



Yes, Our Democracy Is a Mess, and Yes, Our Opportunities Are Real

Richard C. Harwood

As part of the Kettering Foundation's efforts to take stock of trends affecting citizens and communities, I have recently held 10 in-depth conversations with leading thinkers and practitioners in the areas of democracy and American life.

In these discussions, we talked about the current condition of the country and the forces that are shaping it today. I asked those I interviewed about the positive trends they see among people engaging and working together in communities. I also asked how widespread these positive developments are, what is driving them, and how we can accelerate and deepen them. And I explored with these individuals what they believe resulted from the so-called civic renewal movement of the 1990s (the attempt to build new civic capacities and practices among organizations, leaders, networks, and citizens) and the implications of that movement for us today.

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When I combine these conversations with what I have seen and heard working in communities over the past few years, it seems that the 1990s movement was simply too shallow and narrow in scope to withstand larger economic, political, and social trends, such as the Great Recession and the September 11 attacks. While the leaders I interviewed differed in their interpretations of what exactly happened, there was general agreement that the ideas behind those civic activities did not penetrate American society widely or deeply enough. The innovations simply failed to be adopted and embedded into the necessary structures, processes, and organizations. Indeed, the civic renewal movement didn't succeed in permeating our collective sense of how we want to connect with one another, work together, and get things done.

Harry Boyte, codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, told me, "In some ways the civic impulse spread in spaces that were less structured and bureaucratized, where the politics of knowledge was not as hierarchical and rigid. But that was also the weakness because it was quite vulnerable."

Carolyn Lukensmeyer, executive director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, highlighted many of the positive elements of that earlier period while suggesting that the efforts did not go far enough. She observed that while the civic renewal work "was incredibly important on shifting professional practices . . . it didn't get embedded into ongoing mediating organizations in the communities it was attempted in."

What I kept hearing, in other words, is that the civic renewal movement faded away. Without question, it made a difference at the time: it changed how people, organizations, and communities worked and helped establish a foundation for many of the positive actions we see today. But it did not firmly take hold.

A Fragile Opportunity

So what now? How do we build on the good efforts that were made? How do we regain some of that positive momen-

tum? How do we ensure that the important work happening in communities today does not, once again, dissipate?

My sense is that the nation is at a major inflection point—a pivotal moment of change. I believe we are in the early phase of a new era of engagement among people and organizations, but it is nascent, fragile, and occurring in small pockets. Understanding this stage of development is crucial because only then is it possible to identify the right strategies to move forward. To be successful in this, we must determine how to harness, accelerate, and deepen positive movement.

And that brings us to examine another important juncture: the current national narrative tells us that we simply cannot get things done together. We hear this day after day on the news as well as from various leaders and among ourselves. Diana Aviv, president and CEO of Independent Sector, explained, "Government [is] more partisan than ever before, more cynical and more out of touch with the citizenry." This negative narrative drives our mind-set, attitudes, behaviors, and actions. "The public space," Aviv observed, "is rife with all of this divide."

I have been hearing this narrative over and over again as I travel the country on the Reclaiming Main Street campaign—an initiative of The Harwood Institute to engage people in making community once again a common enterprise. I launched the campaign on the heels of the government shutdown, going to communities such as Oakland, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Murray, Kentucky, to talk to people about their shared aspirations.

People believe we as a nation—and as individuals—can do better. People are tired of business-as-usual. They don't believe leaders have their best interests at heart. They believe too many people and

organizations are in it for their own good at the expense of the common good.

There is too much finger-pointing and blame-placing. And when good things do happen, there is too much jockeying to claim turf and not enough sharing of credit. The toxic discourse and political acrimony seep into our daily lives. As a result, we are overcome by dysfunction and division.

The sense of frustration is great, but I have also seen that the will within the nation to take a different path is even greater. In my conversations with the 10 thought-leaders, I repeatedly heard

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a sentiment articulated by people such as Allison Fine, author of *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age*. People feel "bipolar" about the state of politics and public life today. In her view, "People individually are doing some phenomenally interesting and energetic things . . . [but] traditional advocacy and organizing groups are doing a miserable job of tapping into that kind of energy." Echoing that sentiment, Diana Aviv said she feels simultaneously "optimistic and anxious." On one hand, we confront a bevy of obstacles to moving forward as a country. On the other, there is a deep hunger among the American people to engage and accomplish things together. We must tap into this energy to build positive momentum.

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It's Happening in Communities

After all, America is a nation of builders. Throughout our history, we have proven that we are capable of so much when we set goals and get moving—together. And people are doing just that every day in communities across the country. Ben Barber, author of *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*, rests his hope for the future of our country—and indeed, our world—on progress and innovation happening at the local level. “Cities,” he told me, “have re-instilled my hope for the possibilities of democracy.” He said he was encouraged by “watching what cities, when they work together, can do to solve problems that increasingly were looking

ernment more effectively.” She continued, “It’s happening in places, but we just haven’t figured out as a country [how] to make it the routine part of how we do our work.”

Still, while some of the people I spoke with believe that further strengthening local conditions can serve as a counterforce to change our country’s politics and narrative, most warned that particular attention also must be paid to the national level. As former Congressman Jim Leach said, “There’s a breakdown in civility . . . but the bigger issue is the pattern of decision making in which both parties are indebted to certain groups and everybody at the [national] elected level has to pay attention to their party’s general position and

their own vulnerability within their party.” This is a challenge of the inflection point: while there are positive signs of change in pockets across the country, there is a danger they can get overwhelmed by a dangerously broken national system.

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to be insoluble in a world of bickering sovereign nations and states that refuse to cooperate.”

Despite stagnation at the national level, there is positive movement on the ground. John McKnight, codirector of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, pointed to such positive signs as people creating more community gardens and neighborhood watch groups. In doing this work, residents are asserting themselves as citizens. They are connecting around their shared aspirations, engaging in meaningful ways, and tackling challenges together.

We need more of that work. As Martha McCoy, executive director of Everyday Democracy, put it, “We’ve learned a fair amount in our field about what’s possible in terms of people coming together in ways that they can actually form relationships, make a difference, work with gov-

Shared Problem, Shared Solutions

So what do we do? There is no quick fix, nor should blame be placed solely on government, elected officials, the business community, nonprofit organizations, or even citizens. This is a shared problem that can only be addressed if people and institutions from all sectors step forward in a fundamentally different way. They must collectively take some small but important steps to build conditions that enable people to come together to get things done and make our communities and country thrive. After talking with these thought-leaders and reflecting on my work around the country, I believe there are three areas we must concentrate on in order to put the country on the right path:

- **Focus on shared aspirations.** Everywhere I travel I find that Americans share many of the same desires and goals for their communities and the

country. While people don’t agree on everything, there is enough that unites us that we can build upon. Our work at The Harwood Institute rests on this very assumption. But our leaders, organizations, and citizens must use these shared aspirations as a guidepost—a starting point for making decisions together. By focusing on our shared aspirations, we can change the frame of the public conversation from one of “problems,” “deficits,” and “blame” to “what we stand for” and “what we seek to build together.”

- **Work together to get things done.**

Leaders, organizations, groups, and citizens must come together to get things done. People must cross dividing lines and work together on common problems—even if in small ways. This will unleash a sense of shared responsibility and instill confidence that change is possible. John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic Enterprises, called these “hope spots.” He said we need to focus on the question, “Where is the country actually successful in taking these issues that are often thought to be chronically unfixable and successfully moving them?” These hope spots exist, but they need to be multiplied and connected. And they must be illuminated for all to see. This step is pivotal to getting the country moving in the right direction.

- **Change the stories we tell about the country and ourselves.**

In my own work, I have found that the narrative we tell about our communities and ourselves is the greatest hidden factor that determines whether communities and people move forward. As I have said, right now the predominant narrative in the country is that we can’t work together. To move forward, it is essential that we tell stories that show how people are joining together to work for the common good. Such stories must be rooted in real actions—not public relations and hype. This is not about telling more stories. The goal must be to connect different accounts of success over time and weave them into a coherent narrative that enables us to see that we are moving on a new trajectory. This

Shared Problem, Shared Solutions



1. Focus on shared aspirations. Change the frame of the public conversation to “what we stand for” and “what we seek to build together.”



2. Work together to get things done. Illuminate “hope spots” for all to see—multiplied and connected.

3. Change the stories we tell about the country and ourselves. Connect different accounts of success that enable us to see that we are moving on a new trajectory.



narrative must highlight leaders and people so they can see that they can indeed help to create change through their daily actions. On the Reclaiming Main Street campaign, I am constantly motivated by the need to remind the country—and reclaim the practical idea—that community is a common enterprise.

It’s time to restore our belief that we can get things done, together. If we don’t, communities will continue to be stuck, unable to move forward. The country as

a whole will remain mired in partisan gridlock. And people’s faith in institutions, leaders, and our collective ability to address pressing concerns will further erode. This early phase of a new era of engagement will dissipate, just like the civic renewal movement of the past.

There are clearly challenges ahead. Maya Enista Smith, former director of Mobilize.Org, voiced the choices we face: “From this moment of doubt and search for a better alternative may come really great things. . . . Hopefully we keep believ-

ing in our ability to do something better, elect someone better, or create a better system—but I’m actually not sure where the chips are going to fall on that one yet.”

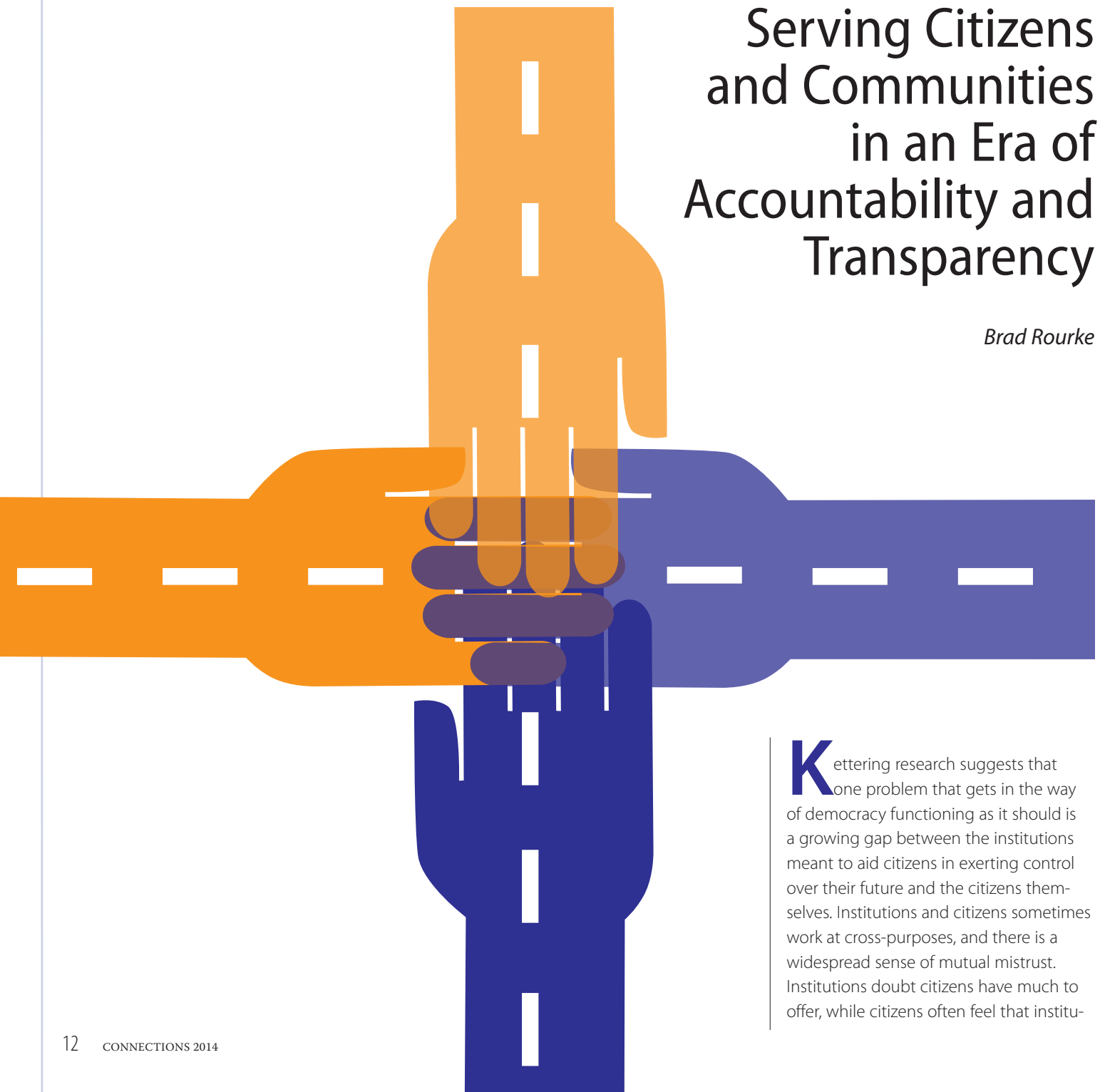
It is up to us to decide where the chips will fall. It is up to us to make the most of this pivotal moment and prove that we can get things done together. I remain ever hopeful that we will.

Richard C. Harwood is president and founder of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. He can be reached at rharwood@theharwoodinstitute.org.

Philanthropy at a Crossroads

Serving Citizens
and Communities
in an Era of
Accountability and
Transparency

Brad Rourke



Kettering research suggests that one problem that gets in the way of democracy functioning as it should is a growing gap between the institutions meant to aid citizens in exerting control over their future and the citizens themselves. Institutions and citizens sometimes work at cross-purposes, and there is a widespread sense of mutual mistrust. Institutions doubt citizens have much to offer, while citizens often feel that institu-

tions are only concerned with furthering their own aims. So one of the things Kettering studies is ways that institutions' and citizens' work can come into greater alignment.

Institutions are not just large governmental constructs or national bureaucracies. The so-called "social sector" is filled with institutions—organizations established on behalf of the public. One such field is organized philanthropy.

Philanthropy, like most institutions, is now facing a growing public call for accountability; this provides an opportunity for the field to engage in stocktaking on the issue. Kettering research as well as that by others suggests that what citizens mean by "accountability" and what institutional actors do in response is often very different. Kettering wanted to know what this important field makes of the increasing emphasis on accountability, so we worked with Philanthropy for Active Civic Education (PACE), a group of foundations that fund initiatives related to democracy, to engage a number of philanthropy and other nonprofit leaders in a series of discussions on this issue. The results are collected in a new Kettering/PACE report, *Philanthropy and the Limits of Accountability: A Relationship of Respect and Clarity*.

The conversations that this report details did not result in a series of pronouncements or a five-point plan of action—nor were they intended to. The intent was to describe the kind of conversation that philanthropy leaders feel the field ought to have about this topic.

Following are four main insights from the report, along with questions these insights suggest. These questions could stimulate greater stocktaking in the future.

1 Philanthropy is at a crossroads as it experiences increased pressure from all sides to solve public problems and to be more accountable both for outcomes and its relationship with communities.

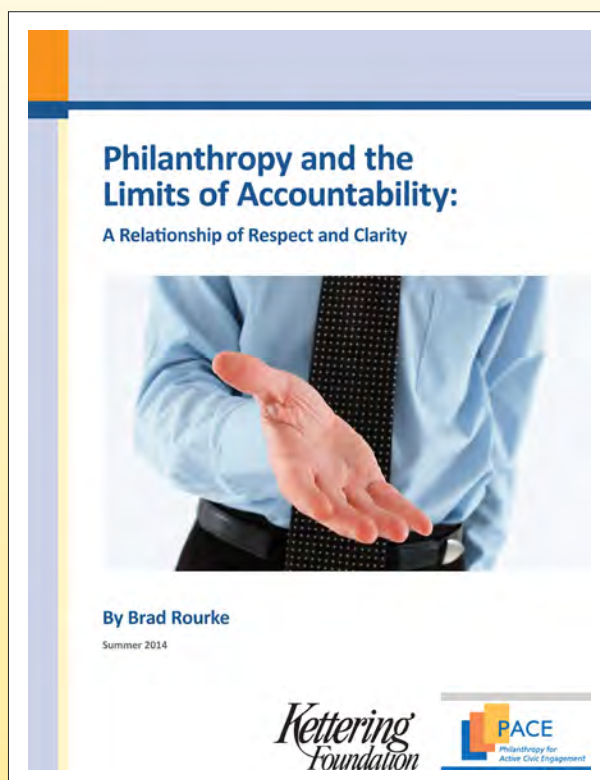
Foundations have few external pressures beyond a set of *pro forma* legal operational requirements imposed by the

ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING AND PACE

Philanthropy and the Limits of Accountability

A Relationship of Respect and Clarity

by Brad Rourke



Kettering Foundation and PACE | 2014
FREE • 17 pages

Philanthropy and the Limits of Accountability: A Relationship of Respect and Clarity, a joint effort by the Kettering Foundation and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), explores how the field of organized philanthropy might think about responding to a growing movement for accountability and transparency. The report distills the results of three roundtables, in addition to one-on-one conversations, with philanthropic and nonprofit leaders about how the issues of transparency and accountability might soon impact the field of philanthropy.

To download this FREE publication, visit www.kettering.org.

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federal and state governments, yet among those within philanthropy, there is often a sense of being besieged. There is almost a bunker mentality.

Participants in these conversations point to many efforts by different levels of government that they see as threatening their ability to do their work. Foundation leaders sense a kind of growing isolation coupled with greater need to show impact. Philanthropic institutions themselves are changing, becoming both more independent and at the same time more reliant on a relationship with the public. Philanthropy is beginning to occupy a space that goes beyond the supplemental role it has traditionally played in public life.

Research suggests that there is a gap between the institutional view of accountability and what citizens mean when they think about it. Citizens want to feel that they can trust institutions and that they are in some sort of relationship together.

The sector is more and more often stepping in to play a role that had previously been the exclusive purview of the public sector.

Such public activities are difficult without a working relationship with the public, and yet how do institutions that consider themselves private find ways to constructively engage with citizens? The more it occupies this public space—and is seen as responsible for doing so—the more philanthropy will need to consider how to engage the public in their decision-making and priority-setting processes.

Philanthropy might ask: What are our responsibilities as institutions with a growing public role and public trust?

2 Transparency may be a necessary component of accountability, but it is not sufficient—and too often may be obfuscating.

One way institutions try to demonstrate accountability is through *transparency*. Institutional actors think that if the public could see the data for themselves then they would trust institutional decisions more. No one denies that transparency is an important component to establishing and maintaining trust between philanthropy and the broader public. Sunlight is a critical disinfectant. But there are problems, too, according to the participants in these conversations.

Relying solely on transparency places the burden of responsibility on the public. The public must be able to make sense of the information being provided. This can be problematic in the case of large amounts of data. People may (rightly) see these massive troves of data as obfuscating, a way to actually decrease accountability.

One conversation participant described

how efforts to be accountable through transparency could create problems:

In the end, we need some smart person, or librarian or whoever, to take all that data and process it, and be able to develop a relationship where you can have a conversation about performance that is coherent, where you can say, “So here’s the deal. We’ve looked at this [data], and so it does look like this school’s getting a little better, but when we look at it, it’s really the kids from that side of Broadway, not this side of Broadway.” [You need to be able] to actually make sense of it.

The idea that transparency, by itself, is just not helpful was a common theme. Foundations, these participants felt, needed to take the next step and go beyond transparency.

Philanthropy might ask: How can we add clarity and context to transparency?

3 Strategic philanthropy and collective impact initiatives may paradoxically tend to make philanthropic organizations seem less accountable.

Philanthropy works mainly through intermediaries. Foundations give money to others who in turn do work. Many foundations, seeing intractable problems in communities, are trying to structure their grantmaking so that there are clear and measurable results that can be achieved.

This desire for impact is at the heart of a growing body of thought that sees accountability as inextricably linked to institutional performance—linked to outcomes. This has given rise to a number of approaches, including *strategic philanthropy*, *impact investing*, and *collective impact*. But with the kinds of difficult public problems that philanthropy increasingly takes responsibility for, such approaches can be problematic. The empirical questions (what will achieve impact?) are one thing, but since these are public questions, they are also wrapped in normative issues: what *should* we do?

Participants in these conversations pointed out that strategic philanthropy is a double-edged sword. As foundations try to show more impact, they may take actions that can appear unilateral and unaccountable. According to the participants in these conversations, foundations are increasingly choosing and even implementing solutions themselves—as opposed to responding to the ideas of others. According to one:

There’s a rather strong strain . . . of foundations now deciding that they know what the problem is and that they know what the solution is and that they’re now going to be sub-

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contracting [with nonprofits] to actually do the work as if they are paid employees or paid consultants.

Philanthropy might ask: What is our real responsibility for showing impact? How much can or should we control?

4 Accountability isn't just about outcomes; it's also about relationships.

Research suggests that there is a gap between the institutional view of accountability and what citizens mean when they think about it. Citizens want to feel that they can trust institutions and that they are in some sort of relationship together. In a Public Agenda study for Kettering, *Don't Count Us Out*, citizens focused on tangible evidence of being respected: Will they pick up the phone if I call? Is there someone I can talk to about my concerns? Do they listen to people like me?

Institutional leaders view accountability differently than citizens. An institutional response will seek to show evidence of effectiveness and impact, of good processes fairly followed, of open data, and of openness to scrutiny. These add up to accountability. But others see accountability as inherently relational in nature. Results and transparency are necessary—but not sufficient.

One conversation participant summed it up: "It's not just relationships, and it's not just outcomes or metrics. It's both." Another said: "There is a deep discontent among grant recipients, including the ones that get the money, with the way in which decisions are made and the lack of humility, engagement, discussion with what's going on."

Participants in these conversations called for an approach to accountability rooted in respect for the role of the public and that seeks to provide clarity about

what institutions are trying to do and why they are trying to do it.

Such a relational view of accountability assumes a different role for institutions. Rather than existing in order to do their own work, or to work on behalf of citizens, institutions are one of many means by which citizens have a hand in acting.

Philanthropy might ask: How can we improve our working relationship with citizens and demonstrate respect?

As philanthropy responds to the changed world and its emerging new role, it might do well to look for ways to consider these questions, mindful also of the fundamental relationship of respect and clarity that their publics seek.

Moving forward, Kettering and PACE hope to take part in further conversations on these questions as philanthropy continues to take stock.

Brad Rourke is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at brouke@kettering.org.

ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING FOUNDATION

Philanthropy and the Regeneration of Community Democracy

by Peter H. Pennekamp with Anne Focke

The inquiry described in this Kettering Foundation occasional paper is located within a current debate in philanthropy and among its critics about the behavior of public foundations (including community foundations) and private foundations alike. Peter Pennekamp, who was the executive director of the Humboldt Area Foundation from 1993 to 2012, explores the questions of why and how community democracy can be both a cultural choice and an organizing system for philanthropy. Pennekamp accomplishes this through stories that demonstrate the principles and practices, continually refined by experiences in Northern California communities and by lessons from other communities.



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