INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC DELIBERATIONS
A Report for the Kettering Foundation by Scott London
Americans’ confidence in government has been steadily declining for almost half a century. Today, public trust in the presidency and Congress is at or near historic lows. A similar pattern has emerged for most of our public institutions, including the news media, public schools, churches, and the health-care system. Public dissatisfaction is now so low that a sizable number of Americans have come to question key aspects of our democratic system.

For nearly thirty years, *A Public Voice* has sought to address the widening rift between the public and government. Each year, the Kettering Foundation, in collaboration with the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), organizes the program to bring together members of Congress, members of the Washington policy community, and members of the public to reflect on what Americans are saying about the complex issues facing the nation.

Unlike traditional briefings, *A Public Voice* engages policymakers in a conversation about public deliberation, how the information that emerges from deliberation differs from what can be gleaned from polls and focus groups, and the value this information holds specifically for policymakers. *A Public Voice* also conveys the outcomes of nationwide forums on contentious public issues such as immigration policy, criminal justice reform, and the rising cost of health care. National Issues Forums (NIF) are moderated exchanges that allow participants to learn about an issue, examine a range of policy alternatives, and weigh the costs and benefits of various pathways to action.

The basic premise of *A Public Voice* is that our leaders in government can benefit from hearing more than the voices of pollsters, policy experts, and special interest groups. A public voice reflects what people are willing to do—what they consider politically “permissible”—when recognizing that there will be costs and often unpleasant consequences for moving ahead on shared problems. It clarifies how citizens will respond to the difficult trade-offs that are inescapable in policymaking.

The format, venue, and participants of *A Public Voice* have changed over the years. The program originated as a Washington briefing for members of Congress and the national news media. It later took the form of a televised panel discussion broadcast on PBS stations across the United States.

Today, *A Public Voice* is structured more like a roundtable discussion, one that brings together distinguished panelists and members of the National Issues Forums network. The format has evolved, yet the animating purpose remains the same—to promote dialogue between policymakers and members of the deliberative public about the urgent problems facing the country.
A Public Voice 2019

A Public Voice 2019 was held at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on May 9, 2019. The program brought together legislators, local elected officials, congressional staffers, and citizens from the National Issues Forums (NIF) network, some of whom joined via live video from locations across the country.

In his welcoming remarks, John Dedrick, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Kettering Foundation, observed that Americans have proven themselves to be both able and willing to reason together about complex and divisive public issues. “In deliberative settings,” he said, research shows that “people will listen to each other, consider different points of view, and make some progress on difficult issues.”

For almost forty years, Dedrick observed, the outcomes of National Issues Forums have clearly offered valuable insights into “what matters to people, how they connect with the issues, what the issues mean in their lives, and what they will and won’t accept to make progress on a problem. They reveal what’s out of bounds and what still needs to be considered.”

What is less clear, he said, is how the public voice that emerges from deliberative forums relates to policymaking at the state and federal levels. “Can this voice be heard by officials? What does it add that is not already available from public opinion surveys, reporting by organized interests, focus group research, and other expert studies?” These, he said, were some of the questions he hoped the panelists would explore.

The two-hour discussion was structured in two parts. In the first, members of the Washington policy community and members of the NIF network focused on public deliberation—what it is, how it differs from polls and focus groups, and why it can be beneficial to policymakers. The second part of the program involved an exchange about critical issues and public concerns that the NIF network might tackle in the future.

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— John Dedrick
Panelists

Policymakers

Stacy Palmer Barton, chief of staff for US Representative Steve Chabot of Ohio
Nick Bush, deputy chief of staff and legislative director for US Representative Steve Stivers
Tamara Luzzatto, senior vice president, Pew Charitable Trusts, and former chief of staff for Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and John D. Rockefeller IV
Glenn Nye, president and CEO, Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, and former US representative from Virginia

Representatives of the National Issues Forums Network

James P. (Ike) Adams Jr., dean emeritus, University of Kentucky
Kara N. Dillard, Common Ground for Action operations & moderator training specialist, National Issues Forums Institute, and lecturer, University of Washington
Michael Neblo, professor, The Ohio State University
Jule Zimet, CEO, Daniel’s Moving and Storage, El Paso, Texas

National Issues Forums Convenor Groups via Live Video

Harper’s Ferry, WV:
Heidi Dobish, associate professor and acting dean of students, Shepherd University
Sedona, AZ:
Andrea Christelle, founder, Sedona Philosophy
William Chisholm, councilor, Sedona City Council
Paul Friedman, retired professor, University of Kansas, and instructor, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
Mound Bayou, MS:
Elaine Baker, professor emerita, Albany State University
DeGail Hadley, doctor of osteopathic medicine, Cleveland Medical Clinic
Elnora Littleton, executive director, Bolivar County Community Action Agency
Jacksonville, FL:
Gregg Kaufman, retired professor, Georgia College & State University, and deliberative dialogue educator, the Deliberative Voice
Carol Barbour, forum convenor, Palms Presbyterian Church
Elaine Brown, mayor, Neptune Beach

Moderators

John Doble, former senior vice president and research director, Public Agenda, and founder, Doble Research
Charles Moses, interim dean, University of San Francisco School of Management
A Different Kind of Talk

Moderator Charles Moses kicked off the first session by inviting the panelists to reflect on how public deliberation can improve our national discourse and strengthen the policymaking process. “What happens when Americans get together to deliberate seriously about tough and divisive issues,” he asked, “and how do these discussions differ from typical town hall meetings?”

Public deliberation offers a unique vantage point for understanding people’s thinking about issues, one that differs from conventional opinion polls and focus groups, said John Doble, a longtime public opinion analyst and former senior vice-president and research director at Public Agenda. Public opinion is constantly changing, much like “a slow-moving river,” he noted. Opinion polls offer a snapshot of people’s thinking at a given moment, but they say nothing about how those views shift and evolve over time.

“National Issues Forums yield something else altogether,” Doble said. “Forums provide a map of people’s thinking as they take in strategic facts and wrestle with the costs and consequences of various approaches to addressing an issue.” Deliberative forums reveal how the public’s thinking becomes “more differentiated, more nuanced, and more pragmatic.”

Doble stressed that as people deliberate, “the boundaries of political permission” tend to expand. “People increasingly see issues the way politicians and policymakers do—as complex problems that don’t have easy answers,” he said. “They become more willing to accept the costs and consequences of making difficult choices. And they want policymakers to do the same thing—to come together to talk with each other and deliberate.”

For NIF forum participants and organizers, deliberating with others in a forum tends to have the opposite effect of attending a town hall or exchanging views on Twitter or Facebook. It allows people to bridge differences and discover new ways of understanding an issue, according to NIF organizer Ike Adams Jr. “One of the things we’ve observed in convening forums,” he said, “is that participants become more receptive to crossing boundaries and accepting diverse opinions.”

The act of deliberating also allows people to approach issues with greater nuance and complexity, said Andrea Christelle, an NIF convenor who joined the discussion via live video from Sedona, Arizona. “Deliberation enables people to see many sides of an issue,” she said. Reporting on a recent series of forums on political divisiveness, she stated that participants, even those from opposite ends of the political spectrum, were able to discover common ground.
Local policymakers, joining APV via live video, brought a new energy to the discussion. William Chisholm, a Sedona city council member, said that forums can be valuable for local officials. They allow them to exchange views with their constituents and see how people are working through complex issues. All too often, he said, talk becomes reduced to sound bites and ideological gestures instead of a search for pragmatic solutions. “When I’m in the room and I see how people are reacting to the comments that are made, it gives me a better feel for where the common ground is.”

Michael Neblo, an NIFI board member and political scientist at The Ohio State University, has worked with sitting members of Congress to develop deliberative practices for constituent consultations. He noted a growing interest in the outcomes of public deliberation among legislators. They see it as a valuable antidote to the finger-pointing and name-calling that has come to dominate public discourse today.

“Elected officials are genuinely interested in knowing what informed public judgment in their district or state looks like. They appreciate the chance to interact with and hear from their constituents without just standing there like piñatas to be beaten up.”

— Michael Neblo

But exchanging views with constituents in a civil and constructive way is just one of the many benefits of deliberation, he added. A growing number of officials see forums—especially those that are statistically representative of their districts—as a way to “get out in front of issues that are still emerging.” And younger and more recently elected representatives, especially those who are social media savvy, see online forums as a promising new opportunity.

The former legislators and congressional staffers on the panel all spoke to the pressing need for constructive dialogue if we are to solve the vexing problems facing the country. “There is a sense that we need a better way in this country to talk to each other,” said Glenn Nye, former US representative of Virginia and current president and CEO of the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress in Washington, DC.

“A growing percentage of Americans who care deeply about the issues affecting our country are looking for a better way to interact with each other,” Nye observed. “We know that we’re incentivized to disagree sometimes. We know that the media wants to cover the drama—they are not as excited about covering the thoughtful deliberations sometimes. So, it’s on us to make sure that we continue to provide opportunities for citizens to engage in a way they really want to.”
Stacy Palmer Barton, chief of staff for US Representative Steve Chabot of Ohio, said she would like to see more deliberation, not only between citizens and their elected representatives but also between policymakers in the halls of government. “We don’t talk like this in Congress,” she said. “Members of Congress yell at each other. And then, constituents yell at the members of Congress.” Deliberation represents a more constructive alternative. “Given the current times, I think the appetite for respectful dialogue will only increase.”

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— Nick Bush

“Americans could benefit from greater exposure to public deliberation,” said Tamera Luzzatto, senior vice president of the Pew Charitable Trusts and a former chief of staff to Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and John D. Rockefeller IV. “People need stories that exemplify a different approach,” she said. “They need to know that this is possible. I’m convinced that if more people knew how to deliberate and work out a decision on an issue—if they knew the formula—they would say, ‘I think I might try that, too.’”

Nick Bush, deputy chief of staff for US Representative Steve Stivers of Ohio, made the case that Americans need to see more examples of how public deliberation works in practice. Forums demonstrate more effective ways to address common problems. “It’s not about finding ‘kumbaya,’” he insisted. “It’s about having better disagreements. You may not walk away from a forum with your ideas changed, but you may find that your idea of the other side of the equation has changed.”

Public Issues of Shared Concern

“Our country faces dozens of questions that would benefit from thoughtful deliberation,” said John Doble as the group segued into the second session. “Now I’m going to ask each of you a question designed to help the National Issues Forums move ahead in its work: What issue would you most like to see people across the country deliberate about next year?”

The panelists responded with a range of issues. One of the most pressing of these, according to Glenn Nye, is the future of work. We are on the cusp of major change as a new era of automation—led by robotics and artificial intelligence—is about to wipe out jobs and transform many sectors of the economy.

The changing nature of work is an issue with many dimensions, Nye said. It raises questions about how we should educate the next generation of workers, how we should structure the economy, and what role the government should play in creating and sustaining jobs. “The issue is vital for the country to get a handle on,” he said. “It’s also one that fits well with the deliberative approach where people take a complicated issue but focus on some relatively discrete elements of it and deal with the trade-offs.”

For both Tamera Luzzatto and Nick Bush, the most urgent issues today involve immigration policy. The country seems to be at cross-purposes, Luzzatto noted, with the president demonizing immigrants and barring people from the country based on their race and ethnicity while many in the business community are calling for opening our borders and admitting more immigrants to boost the economy. She stressed that “this country badly needs to arrive at some consensus on immigration policy—morally, socially, and economically.”

Bush agreed, saying that constructive conversation about immigration is “desperately needed” today. “The lack of civil, thoughtful discussion on the immigration question is what is forcing people into an all-or-nothing approach to the issue.” The best remedy for polarization, he said, is honest, face-to-face conversation at our dinner tables, with our neighbors, at restaurants, and with our elected officials.
Few cities have been as deeply affected by the immigration issue as El Paso, Texas. Jule Zimet, a longtime NIF organizer and El Paso native, reported that the city was in the throes of a humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of migrants were arriving from Central America, overwhelming medical teams and border agents. “They have no belongings,” she said. “They are often hungry, confused, and scared. They just don’t know what to do. It’s up to our community to figure out how to house and feed them, how to care for them, how to communicate with their families, and how to get them on their way.”

Zimet emphasized that public deliberation at its best is not just a matter of educating people on issues or having more civil conversations. It’s about searching for remedies and solving problems. It’s about helping people discover common ground and take action together. “The situation in El Paso is a dangerous one,” she said presciently, “and the need for a change in strategy is really urgent. Obviously, there is no perfect solution. But deliberation can help us figure out what will give us the best possible outcomes.”

In Florida, many communities are facing a similar call to action, one caused not by immigration problems but by the effects of climate change. While policymakers continue to debate about how best to reduce carbon emissions and transition to a green economy, the people who live along Florida’s 8,436 miles of coastline are dealing with a more immediate concern—rising sea levels. The problem is not abstract. It calls for practical solutions and collective action.
Gregg Kaufman, an NIF board member who joined the discussion via live video from Jacksonville, Florida, has been working with communities across the state to frame potential options for deliberation about rising sea levels. “Floridians are concerned about coastal erosion as well as algae blooms—not only on the coast, but in our lakes,” he said. “They are concerned about the ocean’s health and preservation. And they want to talk about preserving their communities and their way of life. They recognize how tourism and the fishing industry and recreation will be impacted, resulting in economic decline. In fact, jobs will be lost.”

Elaine Brown, mayor of Neptune Beach, one of three Florida beach communities adjacent to Jacksonville, has worked with Kaufman to promote dialogue and deliberation about what rising sea levels will mean for the region. She said she hoped the forums would help people come together to develop strategies for adapting to the new reality. “Hopefully, we’ll come out of the forums with some education and the start of changes that will be used in the future.”

Immigration and climate change are problems that have a national as well as local dimension. This, the panelists noted, makes them ideal topics for public deliberation. Making progress will require that people come together at every level to identify strategies, weigh options, make decisions, and implement solutions.

Stacy Palmer Barton made the case for nationwide deliberation about whether policy decisions on key issues such as health care are best made at the national, state, or local level. Democrats often see a role for the federal government in shaping national policies, she observed. In contrast, Republicans often make the case for policies shaped at the state or local level. “I believe this is the crux of some of the division that we see among policymakers today,” she said.

Several panelists emphasized that the failure of our leaders in Washington to make real progress on immigration, climate change, gun control, health care, race relations, infrastructure, the budget deficit, and a host of other urgent problems is, itself, an issue worthy of deliberation.
Nye lamented what he described as a combination of political dysfunction and a pervasive loss of faith in government. “We have a constitutional system that requires compromise, but we have an electoral system that actually promotes the opposite of compromise.” What is needed today, he said, are reforms that promote the working out of political differences. “Can we get elected officials to be willing to compromise—not just willing, but incentivized, to compromise—at the level that is required to have our system function?

The point was echoed by Luzzatto. “Compromise has become a four-letter word today,” she said. “I’ve seen a steady dissolution of the incentives and opportunities to resolve issues in Congress.” The problem can be attributed to a range of factors, from the vast amounts of time officials spend fund-raising to what she called “the dark side of transparency” in government. With the arrival of first C-SPAN and later online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, members of Congress are less and less willing to engage in unscripted debate, Luzzatto said. Every moment is now “a potential gotcha!”

Today, Luzzatto concluded, members of Congress are generally unwilling to do what citizens in National Issues Forums do—listen and learn from one another. “I have seen a disintegration of the ability at the federal level,” she said. “My observation is that the closer you get to citizens—the closer you get to what is taking place in these forums—the more room there is for tolerance and compromise.”

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— Tamera Luzzatto
Divisiveness in America

Online Deliberations Using Common Ground for Action

On May 9, 2019, local National Issues Forums participants joined an online forum timed to coincide with *A Public Voice*. Like the panel discussion at the National Press Club, the online group focused on what to do about the outrage, intolerance, and hyperpartisan rhetoric that has come to dominate American political discourse.

Using Common Ground for Action—a platform for deliberating online developed by the Kettering Foundation—the group weighed the pros and cons of a range of options for addressing the deepening political cleavages in the United States and how they prevent us from making progress on the urgent problems we face. Participants were presented with three options for deliberation:

- Should we require more accurate, respectful discussion in the media and online, or would that stifle free speech?
- Should we reform politics and government to encourage compromise, or would that mean giving up on the changes we really need and want?
- Should local communities set policies in areas such as education and the environment, or would that risk the progress we’ve made and make further progress more difficult?

“I have watched with dismay as the constructive ways for citizens and officials to engage with others with whom they disagree have disappeared,” said one participant, a retired lawyer and former state legislator who joined the forum from North Carolina. “I believe in the importance of having a government that acts for the common good,” she said, “and I’m worried that it’s slipping away.”

Another participant, a school board member from New Orleans, concurred, saying that she was motivated to run for office in no small part because of political gridlock at the local and national level. Speaking as a newly elected official, she said, “People aren’t being served effectively. I now hope to have a bigger platform to work from to take action.”

Kara Dillard, who prepares moderators for online forums, took part in the live-video forum from the National Press Club. “Our group really coalesced around the idea that we need to make politics more fair,” she told the panelists and audience at *A Public Voice* as the online discussion concluded. “The group in their deliberation was willing to live with some degree of the potential for voter fraud . . . if it meant that our system could be fairer, that more people had access to politics, and that they had more ability to participate in our civic and political life.”
Closing Remarks
by David Mathews

The purpose of public deliberation is not simply to have a civil or a pleasant, or even an informed, conversation. As my friend Daniel Yankelovich used to say, “If a little more civility or a little bit more information were going to solve the problems of democracy, they would have been solved a long time ago.”

Deliberation is tough work. It means making decisions together about the right course of action. To deliberate is to carefully weigh possible actions or policies against the various things we hold dear in order to settle on a direction to follow or a purpose to pursue.

As a research organization, the Kettering Foundation has been studying how public deliberation can improve the quality of public discourse and inform the process of democratic decision-making. A Public Voice has been a long-running effort to bring elected officials together with a deliberative citizenry.

It hasn’t always been easy to get any real interaction between the two. In the past, we have shown members of Congress video clips of people deliberating in forums so they could see how the public was thinking about an issue. But we found that no matter what the subject was, the clips just cued the representatives to whatever their set speech happened to be on the issue.

The discussion today was different. What struck me was how much interaction we saw. We had participation from people in local communities. We had former members of Congress. We had representatives from Capitol Hill. We even had two sitting members of state legislatures here in the audience.

Seated next to me is Les Ihara Jr., a member of the Hawaii State Senate. He is among the first members of a state legislature to ask his constituents to deliberate on a difficult issue. He used the results of those deliberations not to tell the legislature what to do, but to inform them about how the public was reasoning and weighing the options in front of them on the issue.

So, the breakthrough this time, I think, was clearly in getting an interaction between sitting members of legislative bodies and citizens who are deliberating about the controversial issues facing the country. We heard people talk about what they took away from deliberation.

Another insight that struck me as I listened to the discussion is that gray is beautiful. By gray, I mean the realm between agreement and disagreement. What has happened in our political life is that the gray has all but disappeared. Today, issues have got to be either black or white. What deliberation does is bring the gray back. That is important because life consists of living in the tension—not resolving it and making it go away. The ability to live with tension is one of the secrets of America’s political system.
One of the points made this morning was that town meetings are no longer the friendly gatherings they used to be. In some cases, to attend one as an elected representative means to put yourself in physical jeopardy. Nobody in his or her right mind would want to be attacked by a mob.

What happens in deliberative forums is very different from what happens in these town meetings. In a forum, the objective is to weigh all the options fairly—not to divide considerations into good or evil categories but to recognize the tensions and shades of gray.

For example, I was just reading a report from the forums on immigration reform. The differences between people were strong, and they didn’t go away as people deliberated about what to do. Some of the people in the forums were immigrants themselves, or their parents were immigrants. Others were fearful of immigrants and concerned that they were breaking the law.

For the most part, participants in the forums didn’t change their opinions on the issue. But in some cases, they changed their opinions about other people’s opinions. “I now know why you hold the views that you hold.” That may seem like a small accomplishment, but it can make all the difference.

While forums are useful, the great hope is not that everybody in the United States is going to participate in one. The great hope is that people can begin to bring deliberative qualities into everyday speech and into public discourse wherever it occurs.

I’m very pleased that we were able to bring you some insight into the nature of the forums taking place across the country. There is a lot more interest in what we are collectively doing than there was even a few years ago. People are worried that something terribly amiss is happening to our political system, and many see deliberation as a valuable alternative to politics-as-usual.

We have had a lot of success with Common Ground for Action—the platform that allows people to deliberate online. When we report the outcomes of NIF forums across the country, about half of them now come from these online discussions. So, that has really expanded the scope of activity throughout the network.

We face a lot of challenges ahead. We need to learn to make greater use of new technologies. And more work needs to be done expanding the interaction between legislators and deliberative citizens. But this meeting was a great step forward. I’m grateful to my colleagues who organized it. Most of all, I’m grateful to the people across the country who convened and participated in the forums. Without them, we would have nothing to share or talk about. So, thank you.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation. His closing remarks have been edited for length.
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 an office in Washington, DC. For more information, call 800-221-3657 or visit the foundation’s website at www.kettering.org.

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.