Democracy has many meanings, and debating its meaning is one of the characteristics of a democracy. It should not be surprising, then, that there are also different interpretations of public deliberation and its role in democracy. At the Kettering Foundation, we have never felt that there is one true definition of either term—only that we need to be as clear as possible about what we mean when we use these words. That necessity led us to look at how political theorists have defined deliberation, because we draw on that rich body of work. In this foreword, I will describe how Kettering has come to see deliberation as a key democratic practice and an entry point into democratic politics writ large.

The story of Kettering’s use of deliberation begins with a distinction that former Kettering board member Daniel Yankelovich made in his analysis of public opinion. He found a qualitative difference between the initial, ever-shifting reactions people have to politicians and policies and the more stable, reflective judgments people often make when it comes time to vote or pass a law. This distinction led Kettering to collaborate with Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization founded by Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance, in preparing briefing books for citizens on major policy issues facing the country (Social Security financing, for example). The purpose of these books was, and continues to be, to help people move from first and often hasty reactions to more thoughtful, shared judgments.

The books, now called National Issues Forums (NIF) issue books, have been used since 1981 by civic, religious, and educational institutions—and even some prisons—in all 50 states. There are variations of these books being used from the Middle East and Africa to Latin America and the Pacific
Basin. Participants in deliberative forums based on these books often notice something different about these conversations. But initially, we didn’t have a word to describe what was happening; we only knew that forums are neither discussions nor debates.

The search for a term to describe what was going on eventually led us to settle on deliberation or, more precisely, public deliberation. The word appealed to us because it has a history. In Latin, libera refers to a pound (libra) or the act of balancing or weighing, as on a scale (libro). These roots call to mind thoughtfully considering a matter, in consultation with others, in order to make a balanced decision. Carefully weighing in the process of determining the worth of something also suggests the exercise of our faculty for judgment. Personally, I like Thucydides’ account of Pericles’ funeral oration, which describes the talk (logo) used before people act in order to teach themselves (prodidacthenai, a word that lacks any English equivalent) how to act. In addition, we drew on Isocrates’ discussion of the particular kind of reasoning he advocated in the Antidosis and on Aristotle’s concepts of moral reasoning and phronesis, or practical wisdom. Yet, deliberation had the advantage of being familiar to English speakers, and Latin won out over Greek equivalents.

Our foundation has learned a great deal about public deliberation from NIF and similar forums. For instance, participants aren’t always content to deal with national issues and policy choices. Many people have gone on to use deliberative framings and decision making to foster collective action on the problems that they encounter in their local communities. Most everyone has recognized that something in the community is not as he or she wants it to be; yet people may not agree about what the problem is or what should be done about it. And the disagreements are normative; people differ not so much over the facts as over what the facts mean. They struggle with determining the right thing to do. When the issues are controversial, like how to prevent the spread of AIDS or whether to permit a clinic that offers abortions, this is particularly evident. The deliberation we see is as Aristotle described it, an attempt at moral reasoning.

Moral reasoning has proven particularly relevant to our colleagues in the Middle East. Modern democracy—or more precisely, representative
government—depends heavily on rational decision making. Reason and logic work fine when factual matters and tangible interests are in contention but not when values derived from identity and religious convictions are involved. One of our associates, Randa Slim, explains this when writing about the Middle East:

The prevalent form of democracy people have come to know so far has been representative democracy. What the West has most cared about is the holding of elections, people going to the voting booths. Though these acts of citizen participation are an essential first step in a society transforming itself into a democratic state, they are rarely by themselves sufficient to usher in an era of sustainable stability. . . .

In divided societies, the challenge for any political intervention aimed at promoting sustainable democratic change is to move the individual from the confines of his or her self (often defined by the tribe or ethnic identity) to the wider realm of a citizen actor.4

These experiences, both domestic and international, led us at the foundation to expand our understanding of deliberation. We see deliberation as decision making on normative or morally charged issues that require the exercise of judgment rather than reason alone. This decision making proves to be difficult because things that people hold dear or consider valuable are in tension with one another, and the tensions can’t be eliminated because they grow out of shared concerns. Watching hundreds of forums over some 30 years, we have found citizens grappling with political imperatives—the need to be free, to be secure, to be treated fairly. Yet in making decisions on what to do in specific situations, these imperatives pull people in different directions. For example, actions that would make citizens more secure might impose limits on their personal freedom. We have called these imperatives simply “the things people value,” although they seem more basic and common than values. Because the tensions can’t be resolved by eliminating one or more of the imperatives, they have to be worked through to the point that people find some balance and can move ahead, even if they aren’t in full
agreement. We have found that these tensions lie behind many problems that appear to be technical yet can’t be solved unless the tensions are recognized and addressed.

We have also come to see deliberative decision making as part of acting, not as something separate or distinct. We have called this integrated activity “deliberative politics.” It begins in deciding on a name or description of a problem that resonates with the things people consider valuable. It continues in creating a framework for decision making that puts all the major options for action people want to consider on the table—along with the tensions inherent in each option. As people weigh these options, they think about the resources they will need and the allies that will be critical. They imagine how they might organize their efforts. And, most of all, people seem to be learning as they go along—learning what the problems really are as they take in the experiences of others, learning what trade-offs have to be made, and learning which actions are and are not likely to gain support. Deliberation seems much as Pericles described it, the talk people use to teach themselves as they prepare to act. As a means of learning, deliberation has its own way of knowing, by using experience as interpreted by the things people hold dear, and its own kind of knowledge, practical wisdom. It employs the human faculty for judgment (a faculty that neuroscientists have mapped in the brain).

Most important of all, for democracy understood as people having the power to shape their future, deliberation makes citizens political actors in their own right with the ability to produce public goods themselves or co-produce them with governments and other institutions.

The dilemma that Kettering has encountered is that the more precise we have become in describing what we see as deliberation, the more we have given the misimpression that we have in mind some special, esoteric technique that can only be mastered by highly trained experts. (There may be some types of deliberation that require considerable expertise, and even the deliberation used in the National Issues Forums is demanding and re-
quires preparation.) To correct the misimpression that NIF deliberation is a technique for experts, we are now exploring the deliberative elements in everyday conversations. Regardless of how our understanding of deliberation compares with that of political theorists, many themes in this volume resonate with our experience. One thing is certain: political theory has multiple concepts of deliberation available to illuminate our experience and deepen our research.

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