

A **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP** Report
on Citizens in Democracy

CAN PUBLIC LIFE BE REGENERATED?

by David Mathews



ABOUT THE **KETTERING FOUNDATION**

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

ABOUT THE **COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP**

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

This report is based on a presentation by David Mathews at the September 5, 1996, Independent Sector conference on issues of community, civil society, and governance.

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FOREWORD

This paper was written in 1996 for an Independent Sector conference. At that time, the term *public life* was used to distinguish political life from other kinds of collective living. This was intended to counter a tendency to conflate largely social phenomena (attending a picnic) with more political activities (building a playground to give children a safer place to play).

If I were writing this paper today, I likely would title it *Can Democracy Be Regenerated?* The Kettering Foundation’s research has led to a distinctive understanding of democratic politics that puts citizens at the center. By citizens, we mean people who join with others to produce things that serve our common well-being. As our research evolved, we came to use “making democracy work as it should” as a central, organizing theme. We define democracy, at its most fundamental, as a system of governance in which power comes from citizens who generate their power by working together to combat common problems—beginning in their communities—and by working to shape their common future, both through what they do with one another and through their institutions.

David Mathews

April 4, 2016



THESE DAYS WE SEEM willing to consider the possibility that democracies need something more than written constitutions, multiple parties, free elections, and representative governments. They also depend on a strong public life, a rich depository of social capital, a sense of community, and a healthy civil society.¹

Now comes the obvious follow-up: Is it possible to “reweave the social fabric,” to generate social capital where it is lacking, to build a sense of community in a fragmented, polarized city, to invigorate public life at a time when many Americans are seeking security in private sanctuaries?² No one knows. Maybe a democratic civil society takes centuries to develop, building layer upon layer like a coral reef. Maybe the places we admire most result more from happenstance than we would like to admit.

These reservations notwithstanding, we do have cases where a civil order changed its character in a relatively short period of time. Modern Spanish democracy emerged from Franco’s fascism in only a few decades, according to Víctor Pérez-Díaz.³ And Vaughn Grisham Jr. reports that Tupelo, Mississippi, changed its civic character in roughly the same amount of time, the result being that the poorest city in the poorest county in the poorest state of the union became a progressive community with a per capita income close to that of Atlanta.⁴

So maybe—just maybe—it is possible for towns and cities, perhaps even counties and states, to change their politics. Maybe public life can be regenerated. I say “regenerated” because I am assuming that some vestige or memory of public life exists almost everywhere. I think modern public life is rooted in the earliest institutions and norms created for collective survival. So my instincts tell me that strengthening public life is best accomplished by following the advice of J. Herman Blake, a very effective community organizer, whose practice is to “build on what grows.” With that as a predicate, I want to go on to the question of how people might change the character of their civil order.

There is some urgency surrounding this question; I sense a danger in trying to strengthen public life with only a thin concept of the public, civil, or communal to guide the way. That would create a problem akin to trying to paint a barn red without clearly distinguishing red from pink or orange. There is a tendency to take descriptions of cities with a rich reservoir of social capital and try to replicate their features. If they have a lot of festivals, why not generate public life with a pig roast? (Actually, a foundation in Europe was asked to do just that.) But are community barbecues and festivals the product of something that happens prior to the events, of some precondition that we haven’t been able to identify? Are we in danger of mistaking the

symptom for the cause? If we do, our strategies for building civil society will be the equivalent of dress-for-success strategies that tell us we can get ahead in the world by wearing the right tie or dress.

DEVELOPING A CONCEPT OF PUBLIC LIFE

Here is what I will try to do in this paper:

Drawing on what the Kettering Foundation is learning from its research and observations, and from studies others have done, I will propose a way of thinking about public life, or a paradigm.⁵ Kettering has been developing a hypothesis about what public life is in order to have a better idea about how to strengthen it. The way we understand the structure and function of a public suggests ways to regenerate public life. Since no one knows the answer to the question of whether such life can be renewed, surely the thing to do is to spell out our assumptions, which can be tested by experience.

The Influence of Studies of Social Capital and Community Development

We aren't making empirical claims when we develop a hypothesis. Yet our experiences influence our imagination of what might be. For 15 years, Kettering has been observing public life in communities from Grand Rapids,

Michigan, to El Paso, Texas, and from Newark, New Jersey, to Orange County, California. We have also commissioned independent research on public life. And we have been influenced by studies like Pérez-Díaz's on Spain, Grisham's on Tupelo, Robert Putnam's on north central Italy, and that of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development on the difference between dying and prospering rural communities, among others.⁶

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Putnam and Grisham reinforced our own impressions that the "soft side" of the social order or an intangible such as social capital is critical to public life. Social capital is said to consist of networks of civic associations, along with norms of reciprocity and social trust, that

result in high levels of voluntary cooperation. This capital is generated where public life is strong, that is, where people are involved in public matters and in relationships that run horizontally (among equals) instead of vertically (between haves and have-nots). As you know, while Putnam found these characteristics in some areas in Italy, they were noticeably absent in others. People in the “uncivil” areas did not participate in either local politics or social organizations, and their relationships tended to be hierarchical, with the have-nots dependent on the haves.⁷

Similar studies have found towns and cities in the United States with many of the characteristics of those in north central Italy. Tupelo is often cited as an example. Small (its population is about 30,000) and located in a rural area, Tupelo has no special advantages: no large body of water, no nearby metropolitan center, and no government installation with a large federal budget. Until 1980, there wasn't even a 4-lane highway within 75 miles. Today, its prosperity extends into the surrounding area. In each of the past 12 years, Lee County has added more than a thousand new industrial jobs and even more service jobs.

According to Grisham, who has spent the better part of his career studying Tupelo, a large proportion of the people there have a strong sense of community (of what they share together) as well as a willingness to take

responsibility. The citizenry “owns” the town's major civic projects; participation levels are high. Tupelo has a rich array of organizations and networks that provide opportunities for people to define and redefine their problems and make decisions about how to act. Of course, this is not a perfect town. The local development foundation has been compared to the political “bosses” that ran local governments at the turn of the century. Some prominent citizens don't believe in public participation and think decisions should be in the hands of a small elite. Most, however, are convinced that the upper tier of leadership has to create even stronger ties to rank-and-file citizens because, as the town grows, new people and new problems create new challenges. On the whole, Tupelo appears to be a town with a flourishing public life, which has been able to reproduce itself decade after decade.

You might ask whether the strong economy isn't the reason for this town's strong public life. Obviously, each reinforces the other. But when Putnam investigated a similar question in his study, he found that it was public life rather than the economy that made the difference, that north central Italy was not civil because it was rich but rich because it was civil. The people of Tupelo agree. They say that their prosperous economy has been the result of community development; their economic strategies have been what I would call public-building strategies.

While citizens of Tupelo would say that they have a rich community life, I would call it public life because the word *public* helps capture the natural dissonance within a democratic community. A public, for me, is a society of diverse people who are joined through ever-changing alliances in the practical business of addressing common problems. I have always found Parker Palmer’s characterization of a public as a “company of strangers” useful.⁸ Citizens share some things with one another; others they don’t. Interests differ and still people are able to work together in always temporary alliances. I suspect that norms of cooperation and trust may be by-products of this public work.⁹ Without denying the importance of such factors, I want to give due weight to the pragmatic and practical. Our experience at Kettering, especially our international experience, leads us to believe that people don’t have to be close to or even like one another in order to work together effectively.

The Difference between Public Capital and Social Capital

We have found it useful to make a distinction between different forms of social capital, not to deny that all political capital is a kind of social capital, but in order to call attention to the particular type of capital directly related to politics, or the capacity of a community to solve its problems.

To be sure, public life rests on an informal social system. Social gatherings help people form closer ties to their communities. People chat before and after church services; they talk at weddings and festivals; they sound off in bars and bingo parlors. Many of their conversations are about issues of the day, common social and economic problems, and deep political concerns. Ray Oldenburg has called the sites for these conversations the “great good places” of a community. They are remarkably similar to good homes in the comfort and support they offer.¹⁰

In order for these social gatherings to strengthen public life, however, some have to have particular characteristics; we would say that they have to build *public* capital rather than purely social capital. Our research suggests that, in order for public capital to be generated, there have to be occasions where people can get to know one another as citizens; it’s not enough



for community members to know each other on the basis of social status or family background. Also, people must have opportunities to engage in a larger conversation about the well-being of the community as a whole. And there have to be inclusive gatherings, inclusive with respect to who organizes them as well as who takes part in them. Citizens must be able to find others who have similar or related interests.¹¹

GUESSES ABOUT STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

Focusing on the more public forms of social capital, we have begun to create something like an anatomical framework for ordering what we are learning about public life.¹² We felt that we needed to develop a reasonably comprehensive and coherent account of what constituted public life and how it functioned in order to be able to make reasonable assumptions about how to strengthen or regenerate it. We have come up with a half-dozen or so categories for capturing the essential elements of public life. Here they are in brief:

We think that public life consists of particular kinds of *relationships* or, better said, *ways of relating*. These public relationships are a source of political power, so we put them together in one category. We think that public relationships are governed by certain *precepts* or *mind-sets*

about how things get done. At Kettering, Hal Saunders has called these “pictures in the mind” or mentalities. We suspect that, where public life is strong and democratic, the concept of politics is strikingly different from politics-as-usual. (I’ll elaborate as I go along.)

In addition to relationships and precepts, we believe it is useful to look at the distinctive structures characteristic of public life. We have in mind an array of ad hoc associations and more formal organizations that provide space for public relationships to form, that create “connective tissue,” and that serve as channels of communication among disparate elements within a geographic community. So *civil infrastructure* is another of our categories.

Public life, we have long thought, is expressed in particular *practices*. By “practices” we mean what the Greeks meant, ways of acting that have intrinsic worth or value to people, as contrasted with techniques, or purely instrumental ways of getting things done. For example, hammering a nail is a technique; no one hammers for hammering’s sake. Painting, singing, and dancing are practices; they have intrinsic worth to the practitioners, as well as social benefit. People genuinely like to paint, sing, and dance. An example from politics: the dialogue used to solve problems seems to have intrinsic value to citizens. They like the dialogue; it changes people, adding a public dimension to their lives.

We have identified six practices we think are critical in public life:¹³

1. Naming problems to reflect the things people consider valuable and hold dear.
2. Framing issues for decision making that not only takes into account what people feel is valuable but also lays out fairly all the major options for acting—with full recognition of the tensions growing out of the advantages and disadvantages of each option.
3. Making decisions deliberatively to move opinions from first impressions to more shared and reflective judgment.
4. Identifying and committing all the resources people have, including their talents and experiences, which become more powerful when combined. These are assets that often go unrecognized and unused.
5. Organizing civic actions so they complement one another, which makes the whole of people's efforts more than the sum of the parts.
6. Learning as a community all along the way to keep up civic momentum.

Finally, in observing and reading about places where public life is strong or growing, we have been impressed by how much those communities are like good students. They are voracious learners, picking up everything they can from both their own experience and the experience of others. That seems to be how they maintain the vitality of their public life. We have been calling this *civic learning*.

Having now summarized what is to follow, I'll go into more detail about what we see as the major elements of public life.

Precepts and Norms

We distinguish the social norms that influence public behavior from what we refer to as precepts, mind-sets, or mentalities. To us, norms mean social pressures that result in noncognitive, adaptive behavior. Precepts are more like guiding principles for political behavior, which grow out of a shared image of how things get done. Precepts are more cognitive than norms, which though powerful, appear to be by-products or derivatives of precepts. So, without dismissing them, we have been looking more at the role of mentalities or what some call “conventions.”¹⁴

As I said earlier, we suspect that where democratic public life flourishes, the mind-set about how things get done is strikingly different from the perspective that informs politics-as-usual.¹⁵ One difference is that where public life is strongest, people seem to have a broad, interconnected concept of their community, rather than a compartmentalized perspective, which separates everything into discrete categories.

Grisham calls precepts “guiding principles.” In Tupelo, they include injunctions such as “Never turn the work over to agencies that don’t involve citizens.” Widespread, inclusive participation is an absolute maxim. Some of the guidelines are commonsensical: “Build teams and use a team approach.” Others are counterintuitive: “Each person should be treated as a resource.”¹⁶

John McKnight, a student of community organization, helps explain why this last principle—seeing people as a storehouse of capacities rather than only as needs—is so critical.¹⁷ Thinking of communities as the sum of the capacities of citizens has the potential to change the understanding of public participation from a right to an asset. Everyone can be seen as a glass half empty or half full, McKnight says. By labeling people with the names of their deficiencies (i.e., their needs), we miss what is most important to them—opportunities to

“express and share their gifts, skills, capacities, and abilities.”¹⁸ The only way communities can become stronger, he argues, is by harnessing the sum of everyone’s abilities. That precept has evidently guided the citizens of Delray Beach, Florida, whose recent civic projects have been based on the principle, “err on the side of inclusion.”¹⁹ Don’t leave a lot of people on the sidelines.

Where public life is strongest, we also expect to find a different mind-set about power. Conventionally, power means control over scarce resources and a legal license to act. This kind of power is finite, in limited supply. Particular people and institutions are thought to have the power or authority to act, while others are seen as powerless. So those without power must be empowered by the powerful. Yet, as Mary Parker Follett pointed out many years ago, the power given by others isn’t real power; no one can really empower someone else because it grows out of each person’s unique experiences and talents.²⁰ Consequently, this traditional concept of power is bound to leave a great many people feeling powerless or in need of being empowered.

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For public life to be robust, there would surely have to be a broader concept of power, a notion of how even those who have no formal authority or control over existing resources could accomplish something. And, in fact, some citizen groups are quite aware of types of power that people generate themselves, such as the power of personal commitments. These groups think that power grows out of people's innate capacities and is amplified through their ability to band together.²¹

Seeing power as innate leads to the conviction that "local people must solve local problems," which is another of Tupelo's guiding principles. In other communities, citizens have said, "We are the solution," echoing the words of the song "We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting

For." These expressions are affirmations of responsibility, evidence of people "owning" their problems.

That people have to claim their own responsibility may be the most important precept of all for democratic public life. In an area of western Connecticut hard hit by plant closings, one citizen explained the need to claim responsibility this way: "All workers have to realize that we're responsible for our own condition. If we don't devote some time to our unions, our political party, our church organization, and the laws being enacted, we'll wake up and find ourselves with empty pension funds, bankrupt companies, disproportionate sacrifices, and a run-down community."²² A newspaper editor in Wichita expressed the same conviction: "The only way . . . for the community to be a better place to live is for the people of the community to understand and accept their personal responsibility for what happens."²³



PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS DEPEND ON ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS THAT PROVIDE SPACE OR OCCASIONS FOR THEM TO FORM. THE SAME THING IS TRUE OF ALL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.

Relationships

Mind-sets about a different way of doing politics take concrete form in the way citizens relate to one another and to those in office. Public relationships are those that people form with one another in the course of attending to public matters. They are different from relationships based on kinship, affection, or friendship. To paraphrase Parker Palmer, they are ties that bind relative strangers in the practical work of attending to common problems. Public relationships, we think, abound in public life.

Gerald Taylor, of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), tries hard to build these relationships in the communities where he works.²⁴ While he sees public life and private life overlapping, he thinks they are separate spheres governed by different rules of behavior. Public relationships begin in different interests and in acknowledging those differences rather than trying to homogenize them. Public relationships are personal, human, and face-to-face, but they are also relationships among different interests, connections where one set of interests influences another.

Here is an account of how IAF operated in Baltimore to build public relationships by connecting interests: “When leaders of Baltimore BUILD, the nation’s largest mainly black local organization, first met with Senator Paul Sarbanes, he smiled, took out his notebook and asked ‘What can I do for you?’ ‘Nothing,’ replied the leaders. ‘We’re here to get to know you. We want to know why you’re in the US Senate, what are your interests and concerns. We think that will help us develop a working relationship over time.’”²⁵

Taylor believes there is political power in the ability to form public relationships, the kind of power that comes from different people combining their capacities. These combinations are held together by promises people make to one another in public. You might call them

commitments or covenants.²⁶ Promises, made in public and subject to public review (Did you do what you said you would?) are Taylor's equivalent of trust.

Organizers trying to build public relationships aren't just trying to solve specific problems, they are trying to change the way people deal with one another. While they say that public relationships are subject to change and that alliances may shift (because there are no permanent enemies or friends, only interests), they hope that public ways of relating can become ongoing habits. Their ambition is to create public life even when interests differ and conventional power is unequally distributed. Public relationships don't require equality among the parties or promise equal distribution of outcomes. Though filled with tensions, they are a nonviolent alternative to dealing with the potential clash of differences.

Civil Infrastructure

Public relationships depend on organizations and institutions that provide space or occasions for them to form. The same thing is true of all human relationships. Families are social organizations that allow relationships of love and caring to develop. Trade associations create commercial relationships, and so on.

For public life to flourish there must be space, that is, events and meetings, where people can join to talk about and organize action on common problems. There must be institutions and associations willing to organize those gatherings. We call the sum total of this public space, along with the way it is ordered and connected, a community's civil infrastructure.

One of the distinctive features of a community with a healthy public life is the amount of effort that goes into building this civil infrastructure, which also provides channels of communication. On the "ground floor," numerous ad hoc associations (small groups like local development councils and neighborhood alliances) open doors for people to get involved. Associations like those Alexis de Tocqueville found in the 19th century still provide opportunities for public deliberation on key issues. In the case of the public forums of Grand Rapids, for example, a loose alliance of 30 to 40 civic and educational organizations has convened the community to deliberate on 3 major issues each year for more than a decade.²⁷ The forums depend on the voluntary efforts of citizens, and their only structure is a steering committee that organizes a kickoff to introduce the issues and a wrap-up meeting to report on results.

The next tier in the infrastructure consists of formal civic clubs, leagues, and nongovernmental organizations, which usually have offices with signs on the doors, staffs, and budgets. We think that, if public life is to be healthy, some of these organizations have to serve as umbrellas or boundary spanners, encouraging a communitywide exchange, developing a sense of interrelatedness, building networks, and promoting resource sharing. The Wilowe Institute, established in Arkansas in 1982, has been a classic boundary spanner. Dorothy Stuck, one of the founders, described the mission of the organization simply as “connecting people.” The institute convened statewide assemblies of citizens as citizens (rather than citizens as representatives or delegates) to work on issues from education to economic development.

Practices

Associations and organizations that develop public relationships also provide public space for citizens to work on their common problems, using the civic practices I mentioned earlier.

Community problem solving, or any problem solving for that matter, follows a familiar pattern. Something untoward happens; someone gives the problem a name and proceeds to make decisions about how to act; someone acts; and

then someone assesses the results. Too often, the public is pushed aside at each of these crucial points. Problems are named in technical, legal, or ideological terms. Leaders make the decisions; citizens never struggle with the choices. Results are evaluated in a way that undermines the public’s sense of ownership and accountability. Public life grows weaker at every step. So at Kettering we asked ourselves what it would take to put the public back into the picture, what genuinely public problem-solving practices would look like. Here are the results of our thinking:

Naming Problems and Framing Issues in Public Terms

Who names the problems in a community and the names that are chosen—even the terms that are used—are critically important. They determine the way a community will approach a problem and who will be involved. They even shape the outcomes of the actions taken to solve problems. While the tendency is to use names foreign to them, citizens have their own “take”



on problems. They respond to those described in ways that reflect everyday experience and the things people consider most valuable. For example, many Americans are inclined to see stopping drug abuse as a family or community issue rather than simply a matter of enforcing the law or preventing drugs from entering the country. That perspective captures deeply held concerns about the collapse of the family and the loss of personal responsibility. Naming the problem in legal and governmental terms shuts out those who see drug abuse every day in their neighborhoods and connects the problem to what is happening in the social order and economy.²⁸

Studies have shown that people will not take the first step into public life unless they see a connection between civic matters and their personal concerns.²⁹ People aren't just looking for down-home stories or words with less than three syllables. The obstacles that keep them from becoming involved can't be overcome by just using everyday language. Problems have to be named in ways that show their connection to the things people consider most valuable. I don't mean "values," I mean basic motives like being secure from danger or being treated equally.³⁰ Naming problems to capture the deeper concerns of the whole community builds a sense of shared fate; it helps move people off the sidelines.

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT PEOPLE WILL NOT TAKE THE FIRST STEP INTO PUBLIC LIFE UNLESS THEY SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN CIVIC MATTERS AND THEIR PERSONAL CONCERNS.

Although naming problems is a critical first step in community problem solving, it's only one step. Framing issues for presentation to the public is equally important. (Ask any lawyer!) A name identifies a problem but doesn't say what our options are for solving it. The name doesn't tell us what has to be decided or what is really at issue in an issue. And what is really at issue are tensions among the many things we consider valuable. Framing issues in public terms sets the stage for confronting our competing motives. Our various concerns often lead to different approaches to dealing with issues, which may be in conflict.

When it comes to health care, for example, we want what is best, and we also want what is most affordable. Yet the better the care, technically, the more costly and less affordable it is. Any strategy for dealing with the costs of technically advanced health care runs squarely into this dilemma, which is typical of the dilemmas posed by major public issues. Furthermore, every option for action will have in it both positive and negative implications for what we hold dear.

Unless citizens see and confront these conflicts and the costs of every option, they won't make sound decisions. (A sound decision is one in which people understand and are willing to accept the consequences of the option they like best.) Citizens will not move beyond individual first impressions to shared, mature public judgment. Therefore, we believe that public judgment, as opposed to popular opinion, is essential to healthy public life.³¹

The Role of Public Deliberation

Naming problems and framing issues in public terms set the stage for making choices together so people can act together. At one of the recent Grand Rapids forums, a mother who had lost two sons to random violence said simply but with conviction, "We have to band together to stop the killing." Communities can't band together, however, unless they can make decisions about the purposes and direction of action. As I have just noted, these decisions are always difficult. Conflicts inevitably arise because a great many things are valuable to us, and we have no way of being certain which of our concerns should guide us.

How have people been able to arrive at decisions when the stakes are so high and the uncertainty about what to do so great? They have called on the human faculty for making judgments and have employed that form of thinking that is tied



to a particular way of talking to one another, which we call “deliberation.” The Greeks of ancient Athens knew about deliberation, colonists used it in America’s early town meetings, and it flourishes today in Grand Rapids. To deliberate, people have to talk face-to-face in order to examine a wide variety of perspectives and weigh the pros and cons of every option. That is what deliberation is—carefully weighing various approaches to an issue against what is truly valuable. Deliberative dialogue is different from popular expression (sounding off), information gathering, and debate. Deliberation explores several basic questions: What is valuable to us when we think about a particular issue? What are the costs and benefits of the various options for acting on that issue? What are the tough choices or dilemmas that make the decision so difficult? The final question can take a variety of forms: What are we willing to do to solve the problem? What trade-offs are we willing (or unwilling) to make? Where do we want a policy on this issue to take us? In responding to these questions, people are also “working through” conflicts over which of the many things that are valuable to them should inform their actions.³²

Deliberation is a process of decision making that is tied to action. While it doesn’t necessarily result in agreement, it can produce a general sense of direction and point to shared or

interrelated purposes. We do not think of deliberation as the same thing as building a consensus or mediating differences. Forums identify a range of actions that people can live with. They locate the area between agreement and disagreement, the area of the politically permissible. Better said, deliberative forums *create* this area, as people sort out what they are and aren’t willing to do to deal with an issue.

By watching thousands of National Issues Forums, locally controlled, financed, and convened by civic and educational organizations across the country, the Kettering Foundation has been able to learn more about the outcomes of deliberative dialogue.³³ We thought initially that deliberation would prompt changes in attitudes. While that happens in some cases, the forums are more likely to change a person’s perception of another person’s opposing views than to get the two to agree. In other words, participants don’t change their own opinions as much as they change their opinions of others’ opinions. They say they understand opposing views better. Deliberation allows us to “take in” other people’s experiences. As we internalize their views, we are changed, our perceptions of others are changed, and we see possibilities for acting together that we hadn’t seen before.³⁴ And that sense of possibility generates civic energy for implementing decisions.

Difficult decisions about how to act are made in stages, never all at once. So deliberation has to become a habit; one or two forums won't have much effect. People usually begin by blaming the difficulties on others before working through the emotions provoked by having to face unpleasant costs and consequences.³⁵ Working through an issue takes a long time, goes on in many different settings, and moves in fits and starts. Conversations may begin as friendly backyard exchanges long before they become seriously deliberative. Typically, we start talking about personal concerns and then try to find out whether anyone else shares our worries. For example, neighbors may begin talking about the drug paraphernalia they found alongside the streets.³⁶ Informal conversations may turn into a larger dialogue at a neighborhood gathering. Later, a forum may be held on the issue. Months of deliberation may pass before people determine what they can do together.

Public life in America has benefited from the deliberation of citizens since the first town meetings in the 1630s. So, in analyzing public life today, we look at community decision making to see how public and deliberative it is, and we look to see whether there is enough patience for deliberation to become a habit.³⁷

Acting Publicly

Another phenomenon some of us think is characteristic of public life is a particular kind of action, which we have called public action. A good argument can be, and has been, made that the most important feature of public life is the nature of action or "public work."³⁸ One of the limitations of the term *public life* is that it tends to underplay the dynamic quality of what a public does. A public is a body of political actors, and public life is a life of action. And we assume that public life is characterized by a way of acting that is quintessentially public.

Public action may be seen as a pattern of acting, an ongoing process integral to the political culture of some communities. Just after the Second World War, observers recalled that the trains in both England and Germany had run on time. In Germany, they had been on time because someone had ordered them to be punctual. In England, they had been on time because that had been "the custom." Public action is a custom of acting, an ethos for acting.

How else might we understand public action? While the studies of towns and cities with a vibrant civil society give some indication of what public action is, we thought we might be able to describe it more fully by asking what action would be like if it had the qualities associated with publicness.



For example, the word *public* is closely linked with what is common, shared, or for the benefit of all. Public action, then, would be that action focused on the overall or common well-being of people—although the common good might be found at the intersection of different self-interests. “Public” also refers to that which is open to all, unrestricted, and therefore diverse. So public action would be the action of a diverse array of citizens. And a “public” is an organized body of people, so public action would be the action of cooperating citizens. The term could be used for a type of civic action we suspect is found in public life, action that is complementary and mutually reinforcing rather than fragmented and compartmentalized, an “alloy” of initiatives

drawing on different capacities and fused the way different metals are, to make a superior material. The many initiatives that make up public action shouldn’t be merely amassed, they should reinforce each other, so that the whole of the effort becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

**A PUBLIC IS A BODY OF
POLITICAL ACTORS, AND
PUBLIC LIFE IS A LIFE
OF ACTION.**

While public deliberation seems a necessary condition for stimulating public action, we don't think it is a sufficient one.

Case studies of areas where civil society is strong do, in fact, report action with these public qualities. For instance, the Delray Beach project could be called public because it included an array of citizens, no one was left on the sidelines.³⁹

In describing civil society relationships as horizontal, Putnam's study of Florence gives us another clue to the nature of public action. While not antithetical to governmental or institutional action, which is vertical, as well as uniform, linear, and coordinated by an administrative agency, public action surely has a different character. Institutional action is necessarily vertical. The fire department lays out rules for exiting a building safely. It sends an inspector around from time to time to supervise a fire drill. The interactions are from officials down to citizens or, in some cases, from citizens up to officials. Public action, on the other hand, is a repeating collection of lateral efforts; it isn't linear, beginning at one point and ending at another. Neighbors working together to take care of their parks—pitching in to remove trash, plant trees, or build benches—might be an example. The interactions are horizontal, shoulder-to-shoulder, citizen-to-citizen.

We don't think of public action as a substitute for carefully planned actions by organizations, although it has certain qualities that other forms of action lack. Economists would say that it is efficient because its transaction costs are lower. Even though it requires a degree of coordination (everyone can't show up at the park to mow grass and pick up trash), it isn't administratively regulated.⁴⁰

Our guess is that cities where there is little public action—where everything that is done has to be highly organized and planned in detail—miss the initiative and inventiveness that allow them to be optimally effective. What's more, institutional action may be less productive than it might be when it isn't reinforced by public action. Consider the way a good neighborhood-watch program helps a police department do its job. Because official interactions are vertical, while public interactions run the other way, they can support each other. If the two are woven together, as with threads, the result should be the strong "whole cloth" of community action. (If it were not for the threads crossing one another in the fabric of our clothes, our elbows would come through our shirtsleeves.)

Though public action isn't the product of an administrative plan, we don't see it as spontaneous or magical. We believe it can grow out of deliberation, which, if it goes well, results in a sense of direction. Yet while public deliberation seems a necessary condition for stimulating public action, we don't think it is a sufficient one. Communities also have to deal with the obstacles posed by conflicting interests. Ideally, common interests should override the particular interests that often clash, but that is not always the case. We have all seen interests in direct conflict such as in instances where developers and environmentalists clash. Other kinds of self-interest, which are not mutually exclusive, may also hamper public action. People simply may not see the interdependence of their interests clearly enough to be mutually supportive. The interest of the policeman on the beat may be to preserve order, while the social worker in the area may be more concerned with the harmony of family life. These interests are different and, while not mutually exclusive, they aren't necessarily related either. Each professional can, and often does, go about his or her business without the assistance of the other. So, after deliberative forums, citizens and organizations have more work to do in order to identify the interdependence of different interests. Deliberation lays the foundation for that discovery. Seeing where particular interests are interdependent should prompt more complementary public action.⁴¹

Judging Results

Another practice that we think has a great deal to do with public life is the means used to evaluate the outcomes of action. Americans insist on knowing results because they want to be successful—and well they should. If they didn't, efforts to strengthen public life would degenerate into the worst kind of therapy: warm but illusory feelings of momentary comfort. Results must be known and evident to more than those directly involved. Unfortunately, the conventional way of assessing outcomes can undermine the very thing that makes for success—a strong sense of public responsibility.

For instance, a community might decide to improve its schools by having experts, educators, and key leaders set measurable standards of “success.” Although local districts might have wide latitude in implementing the standards, the outcomes would be calculated against a predetermined criterion, the way a carpenter calculates whether a board is a certain length. That would limit the public to measuring success by standards it hadn't set, which, would undercut its sense of accountability—of citizens holding *themselves*, not just officials and institutions, responsible. When people don't feel responsible, when they don't hold themselves accountable, their communities would seem far less likely to change.

Success, getting the results we want in the affairs of our communities, may not be reducible to simply promulgating standards and measuring results; it may require an ongoing process of judging results publicly. To prevent the loss of “ownership,” we may need the kind of accountability in which citizens participate in determining success rather than just receiving reports of what others have done. This public accountability would require a mechanism for direct examination of outcomes by citizens in much the way that a jury sees evidence and hears witnesses.

If the essence of public accountability is judging results publicly, as we think it is, then not only does the judging have to be done by the public, but also it has to employ the appropriate mode of reasoning. Judging is the act of determining the worth of something when there is no authority to tell us what its value is and when people are likely to reach different conclusions.

As you may recognize, we are drawing on the classical definition of judging the worth of an action. Isocrates first described the difference between this kind of practical reasoning and both scientific and philosophic inquiry using the device of a fictional jury trial for Timotheus, a general, accused of being a bad officer because he pacified rather than annihilated his enemies. Isocrates laid out the criteria for determining the worth of action as he showed how the general's

tactics were consistent with what Athenians considered most valuable to the city.⁴² (Friendly allies are better than bitter subjects, he pointed out.) We have used the classical criteria in constructing our standards for judging publicly.

In order to determine the worth of political actions, citizens have to look both at what happened as a result of those actions and, simultaneously, at the effects of what happened on what they consider most valuable. Those two determinations are the essential steps in judging success. In the simplest terms, people have to ask themselves, “Did we get what we really want?”

This process is unlike that used in the hypothetical case of school evaluation where one of the elements in the determination of success—what people wanted or considered most valuable—was not subject to reconsideration by the public. We anticipate that in the process of judging, people will change their definitions of success. We expect them to do in public life what they do in private life where it is common to change our minds—such as when we change our minds about what we really need after buying something that does what the manufacturer said it would do but doesn’t do what we wanted done. (In the South we say, “I felt like the dog that caught the car,” to let people know that we’ve changed our definition of success.)

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We certainly don’t mean to imply that judging results involves nothing more than application of a simple two-part formula. We recognize that there will be difficulties because (1) many things are important to people, so defining success is not simple; (2) actions to get what we want always have both negative and positive consequences; and (3) our actions usually produce unanticipated and unintended effects.

Furthermore, judging publicly won't result in clear-cut declarations of success or failure because success is a moving target. However, this way of evaluating outcomes should produce a more realistic understanding of actions and consequences. And, most important, it should prompt the civic learning so essential to public life. Judging publicly should help communities decide what to do next; opening people's eyes to possibilities for moving ahead.

Civic Learning

In introducing this report on our efforts to paint a picture of public life, I said that we have been impressed by the importance of the community learning described in Grisham's account of Tupelo. We have seen the same kind of learning in other places where public life seems to be growing, such as the "wiregrass" area of southeastern Alabama. At first, we meant no more by "civic learning" than studying what others are doing. Tupelo, for instance, has made a habit of sending investigative groups and bringing in scores of outsiders for advice and counsel.

We have suspected, however, that learning from others involves more than looking for good models to replicate. Modeling would seem to drive out learning. When he was with the Council for Economic Development, Scott

Foster reported at one of our board discussions that communities successful in reviving their economies had gotten beyond the impulse to copy others, which was fatal to the strategy that worked best, namely, building a new economic base rather than resurrecting dying industries. We continue to believe that civic learning is adaptive, not imitative. Rather than importing models from elsewhere, learning communities seem to create their own.



More recently, we have begun to look at how communities with a strong public life learn from their own experiences. Rather than trying projects, finding them imperfect, and giving up, the Tupelos of the world seem to learn from their failures. Or as Charles Kettering once said of inventors, they know “how to fail intelligently.”

In contrast, we have noticed that politics-as-usual seems to preclude civic learning. Leaders often take months to study issues and make decisions among themselves yet allow the public little opportunity to learn. The custom is to promote the proposals of leadership groups with a collection of supporting facts intended to convince the public of their merits. Leaders put their energies into doing “a real selling job.” They don’t seem to recognize that, if it takes the best-informed people a long time to decide how to respond to a problem, it is likely to take those less familiar with the issues at least as long. Perhaps leaders assume that citizens are very accepting of the conclusions reached by prominent folk in positions of authority. If so, it is an assumption that they might want to reconsider in today’s cynical, antiauthoritarianism climate.

Civic learning surely involves more than people hearing proposals and amassing facts. Citizens have to understand the perceptions that others bring to problems because no one has exactly the same experience with any given issue, and differing experiences lead to differing ways of approaching problems. The new road that gets one person across town more quickly may block someone else’s access to neighbors. In order to know how a community sees a problem like improving transportation, people have to synthesize a number of quite different perceptions. They can’t really know what *they* think about an issue until *they* have talked about it. They have to construct a shared sense of what is happening; that takes time and patience, which are often in short supply.

Civic learning seems to allow us to know those things about our communities that we can know only by learning together—and never by learning alone. That means understanding what is valuable to us as a community, what our shared or interrelated interests are, whether we have compatible purposes, and what we think we ought to do in responding to common problems. People don’t discover those things as much as they create them; they don’t preexist their talking together in the kind of talk that people use to teach themselves before they act.⁴³

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From What to How

We believe civic learning is indispensable to public forming because it is compatible with the kind of politics that citizens “own” and does not undercut the sense of responsibility that is so crucial. Consequently, rather than trying to find ways for a third party to intervene, the better strategy for strengthening public life might be to think of ways citizens can accelerate civic learning in their communities. This learning might occur most around those activities in which the public has been least involved—naming problems and framing issues, making decisions about policies or courses of action, figuring out how to act together effectively, and determining whether actions have been successful. All of these, taken together, would seem to be rich in opportunities for learning and for developing an idea about a more public form of politics.

Our towns and cities are more alike than is popular to say, yet strengthening public life requires that each of them find its own way. While no one should expect the way to be neat, linear, and systematic, neither does it have to remain mysterious. Although we think that it may be possible to strengthen public life by putting the public back into the act at critical points, we certainly don’t assume that there is a science or set of rules that can be followed to a predictable outcome.

We don't expect public-forming strategies to work overnight. One round of naming problems in public terms or one deliberative forum won't change anything. These strategies have to become habits and be embraced as practices. Still, we may not have to wait for centuries for our neighborhoods, cities, and states to change their ways of doing business, to strengthen their public lives. We can start experimenting now.

Implications for Leadership

There isn't space to spell out the implications of our concept of public life for leadership. Many would argue that the only way to strengthen public life is through leaders. We aren't sure that is an adequate answer. Some research suggests that established civic leaders can be one of the principle obstacles to involving more of the public because they think they are the public. Even those leaders who are convinced that their communities need a more active public aren't sure of what to do to bring that about. One problem is that a public is an abstraction difficult for them to distinguish from voters, an aggregate of interest groups, or a body of clients.⁴⁴



Communities where public life is strong may not have what would normally be considered the “best” leaders. Yet they have so many leaders in so many places that they are “leaderful.” In robust communities, some forms of leadership initiative appears to be expected of everyone.⁴⁵ When citizens talk about their leaders, they seem to recognize that they are talking about themselves.

We have also noticed that, where public life is strong, those exercising leadership appear to know a great deal about how to enrich public life. For example, they seem more likely to be door openers, getting others involved and connected, than serving in the more conventional role of gatekeeper, granting or withholding approval for civic initiatives. I have always liked Ronald Heifetz's definition of leaders as good coaches for civic learning (my language, not his).⁴⁶

COMMUNITIES WHERE PUBLIC LIFE IS STRONG MAY NOT HAVE WHAT WOULD NORMALLY BE CONSIDERED THE “BEST” LEADERS. YET THEY HAVE SO MANY LEADERS IN SO MANY PLACES THAT THEY ARE “LEADERFUL.”

THE NEXT CHALLENGES

For those who share these or similar assumptions about public life and how it might be strengthened, the next task is to find out more about how civic learning can be accelerated through the public experiences of naming problems, making choices, and the like. That is what Kettering is attempting to do now. We also want to find out which existing institutions will provide the public space needed for civic learning or, if these institutions don't provide enough of this space, how to build new democratic organizations that will.

Finally, we believe that people learn how to live a more public life not practice-by-practice but by first getting a sense of the whole, which is more than the sum of the parts. As I said early on, mentalities seem to shape relationships, practices, even structures. So ultimately, people have to decide whether they want to live a different kind of political life that would place themselves at the center of a stronger, more public form of democracy.

Notes

1. Michael J. Sandel, "America's Search for a New Public Philosophy," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1996): 57-74.
2. Ernesto Cortés Jr., "Reweaving the Social Fabric," *Boston Review* 19 (June 1994): 12-14.
3. Victor M. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
4. Vaughn Grisham Jr. and Rob Gurwitt, *Hand in Hand: Community and Economic Development in Tupelo* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1999).
5. While I've used a variety of terms up to this point—*civil*, *community*, *public*—I will stick with *public* or *public life* from now on. The others are perfectly fine; but I am staying with one terminology in order to prevent confusion and to avoid ignoring different meanings of the words. Also, I want to connect to certain works in political philosophy where the discussion has been about "the public," for example, John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*.
6. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society*; Grisham and Gurwitt, *Hand in Hand*; Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Heartland Center for Leadership Development, *Clues to Rural Community Survival*, 8th ed. (Lincoln, NE: Heartland Center for Leadership Development, 1992).
7. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*.
8. Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1985).
9. No one has described the concept of public work better than Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari in *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). See also Harry C. Boyte, "Beyond Deliberation: Citizenship as Public Work," *Newsletter of PEGS* 5 (Spring 1995): 15-19.
10. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
11. The Harwood Group, "Forming Public Capital: Observations from Two Communities" (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, August 1995).
12. These elements were first presented in chapter four of a book I wrote on the question, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 1996).
13. In the 1996 version of this paper, only four practices were listed. This list has been updated to include the six practices the foundation has identified to date.
14. David W. Brown, *When Strangers Cooperate: Using Social Conventions to Govern Ourselves* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).
15. I reported on these unique perspectives in greater detail in *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chaps. 8, 9.
16. Grisham and Gurwitt, *Hand in Hand*, 32.
17. John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, 1993).
18. John L. McKnight, "Do No Harm: Policy Options That Meet Human Needs," *Social Policy* 20 (Summer 1989): 5-15.
19. Otis White, "The Best-Run Town in Florida," *Florida Trend* 17 (February 1995): 36-43.
20. Mary Parker Follett, *The New State: Group Organization: The Solution of Popular Government* (1920; reprint, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 105.
21. Jeremy Brecher, "'If All the People Are Banded Together': The Naugatuck Valley Project," *Labor Research Review* 1, no. 9, article 10 (1986): 3.
22. Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, eds., *Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 93.
23. Davis Merritt Jr. (transcript, Public Journalism Seminar sponsored by Kettering Foundation and New Directions for News, Dayton, OH, December 1992), 9.
24. Gerald Taylor, "The Contours of Public Relationships" (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, June 1993).
25. Harry C. Boyte, "The Growth of Citizen Politics: Stages in Local Community Organizing," *Dissent* 37 (Fall 1990): 513-518.
26. Daniel J. Elazar, "America and the Federalist Revolution," *This World* 10 (1985): 52-71.
27. Grand Rapids is one of many communities that use National Issues Forums (NIF) issue guides for their meetings. Kettering has prepared these materials to stimulate serious deliberation on issues of nationwide concern. Topics have ranged from poverty, health care, and national security to the drug crisis and the environment.
28. Using the drug problem as an example has the advantage of illustrating the difference between the way experts or professionals may approach an issue and the way citizens experience it. The disadvantage is that the example seems to suggest that citizens should make choices about means and not ends. Actually, the most important decisions are about objectives, purposes, and directions. The details of implementation are usually the province of professionals. In the case of the drug issue, however, a public consensus on the objective already exists: there is little controversy over whether we need to combat the abuse of street drugs like crack.
29. The Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1993).
30. For a study of the considerations that shape the way people respond to issues, see Milton Rokeach and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, "Stability and Change in American Value Priorities: 1968-1981," *American Psychologist* 44 (May 1989): 775-784.

31. Daniel Yankelovich has written extensively on the distinction between opinion and judgment in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991).
32. On “working through” these conflicts, see Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*, 63-65.
33. National Issues Forums (NIF) are part of the programs of thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as by libraries, high schools, and colleges. Neighborhood associations, prison literacy programs, community leadership programs, and a diverse array of other organizations are also part of the NIF network. The forums take their name from the NIF issue guides they use, which are prepared by the Kettering Foundation. For more information, visit www.nifi.org.
34. For a more complete account of the effects of public deliberation, see Doble Research Associates, *Responding to the Critics of Deliberation* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1996) and Steve Farkas and Will Friedman, with Ali Bers, *The Public's Capacity for Deliberation* (New York: Public Agenda for Kettering Foundation, 1995).
35. The shift from opinion to judgment comes slowly and in stages, according to Yankelovich. Early in the life of a policy debate, opinions are likely to be ill formed and unstable. When people first become aware of an issue, they respond to initial impressions and scant information. Opinions fluctuate almost from day to day. Mere awareness is a far cry from stable, consistent, and coherent public judgment. There are many obstacles along the way, for example, blaming others and engaging in wishful thinking. To develop mature judgment, Yankelovich says, people have to explore a variety of choices; they have to overcome a natural resistance to facing costly trade-offs; they have to look honestly at all the pros and cons; and, finally, they have to take a stand, both intellectually and emotionally. It is a long journey. See Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*.
36. The Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos*, 11-12.
37. Pérez-Díaz's account of the emergence of civil society in Spain reinforces this view. He suggests that, among other factors, a public discussion of different versions of the common interests helped the country take initiatives in solving its collective problems. See Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society*, 57, 101.
38. Boyte and Kari, *Building America*.
39. White, “The Best-Run Town in Florida.”
40. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
41. This assumption is based, in part, on results from use of a workbook Kettering designed for communities trying to stimulate more “public action” to deal with young people growing up at risk. See Rick Fisher, *Using the Growing Up at Risk Materials: An Analysis of the Research from Communities* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1995).
42. Isocrates, “Antidosis,” in *Isocrates*, vol. 2, trans. George Norlin (1929; reprint, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2000).
43. The concept of a kind of public talk that has didactic power is found in the “Funeral Oration of Pericles,” in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40.2.
44. The Harwood Group, “America's Struggle Within” (Bethesda, MD: Pew Center for Civic Journalism, 1995), 16-19.
45. Grisham and Gurwitt, *Hand in Hand*.
46. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994), chap. 4.



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