

# NAMING AND FRAMING DIFFICULT ISSUES TO MAKE SOUND DECISIONS



A KETTERING FOUNDATION REPORT

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The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. 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. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research 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. Kettering's research suggests that democracy requires: responsible citizens who can make sound choices about their future; communities of citizens acting together to address common problems; and institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening society. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world.

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This report is for citizens who want a stronger hand in shaping their collective future, which requires making choices about what kind of future they want. Standing in the way of these citizens are inevitable disagreements over what the future *should* be. People may recognize that what is happening to them isn't good or right, yet not agree on what should be done. They may even disagree over the nature of the problem that is confronting them.

Updating an earlier work, *Framing Issues for Public Deliberation*, this publication incorporates insights from the Kettering Foundation's most recent research on how potentially divisive issues can be presented in ways that promote shared and reflective judgments. It is a companion to other foundation publications: *We Have to Choose: Democracy and Deliberative Politics*, *Working Through Difficult Decisions*, and *Public Deliberation in Democracy*.

## THE CHALLENGES

People are constantly challenged by issues that have far-reaching consequences. Some are national issues, which almost always have local implications. And some are local issues, with national implications. Whatever the case, the challenge is the same; disagreements that are about more than just the facts are normative questions of what we *should* do. What should be done to maintain our system of Social Security in the face of declining revenue? What should we do to keep our neighborhoods safe without becoming an armed camp? How should we change our health-care system when modern medicine gives us excellent treatment, but the high costs put protection out of reach for many people? How should we meet the demands for energy needed for a prosperous economy and, at the same time, protect the environment? The list of issues goes on, not only at the federal level but also at the state and local levels.

The most difficult disagreements involve things that all people hold dear, things that are intrinsically valuable, such as freedom, security, or fairness. A decision that would favor one of these imperatives might adversely affect another. For example, measures that would make us more secure could restrict our freedoms.

These decisions are difficult to make because there are no experts on what *should* be. And people are disinclined to compromise when the things that are most valuable to them hang in the balance. Furthermore, we feel strongly about the things we hold dear. So emotions are involved when we try to make decisions. That is often the case, even on seemingly practical problems like curbing alcohol abuse or improving our schools. We debate practical solutions, yet underneath



there are normative disagreements about how much control should be exercised over individual behavior or what the mission of the schools should be. Voting isn't likely to resolve such differences. Although we probably won't ever be in complete agreement, we have to work through the conflicts to the point that our best collective judgment emerges. Otherwise, people get bogged down in endless solution wars, and unresolved differences lead to political polarization.

Adding to these difficulties, many of the problems people want to solve can't be solved unless citizens from all sectors of a community respond. One group or institution can't handle them alone; citizens have to act as well. They have to join forces to make things that benefit the community as a whole—a neighborhood watch organized in cooperation with law enforcement agencies, an after-school tutorial program, a baseball team, an arts collective.


People are much more likely to work together if they have participated in the decision making about what to do. And in making the decision, they may come to a more complete understanding of the nature of the problem they are facing, which could open their eyes to untapped resources that they can bring to bear.

The obvious question is, what would motivate citizens to invest their limited time and other resources in grappling with problems brimming with conflict-laden, emotionally charged disagreements? Generally speaking, people avoid conflict, and they don't usually invest their energy unless they see that something deeply important to them, their families, and their neighbors is at stake. And they won't get involved unless they believe there is something they, themselves, must do.

Therefore, in order for citizens to make sound decisions and take effective collective action, they have to:

- ✓ Connect with the things that are deeply important to them,
- ✓ Deal with normative disagreements that can lead to immobilizing polarization, and
- ✓ Identify those things that they can do through their collective efforts to help solve problems.

## **THE POTENTIAL IN NAMING AND FRAMING**

 here are opportunities to master these challenges at two critical moments in dealing with problems. One occurs when a problem is being named, that is, when someone defines the problem. This is usually done by a news organization, a professional group, or a political leader. While seemingly insignificant, Kettering research has found that who gets to name a problem—and how they name it—are critical factors that go a long way in determining how effective the response will be.

Another critical juncture occurs when different options for dealing with a problem are put into a framework for decision making. There may just be one option on the table, a solution favored by a school board or championed by an interest group. Or there may be the predictable two options in a political debate, one being the polar opposite of the other. Our research suggests that deliberation is more likely to occur if the full range of options is available for consideration.

As every trial attorney knows, whoever controls the way an issue is framed in a court case has the upper hand. So the creation of a framework for decision making—presenting the case as it were—plays a critical role in problem solving.

This booklet describes ways of naming problems and framing issues that give citizens a greater ability to chart their future and solve problems. The results of this naming and framing might be a guide to use in forums or town meetings, or it might be a strategy used to break out of solution



wars and give the public a stronger voice in decision making. Naming and framing can also be done in classrooms to introduce students to roles that citizens can play in politics other than campaigning and voting.

One clarification: while naming and framing are critical, they aren't ends in themselves. They are just two elements in the larger politics of public decision making and acting. To reach a decision, people have to weigh various options for acting on a problem against all of the things they feel are at stake. Unless that happens, unless people face up to the consequences of the options they favor, there is no way to know how the public will react when push comes to shove—as always happens on difficult issues. When people wrestle with the trade-offs they may need to make, they will often revise the name they have been using, or they may put more or new options on the table to consider.

In making decisions together, people also have to be mindful of the resources they will need, how they will commit those resources, and how they will organize the actions that need to be taken. These are other critical junctures. When resources are being identified, they may or may not include resources that citizens have, such as the social relationships they can draw on. When

resources are committed, the commitments may be limited to legally binding contracts and not include the promises people make to one another, covenants that also enforce obligations. When actions are organized, they may be bureaucratically directed and not make use of the self-directing capacities of citizens, such as networking. All of these are junctures when people are either drawn into or shut out of what should be the public's business. And the way problems are named and issues are framed paves the way for all that follows.

### ***These Are Not Special Techniques***

The ways of presenting issues that are described here are not specially designed processes. In fact, what the foundation is reporting reflects what can occur in everyday life. Take the matter of describing a problem that needs attention. People do that in conversations while waiting for a bus or sitting in a restaurant. These conversations revolve around ordinary questions: What's bothering you? Why do you care? How are you going to be affected? When people respond to these questions, they are identifying what is valuable to them. Kettering wanted to find a term that would capture what was going on politically when people identify a problem. We have called it "naming." These "names" have to capture people's experiences and the concerns that grow out of those experiences. For citizens, naming the problem is the first step toward becoming engaged.

As people become comfortable with the description or name of a problem, they raise more questions: What do you think we should do about the problem? What did the folks in the neighboring community do? Citizens try to get all their options on the table so they can consider the advantages and disadvantages. Tensions among different options become apparent: if we do "x," we can't do "y." Kettering would say that these conversations create a framework for addressing the problem. A "framing" collects and presents options for acting on a problem and also highlights the tensions within and among various options.

Once the options for acting are on the table, a decision has to be made: that can be done in any number of ways—by voting, negotiating a consensus, bargaining, or deliberating. If decision making is done by citizens weighing the possible consequences of a decision against what is deeply valuable to them, Kettering would call that "public deliberation." The term may sound a bit strange, even though it is used to describe what juries are supposed to do. Aside from juries, you can hear deliberation taking place as people talk to one another about a shared problem: If we did what you suggest, what do you think would happen? Would it be fair? Would we be better off? Is there a downside? If there is, should we change our minds about what should be done?

Although not the subject of this booklet, the work of citizens doesn't end with decision making. As noted before, resources have to be identified and committed, actions organized, and results evaluated. But how all of this is done, and the role citizens will play, is heavily influenced early on by the way problems are named and framed.



## ***Discovering the Names People Use***

Finding out how people name a particular problem is simple enough. Listen to what they say when they describe how an issue affects them or their family or when they talk about what is most important or what concerns them: “I am afraid that we are going to bankrupt ourselves.” “I don’t want my children to have to drink this water.” “The streets aren’t safe anymore!” As people voice their concerns, they may not be aware they are describing what is valuable to them. Nonetheless, the things people hold dear are fairly obvious: financial security, the well-being of the young, safety. Rather than eavesdropping at grocery stores and at lunch counters, civic organizations that have wanted a better sense of the names people use have sponsored neighborhood get-togethers or held meetings in libraries and town halls.

Naming a problem in terms meaningful to citizens isn’t simply describing it in everyday language. As *We Have to Choose* explains in more detail, the names that people give problems reflect concerns that are valuable to most everyone. We all want to be free from danger, secure from economic privation, free to pursue our own interests, and treated fairly by others—to mention a few of our basic motives. These imperatives are more fundamental than the interests that grow out of our particular circumstances (which may change). And they are different from values and beliefs,



which also vary. Our collective political needs are similar to the individual needs that Abraham Maslow found common to all human beings. When people describe how a problem affects them personally, however, don’t expect them to settle on just one way of describing a problem. There will always be more than one name because we have numerous collective motivations, and all of them are important to us. We want to be secure *and* free, for instance. But our circumstances are different, so we disagree about which of the several things that are valuable to us is most relevant in a given situation. If we believe we are in danger, we may want more security. If the danger is remote, we may put a higher premium on personal freedom. And we will differ over what these circumstances are because we have different experiences. These differences in circumstances

lead to tensions among the things we hold dear, and the tensions are both within us personally and among us collectively.

These differences don't necessarily become divisive, however, especially when people recognize that although they don't share the same circumstances, they share the same basic concerns. In deliberative decision making, people can see that they both agree and disagree. This encourages them to agree to disagree and lessens the likelihood of polarization.

This insight is far less likely to occur if issues are named with the terms that professionals use or the terms of reference used in partisan politics. While nothing is wrong with these other names, they don't normally take into account what citizens experience and hold dear. For example, people tend to think of drug abuse in terms of what they see happening to families and how it influences young people, not in terms of police interdiction of the drug trade. The temptation to use professional names is particularly strong because they are so expert; in fact, they are so accurate that they create the impression that no other names are possible. If that happens, people don't see their worries reflected in the way problems are presented, so they back off. In addition, professional descriptions may give the impression that there is little that citizens can do. The names used in partisan politics can also be off-putting to citizens.

## **LAYING OUT OPTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION**

*A*s mentioned earlier, a framework collects the actions that need to be considered in dealing with a problem and identifies adverse consequences. The everyday question, "If you are that concerned, what do you think should be done?" usually opens the door to identifying actions. Typically, the actions are implicit in the concerns. This is only true, however, if the focus of the question is on a discrete problem that requires a decision. Asking people about a broad topic like health or education will generate a long list of concerns that doesn't lend itself to decision making. If the topic is health, one person may complain about the complexities of the system, another medical errors in hospitals, and still another about the lack of insurance for preexisting conditions. The actions that would follow from these varied concerns wouldn't result in options for dealing with one specific problem. They are responsive to a number of problems.

In a framing of a discrete problem, each concern will generate a variety of proposals for action. For instance, in a poor neighborhood hit hard by a rash of burglaries, most people would probably be concerned about their physical safety. Some might want more police officers on the streets. Others might favor a neighborhood watch. Still others might want to close or raze abandoned buildings. Even though each of these actions is different, they all center around one basic concern—safety. In this sense, they are all part of one option for action. An option is made up of actions that respond to the same basic concern or have the same purpose. They also have similar advantages and disadvantages.

In the neighborhood just mentioned, there are likely to be other concerns that call for different actions. People might also see a connection between crime and poverty and would want to bring in employees and begin job-training programs. Furthermore, seeing an increase in young offenders, they might favor more social services, youth clubs, and adult mentors.

Each option will generate its own proposals for action. Or to say the same thing differently, actions, which are centered on one distinct concern, make up an option. In this case, the options were to (1) provide greater protection from crime, (2) revitalize the economy, and (3) offer more help to troubled youth. Putting these three options together creates a framework for decision making. These options are not mutually exclusive, yet they are different because they reflect different concerns as well as different opinions about the circumstances. Still, the three are not so similar that selecting one would require selecting another.

Another example: in the case of energy policy, one option often considered is ending dependence on fossil fuels. That would require finding other energy sources, which isn't another option but a necessary means for ending dependence. Avoid a framework that tempts people to select "all of the above." Recognizing tensions within and between options is essential in the work of deliberation, which requires facing up to the inevitable trade-offs that have to be made. These tensions occur when doing something that addresses one concern raises another.

### ***Anticipating Consequences***

The purpose of pointing out the possible downsides of every option is to expose the tensions that have to be worked through. This creates a basis for the kind of fair trial that engages citizens. For the trial to be fair, each option also has to be presented with its best foot forward, yet with equal attention given to drawbacks or potentially unattractive consequences or disadvantages.

Obviously, a fair trial isn't possible if the title reflects a preference for a particular outcome. Stopping drug abuse is a worthy goal, yet it isn't necessarily an apt title for an issue when there will be differences of opinion over which drugs should or shouldn't be legalized.

In the case of the neighborhood experiencing burglaries, the larger issue is what should be done to make this area more livable. It isn't just stopping criminal behavior, strengthening the economy, or caring for the young. Those are the options being considered, and although they all have advantages, they have disadvantages as well. More police officers might make the neighborhood seem like an armed camp. Or the businesses that would come to the neighborhood to bolster the economy might only employ low-skilled workers at minimum wage and thus restrict upward economic mobility. And providing more services for young people might not foster self and social responsibility. No constructive action is immune from unintended consequences.

Notice that the consequences identified in this framework aren't just practical considerations, such as costs. The disadvantages also touch on what people value—responsibility, economic

well-being, freedom of movement. These disadvantages are real and have to be addressed. That is why adverse consequences have to be recognized in framing an issue for deliberation.

### **Identifying Actions that Citizens Can Take**

A third challenge on the list of conditions necessary for people to become involved and make sound decisions is identifying the things that citizens can and must do. Civic actions as well as



government actions have to be included in a framework for public deliberation. In the neighborhood example, some actions would be taken by governments, some by institutions like schools, and some by citizens organizing projects with other citizens. In all cases, the actors are real, not amorphous like “the culture” or “the environment.”

Citizens, however, may be reluctant to see themselves as political actors because they aren’t sure they have the necessary means. Institu-

tions have legal authority, financial resources, and personnel to draw on, but what citizens can do is less obvious, even to citizens. A society that operates on expert knowledge and professional skills is prone to be skeptical about what citizens can accomplish. For instance, some saw restoring New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as primarily a job for the Corps of Engineers since only the Corps could repair levees. Certainly, citizens don’t repair them by hand anymore, but rebuilding a city requires far more than repairing levees.

*We Have to Choose* suggests that the challenges that communities face often come down to one question: have citizens been reduced to ineffective amateurs in a professionalized, expert-driven, global world? Two scholars argue that they haven’t: Ronald Heifetz at Harvard University and John McKnight at Northwestern University. Heifetz, who was trained as a physician before coming to teach government, points out that while doctors can solve certain medical problems like a broken arm, other problems like diabetes require *people* to do some things (such as controlling their diets) and *physicians* to do others.

The same is true of many political problems; there is a technical remedy for some (rebuilding a schoolhouse) but not for others (countering a rise in crime). Citizens have to act on these problems. McKnight and his colleague, John Kretzmann, have found untapped talents in even the poorest neighborhoods that can be combined into collective capacities. These include a capacity

for economic revitalization that grows out of people's skills—people whose limitations are offset when they exercise their ability to work together.<sup>1</sup>

The foundation has accounts of what citizens have done through their collective efforts in publications like *Engaging Citizens: Meeting the Challenges of Community Life*. One example comes from a project in inner-city churches.<sup>2</sup> Participants in a church workshop responded to a series of questions: What do you know how to do well? Where did you learn it? What helped you learn it? Have you ever taught anyone anything? What do you think made your teaching effective?<sup>3</sup> People's first reaction was, "I never taught anybody anything," perhaps because they associated teaching with classrooms. Later, however, they described numerous ways in which they had, in fact, educated others.



They had taught basic reading and mathematics as well as skills like cooking, sewing, and taking care of equipment. Their "lessons" included the virtues of patience, persistence, and sacrifice. The potential to make these kinds of contributions through the collective efforts of citizens needs to be included in the list of actions that can be taken to solve a problem.

## **DELIBERATING TO WORK THROUGH DISAGREEMENTS**

Once an issue has been framed using terms that capture what citizens consider valuable, all the major options have been identified (along with the pros and cons of each one), and possible actions have been included (including those that citizens take), the stage is set for weighing various actions against possible downsides. Making decisions this way has been called moral reasoning or deliberation.

Because the things people hold dear are at stake in this type of decision making, citizens must deal with strong emotions. They have to work through the feelings aroused when the things they

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, 1993) and John L. McKnight, "Do No Harm: Policy Options That Meet Human Needs," *Social Policy* 20 (Summer 1989): 7.

<sup>2</sup> The results of the project carried out from 1992 to 1994 are reported in Doble Research Associates, *Take Charge Workshop Series: Description and Findings from the Field* (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> These questions came out of the Solomon Project, which worked with low-income communities in Minneapolis to "recognize their own educational capacities." See *The Solomon Project Annual Report* (Minneapolis: Project Public Life, Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, 1992).



might like to do have a negative impact on other things they hold dear. People don't have to reach total agreement, but they reach a point at which they can move forward on solving a problem.

*Working through* is an apt phrase because people go through stages in coming to terms with the difficult trade-offs they have to make.<sup>4</sup> For instance, how much personal freedom are we willing to give up to be secure from danger? Initially, we may be unaware or skeptical of predictions about future dangers. Is global warming really a problem? Then, if convinced that there is a danger, we are prone to look for someone or something to blame. Government waste, fraud, and abuse are common scapegoats. Or we latch onto something that we hope will save us and remove the necessity for making painful trade-offs. Science and technology are often turned to for answers. If finally convinced that blaming others isn't getting us anywhere and that someone or something else isn't going to provide painless solutions, we settle down to confronting the trade-offs we have to make and work through the strong emotions that well up when we have to make sacrifices. Eventually, we can reach a point when we are reconciled to what has to be done and move ahead.

Actually, recognizing and facing up to the tensions between what we would like to do and adverse consequences is beneficial. It allows deliberative decision making to do what voting and other forms of deciding have difficulty doing. In deliberating, people may become aware of what they have in common—the things they value—as well as the differences in their circumstances. So the tone of the disagreements becomes less caustic. People may agree to disagree. And they have a better chance of coming to a shared sense of direction. Disagreements don't disappear, but people can move forward in solving problems. This is why identifying these tensions is crucial in developing a framework.

Fears that recognizing tensions will be disruptive and divide rather than unite people haven't been realized in the thousands of deliberative National Issues Forums that Kettering has seen. Deliberation isn't a form of conflict resolution per se, but it is depolarizing. Naming problems to recognize the many concerns that people bring to an issue keeps the focus of deliberation from narrowing to one concern that trumps all others. Such a narrow focus invites conflict.

Weighing each option fairly and recognizing the range of concerns at stake also gives people confidence that their point of view will get a fair hearing. While people dislike controversy, many welcome opportunities to talk about hot topics frankly, provided they can exchange opinions without being attacked personally. Forum participants have given high marks to meetings where they could express strong views without others contesting their right to their beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Yankelovich discusses his concept of “working through” problems in chapter 17 of his book *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> These are some of the attitudes the Kettering Foundation has seen reflected in the deliberative National Issues Forums. To find out more about these forums, visit [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org). Chapter 12 of *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) has a more detailed description of this political discourse.

## THE PAYOFFS

The most profound benefit of deliberative framing is not just the deliberation it promotes; it is the kind of democracy it fosters. That is a democracy in which citizens have a greater opportunity to shape their collective future through sound and just decisions. Deliberative democracy is also the kind of politics that promotes innovation and distinctive norms. Perhaps the most important of these norms affects the way citizens respond to nondeliberative or even antideliberative behavior, such as refusing to acknowledge the variety of contrary opinions. The norms of deliberative politics encourage people to engage this resistance rather than reject it. Another norm is to act on what has been decided. Because those who have participated in such deliberations have shared in the experience of making a decision, it may have a greater claim on their behavior; they may be more disposed to act.

### ***A Politics of Learning, Discovery, and Invention***

The ancient Greeks described what we now call public deliberation as “the talk they used to teach themselves” before they acted. It produces a distinctive type of knowledge—practical, useful public knowledge—which is widely shared. People learn about the nature of their problems, one another, and the possible consequences of their actions. And places where this occurs become centers of civic learning. When this happens, politics can take on a different tone and the qualities associated with learning communities. That is critical because high-achieving communities (those that tend to solve their problems or at least manage them well) are distinctive in their ability to learn. Learning allows them to keep up the momentum when they encounter obstacles and setbacks. They have learned how to fail successfully by using their experiences to design a new round of civic initiatives.

### ***A Greater Ability to Solve Problems***

While deliberation opens the door to deliberative democracy, the most immediate reason for deliberating together is often to make decisions that will launch collective action, both by citizens



with citizens and by citizens in relation to governments, schools, and other institutions. Deliberative decision making is particularly important for those problems in which communities as a whole have to act because no one group or institution can solve the problem alone.

Deliberative decision making works in a distinctive way. Caught in the tensions of having to make difficult choices, we may be less certain, even

about the options we favor. So we may open ourselves up to experiences other than our own. Despite the tendency to seek out the like-minded when looking for affirmation of our opinions, when uncertain, we may become curious about how others have been affected or what they have done to solve a problem. This opening, which leads to an “enlarged mentality,” is a key ingredient in problem solving.

As citizens incorporate the experiences of others into a more shared and inclusive understanding of the difficulty they are facing, they gain new insights about both the nature of their problem and themselves as a citizenry.

As participants take in the experiences of others, they tend to redefine the problems that confront them. Their understanding of the problems broadens, becoming more comprehensive and nuanced. And this enhanced understanding leads people to identify political actors and resources that haven’t been recognized before. New, innovative ways of solving a problem can emerge.

People engaged in deliberations may also come to see themselves in a new light. They might realize that they have been responsible for creating some of their difficulties and reason that if they can create a problem, they might have the ability to solve it. Furthermore, participants in deliberations may not change their own positions on an issue, but they often change their opinion of those who hold contrary views. And this allows people to make progress without being in full agreement.

Kettering has found these insights make it easier for people to arrive at a reasonably shared sense of direction, or broad course of action, to follow in solving a problem. And this sense of direction allows citizens to act in different ways as the missions of their organizations dictate and yet complement or reinforce one another. Schools can teach, government agencies can administer, and civic organizations can bring contributions, as their abilities allow. But if all these efforts serve a common purpose, the whole is likely to be greater than the sum of the parts.

### ***A Stronger, More Informed Public Voice***

Some organizations, particularly those in education, frame issues to prompt public deliberation, not because they expect immediate public action, but because they want to inform the discretion of citizens. While they don’t have a predetermined conclusion in mind (that would interfere with the fair trial citizens expect), they do want to help people get beyond hasty reactions and first opinions to more thoughtful second opinions. And participants in deliberations do, indeed, say they get a better handle on issues; that is, they are able to put particular issues in a larger context and make connections between problems. People then tend to approach policy questions more realistically. Self-interests broaden and connect; shared concerns become easier to see. Citizens begin to talk more about what *we* ought to do and see their personal well-being in a larger context. They begin to speak in a more public voice.

Individuals can have their own voice in the political system, and groups of citizens who share the same interest certainly have a powerful voice. What is often missing is a collective public



voice. It is not the voice of everyone or the majority, but a voice that speaks the language of shared and reflective public judgments. It is different from the aggregation of individual voices that polls provide and different from the homogeneous voices of a particular interest group. A public voice is a synthesis of many voices that reflects the way the citizenry goes about making up its collective mind. Deliberation helps add that voice to our political discourse.<sup>6</sup>

### ***A Type of Information Officeholders Need***

Officeholders benefit from public deliberations because the deliberations can provide essential information that goes beyond what polls and focus groups offer. This includes where or what stage the public is in as they work through an issue. For example, if people are trying to decide whether an issue is really a problem, officials who hope to connect with them have to address that uncertainty before proposing their solutions. But if citizens have decided that an issue merits their attention, yet haven't faced up to unpleasant consequences, officeholders still need to know what the citizenry will do when push comes to shove. Not knowing which trade-offs people will or won't accept can be fatal to proposed reforms. And if citizens have reached the stage in which they have come to terms with necessary trade-offs, officials need to understand the trade-offs they have made—and why they made them.

Polls and demographically balanced focus groups also provide useful information; it is just different information from open-to-all forums. Typically, people make up their minds on issues by talking to those they meet every day—in their family, neighborhood, workplace, or community. Few decide on demographically balanced settings. So deliberative occasions that are not selective but open can come close to replicating the settings in which opinions are actually formed.

### ***A Civic Education that Students Can Use Every Day***

Many schools, colleges, and universities teach issue framing for deliberation to prepare students to be effective citizens. In one four-year study, faculty members introduced public deliberation at multiple sites: in their classrooms, in the campus community, and in the town where the university is located. Deliberation was not presented as just a way of conducting forums, but instead as a way of living democratically. The results have been promising. Students who have had deliberative experiences have not come away with a limited view of citizenship—the perception that citizenship is a deferred responsibility, one they can get to later. And these students have not been as cynical about politics as their contemporaries sometimes are.<sup>7</sup>

The impact that the four-year program had on students' daily lives was particularly significant. As one participant said, it affected everything she did. She and her classmates developed an

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<sup>6</sup> Results of National Issues Forums have been used to show the nature of public thinking on a multitude of issues in a program called *A Public Voice* that has been held in Washington, DC. More recently, state and regional organizations have made similar presentations to governors, local officials, and the media.

<sup>7</sup> Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).

## *Naming and Framing*

expanded sense of the many ways they could be effective political actors, which went beyond electing representatives. They gained a particular appreciation for the work citizens need to do together that goes beyond service. Most of all, they graduated with a richer concept of democracy.

Interestingly, the students in this program were more, not less, likely to vote—even though they knew that the elections were not the be-all and end-all of democracy. And unlike the students not in the program, who thought of citizenship primarily as asserting individual rights, these students seemed more inclined to think of citizenship in terms of responsibilities carried out through collective problem solving. Similar projects using public deliberation in secondary schools suggest that the effect on students is much the same as those on college undergraduates.

### **KEY INSIGHTS**

The following charts present the gist of what Kettering has learned from observing more than 25 years of efforts to frame issues in a way that will promote deliberation. The issue books or briefings that result from the framings are like the starters on cars. Their purpose is to jump start deliberative decision making. Their job is to be provocative, not comprehensive. People in forums will add their own options and views on advantages and disadvantages, and their contributions are part of what makes deliberation work in any given context.

## **I. When Public Deliberation Is and Isn't Useful**

There are many ways of attracting the attention of citizens, informing them, and getting their opinions. And there are also many ways of making collective decisions, such as by negotiating with stakeholders or voting. Deliberative decision making by citizens is only appropriate for certain types of issues.

- ✓ Public deliberation is useful when citizens are aware of a problem, but unsure if it merits their attention. Ad campaigns and informational meetings can be helpful when people are unaware of a problem.
- ✓ Deliberation helps citizens identify what is deeply valuable that is at stake. Some issues can be decided by accepting or rejecting a technical solution and need not be deliberated by the public. The only caveat is that decisions may be presented in purely technical, professional, or administrative terms, and may, in fact, have profound normative implications.
- ✓ Public deliberation is for situations when decisions haven't been made. Issues on which a decision has already been made—and the decision makers want public support—are more appropriately presented by advocates putting forward the merits of the decision.
- ✓ Some issues are in the purview of a specific agency or institution with a legal obligation to make a decision, an obligation that can't be delegated. Public deliberation is appropriate for setting direction and policy, not for making management decisions. Its results, however, can give officeholders insights into how people go about making up their minds when confronted with painful trade-offs.
- ✓ Public deliberation is most useful to officials at the early stages of setting policy, when the issue has not yet crystallized, or when polarization is threatening to immobilize an agency.
- ✓ An issue chosen for deliberative decision making can't be too broad because there are likely to be many issues involved, not just one. Reforming the entire health-care system, for example, is a very broad topic containing many issues such as constraining costs.

*To sum up, public deliberation is most useful on issues that have normative elements and that are likely to become divisive unless named and framed in public terms. These issues arise when people are disturbed by what is happening to them, yet are not in agreement about what the problem is or what should be done.*

## **II. Substituting a Deliberative Framework for a Conventional One**

One of the greatest benefits of public deliberation is reinforcing a political culture that is focused on problem solving rather than adversarial combat between partisans. Of course, disagreements among competing interests are inevitable and can be beneficial because lack of disagreement is usually associated with a lack of democracy. Deliberation, however, recognizes a different kind of political conflict that is not so much between us as interest groups as within us as human beings who have multiple concerns, which can be in tension with one another. For example, if the pros and cons of an option are presented as the views of *advocates* and *opponents* rather than as *advantages*, which serve some of the things that most people value, and *disadvantages*, which also affect things that most everyone values, then the insight that people share many of the same concerns is lost. Nonetheless, people differ because their circumstances and experiences differ, and so they give different weights to the things they all consider valuable.

A deliberative framework should identify this deeper level of conflict. Unfortunately, the association of politics with bipolar, adversarial conflict is so strong that there is a tendency to frame issues in adversarial terms, even when attempting to stimulate deliberation.

The assumption that politics is exclusively adversarial also affects the way that the “things that are valuable” is understood. The basic concerns common to all human beings may be translated into values, which are presented in adversarial categories. This invites ideological debate rather than public deliberation.

On the other hand, if values aren’t singled out for debate, they may not be discussed at all in a conventional framing. Typical frameworks can be quite technocratic, avoiding normative or “should be” considerations all together. When that happens, issues are presented as questions of *how* to do something, not questions of what *should* be done. And options are reduced to very specific solutions that people are expected to be for or against. This same penchant to treat issues technocratically results in the pros and cons being described in terms of feasibility and efficiency. For example, a favorable presentation of an option will emphasize lower costs or ease of implementation, and negative considerations will be just the opposite. In such frameworks, conflicts won’t be presented as tensions among different things we all consider valuable, but rather as simply disputes over feasibility.

One of the chief contributions of a deliberative framing of issues is that it opens the door to citizens; it presents issues in terms of the things they care about. A deliberative framing also helps counter the wars that often break out over technical solutions because the underlying normative considerations have not been addressed. And, perhaps most useful of all, a deliberative framing gives people more than one way to go about making political decisions.

### **III. Characteristics of an Effective Framing**

- ✓ The things that concern people—things they consider valuable—are reflected in the options for action, and the actions follow logically from people’s concerns.
- ✓ The tensions that exist between the advantages and disadvantages of each option, tensions that require making trade-offs, are clear. And the framework as a whole does not lend itself to selecting “all of the above” because that avoids confronting and working through conflicts.
- ✓ The consequences that might follow from actions to solve a problem are also described in terms of their effects on the things people hold dear, not just in practical terms of costs and other measures of feasibility.
- ✓ The actors who should take action include citizens and the work they must do together or collectively (not just as individuals). The framework also recognizes governmental, nongovernmental, and for-profit actors.
- ✓ An effective framework recognizes unpopular points of view.
- ✓ Each option is presented best foot forward; that is, in the most positive light, and then negative consequences are described with equal fairness. This ensures the fair trial that people look for. If the framing seems to favor one particular option, people will feel manipulated.
- ✓ The pros of one option are not the cons of another. Each option needs to be considered in light of its own advantages and disadvantages. Otherwise, the framing truncates the process of decision making.
- ✓ An effective framework does not prompt the usual conversations; it disrupts old patterns and opens new conversations. So a framework for public deliberation should not replicate the prevailing academic, professional, or partisan framework. It should reflect where citizens are in thinking about an issue, wherever that may be; it should start where people start.
- ✓ An effective framework often leaves people stewing because they are more aware of the undesirable effects of the options they like most. The tensions or trade-offs are clear, authentic, and unavoidable because they are needed to produce the learning that choice work is intended to prompt.

#### IV. An Example of Naming and Framing

The objective of naming problems in the terms people use and of framing issues to highlight the tensions that have to be worked through is to prompt genuine deliberation rather than a general discussion or debate. The “issue map” that follows is an illustration of how an issue can be named and framed in a way that can jump start deliberation. To begin with, notice that the issue being presented (affordable health care) is put forward as a question of what *should* be done, not *how* to do something. The reason is to make clear that the issue is normative not just technical.

Note, too, that the title recognizes two things that are valuable to people and that are at stake: one is a desire to do something about the cost of medical care, and the other is to maintain the quality of health care that people count on. The title also anticipates tensions that result from having more than one objective. But the title doesn’t just point to a general topic (health care) because it would be too broad for decision making. And it doesn’t single out a particular outcome that some would advocate, such as limiting malpractice awards, because that would preclude genuine deliberation.

The three concerns that people often mention when asked about how the cost of health care affects them and their family are:

- ✓ Not being wiped out financially by catastrophic illness or accident,
- ✓ Not being ripped off by profiteers, and
- ✓ Not having insurance for everyone.

These concerns are the basis for the three options to be considered in the issue map. Each option is presented in a way that people might be able to see themselves or someone they know in it. After the concerns is a sample of the actions that follow logically from each one of them. Notice that there are numerous actors: citizens, government, and businesses. The advantage of each course of action is then described and is followed by a brief reference to some possible disadvantages. The disadvantages bring tensions to the surface by anticipating unpleasant but necessary trade-offs.

The purpose of this map is to remind people that what should happen in deliberative decision making follows the pattern in the best of everyday decision making. People may not refer to “concerns,” but it isn’t difficult to hear a conversation along these lines: “If that bothers you so much, what do you think should be done?” And once that question is answered and the possible actions are on the table, someone usually brings up a potential disadvantage. “But if we did what you are suggesting, wouldn’t it harm our \_\_\_\_\_?” (They fill in the blank.) That is essentially what this framework does; it follows the pattern of sound decision making.

While the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action for something most all people hold dear are spelled out, the framing doesn’t encourage a debate over philosophic values or beliefs but rather the fair weighing of possible political actions.

Finally, the framework does not stop people from adding options or renaming issues: it provides enough structure to direct the conversation out of predictable and often partisan or ideological channels.

## V. An Issue Map

### **What Should We Do to Combat Rising Medical Costs That Would Not Compromise Good Health Care?**

The issue map lays out some of the major concerns people have when they encounter the increasing costs of drugs, doctor fees, hospital visits, and insurance premiums. It also looks at some of the possible remedies to combat these costs.

	<b>What Concerns Americans</b>	<b>What Might Be Done (the Advantages)</b>	<b>Some Possible Disadvantages</b>
<b>Option 1</b>	<p>The costs of catastrophic illness or accidents make people feel extremely vulnerable, with no personal control. People recall stories of Americans who have lost all their savings to pay for their medical bills. They worry about the same thing happening to them.</p>	<p>Require everyone to carry private or government insurance to protect against extreme loss but with higher deductibles (just as we do with home and auto insurance). Communities could establish more wellness centers, which would give people the information to take more responsibility for their own health using preventative measures.</p>	<p>Higher deductibles may discourage people from getting the early diagnosis that can result in effective treatment. So the quality of care could be compromised for those who couldn't pay the higher deductibles.</p>
<b>Option 2</b>	<p>Prices are so high that they seem unreasonable. At the gas pump, people suspect, rightly or wrongly, that someone is ripping them off, and they have the same reaction to the prices of drugs and medical services. They say that the prices aren't fair, that it isn't right to profit from the misfortune of others.</p>	<p>Put limits on what can be charged or at least regulate what can be charged. And if excessive jury awards are driving up costs, put limits on the amounts that can be awarded for damages. Encourage citizens to use generic drugs. Communities could require hospitals to make prices available.</p>	<p>Cost controls, while holding down price increases, could dry up funds for research and limit the use of expensive but life-saving medical technologies. And caps on awards for damages could result in uncompensated losses, not to mention infringing on basic rights. Furthermore, government controls would negate market competition and its potential to control costs through informed consumer behavior.</p>
<b>Option 3</b>	<p>We aren't recognizing that we are all in this together and that by joining forces we could both reduce costs and protect the most vulnerable. High costs mean that some Americans have to choose between eating and taking their medicine. They put off needed surgery because they can't afford it. This inequity is troubling. Costs also make our industries less competitive globally.</p>	<p>Give every American insurance by any one of several plans. We could have a single plan and payer for everyone as governments offer in other countries. Or we could expand the existing government programs—Medicare and Medicaid. Or communities, churches, and fraternal groups could pool risks and self-insure.</p>	<p>Universal coverage would likely require some kind of restrictions on coverage, and those limits could adversely affect the availability of care for those who do not qualify for treatment.</p>

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