

CONNECTIONS

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An Experiment Studying Experiments

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From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

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The Work of
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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.

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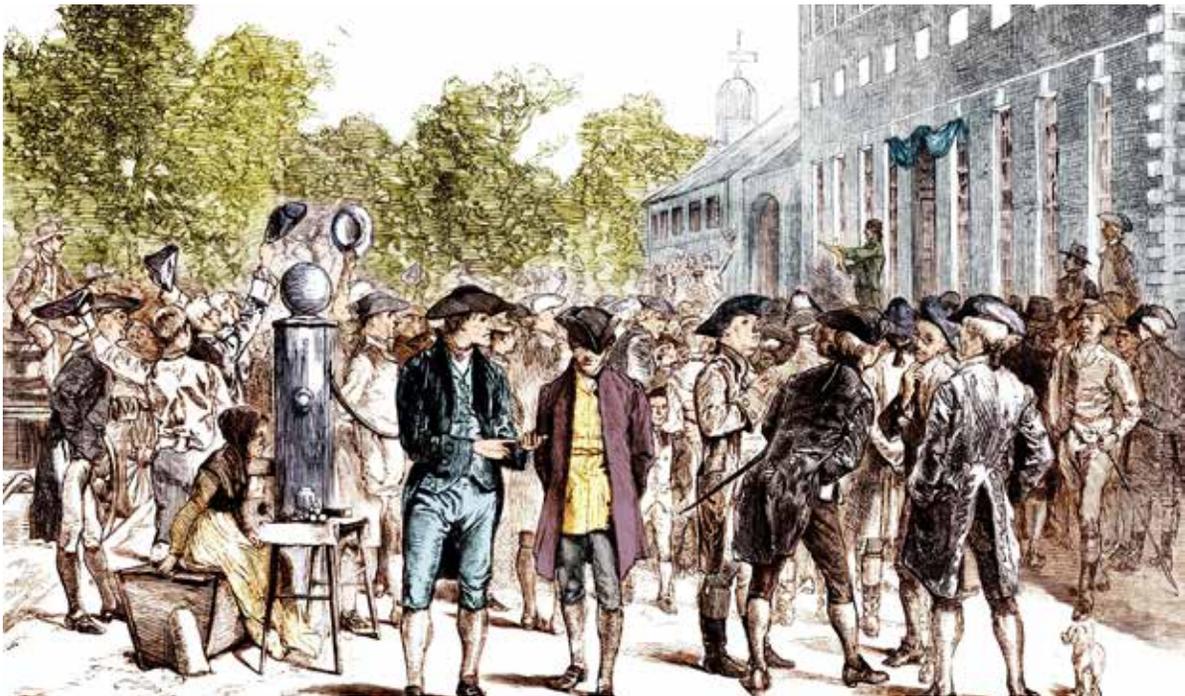
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Historic Decisions: Looking Deliberatively at the Past

By Joni Doherty

Historic Decisions is a problem-based approach to civic education that supports the development of skills needed for active participation in democratic life. During a Historic Decisions forum, participants deliberate about the options that were available when people in the past had to make a decision about a public problem. In addition to practicing deliberation, participants discover that decisions about public problems are made not only by leaders, but also by everyday people. Looking at history through this perspective expands participants' sense of who can be a political actor and where political actions can occur.



Declaration of Independence Read Aloud, 1776



Over the last five years, museums across the country have been creating guides for deliberation about historic issues.

Politics, understood this way, is not only about what governments do, but also about how everyday people can work together to address the challenges of living well together in a democracy.

Historic Decisions draws on Kettering's research in community-based deliberation. For more than 30 years, deliberative forums on contemporary issues have been used across the country to address public problems involving ethical dilemmas that demand the public's attention. Addressing these what-should-we-do kinds of questions requires more than expertise or critical thinking; it requires a kind of moral reasoning that recognizes our responsibility to one another.

Building on this, over the last five years, museums across the country have been creating guides

for deliberation about historic issues. The guides do not offer a counter-factual or hypothetical history. The information presented is historically accurate, including actions that were being considered at the time. While these forums can be part of a museum's public program, and some have been used in college courses, this article focuses on the experiences of students in grades 4-12.

Both historic and contemporary issue forums offer frameworks for deliberating about options for addressing a problem that are grounded in things people value in democratic communities.

Examples include:

- being free to act according to one's wishes,
- feeling safe from harm,
- being treated fairly by others, and
- living in a secure and stable community.

Although everyone wants all of these things, people may prioritize one thing over another, depending on where they are in their lives, particular life experiences, or the historical context. For example, just after 9/11 in 2001, most people prioritized safety; 10 years later, many wondered if too much freedom had been given away.

More typically, disagreements arise over what strategies should be

used, not the things valued. For example, the issue guide developed by the National Center for Civil and Human Rights offers three options for how residents of Montgomery, Alabama, might reduce tensions during the 1956 bus boycott. One option supports immediate integration (fairness); a second, that individuals should make their own choices (freedom); and the last focuses on the safety of all residents. During a forum, many associated safety with increasing police presence, but, as an African American participant observed, this may cause others to feel less safe. In that moment, participants became aware that their lived experiences differed, and the tone of the deliberation shifted. Advocates for immediate integration understood that, while they may be willing to risk their own safety to achieve it, they saw more clearly how it might harm others. Those who thought everyone should be free to make his or her own choices were more aware of the trade-off: in a segregated society, some people have more choices available to them than others. As participants consider the trade-offs of each option, the complexity of the problem becomes apparent. And the ethical dilemma that people wrestled with more than 60 years ago became relevant to contemporary life.

Students who actively deliberate

about the problem discover there is no “right” answer. Middle school participants in the Autry Museum of the American West’s annual Day of Deliberation demonstrated this in their reflections after the forums about how to make the best use of our natural resources in Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley. After listening to a variety of perspectives, students found coming to a decision was difficult. Sarah Wilson, the director of education at the Autry, shared some student responses:

- “No option would be fair.”
- “It’s hard to decide because there is no right decision.”
- “A moral dilemma about thinking about yourself or others.”
- “I feel bad for Congress; they have to make hard decisions!”

INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

1. *At first, students may wonder how they can contribute to a historical deliberation.* The premise of Historic Decisions forums is that people, whether or not they were recognized formally as citizens, or even if they were enslaved, were deliberating, both privately and publicly, about what the best possible outcomes would be for themselves, their families, and their communities.

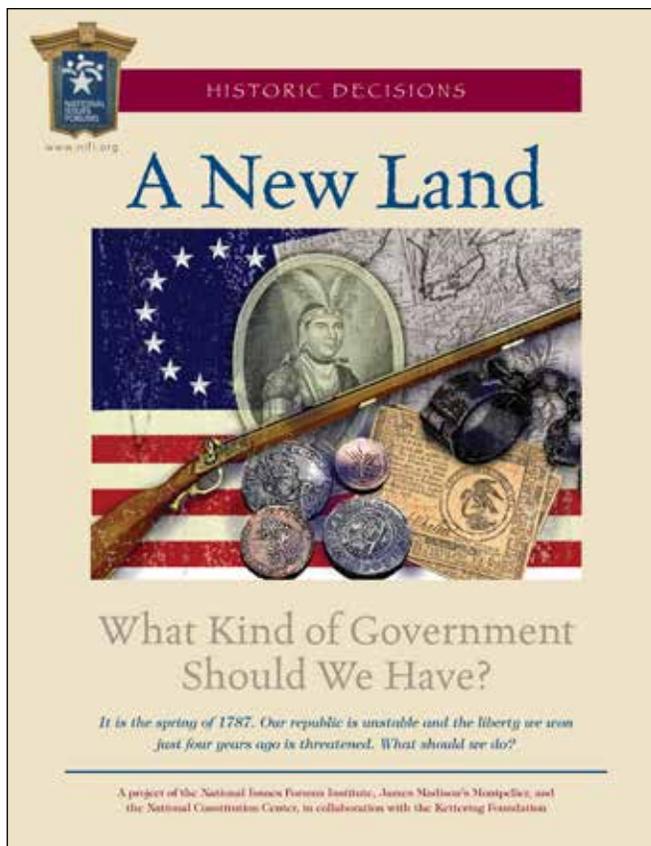
Making connections between the students’ lives today and the

historical issue by inviting them to share a personal experience related to the issue today is a helpful entry point. Then, students can more easily imagine the issue faced by people in the past. Encouraging them to occasionally make comparisons between the past and their contemporary life experiences throughout a forum also enriches their thinking. For example, in *A New Land*, a Historic Decisions forum about the development of the Constitution, a moderator may encourage participation by saying, “While our forum is set in 1787, if a

personal experience or contemporary issue seems relevant, please share it.” They may then go on to ask questions such as, “Given what people cared about in 1787, what was the best way to address the problem at that time?” and “As you think about what we care about today, what kind of government should we have now?”

Initially, museum staff and teachers were skeptical about the ability of students to balance between past and present, but after a forum, they are typically surprised at how well it went. Students deliberate successfully about a historical issue with relatively few, but strategic, historical facts. Because the things people value remain consistent over time, the options serve as a bridge between past and present. Autry Museum educators who spoke with teachers after the forums reported that one observed, “They [her students] enjoyed the chance to discuss the issue more deeply.” Another noted, “Students were more engaged and more likely to participate [than in a regular discussion].”

2. *Teaching history and moderating forums about historical problems are two different animals.* Ideally, teachers will spend some class time in advance of a Historic Decisions forum laying out the historical groundwork and explaining what deliberation is and why it is important in a democratic



society. During a forum, participants are decision-makers, not students. Turning a forum into a lecture about history disrupts the students' development of deliberative civic skills. The forum creates a dynamic through which civic education and historical education are mutually reinforcing.

During a forum on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Abby Pfisterer, education specialist for the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History, observed a high school teacher prompting students to make connections between that issue and what they had learned throughout the course. She noted, "Specifically, he asked them to identify similarities between the offer of citizenship to the Californios in 1849 and [other course content]. . . . Afterwards, the teacher talked with us about how the deliberation was an important platform to activate students' prior knowledge and build their historical thinking skills."

3. *Contemporary participants can find thinking through options that are now almost universally rejected to be challenging.* Not including these kinds of options in issue materials would erase important parts of our history, but the options can easily be dismissed if students impose their contemporary views on the past. To counteract this, participants need to keep in mind the distinction between



Deliberating about why strategies now shunned but that were once acceptable can lead to greater insights into pervasive contemporary problems.

the things people value and strategies to achieve them, which change over time. Presentism—the interpretation of the past in terms of contemporary perspectives—is avoided through explicitly acknowledging differences between then and now.

Deliberating about why strategies now shunned that were once acceptable can lead to greater insights into pervasive contemporary problems. Deliberating about the options can also bring to light some of the trade-offs we live with today and challenge contemporary moral complacency.

One example of an issue guide containing options that would be unacceptable today appears in *Slavery or Freedom Forever: What's at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act?* As students wrestle with the question

HISTORIC DECISIONS SKILLS

Through participating in Historic Decisions forums, students develop the deliberative skills necessary for working productively together to make decisions about morally grounded disagreements. These skills include the ability to:

- work collaboratively with others,
- offer reasons for an opinion,
- recognize the importance and use of evidence to support positions,
- understand other perspectives and how these arise out of differing life experiences,
- articulate the benefits and trade-offs of different positions, even if disagreeing with them, and
- generate new insights for addressing a problem.

of slavery in the territories, they consider three options: Remember Our Ideals (treat everyone fairly), Affirm Individual Choice (the settlers should be free to decide for themselves), and Protect Our Prosperity (national stability). The trade-offs raise disconcerting but productive questions about power, absolutist positions, the dangers of civil war, and the dangers of unlimited individual choice and self-interest.

After a forum using the *Separate and Unequal in 1963* issue guide, Gabrielle Lampugh, education director for the Mathews Center for Civic Life, wrote about how students came to understand the risks associated with taking action. One student questioned whether the group would really be willing to put their lives on the line for something they believed in. In response, some acknowledged their fears about disappointing their families or damaging their families' reputations. One student observed, "It's easy to say you would stick your neck out to do the 'right thing,' but there is a reason very few people actually do that." The moderator concluded, "It's really easy to say what should and should not be done when it isn't you doing it. But they recognized the question the deliberation was posing: 'What are you, personally and collectively, willing to do to impact change?' And they were



deeply self-aware and introspective about their own strengths and weaknesses as they answered this question.”

4. *The museum staff who participated in a multiyear research project using Historic Decisions concluded that role-playing is not effective.* Role-playing undermines the civic purpose of Historic Decisions because it requires students to act out the views of historical characters instead of wrestling with the problem themselves. Instead of doing the actual work of deliberating, they are stuck in an imaginary role. In addition, and quite harmfully, role-playing can result in caricatures or in reinforcing stereotypes.

Intellectual flexibility and honesty are hallmarks of a deliberative frame of mind. Mark Wilson, director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities at Auburn University, shared a story about how one fourth grader changed her mind as she deliberated about an action she had initially supported during a forum on the Creek War of 1813-14. When she realized the consequences of that action, she stopped mid-sentence and said, “No, that’s not what I think we should do. Never mind!” Deliberation helps participants to hear others, but often, as she demonstrated, it helps us hear ourselves.

HISTORIC DECISIONS ISSUE GUIDES

1776: What Should We Do?
National Issues Forums Institute

A New Land: What Kind of Government Do We Want? (1787)
National Issues Forums Institute

The Creek War of 1813-14: What Would You Do?
The Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities, Auburn University and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: What Do You Do When the Border Crosses You? (1849)
Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Slavery or Freedom Forever? What’s at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act? (1854)
The New England Center for Civic Life

Bleeding Kansas: How Do We Grow Our Fractured Nation? (1857)
Lancaster History

Moving Towards Freedom: What Rights and Opportunities Should Be Afforded to African Americans? (1866)
National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

Hetch Hetchy: How Do We Make the Best Use of Our Natural Resources? (1913)
The Autry Museum of the American West

World at War: What Role Should the United States Play in International Conflicts? (1915)
National WWI Museum and Memorial

Woman Suffrage and the Great War: What Should Woman Suffrage Advocates Do in Response to the Great War? (1917)
National Woman’s Party

Forging a New City: How Should We Shape Modern Pittsburgh? (1946)
Heinz History Center

The Long Road Home: How Should We Help People Still Suffering Because of World War II? (1952)
The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

What Should Be Done to Ease Racial Tensions in Montgomery in 1956?
National Center for Civil and Human Rights

Historic Decisions issue guides are available for download at www.nifi.org/historicdecisions.

BEYOND THE FORUMS

Integrating Historic Decisions into museum programs and school curricula has led to closer relationships between museums and local schools. A number of museums, including the National WWI Museum and Memorial and the Senator John Heinz History Center, have begun offering workshops on deliberative practices to teachers, often in the summer, so they can better understand the ideas and practices that are the foundation of this approach to learning about history and about democracy. The Heinz History Center has experimented with using primary materials from their archive to create frameworks with both students and teachers. Some museums, including the Autry and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, have developed websites with supplemental materials for teachers and students.



Integrating Historic Decisions into museum programs and school curricula has led to closer relationships between museums and local schools.

In addition to the existing materials, the Smithsonian is working with students and teachers to create four new issue guides. One of these addresses the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Native American students and their teacher have shared critical insights about their history and its contemporary connections. During a test of the draft, they engaged in a challenging conversation about the complexity of this history and the best approach for inviting others to grapple with it. The students shared their concerns about what cultural information could enable non-Native American students to thoughtfully and respectfully engage with this content. While the students did not come to a shared agreement, they used the Historic Decisions issue framing as an entry point for an important conversation about their history and relationship to others.

In Teaching History for the Common Good, Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik recognize that the past can be used “in a variety of ways, and for a variety of purposes.” One of these is to use history’s “potential to prepare students for participation in a pluralist democracy.” The Historic Decisions research over the past five years has demonstrated how this potential can be realized. ■

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