

# WITH THE PEOPLE

**Making Democracy Work as It Should**

by David Mathews

*A Cousins Research Group Paper*

## ABOUT THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

## ABOUT THE COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP

The Cousins Research Group is one of the internal research divisions of the Kettering Foundation. Named for Norman Cousins, a leading American journalist and Kettering Foundation board member from 1967 to 1987, the group synthesizes different lines of study into books and articles and also proposes new lines of inquiry. The central focus for the group, as for the foundation, is on the role that citizens play in a democracy. Within the Cousins Research Group, there are a number of "departments." One group looks at the effect of federal policy on citizens, communities, and democracy itself, with an eye for implications on the relationship between citizens and government today. Another subset, the political anthropology and etymology group, examines the origins of human history for clues to how human beings collectively make decisions. A core group is also asked to prepare our research for publication. This group regularly writes for Kettering's periodicals, *Connections*, the *Kettering Review*, and the *Higher Education Exchange*, as well as for other publications.

**Insights from the forthcoming book, *With*, by David Mathews, to be published by Kettering Foundation Press in 2020.**

**EDITOR:** Laura Carlson

**COPY EDITOR:** Lisa Boone-Berry

**DESIGN AND PRODUCTION:** Laura Halsey

**COPYRIGHT** © 2019 David Mathews

# WITH THE PEOPLE

## Making Democracy Work as It Should

by David Mathews

*A Cousins Research Group Paper*



Many Americans have been troubled by our political system for some time. They live in all parts of the country and have different reasons for being disturbed. Some fear that America is in decline because of an erosion of our core values and problems in the way our political system works—or doesn't work.<sup>1</sup> Others are troubled by issues like a growing economic divide, along with racial and other forms of injustice.<sup>2</sup> People tend to see these problems as self-inflicted wounds, and they usually blame politicians for them. Political leaders, on the other hand, may blame what they see as an irresponsible electorate. Whatever the reasons, many people, for many reasons, have lost confidence in the government, and their discontent has been widespread for some time.<sup>3</sup> If this situation were to morph into a rejection of government legitimacy, it would be fatal to our democracy.

## **SYMPTOMS OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM IN TROUBLE**

The challenges today's political system faces come from multiple sources.

### ***Loss of Confidence: Long-Standing and Mutual***

A downward spiral in confidence was spotted by a few scholars decades ago. A 1976 report by Robert Teeter, an insightful survey researcher, showed "tremendously increasing rates" of public alienation from and cynicism about government.<sup>4</sup> Teeter traced this change in attitudes back to the late 1960s. His findings were confirmed in a 2015 Pew report, which found that "The share [of Americans] saying they could trust the federal government to do the right thing nearly always or most of the time reached an all-time high of 77% in 1964. Within a decade . . . trust had fallen by more than half, to 36%. By the end of the 1970s, only about a quarter of Americans felt that they could trust the government at least most of the time."<sup>5</sup> This decline would grow even more as we entered the 21st century.

Why this change in attitudes? The people Teeter surveyed believed that, even if they voted, they would have little impact. They felt powerless to influence, affect, or even communicate, not just with governments but with all large governing institutions—even nongovernmental ones. Convinced that they had little or no role, they responded with frustration and anger. People wanted better government, meaning more responsive government. In 2017, a Bosque County, Texas, resident put it this way: “They [the leaders of the political system] don’t care about *people like me*” (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> For some time, Americans have felt relegated to the sidelines, where they sit uncertain about their ability to make a difference in their own democracy.<sup>7</sup>

**What Are “Governing” Institutions?** Governing, at its most basic, can be thought of as the organization of collective efforts for collective well-being. The institutions that do the governing are present from the local to the national level. They are agencies of governments, but they also include nongovernment institutions that organize collective efforts. These may not have the authority of law, yet they have the authority that comes from covenants or the mutual promises people make to one another to act. Other types of governing institutions are in education and social services. They range from governing councils to boards of directors.

Because it has been growing for decades, the public’s loss of confidence isn’t likely to end quickly.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it isn’t confined to the United States; it threatens governments in other countries as well. To make matters worse, some officials in the government have little confidence in the public. The distrust seems mutual.<sup>9</sup>

**An Undemocratic Concentration of Power?** Is declining confidence the result of problems that are even deeper than public perceptions? Does it grow out of the way modern government now does its job? For example, one of the ways our system was intended to work was to separate the power of government into three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial. This is a democratic standard for preventing a concentration of authority, which could lead to tyranny. Most people may not be familiar with the finer points of constitutional law concerning the separation of power.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, any concentration of authority is likely to seem undemocratic.

There are reasons, however, that large departments of government sometimes exercise versions of all three functions. It is more efficient. Yet this efficiency is likely to raise troubling questions if people believe the standard of separating power is compromised. A consolidation of power is particularly problematic if people see power being concentrated in an unelected bureaucracy.<sup>11</sup> Many Americans will react negatively to anything that reduces the control they feel they should have in their lives.

### ***A House Divided***

Today, the tone of the public's disquiet about the political system has also changed in alarming ways. Frustration and anger have turned into sharp bitterness as the political environment has become supercharged with hyperpartisan polarization. This has spread into our Main Streets, where all types of divisiveness are evident. Divisiveness, which pits people against one another, takes many forms and is highly contagious. Despite some constructive initiatives, less is being said today about forgiveness, reconciliation, and loving your enemies. Thomas Hobbes comes to mind: Are we entering the worst of all worlds where there is a war of all against all?<sup>12</sup> Remember Abraham Lincoln's warning: "A house divided against itself cannot stand."<sup>13</sup> About the only thing everybody agrees on is that there is too much divisiveness.<sup>14</sup>

## IS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT THE REMEDY?

Local government officials have tried to address the concerns of citizens in a variety of ways. (“Citizen,” as the term is employed here, is used in its historic sense—all the people who live in a city, village, or community. They are the demos or collective citizenry in “democracy.” The term is not used in the narrow, legalistic sense.) The *National Civic Review* has featured accounts of city council members who hold coffee chats and invite constituents to speak directly with them.<sup>15</sup> Some councils even have an attorney attend their meetings so they can change ordinances in real time with citizens watching.<sup>16</sup> Still others use visioning processes that invite citizens to say what they would like their community to be in the future.<sup>17</sup> And several cities have tried participatory budgeting programs.<sup>18</sup>

*The loss of public confidence has increased even as engagement efforts have grown.*

Regrettably, declining public confidence hasn’t been arrested by decades of public participation and civic engagement efforts. Even more alarming, according to scholars like Brian Cook, many participatory practices may be counterproductive, unintentionally widening the divide that they were intended to close.<sup>19</sup> Whether Cook is correct or not, the loss of public confidence has increased even as engagement efforts have grown. Many Americans have difficulty seeing a place for “people like me” in a highly professionalized, bureaucratized government. An *Economist* article even made a case for replacing citizens with professionals: “When professionals dominate all complex subjects, from the forecasting of markets to the cataloguing of library books, perhaps it is too much to hope that public policy can ever be the province of the amateur,” meaning citizens.<sup>20</sup> Can there really be a citizenless democracy?

I don't mean to dismiss the usual remedies for countering the loss of public confidence. They have value. Yet I have come to the conclusion that they don't go far enough. It has been argued that Americans should think of themselves and the government as synonymous, making the question of confidence moot. I doubt that will ever happen. So what can be done to keep the government from being seen as the people's enemy?

### **WHY NOT TRY MORE GOVERNMENT *WITH*?**

There may be other strategies for dealing with the public's alienation that need to be tested. One is captured in this publication's simple title—*With*. It was inspired by Abraham Lincoln's ideal of a government *of, by, and for* the people in the Gettysburg Address. Today, do Americans think our government is really "of" the people? That's debatable. "By" the people? Doubtful. "For" the people? Perhaps for some, sometimes. So why not try another preposition—more government *with* the people? This is a modest proposal for bridging some of the divide separating the people of the United States from their government and from the country's major institutions; we already have limited cases of this happening. I am suggesting that we build on these cases to create a different form of collaboration that would have institutions working *with* citizens, not just *for* them. In fact, I believe that to work *with* citizens is the best way to work *for* them.

***To work with citizens is the best way to work for them.***

What I am proposing isn't a sweeping, fix-everything-now solution. It is rather an incremental, build-on-what-grows strategy that could have a cumulative effect on the troubles that our democracy faces, like the loss of public confidence. This *with* strategy isn't a set

of best practices either. It is a different way of thinking about the relationship citizens should have with their governing institutions.

### ***With as Democracy***

What does *with* mean? Part of the answer is that it is a democratic strategy. Saying that, of course, demands an explanation of what is meant by *democracy* here, because the word has many meanings. Today, the most common is that democracy is a system of contested elections resulting in a representative government. Certainly, that is a valid definition. However, there is reason to believe that a democracy is much more.

I think what we now call democracy began long before the word was coined. It grew out of lessons taken from the collective actions needed for human survival when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers living in tribal enclaves and, later, villages. This was before there were kingdoms and nation-states.<sup>21</sup> As humans spread out across the globe, they carried with them a “political DNA” developed in the struggle to survive. A principal lesson of survival was that cooperation is key because we need collective efforts to stay alive. The first *with* strategy was people to people.

***Democracy began and continues as a political system in which . . . citizens must work with other citizens to create things—“public goods”—that make life better for everyone.***

Much, much later, the Greeks captured some of this survival legacy in a language with new terms like *democracy*. This word has two roots: *demos*, “the people collectively,” as in a village or *deme*;

and *kratos*, “the sovereign power” or the capacity to act in a way that makes a real difference.<sup>22</sup> Modern representative government rests on this earlier foundation of collective decision-making leading to collective actions for collective well-being.

From this perspective, democracy began and continues as a political system in which, at the most fundamental or organic level, citizens must work with other citizens to create things—“public goods”—that make life better for everyone. Our ancestors went on to form governments and other governing institutions to produce more and different public goods. These two political systems, one governmental or institutional and the other organic or civic, are interdependent in the ecosystem of democracy, which is the subject of an earlier book.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this essential, symbiotic relationship becomes weaker if citizens don’t join to produce public goods, if they delegate much of what they must do to government agencies, or if all forms of governmental institutions are influenced wholly by professional expertise and bureaucratic routines. All of these relegate citizens to the sidelines.

## ***A with strategy encourages collaboration through mutually beneficial or reinforcing efforts between the citizenry and the government.***

A *with* strategy is idealistic in that it is democratic, yet it isn’t a pie-in-the-sky fantasy. The United States recognized the need for what citizens produce with laws allowing tax exemptions for nongovernmental institutions serving a public purpose.<sup>24</sup> And public-government collaboration is, in fact, very common in some situations. Think about communities hit by natural disasters—fires, floods, and tornadoes. Before the government relief arrives, people rush to help others—even those who may be strangers—possibly

putting themselves in harm's way. Yet, while collaboration with government agencies does occur in extreme circumstances, it isn't a well-established policy.

A *with* strategy encourages collaboration through mutually beneficial or reinforcing efforts between the citizenry and the government. And it fosters collective work, not only among people who are *alike* or who *like* one another, but among those who recognize they *need* one another to survive or to live the lives they want to live.

### ***What Isn't Being Proposed***

A *with* strategy aims to bring about a better fit or alignment between what the government does and what citizens do. But it isn't another form of public participation. And at the federal level, it doesn't mean just partnering with state and local governments. A *with* strategy goes beyond consulting with citizens who are beneficiaries of a government program. Moreover, it isn't the same as transferring government responsibilities to nongovernmental organizations; it isn't devolution. I am also not talking about volunteers serving government agencies, valuable as that is. And I don't have in mind the kind of partnerships governments have with businesses and other institutions. I am not critical of any of these efforts or alliances, yet I still believe there is more to be done.

### ***Reciprocity and Complementary Production***

I think of "working *with*" as a reciprocal relationship. The best metaphor I have for this may be too dated to mean much today. Where I am from, pine trees grow so rapidly that they are treated as a crop like corn. Seedlings are planted in neat rows so the trees can be harvested easily by machines. Before this equipment was available, however, the trees were cut using long crosscut saws, with two workers reciprocating in pulling the saw back and forth. Their efforts produced a result that neither laborer could have achieved by working alone. They worked *with* each other.

A *with* strategy fosters reciprocity between what citizens do on their end of the saw and what governments do on the other end. The strategy is based on evidence that governments at any level can't do their jobs as effectively without the complementary efforts of people working with people.<sup>25</sup> That is because there are some things that can only be done by citizens or that are best done by them. People aren't the only ones who need people (as a song of yesteryear goes). Democratic governments need working citizens.

***There are some things that can only be done by citizens or that are best done by them.***

The case for such complementary efforts was made persuasively in Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning research on what she termed "coproduction." Citizens can't be left on the sidelines, she said, because their work is needed to reinforce and complete the work of governments, schools, and other institutions. Here is Ostrom's very practical argument:

If one presumes that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and social workers are essential to the development of better public services. Ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of these services means, however, that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account in the way that policy makers think about these problems. The term "client" is used more and

more frequently to refer to those who should be viewed as essential co-producers of their own education, safety, health, and communities. A client is the name for a passive role. Being a co-producer makes one an active partner.<sup>26</sup>

Products from the work of citizens can complete what institutions do because civic work is different from the work of institutions. I hope I have been clear that I am not talking about such things as volunteering to take the load off teachers and health-care professionals, although that is very commendable. I have in mind supplementary projects that make use of people doing the things professionals don't—and can't—do. That's why I prefer the term *complementary production* rather than *coproduction*.

## *Citizens aren't usually thought of as producers capable of contributing to what governments do.*

A good example of complementary production is captured in a story a colleague told me about an exchange between a group of citizens in her community and their local government. The citizens had started a cultural project, but when they met with municipal officials, they didn't ask them to take over the project. They simply said, "Here is what we have done, now what can you do?" Town officials offered assistance from a crew that brought in some equipment that the citizens didn't have. That is the type of reciprocity that is central to a *with* strategy. Citizens take an initiative; they work together to produce something. Then the government adds the resources it has. Collaboration develops that is mutually beneficial.

Governments already work *with* citizens when there is a problem that is beyond their capacity to solve alone. The two can aid one another. I have already mentioned what happens when natural disasters

strike. Citizens at the site do immediate rescue work before municipal and federal emergency crews can arrive. Yet, as I have noted, working *with* people and communities isn't typically an intentional strategy used on a regular basis. This may be because citizens aren't usually thought of as producers capable of contributing to what governments do. And, on the government's side of the divide, there can be complications with coordination and confusion about authority that make officials reluctant to go beyond consulting with citizens.

### SEEING CITIZENS AS AGENTS

I have already referred to citizens as producers, and I want to emphasize that again because it is essential in a *with* strategy. Citizens, even in participatory projects, may not be thought of as producers; more often they are seen as constituents to be heard or consumers of government services. Recently, however, I was intrigued when the World Economic Forum, an organization of business leaders, issued a report that proposed citizens be treated as creators and producers rather than consumers or clients.<sup>27</sup> That is exactly how a *with* strategy sees citizens—as actors themselves rather than as objects of the actions of others.

#### ***Part of the Sovereignty of My Country?***

Working together to produce public goods can give people a sense of themselves as agents who can make a difference. In 1780, Samuel Cooper, a Boston minister who was a leader in the resistance to the British during the American Revolution, gave a sermon in a ceremony recognizing the creation, after lengthy public debate, of a constitution for Massachusetts. The new constitution, he said, was “an established frame of laws; of which a man may say, ‘we are here united in society for our common security and happiness.’” He compared the laws that had been passed to the fruits that farmers produced by their labor on their own land. So, he reasoned, “The regulations under which I live are my own; I am not only a proprietor

in the soil, but *I am part of the sovereignty of my country*” (emphasis added).<sup>28</sup> Cooper had a right to that sense of agency because he had, in fact, been instrumental in creating not just a state constitution but a new nation.

## ***The key to stemming the loss of confidence may be more in what citizens do than in what the government does.***

What I take away from this sermon is that, ultimately, the key to stemming the loss of confidence may be more in what citizens do than in what the government does. The reason is that human beings usually have more confidence in what they’ve made, or helped make, than in what has been made for them. When people have worked *with* an institution to solve a problem, they tend to have positive feelings about that institution, provided that the institution has been receptive and the work isn’t just menial. When people have positive feelings about schools, for example, they speak as agents, saying, “*Ours* is a good school.” Then they will often add, “And we are involved in it.” Seeing this connection helped me recognize the possibility of restoring confidence in government by using a *working with* strategy. This strategy can also generate a sense of public ownership and responsibility because people tend to feel responsible for what they have made. A *with* strategy should help restore a sense of democratic sovereignty.

### ***Starting in Communities***

Much of the work citizens do begins locally. And more attention is now being given to the importance of communities and what citizens can do there.<sup>29</sup> Writers James and Deborah Fallows toured communities across America from 2013 to 2016 and reported that, while many news stories gave the impression that the country was “going to hell,”

the view locally was usually positive.<sup>30</sup> “The closer [people] are to the action at home, the better they like what they see.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this is a result of frustration with Washington, but, whatever the reasons, constructive change at the community level appears more likely.

Greater appreciation for what can happen locally has implications for a *with* strategy because citizens are able to see more clearly what can be accomplished when people join together. Municipal governments and local institutions can be their first allies. That said, community politics is not immune to the partisan polarization that infects national politics. And, although there may be greater opportunities locally for a *with* strategy, that doesn't mean such a strategy doesn't have potential at the federal level.

### ***Things Only Citizens Can Do***

As I have emphasized, a *with* strategy is especially important when there are distinctive things to be done that only citizens can do or that they can do better than government agencies. For example, neighbors and family members are probably best at providing emotional support when trouble strikes. And citizens working in tandem with officials can supply the local knowledge that comes from living in a place 365 days a year. Using this knowledge, people understand how to do things that are different from what professionals can and should do.

***Another thing people uniquely contribute is their ability to generate civic energy at the grassroots level.***

Here is a simple case of the importance of local knowledge taken from a large city in the Midwest: In one neighborhood, a dimly lit pedestrian bridge was unsafe for residents and a place where drug dealers congregated because it was a quick “in-and-

out” area for people buying drugs. For the police, this was a minor concern given other, more flagrant violations in the neighborhood. They only agreed to provide temporary patrols. It was citizens who came up with a solution to the problem. Knowing exactly where the drug dealers sat (local knowledge), and with officials’ endorsement, people glued inexpensive plastic eggs to the bridge railings (not something governments normally do), making them uncomfortable for sitting. Then the government did the things it does best: installed better lighting and improved the landscaping. Together, all of these efforts helped ensure that the dealers wouldn’t return.<sup>32</sup> That was complementary production.

Another thing people uniquely contribute is their ability to generate civic energy at the grassroots level. This was evident in a 2018 study of what has allowed some cities to lower their crime rates when others couldn’t.<sup>33</sup> The generators of civic energy in this case were a multitude of associations of citizens working together to improve their community. Researchers found that “every 10 additional [civic] organizations in a city with 100,000 residents . . . led to a 9 percent drop in the murder rate and a 6 percent drop in violent crime.”<sup>34</sup> Such groups didn’t necessarily regard their work as preventing violence, but “in creating playgrounds, they enabled parents to better monitor their children. In connecting neighbors, they improved the capacity of residents to control their streets. In forming after-school programs, they offered alternatives to crime.”<sup>35</sup> Even if not directly related to crime, these efforts helped turn negative emotions into positive energy.

### ***Citizens Working Together through Democratic Practices***

There are opportunities available every day for people to do the work that enables them to make a difference. Take something as simple as describing problems. When communities are facing difficulties, they have to identify or give names to problems that will resonate with or engage citizens. From people’s perspectives, these names

may not be like the names that professionals or experts properly use. Rather, they reflect the primal concerns of humans—security, freedom, control, being treated fairly. These are deeply valuable to most everyone and they engage people in a way that expert names may not. Communities also have to come up with options for acting on problems. Those options can include the unique actions citizens can take, which I just mentioned.

The availability of opportunities, however, doesn't mean that they are easy to take advantage of. Because people consider many things valuable, there will inevitably be tensions among these basic imperatives. For example, actions to make us more secure from danger may restrict our freedom. Although our primal motivations are much the same, we give different priorities to them because we live in different circumstances. That means we have to work through these tensions in order to find a way to go forward. We have to move beyond hasty reactions and exercise our human faculty for judgment to make sound decisions. This “working through” is also known as “choice work” or deliberation. Citizens can do it and will, if there are civic and educational “spaces” open to public deliberation.<sup>36</sup>

## ***While governments organize actions centrally and bureaucratically, citizens act in varied ways.***

Obviously, resources have to be available to implement decisions. For governments, these resources include legal authority, money, and tangible materials and equipment. Citizens also have resources in their communities, which are often intangible. These include civic energy or political will. In addition, people have structural resources like the associations they form that allow citizens to work together. While governments organize actions centrally and bureaucratically, citizens act in varied and less formal ways. But if their actions share

broad, general purposes, identified in deliberation, they can reinforce one another. That makes the sum of the civic efforts greater than the parts, which is powerful.

The associations that citizens create also can draw on the varied experiences in a group, along with collective knowledge. That fosters learning together, which is essential in keeping up the momentum in civic problem solving. As people learn more, they tend to stay motivated when problems resist standard solutions. Citizens who learn together are more likely to profit from failures than to be stopped by them. Learning together also benefits from diverse perspectives, which helps people understand what is happening around them more completely. And that allows them to act more effectively.

***There is no public for the government to collaborate with unless citizens have created a productive public by deciding and acting together on problems they face.***

The work of citizens makes complementary production possible. There is no public for the government to collaborate with unless citizens have created a productive public by deciding and acting together on the problems they face. Working together in the ways I've just described allows citizens to do their share of complementary production. The opportunities are present everywhere, every day. The challenge is to recognize the opportunities for citizens to make the difference they want and need to make. Naming problems goes on all the time. Options for action are constantly being proposed. Decisions are being made in many places and in many ways.

The opportunities are so common it is easy not to see their potential. But why not include the names people use? Why not add

the options for action that citizens can take? Why not call on the faculty for judgment that people have for making decisions?

### WHAT ABOUT THE OBSTACLES?

Up to this point, my objective has been to explain a *with* strategy and why it is needed, given the problems facing democracy now. However, as is always the case, there are challenges to this strategy that have to be overcome. I am afraid what I have said so far won't be credible unless these barriers are acknowledged.

#### ***Citizens' Perceptions of Their Fellow Citizens***

One obstacle has to do with the way citizens see their role and their fellow citizens. The unpleasant truth is that people don't always have confidence in one another. Surveys report that Americans believe selfishness is growing.<sup>37</sup> And some people may be more comfortable with being consumers and clients than taking on the responsibilities of active producers. If involving citizens in carrying out a *with* strategy were easy to do, it would be commonplace.

**Differences in Ways of Working.** Other obstacles are differences between the ways citizens do their work and the ways government and large institutions do theirs. Why are there differences? After all, the tasks that make up any kind of work are similar. Most all work involves identifying problems, making decisions about what needs to be done, finding the necessary resources, organizing the efforts, and evaluating what happens; nothing exceptional about that. Nonetheless, public and government ways of working not only may fail to mesh, but the way the government works may have adverse effects. For example, citizens typically work through small, informal, grassroots associations. These groups are quite unlike highly structured government institutions. When governments try to work with these citizens' groups because they are good at what they do, the government's agencies may unintentionally remake them in their

own image or “colonize” them. The result is that the citizens’ groups lose their identity as authentic agents of the people, which is what made them effective.

### ***The Way Government Works***

To propose any kind of change in what the government does, like working more with the citizenry, it is good to have some grounding in how the government actually functions. At the federal level, the agencies in the executive branch are in the best position to collaborate with civic organizations and citizens. They are staffed by able public servants who work in large bureaucracies, which are necessary given the scope and complexity of the programs they direct. Bureaucratization, however, brings with it certain mind-sets and values that are problematic for a democratic *with* strategy. While inevitable, these obstacles are not insurmountable.

Bureaucracies “see like a state” and may not be as aware of local conditions and human concerns as citizens are, so they can appear to lack common sense.<sup>38</sup> Bureaucracies are charged with enforcing rules uniformly and, in doing that, may not take into consideration extenuating circumstances. Rulemaking or promulgating regulations is one of the primary functions of a bureaucracy, and how it is done has significant implications for citizens’ confidence in government. Rules are also legalistic, and that can create a climate that isn’t conducive to collaboration.

***Bureaucratization ... brings with it certain mind-sets and values that are problematic for democratic with strategies.***

**An Inevitable Tension.** It is popular to blame bureaucrats for all we don’t like about large institutions. Nonetheless, there are reasons that public administrators do what they do. Before he was president,

Woodrow Wilson was a young scholar in what was then the new field of public administration. He recognized that there is an inevitable clash between the canons of effective administration and democratic values.<sup>39</sup> That was particularly true as public administration became more professional and expert. Bureaucracies were to be objective and above the political fray and could better see and serve the true public interest. But those worthy ambitions clashed with democratic precepts like rule by the people, who were to be the best judges of their own interests.

Although people are supposed to have an influential voice in the decisions being made on their behalf, that doesn't necessarily happen if citizens are only seen from an expert's point of view. Professional administrators may believe, with some justification, that if citizens knew what the professionals know, they would support what the professionals are doing. This, of course, assumes that the problem to be solved as experts see it is the same as the problem that citizens experience.<sup>40</sup>

**An Iron Triangle.** The tensions faced by professional bureaucracies became more difficult as interest groups of all types grew in number and political clout. They formed effective alliances with the staffs both in government agencies and in Congress.<sup>41</sup> These powerful "iron triangles" shape laws and regulations in the shadows of government, even in some cases bypassing open debate in Congress. Obviously, collaboration with citizens' associations that aren't interest groups is compromised when the legislative process happens out of public view. Citizens outside these iron triangles can't work with a new law or regulation that they don't know about.

## WHERE THE TWO CAN MEET: A BETTER ALIGNMENT

I believe that governments and the citizenry can work effectively together by realigning their efforts so that they are mutually reinforcing. The way citizens go about their work has to be recognized

in the way that governments do theirs. The challenge, as I have said, is that these two ways of working aren't the same and can be seriously misaligned. As noted, citizens and governments alike give names to problems, but the terms aren't identical. For example, citizens want to feel that they are safe in their homes, and this feeling of security is less quantifiable yet more compelling to them than the statistics professionals use to describe crime. As people decide what they should do about their problems, they draw on their experiences. They reflect on how a problem affects what is valuable to them and their families. It shouldn't be too difficult for officials to incorporate the names people use in their descriptions of issues. That is alignment. A better alignment between citizens and government actors doesn't necessarily require government officials to do more but rather to do what they are already doing a bit differently.

***A better alignment between citizens and government actors doesn't necessarily require government officials to do more but rather to do what they are already doing a bit differently.***

Ideally, government institutions and associations of citizens will collaborate for the benefit of each. An example of what can happen: there have been exchanges between people deliberating on policy questions and government officials who must also deliberate to make laws and issue regulations. As officials deliberate among themselves, they have to weigh various policy options against their costs and consequences. They have to consider tensions among the things they consider valuable as they weigh pros and cons. This is their "choice work." Citizens do the same thing, albeit in their own terms, when

they deliberate. When government officials sit down with deliberative citizens to compare the outcomes of their respective efforts at choice work, they are collaborating *with* one another.

***A deliberative voice can tell [officeholders] how citizens go about making up their minds when there are costs and other trade-offs to consider.***

Officeholders can benefit from hearing a deliberative public because it is a voice different from those that government officials are attuned to hearing. It isn't the voice of polls or focus groups, of constituents, or even of interest groups. A deliberative voice can tell them how citizens go about making up their minds when there are costs and other trade-offs to consider. Legislators and public administrators can't create this citizens' voice, yet they can help create a climate where such a voice is likely to develop. When citizens have deliberated in forums on an issue that is also before the government, the outcomes of the public deliberations have been helpful to elected representatives by showing them routes they can take that are less likely to lead to polarization. Exchanges between legislative branches and a deliberative citizenry are excellent examples of a *with* strategy at work.<sup>42</sup>

## THEN AND NOW

There are many more questions about *with* that need to be explored than can be dealt with in this small booklet, which is intended to be only an introduction to another strategy for repairing the troubled relationship between the people and major institutions like governments. Frustrated citizens need to hear more about what people have tried in the past to change their relationship with

bureaucrats. And frustrated public administrators need opportunities to think more about how to deal differently with often-exasperating citizens. These are some of the subjects that will be covered in the book titled, *With*.

There are also issues the country continues to face that would benefit from being seen in the context of earlier efforts to deal with them. For example, the interaction between federal officials and the citizenry in communities in the case of school desegregation has been contentious. Yet, when citizens in some towns once took constructive steps, the government was not able to make effective use of their work. Why the misalignment? The country also continues to face outbreaks of deadly diseases like flu and measles, while public resistance to vaccinations is growing. What has been done before inside and outside government when there was the possibility of an epidemic? Are there lessons to be learned that could be useful in the future? Still another continuing issue: Scientific authority is being challenged by a disbelieving citizenry. What can we learn from earlier efforts to deal with breakthroughs in medicine like recombinant DNA, which posed potential risks to public safety? These cases and others are used in the book-length version of *With* to show when collaboration is and isn't possible.

Now, as always, the most hotly contested issue is whether Americans are able to meet the responsibilities of citizenship. As you have read, I think that there are ways for citizens to make some of the differences in the political system that they would like to make. But I don't have any doubt-eradicating proof. That acknowledged, and also recognizing that people collectively have acted foolishly and worse at times, democracies have endured because of a faith in The People. I am reminded of one of the first tests of democracy's faith in citizens that occurred at the onset of the American Revolution. Would the people in the Colonies support a war against one of the world's superpowers, Great Britain? Daniel Webster recalled that founders like John Adams had responded to the doubters unequivocally by

insisting that citizens were not fickle but would stay the course in the resistance to British aggression. Perhaps influenced by his own era's democratic spirit in 1826, Webster imagined Adams rising to rhetorical heights to capture the spirit of 1776: "But we shall not fail. The cause will raise up armies; the cause will create navies. The people, the people, if we are true to them, will carry us, and will carry themselves, gloriously, through this struggle."<sup>43</sup> This was the same citizenry that Abraham Lincoln placed his faith in at Gettysburg.

## ENDNOTES

1 Brad Rourke, memorandum to Kettering Foundation deliberative politics, NIF issue guide, and institutional research workgroups, “A View from Rural America,” March 30, 2018.

2 Pew Research Center, “The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider,” <https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/> (accessed May 29, 2018).

3 Ian Anson, “Americans Distrusted US Democracy Long before Trump’s Russia Problem,” *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/americans-distrusted-us-democracy-long-before-trumps-russia-problem-100082> (accessed July 18, 2018).

4 Robert Teeter, “The Present National Political Attitude as Determined by Pre-Election Polls,” November 1976, Box 62, Folder “Post-Election Analysis—Speeches and Reports (2),” Robert Teeter Papers, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI. One of the studies we have found useful in tracing declining confidence in government is Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).

5 Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government* (November 2015), 18.

6 Laurie Kellman and Emily Swanson, “AP-NORC Poll: Three-Quarters in US Say They Lack Influence,” Associated Press, July 12, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/a3eac6255194410eb2ab2166f09cd429/AP-NORC-Poll:-Three-quarters-in-US-say-they-lack-influence> (accessed September 14, 2017).

7 The Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1991), 19.

8 Seyla Benhabib et al., *The Democratic Disconnect: Citizenship and Accountability in the Transatlantic Community* (Washington DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2013), vii. “What’s Gone Wrong with Democracy,” *Economist*, March 1, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/news/essays/21596796-democracy-was-most-successful-political-idea-20th-century-why-has-it-run-trouble-and-what-can-be-do> (accessed June 23, 2017).

9 There is a survey of the negative perceptions that Washington officials have of citizens in Jennifer Bachner and Benjamin Ginsberg, *What Washington Gets Wrong* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2016), 9-10, 15-18.

10 See the discussion of overlapping powers in Matthew Spalding, ed., *The Heritage Guide to the Constitution* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2014),

231-236; and Jon D. Michaels, "An Enduring, Evolving Separation of Powers," *Columbia Law Review* 115, no. 3 (April 2015): 515-597.

11 James M. Smith, Review of *The Rise of the Unelected: Democracy and the New Separation of Powers*, by Frank Vibert, *Political Psychology* 29, no. 2 (April 2008): 297-300.

12 In Latin, "*bellum omnium contra omnes*," Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 185.

13 Abraham Lincoln speaking to the Illinois Republican State Convention, Springfield, IL, June 16, 1858.

14 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record-High 77% of Americans Perceive Nation as Divided," Gallup, November 21, 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/197828/record-high-americans-perceive-nation-divided.aspx> (accessed March 6, 2018). Rick Hampson, "As Trump Hits 100 Days, Americans Agree: We're Still Divided," *USA Today*, April 28, 2017. Natalie Jackson and Ariel Edwards-Levy, "Huffpollster: The One Thing Americans Can Agree on Is That They're Divided," Huffington Post, November 29, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/americans-agree-divided\\_us\\_583d8036e4b04b66c01ba9af](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/americans-agree-divided_us_583d8036e4b04b66c01ba9af) (accessed March 6, 2018). John Wagner and Scott Clement, "'It's Just Messed Up': Most Think Political Divisions as Bad as Vietnam Era, New Poll Shows," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/democracy-poll/?utm\\_term=.d5c34dde0090](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/democracy-poll/?utm_term=.d5c34dde0090) (accessed March 6, 2018).

15 Aaron Leavy, "Fort Collins, Colorado: An Expectation of Public Engagement," *National Civic Review* 105, no. 1 (April 2016): 48-53.

16 Leavy, "Fort Collins, Colorado: An Expectation of Public Engagement."

17 Daniel Yankelovich and Isabella Furth, "Public Engagement in California: Escaping the Vicious Cycle," *National Civic Review* 95, no. 3 (September 2006): 3-11.

18 Ellen Knutson, "It's Our Turn to Decide: Participatory Budgeting in Chicago's 49th Ward," *National Civic Review* 105, no. 4 (2016): 14-22.

19 Brian J. Cook, *Bureaucracy and Self-Government: Reconsidering the Role of Public Administration in American Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 134-135.

20 "Building the Perfect Citizen," *Economist*, August 22, 1998, 21-22.

21 The foundation has been reading the literature in paleo-political anthropology for many years (reviews on file) as well as examining the work of scholars who found what we know of prehistoric times useful in understanding the earliest forms of politics. See Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*:

*From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

22 See Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. 1 (Boston: Leiden, 2010), 325, 772; and Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 386-387, 992.

23 David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).

24 Paul Arnsberger et al., "A History of the Tax-Exempt Sector: An SOI Perspective," *Statistics of Income Bulletin* (Winter 2008): 106, 124.

25 Elinor Ostrom, "Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society," *PEGS* (Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society) *Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 8.

26 Ostrom, "Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society," 8.

27 Global Agenda Council on the Future of Government, *Government with the People: A New Formula for Creating Public Value* (Cologny, Switzerland: World Economic Forum, February 2017).

28 Samuel Cooper, *A Sermon Preached before His Excellency John Hancock, Esq., Governour, the Honourable the Senate, and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, October 25, 1780: Being the Day of the Commencement of the Constitution, and Inauguration of the New Government* (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, and J. Gill, 1780). See also Charles W. Akers, "Religion and the American Revolution: Samuel Cooper and the Brattle Street Church," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1978): 477-498.

29 John Doble and Jean Johnson in collaboration with Paloma Dallas, *A House Divided? Reflections on the Public's Mood* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, October 2017); Rich Harwood, *America: Where to from Here?* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, October 2017).

30 James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018). James Fallows, "How America Is Putting Itself Back Together," *Atlantic* (March 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/03/how-america-is-putting-itself-back-together/426882/> (accessed October 19, 2018).

31 Fallows, "How America Is Putting Itself Back Together."

32 Valerie A. Lemmie, *Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box: A New Role for Elected Officials, City Managers, and Citizens* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2008), 37.

33 Patrick Sharkey, *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

34 Emily Badger, “The Unsung Role That Ordinary Citizens Played in the Great Crime Decline,” *The Upshot*, *New York Times*, November 9, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2hlT3Mu> (accessed May 22, 2018).

35 Badger, “The Unsung Role That Ordinary Citizens Played in the Great Crime Decline.”

36 For a list of some organizations and institutions around the country that provide these spaces, visit the National Issues Forums Institute website at <https://www.nifi.org/en/network-partners>, or email the National Issues Forums Institute at [info@nifi.org](mailto:info@nifi.org).

37 Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, after All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think about God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), 23.

38 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

39 Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration,” *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (June 1887) as reproduced in Jay M. Shafritz and Albert C. Hyde, eds., *Classics of Public Administration*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1987), 22.

40 John Doble, a senior research fellow at Public Agenda, reports, “In terms of my own experience, the vast majority of experts I’ve interviewed over the years in all kinds of fields such as foreign policy, health care, the environment, criminal justice, the environment, education (especially school board members and principals), science policy, journalism, etc., think that ‘if only the public understood the issue as well as we do, they’d agree with us.’” John Doble’s memorandum to David Mathews, “Examples of Disdain toward Ordinary Citizens,” September 14, 2018.

41 Theda Skocpol, “The Narrowing of Civic Life,” *American Prospect* (May 17, 2004), <http://prospect.org/article/narrowing-civic-life> (accessed July 2, 2013).

42 For information on members of Congress using online deliberation to engage their constituents without the rancor of many town meetings, see Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, David M. J. Lazer, *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

43 Webster’s imagining of what Adams said in his defense of the Declaration of Independence is recorded in Daniel Webster, *Discourse in Commemoration of the Lives and Services of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Delivered in Faneuil Hall, Boston, August 2, 1826* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard and Co., 1826), 40-41.



A **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP** Paper

[www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)

200 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459-2799 • (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657  
444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001 • (202) 393-4478