

# CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2019

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**Felt Democracy: Multinational  
Research Exchange Week, 2019**

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**When Communities Embrace  
Shared Responsibility**

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Exploring the  
Relationship between  
**THE PUBLIC  
AND GOVERNMENT**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make 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).

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# A Public Voice: A Look at National and Local Efforts

By Tony Wharton



*For more than 30 years, the Kettering Foundation, in collaboration with the National Issues Forums Institute, has organized A Public Voice (APV). This annual program brings together representatives from forum groups around the country and from national dialogue and deliberation organizations, as well as elected officials and staff, to explore the contributions that a deliberative public makes to addressing some of the most challenging issues facing our communities and elected officeholders.*

**T**he 29th annual A Public Voice program was held at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on May 9, 2019.

The two-hour discussion brought together legislators, local elected officials, congressional staffers, and citizens from the National Issues Forums (NIF) network.

APV 2019 focused in part on the deliberations held in recent months using the NIF issue guide on political divisiveness, *A House Divided: What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?*

Heading into the 2020 elections, Americans urgently need to talk more constructively with one another and with legislators and candidates if the nation is going to make progress on the problems we face, panelists at A Public Voice 2019 said.



“We don’t talk like this in Congress. Members of Congress yell at each other, and then constituents yell at the members of Congress,” said Stacy Palmer Barton, chief of staff to US Representative Steve Chabot (R-Ohio). “I think that given the current times, the appetite for respectful dialogue will only increase.”

Glenn Nye, a former congressman and current president of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, said, “I’m sure that all of you agree from talking to your

neighbors that there’s a sense that we need a better way in this country to talk to each other. We know that we’re incentivized to disagree sometimes; we know that the media wants to cover the drama. So, it’s on us to make sure that we continue to provide opportunities for citizens to engage in the way that I think they really want to.”

The program also looked ahead at what issues should be topics for issue guides and deliberative forums in the coming year.

As host and National Issues Forums Institute board member Charles Moses put it, “What happens when typical Americans get together to deliberate seriously about tough, divisive issues, when they weigh choices and listen to different perspectives? . . . What issues most need this kind of deliberation?”

Panelists suggested several topics they thought were ripe for delibera-

tion, including health care, immigration, and the future of work in the US.

Gregg Kaufman, a retired pastor and NIF veteran now on the faculty of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of North Florida, described Floridians' concerns about sea level rise as a result of climate change.

“People are concerned about the oceans' health and preservation, and people want to talk about preserving their communities and their way of life,” Kaufman said. “They recognize how tourism and the fishing industry and recreation will be impacted, resulting in economic decline. In fact, jobs will be lost.”

**JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA:** Convenors from Palms Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, gathered people for eight *A House Divided* forums. Three local mayors, Charlie Latham, Jacksonville Beach; Ellen Glasser, Atlantic Beach; and Elaine Brown, Neptune Beach; as well as city council members, were also invited. The three mayors, as well as several people who are responsible for city projects, attended and participated in the forums. Soliciting the mayors' interest is an effort that is intended to move well beyond a single forum. The forum-convening groups, like Palms Presbyterian Church, are trying to create an infrastructure for civil discourse that involves faith communities, nonprofits, city agencies, and citizens.

—Gregg Kaufman



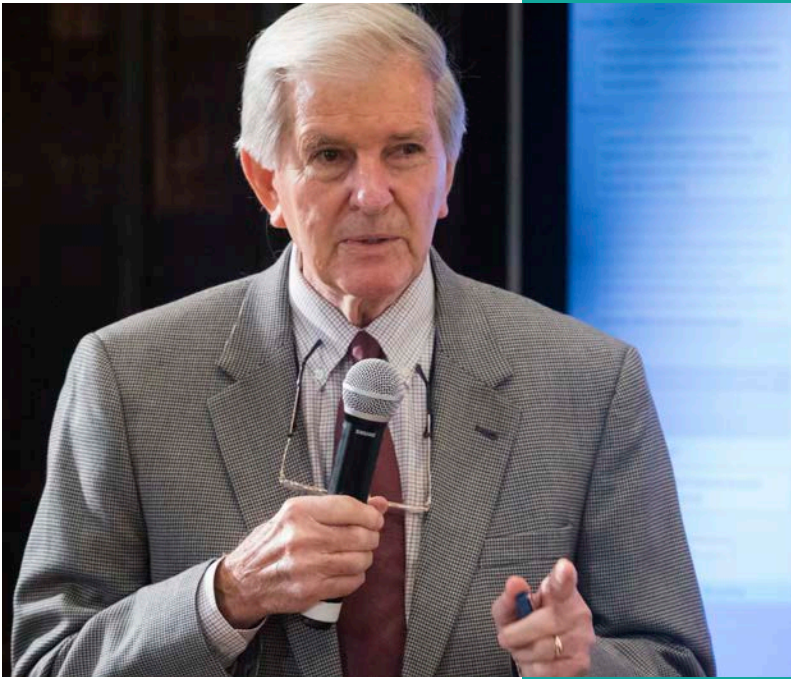
**SEDONA, ARIZONA:** City council members regularly attend forums and enjoy the opportunity to connect with the community informally. Forums are a way for policymakers to get more information about what citizens are thinking. One city council member said, “I don’t think of the citizens at forums as decision-making groups because they aren’t. What they are is perspective-expanding groups.” Deliberative forums create an opportunity for engagement that is not adversarial or competitive. Overall, deliberative forums build a feeling of community connection and goodwill in Sedona. They are spaces where people can express their views, hear the views of others, and consider competing options fairly. “When is the next one?” is the question convenors always hear at the end of a forum.

—*Andrea Christelle*

Simultaneously with APV 2019, NIF affiliates held Common Ground for Action online forums about the issue of political divisiveness, with participants both deliberating among themselves and commenting on the discussion taking place in Washington.

One participant, a retired state legislator from North Carolina, said, “I have watched with dismay as the constructive ways for citizens and officials to engage with others with whom they disagree have disappeared. . . . I believe in the importance of having a government that acts for the common good, and I am worried that that is slipping away.”





Panelists agreed that the need for constructive, deliberative dialogue is more urgent than ever.

“The most encouraging thing that I’ve heard is the idea that folks have sat across the table from somebody that has a different opinion,” said Nick Bush, deputy chief of staff and legislative director for US Representative Steve Stivers (R-Ohio), a founder of the Congressional Civility and Respect Caucus. “Even acknowledging that our political opponents do the same things, they go home with their families, they have their community centers. . . . We don’t have to get to a solution, but just having the conversation, I think that’s the most encouraging thing I see from this.”

Sedona, Arizona, city council member Bill Chisholm said citizen deliberation “allows me a nuanced look at what people are saying. All

**MOUND BAYOU, MISSISSIPPI:** The forum on *A House Divided* was the first time the forum-convening team intentionally brought ordinary citizens, practitioners, and officeholders together at the same time. As in their previous forums, they found that participants were eager to talk across boundaries, listen to different points of view, and learn more about the issues. Attendees did discuss in detail some options, and given more time, may have come up with shared directions and policy implications. Still, participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss issues in a way they usually hadn’t experienced in other community public meetings and forums. As they continue to hold these forums, learn from these public gatherings, and focus on what happens after the forums and gatherings, they are likely to experience more shared direction.

—James (Ike) Adams Jr.



**HARPERS FERRY, WEST VIRGINIA:** In Pursuit of Happiness (IPOH) is a movement that was started by citizens seeking to create a community culture of holistic wellness and health. Central to these efforts were deliberative forums, which led many organizations to change how they worked. Moving forward, IPOH will continue focusing on cultivating relationships, connecting people in their community, and utilizing as many of the resources that are available to them. Their next step is to assess the major pieces that are in play now to ensure that people are better connected to each other and to their community. Two questions to consider: Do they perceive these connections as working for them, and do they know how to access effective resources?

—Heidi Dobish



too often I hear the soundbites that come from a particular person's bubble, wherever they're getting their information from. But when I'm in the room and I see how people are reacting to comments that are made, it gives me a better feel for where the common ground is."

In his concluding remarks, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews said he was struck by the level of interaction between citizens and legislators.

"The legitimacy of democracy is endangered, and it's endangered by the loss of confidence; it's endangered by the divisiveness. That gives special meaning to this particular gathering," Mathews said. "The breakthrough this time, I think, was clearly in getting an interaction between sitting members of legislative bodies and a deliberative citizenry. Before, when we tried it, we would show videos of people deliberating. Whatever the subject was, it just keyed a member of Congress to go into whatever his or her set speech was about the issue at hand. We didn't get any interaction. We did this time. People began to talk about what they took away from deliberation." ■

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