Experts agree that effective engagement and a comprehensive pledge from relevant key stakeholders from the very onset are crucial to ensure the development and implementation of

effective national policies and strategies. Without the participation of citizens, facilitation and the execution of policy might prove difficult, and multi-sectoral stakeholder involvement is proven to accelerate the process of any political commitment. While ensuring greater citizen

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## Citizens' participation doesn't necessarily mean that people have to gather in assemblies to give their opinion on policies.

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participation can be a costly process, the benefits of including citizens' perspective in public policy can outweigh the costs by helping reduce the gaps of power to decide over policies that affect them and their communities. This will eventually result in a reduction of inequities in services and might, in turn, reduce the cost burden on the health system.

Now, to answer whether it is doable, citizens' participation doesn't necessarily mean that people have to gather in assemblies to give their opinion on policies. Participation is not limited to decision-making. It can include monitoring and evaluating results and the impact of social policies. So, even if citizen participation in policymaking is difficult, setting up monitoring and evaluation cells led by citizens can improve the quality of health services. And by that definition, it can be made more feasible than, say, gathering people in monthly assemblies to get their feedback on every policy that is proposed in the parliament.





Now, let's investigate whether there are active efforts to ensure that policymaking in the country is participatory. Policymaking in Bangladesh is virtually in the domain of the bureaucracy. In a report published by the Bangladesh Health Watch, Dr. M. Atiqul Haque, associate professor in the Department of Public Health and Informatics of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), examined citizen participation to identify principal actors and factors based on views of representatives from states, health service providers, and the citizens. The findings of the study were that, although stakeholder engagement and communication are theoretically cited as important for ensuring transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of public health policies and events, there is very little practical action being taken to ensure active public consultation in the decision-making process. Government officials take it as their responsibility to develop policies and so they do, but only half-heartedly, making incremental improvements over something that already exists.

So, the participation of civil society or citizens in policymaking is controlled by bureaucrats and is often challenged by the unwillingness and ignorance of government stakeholders. The

citizen stakeholders, therefore, are purely ceremonial and not truly valued for their engaged, constructive participation. Without clarity, or even a definition of which citizens are engaged in stakeholder consultations, citizens are only engaged to tick off boxes.

**N**ow that we have discovered that there is room for improvement in terms of engaging citizens more effectively in policymaking, let's ask a fourth question. How do we ensure a more participatory process in decision-making? Looking to others might help. In Thailand, for example, the National Health Assembly (NHA) was first convened in 2008 after which until 2019, 85 resolutions from 12 assemblies have been implemented, including resolutions on Thailand's Global Health Strategies antibacterial resistance, illegal advertisement of drugs and health products, daily cycling, waste manage-

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## How do we ensure a more participatory process in decision-making?

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ment, health, and housing, to name a few. The Thailand National Health Assembly is often cited for its inclusive participation from the government, academia, professions, and people throughout the process.

But like any relationship, the relationship between the state and its citizens is a two-way process. What can we do as citizens? Maybe we can start with asking questions. Questions

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like, How effectively has civil society organized itself over the years? How familiar are those who have the privilege of literacy and knowledge with the policies that currently exist in Bangladesh? And if there were such a thing as an *Ecclesia* in Dhaka, Khulna, or Rajshahi, how many of us would be able to make meaningful contributions to policies that have direct bearings on our lives? And if we were making meaningful contributions, how prepared would the state be

to listen to us and take on board citizens' voices? And until the state and the citizens find an equilibrium where they are both ready to listen to each other, how will things improve?

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*Shagufta Hossain is a freelance consultant at the Bangladesh Health Watch and the founder of Leaping Boundaries. This essay originally appeared on August 11, 2021 in the Daily Star newspaper in Bangladesh. It is reprinted here with permission of The Daily Star.*

# Using Citizen Democracy to Empower Institutional Democracy

By David Mathews

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

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

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

## **What Is Democracy?**

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

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

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



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

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What is most disturbing is that a good many people don't think of democracy as us. It's somebody else—maybe the politicians, maybe those who lead the institutions. But it's not you and me.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Citizens as Producers*

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

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

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

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



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

**The History of a Productive Citizenry:**

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

There, Wayne argued:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Looking Ahead

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

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



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

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

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

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