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# ENDURING VALUES, CHANGING CONCERNS

## A Retrospective Analysis of NIF Forums on Jobs and the Economy from 1982 to 2020

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

### SUMMARY

SINCE ITS FOUNDING, the National Issues Forums (NIF) has revisited the issue of jobs and the economy on nine separate occasions, ranging from its inaugural year in 1982 to its most recent forums in 2020. In this analysis, we have reviewed reports from those forums to understand how the nature of public discussion has evolved over almost four decades.

Four main themes have emerged from the review:

- **Enduring values.** Although the forums have been held under 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 that shape the participants' attitudes have remained remarkably constant. Their primary concern is the well-being of what they call "the middle class." For the participants, this is not an economic category but a vision of American society in which people who work hard and play by the rules can expect a decent life for themselves and their families and a better life for their children. They worry when this vision is threatened, and they seek policies to promote and protect it.
- **Changing concerns.** While these values remain constant, the participants' concerns have varied over the years, depending on the prevailing economic conditions when the

forums were held. As a general rule, in the most difficult economic times, the participants are most concerned about society as a whole. When the forums are held in times when the economy is stronger and the opportunity for jobs seems better, the participants' concerns stretch more to those who are not sharing in the economic well-being that others are enjoying. In those times, they worry especially about people who work in threatened industries, those who do not have a college education, and women and minorities.

- **Underlying causes.** The forum participants also have a surprisingly consistent framework for analyzing the causes of economic problems. Coherent with their overall orientation, they tend to attribute economic problems to problems in values and character. On the one hand, they often blame corporations, financial institutions, and their managers for a focus on short-term profits rather than the long-term health of their companies and the well-being of their workers. Ultimately, the participants see the problem as short-sighted greed. Over the years, some participants have also blamed their fellow citizens for financial irresponsibility and an unwillingness to work hard. Other participants push back and argue that the problem is not a broken work ethic, but a broken reward system.

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- **Policies.** Over the decades, the forum participants have deliberated on a wide variety of policies to improve employment opportunities, ranging from protectionist trade policies and corporate bailouts to tax increases and tax cuts. The most favored policies are invariably those that deal with some improvement in education. For the participants, education is the best way to help people help themselves; virtually every proposal for improving education at any level—from Head Start to vocational training, to college education and lifelong learning—achieves strong support. In looking at more debatable policies, the

participants invariably ask two questions: Does the proposed policy target individuals rather than corporations and managers, and Is it likely to be effective? As we have seen in other areas, one of the most controversial topics in the forums is the effectiveness of government in carrying out these policies.

These themes also suggest a different view of how citizens approach these issues. Although the public is sometimes criticized by elites for being inconsistent and polarized, over the years, the forum participants have been surprisingly consistent in the way they think about issues and have displayed considerable common ground at the level of values.

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1981, a group of 14 organizations—including libraries and colleges, policy associations and foundations—met at the Wingspread Conference Center in Wind Point, Wisconsin, seeking to fill what they saw as a missing piece in American political life. What was needed, they concluded, was not a new organization but a new way to engage Americans in fruitful discussions about issues that affect us all. This was the inspiration for the 1982 inaugural season of the National Issues Forums. Three issues were chosen for that first venture in public deliberation: jobs and the economy, Social Security and retirement, and inflation. Of those three issues, jobs and the economy has proved to be the most salient. In the years since, NIF has revisited the issue of jobs and the economy nine times, more than any other single issue. In this report, we review the documentation from those forums to see what lessons can be drawn from nearly four decades of deliberation by thousands of engaged citizens.

In American life today, having a job (or being married to someone who has one) is a virtual equivalent to citizenship and a key to both the well-being of individuals and to the health of society. When employment rates are high, many other indicators are positive. When people are losing their jobs, other dysfunctions tend to increase. Given the importance of employment, experts have produced countless studies, politicians have made many policy proposals, and pollsters have conducted numerous public opinion surveys. Each is useful in its own way.

This report summarizes a kind of public thinking that is often missing from the national stage; it focuses on what Americans think about issues concerning jobs and the economy when they weigh different options and deliberate about them with others. Over almost four decades, local convenors, working with nonpartisan materials prepared by NIF, have hosted these forums on topics related to jobs and the economy. The forums typically lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours. The special

feature of NIF forums is that they allow people to think through and discuss complicated issues and ideas with others.

The results of these deliberative forums are not scientific surveys of the American public. However, they offer indispensable insights into the ways that people think about issues when they have an opportunity to weigh benefits and trade-offs and—perhaps most important—to hear and learn from others. These forums contrast with polls, in which individuals answer questions without an opportunity to hear and deliberate about alternative solutions or to consider trade-offs. In addition to giving participants different perspectives and an opportunity to deliberate with others, the forums give the participants an opportunity to change their views after deliberating about the questions.

In what follows, we review four takeaways from these nine sets of forums, conducted over a 38-year period:

- **Enduring values.** Despite dramatic changes in the economic realities that face the country, the forum participants invariably return to a consistent set of values.
- **Changing concerns.** Although the values remain constant, the participants' concerns and worries change in response to changing economic conditions.
- **Underlying causes.** The participants—consistent with their values orientation—tend to see problems at the values level as major drivers of economic problems.
- **Policies.** Over the years, the forums have presented many different policy options for deliberation by the participants, and their values have shaped their responses to these options.

This analysis is drawn from the summary reports written about each of these forums. With the help of

## Employment-Related Forums

**1982:** *Jobs and Productivity*

**1984:** *Jobs and the Jobless in a Changing Workplace*

**1990:** *Regaining the Competitive Edge: Are We up to the Job?*

**1992:** *Prescription for Prosperity: Four Paths to Economic Renewal*

**1995:** *Pocketbook Pressure: Who Benefits from Economic Growth?*

**1998:** *Jobs: Preparing a Workforce for the 21st Century*

**2010:** *Economic Security: How Should We Take Charge of Our Future?*

**2016:** *Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?*

**2020:** *Back to Work: How Should We Rebuild Our Economy?*

these reports, which include quotes from the participants, one can get a sense of the tenor of the forums.

## ENDURING VALUES

The years since 1982 have been a roller-coaster ride of economic trends and their impact on jobs and the prosperity of Americans. Unemployment stood at 10.8 percent during the year of the very first forum and, after a bumpy ride of increases and decreases, had fallen to 3.5 percent in 2019 before going back up during the year of our last series of forums in 2020. Despite the variation in the participants' perception of economic realities and trends, their values remain highly consistent. What they want is a world where people who work hard and play by the rules can live a decent life and provide a

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better future for their children. Although it sounds trite, what they strive for is that traditional vision known as “the American Dream.” When they are faced with tough economic times, they try to explain them in terms of departures from this vision, and they favor policies that promote these values (as long as the policies benefit all fairly). The writers of the report on the 2010 forums conducted as the United States pulled out of the Great Recession, summarized this in a way that could equally characterize the whole series:

*The forums reflected the preoccupation of Americans with the moral quality of their times. One might say that this questioning persists without regard to the economic fortunes of the nation. In good times or bad, people ask whether the values that are important to them—things like responsibility, personal accountability, the work ethic, and fairness—are getting short shrift. When faced with serious economic insecurity, they become even more reliant on moral reasoning to make sense of the problems they—and their country—face and to guide them toward answers. In this sense, the NIF forums on economic security were perfectly representative of how ordinary Americans think.<sup>1</sup>*

The participants, however, don’t typically express their concerns in these precise terms. Their commitment to these values comes through most clearly when they talk about the fate of what they call “the middle class.” For the participants, the

middle class is clearly not an economic term, but a description of a lifestyle that was essential to the creation of this country, a lifestyle that many now see as being threatened. A Long Island woman in the 1995 forums explained how in her childhood a hardworking man, even without an education, could create a decent life for himself and his children:

*My father raised a family of five as a bus driver. But those kinds of jobs are fewer and fewer today, and they pay so [comparatively] little that people who have them can’t raise a family on what they earn.*

In the forums, the participants spoke frequently about the pressures on the middle class. One of the most common themes concerned people who were working hard in good jobs only to see either those jobs eliminated or themselves replaced by lower-paid workers. The 1984 forums focused on the problem of workers in well-paying factory jobs who were losing their jobs to deindustrialization. These workers, who had been the heart of the middle class, were being forced to take unemployment or jobs that paid less and had fewer benefits. A young man in Oswego, New York, expressed his resentment this way:

*Most companies treat workers like empty beer cans. They throw people away when they no longer have any use for them.*

An older woman in the 1992 forums talked about how she felt about the world her children would inherit:

*Many of us will be part of the first generation of Americans who will not leave a legacy to our children. Instead, we’ll leave them a debt.*

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<sup>1</sup> FDR Group, *Public Thinking about Economic Security: How Should We Take Charge of Our Future?* Results from the 2010-2011 National Issues Forums (Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 2011).

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The 1995 forums focused specifically on what they called “pocketbook pressures” and the question of who benefits most from economic growth. Even though economic conditions at that time were somewhat better than in previous years, with an encouraging downward trend in both unemployment and inflation, there was a great deal of talk about how the middle class was being “squeezed.” A woman from Dayton, Ohio, said:

*I have aging parents, and I have young children. I feel like there is a tremendous burden being placed on the middle-class people that we are poorly suited to handle.*

A Columbia, South Carolina, participant said that the loss of a middle class isn’t a problem for just individuals, but rather for the country as a whole:

*If this trend keeps up, it will be devastating politically. What makes a democracy stable is a huge middle class: people with a stake in things. If this gap keeps increasing [and the middle class continues to shrink], it will be a threat to our society.*

At another South Carolina forum, 11 years later, one participant expressed the same sentiment this way:

*I see our country in a dangerous period of political anger and frustration, largely caused by the lessening of the possibility for improvement and “getting ahead.”*

Another participant in that forum summarized the discussion this way:

*The American Dream of working hard and getting ahead seems to be less attainable.*

Interestingly, the forum participants were often even more concerned about the welfare of future generations than they were about their own situation. A woman in Dayton, Ohio, in 1995 spoke of her grandchildren this way:

*It seems like our grandchildren are going to have a much tougher time than we did, and I just hope they’ll be able to make ends meet.*

A woman in one of the 2016 online forums shared this concern:

*I have watched my children and grandchildren struggle in ways I had to—ensuring they have homes, medical insurance, et cetera—and seen them question whether the future will be better. I have watched the erosion of programs which were there in my younger days erode or disappear—programs which allowed us to have a secure financial footing to build on.*

Another woman from the 2016 online forums said:

*I can’t provide the same situation for my daughters who’ll be in college in a few short years. There’s a certain amount of shame in not being able to do the same as was done for you.*

Whether implicitly or explicitly, this desire for the American Dream underlies much of what we heard in the forums over the years.

## CHANGING CONCERNS

In good times and bad, the participants are always concerned about the well-being of themselves and their families and of the country as a whole. They always ask themselves whether the

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economy rewards hardworking Americans with a decent living. But the emphasis changes somewhat as the economic realities change. When unemployment is at high levels, the participants most often emphasize the impact on people like themselves and express anxiety about what their children and grandchildren will experience. At other times, when the economic situation is more positive, the forum participants are more likely to widen their concerns to those who have benefitted less from an improved economy. Here are several examples:

### **1982 vs. 1984**

In the very first forums on jobs and the economy in 1982, unemployment stood at 10.8 percent. Many of the country's "pillar industries," such as steel and automobiles, were pushed to the brink of collapse, and the GDP experienced the sharpest decline since 1946. The perception that the country was in serious danger was shared across all segments of the population, across economic sectors and political parties. The participants were deeply worried for themselves, their families, and the society at large. The goal of correcting economic malaise by improving productivity was, according to the report authors, "shared across the board, by young and old, by those who are well educated and those who are not, by people whose family income ranges from less than \$10,000 to more than \$50,000 a year, and by Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike."<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, in the 1984 forums, the economic situation had improved significantly, unemployment was down to seven percent, the lowest in four years, and the trend seemed to be headed for better numbers in the future. Although concern for the country as a whole always remained, the immediate focus of

concern shifted to those who had missed the train of economic growth. A lot of attention focused on the "Rust Bowl" and the "blue-collar blues." This was a particularly large concern for participants in Pocatello, Idaho, where several large employers had recently shut down factories. A foundry worker in Birmingham, Alabama, explained how he had lost his high-paying job and had no prospects of finding anything with a similar salary. The report writers summarized the forums by saying that "there was broad agreement that displaced workers should receive more assistance than they are currently getting."<sup>3</sup>

### **1992 vs. 1998**

In the 1992 forums, when unemployment was at 7.4 percent and people were just beginning to pull out of the 1990-1991 recession and oil price shock, people told painful stories about people like themselves falling on hard times. One man said:

*My wife worked for what used to be the premiere airline in the world. After working for that company for 26 years, all of a sudden, she [was fired on a] couple of hours' notice. If part-timers are available for \$6 an hour with no benefits, why should a company pay [permanent employees like my wife] \$15 or \$20 an hour.*

By 1998, the country was well into what would turn out to be the longest period of growth the country had experienced until that time, and unemployment had dropped to 4.4 percent. In this rosier economic world, the discussions tended to broaden to focus on the subgroups of Americans who had not

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<sup>2</sup> Public Agenda, *The Domestic Policy Association: A Report on Its First Year* (Dayton, OH: A Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1983).

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<sup>3</sup> Public Agenda, *The Domestic Policy Association's National Issues Forum: A Report on the 1984 Forums* (Dayton, OH: A Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1985).

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experienced the full benefits of economic recovery. There was a great deal of discussion concerning the plight of young people who did not go to college. Many of the participants agreed with a North Carolina woman who said that “not all students are made for college” and called for an expansion of practical vocational education to prepare more people for the well-paying jobs that don’t require a college education.

### 2010 vs. 2016

We heard much the same in the 2010 forums when the country was digging itself out of the depths of the 2008 financial collapse and unemployment stood at 9.3 percent. A woman in Kansas described her own situation in a way that echoed the views of many participants:

*We’ve been very, very frugal and thought that we’d planned very well for our retirement, and then everything went to heck, and we lost a lot of what we had saved, which is a major disappointment. It makes us feel very insecure now about our future. We never expected this to happen at all.*

She and the other participants thought that they had been following the script of “working hard and playing by the rules,” only to see their expectations crumble before their eyes.

In bad economic times, the participants often, as we have noted, fault corporations and managers for focusing on only short-term profits. However, those sentiments were particularly strong in the years after the 2008 recession when we heard sentiments that would also surface in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement of 2011. People were outraged that executives were collecting bonuses while taxpayer funds were being used to rescue their companies. As one participant said:

*You know, if you [financial institutions] want to take a lot of risk, then far be it from me to tell you that you shouldn’t. But I’ll tell you what . . . if you screw up you’re dead. You’re done, and you’re out of business. . . . Our government feels we have to bail them out. I think that creates a losing proposition.*

In the post-forum questionnaires, a healthy majority of the respondents said it was extremely important for government to regulate more strictly those financial institutions that make risky investments and to break up large Wall Street banks.

In contrast, in 2016 with unemployment at 4.7 percent, a major concern was a growing gap between the rich and the poor and, in particular, a concern that non-Whites were not reaping the benefits of economic growth. There was a lot of discussion about raising the minimum wage. A participant in Washington State worried that even raising the minimum wage and providing more aid to students wouldn’t help people at the margins: “There are still inequalities; there’s still people who are a little bit racist, wanting that common white male [compared to someone else].”

## UNDERLYING CAUSES

From the participants’ perspectives, there are three main reasons the economy fails to deliver good results either to the country as a whole or to specific groups who are left out.

**Moral failures at both the individual and the corporate level.** The forum participants almost invariably discussed failures in the economy as caused by underlying moral or character failings either by individuals or by larger institutions.

*For individuals.* One of the more controversial topics in the forums is the degree to which Americans themselves are to blame for the country’s

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economic woes. Sometimes this desire to find blame plays out in a tension between the generations. An Oklahoma woman in the 1982 forums talked about her experience with younger workers: “Even now, with so many people out of work, the young people don’t seem to care as much about working hard or breaking the rules sometimes.” But a Cincinnati man in his mid-30s expressed the opposite sentiment: “I am sick and tired of hearing that workers are the source of the problem.”

The report on the 1995 forums also noted a deep division between the participants on this theme: “Middle-class [older] White men who participated in these forums tended to say economic problems stemmed from an eroding work ethic.” However, the idea of the American work ethic is built on the idea that if people work hard, they will be rewarded. The report writers observed that from the perspective of younger workers, the problem was not an eroding work ethic, but an eroding reward system. In the same forums, “A younger group with more women and minorities contended that the rules have changed and people like themselves no longer have a realistic chance to get ahead and prosper.”<sup>4</sup>

In the 2010 forums, some participants connected the financial collapse to a change in personal values and habits. As one Kansas participant said, “We’ve diminished the value of doing work. And we’ve transferred that into consumption.” After the financial collapse, for example, forum participants pointed to the fact that many people were financially irresponsible, caught up in consumerism, and living beyond their means. Another Kansas man in the 2010 forum said, “I still see people, and my very own granddaughter is one of them, going way in debt,

and I don’t know why they’re still allowed to do that.” At different times and in different ways, in other words, forum participants attributed economic distress to the laziness, irresponsibility, and greed of their fellow citizens.

*For corporations.* Another common theme of the forums is to attribute economic problems to a moral failing in corporate America, specifically a tendency of corporations (and financial institutions) to go for short-term gains rather than focusing on the long-term. In the 1990 forums, a majority of the participants divided the blame for declining prosperity between a growing federal budget deficit and business for taking a short-term approach. In effect, the moral flaws of individuals (especially greed and laziness) are writ larger to managers and corporations, which are seen as sacrificing long-term gains that would benefit everyone for short-term profits that will benefit only managers themselves and their stockholders.

The concern about corporate greed was even more pronounced, as we noted above, in the 2010 forums, as the participants looked back to the reasons for the financial collapse. The report writers captured the sense among forum participants that financial institutions—and the executives leading them—had been busy stoking the debt culture and hiding the exorbitant risks they were taking because of something as simple as greed. Although the forum participants were willing to say that individuals were part of the problem, one Kansas participant was outraged by placing all of the blame on individual consumers:

*Some of the cynicism and anger that us little folks feel when we’re told that we have to be more responsible is if we look around and see the big players in the financial world not being responsible at all.*

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<sup>4</sup> John Doble Research Associates, *NIF Report on the Issues 1996: Pocketbook Pressures: Who Benefits from Economic Growth?* (Dayton: National Issues Forums Institute, 1996).

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A Maryland man in the 2016 forum said:

*The only person that a corporation is beholden to is the shareholders and the board. They don't owe anything to anyone else—and they pretty much act that way. . . . They don't care if they destroy the environment. They don't care if they destroy a town. They don't care if they rip people off of their pensions.*

The participants almost never extend the charge of greed to small business, and indeed, there is kind of a reverential respect for local “mom-and-pop” businesses. A 2011 forum participant in New Mexico, for example, spoke proudly of a successful local initiative to help small businesses, and there was broad support in the post-forum questionnaires for making federally backed loan money available for small business expansion. The report on the 2010-2011 forums observed, however, that “although some consumers might opt to pay more in support of the local mom-and-pop store, it was perfectly understandable that many would choose to save money by shopping at ‘big box’ stores.” As one participant said, “I would rather not support [the big box stores], but I have to go to Wal-Mart. I can't afford to go anywhere else.”<sup>5</sup> Forum participants returned to the subject of small businesses in 2016, with even more ambivalence fueled by a sense that these stores can rarely compete against the big box retailers, and it may be impossible to help very many of them.

#### **Lack of skills, education, and training.**

While the participants might differ about whether the work ethic is a factor in the country's declining economic competitiveness, there is much more agreement about problems with the skills, educa-

tion, and training of the American workforce and that these problems explain why the country is losing jobs to overseas companies. In the post-forum questionnaire from 1990, more than 7 out of 10 said that a major factor in reducing this country's economic competitiveness is that “millions of people lack the basic skills (such as reading and writing) to participate in the work force,” and 6 out of 10 attributed reduced competitiveness to the idea that “American workers don't have the technical knowledge in higher math and science that is necessary in today's work place.”

**Ineffective government.** Government also gets its share of blame from the participants. For example, in the 1992 forums, the participants supported, in theory, the idea of greater government spending on education and infrastructure; however, “coexisting with the view that more spending on education and infrastructure would be a good investment was the widespread conviction that government does not spend its money wisely, no matter how urgent the need.” In some years, the participants seemed to stress inefficiency; at other times, ineffectiveness or corruption. Concern about the federal budget deficit was a recurring theme through many of the forum discussions.

In 2010, the first jobs and economy forums after the 2008 financial collapse, the participants were deeply ambivalent about government. The participants complained about what a poor job the government had done in preventing the financial collapse, but, at the same time, they called for more government regulation to prevent similar collapses in the future. One of the forum moderators summarized this paradox: “They felt that there should be government regulations, but there was absolutely no trust that the government could implement

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<sup>5</sup> FDR Group, 2011.

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those regulations effectively.” Parenthetically, we noticed much the same ambivalence in our recent retrospective of forums on health care.<sup>6</sup>

## POLICIES

Over the decades, the forum participants deliberated about a wide range of policy recommendations.

**Education.** Given the value orientation of the forum participants, it is not surprising that education is the one policy recommendation that seems to command near universal support in every set of forums. The reason for this is obvious. Giving people better education is seen as the most direct way to help Americans help themselves. As a result, virtually any proposal to improve education gets positive support, including the following: Head Start, higher educational standards for K-12 schools, more training in basics, vocational programs, school-to-work programs, better access to GED programs, efforts to make college more affordable, life-long learning, and training for “soft skills.” In a post-forum questionnaire in 1990, for example, 88 percent of the respondents said that the country should “expand early education programs that help the poor, such as Head Start, even if that means a tax increase of \$50 per year per taxpayer.” In the 1995 forums, 75 percent said that “every child should get a fair start in life, even if we have to pay more taxes for schools and other public programs.” Eighty-four percent were willing to spend more money “to pay for tutoring and special classes for kids to reduce the dropout rate.” In the post-forum questionnaire in 2010, 90 percent said it was “important to increase

government funding to community colleges and vocational/technical schools.” (For 72 percent, it was very important.)

A second expression of this concern is a desire that we see throughout the forums to try, as much as possible, to give all children an equal start. The report writers concluded that for the participants, “The linchpin of the American Dream is opportunity, especially educational opportunity.” A Long Island woman put it this way: “Poor or rich, if you get a good education, you have an opportunity to succeed.” In the post-forum questionnaire, 73 percent said that “all qualified students should have access to a college education.”

**Conflict about other policy recommendations.** In forums across the years, participants deliberated about a wide range of noneducational policies, including corporate bailouts, protectionism, tax cuts to encourage investment, tax increases to generate revenue, providing more childcare, small business loans, various methods of reducing the national debt, and renegotiating pension funds. Not surprisingly, some got more support than others. There were healthy disagreements about many of these proposals. But what is most interesting is not which were more favorably received, but the nature of the deliberation itself. Generally speaking, the participants agreed that the best policies are those that directly help individuals (as opposed to helping corporations or managers). The next question in the minds of the participants is whether they think the policies will be effective in providing that help. Because the participants have this question in the back of their minds, their views can change depending on the context in which the issue is being discussed. In the very first forums on this issue, for example, the 1982 participants struggled with the question of whether to support protectionist trade policies versus encouraging free trade to create

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Johnson, Keith Melville, and John Immerwahr *Fixing the Health Care System: What People See—And What They’re Willing to Do—After Deliberating* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 2020).

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healthy competition. The report writers summarized this struggle as follows:

*If the emphasis is on imposing such measures in order to save American jobs from competition, many seem to be in favor of them. . . . But—and this reveals how much people need to think through the implications of their choices—if the emphasis is on protecting American companies from foreign competition, people feel differently. . . . The reason for this apparent contradiction is perhaps that when asked about measures to protect industries, people think of stockholders and executives as the beneficiaries, not ordinary workers.*

They were, presumably, reluctant to protect “greedy” stockholders and managers. At the same time, they were eager to protect the jobs of hard-working Americans.

In the 1995 forums, the participants had a similar debate about bailouts of major companies such as Lockheed and Chrysler. The participants went back and forth about the merits of such measures, but as the report authors noted:

*As the discussion focused on the plight of unemployed blue-collar workers, the consensus shifted. While some people still maintained that bailouts would be justified only if things got worse, by the time the forums concluded, there was substantial support for bailouts to keep the unemployment situation from getting worse.*

This dilemma permeates other policy recommendations on topics such as industrial policy, deregulation, tax cuts, and various government policies. For example, in the 2016 forums, the

participants were almost equally divided on the statement that “if Congress cut corporate taxes, American companies would stop moving jobs and facilities overseas.” But looking at the debate, it seems clear that the question is about the efficacy of such a policy, not its goals. Indeed, the Hidden Common Ground initiative<sup>7</sup> found the same thing in regard to health-care questions. Although there might be intense ideological disagreements about, say, the proper government role in health care, there is a high level of agreement about the goals of health-care policy.

When it comes to the question of government assistance programs, the participants also seem to be navigating a different internal conflict. The participants want to help people who are in need, but they are concerned about creating dependency. A South Carolina 2016 participant, talking about safety net programs, said:

*[It’s like] you have a baby bird that sits there with his mouth open and somebody comes and deposits something; every time you turn around there’s something deposited. Our system keeps letting them be the baby bird. It just keeps depositing and depositing. It builds up a mentality of entitlement.*

The report on the 2016 forums described the thinking of the participants in terms that would

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<sup>7</sup> The Hidden Common Ground initiative was a research partnership between *USA Today* and Public Agenda with collaboration from the Kettering Foundation, National Issues Forums Institute, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The initiative combined original reporting from *USA Today*, survey research from Public Agenda, and community forums from the National Issues Forums Institute. For more, see <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/elections/hiddencommonground/2020/10/20/hidden-common-ground-challenges-divided-america/5878341002/>.

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probably have applied equally to any other forums on the same subject:

*Forum participants believe that government and other institutions have a responsibility to help people through hard times, but they also think that those who get help have responsibilities to help themselves, too. In other words, getting “help” is not a one-way street, but part of a deal in which individuals have a responsibility to contribute to society, and society has a responsibility to support individuals.<sup>8</sup>*

In different years, the forum participants have had healthy and productive deliberative discussions about a variety of proposals to bolster jobs.

**Accept sacrifices, but only if the sacrifices are shared fairly.** In several of the forums, the participants discussed their support for belt tightening and personal sacrifice to achieve a greater good. In the 1992 forums, the participants deliberated on the need to accept sacrifices in the present to reduce the federal debt and deficit. The participants were not opposed to this in principle, but they insisted that any sacrifices be made fairly. Speaking for most of the participants, a woman said, the “need to take, say, an equitable cut of five percent makes me very suspicious that, in fact, the wealth is going to remain in the hands of a select few.” The participants were also concerned that any sacrifices that might be called for would actually go toward solving the problem. The same points were brought up in the 2010 forums, which raised the possibility of cutbacks in Social Security to protect the viability of the system

for the future. The report writers noted that some of the participants expressed a willingness to accept cutbacks, but others raised concerns, not so much about accepting sacrifice in principle but the unfairness of asking seniors to be penalized because of government mismanagement. As the report noted, “It violated many people’s sense of fairness to ask ordinary folks to sacrifice when they saw that federal spending was wasteful and irresponsible.”

## HYPOTHESES FROM THE 2020 FORUMS

As we mentioned earlier, the most recent NIF forums on jobs and the economy (2020) used an issue advisory entitled *Back to Work: How Should We Rebuild Our Economy?* This was initially planned as part of the Hidden Common Ground initiative for 2020. Before the forums could start in earnest among the network of the National Issues Forums, the pandemic hit. The issue advisory was modified to adjust to the new realities, and an attempt was made to continue these forums using the Common Ground for Action (CGA) platform for online forums and forums held via Zoom. With so much attention on the pandemic and the 2020 presidential election, only a small number of these forums were actually conducted. As such, we can make only preliminary hypotheses based on a few CGA forums and a small number of Zoom forums, both of which predominantly involved university students.

Several themes suggestive of further study emerged from analysis of the CGA and Zoom forums using the *Back to Work* issue advisory:

**Anxiety about future employment.** The college students who participated in the forums had entered college with the expectation that they might be graduating in a booming economy with one of the most favorable job markets in recent history. These expectations were shattered by the

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<sup>8</sup> Kettering Foundation, *What We Learned: Making Ends Meet: A Public Voice 2016* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 2017).

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pandemic. Students were worried not only about getting jobs in the near term, but also about major and unpredictable changes in the kinds of jobs that would be available in the future. Here are some typical comments from the online forums with college students:

*I believe COVID-19 has forever changed the job market. I think that it is going to be very difficult to navigate the job market upon graduation.*

*I think that finding jobs when I graduate will be a lot harder than it should be. A lot of places aren't hiring as many people anymore because of what's going on. I'm concerned I won't be able to find anything in my interest or anything at all.*

This was consistent with what Public Agenda found in a recent survey on the economy.<sup>9</sup> In February 2020, just before the pandemic hit, Public Agenda found that only 14 percent rated national economic conditions as poor. Six months later in August of 2020, that percentage had more than doubled with almost 4 in 10 (38 percent) believing that the national economic situation was poor.

**Positive views of (legal) immigration.** One of the options presented in the forums for restoring the country's economic health was restricting immigration. This option was poorly received by the participants. Interestingly, many participants 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." In the post-forum questionnaires, 64 percent oppose reducing immigration to make more jobs available to US-born workers. Only 14 percent list this as a priority or a top priority. There is also support for free trade as opposed to tariffs to protect American jobs.

**Preference for policy choices that would directly benefit individuals.** The issue advisory presented options for helping to rebuild the economy. Consistent with what we have seen in past forums, participants gravitated to those that they perceived as most likely to help individuals rather than corporations, stockholders, or managers. The moderator of one of the Zoom forums summarized what he had heard in these words: "Target pandemic aid to people and families in need, NOT large corporations." As one college student in an online forum put it:

*I think that workers have been hit harder than employers, so I think they should be the priority when giving work and support.*

The post-forum questionnaire presented a list of 12 things that might be done to restart the economy and asked for participants' top three priorities. All of the ones that were highly rated dealt with providing something directly to workers, including more childcare for workers, better internet in underserved areas, unemployment insurance, and support for minority businesses. Options that were directed more to systems than to individuals got less support. These included encouraging employers to make it easier to work from home, infrastructure projects, buying locally, tax breaks for employers, and more STEM in schools. At the bottom of the list of priorities were restrictions on immigration and tariffs, which received outright opposition.

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<sup>9</sup> Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos, *Economic Opportunity and Inequality: A Public Agenda/USA Today/Ipsos Hidden Common Ground Survey* (New York: Public Agenda, 2020).

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## IMPLICATIONS

The forum participants do not, by any means, represent a random sample of the American public. The forums do, however, offer an insight into the way people think when they have a chance to consider different choices and hear how others think about them as well. Based on the deliberative forums, there are certainly some hypotheses about the general public that deserve further study.

- **Shared values.** It is commonplace today to say that the public is more polarized than ever. The forums bear this out in some ways but not in others. The participants differ, and their differences sometimes fall along familiar ideological arguments, especially about the role of government. But participants seldom disagree about the underlying values that they bring to the deliberative forums. At the values level, there is more agreement than disagreement among the forum participants and, perhaps, among the public in general.
- **A principle for evaluating policies.** While the public is often criticized for being inconsistent and even irrational, our reading of the forums suggests a deeper logic at work when the participants consider issues of jobs and the economy. Their value system provides a touchstone for evaluating policy proposals. They ask themselves whether the proposed policy will actually help individuals help themselves. The policy gains support among the

participants to the degree that it has this goal and has some chance of providing benefits to individuals.

- **A dangerous disconnect between participants and elites.** While the participants' emphasis on the American Dream is not completely inconsistent with the goals espoused by elites, neither is it perfectly aligned. The deliberative forums suggest some differences between the views of the participants and much of what we hear from leaders, experts, and the media. To the degree that the forums give us an indication of strains of thought in the public generally, this disconnect suggests that leaders and the public may be talking past each other. Leaders tend to focus on macroeconomic interventions and measure success by indicators such as unemployment, inflation, and GDP. By contrast, forum participants evaluate the economy based on what they see in their communities, their places of employment, and their families. For those in the forums, their assessment of whether the economy allows hardworking people to live a decent life is a far more compelling measure than trade balances or GDP. And perhaps surprisingly, they often take a long-term view, worrying about what the world will be like for their children and grandchildren, fearing that they will leave their children a harsher world than they themselves had experienced.

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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.