

AMERICA'S JOB ONE: How a Deliberative Public Talks about the Economy

A Report from the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Network

IN THE LAST FOUR DECADES, the US has weathered recessions and enjoyed periods of growth and improvements in living standards. In good times and bad, “jobs and the economy” typically ranks at or near the top of the country’s most important issues. There is little disagreement about the goals: growth and prosperity, good jobs, fair wages, and an equal shot for everyone. But there are sharp divisions on how to achieve these goals. Leaders in government and the private sector—at national, state, and local levels—must choose where to invest money and time, what comes first when one cannot do everything, and which policies best reflect the values and priorities of the American people.

Against this backdrop, the network of the National Issues Forums (NIF) has convened deliberative forums on jobs and the economy nine times between 1982 and 2020. Each round of forums took place in different locations over the course of a year, with 2020 forums conducted online. In addition, the network has hosted forums on issues related to the economy, including immigration, the federal budget, health care, and higher education. Forum participants have come from all walks of life and have gathered in libraries, schools, senior centers, and all manner of community gathering places to exchange views.¹

Looked at together, these forums, held over four decades, offer an unparalleled window into the participants’ thinking on jobs and prosperity, economic

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

growth and opportunity, and ways the country and local communities can adapt to economic and technological change.² Equally important, the forum

deliberations suggest practical ways leaders can help nonexperts better understand the country's economic challenges and consider the advantages and risks of different paths.

The Limits of Polling and Town Halls

Although polls alert leaders to public concerns about the economy, they often capture top-of-the-head reactions to complex questions that many Americans have not had the chance to think much about. Town halls attract proponents and opponents of specific proposals but rarely provide reliable guidance on the broader public's views. In contrast, NIF forums provide a unique perspective by capturing participants' views on difficult problems after they weigh different approaches and deliberate about them with others. Forums aim to capture the participants' more considered judgments.

Since the early 1980s, the Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan research institute, has collaborated with the network of the National Issues Forums to foster nonpartisan public deliberation on key issues. NIF is a nationwide network of community-based groups that convene forums. Forums are locally sponsored and meet in neighborhood settings. In recent years, forums are frequently convened online, using NIF's Common Ground for Action platform.³

How Do People Think about the Economy?

In this brief report, we recap what Kettering and NIF have observed about how those attending the forums understand and think through economic choices, risks, and trade-offs.⁴

What Blocks Public Deliberation

1. Relying on Terms and Concepts Like "GDP" and "Economic Growth"

Economists and policymakers need a shared vocabulary to assess the economy's track record and determine how it is faring against international competitors. But centering economic discussions on GDP, economic growth rates, the trade gap, and similar macroeconomic concepts pushes nonexperts out. Even when these concepts are defined in accessible terms, they are too abstract and top-down for most people to think about usefully.

NIF's experience suggests that people are far more likely to assess the economy based on their own jobs and wages, the bills they pay, the stores they visit, and how well their children and neighbors are doing. Beginning with this context, they can then move on to pragmatic deliberations about which policies are most likely to help them and their communities prosper.

What Blocks Public Deliberation:

Relying on terms and concepts like "GDP" and "economic growth"

Presenting solutions before people understand the choices

Neglecting the public's core economic values

Skipping steps in explaining how proposals work

What Supports and Enhances Public Deliberation:

Focusing on what people care about without using jargon

Zeroing in on concrete, local examples

Visualizing a small business

Giving people a chance to talk about right and wrong

2. Presenting Solutions before People Understand the Choices

Typically, leaders have put in years of learning about economic issues and considering various options for tackling them. Most routinely consult with a wide range of stakeholders—business leaders, investors, economists, union officials, consumer groups, elected officials, and others. They have often homed in on specific solutions they support.

But few Americans bring this background to the issues. Even if they follow news and politics closely, most lack a “lay-of-the-land” grasp of what might be causing the US economy to fail or to thrive. They rarely bring a crisp list of policy solutions to the table.

NIF forums are designed to help people catch up by doing “choice work.” Participants begin by looking at three or four broad strategies to address an issue, each reflecting different priorities and requiring different courses of action. In this respect, NIF choice frameworks are like the options papers military and national security officials prepare for the president. They lay out the choices clearly and explain the potential risks and downsides.

Choice work has proven to be one of the quickest and most effective ways to help people understand complex problems and deliberate on how to solve them. Moreover, weighing choices often reduces mistrust. When people realize that every option comes with costs and trade-offs, they tend to become more realistic about how quickly and easily a problem can be solved.⁵

3. Neglecting the Public’s Core Economic Values

In NIF’s assessment of 40 years of economic forums, participants repeatedly endorsed a common vision:

Although NIF forums have been held in dramatically different economic conditions, from unemployment as high as 10.8 percent during the 1982 forums to as low as 3.5 percent during the 2019 forums, the underlying values shaping

the participants’ attitudes have remained remarkably constant. In forum after forum, participants talk about the well-being of what they call “the middle class.” For them, this is not an economic category but a vision of American society where people who work hard and live by the rules can expect decent lives for themselves and better ones for their children.⁶

In tough times, participants see this vision as threatened and seek policies to bolster and reenergize it. In better times, they look for ways to secure it and give more people access to it.

4. Skipping Steps in Explaining How Proposals Work

In forums, participants use an issue guide that lays out choices with specific actions for each. The 2020 guide explored options for getting the economy back on track after COVID, and, like all NIF guides, it was pretested in focus groups and test forums for balance and clarity. Not surprisingly, the guide included infrastructure spending as one idea.

In the pretesting, most people understood the word “infrastructure,” and those who did not quickly grasped the vision of building bridges and roads, improving the electric grid, and expanding Wi-Fi nationwide. But some asked why the government would spend money when the economy was so bad.

Once explained, this thinking made perfect sense to many participants, and the group engaged in a healthy discussion about whether infrastructure spending should be a top priority and “how to keep politics out of it.”

But the warning here is that people do not necessarily see the ripple effects of proposals such as infrastructure spending, tax policy, and technology investment. They do not necessarily oppose these ideas, but many do not understand how they could lead to better jobs and wages in their own communities. Unless these connections are clear, many will dismiss these options.

What Supports and Enhances Public Deliberation

1. Focusing on What People Care about without Using Jargon

In many respects, the public’s starting point on the economy is at the other end of macroeconomic policy. People either get or lose jobs. Their wages

go up or stagnate. They can or cannot pay their bills, buy a house, or afford college. Their community is on the upswing or the decline. Unless leaders engage people by focusing on what matters to them, there will be disconnects.

This chart summarizes what mattered most to the NIF forum participants over time. According to the NIF analysis, leaders need to focus on:

<i>Daily lives, not economic statistics</i>	For most people, a good economy isn’t measured by GDP or even changes in unemployment rates. Instead, they assess whether it’s possible for them to have decent lives for themselves and look forward to better ones for their children.
<i>Workers, not systems or corporations</i>	NIF participants tended to be skeptical of proposals they saw as mainly benefitting corporations and institutions. Unless they saw an obvious connection to benefits for workers, they were often dubious.
<i>Education and empowerment, not productivity</i>	Economists believe higher productivity benefits society as a whole and pays off for workers—a “better-educated workforce” is one means of increasing productivity. But in forums, participants talk about the need to empower individuals and give them a path to build their own lives. In 40 years of forums, education has been a favored solution to a wide range of economic problems because it helps people help themselves.
<i>Help for people, not incentives for the wealthy</i>	Economists and policymakers can testify to the power of incentives. But forum participants often reacted negatively to policies that seemed to reward corporations and wealthier taxpayers while average people struggle. In most cases, the participants wanted a rising tide guaranteed to lift all boats, not one that motivates only those who are financially better off to behave differently.
<i>Effectiveness and competence, not ideology</i>	Forum-goers often deliberated on government’s role in the economy—problems it can and cannot solve. But the deliberations nearly always centered on government’s effectiveness and competence. Very few participants feared government power and action per se.
<i>The future, not only the present</i>	Even in tough economies, people in forums worried about what the future might hold for their children and grandchildren. Most wanted policies that offered immediate relief but not if the long-term consequences robbed their children of their future.

2. Zeroing in on Concrete, Local Examples

For anyone who wants to encourage deliberation on economic issues, all politics is local. This does not mean people in forums cared only about their own communities and were oblivious to the needs and interests of Americans elsewhere. But it does mean that feathery, abstract concepts such as business and job creation come to life when people think about where they live. Are local businesses closing, and, if so, why? Is anyone starting new ones? Do young people coming out of local high schools and colleges find jobs? Have they learned the skills they need to do those jobs? In forums, people draw on their own experiences and those of people they know to bring concrete examples to the deliberations. Charts and statistics can add useful context, but they rarely bring forums to life.

In some cases, a local versus national perspective shifts the deliberations. In recent years, some NIF participants have worried that high levels of immigration (documented and undocumented) “take jobs away” from US workers and damage the economy without providing any benefits. But when they began talking about immigrants in their own communities, the deliberations became more nuanced. Many mentioned immigrants doing essential work in local businesses and hospitals. More than a few voiced their admiration for the hard work so many immigrants do, sometimes seeing foreign-born Americans as foremost examples of those pursuing the “American Dream.”⁷

3. Visualizing a Small Business

Most Americans participate in the economy as workers, consumers, and taxpayers, and it is often difficult for them to see economic problems through the eyes of corporate CEOs, investors, and government officials and planners. But they can easily imagine what happens in a small business. In fact, thinking of a small business gives people a chance to work through policy costs, risks, and trade-offs that might not have been readily apparent.

Deliberations on the minimum wage are a good example. Participants routinely voiced sympathy for people who work hard at very low wages, and most felt an immediate inclination to help them by raising the minimum wage. But when they envisioned a small business, they had to consider the idea from the perspective of a business owner who has to meet payroll every week. This perspective led participants to wrestle with more complicated questions: How high should the minimum wage be? Should it apply to very small businesses? Should it phase in slowly over time? Should it vary depending on the local cost of living? In the end, most NIF participants remained committed to the goal of a living wage for anyone who works hard, but the forum deliberations became more subtle when participants thought about small businesses. Perhaps the most important shift was that participants were less likely to categorize anyone with reservations about upping the minimum wage as merely cruel or uninformed.

4. Giving People a Chance to Talk about Right and Wrong

In NIF forums over 40 years, participants have been drawn to a simple formula for the US economy: “If you work hard and stay out of trouble, you should be able to live a comfortable (not sumptuous) life and get your children started on the right foot.” When the economy does not uphold this basic principle, anger and disappointment result. The violations vary: someone who breaks the rules but lives a life of luxury, someone who works like crazy but struggles to make ends meet, or people who save their whole lives but watch their planned retirement slip away due to a stock market crash or out-of-control inflation.

Forum participants often attributed economic problems to character flaws and poor values. On the one hand, many blamed greedy corporations and financial institutions for focusing on short-term profits rather than the long-term well-being of

companies and workers. Over the years, some participants have flagged a declining work ethic, excessive materialism, financial irresponsibility, and an unwillingness to plan for a rainy day as fault lines in the American economy. Some forums have centered on whether the problem is a broken work ethic or a broken reward and education system. These are important conversations to have—they are not mere questions of fact.

One takeaway from NIF forums over the decades is that for most Americans, you cannot talk about the economy without talking about values and morality. If leaders ignore or downplay these values questions, their diagnoses and prescriptions may seem unrealistic, naïve, or self-defensive.

How Divided Are We?

Recent opinion research highlights the despair many Americans feel about our deeply polarized national politics. This concern comes up in forums all the time. Yet polls also show wide agreement—outside the lines of partisan politics—in many areas of economic policy.⁸ To us, that means the country needs to talk more about these issues in settings outside policymaking circles.

NIF forums demonstrate that lay individuals can deliberate seriously on policy problems. Questions do not have to be sugarcoated or oversimplified. Typical Americans can handle an enormous amount of complexity when invited to do so.

Perhaps the principal takeaway from 40 years of NIF forums on the economy is that when people

deliberate together, they tend to reach judgments that are reasonable and thoughtful and often provide sound guidance for decision-makers.

Notes:

- ¹ Although NIF forums are not conducted with random samples or cross sections of the American public, post-forum questionnaires show that participants are demographically and socially diverse.
- ² For a full review of these forums over four decades, see John Immerwahr, *Enduring Values, Changing Concerns: A Retrospective Analysis of NIF Forums on Jobs and the Economy from 1982 to 2020* (forthcoming).
- ³ See <https://www.nifi.org/en/cga-online-forums> for information on NIF's Common Ground for Action online deliberation platform.
- ⁴ This analysis draws primarily on the forthcoming report by John Immerwahr (see footnote 2), but it also reflects observations from Kettering and NIF work preparing and testing forum materials and other analyses of forums on other issues.
- ⁵ Jean Johnson and Keith Melville, "From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums," *Connections* (2020): 35-41.
- ⁶ Immerwahr, *Enduring Values, Changing Concerns*.
- ⁷ For a full treatment of recent NIF forums on immigration, including public thinking on the connection between immigration and the economy, see Keith Melville, *Beyond the Clash: How a Deliberative Public Talks about Immigration* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2019).
- ⁸ Will Friedman and David Schleifer, *Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Life: A Hidden Common Ground Report* (New York: Public Agenda, 2019).

Author: Jean Johnson

Contributing Editors: Nicholas A. Felts and
John Immerwahr

Copy Editor: Ellen Dawson-Witt and Mary McCulley

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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.