
*Public Deliberation
and Divisiveness
An Update on the Research*



*“With public sentiment, nothing can fail;
without it nothing can succeed.”*

—Abraham Lincoln

The Kettering Foundation has done research on public deliberation for some time because it is key to Kettering's central research question: What does it take to make democracy work as it should? In our research, we look at more than representative government and contested elections. We see democracy in foundational terms. It is about citizens' ability to work together, despite their differences, to have some measure of control over their shared future. This understanding of democracy is based on collective decision-making to guide complementary actions. Making decisions collectively requires the exercise of public judgment, which is created through deliberation. To read more about Kettering's understanding of deliberation, see *Public Deliberation in Democracy*, which can be downloaded for free on our website.

The foundation's research is done in two ways: by reviewing the scholarly literature and by drawing on accounts of people's experiments in trying to put democratic concepts into practice. For the latter type of research, Kettering's principal resource for learning about deliberation comes from what is happening in the National Issues Forums (NIF) network of deliberative forums. This report draws on both kinds of research.

As references to deliberation have become more common in both popular and scholarly literature, we have found it useful to distinguish the kind of deliberation we study and explain why it is critical for a strong democracy. We understand deliberation as a means for people to move from hasty reactions to a more shared and reflective judgment. It is useful when there is a discrepancy between what is happening to people and what they think should be happening—and yet there is no agreement on what should be happening. There is no such thing as an expert on what *should be*; determining this is a matter of judgment. To make sound judgments, people have to weigh possible actions against what they consider valuable. This careful weighing is at the core of deliberation. Because deliberation deals with ethical or moral questions, it has been called moral reasoning.

Countering Opinion Polarization

Some scholars have argued that discussions about controversial issues among like-minded groups can lead to more extreme positions, exacerbating polarization and potentially challenging the idea of deliberation contributing to sound judgment. A 2017 Finnish study, “Do Discussions in Like-Minded Groups Necessarily Lead to More Extreme Opinions?” set out to test this claim.¹ In framing their study, the researchers write:

Many Western democracies are currently affected by a negative, and even aggressive, discussion climate. According to Sunstein (2002, 2009), opinion polarization, in the sense of opinions becoming more extreme through discussion than they initially were, is a consequence of the fact that most people tend to discuss politics among like-minded individuals, nowadays often in online contexts. A fundamental problem with political discussion in groups of like-minded individuals is that the ideas and opinions that thrive within this context escape reasonable criticism based on other points of view. Hence, such groups may end up with extreme, or at least very narrow, views. On the other hand, many democratic theorists (Bohman, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) put the meeting and exchange of ideas and arguments at the heart of a working democracy and evidence from deliberative mini-publics indicates that opinions depolarize, or at least do not polarize in the first place, as a result of taking part in deliberative group discussions (e.g. Farrar et al., 2009; Himmelroos and Christensen, 2014; Luskin et al., 2002).²

¹ Kim Strandberg, Staffan Himmelroos, and Kimmo Grönlund, “Do Discussions in Like-Minded Groups Necessarily Lead to More Extreme Opinions? Deliberative Democracy and Group Polarization,” *International Political Science Review* (June 26, 2017), <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0192512117692136> (accessed September 21, 2018): 1-17.

² Kim Strandberg, Staffan Himmelroos, and Kimmo Grönlund, 2.

The researchers designed an experiment that would test the effects of deliberation on people talking with others who hold similar views about an issue. They also tested if it made a difference whether people met face-to-face or online:

Without their knowledge, every participant was placed in a like-minded group based on their initial opinions on the matter. Furthermore, we enforced two treatments. Randomly, half of the participants were allocated into groups with no discussion rules, whereas the other half deliberated in groups with rules and a trained facilitator. We also organized the discussions in two modes. Two-thirds of the participants met physically and discussed face-to-face, whereas one-third discussed in virtual chat rooms where they discussed via webcams, microphones and text-chat.³

The researchers found that “group polarization took place in discussions without deliberation (H_{1a}), whereas polarization tendencies were alleviated in the deliberative treatment where rules and facilitation were in place (H_{1b}).”⁴ This held true both for groups who met face-to-face and for those who discussed online. This finding, while limited, is encouraging to those of us studying deliberation. It also resonates with NIF’s experiences.

Divisiveness and Deliberation

Kettering has also looked into the way deliberation deals with the wave of divisiveness that is sweeping the country and making it difficult for people to speak candidly or to be heard by one another. Deliberation is not a cure-all, but it does have something to offer in this environment.

First of all, deliberation takes people into the practical side of politics. It is about making sound decisions that affect people’s

³ Kim Strandberg, Staffan Himmelroos, and Kimmo Grönlund, 11.

⁴ Kim Strandberg, Staffan Himmelroos, and Kimmo Grönlund, 11.

daily lives. As a friend in Egypt reminded us, that includes decisions about how people should deal with a drainage system that leaks sewage into their homes and threatens their physical well-being. Centuries-old divisions have formed around issues of religious orthodoxy. However, sewage is not a theological issue. It is very practical.

Divisiveness, despite its virulence, is quite contextual. It flowers in some environments but not others. A foundation researcher, who became a banker, reported that the bank's employees were very divided outside of work into red and blue camps. Yet inside the bank, they worked together cooperatively. His experience resonated with what Kettering has heard about children from warring neighborhoods who, when transported to play sports outside the area where they lived, played normally. But as soon as the bus they had been riding got near their homes, the children resumed fighting. That illustrates the influence that context or environment has. Deliberation creates a practical environment.

Second, and perhaps most influential, deliberation deals with what is most valuable to people, with the things they all hold dear, the ends and means of life itself. This includes being secure in the face of danger, being free to act, being treated equitably, and, most of all, having enough control or influence over the future to obtain the things they value. Deliberation recognizes that such things are important to everyone, but because people live in different circumstances, they put different priorities on what they hold dear.

There are inherent tensions among the various things that we all deeply value, and this realization changes the tone of the decision-making from one of people against people to one of people against a common problem. People don't necessarily agree or come to like one another, yet they can see that others, as mistaken as they may seem, are not evil. That was evident in a story about a forum in Chattanooga on AIDS. Bob Kingston was the moderator. One of the participants attempted to disrupt the meeting with his insistence that AIDS was divine retribution and a moral issue. Bob asked

if anyone else also saw the issue as a moral one, albeit from a different perspective. All hands went up. The deliberation moved ahead.

Deliberation recognizes tensions over what should be considered most valuable, not as justifications for combat, but rather as inevitable differences. Deliberation is structured to help people work through these differences.

Dealing with Misconceptions

Other important insights about deliberation have also come from NIF forums. In a recent report, National Issues Forums Institute vice president Jean Johnson shared some findings drawn from her observations of forums and from conversations and exchanges held with forum moderators from across the country.⁵ The following chart illustrates what she found to be the key points to communicate in identifying what characterizes an NIF deliberation. The second chart identifies the common misconceptions that lead people down a path to a different understanding of deliberation and its role in democratic politics.

⁵ The National Issues Forums Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves to promote public deliberation about difficult public issues. Its activities include publishing issue guides and other materials used by local forum groups and sharing information about current activities in the network. For more information about NIF and the institute, see www.nifi.org.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF NIF FORUMS

NIF's mission is to get citizens talking seriously about tough issues that divide the country and their communities.

NIF is a network of diverse local organizations—schools, libraries, colleges, universities, community groups, centers for older adults, etc.

Citizens themselves convene and moderate forums.

Forums are successful only if people listen and think.

NIF forums spur a different kind of conversation—one badly needed in our politics.

Forums:

- recognize 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.
- present a range of options for citizens to weigh, 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.
- ask participants to 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.
- allow participants to develop a better grasp of an issue and a better sense of how others in their community view it.
- allow participants to hear ideas they hadn't thought about before.

NIF forums can prompt citizens to take action together to solve problems, although the forum itself is generally only a first step.

NIF provides space for those who disagree to talk and listen to each other. In fact, NIF is one of the few networks bringing people together to talk and take action across our divides.

There are many ways to participate. Forum participants come from every walk of life. All sorts of groups and institutions convene forums. People can gather in person or they can deliberate online in Common Ground for Action forums.

NIF is a network with a respected track record of gathering citizens to talk about controversial issues. Over the years, forums have covered all kinds of issues.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT NIF FORUMS

The main purpose of forums is to give people a chance to make their desires known to decision-makers.

NIF is a large national organization managing local affiliates, providing funding or sending out moderators.

Someone else hosts, and you're invited to attend.

Forums are successful if everyone "speaks out" and "tells his or her story." That's the main point.

Forums are successful only when people agree on "next steps." Sidestepping tensions in an issue is worth it if it helps people organize for action.

NIF's main function is to give people a chance to speak out so they can send a message to those in power.

You need to be near a current NIF convenor to participate.

NIF moderating requires special training or certification.

Other common misconceptions include:
The NIF network (or the Kettering Foundation) gives out grants.
NIF is a good government, left-of-center group.
NIF is a "storm the barricades" progressive group.
NIF is a closet conservative group that believes all problems can be solved locally by citizens without any help from government.

NIF forums do **NOT**:

- “translate” what experts know in ways non-experts can understand.
- give people the facts and figures “they need” to make a good decision.
- raise people’s consciousness about important causes and call it a day.
- rally “the good guys” to fight for “righteous causes.”
- circumvent disagreements to promote civility.
- see existing public opinion as a useful recipe for action.
- miraculously allow people to find common ground and reach consensus—forums aren’t a magic bullet.
- assume people can make up their minds about an issue after attending a two-hour forum.

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