BEYOND THE CLASH

How a Deliberative Public Talks about Immigration

A Report on 2018 National Issues Forums on Immigration
A Note on NIF Forums

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About the National Issues Forums
Every year for nearly 40 years, typical Americans have gathered in communities nationwide to exchange views on tough, divisive issues. Under the auspices of the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), local convenors—including colleges and universities, libraries, schools, civic and senior associations, and religious groups—bring people together to wrestle with the difficult choices these issues present and to listen to the views and insights of others.

At a time when so many bemoan the divisiveness, ill will, and mistrust in our national politics, the work of the National Issues Forums (NIF) is a tribute to the open-mindedness and civic-mindedness of people in communities across the country. It is proof that, given the opportunity, Americans can still talk and listen to each other, even on a topic as divisive as immigration.

Over the years, participants in NIF forums have deliberated on nearly every urgent public issue, including health care, the economy, the national debt, crime and justice, education, substance abuse, and foreign policy. NIF forums attract people from every walk of life and demographic category. And while many worry about the civic interest and involvement of younger Americans, NIF boasts robust participation on college campuses and in K-12 schools.

In recent years, NIF has introduced online deliberations using the Common Ground for Action (CGA) platform developed by the Kettering Foundation. On this platform, people in rural areas can exchange views with urban dwellers. People living on the coasts can exchange views with people in the heartland.

The content and tone of an NIF forum are distinctive and quite remarkable when set against the sloganeering and oversimplification that colors so much of our current political talk. Forum deliberations begin with nonpartisan issue guides developed by the Kettering Foundation in association with NIFI. Written specifically for nonexperts, these guides prompt participants to grapple seriously with alternative ways to think about and address difficult policy problems. People are asked to consider what is valuable for each option and to weigh the advantages and trade-offs of different solutions.

In NIF forums, participants acknowledge that the country’s toughest problems simply don’t have easy, cost-free answers. They often come to recognize that other Americans have different priorities and experiences that they need to understand and take into account.

Over the last year, participants in the NIF network deliberated on three distinctive approaches to the nation’s immigration policies, and Beyond the Clash summarizes what we heard from the forums in some 58 towns and cities in 28 states. The report that follows is not a policy
prescription for government action, nor does it represent people's final and ultimate thoughts on this complex and divisive issue.

This report offers a powerful demonstration that typical Americans with differing views can exchange ideas on immigration and that as they listen to one another, their views become more nuanced and pragmatic. Most important, it shows that people with different starting points can and will find areas of common ground for action on which they would be willing to come together. And time after time, in all kinds of settings, participants leave the forums wishing that their elected officials, too, could begin looking for areas of agreement and hammering out a more lasting solution.

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Over the course of 2018 and continuing into January 2019, an array of organizations, including libraries, local associations, college departments, community groups, and others, convened 86 nonpartisan public forums in towns and cities in 28 states across the country. Held under the auspices of the National Issues Forums Institute, these forums took place in all sorts of venues. The people who attended them chose to take part in discussions about one of the nation’s pressing issues: immigration.

The forums attracted a broad range of participants, including college students, church members, retirees, tech workers, military personnel, professionals, and recent and long-term immigrants. Most forums, but not all, took place on college campuses or in community meeting places in university towns. In addition, 42 forums were held online using a platform developed by the Kettering Foundation called Common Ground for Action (CGA). This report summarizes the perspectives of the roughly 2,300 people who took part in all of these forums.

**A Complex Issue at a Difficult Time**

These deliberations for the most part took place in the months leading up to and following the 2018 midterm election. Several national surveys at the time showed that immigration and border security were the most important issues that affected people’s votes in the elections. However, attempts in Congress to fashion a broadly acceptable comprehensive reform of immigration policy have repeatedly failed in part because there is no apparent agreement about how comprehensive reform ought to be or which programs should be part of a broad reform package.

Immigration is complex. More than 40 million people who currently live in the United States were born in other countries. Immigration has an impact on this nation’s schools and colleges, its health care, labor market, and local, state, and federal budgets. At issue: How many immigrants should be admitted? What should we do about millions of people who have resided in the United States without permission, some for many years? What should we do to deter those who enter or stay illegally?

As we found in these public forums, it is a topic about which most Americans do not start with a base of knowledge. Many are not aware of how the immigration process works. A close examination of these conversations and our analysis of a questionnaire that participants completed when the forums ended reveals insights that differ from what polls show.

Polls capture views of a divided public that is sharply split along partisan lines on key points about immigration and that are based solely on what respondents already know. But deliberative forums capture the views of people who have had the opportunity to consider basic facts, weigh different views, and reflect on some of the complexities of the immigration issue, which involves trade-offs between short- and long-term drawbacks and benefits and requires balancing deeply held ideals and hard realities about short-term costs. Deliberative forums provide a
different kind of knowledge, one that can uniquely outline the bounds of political permission within which policymakers have room to lead.

**A Notable Departure from Partisan Debate**

In their substance and tone, these deliberative forums were a notable departure from most partisan exchanges. Unlike many discussions about political issues, it was often hard to tell whether a particular participant was a self-identified liberal or conservative. The views they expressed, with few exceptions, were not those of people who favor sharply restricting immigration, nor were they advocates of an extreme pro-immigration agenda that favors open borders. By and large, forum participants were willing to grapple with trade-offs to try to find a practical and humane response to a complex problem.

While many participants welcome newcomers and are generally supportive of the current level of immigration, overall these forums reflect a moderate, pragmatic perspective. The forums offer an insight into a public that is not so sharply divided by partisan differences, a public that is eager to move beyond the partisan slugfest in which each side holds a distorted and dismissive view of the other.

There is a notable difference between poll results and what can be gleaned from deliberative exchanges such as these NIF forums. Polls reflect off-the-top-of-the-head

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**CHARACTERISTICS OF NIF FORUMS**

NIF is a network of diverse local organizations—schools, libraries, colleges, universities, community groups, senior centers, and more. NIF’s mission is to get citizens talking seriously about tough issues that divide their country and their communities.

All NIF forums are locally funded, organized, and convened. Forum participants engage in deliberation, weighing options for action against things held commonly valuable.

**PEOPLE IN NIF FORUMS:**

- Come to recognize that the issue at hand is tough and not easily solved;
- Recognize that people disagree. That’s why we have to talk and hear each other out;
- Weigh a range of options, acknowledging that each has advantages and trade-offs;
- Focus on ideals and concerns that shape our views rather than limiting the discussion to facts and figures;
- Listen to others respectfully, with curiosity and courtesy;
- Recognize that people may not always agree about what to do at the end of a forum. These are complicated issues. Most people need more time to think about them;
- Develop a better grasp of an issue and a better sense of how others in their community view it; and
- Hear ideas they hadn’t thought about before.
responses. They describe the way the public is thinking about issues they have had little or no opportunity to discuss with others, much less others who hold different views. Polls do not reflect the considered judgment of people who have taken time to hear different views, learn pertinent facts, and take into consideration the drawbacks associated with different courses of action.

What we gleaned from these forums was the outcome of a deliberative process in which participants weigh alternatives, listen to different points of view, and move toward a more thoughtful public judgment. While, for the most part, forums lasted no more than two hours, participants had ample opportunity to learn many salient facts about immigration. They viewed a short video and read briefing materials that presented three different perspectives on immigration and described both advantages and drawbacks of suggested actions associated with each. Most important, the forums were an occasion for people with different views and experiences to hear one another and learn from their differences.

This report describes how people think about immigration, what they hold valuable, the experiences they bring to bear on this topic, how they grapple with the costs and trade-offs associated with an influx of immigrants, and how their thinking evolves over the course of these deliberations.

**About the Forums and Who Participated**

The forums were informed by a nonpartisan issue guide that describes three different ways of approaching immigration. In some cases, participants had read the issue guides in advance of the forum. In others, they saw a short video as the forum began and referred to a six-page issue advisory that synopsizes the material in the longer issue guide.

The forums were led by trained moderators who made a point of considering each of the three options and its respective strengths and drawbacks. The nonpartisan guides

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**Coming to America: Who Should We Welcome, What Should We Do?**

The deliberative forums described in this report used an issue guide prepared by the Kettering Foundation and published by the National Issues Forums Institute, designed to help people deliberate together about how to approach the issue. It includes options that reflect different ways of understanding what is at stake and what matters most when facing difficult problems that involve everyone and that do not have perfect solutions.

Participants considered these options, along with concrete actions that they would suggest and the trade-offs and drawbacks of each.

**Option 1: Welcome Immigrants, Be a Beacon of Freedom**

Immigration has helped make America what it is today—a dynamic and diverse culture, an engine of the global economy, and a beacon of freedom around the world.

**Option 2: Enforce the Law, Be Fair to Those Who Follow the Rules**

We need a fair system, where the rules are clear and, above all, enforced.

**Option 3: Slow Down and Rebuild Our Common Bonds**

Newcomers have strengthened American culture in the past, but the current levels of immigration are so high, and the country is now so diverse, that we must regain our sense of national purpose and identity.

The research involved in developing the guide included interviews and conversations with Americans from all walks of life and communities, including people not born in the United States, as well as surveys of nonpartisan public-opinion research, subject-matter scans, and reviews of initial drafts by people with direct experience with the subject.
served as a point of departure for these exchanges and a source of information about immigration facts and trends.

At the end of the forums, participants were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire in which they registered post-forum thoughts about immigration. In preparing this report, we analyzed more than 1,500 completed questionnaires and have drawn on them to describe the main themes of these deliberations. In the course of preparing this report, we also visited forums held in 10 cities: Seattle, Washington; El Paso, Texas; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Manhattan, Kansas; Jacksonville, Florida; Panama City, Florida; Dayton, Ohio; Binghamton, New York; Birmingham, Alabama; and Cleveland, Mississippi. We also reviewed reports by forum moderators and looked at videotapes and transcripts of some forums.

In their racial and ethnic characteristics, the percentage of white and African American participants in these forums was similar to that in the nation as a whole, while the percentage of Hispanic or Latino participants was slightly lower than their share of the nation's population. More women than men took part, by a margin of 57 percent to 38 percent. Both older cohorts and younger Americans (people 30 or younger, especially college students) were overrepresented. The themes and insights reported here are not based on a statistically representative sample, nor should they be interpreted as such. This report, instead, portrays the views of a set of people who chose to devote collective time and attention to this question. (Further methodology information, including questionnaire responses, are available at www.nifi.org.)

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

1. People began by talking about immigration largely in personal terms, drawing on their own experiences, positive and negative, and on recollections of their families’ immigrant heritage.
2. For many participants, considering immigration and the policies associated with it was a new and demanding experience.
3. There is limited understanding about the impact of immigrants, both locally and nationally.
4. Most forum participants had one of two clear starting points, which in many ways were mirror opposites.
5. Through the course of deliberation, many who started with one perspective began to show signs of modifying their views.
6. As they worked to reconcile competing understandings of what they held most important, participants wrestled with the specific dilemmas involved in dealing with those who are here without permission.
7. There is more common ground on immigration than is generally recognized.
8. People welcome constructive occasions to exchange views about this complex and emotional public issue.
Findings

People began by talking about immigration largely in personal terms, drawing on their own experiences, positive and negative, and on recollections of their families’ immigrant heritage.

For most people, immigration is not an abstract topic or an issue about which the public’s thinking is shaped mainly by what they hear and see in the media. Consistently, in the NIF forums, the frame of reference was personal, based on individuals’ own experiences or on recollections of their family heritage as immigrants. Participants in many forums spoke with pride about their ancestors who came to the US as immigrants, even when they immigrated generations ago. The forums also included a considerable number of foreign-born Americans who recounted their personal stories.

In a Binghamton, New York, forum one woman asked, “What are we talking about when we talk about immigration? We are talking about our own families’ stories, and about our identity as a community and a nation.” Another said, “My ancestors came a long time ago, but we are immigrants, too. We are a nation of immigrants.” Another woman added, “We are talking about what kind of country we want to be. It makes me proud to say that we are a welcoming nation.”

A man in a Jacksonville, Florida, forum said that his grandfather came to the US with a sixth-grade education, but that in a nation that welcomes and supports newcomers, he was able to become a professional with multiple degrees.

In many cases participants said their views on immigration had been shaped by personal encounters and relationships with immigrants in their own communities. Most often, these stories depicted immigrants who are hardworking and law-abiding, often taking on jobs that most Americans are unwilling to do.

From a Vacaville, California, moderator report:

One thing stood out for me: Nearly every person at this forum had a personal relationship with an immigrant or multiple immigrants, both legal and undocumented. They regularly cited examples from their own observations and interactions to make their points. And they were very concerned about the future for undocumented immigrants.

However, other personal experiences illustrated the difficulties and challenges involved in accommodating the needs of new community members who come from a wide variety of cultures.
From a Panama City, Florida, moderator report:

A university student described a situation in one of his classes where three students did not speak English and another student translated for them. He said the arrangement was “distracting” and took time and attention away from the class. A school teacher described an English immersion system in local schools where non-English speaking students have three years to pick up the language. She described the policy as frustrating and not adequately staffed, “not a good use of taxpayer dollars.”

For many participants, considering immigration and the policies associated with it was a new and demanding experience.

As participants discussed possible approaches to immigration, they considered different categories of immigrants and the policies relating to them. For many it was a new and demanding experience. Many acknowledged what they didn’t know and what they needed to understand more clearly to consider these perspectives. Some participants conflated legal, unauthorized, and refugee immigrants.

As the forum moderator in Vacaville, California, observed, “Among the things that stood out for me, it came up repeatedly just how complicated this issue is.”

Some participants noted the difficulty of getting reliable information about this issue at a time when partisan media often present competing information, especially about illegal border crossings.

A participant in Rindge, New Hampshire, said:

I think the [habit of Americans choosing] news outlets in harmony with their own view of the world impacts the way we see the world. It is increasingly difficult to get accurate, reliable information. We don’t have a common understanding because we all consult different news sources. It has become so politicized.

Both the issue guide and the issue advisory lay out the proposed actions and drawbacks associated with the three different perspectives and present a summary of facts and trends. These describe, for example, the immigrant share of the US population and how it has changed, the legal status of immigrants living in the US, and the country of origin of recent refugees. In some cases, when moderators introduced certain of these facts or trends into the conversation, it shifted the conversation.

Referring to a chart in the issue guide on the percentage of foreign-born and how it has changed, another forum participant in Rindge, New Hampshire, said:

The thing that stays with me at the moment is that the average American knows nothing about the numbers presented in this graph. Most of us are operating without much hard information. Once you see, hear, and understand what is happening, it changes your perspective.
Many forum participants had limited or inaccurate impressions in a number of areas, including:

- Many had no clear sense of the level of current immigration or recent trends.
- Most seemed to have a minimal understanding of how the current system works: how long it takes for legal immigrants to go through the process and what the various entry categories are.
- Many people were surprised that most immigrants in the US are here legally.
- Many were unaware that a majority of undocumented individuals do not enter by illegal border crossings, but rather, overstay their visas.
- Most were unaware that the estimated unauthorized immigrant population in the US is lower than it was several years ago.
- There was considerable confusion about the implications of family-based “chain migration,” its merits, and its drawbacks.
- A majority were unaware of recent proposals by the White House to significantly reduce the admission of refugees and members of other immigration categories.

From a Rindge, New Hampshire, moderator report:

The biggest moment(s) seemed to be when people became better informed about the issue. A number of participants mentioned that they felt better able to evaluate news coverage/government statements about immigration policy based on the discussion and information presented.

In follow-up questionnaires, nearly half of the participants reported that in their forums people talked about aspects of the issue they had not previously considered. Notably, more than one in five reported having second thoughts about a proposal they had tended to favor at the outset.

3. **There is limited understanding about the impact of immigrants, both locally and nationally.**

In many forums, contrary claims were made about the local impact of immigrants. With regard to the impact of workers without documentation, the consensus in most forums was that they are generally willing to perform work that most Americans don’t want to do. In Cleveland, Mississippi, for example, several participants remarked that the local economy in the Delta region is heavily dependent on labor performed by such workers.

However, different views were expressed and some disagreement was apparent with regard to two matters: whether low-income noncitizens qualify for public benefits and the impact of immigrants, especially unauthorized individuals, on the labor force. To note one instance,
participants in a Birmingham, Alabama, forum raised concerns about unauthorized immigrants bringing down wages.

In Panama City, Florida, several forum participants expressed concern about green card holders, who they believe are more often a burden than an asset to the community because they are eligible for public benefits. Others in that forum asserted that newly arriving immigrants appear not to be as carefully vetted as in the past, that many are not “productive,” and that some new immigrants seem not to want to learn English. In that forum, there was interest in giving preference to immigrants who possess needed skills and could help ease worker shortages. Others pushed back, asking why Americans don’t take these jobs.

Most forum participants questioned the assertions that President Trump has repeatedly made, that porous borders “set loose vicious predators and violent criminals.” In several instances, people cited contrary evidence to refute this claim.

4. Most forum participants had one of two clear starting points, which in many ways were mirror opposites.

The 86 deliberative forums on immigration offer a unique perspective on the public’s thinking, and they permit insights about how views evolve when people take time to form a more considered judgment. One important aspect of our analysis of these forums was that we examined the difference between people’s starting points—the views expressed early on in forum exchanges—and how participants’ views evolved as they wrestled with trade-offs and drawbacks.

On this issue, more so than most public concerns, the opening remarks in forums tended to correspond to one of two sharply contrasting views. In a majority of the forums, participants expressed a clear sympathy for immigrants, legal and unauthorized. They came into the forums predisposed to regard immigration as something that is good for the nation and saw little reason to be concerned about its costs or impact. In other forums—a smaller but not insignificant number of them—the most prominent voices pushed back against immigration. They are particularly concerned that immigration at its current rate is out of control and that newcomers, especially those who are poor and unskilled, negatively impact their communities.

The following snapshots illustrate these contrasting views.

Positive Views on Immigration

In a majority of forums, participants expressed a sympathetic and welcoming attitude toward newcomers. They came into the forums predisposed to regard immigration as something that is good for the country, an expression of this nation’s historical commitment as a nation of immigrants. As we have noted (Finding #1 above), the stories they told affirmed their belief that the United States is a land of immigrants and that our ability to welcome individuals
from many nations is a defining feature of this nation’s civic culture. In many cases, these stories were personal and emotional, emphasizing the storyteller’s pride in belonging to a nation that welcomed their ancestors and offered them the opportunity to start a new life here.

Those who share this view typically expressed few reservations about the current rate of legal immigration. They are sympathetic to the plight of most people who are here illegally and the reasons they sought a better life for themselves and their families. They see little reason for concern about the nation’s ability to successfully absorb this new wave of immigrants, just as previous groups have become absorbed—and assimilated.

In particular, they are sympathetic to the situation of refugees. Despite widely publicized instances in which individuals who entered the country as refugees have been identified as suspected terrorists, most forum participants expressed sympathy for those seeking refuge, and they supported accepting more refugees. Even in cities such as Seattle, where many refugees have settled, or Binghamton, New York, which several decades ago was designated as a Refugee Resettlement Community, there was strong sentiment in favor of supporting refugees. Overall, when participants were asked whether the United States should accept more refugees fleeing war and deprivation in countries like Syria and Somalia, a majority of forum participants agreed that they should be.

At a time when a record high number of refugees are seeking asylum, there was little indication in these discussions that participants had any fears about an unmanageable wave of asylum seekers. In contrast to the nations of Western Europe, where many are struggling with the cost and logistics of receiving thousands of refugees, judging by these forums, there are few such concerns among Americans.

In various forums, those who entered the conversation with a strong pro-immigration perspective dismissed the anti-immigration view and regarded it as fear-based, inflamed by partisan media. In a Binghamton, New York, forum, when one man said that “new immigrants are causing tensions in this community because they are taking jobs that other people want and causing some families here to go on welfare,” another responded, “What are you talking about? We have low unemployment rates here. This is all about fear of change.”

In Santa Fe, the same point came up in the course of discussions about the third option, which makes the case for moderating the flow of immigrants: “This [anti-immigrant] perspective is rooted in fear. That’s the problem with the immigration debate. So much of it is about fear and about how elected officials are stirring up fear to enhance their own power.”

Cautionary Assessments of Immigration

While the perspectives shared at the outset of forums mainly reflected a pro-immigration perspective, there were notable exceptions. In a handful of forums, the opening comments reflected a negative assessment of immigration and its impact, along with a belief that this nation has lost
control of its borders. These participants believed that their communities and their way of life were changing in rapid, unexpected, and uncontrolled ways.

In a forum held in Southfield, in the metropolitan Detroit area, for example, both in opening comments and subsequent exchanges, participants strongly pushed back against immigration and its impact.

From a Detroit area moderator report, quoting representative comments:

There is so much poverty in America. I am not against immigrants, but this system is backwards. It uses public resources to help immigrants when they are needed for our people here in America. We should focus first on the needs of Americans.

The focus needs to be on bettering the lives of Americans. Immigrants are winning. They get benefits that are not offered to us.

Family reunification can be an important criterion for admitting new immigrants. But the family members of immigrants should not be a burden on the US economy.

We should accept refugees whose lives are in danger if they are not criminals or a threat to us. But we shouldn’t permit people to jump the line by getting in illegally.

In Panama City, Florida, both in opening comments and subsequently, there were repeated comments to the effect that US immigration policy is broken, that laws are routinely ignored or violated, and that immigrants are more often a liability than an asset. When a Panama City moderator mentioned that she was a naturalized citizen (adopted by Americans in infancy) and that her sister was a green card holder who didn’t want to become a citizen, one woman asked whether the sister was “collecting benefits.”

To illustrate his assertion that many recent immigrants aren’t making an effort to assimilate into American culture, a man in Panama City recounted a story about Puerto Rican youths in the community who resisted learning English. Another said people should be able to come to the United States but only if they are “productive.” When someone described New Zealand’s strict immigration laws and the moderator asked why that country has such strict laws, one woman responded, “Maybe they like their country the way it is.” One man spoke enthusiastically about a wall between Mexico and the United States because, he said, it conveys the idea that “you don’t have a right to come here.”

5. Through the course of deliberation, many who started with one perspective began to show signs of modifying their views.

Many forum participants who initially voiced enthusiastic support for welcoming immigrants and offering a path to citizenship for those who entered illegally began to change
their minds over the course of the forum deliberations. As a man in the El Paso, Texas, forum put it:

The more I looked at option number two [about enforcing the laws and being fair to those who follow the rules], the less black-and-white the entire issue seemed. I understand better now why some people favor cracking down on illegals. It’s unfair to those who are waiting in line.

When discussion turned to whether a path to citizenship should be offered to those who live here illegally, there was little agreement. Most agreed that offering amnesty for those who are here illegally is an affront to our commitment as a nation of laws. While there was general support for permitting people here without permission to stay if they met certain conditions, there was little agreement about what those conditions should be.

Even among staunch pro-immigration participants, there was notable discomfort with routine violations of the nation’s laws. This became particularly apparent in the course of discussions about sanctuary cities. Many forum participants expressed strong reservations about permitting entire cities to reject national laws. Pushing back against sanctuary cities, one woman commented, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” Another woman, also sympathetic to immigrant populations, added, “I don’t go with lawbreaking.”

Many on the liberal side of this issue who endorse the tradition of welcoming newcomers are reluctant to struggle with the fact that at a time when growing numbers of people from around the world seek to come to the US, the country cannot simply admit everyone. As a man in Binghamton, New York, said, “All this talk about being a welcoming nation doesn’t get to the real issue, and that is where we should draw the line.” There were few forums in which this was clearly acknowledged. Even when it was, there was little agreement about how to think about a reasonable ceiling on the rate of immigration. Neither was there much clarity about what should be expected of new immigrants or about the meaning of American identity.

Similarly, many people who initially regarded unauthorized immigrants as lawbreakers, whose illegal behavior should be punished, struggled to reconcile that conviction with the realization that such individuals are law-abiding, hard-working people who are long-time residents.

Some forum participants affirmed the view that granting legal status to immigrants in the United States who are here illegally amounts to rewarding people for doing something wrong. In their view, illegal behavior should be punished, and undocumented individuals should be rounded up and deported. But this was distinctly a minority view, and one that many participants were not ready to consider. Many exchanges reflected an inclination to sympathize with unauthorized immigrants and the reasons they take great risks and brave formidable physical hardships and perilous voyages to get to the United States.
As the moderator of a Manhattan, Kansas, forum reports:

A woman who was one of the more conservative voices in the conversation noted that hearing the experience of others—especially people who were immigrants or came from families that had recently immigrated—persuaded her to reconsider her own views of the issue.

In Carrollton, Virginia, after hearing a round of comments, one of the participants said, “We all agree that immigrants are more beneficial to our country than harmful.”

In Panama City, Florida, one woman told a story about a hard-working immigrant mother who had tried and failed several times to pass the citizenship test. A number of participants voiced sympathy for this woman. Some said exceptions should be made for people who are trying hard to become Americans, but on a case-by-case basis.

And in Cleveland, Mississippi, one participant asked whether, as a practical matter, it was possible to deport 11 million illegal immigrants without resorting to police-state tactics. A woman responded, “They all should obey the law and should be sent back, including those seeking asylum, and get at the end of the line.” A man responded with a historical account of the African American experience in this country. He reminded participants that it was against the law for enslaved African Americans to run away from their masters, but some still sought freedom in northern cities. The moderator’s closing comment: “I suspect the irony of the conversation was sobering and apparent to most in attendance.”

6. As they worked to reconcile competing understandings of what they held most important, participants wrestled with the specific dilemmas involved in dealing with those who are here without permission.

In many forums, discussion centered on the question of what should be done about the estimated 11 million people who are here illegally and how to deal with them in a way that respects the nation’s commitment to its laws. While other aspects of this issue generated contrary assertions and occasionally contentious exchanges, about one issue, there was near consensus: support for the DACA youth. This program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (which was created in 2012 and which President Trump has sought to rescind) was intended to protect children brought to the United States by parents without authorization. It shields them from deportation and offers them work permits.

Forum participants gave several reasons for supporting a path to citizenship for the DACA young people even though their parents did not enter legally: “This is their home. . . . They didn’t choose to come. . . . They are Americans.”
Another in El Paso said, “These young people didn't have any choice, and we can't send them back. They are Americans, and it doesn’t make any sense to send them back to a country they never lived in.”

If most people agree about what should be done regarding the DACA program, there was considerable uncertainty—and readily apparent differences—when the discussion turned to the rest of the 11 million undocumented individuals, many of whom have lived in the United States for more than 10 years. There was clear concern in virtually all of the forums about the implications of this large population of unauthorized immigrants.

For the most part, the stories about unauthorized immigrants were sympathetic. They featured the reasons these people took considerable risks in fleeing their homeland to seek a better life for themselves and their children. Most forum participants agreed that, with few exceptions, those who are here illegally are hardworking and law-abiding, and in any case, are longstanding members of their communities.

The widely shared concern is that it is undesirable for any nation to harbor a large number of people who live in the shadows, fearful of being detected. When asked whether the people here without permission should be deported and made to reapply for reentry or whether those who have been living and working here should be permitted to stay, forum participants chose the second alternative by a substantial margin.

While most agreed that it is unfair to those who are waiting to enter legally to offer a path to citizenship for those who are here illegally, the general sentiment in forums was that there is no practical way to identify and deport undocumented individuals without becoming a police state. Moreover, undocumented individuals are an important part of the American labor force, performing jobs that few US citizens want.

In many forums, people told stories reported in local news media about otherwise law-abiding yet undocumented individuals who were identified by authorities and, without regard for their families, sent back to their countries of origin. In an El Paso forum one man said, “By having all these people live in the shadows, you heighten suspicion of the police, and create more tension in local communities.”

Most of all, the sentiment for devising a path to citizenship was based on a practical consideration: the impossibility of rounding up all unauthorized immigrants and deporting them. The general sentiment in these forums was that it is better for them and for the country as a whole to devise a more humane response, a path by which they can gain legal status and get on with their lives, even if this is inconsistent with the rule of law and unfair to those who are waiting in line.
At the same time, however, forum discussions revealed a sharp concern about how to prevent people from entering illegally. With few exceptions, people dismissed building a more secure wall across the nation’s southern border as a feasible way to stop illegal entry. In El Paso, where the forums took place on the campus of the University of Texas, within half a mile of the existing border wall that separates the city from Juarez, Mexico, forum participants were virtually unanimous in their view that building a more secure wall is no solution.

7. **There is more common ground on immigration than is generally recognized.**

In Washington, DC, the central question in the immigration debate is what needs to be changed and how comprehensive immigration reform should be. One obstacle to finding a way forward in revising the nation’s immigration laws is that there seems to be little middle ground. Elected officials often reflect the views of those who feel most strongly about both sides of the issue. And debate about immigration often consists of highly charged partisan exchanges among advocates who seem unlikely to change their minds on any aspect of the debate.

What took place in these forums suggests that, to the contrary, there is broad willingness among citizens to search for areas of agreement and to reconsider their starting points. The forums also revealed considerable disenchantment with the way this issue has been handled in leadership circles and by elected officials.

**Regarding Legal Immigration**

After considering the case for welcoming immigrants and refugees, and the contrary case for limiting the rate of newcomers, most forum-goers appeared to accept current levels of immigration, perhaps with expanded provisions for refugees. Most forum participants seemed comfortable with the diversity they experience in their own communities. They saw no pressing reason to moderate the current level of legal immigration.
In post-forum questionnaires, participants were asked whether the number of legal immigrants admitted to the US should be reduced. By roughly a three-to-one margin, they opposed reductions, and more than half were strongly opposed. It is worth noting that while many forum participants favor keeping legal migration at its current level, few—except for refugees—advocate substantially higher levels.

When asked at the end of the forums whether they agree with the premise of the third choice, that “current levels of immigration are too high, and the country is now becoming so diverse that we are endangering our ability to assimilate newcomers and maintain our national unity,” most rejected this perspective on the grounds that it reflects an outdated, ethnocentric understanding of who “real Americans” are.

These views, which are consistent with recent national polls, help to explain why the percentage of Americans who favor cutting legal immigration is fairly low and has declined in recent years. A recent Pew Research Center poll shows that 38 percent of Americans agree that legal immigration should be kept at its current level. Thirty-two percent say it should be increased, while just twenty-four percent say it should be decreased.

The generally positive assessment of immigration and its impact reflected in most forums helps to explain what recent national polls have found. A June 2018 Gallup poll found that a record high three-quarters majority of Americans, including a majority of Republicans as well as Democrats, think immigration is a good thing for the nation and that a record low number (29 percent) believe immigration into the US should be curtailed.

Dealing with Unauthorized Immigrants

With few exceptions, participants agree that dealing with unauthorized immigrants is the crux of the immigration problem and this is what Congress needs to address as its first order of business. By the end of these forums, very few people voiced support for anything resembling open borders. Similarly, there was little support for building a wall across the southern border as a means of deterring illegal entry.

Nonetheless, there was considerable interest in other ways of identifying individuals who are here illegally. Among the proposals discussed, two were regarded as promising: finding better ways to identify individuals who overstay visas by checking immigration status through an electronic network such as E-verify and instituting a national ID card. In Santa Fe and elsewhere, when participants described the apparent success of ID cards in Germany and other European nations, this proposal generated considerable interest.

While most favored offering a path to citizenship for those who are here illegally, few favored blanket amnesty. Instead, they talked favorably about earned legalization for the DACA young people, especially those who serve in the military or go to college. When asked at the end of forums what they wanted elected officials to hear about their preferences regarding immigration policy, many quoted the words of one woman, “Create a clear policy to protect the DACA Dreamers, so they’re not living in limbo.”
Most forum participants also favored a path to citizenship, with certain conditions, for other undocumented individuals as long as they have no criminal record and have contributed to their communities. Even among people who were not particularly sympathetic to immigrants and who favored stricter quotas, many acknowledged that mass deportation of unauthorized individuals would be unfeasible and inhumane.

While participants often talked about unauthorized immigrants with considerable compassion and empathy, most also felt strongly about the importance of the rule of law. Few were comfortable with a system in which laws were routinely flouted and those who skirt the law were permitted to gain an advantage over those who enter through legal channels. Forum-goers in several communities made a point of noting that they live in “sanctuary cities,” which have declared that they will not cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in rounding up and arresting people who are here illegally. Many people, however, including those who are inclined to support liberal immigration policies, voiced serious misgivings about allowing cities to act in defiance of, and noncompliance with, federal laws.

**Impatience with Congress**

There was considerable impatience with Congress, and not just for its inability to resolve the DACA policy. Many forum participants voiced their frustration about elected officials and the partisan tribalism that fuels their inability to reconcile differences and reach sensible compromises. As a woman in Santa Fe said, “I’m strongly in favor of the Dreamers. We have to give them a clear path, and it can’t have an expiration date. Why can’t elected officials make up their mind?”

Finally, in many forums we heard stories about what people perceive as unnecessary procedural delays in processing applications for citizenship. There was a widely shared sense that the administrative process of reviewing applications for citizenship is unnecessarily cumbersome and that delays in the legal immigration process lead many people to try to enter in other ways.

This is a typical example, from Rindge, New Hampshire:

I have a friend who has been trying to get her citizenship for 35 years. The law is set up so that you have to stay for a longer period of time. But because she has regularly returned to her home, that disqualified her. Finally, she decided to stay here. Although she worked on her citizenship application for another two years, there was one little legal screw-up, which disqualified her again. So she finally gave up. Our bureaucracy could be designed to work better.
that people who have opposing views about issues often hold values and beliefs that are similar to their own.

As a woman said in Sumter, South Carolina: “I had never heard of deliberation before, and now that I have experienced it, I want to be more active here in Sumter.”

From a Vancouver, Washington, moderator report:

The most powerful moments were at the end when people thanked us for hosting and facilitating the dialogue. Participants got a lot out of it and were thankful the library hosted the event. It was quite moving to hear people say how much it meant to them to speak with community members about a complicated and polarizing topic.

From a Common Ground for Action (CGA) online forum:

We often live in our “small worlds” and need to hear about different experiences, when we realize “I hadn’t thought of that.”

From an El Paso, Texas, forum:

People in my group had experienced immigration firsthand—in their own lives and in the lives of their families—and because of that, [they] brought up things I hadn’t considered. At first I was really uncomfortable talking about immigration because I knew so little about it. Now I can relate to it.

A Cleveland, Mississippi, moderator reported that some participants remarked that it was “good to have this forum” and found it “very beneficial” and “much needed in the Delta.” A retired professor indicated during the reflection period that “The conversation I hear on television is really different from what I’m hearing here. Can you believe this is happening in Cleveland, Mississippi?”

Obviously, no single statement can capture the depth and richness of the exchanges that took place in these forums. But this passage, from a Vesper, Kansas, moderator report, comes close:

Many people, facilitators and participants alike, anticipated that this would be a contentious event. At the end, when tables reported out and many of the same comments and issues were reported, it was not contentious at all. There were passionate and powerful voices and opinions at the tables. But there wasn’t any personal opposition when tensions surfaced. One table contained participants with obvious differences about some aspects of immigration. This table deliberation was the most generative in listening and being willing to find common ground.
## Forum Locations

2018 Forums Using the Issue Guide *Coming to America: Who Should We Welcome, What Should We Do?*

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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.
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.