

David Mathews – Our Democracy Is in Serious Trouble, But Still Resilient ©

Democracy's troubles aren't abstract; Americans have felt them personally. People have been shocked by what has been happening in the country. We have been whipsawed between despair and hope.

A deadly coronavirus shook the economy. The loss of lives reignited conflict over racial justice.¹ Then, January 6, 2021. All of this happened when the country appeared so deeply divided it seemed impossible to solve problems that require us to work together.

But maybe that isn't the whole story. Studies have shown hidden common ground on many issues. And, though not research, users of the TikTok app were challenged to share the qualities they admired in people of the opposing political party. Republicans said they admired Democrats for such things as their concern for the environment, their commitment to equality, and their passion for their beliefs. Democrats saw merit in Republicans' emphasis on hard work, respect for veterans, and belief in free speech for all.² Research has also shown that most all Americans agree on one thing—the country has been too divided.³

By 2021, people appeared to be regaining some of the steely optimism that has been one of our country's defining characteristics. Americans have been pragmatic problem solvers. Our democracy has been tested before and has bounced back. But not overnight.

It is important to recognize that what has happened in the country has deep roots. Destructive forces have been working underneath the surface for decades, seldom recognized and even less often addressed. For some, the America they thought had been a bright citadel on a hill was being destroyed and they were outraged. For others, the values they believed their country prized were being denied in the harsh realities of everyday life—not plenty, but poverty; not justice, but injustice. Also disturbing, America, itself, appeared to be fragmented into a jumble of disconnected pieces. Pundits said we were having a national identity crisis; we didn't seem to know who we were as Americans.

If one election didn't cause all of these problems, is it realistic to expect another to solve all of them?

¹ Susan Page and Veronica Bravo, "The year that was: A global pandemic, racial protests, a president-elect. Oh, and impeachment," *USA TODAY*, Dec. 28, 2020.

² See the 118,951 responses to @s.nesquik, "If you're a Democrat, say one nice thing about Republicans; If you're a Republican, say one nice thing about Democrats," (January 25, 2021), <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMeJdftwf/> (accessed March 3, 2021).

³ Susan Page, "Divided we Fall? Americans See Our Angry Political Debate as a 'Big Problem,'" *USA TODAY*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/hiddencommonground/2019/12/05/hidden-common-ground-americans-divided-politics-see-civility/4282301002/> (accessed March 3, 2021).

The Work Ahead

To sustain our hopes, there is work to be done by citizens and our governing institutions, which are both governmental and nongovernmental. They include those in media, education, philanthropy, and civic life. An account of the research that my colleagues and I at the Kettering Foundation have drawn on to explain this work is now in a small book, *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea* (available at <https://www.kettering.org/catalog/product/with-the-people-introduction-to-an-idea>). We are also finishing a larger, more detailed version.

The book's title was inspired by Abraham Lincoln's ideal of a government of, by, and for the people. Because there are doubts today about whether we have any of those, we thought we might add another preposition. What about governing more *with* the people? That isn't a radical idea; in fact, we see it applied when there is a natural disaster like a pandemic and citizens have an essential role to play.

Institutions, Experts, and Citizens: Troubled Relationships

Institutions alone can't solve all of the country's problems, nor can our most expert professionals. As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her Nobel prize-winning research, there are things that citizens working together must do to empower institutions and their skilled professionals.

A strategy of people working with our governing institutions requires citizens who are seen, and who see themselves, as producers not just constituents and consumers. That's the greatest challenge to a *with* strategy, not because Americans lack the ability, but because many of our institutions have little experience working *with* citizens as other than volunteers helping institutions do their work.

In response to the loss of public confidence, institutions have launched many laudable, participatory initiatives. However, they haven't been effective in stemming a long simmering public distrust of our governing institutions and their professional authority. Institutions usually rely on data and facts to show they are effective. But the real problem is often the lack of a trusting relationship with citizens, one based on shared concerns. Our governing institutions have to invent better ways to regain their legitimacy. And I think they can be creative.

Problems Behind Problems

As early as 1964, the trust people had that the government would do the right thing for the country began to decline. This was the first sign of what would become an avalanche that would reach other governing institutions. Many Americans, for different reasons, felt that they weren't recognized, understood, or treated fairly by these institutions. The criticisms were more than the usual complaints about poor service and bureaucratic red tape. The institutions didn't seem to think people were competent to choose for themselves. And people sensed that they were looked down upon or treated with contempt. Some reacted as though the country they believed belonged to them had been taken away. Others believed that what had been

promised them had never been delivered. All felt they had lost something invaluable and had just grievances. Their politics has been called a politics of resentment.⁴

A few scholars have recognized that while there are very different reasons for these feelings of loss and resentment, they can produce similar reactions. However, in a divided society, groups of aggrieved citizens are more likely to be organized into opposing camps. And people don't sense they have the power that citizens have often had by joining forces in broad-based coalitions.

What Kind of Democracy?

Coming together across dividing lines may benefit from looking more closely at what everyone means when talking about, "democracy," a common word often claimed by opposing groups. I am not noting this to argue for one "correct" definition but rather to suggest that we value much the same things—being treated fairly, everyone having a voice, respect for the law.⁵ These are democratic values. Our differences are actually over the *application* of those values. That being the case, we might talk more in practical, deliberative, problem-solving ways to decide and act on what needs preserving and what needs changing. Maybe looking at various options for getting results, not just one, would help people appreciate how complex the issues facing us are. And perhaps those deliberations would increase the chances of being able to work together with those who disagree with us. Some research has shown how that can happen, which is also reported in the book.

The most common understanding is that democracy is a system of contested elections leading to representative government. Elections are unquestionably important. However, is all that the public should do is to give its consent to leaders who are better at governing? Can We the People just vote and go home after? Can a strong democracy be essentially citizenless? An argument has been made that our troubles come from having too much democracy; a divided and often uninformed public can't govern itself.

That argument can't be brushed aside. But *With the People* asks its readers to consider a broader and much older, more civic, understanding of democracy, one in which the citizenry

⁴ This analysis is based on reports going back to Robert Teeters' analysis of public opinion in 1976, including Robert Teeter, "The Present National Political Attitude as Determined by Pre-Election Polls," November 1976, Box 62, Folder "Post-Election Analysis—Speeches and Reports (2)," Robert Teeter Papers, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI. Other studies we have found useful include Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind* (New York: The Free Press, 1983) and Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government* (Pew Research Center, November 2015). Also, Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: New Press, 2016); Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999 [1986]), 47: "The two jostling strains in American thought agree more than they disagree. Both are committed to individual liberty, the constitutional state and the rule of law. Both have their reciprocal functions in preserving the body politics. Both have their indispensable roles in the dialectic of public policy. They are indissoluble partners in the great adventure of democracy."

does act, both through governing institutions and its own work. Could it be that electoral or institutional democracy depends on civic democracy, although we may no longer recognize this critical connection? Perhaps we should think of democracy as an interdependent ecology rather than only a collection of institutions. Civic life serves as the political wetlands for institutional democracy and the breeding ground for change, good or bad. We neglect its importance at our peril.

Another common understanding is that “democracy” is the name for everything going on in the country. And because some don’t like what is going on, and don’t believe they can change it, they don’t like democracy. It isn’t about them. It’s about parties, politicians, and those who run the government. Unfortunately, this understanding is found in a small but significant number of young people. This troubling trend suggests we might rethink a civic education that has little to say about civic life beyond service to others.

While *With the People* isn’t full of democratic theory, it does take into consideration ideas that have practical, everyday use in helping people recognize the power they have in themselves to make common causes, even with those they will always differ. Democracy isn’t about eliminating all differences and coming to full agreement. It’s about using differences to act more effectively rather than letting them degenerate into divisiveness. We have never been in full agreement, not even at the country’s founding, when less than a majority favored a Revolution. Some differences in experiences, perspectives, and abilities have actually made us stronger.

Managing disagreements has to be ongoing in any relationship. Democracy has been called more a journey than a final destination. But there is no road map. We have to renegotiate the next route with our fellow travelers every step along the way.

American democracy has survived a bloody Civil War, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the protest over the Vietnam War to mention just a few of the tests. Although at times, quite at odds with one another, our system has been more like rubber than stone. It stretches rather than cracks. Democracy in the United States has proven amazingly adaptive and resilient. That’s a legacy that can serve us well now.⁶

⁶ In a January 26, 2021 memo on “A History of Political Tumult in the United States,” which will be published as a Kettering Foundation white paper, Kettering program officer Alex Lovit looked at “the paradox at the center of American political history: that a system in perpetual political crisis, in which politicians routinely describe their opponents as threatening to overturn democracy, should be the oldest continuous democratic government in the world.” Works cited include Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018); Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics, Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 [1993]); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999 [1986]); Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1981); and James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government, Revised Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998 [1990]).