What Does the Kettering Foundation Do?

Research
What Kind of Research?

The Kind Inventors Do
A Legacy of Invention

A Mechanical Invention
In 1908, Charles F. Kettering began experimenting with one of his most important inventions, the electric automobile self-starter. Throughout his life, Kettering sought to encourage innovative thinking on all kinds of problems.

A Political Invention
One of the first political inventions: clay ballots, dating from the 5th century in Athens, Greece.

More Political Inventions
Other political inventions include the National Issues Forums issue guides, which are “self-starters” for deliberative decision making.
What Is the Focus of Our Research?
Understanding What It Takes to Make Democracy Work as It Should
The foundation’s research suggests that when democracy is working as it should, these three elements are aligned:

- **Citizens** who are civically engaged and can make sound choices about their future;

- **Communities** of citizens acting together to address common problems; and

- **Institutions** with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening the work of citizens.
Troubling Trends
Weakening Democracy
Sidelining Citizens
Although there are exemplary cases of collective efforts by citizens to improve the well-being of all, and despite an awareness of civic duties and responsibilities for one another, THE CITIZENRY—THE CONSTITUTIONALLY SOVEREIGN PUBLIC—has become sidelined—and has sometimes sidelined itself—resulting in people being relegated to the margins of our republic.

The sidelining, coupled with changes in the nongovernmental arena, make it difficult for people to have the influence they would like to have in determining their future.

Many Americans have lost confidence in governments. Our schools are leaving too many children behind. We are overwhelmed by economic forces that seem beyond our control. Our role in the world is less clear.

Efforts to act together on these challenges often degenerate into partisan polarization. Still, citizens hold on to the belief that we should and can do better.

The foundation’s objective is to provide insights into what marginalizes the citizenry and what people might do to strengthen their ability to shape their future.
Problems Behind the Problems

Challenges to Democracy
Hasty Decisions

Having a voice that counts takes more than just expressing an opinion; the voice of the people has to be responsible. The country faces numerous contentious issues and citizens are awash in information and conflicting opinions about their choices. As a result, the public’s response may be based more on first opinions and hasty reactions to inflammatory rhetoric than on shared and reflective judgment.

Disagreements

People want a stronger hand in shaping the future, but that takes work. Working together to produce things that improve the future is difficult because people disagree about the right thing to do. People don’t have to agree, but they can’t be immobilized by their differences. Every community often has untapped assets or civic resources that can be used; these have to be identified and committed.

Mutual Distrust

Citizens have lost confidence in almost all major institutions, governmental and nongovernmental. Many doubt that those who represent them are truly representative or competent. What’s more, the distrust is mutual. Professionals in our institutions are frustrated by not being able to engage citizens productively. Consequently, institutions do not have the complementary reinforcement from the work of citizens that could make them more effective.

More than the “Usual Suspects”

Most problems in a democratic society can’t be solved without substantial civic involvement. For example, citizens believe that too many children aren’t being educated as they should be but schools can’t do the job alone. Many institutions and civic organizations can help the next generation learn.
What Are We Learning?

Democratic Practices Used in the Work of Citizens
Democratic practices are ways citizens can work together—even when they disagree—to solve shared problems. These practices aren’t techniques; they are all forms of learning.

**Naming problems** to reflect the things people consider valuable and hold dear, not expert information alone.

**Framing issues** for decision making that not only takes into account what people value but also fairly lays out all the major options for acting—that is, with full recognition of the advantages and disadvantages of each option.

**Making decisions deliberatively** to move opinions from first impressions to more shared and reflective judgment.

**Identifying and committing civic resources**, assets that often go unrecognized and unused.

**Organizing civic actions** so they complement one another, which makes the whole of people’s efforts more than the sum of the parts.

**Learning together** all along the way to assess results and keep up civic momentum.
How Can Citizens Put Democratic Practices to Work?

Asking Ordinary Questions Can Reveal Extraordinary Opportunities
Opportunities for democratic practice grow out of ordinary questions people ask one another when something threatens their collective well-being, such as:

How does this problem affect you and your family?

What do you think is the right thing to do?

What might be the consequences? If there are negative consequences to what you propose, do you think we should still do it?

What are our options?

Who else do we need to solve the problem?

What resources could we use?

Can we support one another?

WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?
Where Are Opportunities to Do Our Work as Citizens?

Start in the Political Wetlands
Scientists now recognize the role of wetlands in the larger ecological system. Kettering’s research has found that the “political wetlands”—the everyday practices of citizens working to solve shared problems—are similarly essential to a healthy political ecosystem.
How Does the Foundation Do Its Work?

Through Joint Learning Exchanges
As a research foundation, Kettering Foundation works primarily through joint learning exchanges with citizen organizations, communities, and institutions that are experimenting with ways to strengthen democracy. Those involved in these workshops trade their experiences for insights that Kettering has collected from past exchanges with a wide range of groups from around the world.

Joint learning exchanges focus on solving particular problems that all participants in the workshops have a stake in addressing, even if they are not from research institutions (and most aren’t). Preliminary exchanges may test to see whether there is, in fact, a shared interest in a problem. Or workshop participants may assemble information from a number of sources in order to get a more complete account of a troubling issue or an unrealized potential. Other exchanges are based on comparing experiments to solve fundamental problems of, or intrinsic to, democracy.

These experiments may or may not be successful; the objective of an exchange isn’t to praise or blame but rather to share what participants struggle with and hope to learn more about. Insights from past exchanges and other Kettering research will be on the table to test against participants’ experiences. Some exchanges can be completed in one meeting; others may require gathering over several years.
Who Does the Kettering Foundation Work With?

A Network
Where Does Kettering Exchange Research Around the World

Countries in dark blue are those with whom Kettering has exchanged research.
Where Does Kettering Exchange Research?
Who Does the Kettering Foundation Work For?

Citizens Who Want a Stronger Hand in Shaping Their Collective Future
How can we come together as a community to rebuild our community?

Hurricane Katrina left residents of Gulf Coast communities struggling with basic questions about their future.
The most important:

Photos are from *In the Path of the Storms: Bayou La Batre, Coden, and the Alabama Coast*, Frye Gaillard, Sheila Hagler, and Peggy Denniston (Pepple Hill Books/Auburn University, Auburn, AL, with the University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, AL, 2008).
The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental research foundation rooted in the American tradition of invention.

The foundation does not make grants.