

# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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**REVIEW**

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**Cover art:** Carol Vollet Kingston and Joan Harrison collaboratively created the cover image, *I Have Work To Do* (2017). This digital photomontage homage to Robert Kingston was created using scans of a painting by Carol Vollet Kingston, *Summer Doldrums* (oil, 1993), vintage engravings, and text from Robert Kingston's writings.

# Out of the Shadows of Polarization

By Linell Ajello

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*The forums allow goals that have broad support across party lines to come to the fore, values and goals that have been buried in the zero-sum contest between parties.*

**B**efore a National Issues Forums (NIF) forum in Jacksonville, Florida, a woman in her 70s told me that, as a Democrat, she'd always felt a bit out of place in Jacksonville. Even still, she said, "There were Republicans with whom I could have a good discussion." This has changed over the past few years she said. In the months before the presidential election, any reference to politics seemed to become more fraught. Her church is visibly politically diverse, with Republican public figures (including the state attorney general and several judges) as well as progressive activists in its pews. Members were finding it impossible to avoid or speak past blasts of disdain and righteous indignation whenever conversation veered to any political issue. The dean of the church characterized the feelings around an increasingly steep political divide between parishioners as well as family members, friends, and colleagues as "anxiety" and "grief." In response, she reached out to Gregg Kaufman, who often convenes NIF forums in town, and together they hosted a forum on political dysfunction (called "Political Fix"), in August 2016.

The evening's program began with Kaufman, as moderator, inviting each participant to speak of a personal stake they have in the issue at hand. The most repeated statement in our little circle was: "I don't like the way things are going," along with "I don't know how to talk," or "There has to be a way we can talk" and "Don't we have some common values?" A woman in her 50s said she had tried, several times and in a few different ways, to speak up when someone said something that offended her, but "now I just let it slide by." Several



people were close to tears. Kaufman reviewed some quick ground rules for the forum, such as prioritizing listening and respect, along with—and this was of primary importance—no talk of Trump/Pence or Clinton/Kaine.

Kaufman directed everyone's attention to an issue guide, which outlined a range of approaches for tackling the issue, itemized areas of concern (for example: lobbyists, campaign donations, term limits), and gave an overview of existing law/policy. Someone spoke up about the influence of lobbyists and special-interest money. An actual lobbyist shared her perspective that lobbyists provide a service, giving politicians solid information about issues that concern people. But industries, corporations, and ordinary people don't have near as much power, someone countered. Insights were offered and countered. As participants picked their way from one focus area and set of options to another, the tenor of the group quickly changed—speech that was like shaky steps on thin ice began to take on the feel of a driveway basketball game, moving steadily, with serious focus and mutual challenge, but without antag-

onism. There seemed to be immediate, broad agreement on the need to curtail campaign donations to bring corporations and the very rich more in line with the average citizen.

The discussion went so well that several people assumed that the event had failed to attract a diverse group. "I think we were talking to the choir," one woman remarked as she left. "There was less diversity of opinion than I anticipated," someone noted and asked, "Are we all similar politically?" Helpfully, though, each member of the group had stated something about their political affiliation in a questionnaire I collected after the forum. And several I spoke with afterwards were very surprised to hear that they had in fact been a diverse group: about half identified as Democrat, and the rest as Republican or Independent.

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A lawyer who has participated in several forums said he thinks the stated purpose of the forum brings out people's capacities to talk to, and even learn from, each other: "We're all gathered here for that purpose, so we're all on best behavior for open discussion. There's no other time we do this, except in a social set-

ting when someone blurts something out. That's what you came here to do, to work hard, listen." In this way, the forum provides an opportunity rarely found elsewhere. "It's a real problem that we have, we sit in our own little pocket, refuse to listen. Both sides are equally bad," he said.

**M**any participants expressed shock at how quickly the electric charge of political disagreement can vaporize mutual respect. But political commentary and entertainment around the presidential campaign was often anything but respectful, and often infused with disdain. Writing in the *Atlantic*, Alec MacGillis surveyed the "barely suppressed contempt" of lower-class whites by both conservatives and liberals. Jennifer Rubin, a self-identified conservative at the *Washington Post* wrote, "Let's name and shame Trump's enablers." But this is certainly a two-way street: Internet comments are peppered with insults to Democrats and progressives as well.

Given the portrayals of some voters as deserving pity or shame for their incompetence, and others as worthy of disdain and mockery for their effiteness, it makes sense that the ground of mutual respect across political difference has disappeared beneath our feet. One participant's observation, that listening respectfully and attentively is a key goal of the forum, highlights how little space there is for this kind of engagement in political discussion, especially around the zero-sum contest of the presidential election and the discourse surrounding it.

At the same time, the issue of money in politics might be an easy win—there is broad, bipartisan agreement that it should be more

regulated. In this case, the forum didn't build a bridge across disagreement but instead revealed an area of common ground that has been overshadowed. In the zero-sum contest of Democrat versus Republican, such issues receive little attention because they do not reaffirm a parti-

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## We sit in our own little pocket, refuse to listen.

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san divide: there is no contest over reforming money in politics that will benefit or harm only one party. But another National Issues Forums topic, violence and policing, involves perspectives and experiences that differ, largely, by race. In Jacksonville, this antipathy played out at the local level. This past winter, local news used the terms *epidemic* and *wave* in relation to recent gun violence, much of it involving young African Americans, much of it occurring in a heavily policed part of the city. In February, Kaufman, the dean of the downtown church, and a reverend of another Episcopal church, this one with a majority of African American parishioners, hosted a forum titled "Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?" In attendance were several members of an organization that had advocated against criminal charges for minors and first offenders. Also at the forum were two former police officers, a sheriff, and the former state attorney general with whom they'd had more than one public clash. Moderator Kaufman began the evening by asking each person to share something for which they are grateful. A range of

things came from the 20 people seated around a large square: grateful to be married 10 days ago, for the Holy Spirit here, for music, to be living today, Jacksonville, to see you all, God's unconditional love, this great country, and these cookies. So, before the participants launched into the three main areas of consideration for the evening, there were some poignant silences, *mhm's*, and chuckles. And before the three focus areas for the evening—cooperation, justice, and prevention—each person mentioned something that concerned them: what a child



is exposed to, breakdown of family, violence and young people, lack of authority, police dealing with mental illness, education, and jobs.

Both of the former police officers revealed a strong sense of purpose: being in service to a community, and of wanting to be—and be seen as—someone to go to for help. Both spoke of the suspicion and hostility they encountered, of overhearing parents who tell their children to stay away from them, or use them as a threat (“the policeman will take you to prison”)

rather than identify them as someone to turn to for help. Other people spoke of negative experiences with law enforcement: “Often people will call police, report a relative ‘acting up,’ police don’t know how to deal with a mentally ill person, next thing you know—dead.” One woman said that what a grieving relative, or traumatized witness, does not need immediately after a violent event is to be interrogated by a police officer (or a reporter); what they need is a counselor.

**I**n the midst of these different perspectives, people at the table soon found themselves voicing desires for the same thing—for police to be prominent in the community—especially at schools. One of the more striking things about the talk was the amount of learning that took place. Indeed, both during the forum and afterwards, in interviews, participants said they didn’t know about certain programs that were mentioned. Towards the end of the evening, many people said that they were only getting part of the story from the news.

Parishioners from both churches said the event was not what they expected. One man said that he had prepared himself to hear the term *overpolicing* and “the Black Lives Matter perspective.” And he imagined that, at the forum, through listening to other people’s experiences, he would understand how someone would come to see policing as a problem. While no one I spoke with changed their mind about the actions and policies they’d opposed, they learned new things about the judicial system in their town as well as the people who administer it: they saw a fuller picture. After one man

said that his neighborhood had become militarized, many people were affected by hearing one police officer say that he not only wants riot gear so that he can get close to the danger (to better protect others), but also because he wants to live to see another Christmas. “We want to go home to our kids, just like you do.” This humanizing aspect of the event, while it didn’t seem to change anyone’s position on programs or policy, enabled people to learn from each other, and—like the earlier event on money in politics—brought common ground to the fore. One woman, a former principal, spoke of the need for greater investment in poor, high-crime areas. Other people mentioned the need to put public money into education and job programs in the neighborhoods that need it most; there was no opposition to this.

Towards the end of the night, after the former state attorney general and others had spoken of their confusion as to why people turn to violence—one man answered that question from personal experience: “Tired of seeing my mom struggle, with six boys and one girl, I took it upon myself to be of some assistance. Struggle is like a hitchhiker, it won’t get off you. Once you go into the facility, you’re 16, 17, you’re in with dangerous *men*, 50-years-to-life killers. Without education you’re lost, easy to be used and manipulated. Ain’t easy, knives in there, guns in there.” It was striking how much discipline, will, and sheer loneliness it took for him to get out of prison, and stay away from a community of people that would enmesh him in crime. The forum built a sense of shared goodwill along with a sense that this problem requires all the information, experience, insight, and expertise that we have to share.

In some respects, the differences between people in both Jacksonville forums were obvious: conservative and progressive/liberal, black and white. While there were some participants in their 30s and even 20s, the majority were over 60. All were Episcopal parishioners. At a public college in New York City, a small “Safety and Justice” forum included mostly younger partici-

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## They came prepared to face disagreement and anger.

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pants—college students and recent grads along with two professional women, one in her 20s and one with two grown children. Unlike Jacksonville, there was no prayer to begin the forum, no reminder that “the Holy Spirit is present.” Instead, Professor Don Waisanen asked, “If you usually talk, try to listen more, and—vice versa—if you’re someone who usually listens, try to talk more.” The point, he said, is neither to debate nor to reach



consensus, but to listen. Still, perhaps because of the college setting, the forum often veered towards debate, especially between one woman, who has managed an alternative sentencing program for young people and was

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## Perhaps the forums provide opportunity for political engagement for those whom polarization has marginalized.

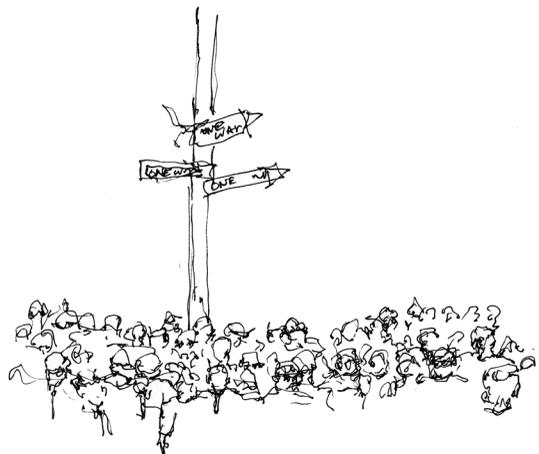
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concerned with overpolicing, and one man, a finance major who several times offered what he described as a somewhat libertarian point of view. Throughout the course of the forum, this man and one other often stressed the high levels of violence in the United States as evidence of a need for arming and empowering police. One cited the 2011 London riots as evidence that, without heavily armed police, protests will turn to riots. “That’s incidence over prevalence,” the young woman countered. Their back and forth was a prominent part of the evening. But, as in Jacksonville, in the midst of divisions, participants agreed on the need for greater funding—into schools, job training, and mental health programs—in poorer, high-crime neighborhoods.

As in Jacksonville, some New York City forum participants had more direct, negative experiences with police than others. One woman said her children and husband had been stopped and frisked in ways that made

them feel harassed. Her daughter, at 12, was stopped and frisked by plainclothes police who she said took so long to identify themselves that she at first thought she was being kidnapped. A young man who lives in the Bronx described the traumatic effects of gun violence at school, on his block, in his apartment building. He described how heavy police presence contributes to a sense of being under siege, and to trauma. To him, guns are the problem no matter who has them and what’s needed most is PTSD treatment for all involved.

As was the case in Jacksonville, people were most affected by the first-person accounts they heard. At the beginning of the event, Waisanen asked everyone to rank the issue of violence and policing in terms of importance, from 1 to 10. The answers ranged from 4 to 10. At the end of the evening, the lowest number was 7. Someone who saw the positive impact of police in his own neighborhood of Corona, Queens, was struck by a fellow participant’s descriptions of his life in the Bronx. When Waisanen asked



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why his number changed, he turned to the young woman and said, “Your line of work opened my eyes, we need more resources.”

**T**he interaction of many factors forms and sustains polarization: a zero-sum game between parties, an entertainment and social media culture that casts either disdain or pity on those we differ from, the lack of shared trust in news sources. Several forum participants said they expected to hear extreme and narrow views, but to get a chance to hear them in person, and perhaps with more background and context than what comes in news segments and social media. They came prepared to face disagreement and anger. They were right to expect this, because those who are most engaged in political life, and who talk about politics more than others, tend to be more ideologically extreme, more fearful, and angrier than those who don’t (according to the Pew Research Center). Yet, after the forum, one participant stated that they were “startled by the degree of agreement.” Another said that they felt different about political discussion and the potential for a way forward. And a

third said the forum “expanded my view of hopeful solutions and I was surprised by the hopeful (potential) willingness to change things.” The format of the event is surely part of what enables this result.

But it may also draw a certain kind of person into political dialogue outside their private lives, one different than the more “ideologically extreme,” the angry and the fearful. Several people asked me whether I thought that the people who come to these forums were more open, more likely to consider the other side, less extreme. That may be. If so, perhaps the forums provide opportunity for political engagement for those whom polarization has marginalized, enabling them the space to do the sort of speaking, listening, and learning they wish to. At the same time, the forums allow goals that have broad support across party lines to come to the fore, values and goals that have been buried in the zero-sum contest between parties.

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