Reassessing the Relationship between The Public and The Government

By David Mathews

Introducing Kettering Foundation research on the relationship between the American people and their government requires some historical context because the relationship in this country is different from that in most other countries. The people created the government in America, which as James Morone points out in *The Democratic Wish*, was not the case in Europe. In most countries, the state was in power before there was a measure of popular sovereignty, and the liberty of citizens was based on a dispensation from the state. The American government, on the other hand, derived its power from citizens who exercised their liberty to constitute a state. Given this unique relationship, Americans have always been a bit wary of their own government out of concern that it might encroach on the power of the people. Morone sees the yearning for self-rule as our most basic political instinct and the source for the historic dislike of central administrative authority, which perhaps began with antipathy for King George III’s ministers. As the Kettering Foundation has conducted studies of the public-government relationship, it has kept this history in mind and has never expected citizens to be uncritical of their government. But even though some may say that the federal government is the source of many of its own problems, most citizens do not believe in a democracy so direct that they can do without a central government.

Throughout most of our history, Americans have lived by the Jeffersonian maxim that the best government is the least government. That precept began to erode in the Progressive era and was almost eclipsed by the Great Depression. Franklin Roosevelt admired local responsibility and a small government, but his overriding concern as President was social justice for a country that he defined by its needs, one whose citizens were “ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished.” He believed that those needs could be met only through the federal government, which he spurred to action. The Great Depression might have been even more disastrous if the government had not broken with tradition.

After World War II, Americans became accustomed to an activist government. Centralizing power in Washington made sense in wartime, and there was little reason to object during the postwar era when, as Bruce Schulman explains in his history, “America enjoyed unchallenged international hegemony and unprecedented affluence.” An economic boom “ushered ordinary working Americans into a comfortable middle-class lifestyle; millions of blue-collar workers owned their own homes, garaged late-model cars, and sent their children to college.”

New federal programs assisted the most vulnerable citizens, particularly the elderly, and reduced the overall level of poverty from a high of 20 percent in the late 1950s to 12 percent in the early 1970s. Pleased with these results, Schulman concluded, nearly everyone “accepted the activist state, with its commitments to the protection of individual rights, the promotion of economic prosperity, and the establishment of some
rudimentary form of political equality and social justice for all Americans.”

Washington influenced people’s everyday lives to an unprecedented degree, “guaranteeing civil rights and voting rights for African Americans . . . subsidizing farmers, regulating air travel, and uncovering the dangers of smoking.” We drove on federally funded highways, attended school with the help of government loans, and lived in homes with federally subsidized mortgages.

Although Lyndon Johnson’s ambitious Great Society program brought the federal government to unprecedented prominence, new challenges had already begun to emerge from the expectations that developed during World War II. Frustration followed disappointment when African American veterans returned to a country still unwilling to extend the promises of democracy to those who had fought for its cause. The struggle for civil rights began in courthouses and soon moved to lunch counters, buses, schools, and the streets. The assassination of President Kennedy shocked the nation’s self-assurance, and though major civil rights and voting rights laws were passed in 1964 and 1965, the disturbance in Watts presaged an intensification of social unrest that the federal government would prove unable to resolve. Urban riots flared across the nation in the days following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Protests mushroomed into political movements, and by 1969, with a stalemate in Vietnam that would linger for several more years at the cost of thousands of American lives, the country faced a bewildering array of difficulties and divisions, all of which were exacerbated by a declining economy. The Watergate scandal would shatter much of what was left from the era of optimism.

Somewhere between the protests of the 1960s and the frustrations of
the 1970s, the notion that the national government was the ideal place to advance the commonweal became contested, if not discredited. The public didn’t reject activism, but people began to suspect that there were limits to what the state could do, particularly without the use of other instruments for self-rule. The change in attitude was dramatic and long lasting. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s, the number of Americans who believed that the government would do the right thing fell from 75 to 25 percent. Confidence in the President declined from 41 to 12 percent, and faith in Congress dropped more — from 42 to only 8 percent.

Even more than the government, the political system was in deep trouble. In a 1991 report on Main Street attitudes done by The Harwood Group, citizens talked about being shut out of politics. Metaphorically, it was as if they had come home one evening to find the house locked and someone else inside wearing their clothes and eating their food. And Americans knew who locked them out. They pointed their fingers at incumbent politicians, campaign managers, powerful lobbyists, and those in the media. They saw these groups as a new, professional political class — the rulers of an oligarchy that had replaced democracy.

They thought politics had become a game for big guns; citizens were relegated to the sidelines, where they stood unable to influence either the players or the rules of the game. Americans came to believe that the real representatives weren’t those they elected but powerful lobbyists such as leaders of political action committees or single-issue organizations. “Citizens don’t have a voice,” people said; “lobbyists, special interests — they have a voice.” What Americans saw happening didn’t square with their notion of democracy. “The original concept was for elected representatives to represent your interests,” one citizen explained, adding “that is no longer true. It is now whoever has the most money can hire the most lobbyists to influence representatives.” Someone else insisted, “The country should come first — before specific constituents.” In studies drawn from deliberations based on National Issues Forums (such as “Governing America”), the Kettering Foundation found that people didn’t expect lobbyists to go away but they wanted more consideration for the general interest, which they believed had become seriously underrepresented.

First attributed to Vietnam, Watergate, and economic decline, this loss of confidence continued long after these crises faded from the news. In 1979, President Carter lamented that the “gap between our citizens and our government has never been so wide.” Kettering Foundation research has shown that the disconnect President Carter spoke about has persisted into the twenty-first century. And it is based on more than Americans’ historic wariness.

Kettering is now considering new research on ways to bridge the divide that separates The People from The Government. We don’t expect Americans’ concerns about state power to go away, but closing the gap seems essential. We are looking at the four main intersections where the public encounters the government: (1) when prospective officeholders meet the citizenry in campaigns, (2) when people cast their ballots, (3) when citizens attempt to influence legislation, and (4) when Americans encounter government bureaucracies and their regulations.
Problems occur at each intersection. Negative campaigns increase cynicism. Candidate images that are carefully scripted on television give citizens little contact with those who would represent them. Americans are less and less likely to show up at the polls because they believe their vote isn’t as influential as the vast sums of money donated by powerful interest groups. When people do vote, it may be for initiatives that not only bypass legislative bodies but also bypass the public deliberation that should inform their choices. Relationships with the federal establishment have been equally problematic. Efforts to enact needed laws may end in stalemates as a result of hyperpartisan polarization. Then the courts fill the vacuum, though only after long and costly battles. And what about people’s trouble with bureaucracies and their rules? Just ask anybody.

There is one bit of good news. The foundation has seen some indications that even though citizens are frustrated by their relationship with the government, they are becoming less resigned and more convinced they have to do something to bring about the changes they would like to see. We plan to document this trend in an update of the Main Street study.

In this issue of Connections, Kettering Foundation program officers and associates assess lines of research that might help clear out these intersections. As with every issue, we hope our readers will help us identify where the opportunities are greatest. We are particularly appreciative when we get reports on what others are doing, as was the case with the last Connections.

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Our Political Awakening

By Richard C. Harwood

Conventional wisdom held that the events of September 11, 2001, would change the tone of politics and public life in America. Now, more than a year later and after the commitment of our troops abroad, what is the state of our national condition?

For months following 9/11, Americans made donations to relief funds, flags adorned buildings and cars, and patriotic hymns were sung. Public opinion polls showed that Americans’ trust in government had gone up, and news media coverage took on a more serious tone. New commitments to bipartisanship and civility were avowed by Washington’s political leaders and echoed throughout the land; many of us recall the moving scene of members of Congress joining hands and singing “God Bless America” on the steps of the Capitol. Patriotic sentiment was on the rise.

Even Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone, which had cataloged the decline in social capital among Americans in recent decades, noticed a change in American attitudes. Based on polling data after 9/11, he reported that Americans are “... more united, ready for collective sacrifice, and more attuned to public purpose... [A] window of opportunity has opened for a sort of civic renewal that occurs only once or twice a century.”

But this newfound spirit does not appear to have transformed our expectations about politics and public life. By January 2002, a Harwood Institute/Gallup survey found that Americans expected that the conduct of political leaders, the news media, and citizens would be about the same or worse than in previous years, despite the wave of patriotism that had swept the nation. I cannot help but think of the earlier Persian Gulf War in which similar claims were made about changes in our nation’s politics. Amidst the upsurge of patriotic fervor, there was a mistaken optimism about the effects of that conflict on politics and public life.

In January 1991, we at The Harwood Institute were preparing to release our report, Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America, when the Persian Gulf crisis abruptly interrupted our plans. The report was one of the first studies to point out that Americans were not apathetic about politics but felt pushed out and disconnected. Based on then-rising perceptions of patriotism and claims of a changed political terrain, we decided to wait until the war had subsided and then repeat the research.

We learned that the war had very little effect on people’s thinking about politics and public life. In fact, we discovered that unless the moderator explicitly raised the issue, the Persian Gulf War was barely mentioned in the discussions among participants. When asked about the war, one person in Memphis said, “I thought we were here to talk about politics. That’s the reason I didn’t bring it up.” And expressing a sentiment that was widely shared, another participant remarked, “Patriotism has gone up dramatically, but I don’t think that has anything to do with political issues.”

Over the past year, as part of our New Patriotism Project, we toured the nation again and engaged more than 300 civic leaders, officeholders, and news media personnel in nine communities in daylong conversations about politics and public life in America. We heard people talking in a new way about changing politics. Just as in our conversations after the first Gulf War, participants in these recent
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discussions did not choose to focus on September 11. They did not think that flag-waving, speeches, or donations to charity would lead to the changes in politics that were needed. Instead, they believed that real change would take hard work by all of us. Based on our research into public life over the last dozen years, I think there is a new awareness of what is required to change the way American politics is conducted.

In the early 1990s, our report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, captured the extent to which people were lashing out in anger toward politicians and the news media. This widespread feeling gave rise to a series of blunt instruments, including term limits, balanced budget amendments, and the advent of Ross Perot, that were intended to administer shock treatment to the political system.

In our 1995 report, *America’s Struggle Within*, we noted that people were no longer so single-minded in their anger, but they were frustrated that the nation had not made more progress on their concerns. Indeed, they were especially exasperated that America had not changed how it addressed its common challenges. People argued that individuals and institutions must change their behavior if America was to set the right course for its future.

Then in 1998, as we reported in *The Nation’s Looking Glass*, people told us that they and their fellow citizens had retreated from American life; they experienced a nation in which societal messages and values and behaviors did not square with the America they sought. This time, though, the message for change was more personal: it must start not with legislative fixes or grand schemes but with individuals examining their own conduct and responsibilities. As one person told us, “People as a whole gotta take responsibility, too. We all shift the blame on each other and everyone. Everybody has to assume some responsibility.”

Now as part of the New Patriotism Project, we have conducted a series of nationwide Citizen Assemblies on politics and public life. During these conversations, people wanted to talk about their aspirations and not just their complaints. They did not just voice their concerns about the conduct of political leaders and the news media, they also specifically included the conduct of citizens as part of what needed to be changed. Their point was that action was necessary, and citizens had to be part of the equation. These conversations suggest that it is no longer acceptable to blame political leaders and the news media for all the ills of politics and public life.

Over these ten plus years the nation’s conversation on politics has shifted, with people moving closer and closer to holding up a mirror to themselves and declaring that their individual conduct is part of the issue at hand. We hear a growing sentiment: “We must find ways to act.” But how?

At the heart of people’s aspirations is the belief that there is much work to do in America, and that such work requires a strong and vibrant politics and public life. People seek a political climate in which vigorous and robust debate occurs; in which character is of genuine concern; and in which all people and all perspectives have a place at the public table. These aspirations stand in direct opposition to the kind of superficial and hollow politics we so often produce.

Americans seek a new covenant among political leaders, the news media, and themselves. The covenant calls political leaders to establish a different kind of relationship with citizens; it calls the news media to work in ways that help people truly come to know about public issues and political leaders so that they can form their own judgments; and it calls citizens to rise above complaints about the state of politics and public life and to take responsibility.

The people I have met across America say that too much time is spent wallowing over just how “bad” politics is; more and more, and with increasing fervor and passion, we hear people wanting to state what they stand for — not merely what they are against.

It would be a march of folly to look to September 11 to transform the tone of our politics. Waving the flag is a symbolic way to express patriotic sentiment; it is not a means of changing our politics. That task must be taken up by all of us, and the encouraging news is that the American people are finding their voice to do so.

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Americans seek a new covenant among political leaders, the news media, and themselves.
Images of political campaigns from the days of big city machines and party bosses teem with the boisterous revelry of crowds, torchlit rallies, and stemwinding orations. Modern campaigns by comparison have become carefully orchestrated, poll-driven, sound bite-laden affairs that lack the same degree of popular involvement. In 2000, the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center conducted about 100,000 interviews to gauge Americans’ interest and participation throughout the presidential campaign. Tom Patterson, who led the study, concluded “somehow, the United States has managed to create nearly the least-inviting and least-savory campaigns imaginable. Elections are supposed to energize the public. They are not supposed to ruin one’s appetite, but that’s the best way to understand much of what Americans now see during a campaign and why they don’t have much taste for it.” And so, Patterson puts the question forthrightly, “What’s going on here? Why are Americans disengaging from election politics?”

A growing body of scholarship indicates that citizens are being squeezed out of the campaign process and out of democratic politics. Campaigns have become more professionalized, and their focus has shifted from large-scale efforts at popular mobilization to a narrower targeting of key blocs of voters. Presidential campaigns are increasingly becoming contests over undecided voters in a few critical states. In a state where one candidate enjoys a commanding lead in the polls, both candidates may limit their campaign efforts because under the winner-take-all system that states’ electoral votes are not in play. Instead, undecided voters in swing states become the unwelcome recipients of a barrage of advertising as each campaign positions itself for advantage. The journalist Joan Didion observed in connection with Election 2000 that “…the reduction of a national presidential election to a few hundred voters [in Florida] over which both parties could fight for 36 days was the logical imaginative representation of a process that had relentlessly worked, to the end of eliminating known risk factors, to restrict the contest to the smallest possible electorate.”

Scholars and practitioners have advanced a number of reasons for voter disengagement from campaigns, and they have offered a range of possible solutions. Patterson’s analysis can be found in his article in this issue of Connections. Lawrence Grossman, former president of NBC News and of PBS, points to the news media as one villain and calls on journalists to improve their campaign coverage. Common Cause and the Alliance for Better Campaigns, among other reform organizations, target the campaign finance system and push for free airtime on television for political candidates. The Institute for Global Ethics challenges candidates to sign pledges to stop negative advertising and conduct “cleaner campaigns,” while the Harwood Institute’s New Patriotism Project calls on candidates, citizens, and news practitioners to sign similar pledges to monitor and improve political conduct.

But other analysts take a different view altogether. Some maintain that campaigns — when studied as a whole, rather than analyzed piece by piece — already constitute an effective conversation among politicians, the press, and the people. Roderick Hart, director of the Texas Institute for Civic Participation, argues that politicians speak more candidly during campaigns than at other times, press coverage adds discipline to the
process, and the people are sufficiently able to communicate what is on their minds. "As for the people," Hart writes, "who can deny that in 1964 they made it clear they did not support extremism, or in 1980 that they hated feeling weak, or in 1996 that they liked having jobs?" He asserts that campaigns are self-correcting and will evolve into new forms on their own without need of interventions by social or political reformers.

Other commentators simply dismiss the idea that political campaigns could or should be made more participatory and democratic. They see this belief as a romantic notion that would only lead to wasted effort. Voters decide early on whom to support, often on the basis of party affiliation, and they stick to their decisions without regard to what unfolds in campaigns. Realists in newsrooms, classrooms, and smoke-filled backrooms point out that politics remains the province of professional managers and political elites who are not likely to defer to a few civic entrepreneurs with promising pilot projects to change the way campaigns are run.

But political campaigns are central to the democratic legitimacy of our political system, and whether or not it appears a romantic notion at first blush, we still must ask how they can be made more democratic. One place to start is by considering the various frames through which political campaigns are viewed. A particular frame defines what the campaign is about, what is worth paying attention to (and what is not), and who is expected to do what. Different frames delineate different meanings for campaigns and the roles of the candidates, the press, and the voters. In order to make campaigns more democratic, we need a new frame that would help all the participants in the process to see their roles and responsibilities differently.

Three common frames in political discourse emphasize the strategic dimensions of campaigns — what it takes to win and who is responsible for winning or losing.

- Campaigns are competitions for power through winning public office.
- Campaigns are a spectator sport in which citizens cheer on their favorite candidate in the race toward the finish line.
- Campaigns are market transactions in which candidates make promises and exchange obligations for citizens' campaign contributions and votes.

Framing a campaign as a power struggle or a horse race pushes citizens to the sidelines. Their votes must be won but their interests or involvement need not be considered or encouraged beyond what is needed to bring them to the polls. In the campaign-as-market-transaction frame, a more explicit consideration of voter interests is made but the terms of trade keep citizens at arm's length and do not invite their participation in shaping the meaning of the campaign.

Two other frames frequently used have more of a civic cast.

- Campaigns are hiring processes in which citizens vet candidates to decide whether they should be employed or retained as public servants.
- Campaigns are debates among candidates about specific issues facing a political community, whether a town, city, county, state, province, or nation.
Framing a campaign as a conversation is the most deliberative frame — and the most democratic. It positions citizens as political actors who contribute as well as evaluate ideas and who influence and engage candidates and other citizens, in addition to being influenced and engaged by them in turn. In the conversation frame, the issues are open-ended, so meaningful choice work can occur. The conversation can include the questions posed by the other frames: (Who is worthy of power or employment or victory? Whose promises or issues are most appealing?), but it goes beyond them to consider the common interests of the political community.

As David Mathews suggests in *Politics for People*, reform efforts may be laudable, but they will have minimal effects until citizens take it upon themselves to push their way back into a system now dominated by “a professional political class of powerful lobbyists, incumbent politicians, campaign managers — and a media elite.” While skeptics debate whether citizens have the desire or the capacity to put the public back into politics, the Kettering Foundation has been studying civic entrepreneurs who are developing ways to do just that.

Each year, the National Issues Forums *A Public Voice* demonstrates that the public names and frames issues differently than officeholders and candidates. Undertakings such as professor Jim Fishkin’s National Issues Convention evince the same sort of public interest and capacity. A format similar to that of the National Issues Convention was used in South Carolina’s statewide elections in 1998 and in New Haven, Connecticut, in 2002, where regional issues were assessed. And newspapers such as *The Virginian-Pilot*, *The Charlotte Observer*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* have experimented with new ways to engage citizens in querying candidates and deliberating about the course their communities might pursue. These campaign-related activities are among a number of promising developments that provide rich opportunities for continuing research into what makes a campaign more democratic, more public, and more engaging and inviting for citizens.

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By Carolyn Farrow-Garland

The right of citizens to elect the men and women who will govern them is fundamental in a democracy. Yet here in the United States, the modern world's oldest democracy, more and more people are choosing not to exercise this most basic right. Voter participation has declined over the past 40 years from 63 percent in the 1960 presidential election to just 51 percent in Election 2000. This seeming disinterest is surprising in a nation whose founders were wary about government.

Voter participation is a widely studied issue, and a better understanding of why so many people have apparently given up on voting should provide important insights into the workings of our complex, modern democracy. The declining interest in voting is of considerable importance to the Kettering Foundation's research on understanding what it takes for democracy to work as it should. Findings from the many studies of voter participation, some of which are summarized below, have proven useful in helping shape our understanding of this issue. But unlike much of this analysis, which focuses on possible explanations for the decline, the objective of the foundation's research is to contribute useful insights on how voting can become a practice and pattern of behavior, especially among young people.

In his book, The Vanishing Voter, Thomas Patterson (see also his article in this issue) describes how the American public's disaffection with voting extends to virtually every area of election activity, from the number of volunteers who work on campaigns to the number of viewers who watch televised debates. Patterson and other social scientists identify a number of factors that help to account for this decline in electoral participation. Political parties no longer seem able to mobilize great numbers of people. Attack journalism and soft news are thought to weaken the foundations of trust and interest in politics. Election campaigns are criticized as being too long, too negative, and too expensive. Voters are frustrated with candidates who overpromise when seeking office but then are unable to deliver once elected. Researchers also point out that there is often little real competition. In the 2002 election, only about three dozen of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives were seriously contested by a challenger. And even though many changes have been made to make voter registration easier and more accessible, people still think the process is too cumbersome.

Another cause cited by researchers is demographic change, which is an issue that goes directly to the heart of the Kettering Foundation's research in this area. Young people have come under special scrutiny as the level of voter participation among people aged 18 to 24 has declined steadily since 1972, the year that 18-year-olds received the right to vote. In an article in Youth Vote, entitled “The Youth Vote: Why Bother?” Patrick Boyle reports that voting rates among young people declined from 50 percent in 1972 to 32 percent in 2000. This low turnout occurred in spite of unprecedented efforts to get young people to the polls. By contrast, 72 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 74 voted in 2000. It is unclear whether this disinclination to vote will change as this cohort gets older or whether it is a symptom of a deeper negative attitude — about elections and the effectiveness of voting — among younger generations.

Get out the vote campaigns targeting young voters do not seem to have had much effect. Recent assessments of these efforts have led many foundations to wonder whether such activities are worth the investment. On the other hand, an argument can be made that without such initiatives the situation might be worse. This leads many to wonder what it is that young people do care about?

Some social scientists have found that despite youth disenchantment from electoral politics, young people are not apathetic. In a recent national survey of
college students conducted by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University, two-thirds of the students told researchers that politics is relevant to their lives. Despite low rates of participation in political campaigns (9 percent) or political or issue-related organizations (14 percent), 61 percent of respondents indicated they volunteered or did community service in the 12-month period before the survey was conducted. These high rates of voluntary service indicate that young people are concerned and interested in public life, yet their disinclination to participate in politics remains troubling.

Boots Riley, a hip-hop artist who joined efforts to get out the vote for the 2000 election, gave voice to a certain ambivalence about voting that may be prevalent among young people. He said “voting is the lowest form of political action you can do, if you want to change the world, there’s a lot more things that you can do.” According to focus-group research commissioned by the Southern Research Council (SRC), young people, voters and nonvoters alike, gain satisfaction from seeing the results of volunteering and community service. Both groups share a distrust of politicians and would not consider running for public office. Where young voters part with their nonvoting counterparts is in their sense of efficacy and their confidence that the act of voting is important and can make a difference. Voters and nonvoters use the same evidence — such as the recount in Florida — to make the case for their very different actions.

The SRC report goes on to note that young voters and nonvoters think schools need to be more effective in educating students on voter registration, current events, and political issues. Young voters also say, however, that parents are a big influence. Young people become more interested in politics when their parents talk with them about political issues and explain to them why they voted for who they did. Projects such as Kids Voting, a national effort to get families involved in voting, are designed to tap into the important role that parents play in influencing their children.

The Kettering Foundation’s initial research on voting will be conducted through a shared learning with SRC. Founded in 1919, SRC focuses on promoting racial justice, protecting democratic rights, and broadening civic participation in the southern United States. They have been active in promoting school desegregation and voting rights and have come to see the decline in voter participation as a symptom of a deeper issue. SRC staff are assessing the reasons for low voter turnout among young people and are developing new ways of connecting with them. Findings from research commissioned by the organization indicate that voting habits are learned early, that parents have a strong influence, and that the quality of civic education can be important in how young people come to an understanding of their roles as citizens and as voters.

The first step in the shared-learning that the Kettering Foundation is pursuing is to understand how young people come to view themselves as citizens and to learn how this awareness expresses itself in the ways young people view their rights and obligations. Do factors such as identity and culture contribute to this awareness? What types of experiences or influences strengthen the idea that voting is an important activity? Do certain issues play a role in generating interest in voting?

There is persuasive anecdotal evidence from the National Issues Forums network...
that people are more likely to vote when they are able to deliberate on campaign issues and ask candidates questions about them. This was first demonstrated following the National Issues Convention held in Texas before the 1996 presidential election. Another example comes from National Issues Forums activity in South Carolina during the 1996 gubernatorial campaign. The Kettering Foundation thinks that these experiences provide clues for thinking about how young people develop the sense of agency that shapes their understanding of their roles as citizens.

SRC efforts are designed to enable young people to develop their abilities to affect civic life in their community. For example, youth councils in Atlanta-area schools provide opportunities for young people to learn how issues impact their lives. Public deliberation will be a key component in SRC’s work, and they intend to tie development of public knowledge about issues to the electoral process. This approach will serve as the starting point for examining the relationship between public engagement among young people and voting. In coming months, the Kettering Foundation will identify other opportunities to examine this relationship, which is so critical for the future of our democracy.

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The Vanishing Voter

By Thomas E. Patterson

Writing in the 1950s, political observers were optimistic about the future of voter participation. Turnout had fallen sharply in 1944 and 1948. In Britain as well as the United States, partisan activity was waning. No analyst has fully explained why this had to be the case or why the wartime governing parties in both England and the United States suffered stinging defeats in postwar legislative elections.

By the 1950s, however, voter turnout was returning to the level of the 1930s, and all signs in the United States pointed to increasingly higher rates. College attendance was on the rise, the gap in the voting rates of men and women was shrinking, and black Americans were asserting their right to fuller participation.

Yet, turnout did not increase after the 1950s. In fact, the period from 1960 to 2000 marks the longest ebb in turnout in U.S. history. Turnout was 65 percent of the adult population in the 1960 presidential election and stood at only 51 percent in 2000. In the 2002 midterm elections, the voting rate was 39 percent, down from nearly 50 percent in such elections four decades ago. A mere 18 percent voted in the 2002 congressional primaries — roughly half the level — even as late as the 1970s.

Fewer voters are not the only indicator of the public’s waning interest in political campaigns. In 1960, 60 percent of the nation’s television households had their sets on and tuned to the October presidential debates. In 2000, fewer than 30 percent were tuned in. Few Americans today pay even token tribute to presidential elections. In 1974, Congress established a fund to underwrite candidates’ campaigns, financed by a check-off box on personal income tax returns that allowed citizens to assign $1 (later raised to $3) of their tax liability to the fund. Initially, one in three taxpayers checked the box. Now only one in eight do so.¹

What’s going on here? Why are Americans disengaging from election politics? During the 2000 campaign, as part of the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, we interviewed nearly 100,000 Americans to discover their level of campaign interest and participation. We combined this information with surveys of previous elections to evaluate long-term trends.
In my new book, *The Vanishing Voter*, I present the results of our study. We found, for example:

- That the weakening of the political parties as objects of both loyalty and thought has reduced the incentive to participate, particularly among lower-income Americans. A century ago, James Bryce worried that the growing complexity of American society threatened the parties’ ability to forge and mobilize cohesive majorities. Social complexity is now orders of magnitude great and has clearly overtaken the parties.

- That demographic changes account for a large share of the decline. Whatever the contributions of the X and Y generations relative to those of the World War II and Baby Boom generations, electoral involvement is not among them.

- That modern reporting works against the development of political perceptions and attitudes that contribute to higher participation levels. Attack journalism and soft news have weakened the foundation of political trust and interest, contributing to Americans’ flight from election politics.

- That, despite substantial improvements in registration and balloting procedures, election laws remain an obstacle to participation, particularly for younger and lower-income adults. Interest is also dampened by the nature of the modern campaign. Somehow, the United States has managed to create nearly the least-inviting and least-savory campaigns imaginable. Elections are supposed to energize the public. They are not supposed to ruin one’s appetite, but that’s the best way to understand much of what Americans now see during a campaign and why they don’t have much taste for it.

Negative campaigning has long been part of campaign politics but now dominates it. Candidates have discovered that it is easier in many situations to attract swing voters by tearing down one’s opponent than by talking about one’s own platform. Research indicates that negative advertising has more than tripled since the 1960s. Such ads now account for more than half the ads featured in most presidential and congressional races.\(^2\)
Our surveys indicate that a cumulative effect of negative politics, campaign after campaign, is a reduced interest in elections. Our evidence does not resolve the recent dispute among scholars over whether a negative campaign in the single instance keeps voters away from the polls. But our evidence points clearly to a long-term effect. Attack politics has worn some people down to the point where they simply don’t want to hear about campaigns. On the average day during the 2000 campaign, Americans who felt that negative messages are a defining feature of U.S. elections were less likely to discuss the campaign and to pay attention to news about it. The differences were not large, but they occurred across the course of the campaign. Day in and day out, those who believed campaigns are akin to mud wrestling were less attentive to the campaign, even when levels of education and income were controlled.

Today’s campaigns are also characterized by promises — endless promises. Unlike their predecessors in the age of party-centered politics, today’s candidates are unable to campaign on broad statements of principle within the context of a reliable base of party loyalists. Today’s candidates build their followings by pledges of support to nearly every conceivable voting group. The changing nature of party platforms tells the story. Whereas platforms were once declarations of broad goals and ideals, they have become promissory notes to special interests. The 1948 Democratic and Republican platforms were less than 3,000 words in length. By the 1980s, they had exceeded 20,000 words.

An effect of this relentless flow of campaign promises is a public wary of taking candidates at their word. In our Vanishing Voter surveys during the 2000 campaign, respondents who felt that candidates will say almost anything to get themselves elected had a significantly lower voting rate than other respondents. On a day-to-day basis, they were also less likely to talk about the campaign and to follow news about it.

Modern day politics also exalts personality, increasing the likelihood that personal blunders and failings will loom large in campaigns. Through the 1972 presidential election, personal controversies did not receive even half as much news coverage as did policy issues. Since 1972, they have received nearly equal time. Even a short list indicates just how salient they have become: Gerald Ford’s blundering statement on Eastern Europe, Jimmy Carter’s “lust in my heart” Playboy interview, Geraldine Ferraro’s tax returns, Gary Hart’s affair with Donna Rice, Dan Quayle’s assault on the fictional “Murphy Brown,” Bill Clinton’s relationship with Gennifer Flowers, and Al Gore’s Buddhist Temple appearance. The revelation in 2000 that Bush had been arrested a quarter-century earlier for drunken driving dominated the headlines in the closing days of the campaign. The incident got more coverage on the evening newscasts in a few days than did all of Bush and Gore’s foreign policy statements during the entire general election.

Although startling revelations can perk up a campaign and draw people momentarily to it, Americans do not like the prominence they have attained. In our surveys, respondents who felt campaigns are now akin to theater were less likely to discuss election politics and to attend to news about it.

The length of the modern campaign is also a turnoff for many Americans. Today’s candidates are self-staters who depend on themselves rather than the parties to win nomination and election. As a result, active campaigning now begins much earlier in the election year than it once did. In our 2000 election surveys, respondents repeatedly expressed displeasure with the campaign’s length. The long campaign also numbed people to the point where many tuned it out. A week before the 2000 Republican national convention, only one in five American respondents knew it was only days away. Not surprisingly, a large share of those who did end up watching the Republican convention did so only because they stumbled across it while channel surfing.

The modern campaign is also warped by competitive distortions. Competition is the lifeblood of democratic elections, and when it weakens, participation suffers. Only about three dozen of the 435 House seats were actually in play in 2002. In nearly twice that many districts, there was literally no competition: the weaker major party did not bother even to nominate a candidate. And in several hundred other districts, the competition was so one-sided that the result was known even before the campaign began. House incumbents have created a lock...
on the offices they hold. They gobble up 85 percent of PAC money, are favorably redistricted when House seats are reapportioned, and use their taxpayer-provided congressional staffs to conduct round-the-clock re-election campaigns.

Presidential campaigns are more closely contested, but the competition they offer is spread unevenly across the electorate. Front loading of the nominating schedule — the placement of a large number of state contests near the front end of the process — has led presidential hopefuls to raise and spend tens of millions on these early contests in an effort to secure nomination with a decisive victory on Super Tuesday. One effect is to make money the king of the nominating process. Not since John Connally in 1980 has the candidate who has raised the most money before the first contests in Iowa and New Hampshire lost a nominating race.7 A second effect is to deprive millions of citizens the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote. Bush and Gore’s Super Tuesday victories in 2000 completely devalued the yet-to-be-held presidential primaries and caucuses. Turnout in these states was a third lower than that in the early-contest states and would have been next to nothing if nominations for other offices were not being contested. Our Vanishing Voter surveys revealed that residents of the late-scheduled states were also much less likely to talk about the campaign and to follow news about it. They were also less informed about the candidates and issues.

In the 1970s, when the nominating schedule unfolded a state at a time until the final month or so, the races lasted longer, money was less influential, and residents of nearly all states had a chance to cast a meaningful vote. Turnout nationally was twice the level that it is now.

In the presidential general election, Americans’ opportunity to be full participants is affected by the Electoral College. Although this feature of our constitutional system has always distorted the process to some extent, the fact that today’s campaigns are based on money rather than volunteers has exaggerated the effect. Unlike volunteers, who work within the communities where they live, money can be targeted and withheld at will. During the 2000 general election campaign, there were no ad buys and no candidate visits in Kansas, a lopsidedly Republican state. In neighboring Missouri, which was a battleground state, there were 18 candidate visits and millions of dollars were spent on televised political advertising.

In 2000, residents of battleground states had a voting rate that was several percentage points higher than that of residents of other states. In fact, although the overall voting rate in 2000 was slightly higher than it had been in 1996, turnout actually fell in nine states, all of which were safely in the Bush or Gore column. Compared with residents of battleground states, those who lived in noncompetitive states talked less about the campaign, paid less attention to news about it, and were less informed about the candidates.8

No doubt, ordinarily Americans share responsibility for their lapse in participation. It is always easier to leave the work of democracy to others. But the modern campaign is anything but an inviting event. In the concluding week of the 2000 campaign, when asked whether the campaign had been “rather depressing, that it hasn’t been nearly as good as a campaign should be” or whether it had been “uplifting, that it made [you] feel better about elections,” respondents in our survey said by more than two to one that the campaign had been “depressing.”

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1. Federal Elections Commission data.
3. Vanishing Voter survey data.
8. Vanishing Voter survey data.
Understanding the Nature of Representation in a Democracy

By John Cavanaugh

How to study legislative behavior is a question that does not yield a consensual answer among political scientists. An ethic of conceptual pluralism prevails in the field, and no doubt it should. If there is any consensus, it is the point that scholarly treatments should offer explanations — that they should go beyond descriptive accounts of legislators and legislatures to supply general statements about why both of them do what they do. What constitutes a persuasive explanation? In their contemporary quest to find out, legislative students have ranged far and wide, sometimes borrowing or plundering explanatory styles from the neighboring social sciences.

— David R. Mayhew, Congress: The Electoral Connection

The most obvious and perhaps largest disconnect between citizens and institutions is the one that separates “We, the People” from what is perceived as “They, the Government.” The public’s generic dissatisfaction with their relationship with government officials strikes at the heart of the Kettering Foundation’s key research questions in the Public-Government program area: How can citizens and officeholders relate more productively in addressing public policy issues?

Our research to date shows that the means officials and citizens typically use to interact with each other (public hearings, for example) are often quite unsatisfactory, to the point of making a bad relationship even worse. Hence our studies have attempted to identify the causes of the poor working relationship. One root cause seems to be the inability of citizens to appreciate the problems facing officeholders in their sworn duties as political representatives.

In the academic literature on this topic, scholars have created various theoretical frameworks to describe the nature of political representation in a democracy. For example, Hanna Pitkin provides four approaches to the study of representation. The first involves a purely functional description of the composition and membership of legislative bodies. The second looks at the formal rules and procedures by which officeholders are chosen and how legislatures operate. A third focuses on how legislators act on behalf of various interests in society. A fourth framework highlights the symbolic qualities of legislatures as they relate to other concepts such as authority and accountability.

Early empirical studies by political scientists who specialize in this area have attempted to study the nature of representation by comparing roll call votes to measurements of district public opinion. This research has found that, district opinion is strongly correlated to roll call votes on certain types of issues such as civil rights. However, these studies also show that personal views of officeholders were more influential on matters such as social welfare policy. This methodology is limited to the extent that it is purely descriptive in that it simply paints a picture of how legislators make decisions. These studies do not provide us with clear explanations of why legislators act the way they do, nor do they address the normative questions raised by democratic theory.

Hence, Kettering Foundation research has great potential to build upon established theories of representation and address normative questions as to how
officeholders might act in a different way. Typically, discussions such as this bog down into debate over two models: The Burkian trustee model versus the Instructed delegate model. The trustee approach suggests that election victories authorize officeholders to use their own best judgment when making legislative decisions. Terms of office provide regular opportunities for citizens to retain or remove their legislators based on evaluations of their conduct in office. The instructed delegate approach suggests that officeholders simply reflect the will of their constituencies. Economists have found this model of particular interest and several studies use a market metaphor in an attempt to explain the relationship of members of the legislature to the electorate. However, this can be problematic as it is nearly impossible to determine accurate measures of what a particular district collectively “thinks” about every issue that may come up for a roll call vote in the legislature.

In Homestyle, Richard Fenno documents the dual role of representatives as both “delegates” and “trustees” in detailed case studies of members of Congress. Thus, members are instructed delegates when they follow the majority will of their districts and informed trustees when they rely on their personal judgments. A key finding from Fenno’s work relates to the two different worlds officeholders must operate in: “Washington and home are different milieus, different worlds. But they are not unconnected worlds…”

Though a Congressman may be immersed in one, he remains mindful of the other.” In essence, Fenno finds that legislators have difficulty navigating between these two different worlds. Recent changes in the makeup of legislative bodies have made this task even more difficult. More and more officeholders are expressing concern that legislatures have become so hyperpolarized that there is a hostile atmosphere which prevents cooperation, which essentially paralyzes these institutions. As Morris P. Fiorina says in Civic Engagement in American Democracy, “In sum, another reason people are frustrated with government is that all too often they see the participants in government locked in battle over unattractive or unrealistic alternatives. The result is unnecessary conflict and animosity, delay and gridlock, and a public life that seems to be dominated by ‘quarrelsome blowhards’.”

Critics of Fenno’s methodology say his approach overlooks the supremacy of the electoral connection between legislators and citizens. As David Mayhew notes, the most powerful explanation of legislative behavior rests on the assumption that officeholders are interested in nothing else beyond re-election. He argues, “What justifies a focus on the re-election goal is the juxtaposition of these two aspects of it — its putative empirical primacy and its importance as an accountability link.”

Supporters of this school of thought point to modern indictments against the power of incumbency and the lack of voluntary turnover of political offices, which have been the driving force for successful ballot initiatives imposing term limits on some state offices.

Our current research on this topic suggests that there is a different way to critically examine political representation in a democracy. As Richard Harwood explains, “We sometimes get stuck, because we can only imagine dependent or independent relationships, not *inter*-dependent relationships.” This would suggest that our future research strategy should focus on the newly forming critical mass of officeholders within the National Issues Forums network who have developed interdependent relationships with their constituencies. These cases demonstrate the possibilities of a more constructive relationship between officeholders and citizens. For example, Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Florida, now provides public space for bipartisan legislative delegations to conduct townhall forums prior to the opening session of the Florida State legislature. Likewise, the University of Hawaii has been conducting citizen forums on topics such as Money & Politics and Gambling concurrently while there is pending legislation on the same issues. Future research in this area might include a major collaborative study with the National Conference of State Legislatures that would attempt to synthesize the findings from these case studies. Another possible line of research might be to encourage more experiments that introduce public deliberation to newly elected state legislators such as the program within the Drummond Center at Erskine College.

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Opportunity for State Legislatures

By Les Ibara, Jr.

In a democracy, if the executive may be viewed as the head of the body politic, then surely the legislature must be its heart. And though the power to make laws is central to its function, I want to emphasize the potential inherent in this branch of government to enable civic discussions on what matters to the citizenry that the lawmakers represent. Given the rancorous partisan discourse that too often substitutes for deliberation among our national legislators, one could be forgiven a sense of disbelief at the likelihood that congressional debate might enhance our civic conversations. But instead, we might take heart in the well-known quote by Justice Louis Brandeis likening the states in our federal system to “laboratories of democracy.” State legislatures may offer opportunities for enriching democratic practices and bringing our system of government closer to our ideals.

It was with this spirit that the Hawaii state legislature held two National Issues Forums (NIF) in 2001. The NIF events were held in April and December 2001, and I helped organize them as a means of encouraging deliberative democracy in the Hawaii legislature.

Money and Politics NIF

Major campaign-finance reform died in a House-Senate conference committee during the 2000 legislative session, and a number of legislators subsequently sought re-election on this issue. The electoral salience of campaign-finance reform increased interest in the Money and Politics NIF, which was held on April 14, 2001. The significance of the event was also boosted by the fact that the House had passed a bill for the public funding of campaigns two days earlier.

Seventy-five people, including two legislators, participated in the forum in the Capitol auditorium. The NIF Money & Politics issue book was used to outline the problem — that a majority of Americans felt that money was corrupting politics, undermining elections, and shutting citizens out of our democratic system.

Most of the forum was spent deliberating on three choices reflecting different views on the subject. The choices were (1) reform the campaign fund-raising system, (2) rein in lobbyists and politicians, and (3) publicize all political donations but don’t regulate them.

Citizens shared their perspectives and concerns during the deliberations, and while few people reported changing their position after the forum, many indicated that they now had a greater understanding of the problem and the choices about how to respond to it. Participants also said that they had a greater appreciation of the views held by their fellow citizens.

The Money and Politics forum achieved the goals of introducing legislators to the NIF deliberation approach,
Twenty

More than 100 citizens participated in the NIF event. The deliberation was successful on its own terms and was useful to legislators as well.

demonstrating positive citizen contributions on the issue, and advancing campaign reform legislation during that session (though a bill on the issue later failed in conference committee again).

Careful planning contributed to the forum’s success. Selecting a relevant issue, legislative venue, and well-timed event date helped the forum fit into the legislative process. Public awareness was also assisted by live cable television broadcasts and extensive promotions to legislators’ offices.

NIF Focus on Gambling

Gambling was another controversial issue in the 2001 legislative session.

The Speaker of the House sponsored a bill to legalize gambling to fund long-term care for the elderly. The Senate president proposed a study on the economic benefits of gambling. Though no action was taken, gambling became the top candidate for a second NIF event, scheduled for December 1.

The forum date was six weeks before the 2002 session, in which a major push to legalize gambling was expected. Forum sponsors hoped to frame the issue early enough to encourage people to respect opposing positions, while feeling free to express their own.

In order to involve more legislators, planning began four months before the forum was to be held. Planners decided to use the NIF Gambling issue book but revise the policy choices to be discussed. Planners also solicited input from advocates and opponents of gambling.

Meetings were held with House and Senate presiding officers, who agreed to encourage legislators to participate. They expressed a desire for more deliberation on the gambling issue. In particular, they wanted more mutual understanding of opposing positions.

Planners then met with six legislators, among whom both pro and con views were represented. The legislators suggested focusing on how gambling revenues would be used and the social problems that might occur if gambling were legalized.

Based on these and other comments, the forum choices for deliberation were revised. The new choices were (1) introduce gambling but regulate it, (2) do more study of the issue because Hawaii isn’t ready yet, and (3) keep gambling out of Hawaii.

More than 100 citizens participated in the NIF event on gambling. The deliberation was successful on its own terms and was useful to legislators as well. Instead of avoiding the controversy, more legislators seemed comfortable discussing the issue, perhaps because it was less contentious.

Legislators also seemed more open to citizen involvement on the issue. Along
with an appreciation of opposing views, there was a greater sense that the arguments on both sides were valid. Also, media coverage on gambling was considered balanced, fair to all parties in the debate, and helpful for improving public understanding of the issue.

**Deliberative Policy-Making**

Deliberation, as practiced in NIF events, means “considering, understanding, and weighing the underlying views and concerns of people involved in the issue under discussion.” As such, deliberation stands in stark contrast to the conflictual arguments and debates that are a common occurrence in legislative chambers.

As a legislator for 17 years, I have found that the legislative process of public hearings and debates is not intended or designed to encourage deliberation. The campaign finance reform and gambling NIF events, however, helped introduce the practice of deliberation to Hawaii policymakers.

These forums provided participants with an experience of deliberation on real issues. Many citizens reported a preference for NIF deliberative conversations over the disharmonious discussions often witnessed in legislative debates. Citizen dissatisfaction with the way legislators make laws could be an impetus for exploring the deliberative policy-making approach to lawmaking.

The Hawaii legislature has explored various practices of public policy deliberation. Community town meetings, facilitated issue development projects, legislative partnering retreats, and electronic bulletin board discussions are but a few. However, it remains to be seen whether and how the legislature might seek to institutionalize deliberative policy-making practices.

**Public Policy Institutes**

In organizing the 2001 Hawaii NIF events, a community capacity-building objective was also achieved — establishment of the University of Hawaii’s Public Policy Institute (PPI). The university was the coordinating cosponsor of the forums, and five other cosponsors served as advisors in setting up the PPI.

The Hawaii PPI is similar to scores of other university-based, NIF-affiliated PPIs around the country. PPI activities typically include research and support of public deliberation programs, sponsor-ship of NIF events, and training of NIF moderators.

A PPI appears essential in conducting NIF events and other public deliberation projects involving legislatures. As a neutral convener of citizen meetings, a PPI can instill trust and lessen fears that participants might have of their being used for partisan political purposes.

The institutional resources of a PPI are also useful in providing research and practical experience in deliberative practices. These resources include an expertise in framing issues, designing policy options, and training facilitators.

As the Hawaii PPI expands its programs in public deliberation, additional resources and opportunities for experimenting in deliberative policy-making will be available to the Hawaii legislature.

**Opportunity for State Legislatures**

The Hawaii experience has demonstrated that NIF events can be conducted successfully in a legislative setting. We found that such forums can provide legislators with a positive experience of deliberative policy-making.

NIF deliberative conversations foster a greater understanding of issues and promote trust among participants who take part in them. Instead of quarrelsome debates, deliberative conversations provide a constructive way for legislators to talk about issues — and narrow the gap between the ideals and the current practice of democracy in state legislatures.

There now appears to be an opportunity to promote deliberative democracy in state legislatures around the country. Legislators in New York, Florida, West Virginia, and other states are already working to promote deliberation in their legislative processes.

To foster information exchange on public deliberation experiments, a national network of state legislators on deliberative policy-making is being planned. Conversations with the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Kettering Foundation have begun to lay the groundwork for this network of local legislators. The intent of the network is to assist and promote the evolution of democracy in America.

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Communicating the Value of Deliberation

by Amy Harper

As Connections’ readers know, the Kettering Foundation takes a keen interest in how National Issues Forums (NIF) might demonstrate the value of public deliberation. Interviews with Michelle Scott and Robert Walker about their recent experience with an NIF briefing at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, suggest that such efforts do promote deliberative democracy.

Scott is director of the Office of Equity and Diversity at Montgomery College, and she is a cofounder of the college’s Center for Community Leadership Development and Public Policy (CCLDP). She is also a member of the NIF network. Walker helped to establish CCLDP, which is also home to a Public Policy Institute (PPI). In November 2001, the Office of Equity and Diversity and CCLDP cohosted a briefing in connection with the release of the NIF research report on “Money and Politics.”

The briefing at Montgomery College was one of four held over the course of three days.

The audience included officeholders, citizens, teachers, and school administrators as well as representatives of the media and local civic organizations. Follow-up requests from participants indicate that the briefing had an impact on both newcomers to NIF as well as those who had some previous experience with them. “We are doing work with people we invited to the briefing,” said Scott. “They came here for one thing and found another.”

Local officeholders, for instance, “found out that things are happening at the college, that it’s an untapped resource,” said Scott. “We’ve been asked to facilitate things as a result.”

Walker agrees that the briefings had an impact on the wider community. “Local political organizers and parties continue to stay in touch with us about continuing deliberative practices,” he said. Nothing concrete has developed yet from these contacts, but “[the briefing] gave us a connection to a group of people. It generated social capital. Without the briefing, people would not have been in touch with this kind of practice.”

“Briefings are a good way to introduce the concept of deliberation,” said Paul Taylor, former executive director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns. “It’s a concept that needs to get out there, and this is a great way to do it. The more people learn about the process, the more attractive it may be.”

Taylor attended an earlier briefing held at the Offices of Common Cause in Washington. He was particularly interested in a finding that was “right down the line” with the Alliance’s advocacy work. Forum participants supported the idea of giving free airtime to political candidates. Taylor subsequently wrote an article for The Political Standard, the Alliance for Better Campaign’s newsletter, highlighting this finding (“Citizens, Meeting in Community Forums Around the Country, See Free Air Time as Best Way to Check Money in Politics,” The Political Standard, November/December 2001).

The Montgomery College forum connected the Office of Equity and Diversity with the Commission on Women and the National Organization of Women. These three groups are now working to frame an issue around the status of women in Montgomery County. Although Scott acknowledges that it’s “a slow-building process,” the Montgomery College event also led to collaborative efforts with the Commission on Aging. She says the process takes “good word-of-mouth promotion.”
The briefing also led to a fruitful relationship between CCLDP and an area middle school. Gayle Starr, assistant principal at Roberto Clemente Middle School in Germantown, Maryland, was familiar with NIF before attending the briefing. She had recently participated in a forum, and her husband is acting director of CCLDP. But the briefing she attended offered another approach to NIF that appealed to her. In addition to the “Money and Politics” report, it included a presentation about NIF in the Classroom.

After the briefing, Starr persuaded school officials and teachers to hold a forum on public schools with a group of eighth graders and their parents. The title of the forum was “Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?” According to Starr “the kids ate it up [and] asked, ‘When can we do another one?’” Two subsequent forums were held, one for a group of seventh and eighth graders that...
“Students say … they feel as if they are being treated as adults, that they’ve been heard, and that their opinions are respected.”

Students have responded well. “They feel empowered by the forums,” said Starr. “Students say, for the first time, they feel as if they are being treated as adults, that they’ve been heard, and that their opinions are respected.”

The students, said Scott, “have begun the process of cultivating a public voice. They expect they will have a voice. They expect they will be heard.”

A recent incident underscores this observation. After a confrontation between two groups of students — one primarily African American and the other primarily Hispanic — Starr decided to suspend the leaders of each group. A student, however, pointed out that suspension would not solve the problem. “He said, ‘What we need to do is talk it out.’” Starr agreed, and the two groups came together to work through their problems.

“Some of those children who sat around the table with me, I never would have thought they were getting anything out of the forums,” said Starr. But the practice of deliberation at the school forums had clearly left its imprint. “The students went through the process of naming, framing, and deliberating about the issue,” said Starr. “They identified the problem and the options and searched for solutions. They took behaviors from the forum into the discussion.” In fact, one student, after it was all over, compared the experience to a forum.

“By the time they left, they were shaking hands,” said Starr. “They felt as if they had come up with a solution they could live with. They felt heard, and they felt it was in their hands. This was a problem they created, they had to come up with a solution, and they did.”

In addition to the forums in school, Starr also convened a community forum on terrorism right after the war on Iraq began. About 30 people attended, and most of them spoke English as a second language. They were not typical forum participants, and they were reluctant to talk at first. At the end, however, “you couldn’t shut them up,” said Starr, and they asked if there would be another forum the following week.

Scott, who has been working with the middle school over the last year and a half, says the NIF process has “changed the culture” of the school and the way administrators and teachers engage students. “It’s been a very interesting journey,” she said. Some teachers and administrators “didn’t believe that students brought enough intellectual or maturity currency to engage with them. They found out otherwise. Students really want to engage in an intellectual kind of way.”

When Starr first proposed holding a forum, the chairman of the world studies department was reluctant. According to Starr, “she did not think children at that level were capable of such lofty discussions.” Now, several forums later, “she’s somewhat of a zealot. She really believes in the process.”

Walker uses these experiences at the Roberto Clemente Middle School as an example when talking to people about the value of deliberation. “It’s an opportunity to show how this goes somewhere,” he says.
Erskine College Hosts a Legislative Orientation

By Virginia York and Jay West

On January 13, 2003, the Drummond Center at Erskine College sponsored an orientation for newly elected South Carolina state legislators. The event was held at the Capitol City Club in Columbia, South Carolina, on the day prior to the opening of the state legislature. The first session was meant to introduce newcomers to some of what they might expect as legislators. Governor David Beasley, Representative James Smith, Senator Jim Lander, and Representative Jim Harrison provided witty and wise observations on the subject. In the second session, Scott Clemons, a former Florida legislator; Virginia York, a fellow of the Citizen Leadership Institute at Gulf Coast Community College; and Rick Stuart, the chairman of the Bay County Chamber of Commerce Redistricting Committee, discussed the use of deliberative forums in helping to promote a better understanding of difficult political issues.

Clemons began by discussing the dilemma a legislator faces in considering whether to act as a trustee or a delegate (John Cavanaugh’s article provides a good analysis of these roles). He explored the consequences and tradeoffs of each choice and then described his own experiences as a representative when he overcame his skepticism and tried a deliberative approach that he had first encountered at a Public Policy Workshop put on by the National Issues Forums. When the issue of tort reform was placed on the legislative agenda, Clemons enlisted support from the Citizen Leadership Institute to convene a forum on the topic at a community college. This was not a usual town meeting, which is often adversarial.

Left to right: Jay West, Erskine vice president; Senator Jim Lander; Governor David Beasley; Representative James Smith; and Representative Jim Harrison.
Participants used a National Issues Forums book to set the agenda, and skilled moderators guided the discussion on approaches to tort reform. The audience did not debate the issue, but instead they deliberated about how Florida might address tort reform. The state representative was provided with a safe space where he could listen to his constituents wrestle with a complex issue before he deliberated about it with his peers in Tallahassee.

Virginia York then described the deliberative forum process and how the habit of deliberation between policymakers and citizens has matured in Bay County, Florida, over the last decade. York explained that the local college is the annual site for a deliberative forum before the legislative session begins. Representatives and senators sponsor these forums and listen to citizens consider what direction the state should seek in current bills before the legislature. The forum provides a venue for elected officials to begin a new session with a clearer perspective on the values and concerns of the people in their districts. Senator Charlie Clary has recently expanded these popular forums to include all of the legislators representing Florida’s panhandle region.

And finally, Rich Stuart related how Bay County, Florida, used a deliberative forum to frame the issue of redistricting. A citizens’ forum was convened to discuss the issue in relation to the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. The findings were presented at a state legislative committee hearing, which resulted in an agreement by Republicans and Democrats on the best direction for Bay County in redrawing district lines. Stuart noted that the citizens in the forum came to realize that both political parties had a shared perspective on the future implications of redistricting and wanted what was best for all of the citizens of Bay County.

The South Carolinians who attended the orientation raised some tough questions about how the process changed behavior and led to nonpartisan cooperation. They also wanted to know about the roles of the press and lobbyists and about the reactions within the political parties to these deliberative efforts. Clemons acknowledged that forums do not always work perfectly and that they could be messy in practice.

This straightforward statement gave added credibility to the discussions. Participants came away with a better understanding of how forums can provide a safe place for policymakers and of how citizens, by struggling among themselves over some tough issues in these forums, come to realize the difficulties that their legislator encounters in working with his or her peers.

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There is a shared expectation in this country that citizens should have the opportunity to tell government officials what they think about what the government is doing and how well it is doing it. Government of the people, by the people, and for the people requires no less. Voting may be the preeminent act by which citizens communicate their concerns but a number of other means, such as opinion polls, provide a more frequent and varied sounding of the citizen voice. However, as readers well understand, there is a big difference between telling politicians or pollsters what you believe and actually doing the hard work needed to make a change. And it may be that this work is hardest when it comes to dealing with government bureaucracies.

On the one hand, hearings, public-comment periods, and other forms of citizen involvement are commonplace requirements for government agencies. The idea that agencies dealing with public health issues, transportation systems, or the environment will have input from citizens is widely accepted. Such involvement is thought to have the potential to improve government effectiveness, enhance accountability, and increase responsiveness to the public’s concerns. But, on the other hand, what participants actually experience tends to fall far short of real engagement. As Dan Kemmis remarks, “Very little hearing goes on at public hearings.” This goes both ways of course — just as citizens may feel that officials only pay lip service to their concerns, officials often have reasons to believe that some participants are more interested in venting their feelings than in creating a dialogue. And so the extent to which citizen participation actually results in programs that are responsive to the public remains an open question. At the Kettering Foundation, we want to know what might be learned from research that focuses on the engagement of a public in the work of government agencies.

Engagement involves a long-term commitment to the cultivation of civic skills and habits — like naming and framing issues for deliberation, convening public dialogues, and building networks. It often requires participants to develop new ways of thinking and acting. Engagement requires time and the commitment of resources that are at a premium for both agencies and communities. Public engagement with government agencies leaves open the possibility that administration may be less efficient, at least in the short run. Services that people want may be provided less quickly and new costs will be incurred.

But an engaged citizenry can provide officials with richer understandings of problems, a sense of the range of permissible actions, and ultimately the public will that is required to implement policy decisions that work for a broad mix of people with varied interests and perspectives. For citizens and agencies to take the risks associated with engagement, they need to know how what they do will make a difference. Hearing a public voice is hard work and translating the public’s concerns into institutional contexts can be exceedingly difficult. If engagement is to become a habit, citizens will need to know that their work adds up to more than “comment,” and agencies will need to know that they have permission to act as they think most appropriate, even if their actions are not approved by everyone. These are not small challenges in a civic culture where citizens have low levels of confidence in their governmental institutions.

As the obstacles to engagement are many, it makes sense to take a thoughtful look at some of the experiments that attempt to bring agencies and citizens into a more public and deliberative mode of engagement. Much might be learned from a careful reading of what is (and is not) working.
In addition to weighing the scientific and economic data, committee members decided to use a deliberative process to get input from citizens.

Consider the following examples from Virginia, Ohio, and California.

In 2001, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) decided to investigate the feasibility of rerouting an increasingly busy and dangerous section of highway in southwest Virginia. Relocating the highway would affect the landscape and economy of the town of Wytheville, and local residents working with the mayor and city manager formed a citizens’ committee to advise VDOT in its decision-making process. This committee, in association with Virginia Tech scholars familiar with public policy, decided to engage the entire town in a process to inform the decisions that VDOT and the citizens would make. An issue addressing the future of the town was framed for public discussion, and numerous dialogues were held with stakeholders including students, lawyers, business owners, hospital and local government officials, engineers, and environmental scientists. Through these dialogues the citizens of Wytheville generated valuable information for informing VDOT decisions, and they began to identify actions that they might take as a community. While VDOT has recently suspended its relocations study, the groundwork for a rich engagement between citizens and a major government agency have been laid.

When the smog level in Columbus, Ohio, began approaching EPA limits, the city’s health department decided to form a steering committee to make recommendations concerning what to do. The committee included a range of science, health, industry, and nonprofit groups. In addition to weighing the scientific and economic data, committee members decided to use a deliberative process to get input from citizens. An issue was framed for public deliberation; numerous forums were held; and reports on the outcomes of the deliberations were produced and delivered to the project staff charged with advising the health department. Several steering committee members reported that their support for the recommendations had been influenced by the deliberations. The outcomes of this public engagement should affect the health department’s approach to the problem, and the deliberations have certainly had an impact on how the steering committee understands the public’s concerns about smog.

With the passage of Proposition 10 in 1998, Californians decided to commit a portion of the state tax revenue from tobacco sales to early childhood development programs. The money is to be distributed to independent county commissions, each of which is required to have citizen involvement in setting priorities for spending the funds. In eight counties, grant-making foundations, nonprofit organizations, and citizens came together under the auspices of the Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families to organize dialogues at the community level. The project used a deliberative approach to making recommendations for using the tobacco-tax revenue. As reported by Scott London,
an early evaluation of the project concluded that it had resulted in both a more inclusive planning process and that it had “deepened county commissioners' understanding and appreciation of the value of citizen participation.”

These are just a few of the efforts that administrative agencies have made recently to engage a deliberative public. They illustrate how a more public practice of politics may be introduced into the interactions among government agencies and citizens. This kind of engagement can strengthen the practice of democratic politics in many ways.

Engagement contributes to the legitimacy of the administrative process and the durability of decisions taken. It can be used to develop a broader ownership of the problem that an agency is attempting to address. Such expansion of ownership may increase the range of actors involved and the scope of the actions taken. A fuller understanding of problems and the responsibilities that a variety of actors have in dealing with them may enhance public accountability and develop the public will to go along with an agency’s decisions, even if they are not to everyone’s preference.

Public engagement also creates “public knowledge” that informs both administrators and citizens. This knowledge comes from considering how a broad range of people see the issues and what they value and what they are (and are not) willing to do. Such public knowledge can complement the technical knowledge possessed by experts, and it can inform the decisions people make about how they will address the problems at hand.

And finally, public engagement may increase the collective capacity to address common problems and create a stronger public culture both among citizens and within agencies. Engagement complements the civic work that many citizens already practice in their communities. This work involves people in naming and framing issues in public terms, convening and moderating public deliberations, shaping specific actions and learning civic practices. Involvement with these practices teaches and reinforces skills and habits of active citizenship that strengthen public life.

The nature of many problems, especially the “wicked problems,” that public administrators must address is such that engagement with a public may yield programs and projects that produce better results. Thus, inquiry into the practice of engagement between the public and government agencies seems to be an especially promising arena for the Kettering Foundation’s research. Given the range of agencies that already have engagement requirements or that are interested in enhancing the engagement practices they use, research in this area could have wide impact.

Much of the actual practice of democratic politics goes on beyond Election Day and outside of the legislative arena. It involves the tasks of building and administering the programs and projects that have been legislated. This is space where communities and governments interact on an ongoing basis, and it is the space where citizens often practice public politics. This is where they organize to address the problems they face in the communities where they live and work. Thus, research on engagement between citizens and agencies builds on work the foundation has already started.

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Bureaucracy — with its rigid rules and procedures, impenetrable forms, experts, waiting lines, and drab concrete buildings — strikes many as the very antithesis of civic participation and deliberation. Yet in areas as diverse as public education, public safety, environmental regulation, and city planning, officials are opening up the machinery of government to genuine citizen involvement.

Unlike most readers of Connections, these officials usually have no great love for civic engagement for its own sake. Instead, they turn to citizens for help in addressing problems they cannot resolve on their own. Some of these problems arise from heated political conflicts in which opposing sides effectively stalemate the policy process. Or official agencies, because of ineptitude or corruption, may suffer legitimacy deficits and need to invite citizen participation to regain the public trust. And sometimes, complex and “wicked” public problems simply outstrip the capabilities of public agencies and leave them incapable of handling the tasks assigned to them.

In general, two kinds of response have been advocated to these situations. Some favor replacing the broken parts of government with private sector, market-based solutions such as vouchers and privatization. Others, notably the “reinventing government” cadres of the Clinton administration, have prescribed new public management techniques to cure these ills. But more recently, a less-noticed and potentially more significant response to these challenges has emerged. Innovations in democratic engagement have helped to mend political rifts, restore legitimacy and public trust in government, and tackle wicked urban problems. Recent experiences from New York City and Chicago illustrate how complex issues or crises in official agencies can create opportunities to deepen public deliberation and participation in the very bureaucratic institutions that seem so inhospitable to such practices.

The City Listens: Repairing the Public Trust

Few urban planning processes have received more scrutiny than the effort to rebuild lower Manhattan after terrorist attacks killed almost 3,000 and destroyed several acres of commercial and residential property on September 11, 2001. While most development projects draw the interest of only narrow circles of businessmen, planners, and residents, the structures that replace the World Trade Center towers will have to respect the pain and hope of not just New Yorkers but those of all Americans as well. And in addition, the statement made by what is built there will have global significance as a symbolic response to international terrorism.

In the official planning process, two regional agencies — the Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation — were charged with leading the effort to rebuild the World Trade Center site. But multiple and conflicting goals and visions — such as commercial versus residential interests, speedy reconstruction versus deliberate and inclusive consultation, and the desires of the families and friends for the victims to be appropriately honored — made it impossible for these agencies to proceed by using routine processes.

The two development agencies joined with several civic organizations to sponsor open public deliberations about the future of lower Manhattan. They brought the Washington, D.C., organization AmericaSpeaks to orchestrate what would be a one-day electronic town hall meeting.
Thirty-one votes and straw polls were recorded throughout the day. This technology allowed a form of public deliberation to take place that combined the benefits of small-group discussion — in which every single person can speak, exchange views, and explore issues in depth, with the power of numbers — thousands of people gathered in a single place to be heard.

Much of the discussion focused on six plans for the site that a contractor had drawn up for the two agencies. As they considered each plan, participants gave voice to several deep and widely shared criticisms. Most of the participants felt that the plans lacked architectural courage, that they emphasized commercial interests at the expense of all other priorities, that they failed to address serious concerns about the quality of residential neighborhood life, and that the most important priority — designing an appropriate memorial to those who died — was left as an afterthought in the official process.

Perhaps because the event was widely covered by regional and national media, officials had no choice but to respond to these criticisms. The agencies in charge reduced the amount of commercial space required in the...
replacement scheme by 40 percent, and they commissioned a new set of architectural and land use plans that would incorporate the concerns that were raised at the Listening to the City event.

On December 18, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation revealed nine new plans. “Unlike the initial group of proposals released by the agency last July,” wrote New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp, “these plans throb with energy, imagination, intelligence and the sheer thrill of contributing to a battered city’s rebirth.” It was less clear, however, how well the plans responded to participants’ calls for mixed-use neighborhoods and affordable housing. Still, all sides claimed that these new plans resulted from, were and therefore in some measure legitimated by, the innovative public process at the Jacob Javitz Center. While a public deliberative process was not used to make the final determination of the architectural plan, it is clear that the Listening to the City event had a significant influence on shaping the overall decision making.

Public deliberation … can also be used to create partnerships that enable officials and individuals in a community to solve problems that neither could solve alone.

Community Policing and Public Education: Wicked Problems

Public deliberation cannot only confer legitimacy on official actions, it can also be used to create partnerships that enable officials and individuals in a community to solve problems that neither could solve alone. In the late 1980s and mid-1990s, the public school system and police department of Chicago reorganized themselves in ways that created substantial avenues of citizen participation and deliberation at the neighborhood level.

In 1988, in the aftermath of a long teachers’ strike and on the heels of blistering evaluations of the quality of the Chicago public school system, parent and civic organizations turned to democratic participation as a strategy for education reform. The Illinois Assembly devolved control over many school decisions to an elected council (at each school) composed of six parents, two teachers, two community representatives, and the principal. These councils are empowered to hire and fire the school’s principal and allocate discretionary funds in school budgets. Importantly, councils develop — ideally through deliberative processes — medium-term school improvement plans that lay out individualized visions for each school, analyses of strengths and weaknesses, and strategies for utilizing capacities and overcoming liabilities.

In 1994, the Chicago Police Department independently embarked on a similar course of reform. Realizing that many conventional strategies were ineffective in addressing chronic urban crime problems, police reformers and

Participants engage one another in discussions around the table about what should be done to remember and rebuild.
community organizations pursued a series of organizational reforms to enable the department to engage in neighborhood-level “problem-oriented policing.” For example, police officers were assigned to specific neighborhoods for extended periods so that they could learn about the area’s distinctive characteristics and challenges. Monthly community meetings are now held in each of the city’s 280 police beats. In these meetings, residents meet with police to discuss their area’s crime and safety problems, to agree on priority issues, and to jointly develop strategies to address those issues. Similar to the school improvement plans, these neighborhood deliberations are captured in “beat plans” that become mission documents for police officers and residents who are involved. Between 5,000 and 6,000 residents attend community policing meetings across Chicago each month.

The participation of ordinary Chicagoans in the workaday operations of these two crucial agencies may offer several important benefits. Residents and parents, because they are on the receiving end of official actions, may know more about what’s working and what’s not than the street-level officials serving them. By developing strategies and action plans through deliberation, novel ideas may emerge from the interaction among professional and resident perspectives. Residents may bring capacities and resources that are unavailable to police and educators. Finally, regular and structured interactions can create channels of accountability in which citizens monitor local officials and press them to do their jobs.

Has injecting citizen participation and deliberation into the schools and police helped these agencies or the citizens that rely on them? Test scores have improved and crime rates have dropped in Chicago since the reforms were instituted. But it would be premature to attribute that success to these democratic initiatives because other cities without these reforms have also experienced similar improvements. Still, there are many neighborhood schools and police beats where collaborations between local officials — police, principals, and teachers — and Chicago residents have yielded innovative solutions to complex problems.

But these programs are not without their blemishes. Participation requires officials to share power, and officials sometimes resist what they consider to be interference from citizens and community organizations. For much of the 1990s, for example, the central management of the school system fought trench wars with many local school councils over the details of local school governance. In community policing, tensions between the department and a community-based group that was central to the original reform caused a break that greatly weakened the role of civic organizations.

Conclusion

These developments in New York and Chicago are good examples of how some public agencies are opening up to allow citizen deliberation and participation. They are typical in both their promise and incompleteness. Engaging ordinary citizens in empowered deliberations about the operations of government can increase legitimacy, bring crucial local knowledge to bear on public action, add resources, and enhance public accountability. However, democratizing initiatives often encounter resistance from officials who are reluctant to share authority or subject themselves to additional public scrutiny. Despite these difficulties, the administrative processes of government can be a promising site for civic deliberation and engagement. Deepening democracy within the state itself is the most direct way to ensure that public deliberation reaches beyond discourse to generate action and change.

Archon Fung is an assistant professor of public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.


“What things do you think need to be done in this room? Because it's our room. You know we all live here.” — Mrs. Kay, 3rd grade teacher

Interviewer: What is school like for kids that are smart in school?
Kevin: You really want me to say it?
Interviewer: Yes, sure. I'm really interested in your ideas.
Kevin: Sorta like heaven.

Interviewer: What is school like for 'not-so-smart'? What is that like?
Kevin: Boy! [sigh] Not so smart? They feel like they can do better. They don’t know how.
Interviewer: They can do what better?
Kevin: Their work and stuff. They don’t know how.
Interviewer: But they don’t know bow: What is school like for them?
Kevin: Well, actually one of my friends in school is just a bump. Kinda like a bump, like they all like to drop out because they don’t know too much. They feel like they don’t belong in school. That they don’t know.

— Kevin, 4th grade student, ranked low by his teacher.

Considerations of power in the educational system are rarely discussed in public conversations about schools. Reaching Higher: The Power of Expectations in Schooling provides just the right opening for such a conversation. Rhona Weinstein has had the great forethought to draw heavily on interviews with children, and a full third of her book is devoted to lessons learned from children. By not changing their words, she gives us an intimate, innocent, hopeful, and heart-wrenching glimpse into the expectations of these young people.

In the Introduction, called appropriately enough “Reframing the Debate,” Weinstein raises important questions regarding power and prejudice. She quotes Gordon Allport’s definition of prejudice as reflective of man’s “normal and natural tendency to form generalizations, concepts, categories, whose content represents an oversimplification of his world of experience.” Because we are prone to categorize and simplify the world around us, and validate these constructs by our association with people much like us, we can create self-fulfilling prophecies. One of the key questions this book sets out to address is “Can the beliefs and actions of powerful others actually cause outcomes that confirm the original prophecy?”

Weinstein calls for us to begin to talk together more deeply about the quality of thinking that is taking place in our schools. She wants us to broaden our conversations with one another to draw in the concerns and ideas of the public ‘about the conditions that nurture intellectual accomplishment...’ She urges us “to celebrate ideas and processes of discovery, and to chart the uneven, the messy, and even the serendipitous in creative efforts. Further, we must change our ways of teaching to highlight active learning, whereby students take on the roles of historian, writer, and scientist as they learn the process of doing scholarship, not simply changing the facts of scholarship.”

While promoting positive outcomes for all students may seem to be an unimaginable task, this book takes us much farther down the road of understanding what questions to ask. David Mathews’ book Is There a Public for Public Schools? finds a companion here. Sharon Robinson, former assistant secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, gave the following response to an imaginary scenario in which a graduate student was asking for ideas for a dissertation. “The question I guess that I have is can we really tolerate having all students learning? Is the principle that all students can learn and live productive and fulfilled lives so threatening to some basic aspects of our identity and fears as individuals and as a society that we just can’t accept it? Because I am wondering what’s keeping us from getting there.”

Reaching Higher: The Power of Expectations in Schooling is a welcome springboard for us to take up such questions.

— Ruth Yellow Hawk, co-director, Indigenous Issues Forums
Alice Bobrysheva was there at the beginning, in 1959, when Norman Cousins proposed what became the Dartmouth Conference, and she has been a constant presence ever since. For more than 40 years now, the Dartmouth Conference and its offshoots have brought Russians, Americans, and others together to reduce conflict. The all-too-slim volume under review here is her account of the beginning of this sustained effort to create a modicum of understanding between two peoples possessed with the ability to destroy the world. It was clearly written with joy, and it gives us an important glimpse into the world inhabited by the participants at those early conferences.

Bobrysheva came to Dartmouth as an interpreter for the Soviet Peace Committee, an organization whose purpose had less to do with peace than with spreading Soviet influence. She did this even though, like many of her contemporaries, her life had been touched by Stalin’s terror. Her father-in-law had been arrested and spent a decade in the prison camps, and three of her uncles were shot by the regime. Her experiences remind us of the great difficulties experienced under Soviet rule, but in her memoir of the conferences what particularly stands out is her perspective on the participants, especially the Americans.

In June 1959, she organized the meeting between the leadership of the Peace Committee and Norman Cousins at which Cousins made the proposal that led to the first Dartmouth Conference a little more than a year later. In many ways these early conferences were the most significant. The kind of dialogue that took place there had rarely taken place before, and these discussions set the stage for the conferences that followed. Yet we still have too little information, particularly from the Russian side, about what took place then. We have documents that give us a sense of what happened at the conference table, but we have almost nothing about what happened between the sessions. And as anyone who has taken part in a Dartmouth Conference will tell you, what happens between the formal sessions is often what is most important.

Bobrysheva is able to fill in some of these gaps. Probably the greatest service she does is in giving us a better understanding of the humanity of these historical figures. Judged solely by his biography and his pronouncements, someone like Aleksandr Korneichuk — a Soviet playwright lauded by Stalin — can appear as simply a cardboard cutout of an apparatchik, a mere instrument of Soviet power. But Bobrysheva brings him to life, recalling the memorable discussion between Korneichuk and George Kennan where she served as interpreter. She also recounts the time when a famous Soviet film director oversaw the making of Pelmeni in Odessa. She provides vignettes of American participants as well, most notably David Rockefeller and, of course, Norman Cousins.

Cousins, as Bobrysheva shows, was a fascinating character. At first she thought him to be unimpressive and shy, but she soon found him to be a good speaker and a skilled raconteur. He was an enthusiast by nature, and Bobrysheva captures his spirit; indeed, in some respects she shares it. She also gives us a memorable portrait of someone who did not take part in the conferences even though he shared a great deal of responsibility for creating them. The first time Bobrysheva met Nikita Khrushchev, she served as the interpreter for a meeting with W.E.B. DuBois. Although he was tired and ill tempered in that conversation, Khrushchev was “a different person” the next time she met him, and his humanity and charm come through in her depictions of subsequent encounters.

Norman Cousins wrote about the early Dartmouth conferences in articles in the *Saturday Review* not long after they occurred. Filled with Cousins’ fervor, these articles captured the spirit of the conferences as the Americans saw them. Now, 40 years later, Alice Bobrysheva has done the same for the Soviet side. Her memoir is overdue and fascinating. It is thoroughly enjoyable and makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of those unusual and important early dialogues.

— James Vorhees

**Thanks for the Memories: My years with the Dartmouth Conference**
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