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Deep in the basement of the Kettering Foundation sits a treasure trove of information about the National Issues Forums (NIF). Just about everything anyone might want to know about NIF—from issue guides to starter tapes, forum recordings, and published reports—is housed in the Kettering archives.

NIF has been in existence for more than 30 years, making it one of the longest running experiments in citizen-to-citizen public deliberation. As a result, the sheer volume of NIF-related materials in the archives can seem overwhelming and unmanageable.

That was certainly the case when Michael Neblo (associate professor of political science at Ohio State University) and I first visited the Kettering archives in 2011. There was, to be sure, a sense of endless possibilities, but it was coupled with the daunting reality of box after box of materials.

The most numerous items in this sea of information are questionnaires. Tucked inside each NIF issue guide is a one-page questionnaire with questions for forum participants to answer privately before and after participating in a forum. For more than 30 years, forum convenors across the United States have administered these questionnaires and dutifully mailed them back to the Kettering Foundation. There are more than 100,000 of these questionnaires, on topics running the gamut from Social Security to gambling. They tell a fascinating story, not about public opinion, but about the much rarer public judgment that is the product of deliberation.

The issue that each questionnaire focuses on changes from year to year, and the questionnaires themselves have also evolved over time. The earliest NIF questionnaires contained around 40 closed-ended questions; they were shortened in subsequent years and now contain approximately 20 questions. Over time, open-ended questions, where participants are free to write as much or as little as they like, were introduced. The first open-ended questions asked citizens whether they had “changed their mind” on anything during the forum and whether they had a “message they would like to send to the nation’s leaders.” As the years went on, a greater number of open-ended questions were used and the questions changed. Today, NIF questionnaires ask citizens to describe how, if at all, they are “thinking differently” about an issue and “what citizens in their community might do” to address the issue at hand.

This change in questions reflects a realization that wholesale attitude change is neither the purpose nor the result of public deliberation. Rather, participants are usually “thinking differently” about an issue in the sense that they have wrestled with trade-
offs and been exposed, through exchanges with fellow participants, to different ways of thinking about an issue. Changes in the wording of questions also reflect an emphasis on what citizens can do about a shared problem rather than what they would like elected officials to do.

One constant focus of the NIF questionnaires, though, is also one of their most uniquely valuable features. From the very beginning, each NIF questionnaire has always asked questions designed to capture which policy trade-offs citizens can and cannot accept. For example, a recent NIF questionnaire asked whether “Congress should raise the age of eligibility for Medicare to 67, EVEN IF that means seniors under 67 would have to get health insurance on their own or from an employer.”

Standard public opinion surveys do not usually ask questions that force citizens to reckon with the negative aspects of even their most preferred courses of action. NIF questionnaires have always done this and they are richer for it, because questions like this reveal what the public will do when push comes to shove. As someone who has both completed an NIF questionnaire and been in the room when others have done so, I know that participants usually note how difficult the questions are. In standard survey research, complaints about difficult questions are a glaring red flag and usually indicate that the wording of the question is unclear or confusing. However, in the NIF context, comments like this about the “even if” questions are a clear sign that participants are really thinking through an issue and grappling with all its complexities.

In a larger sense, the information that NIF questionnaires capture differs from that of standard surveys, even on the same topic. Standard surveys are generally administered to a randomly selected collection of individuals so the results will be representative of some larger population of interest. By contrast, those who complete NIF questionnaires are not randomly selected and, as a result, the opinions gathered from them are not necessarily representative of the larger population. For some, this lack of representativeness is a cause to dismiss information garnered from NIF questionnaires. However, NIF questionnaires are unrepresentative in the best possible sense. While they cannot tell us how the population as a whole feels about an issue, NIF questionnaires can tell us a great deal about how a concerned and informed subset of the population feels about an issue after deliberating with a group of their peers. NIF participants complete questionnaires after having the chance to think about, read about, and deliberate together about an issue. In this sense, NIF questionnaires provide a picture of public thinking that is truly public and truly thoughtful.

The purpose of my original visit to the Kettering archives with Michael Neblo was to see what could be done to make all of this NIF information more easily and readily available. Prior to now, anyone interested in studying the National Issues Forums had to be physically present in Dayton to sift through box after box of materials. This could be done, but the daunting nature of the task deterred many a would-be researcher.

After several years of work and the help of an army of Ohio State University research assistants, we are now on the cusp of having a fully functional digital archive of all things NIF. This archive will contain data from the questionnaires described above, as well as copies of forum recordings, starter tapes, issue guides, and much more. What questions can we ask of this information to help us better understand how issues have been named and framed for public deliberation? Moreover, what can the stories revealed by the NIF questionnaires tell us about the nature of public judgment on the shared problems we all face?

Here at Kettering, we are excited at the prospect of further uncovering the stories that wait to be told by NIF questionnaires.

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