A REVIEW
of
KF Research:
The challenges of democracy—
getting up into the stands

The range of our understanding
of democracy—civic renewal

Insights about democracy—
insights about changing practice
Reviewing a Review
The challenge is to piece together the whole story emerging from Kettering research.
David Mathews ................................................................. page 3

The View from Above: Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy
By getting up into the stands, it is possible to take a broader view, note long-range trends, and distinguish between different types of problems confronting democracy.

Sidelining Citizens, Privatizing the Public
Keith Melville ................................................................. page 7
The Problem of Moral Disagreement and the Necessity of Democratic Politics
Noëlle McAfee ................................................................. page 10

A Proper Focus: Analyzing Today’s Civic Movements
By looking at the positive countermeasures that are now attempting to reverse these downward trends, civic renewal can expand the range of our understanding of democracy.

A Movement to Revitalize Democracy in America
Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland ................................ page 13
Civic Initiatives in American Democracy
Peter Levine ................................................................. page 17
Five Emerging Practices in the Scholarship of Engagement
Derek Barker ................................................................. page 20

Gaining Insights: Traveling in the Company of Others
By bringing together the insights of others about changing practice, the pieces begin to interlink into a whole story of democracy.

Bridging the Divide Between the Public and Government
Philip Lurie and Alice Diebel ........................................... page 23
Owensboro Revisited
Tony Wharton ................................................................. page 27
A Different Kind of Politics, with a Long Tradition
Nicholas V. Longo ............................................................ page 29
A Movement to Revitalize Democracy in America

This essay is adapted from The Civic Renewal Movement: Community-Building and Democracy in the United States, by Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland, Kettering Foundation Press, 2005.

A civic renewal movement that aims to revitalize democracy in the United States has emerged over the past decade. By working to renew and modernize our civic and institutional infrastructure, the movement seeks to foster self-government in the broadest sense. Civic renewal entails more than reforming elections and campaign finance, increasing voting, or making our system more inclusive of the great diversity of Americans. To be sure, these are unfinished projects that warrant much attention. But civic renewal also entails investing in civic skills and organizational capacities for public problem solving on a wide scale and designing policy at every level of the federal system to enhance the ability of citizens to do the everyday work of the republic.

The civic renewal movement—alternatively the “democracy movement,” “community-building movement,” “civil society movement,” or “communities movement”—builds upon the work of activists and innovators in many different arenas. Watershed associations engage various stakeholders in water quality monitoring, collaborative planning, and hands-on restoration of complex ecosystems, often with the support of innovative state and federal policy. In many low-income communities, congregations work together in ecumenical, faith-based community coalitions that partner with business leaders and educators for school reform and state-of-the-art job training. Neighborhood associations, often organized into citywide systems with substantial funding and...
Objective Two

The Civic Renewal Movement

Community-Building and Democracy in the United States

Carmen Sirianni
Lewis A. Friedland

staff support from local government, engage in community planning, dispute resolution, study circles, crime control, and the hands-on design of public space and public art. In an increasing number of cities, youth commissions involve teens in problem solving and policy development with mayors, city councils, municipal agencies, and, indeed, neighborhood associations. Healthy community coalitions bring together civic groups, hospitals, and public health agencies for health education and empowerment among underserved populations. Colleges and universities, as well as K-12 schools, provide an increasing number of service-learning opportunities to renew civic education and contribute directly to community development and environmental restoration.

Our own research over the past decade convinces us that, despite many worrisome signs in American civic life, a substantial amount of civic innovation that can inform broad renewal strategies is occurring. We first made this case in Civic Innovation in America (University of California Press, 2001) and have developed it further, with new areas of research, analysis, and tools of practice, in The Civic Renewal Movement: Community-Building and Democracy in the United States (Kettering Foundation Press, 2005), a book designed for democratic practitioners, community leaders, and everyday civic activists. It is true, as some argue, that we should concern ourselves with long-term declines in civic engagement and recognize that we have a long, hard road ahead. But it is also true that Americans’ capacity to innovate has been demonstrated time and again even amid aggregate declines, and we need to find ways to learn from these innovations and leverage them for democratic revitalization on a much wider scale.

Our research indicates that much of this innovation is of a piece. Many common themes and practices are emerging across distinct arenas. These innovations develop in response to the perceived limits of the usual ways of doing business, whether in revitalizing neighborhoods, restoring watersheds, or improving health. In many instances, innovators borrow from best practices in other arenas and justify their work by appealing to the lively public and scholarly discourse on social capital, civil society, and deliberative democracy. If we look more deeply, we often see a shared vocabulary, despite much variation in practice. Common terms include relationship building, consensus seeking, community asset mapping, community-building, collaborative problem solving, community visioning, public work, and the coproduction of public goods.

In some cases, self-identified movements within specific arenas envision themselves as transforming basic paradigms and practices in their field. Thus, we see a “watershed movement” that emphasizes place-based and citizen-driven approaches to protect ecologically integrated watersheds, as well as an overlapping “community forestry movement” and a “grassroots ecosystem management movement” that insist on the need for collaborative governance of natural resource systems. These movements challenge not only unilateral corporate power but also the command-and-control, pollutant-by-pollutant regulation favored by many Washington-based environmental groups. The “environmental justice movement” adds a further challenge by insisting on the empowerment of poor and minority communities, albeit with an increasing emphasis on collaborative problem solving to prevent pollution and reduce risk. These movements bring a renewed civic dynamism to the larger environmental movement and new tools for accomplishing what the usual forms of regulation often cannot.

We see similar movement and leadership networks to revitalize and modernize core institutional and professional practices in other arenas. The self-described “movement to renew the civic mission of higher education” develops new models of service learning and community-university partnerships that actively involve students, faculty, administrators, and staff in the work of broad community development. The “community youth development movement” engages young people in creative civic action through their 4-H clubs, YMCAs, youth commissions, and myriad other youth groups, while the movement to renew the civic mission of K-12 schools combines teaching principles of constitutional democracy with service learning and other opportunities for active engagement in communities and school governance. Responding to the distinct gender concerns of youth, “the new girls movement” empowers girls and young women through YWCAs and school groups to create safe spaces, free of violence and intimidation, and to contribute to community development through ethnic and tenant associations. In the arena of public safety, the “community policing movement” and broader “community justice movement” aim to transform the practices of professionals in creating safe communities in partnership with citizens who help define problems and imple-
ment solutions. The “healthy communities movement” engages community organizations as vital coproducers of health in partnership with traditional professional, public health, and medical institutions. Tens of thousands of citizens have been trained to resolve disputes through collaborative problem solving as part of the “community mediation movement”; its local centers and institutes work with a broad range of other civic organizations. The “civic journalism movement” has generated new professional and organizational practices to enable citizens to deliberate and problem solve more democratically. In addition, the “information commons movement” is inventing ways to utilize new technological and information capacities as a common pool resource for community problem solving and the creation of a democratic commonwealth.

The civic renewal movement attempts to weave these various movements and innovations into a larger tapestry that can enable democratic work to become broader and deeper, as well as more complementary and sustainable in the decades ahead. Without a broad movement linking democratic work across institutional systems, innovation may progress in some arenas, but it will likely stall or remain invisible in others and fail to inspire action on the scale needed to revitalize our democracy. Unless we can bring these discrete movements and leadership networks into more dynamic relationship with each other, it is unlikely that we will be able to counter those powerful institutional and cultural forces in our society that tend to undermine citizen power and capacity for self-government.

The civic renewal movement’s leaders have emerged from innovative organizations within all these arenas. They have elaborated and exchanged new vocabularies of civic practice across various arenas and networks, for example from assets-based community development and community visioning to environmental justice and community forestry. In doing so, they have contributed to the development of a “social movement master frame,” which scholars have increasingly come to view as critical to the development of movements. Of course, not all or even most of those active in innovative community-building networks identify explicitly with a broad civic renewal movement at this point or share a fully common vocabulary or set of practices. This is not unusual, however, in the history of movements, which almost never begin with a well-defined identity or widely accepted label. Rather, social movements emerge over years, even decades, from many forms of local action that only gradually—and often begrudgingly—begin to utilize a common language and form broader networks. And even then, they almost never fully eliminate contentious internal struggles over identity and mission, not to mention favored practices and policies. This pattern holds for the civil rights, women’s, and environmental movements of recent decades, for the labor movement over a century, and, indeed, for movements of all kinds around the world. The civic renewal movement is not exceptional in this regard.

To include varied renewal initiatives under the rubric of a “movement” is an analytic choice, as well as a political argument. We can draw upon the analytic concepts of social movement theory to clarify why it makes sense to think in terms of an emergent movement with a common identity. We can also analyze the ways in which the civic renewal movement distinguishes itself from recent “rights” and “justice” movements, even as

The Reverend Jon Magnuson, left, one of the founders of the interfaith Earth Keeper Initiative, Carl Lindquist, center, director of the Central Lake Superior Watershed Partnership, and Jennifer Simula, a graduate student at Northern Michigan University and student team project director for Earth Keepers, remove garbage from the Whetstone Brook in Marquette, Michigan, April 11, 2006. The Earth Keepers also hosted the second annual Earth Day Clean Sweep where they worked within their communities to collect electronic waste from around the Upper Peninsula.
it builds upon their achievements and maintains many linkages. But in addition to empirical and conceptual analysis, we can also make a political argument about why we think it is critical to build a civic renewal movement with a common identity that cuts across many distinct forms of civic innovation and links diverse networks engaged in public problem solving. Naming this movement, we hope, will help to develop it further.

The movement, we argue, should remain pluralistic and nonpartisan, open to learning from a wide array of approaches and to collaborating with elected officials of various political persuasions who are willing to problem solve with citizens.

Objective Two

The civic renewal movement seeks to enrich and modernize democratic practice and civic learning so that, in the famous phrase of America’s greatest democratic philosopher, John Dewey, democracy becomes “a way of life,” not just a “form of government.” The civic renewal movement also seeks to enhance “public policy for democracy,” so that the design of policy at every level of the federal system increases citizens’ capacities for responsible self-government, rather than treats them merely as passive clients, aggrieved victims, entitled claimants, or consumers ever-ready to use the exit option. The civic renewal movement does not presume to displace or substitute for all the other ways in which individuals and groups organize, advocate, or protest. Democracy is much more diverse and raucous than any one movement—even one with very broad purposes, such as the civic renewal movement—can ever hope to encompass.

In the wake of the highly polarized 2004 presidential election, civic collaboration might seem a bit quaint. After all, some would say, activists mobilized very effectively to turn out partisans on the basis of very targeted messages to their respective bases. New political organizations, some tailored specifically to the Internet age, raised enormous sums of money and mobilized volunteers in unprecedented ways. The media portrayed a country bifurcated into “blue states” and “red states”—and blue and red “states of mind”—leaves little room to imagine citizens collaborating across deep divides of party, policy, even morality.

Yet many scholars and public opinion analysts have cast doubt on this image of a citizenry so deeply polarized on core values. Much of the innovation we portray in this book points to a citizenry that cuts across regional, partisan identities and advocacy agendas that are not shared by others in the civic renewal movement. But people can be partisan Democrats or Republicans and still collaborate to revitalize civic education in our schools, partner with congregations to revitalize neighborhoods, work with traditional adversaries to restore ecosystems, and engage diverse stakeholders in community visioning for an entire city or region. Indeed, citizens not only can do these things, they already are doing them in many settings that defy neat political categories. Citizens can advocate different agendas regarding a specific set of federal regulations or social programs and still believe that it is possible—indeed indispensable—to remain in dialogue about the civic fundamentals of policy design. They can be deeply committed activists in various rights and justice movements and still be part of a broad civic renewal movement that attempts to enrich community-building practices.

Democracy is much more diverse and raucous than any one movement—even one with very broad purposes, such as the civic renewal movement—can ever hope to encompass.

We recognize that many civic activists, ourselves included, also maintain specific partisan identities and advocacy agendas that are not shared by others in the civic renewal movement. But people can be partisan Democrats or Republicans and still collaborate to revitalize civic education in our schools, partner with congregations to revitalize neighborhoods, work with traditional adversaries to restore ecosystems, and engage diverse stakeholders in community visioning for an entire city or region. Indeed, citizens not only can do these things, they already are doing them in many settings that defy neat political categories. Citizens can advocate different agendas regarding a specific set of federal regulations or social programs and still believe that it is possible—indeed indispensable—to remain in dialogue about the civic fundamentals of policy design. They can be deeply committed activists in various rights and justice movements and still be part of a broad civic renewal movement that attempts to enrich community-building practices.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a $250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or its officers.

Editors
David S. Frech
Libby Kingseed

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Graphic Design
and Production
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.