MAKING CHOICES TOGETHER

The Power Of Public Deliberation

October 2003
# Table of Contents

The Case for Public Deliberation ................................................................. 1
People Who Deliberate. ............................................................................... 2
The History of Public Deliberation ............................................................... 5
Why Deliberate? ........................................................................................... 8
What Is Public Deliberation and How Is It Different? ................................. 10
What Does Deliberation Produce? ............................................................... 14
What Can We Do with the Products of Deliberation? ................................. 18
Deliberation Changes Our Opinions of Others’ Opinions .............................. 22
Deliberation Gave Focus to His Community Involvement ............................ 23
Deliberation Increases the Capacity of a Community to Act ......................... 24
Organizing Forums ...................................................................................... 25
Moderating for Deliberation ....................................................................... 27
Where Do I Go to Get Started? .................................................................. 30
Recommended Reading ............................................................................... 32
The purpose of this booklet is to provide three kinds of information to persons interested in developing deliberative democracy.

The first type of information consists of the basic ideas behind the practice of deliberative democracy. Pages 1 through 24 give examples of persons engaged in public politics through deliberation, a brief history of public deliberation, the reasons deliberation is needed, how deliberation differs from other forms of public talk, what deliberation produces, and what the results of deliberation do in making communities more effective.

The second consists of beginning tips for how to develop programs in deliberative democracy in your community. Pages 25 through 31 give suggestions on how to get started and key ideas about how to develop deliberative forums using National Issues Forums materials.

The third consists of guidance to further resources. Suggestions for further readings on deliberative democracy are found on page 32.

This information gives you a brief “primer” on the essential work of citizenship in a democracy.
The case for public deliberation can be put simply: For democratic politics to operate as it should, the public has to act. It is not enough to vote, not enough to understand or support our elected officials, not enough to merely have opinions or keep up with current affairs. Before people can act as a public, however, they first have to decide how.

Public deliberation is one name for the way we go about deciding how to act. In weighing — together — the costs and benefits of various approaches to solving problems, people become aware of the differences in the way others see those costs and benefits. That enables them to find courses of action that are consistent with what is valuable to the community as a whole. In that way, the public can define the public’s interests — issue by issue.

Public deliberation is neither a cure for all that ails politics nor a wondrous antidote for popular cynicism. Yet it is an essential part of democratic politics.
Young people are at risk in most American cities. Expelled from school, some roam the streets with nothing to do but get into trouble. But in Birmingham, Alabama, for years now, people have done more than just worry or complain about it.

Each year, a number of 11 to 15-year-olds are expelled for being involved in an assault or some incident involving a gun, knife, or other weapon.

The best these kids have to look forward to is returning to school the next fall already labeled as troublemakers, knowing they have to repeat a grade.

“What are you going to do with that person?” asked Peggy F. Sparks, senior executive director of Birmingham City Schools Parent, Community and Student Support Program. To address that question, Sparks has convened forums all over the city. City officials and staff from youth organizations served as moderators and recorders — roles that allowed them to participate but kept the meetings from being the usual “public hearings.”

The moderators encouraged participants of all ages to weigh carefully a variety of approaches to dealing with the problem, not just one or two specific solutions. The goal was to create some common ground for action, some sense of direction, and an appreciation for the interdependence of different purposes so people could act together.

Youth involved in problem solving

One of the directions participants settled on led to a program called CARES, or Comprehensive At Risk Educational Services, run by young people at eight high schools. Three hundred and fifty young people now serve on advisory councils and conduct weekly meetings, Sparks said.

Other programs that grew out of the forums include a teen employment program and Camp Birmingham, a youth-run camp for low-income youngsters.

CARES’ greatest success, however, is that it gives young people a chance to learn how to make difficult choices together. The program has given Sparks a much greater understanding of what young people think the problems are, and that helps her know how her department can engage them in solving their own problems.

From literacy to public life

To most people, it would have been a simple request. The 3-year-old wanted Daddy to read her a story from preschool. But when Walter Miles tried to fake his way through the simple tale, his daughter knew it wasn’t right. And that was when he decided it was time to learn to read.
The 41-year-old garage mechanic turned to South San Francisco’s Project Read literacy program, where he learned not only how to read, but how to participate in what he now calls “the outer ring” of his world. With the help of his tutor, he read a series of short books about public policy issues like freedom of speech and the high cost of health care. Then he attended deliberative forums held by the literacy council to try to make some decisions about these issues with others. At first, he only listened. Eventually, he asked himself, “Are you gonna get involved or are you just gonna leave it alone?” For years, he believed that if he kept his little corner of the world in order, that was all he needed to do. “But as we began to talk about the issues, what freedom of speech meant... keeping my opinion to myself was hurting me more than what I realized,” he said. “I decided, how could my world be peaceful and undisturbed if the rest of the world was disturbed? I have to get involved in the outer ring.”

Miles became heavily involved in a program called Key to Community, which encouraged young people to vote. When kids told him it was a waste of time to vote and asked why they should get involved, Miles pointed to his own experience and talked about how choices made now have consequences later. “By not getting involved now, it’s gonna hurt them in the next 10 years,” he said. “I didn’t catch on until I was in my early thirties what had happened to me.”

Miles clearly had a sense of humor about his struggles. He also seems to have made up for lost time and tried to help others avoid the mistakes he made. “I’m fightin’ back,” he said. Not everyone who is active in encouraging voting got involved through deliberative forums — but Walter Miles did. Deliberation seems to open a door to public life.

“Banding together”

Everyone at the forum in Grand Rapids knew the subject of kids killing kids was far from academic for one woman. She had lost two sons to senseless violence. One was killed in his apartment, the other as he stood in a phone booth. Yet she sat quietly as the others talked about what could be done to stop youth violence.

Then, toward the end of the forum, she spoke softly, saying something that summed up the sense of the meeting: “We’ve got to do something. We’ve got to band together to stop the violence.”

Weeks later, she helped spearhead a millage campaign that resulted in citizens agreeing to pay higher taxes to hire 95 more police officers to patrol the city.

Deliberation as community habit

These stories suggest that deliberation can get people more involved, cause them to join forces, and lead to new civic initiatives. They testify to certain effects deliberation has had, yet they don’t go to the deeper significance of deliberation, which isn’t captured by new programs or votes to raise revenues.

The stories yet to be told are about what decades of forums in cities like Grand Rapids have done to change the way a community approaches problems. In those not-so-obvious stories, citizens come to take more responsibility themselves for curbing violence. They make acting together a community habit. But those stories cannot be written until we find out if the teenagers in Birmingham grow up to be adults like Walter Miles, who see themselves as potential actors and not clients of a program.
Those stories can be written if people understand what deliberation is and know how to go about the hard work of making choices together. And that is the purpose of this book. Briefly put, deliberations aren’t just discussions to promote better understanding. They are the way we make the decisions that allow us to act together. People are challenged to face the unpleasant consequences of various options and to “work through” the often volatile emotions that are a part of making public decisions.

The results are not always as obvious as in the stories you’ve just read. Some say the biggest benefit is that forums help people get a handle on complex public policy issues or understand different points of view before they act. Others say participation makes them feel less isolated, more a part of a community, more disposed to join together in civic action. Still others say that years of forums have changed the way their communities approach decision making and problem solving. Repeated deliberation, they report, changes people, and that gives them the confidence that they can eventually change their communities.
Americans who deliberate today are tapping into one of our oldest and most distinctive political practices. In fact, it can even be argued that public deliberation was a major force in creating our country. Deliberative forums, called town meetings, began more than a hundred years before our Revolution and Constitution, paving the way for both.

Deliberative democracy has roots in many cultures and communities, among them, Massachusetts in the 1630s. With its grassy plain running down to the bay, Dorchester, Massachusetts, must have been an excellent place for livestock to graze. But the animals escaped through the fences. That led to two problems: first, how to protect the livestock; and second — the issue behind the issue — how to decide how to protect the livestock. Dorchester had no local government to address such problems. It didn’t even have an established forum for discussing public matters. The only gatherings were in church, and Sunday services were not the place to discuss such worldly matters as cows and goats.1

It is a shame the events that followed weren’t recorded in great detail. The exact words of the Dorchester townsfolk weren’t written down. But we do know that the Reverend John Maverick and other community leaders got together and set a course for American democracy. We can imagine Maverick and fellow colonists saying, “We have a problem. We need to talk about it. Let’s meet on Monday.”

In school, we are taught stirring phrases such as, “Give me liberty or give me death.” But the observation, “We have a problem; let’s talk about it,” should have been preserved as the quintessential American speech. Nearly every American has heard it and said it at one time or another.

Institutionalizing deliberation

The incidents that created the first town meetings established a political tradition. Colonists began to meet every month, not just when the cows got out. The Dorchester gathering led to an institution that became a foundation of America’s political system: the town meeting. These early town meetings, however, were not at all like today’s town meetings, where officials speak and sometimes answer questions. These were occasions in which people could reflect on and, to use John Adams’ word, “maturely” consider the great questions of the day.

The colonists, then, chose not to adopt (as might have been expected) the English municipal form of government. Instead, they ran the colony by town meetings or a “civil body politic.” The meetings had no authority behind them other than the power that came from the promises people made to one another to

---

1 For the details of the colonial town meetings, see Dorchester Antiquarian and Historical Society, History of the Town of Dorchester; Maude Pinney Kuhns, The “Mary and John”: A Story of the Founding of Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1630 (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1943); and James H. Stark, Dorchester Day: Two Hundred and Seventy-Ninth Anniversary of the Settlement of Dorchester, Dorchester Historical Society, 1909.
work together. These mutual promises or covenants were the bonds that held the colony together and were the basis for its common endeavors.²

“Committees of correspondence”

Citizens and public bodies continued their influence throughout the revolutionary and constitutional eras. In time, towns in Massachusetts and other colonies formed a network for political action. This network was formalized in 1772, when Samuel Adams established a 21-member “committee of correspondence” to create ties to other towns and to explain the colonists' position “to the world.” Within 15 months all but 2 of the colonies had established their own committees of correspondence. In this way, the tradition of talk in the town meetings grew even stronger. And the practice of uniting the small towns, and drawing authority from the people through them, set a powerful political precedent.³

By the time of the American Revolution, public attention had turned to the question of whether a war for independence could be successful against what was then the world’s greatest power. John Adams, from the town meetings of Braintree, Massachusetts, took on the task of defending the proposed Declaration of Independence. Adams’ faith in the Revolution was grounded in what he had learned about people and the power of their public forums. To those fearing failure in the Revolution he replied: “But we shall not fail. The cause will raise up armies; the cause will create navies. The people, the people, if we are true to them, will carry us, and will carry

themselves, gloriously, through this struggle. I care not how fickle other people have been found. I know the people of these Colonies.”⁴

Roots of the Constitution

The town meeting tradition prompted Thomas Jefferson to declare that “the vigor given to our revolution in its commencement” had been rooted in “little republics.” He believed that these little republics had “thrown the whole nation into energetic action.”⁵ These forums provided needed time for reflection and deliberation, which — as John Adams told his wife, Abigail — were much needed antidotes to hasty reactions.

The strength of the town meetings became the strength of the U.S. Constitution. Yet the Constitution doesn’t say how the public is to express itself (except, of course, by voting). Thomas Jefferson, sensitive to this omission, encouraged the spread of town meetings through what he called the ward system. He understood that, without places for the public to define its interest and create its own voice, the government could not govern effectively. Although the ward system didn’t take hold, town meetings became an American political tradition.

Public deliberation continues today, particularly in the civic and educational organizations that hold National Issues Forums (NIF).

Since 1982, in communities across America, these forums have brought citizens together to deliberate about a wide variety of issues and to begin making the hard choices involved in addressing them.


Forums like those you have just read about in Birmingham, San Francisco, and Grand Rapids are locally sponsored by a diverse network of organizations: neighborhood associations and junior leagues, senior citizens' centers and elementary schools, leadership programs and literacy programs, churches, and prisons.

**Issue books are starting point**

These organizations often use issue books prepared by the Kettering Foundation, Public Agenda, and other organizations. The books cover subjects important to the nation in every locality — issues like crime, jobs, health care, the environment, education.

Making Choices Together draws on what has been learned from thousands of those deliberative forums. It speaks to the questions people ask most often when deciding whether or not to join in public deliberations: Why deliberate? What is public deliberation and how is it different? What actually happens in a forum? What does deliberation produce and does it do any good? There is also a section on where you can go to get involved.
WHY DELIBERATE?

If you asked the early settlers of Dorchester this question, they might simply say “to make decisions about how to solve problems.” If you asked that question with the country’s entire history in mind, the answer might be that deliberation both created a public for American democracy and allowed that public to define the public’s interest. Surely that is a never-ending role for deliberation.

A range of reasons

If you ask the people who go to forums today, you are likely to hear reasons that range from personal growth to changing the political system. If some reasons are personal: They want to learn new decision-making skills they can use as citizens, to understand the issues better, to reconnect to the political process, or to regain a sense of agency. They were tired of being on the outside looking in.

Some people have their community in mind, or the role of their institution in the community. They might say they want to strengthen the civic infrastructure. Or they might say their institution was looking for a way to be a catalyst in the community and holding forums made sense, or they were looking for a better way to carry out their organization’s mission in the community. Some would say they participate because they care about the common good. Others would tell you they see forums as a way to motivate people to do things in the community.

Many see a connection between what goes on in the community and the tenor of the conversations people have: they wanted a different kind of dialogue, where people could speak “on the same plane” even though they were from different sections of town. Others would say they wanted to be able to formulate their opinions without becoming someone’s enemy. They wanted an opportunity to hear other voices.

Changing ways of talking also seems to change relationships, as reflected in the following kinds of comments:

“What you need is a redneck like me and a black fireman over there to come together and talk about crime, and realize the other person is not so bad. We’ll...leave talking to each other. The attitude of the whole group will improve.”

“A shared destiny”

“The more we get together and talk, the more we discover that we have a shared future and a shared destiny.”

Another typical comment is: “We wanted a dialogue that taught respect or we were looking for another way to deal with conflict.”

People often come to forums looking for a different way to approach issues and deal with community problems. They say things like, “We were concerned

---

about issues that weren't being addressed by the community as a whole. We were
tired of having issues framed divisively and wanted a dialogue that would help
us manage our problems better. We wanted to understand the 'gray areas' in issues
framed around absolutes. We wanted to open up new avenues to do something.
We wanted a way to imagine new possibilities that people would act on, or we
were looking for a 'stepping stone' to action."

Being concerned about civic action doesn't preclude creating a better relation-
ship with governments. People say they are looking for a better way to gov-
ern or a different way to connect to officeholders. People also say they delib-
erate because they want to create a genuinely public voice in their community
and they want officials to hear that voice.

Not everyone finds deliberation useful. Some people leave forums frustrated
because their expectations aren't realized as soon as they thought they would be.
Most, however, believe the effects are cumulative and are convinced a public
dialogue can have a lasting influence. And they do want something that will
endure because they don't just want to make improvements, they want a differ-
ent kind of politics.

If there is any one theme that runs through these varied comments, it is that
people see problems they think require more action by more citizens. And they
want better informed public action. They see deliberation as the first step. One
implication in what they are saying is that, before people can act together as a
public, they have to be able to decide how to act together.
To increase the chances that our decisions will be wise, we can’t just sound off, argue over solutions, or clarify our values. We have to struggle with the hard choices that every issue entails, considering the pros and cons of each option. That is deliberation in a nutshell. Deliberation helps us know if our decisions are sound — helps us decide if we are willing to accept the consequences of the action we are about to take.

Most political discussions, however, are debates. Stories in the media turn politics into a never-ending series of contests. People get swept into taking sides; their energy goes into figuring out who or what they’re for or against.

Deliberation is different. It is neither a partisan argument where opposing sides try to win nor a casual conversation conducted with polite civility. Public deliberation is a means by which citizens make tough choices about basic purposes and directions for their communities and their country. It is a way of reasoning and talking together.

NIF deliberations are framed in terms of three or four options for dealing with an issue — never just two polar alternatives. Framing an issue in this way discourages the diatribes in which people lash out at one another with simplistic arguments.

**It is dialogue for weighing, not a debate for winning**

To deliberate is to weigh the benefits and costs of various options based on what is truly valuable to us. Think of the way people used to weigh gold on an old-fashioned scale. How much will each consequence tip the scale? What are the costs and benefits of doing what we want to do? Answering those questions requires a setting in which we can explore and test ideas about how to act.

Deliberation also involves weighing the views of others. Careful listening increases the chances that our choices will be sound because a wide range of people have pooled their experiences and insights. No one person or small group of people has all the experience and insight needed to decide what is best. That is why it is essential for an inclusive group of citizens to combine their perspectives.

While we can’t know for certain that we have made the right decision until we have acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate consequences and ask ourselves whether we would be willing to accept the worst possible case. Deliberation is looking before we leap.

**It is about what is most valuable to us, not just facts alone**

We have to deliberate to decide how to act in a way that achieves what is most valuable to us. When we are faced with a difficult choice, we try to get all the information we can. Facts certainly aren’t unimportant, and yet they aren’t enough to tell us what we should do. We use deliberation for those questions like, “How should we act?” when there is no fact or certainty that can give us an
answer. Facts tell us what is and we don’t have to deliberate about things we know. When making personal choices, for instance, in deciding whether to marry, no one goes to an encyclopedia and looks under “M.”

So, public deliberation takes us to facts, important as they are, and beyond, to things no book or expert can tell us, and that is what is truly valuable to us in our common life.

We shouldn’t confuse the choices we make about what is most important to us with simple preferences. We are tempted to think of choice as preference because citizens are often treated as though they are political consumers. Picking a candidate or voting in a referendum appears to be much like picking a brand of toothpaste or cereal. When we prefer, we consult our tastes. The consequences are not too great; we can always switch brands.

Choice — the kind of decision we make when we marry someone or decide on a career — causes us to dig deeper. Because the consequences are great, we have to think carefully about what they might be and whether or not we can accept them. We have to look inside ourselves to determine what is most valuable to us. These decisions will have serious, long-term consequences.

In making public choices, we seem to be motivated by a reservoir of things that have great meaning in our common life, our deepest concerns and convictions. These are the ends for which we live — such as the security of our families. They are also means or ways of behaving that we cherish — such as having the freedom or opportunity to realize our goals. Few people are unmoved by such considerations.

For example, the issue of terrorism revolves around a very basic concern: security. We are influenced, however, by different notions of security. We value the security that comes from the willingness to take immediate action against all threats; we also value the security that comes from maintaining a strong defensive shield to ward off danger. And we value the security that comes from being on good terms with those who seek to harm us.

Most people are motivated at least to some degree by all three of these notions of security. Most people feel more secure if they are stronger than their enemies or if they feel well protected from them. And most of us would rather be on relatively friendly terms with someone who is a potential threat.

In deliberating on what to do about terrorism, we become painfully aware that we can’t be guided by all these considerations and have a coherent consistent policy. We have to make decisions in light of competing motives.

A prerequisite to deliberation: Naming and framing issues in public terms

We can’t begin to make effective choices about how to act until we develop a deliberative framework. It must do two things: It must name the problem in public terms — that is, in a way that resonates with us. And it must capture diverse approaches to the problem, approaches that call attention to our everyday concerns.

Unfortunately, Americans often find problems named in a “foreign” language — in technical, expert, highly partisan, or ideological terms. A wide gap often separates the way issues are presented and the way people experience them. This makes it difficult for citizens to see a connection to what they hold dear.

Here is an example of the different take citizens often have on an issue: In the case of stopping the spread of drugs, people tend to see the problem as a family matter rather than simply a matter of enforcing the law or preventing drugs from entering the country. The problem brings into play deep concerns about the
decline of the family and the loss of personal responsibility. That perspective influences the way people “name” the problem. And the name we give a problem influences how we approach it; the name determines who will be available to deal with it and shapes the response that will emerge.

Finding out how the public sees a problem is also the key to finding out how citizens can “get their hands on” problems that require action. As in the case of drugs, when people find things they can do personally through their families or through common action, they are energized by a sense of possibility.

Naming a problem in public terms for common reference gives us a place to begin deliberation, but it masks the conflicts we have about how to deal with the problem. We must confront our conflicting motives — the many things we consider truly valuable and that pull us in different directions when we have to decide how to act. We must frame the various approaches to dealing with a problem in a way that allows us to confront and work through our inner conflicts as well as conflicts among us. Dealing with these conflicts or tensions makes choice work difficult.

For example, when it comes to our health, we want the best care, and we also want the most affordable care. Yet the better the care technically, the more costly and less affordable it is. Any policy for dealing with the costs of technically advanced health care runs squarely into this dilemma. Every option we come up with on this and similar issues will have both positive and negative implications for what we hold dear.

The conflicts we have to deal with in making choices together aren’t just conflicts between different individuals or interests, as in environmentalists opposing developers or conservatives opposing liberals. People in one of those camps are not likely to be in the other. When it comes to the things most important to human beings, however, most of us are often in the same camp. Recall the terrorism example and the common motives that surface in that issue.

Despite sharing political motivations, however, different people order and apply what they find valuable in different ways. Imagine it is Friday night. You come home from work late, dead tired. Your spouse, who also had a difficult week, wants to go out to dinner. Your children want you to take them to the movies. Your mother-in-law calls and...
invites you over for dinner. And no sooner have you put down the phone than your boss calls and asks if you would come back to the office for two more hours. Your marriage, your children, your job, and your mother-in-law are all valuable, but you still have to decide what you should do as a family on this particular evening. You can’t resolve the dilemma by doing away with one of the things you hold dear. And you can’t do everything everyone asks of you. What is more, there is no authority that can give you the “right” answer. You can’t escape the dilemma of considering the circumstances, on the one hand, and what you think is most important, on the other, and then doing the hard work of finding the best fit.

That is very much like the dilemma we face in public life when making a policy choice. There is no escaping contradictory pulls and tugs, no escaping the constraints on what we can do — and no escaping the feelings that arise from such dilemmas.

While these conflicts are unavoidable, deliberation helps us recognize that the tensions are not so much between us as among and even within us. That helps us “work through” the strong emotions that are part of any major decision.

“Working through” limitations: Combining reason and emotion

The term “work through” aptly describes what we do in making choices: we have to get past our initial reactions and reach a point where we are again in enough control to make sound choices about our future. As we face up to consequences, we often react with a sense of shock akin to the sense of loss people feel in the face of personal crisis. Daniel Yankelovich, noted survey researcher, tells the story of a man in his mid-fifties who learns that he will not receive the pension he had been counting on for his retirement. At first he is angry, incredulous, suspicious, and depressed. Nonetheless, over time, he regains his composure by “working through” the crisis. He might find an alternative source of income or make some tradeoffs so he can live on less. In any event, he reorients his thinking and emerges from the emotional storms in ways that make it possible for him to act in his best interest.

In public deliberation, people have to work through comparable difficulties inherent in all policy decisions. This work requires talking through, not just talking about issues.
WHAT DOES DELIBERATION PRODUCE?

Americans are intensely practical. If they spend time deliberating, they want assurances that their efforts will produce something useful. So what are the outcomes of deliberation?

Changes in people

Based on the results of thousands of forums, the initial effects seem to be personal. Repeated deliberations change people. Participants say they get a better handle on issues; that is, they are able to put particular issues in a larger context and make connections between different issues — all of which helps them understand what the issues really mean. People then approach policy questions more realistically. Self-interests tend to broaden. The experience of deliberating with others makes citizens more confident; they feel they own their opinions and are able to voice them.

A study of citizen deliberations by Public Agenda found that about half the participants (53 percent) change their minds. A much larger percentage (71 percent) said they have second thoughts about their opinions, even though they did not change their minds. More than three-fourths (78 percent) say they encountered viewpoints different from their own and thought those views were good.7

A single forum isn’t likely to change deeply held beliefs about political participation any more than one trip to a gym will convince us of the benefits of regular exercise. But those who have been in a number of forums say they start reading or listening to the news more — and in a different way — looking for the options and their consequences. They also report becoming more involved in civic activities. Perhaps changing opinions of others’ opinions prompts people to see new possibilities for working together. Forum participants come to see themselves as political actors, not just clients or consumers.

As one study on the effects of NIF deliberations reported: “People learn that they are capable of understanding complex issues, saying reasonable things about them, reaching reasonable judgments about what to do.” The study went on to say that, as people deliberate, they see there is no faceless “they” to blame, that problems arise out of conflicting motives and actions that Americans did or didn’t take. For example, deliberative citizens are more likely to say that the desire to spend without raising taxes has intensified the budget deficit. Deliberative forums prompt people to recognize they are often responsible for significant parts of their problems. They then reason that, if they can create problems, they also must have the capacity to begin to manage them more effectively.8

Involvement — and a public

These changes are possible because deliberation seems to have the power to get people to take the first step to civic involvement. Deliberation also links these

---


8 Doble, Responding to the Critics of Deliberation, pp. 59-60.
people to one another, creating a public, which is a body of people joined together to deal with common problems.

Researchers from The Harwood Group asked people what kind of setting they look for when deciding whether or not to get involved. They said they look for open, exploratory conversations. They want to be able to weigh carefully all the options for action as well as the views of others. They want to test ideas, not just score points. They want to look at the shades of gray in issues that are often presented in extremes of black and white. They expect all the emotions associated with politics to come out — but without the acrimony that characterizes partisan debate. Although they never used the word, they look for public deliberation.

Americans use deliberative dialogue not only to understand issues but to decide whether they should act publicly. Situations that might prompt individuals to political action — finding drug paraphernalia in the neighborhood, worrying about what happens to a child in school, seeing oil spilled on a beach — lose their motivating power in time. Something else has to happen. People who have those experiences have to find others who will share their concerns, who also see how the problems affect what is valuable to them. They also have to find out if they can get their hands on a problem and really make a difference. Then they get involved. All of that happens — if it happens at all — in a particular kind of public dialogue, a deliberative dialogue.

While deliberation has been presented as something that happens in forums; it is rooted in common conversations. Deliberation may begin in a simple neighborly exchange over a backyard fence. People may start with personal concerns to find out if others share them. The conversation may turn into a larger neighborhood meeting. Eventually a town meeting may be held. Months may go by, even years, but eventually people reach decisions that determine whether and how they act.

In the process, the people who were just individuals living in the same area have become a public, a diverse body of interconnected citizens who share certain problems and who are joined in ways that allow them to act together to deal with those problems.

Civic responsibility

Making choices together in deliberation also promotes civic responsibility. Human beings take more responsibility for what they have participated in choosing than for what someone has chosen for them. Making decisions as a public is claiming responsibility for the future.

New knowledge

Deliberation allows people to do things they couldn’t do as isolated individuals, things that only a public can do. One of the most important is the ability of deliberation to produce a kind of knowledge that isn’t available from experts or polls. Scholars call it socially constructed knowledge. It consists of things we can know only when we engage one another — and never when we are alone. You might call this “public knowledge.” It tells us:

• how the public sees an issue or the framework people use in approaching the issue;
• what is valuable to people and where the tensions are among the many things that are important;
• what people are or aren’t willing to do to solve a problem; what consequences are or aren’t acceptable; and
• whether there is any shared sense of direction or possibility for a course of action based on interconnected purposes. (If so, it would amount to common ground for action, which is a range of publicly supportable actions.)

Deliberation produces public knowledge by synthesizing many different experiences and perspectives into a shared framework of meaning.

Imagine that you and your friends are standing around a building, trying to determine its condition so that you can make the decision of whether to repair it or tear it down. You could send your friends out to stand on different sides to inspect the building and then invite them back to give their sense of what should be done. Each person would report on the side he or she faced. Some might see an entrance in good repair, others a deteriorating back wall. Although the group could vote on which point of view to accept, that would only reveal which side was seen by the largest number of people. On the other hand, the group could exchange views, reflect on what they saw, and then integrate their views into a composite. They could blend many angles of vision into something new — a picture of the whole structure, different from any of the points of view with which the group began. By synthesizing many different angles of vision, by seeing things from more than one side, the group could see the whole afresh. Integrating views would more accurately reflect what the building was really like.

Note that deliberation does more than tolerate differences; it uses them. And it doesn’t destroy individual differences in a homogeneous amalgam; rather deliberation builds on each perspective in creating its integrated view of the whole.

Changing opinion into judgment

Public knowledge and the interaction that creates it have a very practical pur-
Yankelovich says a deliberative dialogue can “distill” judgment out of mere opinion. The problem with popular opinion is that it’s often contradictory and doesn’t account for what would happen if a policy were followed over the long term. For example, popular opinion says that the government should provide more services, yet this same opinion also insists that taxes should not be raised. The contradiction is obvious and has to be resolved before anyone should take such opinions seriously. This is also a case where popular opinion may be shortsighted: lower taxes will mean more disposable income in the near term, but schools, social services, and highways will eventually deteriorate without financial support. Are people willing to accept the consequences of the attractive prospect of lower taxes? No one can know what public judgment will be until people face up to the contradictions and the long-term consequences. That’s the job of deliberation.

Deliberation works

Over the long term, public deliberation seems to have done what it is supposed to do. Based on their analysis of public responses to thousands of questions on a variety of policy issues over 50 years, public opinion researchers Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro found that, contrary to the perception that citizens are irrational, inconsistent, and fickle, citizens’ long-term attitudes have been quite consistent, rational, and stable. They found public attitudes to be stable in that they change incrementally in understandable responses to real change in circumstances. Their attitudes were reasonable in that people had clear reasons for them. And the public’s views were consistent in that the policies people favored corresponded to what they considered valuable.

Why have public policy preferences, over time and on the whole, been so consistent, rational, and stable? Page and Shapiro think that it is because the “cool and deliberative sense of the community” prevailed.

---

Even if Americans are convinced that public deliberation produces something, they want to know what can be done with these “products.” Many people ask if this kind of public talk has any role in making national policy; others are more interested in how public deliberation might affect community action. Public deliberation’s products have two principal uses: One is to make public action — the action citizens take — possible. The other is to inform the policies of governments and, in the process, help change the often troubled relationships between citizens and officeholders.

Make public action possible

Democracies depend on public action. Public action isn’t the same as the action of special interest groups; it is comprehensive or inclusive rather than categorical. And it isn’t the same as governmental or institutional action, which is uniform, linear, and usually coordinated by some administrative agency. In these cases, the lines of interaction are vertical — from officials down to citizens and from citizens up (or down) to officials. Public action is richly diverse with many people doing their own thing. The lines of interaction are horizontal rather than vertical. It is eye-to-eye, shoulder-to-shoulder, citizen-to-citizen. Public action isn’t administratively coordinated, yet it is coherent and mutually reinforcing because all of the actions serve related purposes. Public action is not linear, beginning at one point and ending at another. It is a more organic, ever-repeating, series of activities. An illustration is citizens working together to restore a park by all pitching in to clean up the trash and plant trees. Public action is powerful because each piece reinforces the other; it is complementary, and so the whole of the effort can be greater than the sum of the parts.

Without public action, institutional action is often ineffective. Think of the way a good neighborhood watch program helps a police department do its job. Also, think of the way a good piece of cloth, the sleeve of your jacket, results from the interweaving of vertical and lateral threads. Without both, your elbow would poke out of your sleeve every time you bent your arm.

What stimulates public action and makes it complementary? Public deliberation. While deliberation doesn’t end in total agreement, it can point people in a particular direction and give them a foundation for identifying sharable or interconnected purposes. Shared purposes allow for a variety of actions that fit together and reinforce one another because they have the same objectives. Without a sense of purpose and direction, no amount of control can keep all activities pointing toward the same end.

Think of public action as a potluck dinner. What keeps the dinner from being all desserts is that the people discuss beforehand what needs to be done and then divide up the responsibilities. No authority controls potluck dinners; no contracts are ever signed. Still, these dinners happen all the time. They happen because people are aware of what others are doing and don’t need to be told what to bring.
Find a way to work together even when we don't agree

A shared sense of direction and an awareness of the interdependence of purposes was described earlier as “common ground for action,” which is important to distinguish from “seeking common ground,” consensus, and compromise.

First of all, common ground for action isn't the same as having something in common, like a love of cats, nor is it the same as compromise. In compromise, people want different things but split the difference. And it is not consensus or agreement, everyone wanting the same thing.

While these forms of unity are wonderful, communities often have to solve their problems with citizens who don't see eye-to-eye and are probably never going to be in agreement. That doesn't mean progress isn't possible.

Deliberation helps us find what is between agreement and disagreement, which is where most of us live our lives. We are seldom in total agreement even with those closest to us — and we aren't in total disagreement either. We are in-between, and that is what deliberation helps us identify — what we can live with.

Inform officials about what is politically possible

One of the questions citizens ask is whether those in government pay any attention to public deliberations. Certainly deliberation produces information (public knowledge) that officeholders need and can't get from any other source. And research shows that those in office look for this kind of help from the public in certain situations. Unfortunately, citizens don't always believe this. Mutual misunderstanding grows out of differences in the way people in and out of government see their roles. And opportunities to change the relationship are missed.

Most officials believe they bear the responsibility for developing and implementing solutions. They see themselves as the guardians of the true public interest. Being responsible means managing the public so that people will accept the solutions they have developed. Their job, as they see it, is “to bring the public along.” That involves building broad-based support for a solution and working with the media to ensure that coverage does not sensationalize conflicts. Throughout the process, officials try to shape both public attitudes and the amount of public involvement. As they see it, that is the right way to involve the public. But that is not the way many citizens see their role. More and more, citizens don't want to be “managed,” treated as consumers, or sold solutions.

Ironically, from the citizen's point of view, the better officials are as guardians, the more objectionable they can be.
Guardians may not want people to do much except vote and express grievances, neither of which citizens see as an adequate vehicle for participating fully in politics.

In certain situations, however, the job description for guardians isn’t applicable to the problems officials face. They often face situations in which the nature of the problem is unclear, the goals of the public aren’t defined, or values are at issue and conflict has gotten out of hand. These are times when they need the public. Officials are frustrated when trade-offs have to be made in situations where there is no public consensus about which choice to make. They also are stymied when political gridlock brought on by interest group conflicts shuts down the machinery of government.

In these situations, officials need citizens, not just as voters, but as active participants in defining what is in the larger public interest.

While citizens despair of having any influence on officeholders, the long-term evidence is that public judgment does, in fact, shape the major policies of our government, though maybe not in the way Americans think it does.

When people ask if public deliberation influences the positions that officeholders and governments take on issues, they often want an unqualified yes or no answer. Either response would miss the way deliberation influences policy, which is gradually and cumulatively. The reality is that although public deliberations can affect policy-making, they rarely do so overnight — and for good reason. Most political issues, even the problems of one community, require that we take time to understand, plan for, and act on them. On major issues, it can take a decade or more to change policy. The role of deliberation is to keep that long journey on track and out of unproductive complaining and blaming.

Does public deliberation eventually affect official policy-making? There is evidence that it does. Fortunately, we have Page and Shapiro’s study that found many issues where public opinion developed independent of government policy and paved the way for a change in that policy. For instance, the gradual change toward favoring more pragmatic relations with what we once called Red China shows how public opinion anticipated and provided a foundation for what Presidents Nixon and Carter would do two decades later.

**Change relations between citizens and officeholders**

Officeholders are often as frustrated by their relationship with citizens as citizens are with them. Officials may genuinely want to work with people but they face some serious obstacles that others need to understand. Officeholders who listen in forums may be attacked for not taking strong positions. They may have trouble working with other officials who think they are too open with the public. Interest groups may attack them for deliberating with citizens rather than negotiating with them. The attacking groups sometimes oppose framing issues in terms other
than those they prefer; they may criticize officials who embrace a larger framework.

Citizens seldom appreciate these problems and so may not do anything to help those in office who would generally like a more productive way of working together. However, if the often counter-productive relationship between people and the government is going to change, citizens are going to have to reach out. Those in deliberative forums have a powerful tool they can use.

Not only is the information produced in deliberative forums useful, the forums themselves create a setting for a better exchange than the usual hearings produce — provided, of course, that citizens let officeholders really participate, which means not insisting that they make speeches or take official positions. They have to be able to explore and test ideas too.

Imagine an official who attends a forum on the condition that he or she be allowed to see how citizens deal with the tough choices before explaining how the “forum” in the legislature or city council has dealt with the same choices. Imagine a setting where citizens don’t ask officials the usual question, “What are you going to do for us?” and instead draw officeholders into their deliberations by saying in effect: “Here is what our experiences with this issue are, here is what we see as the tension, and here is how we have tried to resolve that tension (recognizing the downside of the approach we like best). Now tell us what your experiences are, how you see the tension, and how you would try to resolve it.” Conversations like these would certainly change the relationship between citizens and officeholders as it is today.

Meet the public’s undeleagable responsibilities

Finally, it should be said that the work of deliberation and the products from that work are indispensable in helping citizens meet responsibilities that can’t be delegated to governments. There are some things that a democratic citizenry must do for a representative government to work. Even the best governments can’t create their own legitimacy. They can’t define their own purposes, set the standards by which they will operate, or chart the basic directions they are to follow. Although we often expect them to, governments can’t make and sustain tough decisions on issues that we as citizens are unwilling to make or support. Only a public can do these things.

Moreover, democratic governments need broad public support if they are to act consistently over the long term. Their foundations are in the common ground for action that only citizens can create. Governments can build common highways for us, but not common ground for action. And governments — even the most powerful — cannot generate the public will needed for effective political action. Governments can command obedience but they cannot create will.

Finally, it is up to us as members of a public to transform private individuals into citizens, people who are political actors. Citizens can create governments but governments can’t create citizens. Only citizens can do that because individuals become citizens by joining in public work.
It was a unique approach: Get people from both sides of the abortion issue together in a public forum. The result? People who normally talked to one another only in anger suddenly were listening to each other.

Longtime forum organizer Jule Zimet of El Paso, Texas, said that the forum is one of her favorite examples of how deliberation converts popular opinion, which is comparatively narrow and shallow, into public judgment, which takes into account the important reasons others have for holding different points of view. That conversion is made difficult by the way we’re trained. “Our culture trains us to debate people,” she said. “So we’re always listening for points of disagreement.”

Zimet said she has been amazed by the way deliberative forums help people learn to work together after realizing that, in addition to their differences, they have purposes that overlap. But she has been even more amazed by the changes she has seen in herself. “I’d been on one side of that issue for as long as I can remember,” she said. While working on the forum, she realized she had assumed if she gave an inch on the issue, “they” would take a mile. “I gained a lot of respect for the other side,” she said. Although she did not change her basic position, Zimet said, her views became less black and white and much less harsh.

She has seen similar changes occur in others involved in deliberative forums. One opinionated woman who helped plan the abortion forum also participated in a later forum about freedom of speech. When Zimet asked what the woman thought of inviting a certain person to present an opposing point of view, the woman said, “We need to have that opinion well represented. I don’t have to sit next to him.” Then, after the forum, Zimet said she found the two of them together. “They were talking about the trends in society that disturbed them both.”

“We learn to listen quite differently (through NIF),” Zimet said. “You end up with trust on a very different level. That’s the basis for making things happen in a community.”
For Robert Arroyo, deliberation has made a difference. Arroyo has a long-standing interest in politics. He’s taught political science for years at Fresno City College, where the student population is representative of the surrounding community.

He also has a long-standing interest in community problem solving.

“I’m of Mexican-American descent... I have been, as long as I can remember, conscious of my sociological status in whatever community I’ve been in,” he said. “And I’ve always been conscious of the need to work in the community to remedy the problems that come along with that status.”

It was his interest in solving problems that drew him into what he calls “the community scene,” but it was his discovery of National Issues Forums (NIF) and public deliberation that gave a new focus to his efforts.

“When NIF came to my attention [in 1987], I kind of gravitated to it as another way of doing things I’ve been involved in all along,” he said.

In fact, he more than gravitated toward it; he became in his own description an “NIF gadfly,” seeing with a scholar’s schematic thinking a half dozen or more ways deliberation could be used to improve community life.

He worked with the League of Women Voters on community workshops. He planned strategies for using deliberation in high school social science classes with the local school district’s coordinator. He started a deliberation class of his own. He trained forum moderators. He assisted with the California Issues Forums, a statewide program to frame and deliberate on issues like education and state constitutional reform. He put together a Spanish forums program, and then got a Hispanic radio station and newspaper to broaden the deliberations he’d started.

His experiences convinced him that while deliberation isn’t a cure-all, it can make a significant difference in communities, he said.

“I think the NIF approach gives quite a bit of promise. … It’s more of a realist’s view of the world. If the problem is 100 percent, and if we can make a 10 percent dent in that, I think that’s substantial.”
The mosquitoes were terrible in Twin Lakes, Ohio. So, when the neighborhood association decided to discuss the problem, the group’s president, Bob Walker, wanted to make sure discussion was constructive. “The subject raises a lot of emotional reaction,” he said.

Because Walker has extensive experience moderating National Issues Forums, he decided to take a deliberative approach to the relatively mundane local issue of what to do about all those mosquitoes. His experience is one example of how thoroughly deliberation can permeate the way communities address problems.

Walker gathered information about mosquito control from around the country, then created a four-page booklet called, “Those Pesky Mosquitoes,” outlining the three most common approaches to the problem. He rented a local community room, got some audiovisual equipment, and sent out a letter inviting people to attend a public forum to weigh the three options. About 50 people came and their deliberation resulted in forming committees that eliminated the insects with a minimum of environmental damage.

Many miles away, Heather Ropes-Gale has also seen forums work in unlikely situations. In Wayne, Nebraska, two Lutheran churches, once separated by language, were united by the problem of gradually diminishing congregations. “One (church) had spoken German and one had spoken English, and that’s why there were two — an eon ago,” said Ropes-Gale, an NIF convenor. Money and numbers were pressuring them to merge, but the prospect was deeply troubling because of their history.

For a while the parishioners simply avoided the subject. But a few who had been in NIF deliberations suggested the two congregations create a joint forum on an issue where independence, culture, and survival were at stake. That started the two groups on the road to interdependence. Some congregants who were trained in NIF framed the merger issue in characteristic forum style and held meetings. Experience with NIF develops capacities for engaging many other issues deliberatively.

Ropes-Gale says, “I’ve lived border to border and coast to coast. I was a military wife for ten years. I’ve done everything from stand-up comedy to selling funerals to finally working here at the Humanities Council. And I have not encountered a group of people anywhere that could not profit from the deliberative method.”
Deliberative forums provide essential space for the public to do its work, and you may want to establish some in your community. Although public deliberation certainly can occur spontaneously, in informal settings, its benefits to the community are much more far-reaching if forums are organized to help respond constructively to pressing issues. Forums (sometimes called study circles) have been organized by public libraries; community centers; civic clubs; and religious institutions — virtually any kind of community organization. Some people even hold deliberative forums in their living rooms.

In some cases, forums have been incorporated into the curriculums of schools and colleges to teach the skills of making decisions together. Leadership programs also hold forums for this reason.

Some groups hold deliberative forums a set number of times each year. Others may hold a single forum in response to a specific local issue: for instance, coalitions of police and civic organizations have organized forums on juvenile violence. Size can range from 7 people in a church basement to 300 in a university auditorium.

Although deliberation can be effective as a short-term way of dealing with a specific problem, the major benefits result when people make a long-term commitment to holding forums on a variety of issues. By deliberating on a regular basis, communities begin to change their “civic habits” so that when tough issues arise, citizens are accustomed to making decisions together.

Using issue books

Deliberative forums are more successful if participants have read the issue books before the forum begins. Although it is unlikely that everyone will read them, the more people who do, the better the forum will be.

Materials are available from organizations listed in the “Where Do I Go to Get Started?” section on page 30.

Time frames

Although most people schedule their forums for two hours, there’s no required time period. Some prefer a three-hour period because it gives participants time to address the issues more thoroughly. For a study circle, it is not uncommon for participants to attend a series of three or four two-hour meetings, exploring the issue more deeply.

Don’t go it alone

For deliberation to take root, more than one person has to be committed to it. Successful forums usually have a steering committee of some kind to both plan and organize the meeting. The size and structure of the committee depends on the situation. As a general rule, the larger the forum or the more forums you are planning, the more people you need in your planning group.

In some communities, coalitions of organizations are joining together to host large communitywide forums or series of smaller discussions on the same issue. By pooling their resources, they have more people to help. Some states have done
the same thing. West Virginia, for example, held statewide deliberations on “Our Nation’s Kids.”

Developing moderators

Deliberation is most effective when the discussion is led by a moderator who understands the process of deliberation and who has taken the time to become familiar with the issue to be discussed.

People who have moderated other types of discussions but who are not clear about what makes deliberation different may use techniques that actually hamper deliberation — techniques like giving a lecture about the issue, then answering participants’ questions; having the “experts” frame an issue; or allowing the forum to wander away from working toward a general decision.

Moderators can develop skills through the organizations whose addresses are in the “Where Do I Go to Get Started?” section of this book. Books like this and other materials about deliberation also are listed in this guide.

Costs

Many successful forums cost organizations almost nothing. Grand Rapids’ 15-year series of forums has been sustained largely by volunteers. Others have moderate costs.

Typical costs include the purchase of NIF books and videotapes, postage for meeting announcements and press releases, and refreshments. Many organizations find ways to cover these minimal costs. They may:

• Ask a library to purchase issue books and videotapes, then allow people to check them out.
• Charge participants a nominal fee to pay for books, or arrange for a local bookstore to stock them.
• Ask a local business to underwrite the expenses, perhaps in exchange for a mention in the publicity and at the event itself.
• Encourage steering committee members’ employers to offer services such as photocopying and mailing.

Getting people to come: Going where people are

Naturally, attendance will vary depending on how extensively forums are publicized, and how well the people on your steering committee spread the word.

Sometimes, even with the best intentions and plans, attendance may be low. Groups that have had that experience insist that the key is not to give up. Sparse attendance at one forum need not doom an entire program of community deliberations.

An alternative to getting people to attend is to take the forums to where the people are. Many of the longest-running forums are built into the programs of churches and libraries or into instructional programs.
Perhaps you are interested enough in deliberation to want to moderate a forum. Here are some simple guidelines that can help you.

Setting the ground rules

Deliberation is more likely to take place if some ground rules are laid out at the beginning; they can help prevent difficulties later on in the forum:

- The most basic ground rule is that the purpose of the forum is to work toward a decision, on an important issue. That is the reason for the other ground rules. Moderators find it useful to ask the group to ratify these rules rather than just announcing them.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate, and so no one should dominate. (By saying that ahead of time, moderators find it easier later to stop someone who is taking over the discussion.)
- Listening is as important as talking.
- Participants should speak to each other, not just to the moderator.
- The moderator or someone in the group can jump in occasionally to keep the conversation on track or to remind participants to stick with the option under discussion.
- Participants must fairly consider every option and fully examine all the tradeoffs involved in a choice. A diversity of views is essential. If no one in the group seems to favor a particular option, the moderator or someone might raise a question like, “What would be said by someone who favors this approach?”

Four questions

Four basic questions are asked in forums to prompt deliberation:

- What is valuable to us?
- What are the costs and benefits associated with the various options?
- Where are the conflicts in this issue that we have to “work through”?
- Can we detect any shared sense of direction or common ground for action?

What is valuable to us?

This question gets at why making public choices is so difficult: all the options are rooted in things people care very deeply about. It can take many forms:

- How has this issue affected you personally? (This question usually is asked at the beginning of a forum.)
- What is appealing about this option?
- What makes this option a good idea — or a bad one?

To uncover deeper concerns, people can ask one another how they came to hold the views they have or a moderator can raise the question. Talking about actual experiences, not just reciting facts or making rational arguments, helps.
What are the costs and benefits associated with the various options?

This question also can take any number of forms as long as it prompts people to think about the effects various options are likely to have on what is valuable to them. Because deliberation requires evaluating the “pros” and “cons” of different options, it is important to be sure that both are fully aired. A “pro” is simply a positive consequence, a “con” a negative one. Questions to ensure a fair and balanced examination of all potential effects include:

- What would be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
- What would be an argument against the option you like best or is there a downside to this course of action?
- Can anyone think of something constructive that might come from this option that is being criticized so much?

Where are the conflicts in this issue that we have to “work through”?

As a forum progresses, participants or moderators might ask:

- What do you see as the tension between the options?
- What are the “gray areas”? Where is there ambiguity?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?

Can we detect any shared sense of direction or common ground for action?

After saying in the first few minutes of a forum that the objective is to work toward a decision, the moderator or someone else may continue to intervene from time to time with questions that move the deliberations toward a common ground for action, always stopping short of pressing for a consensus or agreement on a particular solution. Then, as the tensions become evident, people see how they are pulled in different directions by what they consider valuable. The moderator can use questions like the following to see where the group is going:

- What direction seems best, or where do we want to go with this policy?
- What tradeoffs are we willing or not willing to accept?
- What are we or aren’t we willing to do as individuals or a community to solve this problem?

At the heart of deliberation is the question of whether we are willing to accept the consequences of our choices. That might lead to discussing a question like this:

- If our favored choice had consequences that concern others, would we still favor this policy or course of action?
Ending a forum

Before ending a forum, it is usually a good idea to take a few minutes to reflect both individually and as a group on what has been accomplished. These types of questions have been useful:

- How has your thinking changed about the issue?
- How has your thinking changed about other people’s views?
- What didn’t we work through?
- What do we still need to talk about?
- How can we use what we learned in this forum?

This list of questions is not meant to imply that a moderator is constantly intervening. To the contrary, the essence of good moderating is to encourage people to engage one another. That happens when moderators let people talk directly to one another and don’t intervene after every comment, or it can be done with simple questions that connect people, such as “Would anybody like to respond to what Sara said?” The responsibility for doing the work of deliberation is the group’s responsibility. The moderator should make that clear from the beginning. Above all, a moderator must remain impartial so that the group can fairly consider all the options.
Because America’s tradition of public forums prompts people across the country to search for places to deliberate and make choices together, a variety of organizations are involved in holding meetings and preparing materials.

Some organizations, like the League of Women Voters and the Foreign Policy Association, promote educational meetings about public policy or sponsor debates with political candidates. Some local leagues and associations also use National Issues Forums books in forums.

Among the many committed organizations sponsoring deliberative forums using NIF materials are the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC); National Advisory Committee for Adult Religious Education; the Southern Growth Policies Board; the Points of Light Foundation; Study Circles Resource Center; National Collegiate Honors Council; and several of the Presidential Libraries.

To find out who to contact in your area, call or write:

National Issues Forums Institute
Information
100 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459-2777
(800) 433-7834
FAX (937) 439-9804

National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI)

The National Issues Forums are an informal network, not an organization with a staff. But there is a 501 (c) 3 institute that consists largely of senior NIF leaders. The address of the institute is:

National Issues Forums Institute
P.O. Box 75306
Washington, DC 20013-5306
Web site: www.nifi.org

NIF Materials

The Kettering Foundation, working with other nonpartisan organizations, prepares new issue books each year designed to stimulate public deliberation on issues common to people across the country. The subjects are decided by consulting the citizens in the NIF network. These are called National Issues Forums books.

Issue books are often published in two editions, a version written at the adult reading level and an abridged version for new readers. Some are also available in Spanish. All come with short (approximately 10-minute) videotapes or DVDs that introduce the approaches.

Every issue selected for the issue books has a direct and immediate bearing on the lives of most Americans, and is likely to remain prominent for some time. Recent issues have included juvenile violence, money and politics, governing America, public schools, alcohol abuse, the Internet, gambling, racial and ethnic tensions, and terrorism.

An NIF issue book contains at least three basic approaches to each issue. Then it reviews the reasons those who share that perspective have for their views and the concerns others have about them. Each approach is discussed in terms of the strategic facts that make it important, but also in terms of the things held valuable by those who support it.
This careful, nonpartisan way of presenting alternative views allows citizens to weigh carefully decisions that are necessary to address the issue.

The work of making hard choices together avoids simple debate and simple polite discussions. It produces a rich investigation of what the public is thinking about an issue, what the public will accept, and what it will not. NIF issue books foster this discovery.

To order materials, call (800) 600-4060 or write the publisher, Kendall/Hunt, at 4050 Westmark Drive, Dubuque, IA 52002.

Reports on NIF Outcomes

The Kettering Foundation commissions analyses of what citizens are saying each year in NIF forums. The reports are based on a sample of the forums held around the country. Questionnaires completed by NIF participants are used to prepare the reports, along with observations of forums and interviews with NIF moderators. These studies are presented to the media at a National Press Club press conference and sent to local and national officeholders. They are also captured in an annual program, called “A Public Voice,” on public television, where members of Congress and the Washington press corps view together excerpts from the year’s public forums.

The Kettering Foundation

As a nonprofit, nonpartisan research foundation, Kettering studies what it takes to make a democracy work as it should. The foundation concentrates on the role of citizens or the public, the essential elements of a vibrant community, and the relationship between people and their institutions, including government.

The Kettering Foundation produces supplemental material for public deliberation. For a list of Kettering Foundation publications, write to:

Kettering Foundation
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459-2799
Phone: 1-800-600-4060
FAX: 1-937-435-7367
Web site: www.kettering.org

Public Policy Institutes (PPIs)

Public Policy Institutes provide workshops where citizens come together to learn more about convening and moderating National Issues Forums. These training institutes are locally organized and operated by a number of colleges and civic institutions; they are offered annually in more than 30 locations around the nation. To find out more about PPIs, visit the NIFI Web site at www.nifi.org or contact:

National Issues Forums Institute
Information
100 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459
(800) 433-7834
FAX (937) 439-9804

Study Circles Resource Center

The goal of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is to promote the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory deliberations known as study circles. The center hopes this will contribute to a more enlightened, involved citizenry capable of making decisions based on informed judgment. SCRC is a project of the Topsfield Foundation Inc., a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation.

The center serves as a clearinghouse, helps groups develop materials, and publishes a newsletter. Call or write to:

Study Circles Resource Center
697 Pomfret St.
P.O. Box 203
Pomfret, CT 06258
(203) 928-3713
Web site: www.studycircles.org


Democracy and Disagreement by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Belknap Press, 1996.


For more information on the research cited in this book see:


