

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

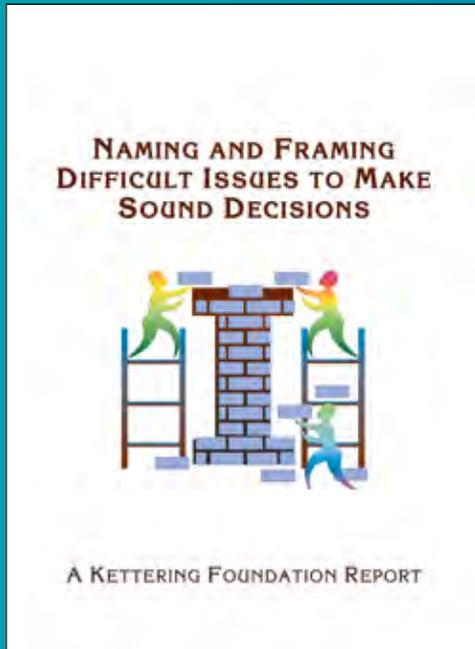
[www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)

2013

**CITIZENS**  
in  
Democratic  
Politics



## ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING FOUNDATION



### Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions

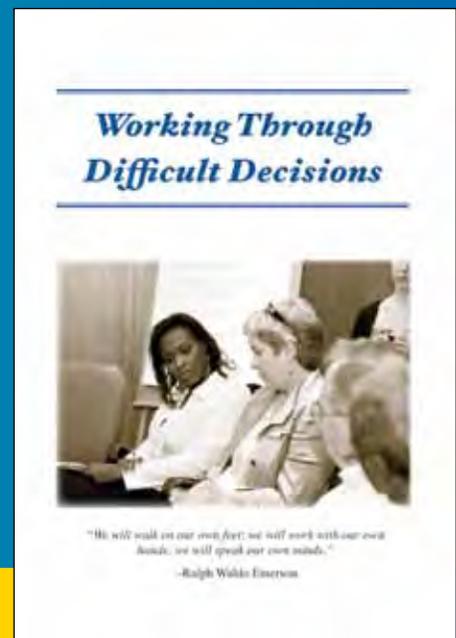
*Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions* is a report for people who want a stronger hand in shaping their collective future and recognize that this requires working through disagreements on what the future *should* be. Replacing an earlier publication, *Framing Issues for Public Deliberation*, this booklet incorporates the foundation's latest insights on how people can describe problems and present different ways to address them so as to encourage sound judgments and avoid immobilizing polarization.

Kettering Foundation | 2011  
**FREE** | 24 pages

### Working Through Difficult Decisions

*Working Through Difficult Decisions* is a brochure for people interested in helping their communities work through their most challenging problems and for anyone interested in moderating forums based on National Issues Forums materials. The brochure speaks to how people can move beyond disagreements to arrive at shared and reflective judgments.

Kettering Foundation | 2011  
**FREE** | 12 pages



▶▶▶▶▶ To read these documents, visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

*Connections* is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

#### Editors

Alice Diebel  
Melinda Gilmore  
Randall Nielsen

#### Copy Editor

Lisa Boone-Berry

#### Design and Production

Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

#### Illustrations

Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

# CONNECTIONS

## CONTENTS



- 4 **Getting Off the Sidelines and Making Good Choices**  
*David Mathews*
- 8 **Deliberative Opportunities in Everyday Political Talk**  
*Amy Lee and Erika Mason-Imbody*
- 12 **Public Deliberation from the Jury Room to Initiative Elections**  
*John Gastil*
- 15 **Issue Guides and Issue Frameworks**  
*Brad Rourke*
- 18 **Learning Exchanges with Centers for Public Life**  
*Alice Diebel and Randall Nielsen*
- 22 **A Public Voice: A Long-Running Experiment Bears Promising Fruit**  
*David Holwerk*
- 24 **Reinventing Hampton**  
*Connie Crockett*
- 26 **Learning Exchanges with Professional Organizations**  
*Phillip D. Lurie*
- 28 **Public Learning in Public Schools:  
How Networks of Teachers and Public Partners Can Support Civic Learning**  
*Stacie Molnar-Main, with Libby Kingseed*
- 31 **Active Citizenry in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia:  
A Case of Citywide Deliberation, Collective Acting, and Civic Capacity Building**  
*Germán Ruiz and Ileana Marin*
- 34 **Online Deliberative Decision Making**  
*Amy Lee*
- 37 **Folk Politics**  
*Randall Nielsen*

# Getting OFF the Sidelines

## AND MAKING GOOD CHOICES

*David Mathews*

The foundation's annual research review in 2013 includes looking at citizens and the importance of the choices they make in politics. In many ways, politics is about choice—not only among policies and candidates in elections, but also among the many actions to address and solve problems.

Two difficulties stand out: Too often, people are on the sidelines of the political system. They don't make any choices, or they choose by not choosing at all. Furthermore, simply being involved won't result in good choices unless people make informed and wise decisions about what they should do. Kettering research is both about what motivates people to become involved and about what helps them make sound decisions. The following is a brief overview of what we are learning.

### Why Do People Get Involved?

Many of us become involved with other citizens because we are trying to solve a problem or influence an elected body or major institution. We may be supercharged by a cause we care about, or we are directly affected by something that is about to happen or needs to happen: "We can't let our school close!" Most people, however, aren't zealots and aren't directly affected by every political decision. Still, all of us are motivated by deeply held concerns about the future and what is at stake for us.

Our most basic political motives—the things that move us to engage with others outside our circle of family and friends—may spring from the lessons our ancestors learned about survival. There is now enough archaeological and biological (DNA) research to make some reasonable assumptions about these prehistoric times. Our earliest forebearers, who survived by hunting and gathering food, likely valued their freedom to forage and look for game. It is also reasonable to think they valued the security that comes from joining forces, which was essential in tasks like hunting. And they may have come to appreciate fairness because the bands they lived in wouldn't stay together unless the benefits from their collective efforts were distributed equitably. Simply put, those who participated in a hunting expedition would want a place in the feast

## Getting Off the Sidelines and Making Good Choices

that followed. Given these formative influences, we humans may be programmed to prize freedom, collective security, and equity.

Early humans were also prone to violent conflict. Yet it is not farfetched to assume that our ancestors would have valued the things that kept them secure from danger and helped them prosper. But regardless of whether these conjectures about our early ancestors are right, when making difficult decisions today, people will often call to mind the things that are fundamental to their well-being.

Kettering has found that when using the word *values* to describe these primary motivations, people naturally think we are talking about "VALUES." Hodding Carter Jr. once told me that he thought of values as "the parts of the Bible printed in red ink." That's not what we are talking about; we are referring to the most essential things that people hold dear. Today, social psychologists recognize these as the ends or purposes of life and the means necessary to reaching those ends.

What is deeply valuable collectively or politically is different from the interests that grow out of our particular circumstances as well as distinct from abstract values or our personal beliefs. Political imperatives are similar to the individual imperatives psychologist Abraham Maslow found common to all human beings, like food, water, and shelter.

It is important to emphasize that the things critically important to our collective well-being are common to most everyone. Most of us want to be secure from danger.

We want to be free to advance our own well-being. We want to be treated fairly by others. These imperatives motivate us to become politically active. They are passions deep in our souls.

Some of the things individuals require are quite tangible (food, for instance), while others (being loved) are less so.

The same is true in collective matters. At Kettering, we learned that from a community that was facing corruption in high places and egregious crimes in the streets. Citizens there asked themselves what they valued most. Nearly all said that,

**Too often, people are on the sidelines of the political system. They don't make any choices, or they choose by not choosing at all.**

more than anything, they wanted to live in a place that made them proud. Pride is a source of identity, a necessity since ancient times. But this intangible aspiration is rarely mentioned in planning documents or lists of goals. Still, the need to be proud of a city can be a powerful political incentive.

The importance of taking into consideration the things people value is illustrated in Wendell Berry's story of an economist who told farmers that it was cheaper to rent land than to buy it, which was factually correct at the time. One farmer responded by telling the economist that his forebearers didn't come to America to be renters. Something the farmer valued in addition to profits was at stake: it was the security of land ownership. My grandfather, who farmed, said of land, "They aren't making any more of it, you know."

### The Importance of a Name

Americans who appear to be uninterested in politics may simply fail to see much connection between what they consider valuable and the policy issues championed by interest groups, pressed by community leaders, debated by politicians, and discussed in the media. The names professionals give issues may be technically precise yet often fail to resonate with the things people hold dear. Getting people off the sidelines may be less a matter of arousing the indifferent than making connections with the things people already care about.

Nearly every day something—perhaps surprising, often troubling—happens. Test



## Getting Off the Sidelines and Making Good Choices

scores show a significant gap in the academic performance of different groups of students. The United States spends more on health care than other countries, but the results aren't as good. When faced with these problems, people begin to talk about what they read or hear. What's the problem? Soon, newspapers, TV shows, and blogs offer explanations. Politicians begin to make pronouncements about what is going on; they give the problem a name like the "achievement gap" and explain what they think should be done.

The names given to problems may seem a trifling matter, yet who gets to name a problem, and the name itself, have everything to do with who gets involved in solving it. It turns out that naming holds a key to countering a serious problem

**Becoming involved is only half the battle. Once involved, people may act together, but it's no blessing unless they act wisely so society as a whole benefits.**

of democracy—people not becoming involved as citizens. For example, the *achievement gap* is a phrase used by politicians and educators, but it doesn't always resonate with people. They see the academic gap as a symptom of many other gaps, such as economic ones. (This insight came from a series of deliberative community forums about helping students succeed.)

### Moving Beyond Hasty Decisions to Sound Judgment

Becoming involved is only half the battle. Once involved, people may act together, but it's no blessing unless they act wisely so society as a whole benefits. Critics worry that the public's participation won't be well informed. And much of the institutional and professional hesitation to involve the public comes from worries that citizens won't make thoughtful decisions.

A woman whose home was surrounded by rental properties saw a fistfight break out in front of one of them. Based on that one incident, which alarmed her, she decided that the problem in her neighborhood was one of loose codes for rental homes. Without the benefit of other information, such as actual crime rates or police reports, she built a huge grassroots movement using e-mail and social media. She and her followers started putting pressure on the city government. A new, very strict rental ordinance was passed that made life more difficult for law-abiding renters. Fear reached an emotional level that didn't allow for thoughtful decision making.

As in this case, being informed politically involves having facts, but facts alone aren't sufficient. People have to exercise sound judgment on issues that are morally charged and can't be resolved with facts alone. These are situations where the issue is about what is "right." The usual response in such situations is to "educate" the people by giving them the correct information—certainly nothing wrong with that. Yet

no amount of information is enough to fully inform the kind of decisions citizens have to make when the question is about the *right* thing to do. Should schools provide more courses in math and science, even if that means reducing those in the humanities and dropping physical education? Should we put stricter controls on the Internet, even if that would infringe on free speech? These questions can be answered in more than one way and require the exercise of judgment. The things people hold dear or consider deeply valuable are at stake and have to be considered. That is why informing our decisions requires more than facts alone.

Here's an example of the difference between questions of fact and questions of judgment: How long a bridge must be in order to span a river and how strong it must be to bear the weight of traffic are factual questions. But whether we should

build a bridge in fragile coastal wetlands is more than a question of fact. Although facts are certainly relevant, deciding to build a bridge to a barrier island requires the exercise of our best judgment about the right thing to do—given all that we consider valuable.

Questions of judgment are especially difficult to answer because we hold a great many things dear. We have to weigh our options carefully against the various imperatives that tug at us. We do that when making individual decisions in everyday life.

Imagine someone coming home from a hard day at work and looking forward to quiet and rest. But his or her spouse, who has been taking care of the home and family, wants to get out of the house and go out to dinner at a new restaurant. The children, however, want to go to a movie. Then, before those conflicts can be resolved, in-laws call, complain of being neglected, and insist the family spend the evening at their house. The spouse, the children, and the in-laws are *all* important. Giving one priority over another usually isn't a good idea. And the must-see movie begins soon, so the parents have to make a decision quickly; there isn't time to negotiate with all the parties involved.

After weighing the pros and cons of possible options, the couple decides to go to dinner and drop the kids off at the movie theater on the way. They postpone the evening with the in-laws to later in the week. They make some trade-offs and balance demands or competing imperatives as best they can. We do much the same thing when making decisions with other citizens.

Making decisions with people outside our circle of family and friends is challenging because we are less familiar with their circumstances. And the things we all hold valuable have different applications in different conditions. For example, I may value security, and because I live in a neighborhood where there are a lot of break-ins, I want a visible police presence. My friend, who also values security, lives in a safe neighborhood and doesn't want it turned into an armed camp. Just because people value the same things doesn't mean they agree.

## Getting Off the Sidelines and Making Good Choices

### The Human Faculty for Judgment

Driving slowly on a wet highway is a sound decision because it makes us safer, even though we may be late for a meeting. Because we value many things—our security from danger, our freedom to act, and so on—we have to determine, given the circumstances facing us, which is most valuable or, failing in that, how best to balance competing imperatives.

Ancient languages have left us a clue as to how we can make use of our faculty for judgment. It is the word *deliberation*, which is found in different written forms, from Egyptian hieroglyphics to old Chinese characters. To deliberate is to carefully weigh possible actions, laws, or policies against the various things that people hold dear in order to decide on a direction or purpose to pursue. Deliberation informs judgment.

The neurosciences help explain how the human faculty for judgment works. Studies have shown that an exchange of experiences with others, exposure to a diversity of opinions, and consideration of all alternatives create the ideal situation

for good decisions. These conditions are found in deliberative practice.

Of course, people don't always make sound decisions. Just because we have a faculty for judgment, doesn't mean we always use it. Public decision making is difficult, sometimes bruising, and there are thousands of ways of avoiding it in a culture that promotes sound bites and partisan debate. All that is natural isn't easy, and it can even be rare.

Having a faculty for judgment, I should add, doesn't mean that the citizenry has a corner on a special wisdom that officeholders, institutional leaders, and professionals don't have. Furthermore, even if people's conclusions are consistent with what they value, there aren't any guarantees that their decision will prove to be the best one. We have no way of knowing

what a decision will produce until its effects have played out over time.

### The Bottom Line

Often research can be distilled into one or two lines. In this case, what we've

**Studies have shown that an exchange of experiences with others, exposure to a diversity of opinions, and consideration of all alternatives create the ideal situation for good decisions. These conditions are found in deliberative practice.**

learned is that deliberation is basically the exercise of the human faculty for judgment. That has been a key insight because the deliberation that Kettering studies is often confused with a facilitated group process that takes place in a forum. Some facilitation is useful in most group meetings. However, public deliberation is a natural act that belongs anywhere and everywhere public decisions are being made—in city councils, school boards, and civic associations. One of the most promising lines of new foundation research looks at deliberative elements in everyday speech—the ultimate public forum that is held at lunch counters, over the office water cooler, and on the bus ride home.

The articles that follow describe a variety of experiments in how naming and framing problems encourages deliberation. These experiments, and others, offer critical insights into how citizens can get off the sidelines of the political system and make sound choices about their shared future.

*David Mathews is the president of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at [dmathews@kettering.org](mailto:dmathews@kettering.org).*





© Copyright 2013 by the Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799; (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street NW, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016; (212) 686-7016

[www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)

|   |
|---|
| Nonprofit<br>Organization<br>U.S. Postage<br>PAID<br>Bloomington, IN<br>Permit No. 26 |
|---|

---

Kettering Foundation  
200 Commons Road  
Dayton, OH 45459-2799