

# A PUBLIC VOICE — 2018

## INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC DELIBERATIONS

A Report for the Kettering Foundation by Scott London





Moderator Gary Paul, associate professor in the department of political science and history at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, and a director of the National Issues Forums Institute

When the Kettering Foundation organized *A Public Voice* in Washington, DC, in the spring of 1991, the objective was to bring together members of Congress, members of the press, and members of the public to reflect on what people across America had to say about key policy issues.

But there was a distinction between *A Public Voice* and other Washington briefings. The members of the public were participants in the National Issues Forums (NIF), a network of community groups across the country that organize deliberative forums on tough issues like immigration, free speech, racial tensions, and the rising cost of health care.

What was noteworthy about the forums was that they revealed a very different picture of public thinking than traditional opinion polls and focus groups. Deliberative forums show *how* people think about an issue and how their views change when faced with difficult choices and trade-offs. Forums can expose where people's thinking is raw and unformed, and where it is integrated and stable. They can reveal where there are unresolved tensions in people's thinking, what trade-offs they are willing to accept, and where there may be common ground for action.

The underlying premise of the briefing was that policymakers and journalists could benefit by hearing "a public voice"—not just the voices of pollsters, policy experts, and special-interest groups. The public does not speak in a single voice, but its view on issues can be rich, nuanced, and surprisingly coherent. And it can offer a deeper and more reliable understanding of where the public stands than polls and focus groups alone can.

Kettering Foundation has held *A Public Voice* annually since 1991. While the format, venue, and participants have undergone some changes, the animating purpose remains the same—to bring together policymakers and members of the deliberative public in an exchange about how to address the tough issues we face as a country. Today, the event is structured less like a briefing and more like a roundtable. It is collaborative by design, aimed not only at sharing findings and insights from forums but also at jointly identifying and framing potential issues for future deliberations throughout the NIF network.

*A Public Voice 2018* was held at the National Press Club on May 9, 2018, and brought together a panel of eight—four representatives each from the Washington policy community and the National Issues Forums network:

- **John Doble**, formerly the senior vice president and research director at Public Agenda, and founder of Doble Research Associates
- **Betsy Wright Hawkings**, program director of the Governance Initiative at the Democracy Fund
- **Adam Hunter**, formerly directed The Pew Charitable Trusts's Immigration and the States project, and former acting chief of staff at US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Department of Homeland Security
- **Jean Johnson**, vice president of the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) and senior fellow at Public Agenda
- **Alberto Olivas**, founding executive director of the Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service at Arizona State University
- **Gary Paul**, associate professor in the department of political science and history at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, and a director of the National Issues Forums Institute
- **Oliver Schwab**, chief of staff for US Representative David Schweikert (AZ)
- **Mischa Thompson**, policy director for the US Commission on Security and Cooperation
- **Virginia York**, NIF organizer and emeritus professor of history and economics at Gulf Coast State College

Moderated by Gary Paul, a director of the National Issues Forums Institute and professor at Florida A&M University, the discussion was structured around two sessions. The first session explored public deliberation, how it differs from the "public opinion" usually available to policymakers, and what public thinking has emerged to date from recent NIF forums on immigration. The second section examined divisiveness as a possible focus for a future NIF issue guide.

*A Public Voice 2018* was streamed via Facebook Live to viewers across the country, including members of the NIF network and those with ties to other groups that organize deliberative discussions, such as Everyday Democracy, the National Institute for Civil Discourse, Public Agenda, and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Democracy—some of whom weighed in with questions and comments as the conversation unfolded.

In his welcoming remarks, John Dedrick, vice president and program director at Kettering Foundation, acknowledged the many practitioners that make up the network. "The research we're discussing today wouldn't be possible without the groups around this nation that convene National Issues Forums," he said.

Alberto Olivas, founding executive director of the Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service at Arizona State University





Panelists and audience members at A Public Voice 2018

## Beyond Polls and Focus Groups

Deliberative forums produce a different kind of information about public thinking than conventional opinion research, John Dedrick noted at the outset of the discussion. Unlike polls that aggregate individual responses to a given set of questions, public deliberation offers a nuanced and dynamic view of the public's thinking. It reveals how people connect to issues, what they will and won't accept to solve a problem, what is "out of bounds," and which aspects of an issue may be unresolved or unclear to people. "In short," he said, "the forums produce a kind of public voice and public knowledge."

**Polls are a snapshot of public opinion at a point in time. Forums yield something altogether different. Instead of a snapshot, they provide a map of people's thinking as they deliberate about a complex issue.**

**—John Doble**



Virginia York, NIF organizer and emeritus professor of history and economics at Gulf Coast State College

In the first part of the program, the panelists took up this idea, examining the differences between public deliberation and other methods of gauging where people stand on issues. "Polls are a snapshot of public opinion at a point in time," said John Doble, a noted public-opinion analyst and a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation. "When they are done well, they are accurate within a precise margin of sampling error." But forums yield something altogether different. "Instead of a snapshot, they provide a map of people's thinking as they deliberate about a complex issue," he explained. "As people wrestle with the costs and consequences of various choices, their thinking becomes more differentiated, more nuanced, more realistic."

The process of deliberating about an issue allows people to clarify what is at stake, examine different paths to action, and wrestle with potential trade-

offs. "Most participants come away wanting problems to be addressed head-on," Doble said. "Because of deliberation, what Daniel Yankelovich called 'the boundaries of political permission' widen. The boundaries widen because the participants see issues the way policymakers do—as complex problems that don't have easy answers." He noted that "almost without exception" people come away from the experience with a more pragmatic and non-ideological view of the issue.

Forums reveal that people's views on issues are to some extent amorphous and indeterminate until they are tested in conversation with others. Questionnaires show that about 4 in 10 forum participants hear something that is new to them. About 1 in 5 admit to having second thoughts about a solution they supported when they walked into the room. In a political culture marked by entrenched opinions and polarized positions on issues, the experience of deliberating often gives people second thoughts and prompts them to reconsider their views.

Early results from a nationwide series of forums on immigration bear this out. In Panama City, Florida, for example, some forum participants tempered their hardline views after hearing directly from immigrants who knew more about the US Constitution than they did. In Sumter, South Carolina, participants wrestled with the moral implications of turning away refugees, denying them rights that every American takes for granted.

To date, there have been about 80 forums on the immigration issue across the country, according to Jean Johnson, vice president for moderator development and communications at the National Issues Forums Institute. While it's still too early to draw conclusions, she said that one of the clear themes in the forums is the public's ambivalence about sanctuary cities. In the media, people's view on sanctuary cities are often treated as a kind of Rorschach test for whether they are pro- or anti-immigration, she said. But when people discuss sanctuary cities in forums it is not a partisan issue. "People are actually seeing things there that are in tension," she observed. "A lot of people are concerned about having their local police be immigration officers. They're not so sure that is a great idea. But they are also concerned

about their town not following the law of the land. They don't like that either. So they really are wrestling with this as a much more difficult and nuanced kind of conversation."

Deliberative forums, by their very design, yield information that is very different from the expert analysis and advocacy information that so often goes into policy. Forums are designed for non-experts, John Doble pointed out. They make use of issue guides and other briefing materials that are thoroughly researched and pretested with typical users for accessibility and balance. The guides present three or four options for addressing an issue and explore some of the potential actions and trade-offs associated with each. "Instead of trying to turn citizens into mini-experts," Doble said, "forums provide people with strategic facts to inform their deliberation."

**Americans want to listen to each other. They yearn to find common ground and work out practical solutions to issues. I don't think we pay enough attention in our politics to what people are saying.**

**—Jean Johnson**

Traditional political debates or policy discussions require a high degree of specialized information on the part of participants. One of the strengths of the NIF-style forums is that they are open and accessible, said Alberto Olivas, executive director of the Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service at Arizona State University. "What is eye-opening and surprising to people in these deliberative forums is the discovery of how much they have

in common, even on very divisive issues like gun control. They are astounded on both sides to see that they actually agree on many points."

By revealing where there might be confusion or lack of clarity on an issue, forums can also serve as "a forewarning" to leaders. For example, a recent series of forums on health care was framed around the question, "What kind of system should we have that will help us contain rising costs and still maintain the quality of care?" One of the surprise findings, said Jean Johnson, was just how few citizens understood how the current system works, let alone how current proposals are supposed to improve it.

These outcomes have implications not only for policymakers but for leaders of all kinds—perhaps especially those in the news media. The press tends to base its reporting of public opinion on a set of assumptions that bears little resemblance to the way people actually think. Jean Johnson illustrated this by describing a series of nationwide forums on safety and justice. "You would think from the headlines that Americans are divided into two groups on the issue," she said. "One group is concerned about police shootings—especially the high number of African American men and people of color who have died in encounters with the police. The other group is concerned about respect for police officers—for the dangerous and difficult work that they do." What the forums clearly showed is the public is not divided on the issue. "Across the country, people agreed with both propositions," she stressed. "They said, 'Something is wrong and we need to look at how we're policing.' 'Too many people are dying.' 'We need to teach people to respect the police. They do important work. They're part of the community.'"

On issue after issue, the forums demonstrate that there is a reservoir of civic capacity that remains largely untapped by our leaders, especially at the national level. "Americans want to listen to each other," Johnson said. They yearn to find common ground and work out practical solutions to the tough issues we face. "I don't think we pay enough attention in our politics to what people are saying."



*John Dedrick, vice president and program director at the Kettering Foundation; Oliver Schwab, chief of staff for US Representative David Schweikert (AZ); Mischa Thompson, policy director for the US Commission on Security and Cooperation; Michael Neblo, associate professor, Ohio State University*

## Narrowing the Gap Between Citizens and Officials

In order to be responsive to the will of the people, our leaders in government need some way of understanding how the public thinks, how its views evolve, and the extent to which it is open to change and compromise on policy issues. Leaders need to understand people's starting point on national priorities and where they are in the spectrum between raw and uninformed opinion on one side, and mature and stable judgment on the other. The question is whether they have access to such information and, if so, how it can be made most useful to them.

Several members of the panel described the challenges facing policymakers looking for greater involvement and input from the public. Many elected representatives have become wary of conducting traditional town hall meetings, concerned that they might be pressed on controversial issues or confronted by angry constituents. At the same time, many already find themselves awash in information. According to Betsy Wright Hawkings, program director of the Democracy Fund's Governance Initiative and a longtime staffer on Capitol Hill, the information available to members of Congress is now "so voluminous that there is a reduced ability to process it." The irony, she said, is that the more information policymakers have the tougher it becomes to make decisions because they have to filter and sort out what it all means.

Similarly, new technologies aimed at keeping policymakers better informed and connected to their constituents has only widened the gap. "When people connect online they get a sense that they are somehow being heard, but often that is not the case," said Mischa Thompson, a senior policy advisor for the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. "One of the effects of new technologies is not just that people see each other and interact less frequently, but also that they see their representatives and interact with them less frequently as well." People can hardly be blamed for feeling estranged from their representatives.



Jean Johnson, vice president of the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) and senior fellow at Public Agenda

Another problem facing officeholders is that much of what passes for public discourse today constitutes “spin,” according to Oliver Schwab, chief of staff for Arizona representative David Schweickert. Social media and cable news have become increasingly “reckless and dangerous” to our public discourse, he said. “One of the things that we see today is that advertising has become a driver of public conversations.” Much of the discussion in the media and in the calls representatives get from their constituents takes its cues from narratives propagated by agenda-driven information sources. “We need to have more responsible kinds of conversations,” Schwab said. “These NIF forums are exactly what we need as tools for critical thinking.”

How can a public voice play a greater role in setting directions for policy? The panel came up with a number of suggestions. Virginia York, a longtime forum organizer from Panama City, Florida, described an innovative approach she and her colleagues at Gulf Coast State College have developed over the last decade. They invite elected officials to attend forums on key policy options and listen without comment as citizens deliberate about what to do. The rationale is to give officials a chance to listen as their constituents

deliberate about the very issues they will be addressing at subsequent legislative sessions in the state capital. The benefits cut both ways, York said. The opportunity to be heard by elected officials gives forum participants a sense that their voice matters, and it gives policymakers a chance to hear how citizens are wrestling with the very choices and trade-offs they face in the Florida statehouse.

Mischa Thompson made a case for conversations that bring people and policymakers together in open-ended conversations about the future. Many Americans are searching for alternatives today, she said. “They feel that somehow the mainstream parties have not been delivering for them. There is a sense that the American Dream is no longer attainable. “They want to have a job, a nice house, two cars, and a good school for their kids. People want to have that back.” It is possible to overcome our divisions and find common ground, she insisted. “But the spaces have to be created.”

Betsy Wright Hawkings agreed, adding that policymakers and the public have to come together in a search for solutions. This is not something leaders can do on their own. “I would like to see elected officials use their platform to empower constituents and not necessarily feel the need to solve every problem themselves,” she said. “The process of doing that enables constituents to take back their own power and brings them back into the system.”

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**—Betsy Wright Hawkings**

## Confronting Divisiveness in America

The disconnect between the public and government can be seen as part of a broader set of social, political, and economic divisions ailing America today. There is a growing perception that the country is coming apart, that it is reverting to a kind of tribalism that not only threatens the social order but undermines key aspects of our political system.

Much of the discussion at *A Public Voice 2018* centered on divisiveness—the potential focus of a new NIF issue guide. How serious is the problem? What lies behind our divisions? How do they affect our ability to address problems? And what can be done to restore our common bonds? The panel explored these questions at some depth in order to begin thinking together about how the issue could be framed for public deliberation.

The panel agreed that divisiveness is a significant and increasingly worrisome problem today. In a recent series of focus groups across several states, John Doble found that the divisions in the country are a major source of concern to Americans. “They don’t like it,” he said. “And it doesn’t matter where they stand on the political spectrum—left, right, or center—they are very uncomfortable with the divisions that we face.”

Americans are losing confidence in the system, said Adam Hunter, former director of the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Immigration and the States Project. “We’re losing trust in our neighbors. We’re losing trust in our social contract. And we’re losing trust in the ability of our democratic institutions to adapt to a bewildering change of pace in globalization and automation, and to be responsive to the realities that we’re facing on the ground.” Waning confidence in institutions is a problem because they act as “shock-absorbers” in a democratic society.

What is especially worrisome about the current trends is that there are forces at work today that are systematically driving wedges between the American people, from special-interest groups and cable news outlets to social media platforms

like Facebook and Twitter. Even some foreign governments, it would seem, have a stake in turning Americans against each other.

Betsy Wright Hawkings stressed that America has always had divisions. “What is different today is technology and the level of money that is feeding what I call the *political complex*,” she said. Divisions in government are now so deep that it becomes almost impossible for lawmakers to bridge them. “I have a lot of sympathy for members of Congress,” she added. “When they first get to Washington, they come with a shared mandate—no matter what side of the aisle they come from—to work together and get along. And what they face when they get here is like a centrifuge that pulls them apart.”

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**—Mischa Thompson**

In the past, disagreements between members of Congress would rarely stand in the way of them working together on legislation. This is no longer true to the same extent, as Mischa Thompson pointed out. “Members of Congress used to get out on the floor, make bombastic speeches, and then go into the back room and have a drink. There they would work on the legislation and hash it out together and we would end up with a fairly good bill. That’s not always happening anymore.”

Many of the incentives and reward systems we have in place further exacerbate the divisions. “You gain more money and influence by not moving the ball forward, by sticking to your position,” Adam Hunter said. “A result of that is that the public’s voice writ large matters less. The result of that is that divisions are fomented and exacerbated and constructed.” It is encouraging to hear a public voice and to see how willing people are to engage in deliberative discussions and search for common-sense solutions, he said. “But other powers are crowding that out. Where are the entry points to effect change? Where are the entry points for citizen engagement that could lead to some systemic reforms? That’s something that I’m grappling with myself. I have no good answer.”

**We have to be careful about not being stuck and mired in a zero-sum game. There is a growing pie for all. There is opportunity for all. Any group can continue to gain, prosper and grow together. Ours is a rich enough country, a big enough country, a diverse enough country.**

**—Adam Hunter**

“I think this concept of incentives and rewards is one that is very important,” said Betsy Wright Hawkings. “One thing that I can tell you for sure is that elected officials do what works. They are *representatives*. They are never going to be the leading indicator, by definition. They represent the people, or whomever it is that has the loudest voice.”

Healing the divisions will require that people go outside their enclaves and filter bubbles, and listen to voices that differ from their own. We need opportunities “to have meaningful conversations with people that think very differently from us,” as Alberto Olivas put it. “We live in diverse communities, but we don’t interact in a diverse way.” Hawkings agreed. “The danger is that you’re never going to understand the other side if you don’t hear it,” she said. “Forums like NIF and others are really important to break through some of the new barriers that we’ve got today.”

But the group stressed that just as we need to acknowledge and accept our differences we also need to know what we have in common and what binds us together. “If you bring people together around what is common and what we all care about—like quality education, jobs in the community, safety—it is easier to talk about some of the problems,” said Mischa Thompson. “If I know you and like you, we can disagree and still be friends. If I start from where we disagree, it’s very hard to then come back later.”

“We have to be careful about not being stuck and mired in a zero-sum game,” said Adam Hunter, summing up the central challenge. “There is a growing pie for all. There is opportunity for all—older folks, younger folks, black, white, gay. Any group can continue to gain, prosper, and grow together. Ours is a rich enough country, a big enough country, a diverse enough country. If we had a forward-looking, shared-ownership perspective that saw everybody’s stake and how everybody could be advantaged, I think we’d be better off.”

*Mischa Thompson, policy director for the US Commission on Security and Cooperation; Betsy Hawkings, program director of the Governance Initiative at the Democracy Fund*



## Feedback from the Livestream of a Public Voice 2018

Hi everyone, I’m from Seattle. I moderated several NIF dialogues on immigration reform this year. I agree about college students and their hunger for deliberation. That has been my experience at the University of Washington.

—Kara Dillard

Hi. I’m joining from New Jersey and I participated in one of the online immigration forums this year.

—Mary McDonald Vanderhoof

The forums we had on immigration in Kansas revealed the deeply complex views people had on the issue. Some people expressed more extreme views, but then realized that they were speaking to a diverse group and needed to back up their claims.

—Tim Shaffer

The problem with divisiveness is not that we have different opinions, but that we get so locked into them that we cannot recognize the validity of others’ positions. Spaces to listen and talk are so needed.

—Linda Urban

I agree that Facebook/social media spaces are often not conducive to deliberation. But there are deliberative spaces online that can show people where common ground is.

—Kara Dillard

How do we get conversations like this to be reported visibly in the news?

—Linda Urban

How do we address the power of money in politics? I’m concerned that money is drowning out the public voice in new ways.

—Joanne Hessmiller

Imagine if our congresspeople actually had conversations to listen to one another and find common ground.

—Linda Urban

I moderated an immigration forum with a Catholic Church group. The conversation changed dramatically when I shared how a group of imprisoned veterans spoke of America as “Our Brothers’ Keeper.”

—Barbara Brown

One of the powerful takeaways from forums that I hear a lot of my community members mention is the ability to hear from the “other side.” In my forums this spring, two young women came to the table. At the end, one of the women shared how she now understands why immigration reform is so personally important to her friend. They’ve talked before, but it was only through deliberation that she was able to really hear and understand the values her friend had and why they animate her views. A breakthrough.

—Kara Dillard

David Mathews always hits a home run tying everything together. He brings in a wealth of experience, common sense, and the ability to speak to what is needed for worthwhile conversations.

—Donnan Stocovy



David Mathews, president and CEO, Kettering Foundation

## CLOSING REMARKS

by David Mathews

There is a good deal of consensus today that we are facing a loss of public confidence in government. It has been growing steadily year by year since the 1970s. I don't know where the tipping point lies, but if a loss of confidence begins to morph into a loss of legitimacy, we are in trouble. A democratic government can live with disagreement, and it can sometimes live with a loss of confidence, but it cannot survive a loss of legitimacy.

I remember visiting Soviet Russia in the 1980s. Perestroika hadn't quite arrived, but it was in the air. When I asked one Russian what the situation was like in his country, he said, "The government is afraid of the people, and the people are afraid of the government." When people lose confidence in government and government loses confidence in the people—when the loss of trust is mutual—democracy is in real danger.

The question is what we can do about this. It seems to me that those in the National Issues Forums network—those bringing citizens together to deliberate about national issues—have two things to offer that are unique. One is the fact that there is often a real discrepancy between the outcomes of public deliberation and the findings from opinion polls and focus groups.

We have seen this in our research over many years. Let me give an example. We have watched the cost of health care in the United States go up for decades, far exceeding the rate of inflation. At a certain point, these rising costs will begin to hollow out the economy. How do we have a public conversation about this problem?

There is a natural tendency in Washington to speak of the issue using professional or expert language. But one lesson we have learned from observing forums is that if you want to have a public conversation about rising health-care costs, you have to start where people start. People make decisions based on what is most valuable to them and in terms of their own experience.

Deliberative forums do not frame issues in terms of expert information. A lot of research goes into finding out what people care about, what they believe, and how they feel about an issue, because that is how they make decisions.

For those who are doing forums around the country, I would say that your ability to share what you are hearing with people in Washington is crucial. It's not that there is a gold mine of public wisdom out there waiting to be tapped. It's rather that there are two different conversations going on. If we want to make progress on issues, we need to get these conversations into better alignment. The NIF groups have an important role to play in that.

The other finding about deliberative forums that makes them unique is that they tend to moderate the tone and intensity of political conversations. Some people believe that bringing Americans together to discuss issues can encourage civility in public life by helping them come to some

agreement. But in our research on forums, we have found almost no case where people were in total agreement. In politics, complete agreement is an unnatural act. People always differ.

What happens in forums is that people will attempt to reconcile positions that are at different points on the political spectrum. They recognize that the things they value, such as freedom and security, are not polar opposites. They are simply tensions in the system. We have found that when people work on trying to balance conflicting imperatives, that work leads them to be more respectful of each other. If you are working with others to address a common problem, you are not going to alienate them.

The research shows that people who deliberate about an issue don't necessarily change their opinions about it. But the act of deliberating changes their opinion of those who hold different views. That changes the tone of the conversation. And it is the tone and the intensity of our politics today that are the problem—not our differences of opinion.

Now, what can those on our guest panel and others here in Washington do to address the loss of confidence? One thing is to encourage and support the people doing forums around the country by participating in the audience. You don't have to stand at the front and expose yourself to slings and arrows. You can help simply by being an observer.

Another thing you can do is listen for the kind of differences that I described. Find out what people think when push comes to shove, because that is exactly what you have to do here in Washington. Whether you are in Congress or in an agency, you are constantly having to look at issues and weigh trade-offs between things that are valuable. That is exactly what happens in the forums. When people deliberate about an issue, they have to work through the very same kinds of choices that you face.

You have the ability to help organizations take advantage of the commonality between what happens in the deliberative forums across the country and the deliberative forums here in Washington. That can help increase and validate the importance of deliberation.

**People who deliberate about an issue don't necessarily change their opinions about it. But the act of deliberating changes their opinion of those who hold different views. That changes the tone of the conversation. And it is the tone and the intensity of our politics today that are the problem—not our differences of opinion.**

That is what this event is about. *A Public Voice* is about connecting a deliberative citizenry—one that is doing the work of making difficult choices—with our deliberative bodies here in Washington. My hope is that this can begin, at least in a small way, to address the corrosive loss of confidence and mutual distrust. Our conversation today was a step in that direction.

*David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation.*

## About the Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is a nonpartisan, 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. Guiding Kettering's research are three hypotheses. 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's small staff and extensive network of associates collaborate with community organizations, government agencies, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Those working on related problems share what they are learning through ongoing research exchanges. As the foundation's learning progresses, Kettering shares its research findings through publications. In addition, Kettering produces materials, including issue guides and starter videos, for the National Issues Forums (NIF). The foundation collaborates with NIF as part of its research efforts.

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. It is an operating foundation headquartered in Dayton, Ohio, with offices in Washington, DC. For more information, call 800-221-3657 or visit the foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

*The statements expressed herein reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors or, its officers.*

## About the National Issues Forums

The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of organizations that brings together citizens around the nation to talk about pressing social and political issues of the day. Thousands of community organizations, including schools, libraries, churches, civic groups, and others, have sponsored forums designed to give people a public voice in the affairs of their communities and their nation.

Forum participants engage in deliberation, which is simply weighing options for action against things held commonly valuable. This calls upon them to listen respectfully to others, sort out their views in terms of what they most value, consider courses of action and their disadvantages, and seek to identify common ground for action.

Issue guides are designed to frame and support their deliberations. They present varying perspectives on the issues at hand, suggest actions to address identified problems, and note the trade-offs of taking those actions to remind participants that all solutions have costs as well as benefits.

In this way, forum participants move from holding individual opinions to making collective choices as members of a community—the kinds of choices from which public policy may be forged or public action may be taken, on community as well as national levels.

**For more information, visit the National Issues Forums Institute's website at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).**

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