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Dick Cheney got our attention immediately.
It was February 1983, during the first in a series of Presidential Library conferences on the public and public policy. This one was held at the Gerald Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was the culminating event of the initial year of the Domestic Policy Association (DPA), which later became the National Issues Forums (NIF).

This landmark meeting was the national rollout of deliberative democracy designed in collaboration between David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, and Daniel Yankelovich, president of Public Agenda.

Patricia Henry, a community and business leader from Lawton, Oklahoma, who had participated in forums, and Cheney—then a Wyoming congressman—were airing their mutual frustrations. (Earlier, Cheney had been White House Chief of Staff during the Ford administration and later served as Secretary of Defense and Vice President of the United States of America.)

Citizens’ Complaint, Officials’ Dilemma

Henry voiced a complaint commonly heard from citizens, that public officials don’t seem to listen to them. Cheney expressed the dilemma of a public official who receives more mail than anyone could be expected to read. Worst of all, he said, was the assumption that the public really knows what the answers are and that if political leaders only listened more closely, they would avoid making so many “dumb decisions.”

The question was: If the public doesn’t offer infallible wisdom for policymakers, what does it offer? The exchange between Henry and Cheney marked the beginning of the foundation’s inquiry into a public voice—not, mind you, the public voice, but a public voice—that continues today.

In his 2012 book, *Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics*, Kettering Foundation senior associate Bob Kingston said researchers wanted “to learn more clearly how the public might find and exert its will in shaping its communities and directing its nation (which sometimes seems, paradoxically, more oligarchy than democracy).”

The research plan included a series of deliberative forums held throughout the country on urgent national issues followed by reporting outcomes to policymakers.

Former presidents Ford and Carter cochaired the 1983 Ann Arbor meeting, where citizens first reported forum outcomes to policymakers. Forum participants had agreed that an important part of the process was to convey to national leaders a sense of what took place in the local forums.

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**Bob Daley**

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Study of Schooling project begins.
This project is a joint effort with /I/D/E/A/ and the foundation’s International Affairs program.
Simultaneously, a series of annual meetings organized by Kettering and called Washington Week, began. Forum participants reported to officials of the executive branch at the White House before going to Capitol Hill to confer with congressional staff. Kingston wrote in *Voice and Judgment* that library conferences, attended by noticeable alumni of the White House and federal agencies, were not trapped in congressional politics. Washington Week meetings with congressional and executive branch staff, he wrote, “proved more rewarding than have presentations closely tied to highly politicized legislative issues and made directly to congressional and executive branch leaders.”

To celebrate the bicentennial of the US Constitution in 1988, Presidential Library conferences were combined with Washington Week. Called National Forums ’88, the event became a four-day joint effort of DPA, the National Archives and Records Administration, the Office of Presidential Libraries, and the Kettering Foundation.

**Experiments Take Shape**

Six separate programs were designed to experiment with a new type of reporting to policymakers. Three of the programs were National Issues Forums roundtables, in which citizen representatives from local forums met with policy experts and influencers to discuss the 1987-1988 issues: “The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security,” “The Trade Gap: Regaining the Competitive Edge,” and “Freedom of Speech: Where to Draw the Line.”

At the National Press Club, Public Agenda presented the fourth program, “On Second Thought: The Public’s View of the Issues.” Rather than a tabulation of opinions gathered, “On Second Thought” was a report of the considered judgments of forum participants.
Two new programs were also on the schedule. “What the Public Needs to Know: A Critical Issues Conference” was a discussion between members of Congress, congressional staff, and conference participants about important issues in our nation’s future. “New Ways to Listen to the Public” was a symposium that engaged national, state, and local policymakers in an exploration of better ways to listen to the public.

Looking ahead, National Forums ‘89 planners built a similar program—a county fair, a reception in the Archives’ rotunda, a Public Agenda symposium, congressional visits, and a National Town Meeting on the subject of the condition of our democracy. Planners set several goals including this one: “To engage policymakers, the Executive Branch, and policy experts in a dialogue with citizens about their shared responsibilities in setting policy direction for the nation—so that the public and elected leaders might better understand their respective roles.”

From the beginning, television had been a part of each program’s capstone event. In 1983, a satellite network hosted by NPR’s Linda Wertheimer brought forum participants from a score of communities across the country into the conference at the Ford Library. A year later C-SPAN broadcast a nationally distributed program from the LBJ Library.

The National Town Meeting, a one-hour television program taped at the National Press Club and broadcast on The Learning Channel, was the focal event of National Forums ‘89 and ‘90. It was a forum-in-the-round involving members of Congress, policymakers, opinion leaders, and informed citizens in a discussion of representative democracy, how well it is working, and what were its problems.

In 1990, it was suggested, Kettering could build NIF’s influence in Washington, and its underlying vision of politics, through a widely distributed, annual report of the forums not much different from the National Town Meetings.

To envision the celebration’s annual national town meeting as a program televised from coast to coast was an incremental step forward. Kettering’s goal was to reach political and media leadership with a message about deliberative democracy and the public voice. To attract congressional attention, the reasoning went, NIF had to be of interest to a significant public audience in congressional districts.

The best way to ensure congressional attention to a public voice, it was felt, was to have congressional participation in the video. The second best way, it was further felt, was to ensure that the discussion was widely seen by elected officials’ constituents.

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Public Voice, Public Broadcasting

After reviewing several options, public television—considered to command a reasonable, national audience—was targeted. The foundation’s senior associate Bob Kingston was executive producer; Milton Hoffman, experienced in public affairs, public television programs, was the producer; and senior associate Diane Eisenberg handled distribution.

A Public Voice ’91, a one-hour public affairs television program was taped on April 15, 1991, at the National Press Club. It was the first time A Public Voice was used formally to describe forum outcomes. Bob Kingston was the moderator. Four members of Congress, four members of the press, and four members of the public joined him.

By September 5, 1991, 123 public television stations and 49 cable systems had broadcast the program and it was distributed by community colleges to their local public access channels. The program continued to be produced in

May 1976

Dartmouth Conference X, held in the USSR, focuses on food supply. The Kettering Research Laboratory has been working on this topic for many years.

August 27, 1976

Kettering Foundation observes Charles F. Kettering’s 100th birthday.
much the same format as the first one from 1991 through 2007. At its peak, A Public Voice was broadcast by nearly 300 public television stations across the country every year.

The program was seen as the central thrust in the foundation’s campaign to bring a new sense of politics to the consideration of the nation’s political and media leadership. The video had a single purpose: to show that there is something we can call “a public voice” on complex and troubling policy matters. And this public voice is significantly different from the debate on these issues as it is recorded in the media and significantly different from the debate “as we hear it through the mouths of political leaders.”

The issue of abortion is a good example. The issue is so polarized, some argued, that it did not lend itself to public deliberation. An issue in 1991, it was part of the initial A Public Voice video program. Approaches were “Affirming Life: Moral Claims, Legal Sanctions”; “Abortion Rights: Personal Choices, Private Decisions”; and “Respecting Differences: Private Lives and the Public Interest.”

Beyond the Usual Divide

The forums also revealed people growing increasingly concerned about the value of individual life.

Public deliberation, we learned, was possible even with the most divisive issues. Catholic churches, strongly opposed to abortion, took part in the forums.

In a significant research experiment, A Public Voice has recently invited policymakers to join in framing new issue guides. Researchers wanted to understand precisely what policymakers needed to know from the public. In 2015, the issue was the economy. On May 7, a panel of officials from local and state governments met in the morning session at the National Press Club. National policymakers met in the afternoon. Their themes and ideas will be used as part of the research base for writing the issue guide in a way that takes into account both what officials want to know from citizens as well as what people hold dear.

After forums are held throughout the country, feedback to policymakers will continue through Washington briefings, perhaps with some of the same local, state, and national policymakers who took part in A Public Voice 2015. This research experiment will continue to be tested in the coming years.

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