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The Habit of Public Deliberation

David Mathews

Every Connections begins six months before its publication when the staff and associates of the Kettering Foundation (assisted by several outside authorities) sit down to review one area of research in-depth. That review ends in a board discussion of options for future research. The Connections for each period then explains these options and illustrates the pros and cons of each through a series of articles.

In this issue, we will report on "Citizens and Public Choice" research. One of the first and most obvious conclusions in studying how democracy might work as it should be is that democracy cannot function at its best unless citizens are able to make responsible decisions about their collective fate. So the foundation has been studying the process of public decision making (deliberation) for nearly 20 years. The objective of this research isn't only to understand how the public talks and reasons but also to find out how such a fundamental practice as deliberation can become a more widespread habit. That deliberation has been a habit in the past is evident. The word is found in many early political cultures with a rather consistent meaning: collective decision making. And students of politics today have made compelling arguments that a democracy necessarily implies deliberation because there is no monarch or other authority to make decisions. (For more on scholars and the roles they might play in deliberative democracy, see the 2002 issue of Kettering's Higher Education Exchange.)

If democracy is to mean self-rule, deliberation has to be public. John Adams understood that in 1776. Adams not only recognized that the "whole People" had to deliberate but also was grateful that deliberation had been going on long enough to "ripen" public judgment:

"Time has been given for the whole People, maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their Judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing it in News Papers and Pamphlets, by debating it, in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private Conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the thirteen, have now adopted it, as their own Act.—This will cement the Union, and avoid those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned, by such a Declaration Six Months ago.

The need for public deliberation is most evident when the nation faces a crisis — as in the recent terrorist attacks. Emotions run high, knee-jerk reactions can set in, and innocent people may be harmed. In order to avoid hasty decisions, public deliberation has to be ingrained in the political culture. That is most likely to be the case when people understand that deliberation is a different kind of public talk, unlike airing grievances or conveying information. In order to know what deliberation is and can do, citizens have to experience it; they can’t just read about it. However, repeating the definition the foundation uses may be helpful here. Deliberation is weighing carefully (with others who may have different views) the costs and consequences of the major options for responding to a common problem. Each alternative touches on a number of things that people hold valuable and creates conflicts that, to use a phrase of Daniel Yankelovich, have to be "worked through." For instance, options that increase our freedom may also compromise our security. Certainly that was the case when Americans
considered declaring their independence from England.

Furthermore, in order for deliberation to be around when we need it, the practice must have found its way into all the places where collective decisions are made and must be available to all parts of society. Fortunately, deliberation seems to occur naturally (as during six crucial months in 1776), so the challenge is to reinforce deliberative instincts, not introduce something that is totally foreign. Yet, that said, public deliberation is far less prevalent today than it needs to be, and there are not always organizations willing to provide opportunities for people to reason together.

How then might deliberation become more firmly established? Kettering staff and associates came up with four options. They didn’t assume that one approach would be better than the other three but rather that weighing all four might result in a better understanding of barriers to and opportunities for, strengthening the habit of deliberation.

The first option for future research is based on the assumption that large national organizations have an untapped capacity to give people across the country more opportunities to deliberate. But for them to play that role, these organizations would have to see public deliberation as consistent with their missions and self-interests. Research might tell us if that is likely to happen.

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Fortunately, several of these organizations are already writing discussion guides to promote public deliberation or have chapters organizing deliberative forums. They include the American Bar Association, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the League of Women Voters of California, the Farm Foundation, and a group of academic honor societies including Phi Beta Kappa. These projects might present an opportunity for shared learning about ways in which public deliberation furthers the objectives of our national civic organizations.

Option two says that the most critical problem facing deliberative democracy isn't the already civically engaged Americans but rather the "unorganized citizen" who doesn't belong to a national organization. The organizations with the greatest capacity to break down whatever isolates these people are community-based institutions such as churches and tenant associations. There is reason to believe that more of these institutions would be interested in providing opportunities for deliberations on issues of concern to their constituencies. For instance, one of the best deliberative programs in the country has been going on for years in a neighborhood association of Topeka, Kansas. We have also learned of ministers who have brought forums to the inner cities of towns like Cincinnati, Ohio. In addition, literacy organizations have taken deliberation into prisons, as is happening in Rockview, Pennsylvania. And deliberation may be going on among the supposedly unorganized citizens in rooms that don't have a sign saying "forum" over the door.

Option three grows out of the assumption that deliberation cannot become a habit when issues are routinely framed in a highly polarized or overly technical fashion. How can there be true deliberation if there are never more than two alternatives to consider on any issue and citizens can't understand what is at stake because the terms in which problems are described are off-putting? This option says to focus the research on organizations that have a self-interest in framing issues in ways that promote deliberation and problem solving. For instance, some news organizations have done that in Hammond, Indiana, and Owensboro, Kentucky.

The fourth option reflects Thomas Jefferson's conviction that deliberation (or any other democratic practice) will not become a habit unless people practice it in their communities. That argues for more research focused on what is happening in framing local issues and finding out what types of community organizations are most likely to provide space for public deliberation. Studies that have been done with civic associations in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Akron, Ohio; Owensboro, Kentucky; and Kanawha, West Virginia suggest a great deal is happening that is going unreported. This line of research could also draw on community forums in other countries, such as Russia, Colombia, and New Zealand to name just a few.

As these options are being discussed at Kettering, the foundation tries to keep in mind the argument that deliberative democracy is neither desirable nor possible — particularly the view that most citizens do not have the ability or the desire to deliberate. Even if the critics are right, however, people continue to go to the polls and vote their convictions in what has been called "lawmaking by ballots." Timothy Egan of The New York Times has written a recent article (reprinted in this issue of Connections) with a long list of what he considers mixed messages and muddled thinking that have resulted when people have voted without the benefit of deliberation. (Also, we have noted that some of the issues put on ballots were framed so that deliberation was virtually impossible.) Some will read Egan's article as confirmation of their worst fears about their fellow citizens. I have read it and recall that often-quoted line from Thomas Jefferson about the inescapable necessity of "informed discretion" in a democracy.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.
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