

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2020

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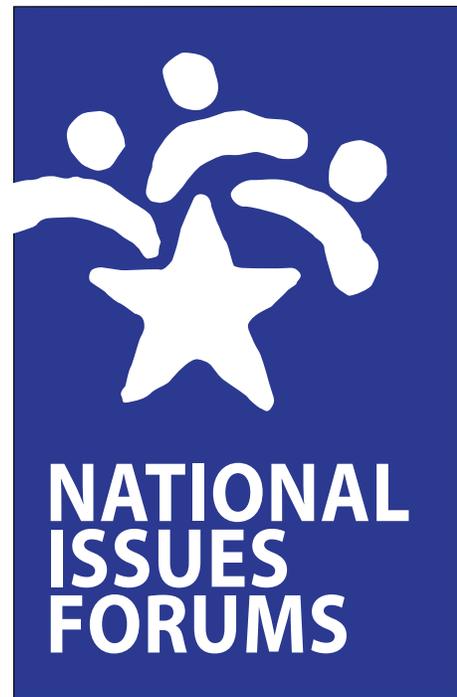
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From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

By Jean Johnson and Keith Melville

In 1980, when several of us started working with Dan Yankelovich at the newly formed nonpartisan research organization called Public Agenda, we looked at the value and the limitations of public opinion analysis. It's a field in which Dan—along with other pioneers including Lou Harris and George Gallup—was a nationally recognized figure.

Well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of traditional polls, Dan was reflecting on a fundamental question in a democracy: How do we advance and support the public's capabilities and its role in democratic life?



THE PUBLIC'S STARTING POINT

What fascinated Dan, and what he wrote about in a seminal book called *Coming to Public Judgment*, was how the public could move toward more considered and stable views after they have had a chance to weigh options and their costs and downsides. In that book, he laid out the main insights that shaped Public Agenda's work and subsequently provided the framework for what we and our colleagues have been examining in an almost 40-year-long exploration called the National Issues Forums (NIF).

As Dan suggested, elected officials, news media, and experts do a reasonably good job of bringing major problems to the public's attention, but the public's starting point

on issues is typically quite different from that of leaders. In most cases, leaders in government, the media, and the corporate and academic sectors have invested years weighing problems and various solutions and tend to talk about them in terms that are unfamiliar or unconvincing to most typical Americans.

Dan recognized that when leaders face important decisions, they think them through by using choice frameworks that lay out the competing options with their risks, costs, and trade-offs clearly delineated. He proposed that the public needs a similar choice framework on major issues.

THE PUBLIC LEARNING CURVE

However, coming to public judgment involves more than laying out choices and providing reliable information from an unbiased source. Because of his background in psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as philosophy, Dan was well aware of the importance of moving through the steps of emotional acceptance of choices, each of which imposes certain costs and involves certain sacrifices. This recognition was the basis for a different understanding of how people think through issues, recognize the downsides associated with each choice, agree over time to accept the costs and consequences of making

certain choices, and move toward more considered and stable judgments.

In his writing and in the course of work we did together at Public Agenda, Dan proposed a distinctive, stage-specific “public learning curve” consisting of various obstacles (such as mistrust and leadership miscommunications), needs (for more context, and a choice framework), traps (such as wishful thinking), and impediments (such as a lack of urgency).

Moving toward public judgment, as he concluded, requires people to listen to a variety of views and reflect on what should be done about pressing concerns. At its core, public judgment reflects what people can live with in order to make progress—not just what they themselves personally support.

TESTING THE IDEA

As intriguing and innovative as Dan’s thinking was about public judgment, it was a theory—a set of ideas and insights that were largely untested. In the early 1980s, David Mathews proposed and the Kettering Foundation played a key role in developing the National Issues Forums, a nationwide network that was one of the first initiatives in what became the deliberative democracy movement.

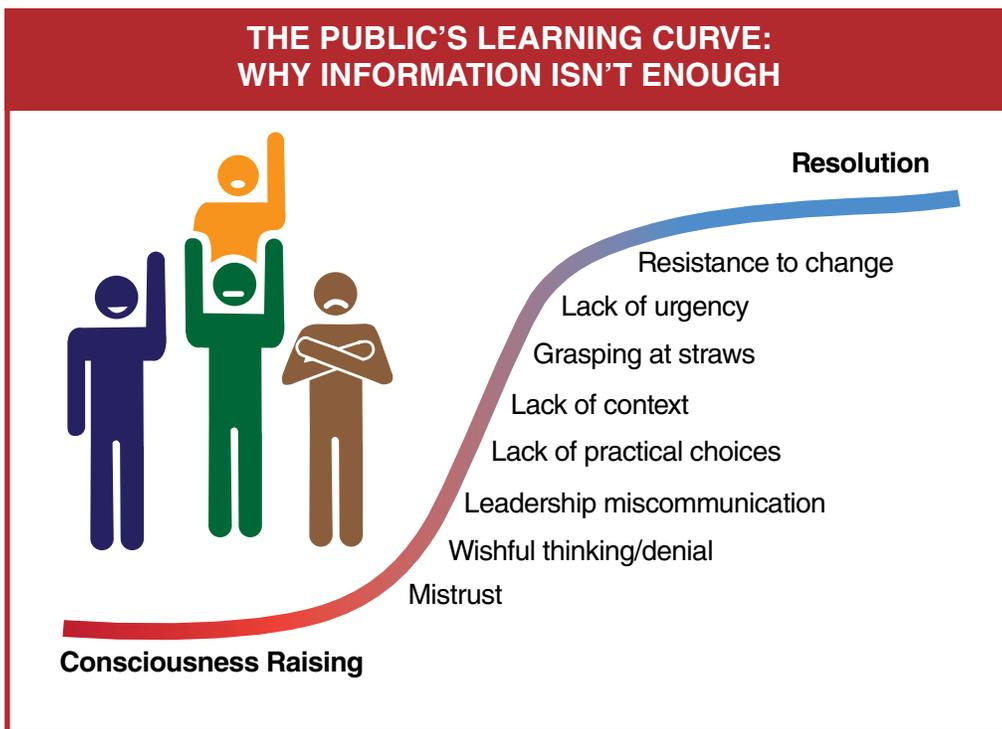
The public forums that have taken

place over nearly 40 years as part of the NIF network have offered a unique opportunity for participants to engage in a different kind of public deliberation. As Mathews writes in *The Ecology of Democracy*, “To deliberate is to carefully weigh possible civic actions, laws, or policies against the various things that people hold dear in order to settle on a direction to follow or purpose to pursue.”

These NIF forums have also served as a research site. We have tried to understand how people’s thinking about major issues evolves. In effect, we have been testing Dan’s idea and in doing so have become clearer about what happens in the course of public deliberation. Today,

at a time of intense polarization and when public attitudes about many issues are short-circuited by partisan lockstep, it is more important than ever to understand the obstacles to moving toward public judgment, in part by considering a range of options and talking with and listening to people who reflect different points of view.

On the eve of the National Issues Forums’ 40th anniversary, it is a good time to step back from the wide range of issues that have been the focus of public forums and return to the questions Dan Yankelovich raised in the early 1980s. By taking into account the impediments laid out in his learning curve, is it realistic to





Based on 40 years of observing forums, a clear pattern has emerged. Rich, meaningful deliberation on complex political questions builds on five specific aspects of public talk.

expect that typical Americans can move toward more complex and stable views on some of the daunting problems the country faces? What have we learned about how nonexperts think about and deliberate on complex issues? And how does the public's process differ from approaches used by leaders and journalists?

FIVE COMPONENTS OF PUBLIC DELIBERATIVE TALK

NIF forums tackle different issues and reflect the vast demographic and social variety in our country. They take place in cities, suburbs, and rural areas and in schools, colleges, libraries, community centers, and, increasingly, online. Yet, based on

40 years of observing forums, a clear pattern has emerged. Rich, meaningful deliberation on complex political questions builds on five specific aspects of public talk.

1. Wrestling with choices and trade-offs

Most NIF participants know something about the issue at hand, but few have followed it closely or have a full grasp of the various “sides” of the policy debate. They are not experts or analysts.

Consequently, supplying more information—more facts and statistics—doesn't mean participants can organize it into a coherent package to think about. In fact, faced with too much information and wildly disparate opinions, many people tune out.

NIF forum deliberations center on “choice work,” much as Dan Yankelovich and David Mathews describe. NIF issue guides lay out three or four long-term strategies, each reflecting contrasting priorities and aspirations. Each strategy requires different courses of action, such as legislation, public investments, or individual change. And each comes with risks, costs, and trade-offs.

Over 40 years, choice work has demonstrated several advantages. It reassures participants that a range of views are welcome and will be discussed. It helps them quickly grasp

the overall breadth and shape of an issue. Perhaps most important, it spurs reconsideration and second thoughts by directly asking participants to weigh risks, costs, and trade-offs.

2. Listening to the personal stories of others

Experts often dismiss anecdotes—and for good reason. An individual's story may or may not reflect the overall trends experts and policy-makers must address. But within the context of choice work, personal stories can provide powerful, indispensable testimony.

Participants come to forums exhausted by partisan bickering and information overload. Consequently, many see the personal stories told by other participants as more trustworthy and comprehensible than what they hear in the media.

In an economy forum, a small business owner might explain the challenges of making payroll twice a month. In an immigration forum, an immigrant might describe the system's complexity and red tape. In forums on safety and justice, minority parents might talk about counseling their teens on interacting with the police while a police officer might recount his or her own experiences.

In the context of choice work, these personal stories offer genuine food for thought and help partici-

pants understand and weigh competing perspectives.

3. Clarifying common political slogans

For policy wonks and news hounds, terms like “affirmative action,” “universal coverage,” “Medicare for all,” and “defund the police” are a useful shorthand. But NIF forums have shown time and time again that these and other seemingly familiar policy slogans are frequently misunderstood by typical Americans.

In fact, participants' views on popular policy ideas often shift once they begin grappling with what these proposals mean and how they would work. Sometimes, participants have become more open to policies once they understand them (as has happened regarding affirmative action). Sometimes, participants develop reservations (as has happened regarding Medicare for all).

The specifics are less important than the takeaway. The public's starting point on issues is often dramatically different from that of policy experts, journalists, and activists, and assuming that people understand these slogans and policy proposals is a recipe for miscommunication.

4. Focusing on practicalities

We all have goals and fears about how our society addresses problems, and it is, of course, important to talk about them. But NIF forums suggest

For nearly 40 years, NIFI and Kettering have explored a number of issues repeatedly as the public conversation about each has shifted and citizens are faced with new choices.

In 2020, Kettering published reports outlining some of the insights and themes that have emerged over decades on health care, the economy, and foreign policy. Many more topics have been covered repeatedly by NIF, including immigration and the national debt and budget, and Kettering continues to explore what can be learned from those as well.

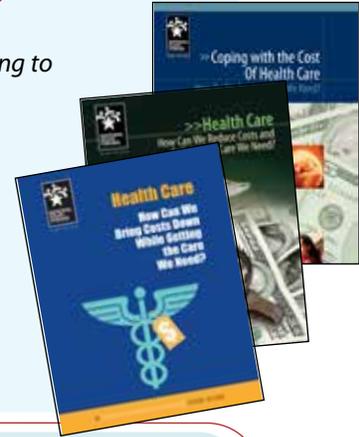
Recent Reports on Deliberation Over Time

Health Care

Latest report: *Fixing the Health-Care System: What People See—and What They’re Willing to Do—After Deliberating*

NIF Health-Care Issue Guides

- 2020 *Health Care: How Can We Bring Costs Down While Getting the Care We Need?*
- 2015 *Health Care: How Can We Reduce Costs and Still Get the Care We Need?*
- 2008 *Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need?*
- 2003 *Examining Health Care: What’s the Public’s Prescription?*
- 1994 *The Health-Care Cost Explosion: Why It’s So Serious, What Should Be Done*
- 1992 *The Health-Care Crisis: Containing Costs, Expanding Coverage*
- 1984 *The Soaring Cost of Health Care*



The Economy

Latest Report: *NIF Forums on the Economy: Changing Concerns and Enduring Values*

NIF Economy Issue Guides

- 2020 *Back to Work: How Should We Rebuild Our Economy?*
- 2016 *Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?*
- 2010 *Economic Security: How Should We Take Charge of Our Future?*
- 1998 *Jobs: Preparing a Workforce for the 21st Century*
- 1995 *Pocketbook Pressure: Who Benefits from Economic Growth?*
- 1992 *Prescription for Prosperity: Four Paths to Economic Renewal*
- 1990 *Regaining the Competitive Edge: Are We Up to the Job?*
- 1984 *Jobs and the Jobless in a Changing Workplace*
- 1982 *Jobs and Productivity*



Foreign Policy

Latest Report: *On Second Thought: How a Deliberative Public Talks about America’s Role*

NIF Foreign Policy Issue Guides

- 2019 *Keeping America Safe: What Is Our Greatest Threat? How Should We Respond?*
- 2010 *America’s Role in the World: What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century?*
- 2005 *Americans’ Role in the World: Building a More Secure Future*
- 2003 *A Relationship at the Crossroads: What Kind of Relationship Do We Want with Russia?*
- 2002 *Terrorism: What Should We Do Now?*
- 1995 *Mission Uncertain: Reassessing America’s Global Role*
- 1991 *America’s Role in the World: New Risks, New Realities*
- 1987 *The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security*
- 1985 *The Soviets: What Is the Conflict About?*
- 1983 *Nuclear Arms and National Security*



that people learn more and think more seriously when they focus on practicalities: How would this idea work? What would it mean for me, my family, and my community? What could go wrong if we do this?

Moving from what we want to what we should do and what we can live with in order to make progress is the heart and soul of deliberative forums. Everyone should have good, affordable health care, but who pays the bill? We want good jobs at good wages, but what steps could our community and state take to create them? Substance abuse destroys lives and communities, but what policies reduce it, and do they have downsides?

Deliberating on practical steps seems to convey two seemingly contradictory, but crucial ideas: (1) big issues like those addressed in forums are not simple to solve; and (2) there are concrete steps we could take to move the ball. Over decades and across multiple issues, participants have developed a sense of realism and empowerment by deliberating about practicalities. Participants often leave forums commenting that their community and the country needs more conversations like these.

5. Talking about what individuals and communities should do

Political candidates generally promise to fix problems, but there is an unspoken reality behind even the sincerest campaign rhetoric. Elected

officials can't deliver positive change simply through passing laws and allocating money. People and communities must do their part.

Forum participants have repeatedly accepted and relished this idea. In health-care forums, participants often spontaneously raise the idea of encouraging healthier lifestyles. In forums on the economy, people often bring up the need to live within one's means and be conscientious workers and students.

When people deliberate, most endorse the proposition that government can't—and shouldn't—do it all. Most want to talk about what they can do themselves and with their neighbors.

THE NEXT 40 YEARS

In NIF forums on multiple issues in hundreds of communities and settings nationwide, we have witnessed and documented the public's capacity to deepen its thinking about complex problems, listen to the concerns of others, and begin to move from top-of-the-head opinions to more realistic, stable judgments. In a democracy, that capacity enables a country and its various communities to confront and wrestle with problems realistically in order to put solutions in place. ■

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