

The logo for 'A Public Voice 2019' is set within a white rectangular box with a thin grey border. The text 'A PUBLIC VOICE' is in a bold, sans-serif font, with 'A' in teal and 'PUBLIC VOICE' in black. Below this, a thick black horizontal line is followed by the year '2019' in a grey, sans-serif font. The background of the entire page is a teal grid of small, semi-transparent portraits of diverse people.

A PUBLIC VOICE — 2019

Heading into the 2020 elections, Americans urgently need to talk more constructively with one another and with legislators and candidates if the nation is going to make progress on the problems we face, panelists at A Public Voice (APV) 2019 said.

“We don’t talk like this in Congress. Members of Congress yell at each other, and then constituents yell at the members of Congress,” said Stacy Palmer Barton, chief of staff to US Representative Steve Chabot (R-Ohio). “I think that given the current times, the appetite for respectful dialogue will only increase.”

Glenn Nye, a former congressman and current president of the Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress, said, “I’m sure that all of you agree from talking to your neighbors that there’s a sense that we need a better way in this country to talk to each other. We know that we’re incentivized to disagree sometimes; we know that the media wants to cover the drama. So, it’s on us to make sure that we continue to provide opportunities for citizens to engage in the way that I think they really want to.”

The 29th annual A Public Voice event was held at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on May 9. The two-hour discussion brought together legislators, local elected officials, congressional staffers, and citizens from the National Issues Forums (NIF) network.

APV 2019 focused in part on the deliberations held in recent months using the NIF issue guide on political divisiveness, *A House Divided: What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?* The program also looked ahead at what issues should be topics for issue guides and deliberative forums in the coming year.

As host and National Issues Forums Institute board member Charles Moses put it, “What happens when typical Americans get together to deliberate seriously about tough, divisive issues, when they weigh choices and listen to different perspectives? . . . What issues most need this kind of deliberation?”

Panelists suggested several topics they thought were ripe for deliberation, including health care, immigration, and the future of work in the US.

By Tony Wharton

Gregg Kaufman, a retired pastor and NIF veteran now on the faculty of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of North Florida, described Floridians' concerns about sea level rise as a result of climate change.

The 29th annual A Public Voice event was held at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on May 9. The two-hour discussion brought together legislators, local elected officials, congressional staffers, and citizens from the National Issues Forums network.

"People are concerned about the oceans' health and preservation, and people want to talk about preserving their communities and their way of life," Kaufman said. "They recognize how tourism and the fishing industry and recreation will be impacted, resulting in economic decline. In fact, jobs will be lost."

Simultaneously with APV 2019, NIF affiliates held Common Ground for Action online forums about the issue of political divisiveness, with participants both deliberating among themselves and commenting on the discussion taking place in Washington.

One participant, a retired state legislator from North Carolina, said, "I have watched with dismay as the constructive ways for citizens and officials to engage with others with whom they disagree have disappeared. . . . I believe in the importance of having a government that acts for the common good, and I am worried that that is slipping away."

Panelists agreed that the need for constructive, deliberative dialogue is more urgent than ever.

"The most encouraging thing that I've heard is the idea that folks have sat across the table from

somebody that has a different opinion," said Nick Bush, deputy chief of staff and legislative director for US Representative Steve Stivers (R-Ohio), a founder of the Congressional Civility and Respect Caucus. "Even acknowledging that our political opponents do the same things, they go home with their families, they have their community centers. . . . We don't have to get to a solution, but just having the conversation, I think that's the most encouraging thing I see from this."

Sedona, Arizona, city council member Bill Chisholm said citizen deliberation "allows me a nuanced look at what people are saying. All too often I hear the soundbites that come from a particular person's bubble, wherever they're getting their information from. But when I'm in the room and I see how people are reacting to comments that are made, it gives me a better feel for where the common ground is."

In his concluding remarks, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews said he was struck by the level of interaction between citizens and legislators.

"The legitimacy of democracy is endangered, and it's endangered by the loss of confidence; it's endangered by the divisiveness. That gives special meaning to this particular gathering," Mathews said. "The breakthrough this time, I think, was clearly in getting an interaction between sitting members of legislative bodies and a deliberative citizenry. Before, when we tried it, we would show videos of people deliberating. Whatever the subject was, it just keyed a member of Congress to go into whatever his or her set speech was about the issue at hand. We didn't get any interaction. We did this time. People began to talk about what they took away from deliberation."

APV 2019 was livestreamed on Facebook and is available to watch [here](#).