
Public Deliberation in Democracy



“I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.”

—Thomas Jefferson

If you are familiar with the Kettering Foundation or the National Issues Forums, you have heard references to “public deliberation,” “deliberative decision making,” and “deliberative politics.” Since these concepts have different meanings for different people, the foundation tries to explain what we mean when we use them. There are more detailed accounts of public deliberation and deliberative politics in numerous foundation publications; this only provides a brief overview.

The focus of Kettering’s research is on democracy and, more specifically, the role of citizens. The full significance of deliberation only becomes apparent in the larger context of democratic self-rule. Taken out of that context, deliberation is often misunderstood, as in these common misconceptions:

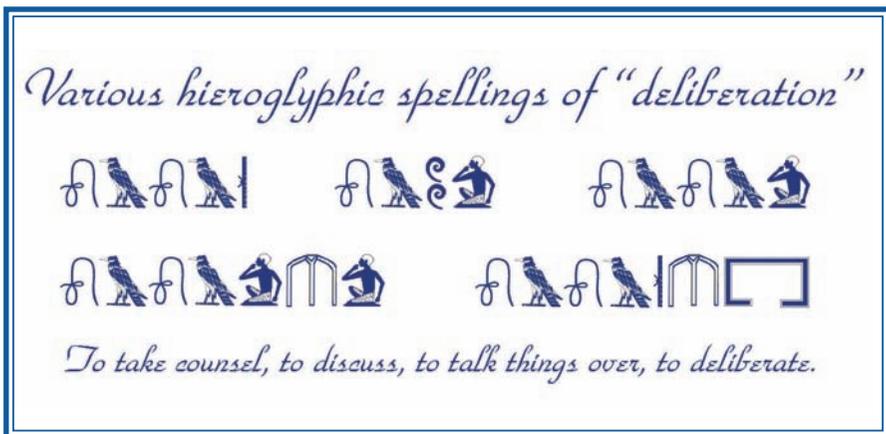
- Deliberation is one of many techniques or methods for facilitating group discussions.
- The value of deliberation is exclusively in the process itself. Critics fault it for being a methodology with an uncertain purpose and argue that it is of little use in dealing with real-world problems like poverty and injustice.
- Deliberation is a distinctly American or western concept. Another version of this perception is that deliberation is a uniquely “Kettering methodology.”
- Deliberation requires special skills and extensive instruction; or, conversely, deliberation will occur if people are just willing to discuss problems in a civil manner.
- Deliberation is a means of rational decision making; or, deliberation is a philosophical discussion of the values at stake in the major issues facing humankind.
- Deliberation is a means of decision making but not of action—the two are quite different; or, deliberation is a means of selecting specific solutions for specific problems.
- To be significant politically, deliberation must result in discernable changes in government policy.

Despite these many misinterpretations of what Kettering is saying, the foundation has found that *public deliberation* is crucial to combating the alienation of citizens who feel shut out of the political system, citizens who want a stronger hand in shaping their future but don't see how they can make a difference.

To make a significant difference, citizens need to have the power to act collectively or together as a citizenry. They may act by electing representatives or through their own civic initiatives. In either case, these actions ought to be wise or sound.

How, then, do people act together wisely? As we all know, citizens can make poor decisions for a host of reasons. People can rush to conclusions without thinking through the consequences of what they are doing. Or they discover that what they have decided really isn't consistent with what they consider valuable. So part of what Kettering studies is how citizens make sound decisions; that is, decisions that lead to actions consistent with what people consider important to their collective well-being.

One time-honored way to make sound decisions is by deliberating. Words for collective deliberation have been found in many ancient languages. So it is hardly a Kettering, U.S., or even western practice.



Why Deliberate? Public deliberation is useful when there is a discrepancy between what is happening to people and what they think should be happening—yet there is no agreement on what should be happening. There is no such thing as an expert on what should be; that 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. Recalling Thomas Jefferson, public deliberation informs our discretion.

Unlike purely rational decision making based on objective data, the deliberation we are talking about takes into consideration people's subjective experiences and the intangibles they hold dear. Facts are important, but determining what they mean is also important. Because deliberation deals with what should be, it has been called moral reasoning. Still, deliberation is not simply a philosophic inquiry or a therapeutic discussion.

There are many occasions when we deliberate—in juries, legislative bodies, and neighborhood associations. The type of deliberation that is appropriate varies accordingly. The foundation concentrates on deliberation among citizens, or *public* deliberation, which is used to stimulate joint or collective action on common problems. While this sort of deliberation certainly benefits from practice, it doesn't require expert skills. If this were the case, it is unlikely that deliberation would be so ancient and commonplace.

Deliberating is a natural act. When people make sound personal decisions, they often deliberate with family and friends; for instance, when choosing a job, they weigh different options against all that is important to them. Modern political discourse seldom models deliberation, yet participants in deliberative forums usually need only a reminder of the purpose of deliberation to get into the conversation. When people deliberate, they tell stories; their conversations move back and forth rather than going in a linear fashion toward a conclusion.

Just because something is natural, however, doesn't mean it is necessarily easy. Collective decision making is difficult because people have a number of concerns, and having to decide which of their concerns is most relevant pulls citizens in different directions. An action that might make us more secure from danger, for instance, might also restrict our freedom. Deliberation helps us deal with these tensions; citizens come to see that they value many of the same things, even though they differ on what is most valuable in a given situation. This recognition minimizes the polarization that blocks cooperative action. Public deliberation seldom produces total agreement; still, it can create enough common ground for collaborative action.



Deliberative Politics: Although the core of public deliberation is weighing possible actions against what is deeply valuable to all of us (at least to some degree), a great deal has to happen before and after the weighing. Deliberative decision making involves everything from determining what is really at issue to identifying options for action and the resources required. Along the way, citizens should be constantly learning from their experiences. At the foundation, we have called all that is associated with public deliberation “deliberative politics,” meaning politics in the broadest sense.

The way people go about making decisions that affect them collectively influences the character of their politics. For instance, if decisions are made by a small, elite group and the decisions benefit a select few, the political system will have the same qualities of elite favoritism. Public deliberation brings different characteristics to politics. For example, it requires considering the various concerns that people bring to a decision, so it promotes inclusiveness, not necessarily for the sake of being inclusive, but because citizens aren’t likely to join in collective efforts if their concerns aren’t recognized. Similarly, the options for action that follow from people’s concerns have to be dealt with fairly in order for the results of the deliberations to be legitimate. So deliberation fosters fairness. People often deliberate in order to give politics more of the qualities they would like for it to have, not simply to make decisions about which actions they should take or which policies they should support.

Deliberation, in other words, has an intrinsic worth; it is satisfying in and of itself and not merely a technique. But at the same time, deliberation has to promote some kind of action; that is the reason for deliberating in the first place. The foundation has learned that public deliberation is an integral part of democracy both because it is a practical necessity and because it embodies the values essential to self-rule.



Keys to Public Deliberation: As mentioned, deliberation begins with identifying the nature of the problems that concern people. Who gets to name a problem—and the terms they use to describe it—is crucial. If people’s concerns aren’t reflected in the names, if the things they hold dear aren’t considered, then they aren’t inclined to become engaged. Unfortunately, this doesn’t necessarily occur when problems are described in expert, ideological, or partisan terms. These terms may be accurate, yet not reflect people’s basic, shared concerns. Their concerns are basic in the sense that they are rooted in the things humans need to survive collectively, such as being secure from danger. People have collective needs just as they have individual needs for food and shelter. And since citizens have many concerns, problems usually have more than one name.

As a problem is being identified, various options for dealing with it are usually put forward. These options are responses to the concerns people

have. If we are worried about children without adequate adult attention, we might favor mentoring programs or parenting classes. Since people have multiple concerns, they typically come up with more than one option for solving a problem. Deliberation involves laying out three or four of the major options and the advantages and disadvantages of each. This creates a framework for problem solving and provides the focus needed to make a decision.

Framing an issue also involves identifying the tugs and pulls of various concerns. Tensions arise when people aren't of one mind about what is most important in a given situation. Those who hope to make decision making more deliberative and less combative take note. Deliberation won't occur unless the tensions inherent in a course of action are recognized. If they aren't identified, they won't go away. Unaddressed, they generate conflicts when people try to act together.

In some cases, tensions may be intentionally avoided out of fear of controversy, or they may be unintentionally obscured by focusing too broadly on maladies like crime, corruption, and cancer, rather than what is at issue politically. But while crime is a serious matter, there isn't a positive side to it that deserves a fair hearing. That is, there isn't anything good about crime that would cause people (except perhaps criminals) to have different opinions. So there is nothing at issue to be adjudicated in deliberations. If people are asked to make a decision when the decision that needs to be made is obvious—stop crime, end corruption, cure cancer—they feel manipulated.

Tensions over what is basic to human survival shouldn't be confused with disputes over technical solutions to an obvious problem like the amount of support needed to sustain a bridge. The options or approaches to a problem that address questions of what should be aren't the same as technical solutions. However, debates over what appear to be only technical matters can sometimes mask normative disagreements over what is most valuable.

When deliberating together, the objective isn't to select one option and reject the others, as would be done in an election, but rather to chart a course that maximizes what is most valuable while minimizing the negative consequences. The result is a strategy for approaching a problem, not a specific solution.

Stages in Decision Making: Although public decisions on major issues like reforming health care or Social Security systems take time, the citizenry moves through stages that mark where the public is in its journey. Deliberation helps keep the decision making moving along so the public doesn't get stuck.

When confronted with a difficult decision, people often begin by denying that there is a problem or blaming their troubles on somebody else. They get stuck in denial or blaming others. Citizens can also be immobilized by the intense emotions that arise when what they need to do in order to solve a problem threatens the things they hold dear. Deliberation helps people own their problems and work through emotional impasses, not to make the feelings go away, but to reach the point at which citizens are in control of their emotions. Only then are they in a position to make sound decisions. "Working through" is a good phrase because that is exactly what happens when people move from denial or blaming others to facing up to the hard choices inherent in every public decision.

Deliberation as Action: Working through may suggest that deliberation is political therapy. It isn't. Deliberation isn't complete unless questions about who needs to act and how are taken into account. In fact, the most important decision that citizens make in deliberations is what they should do. Action is implicit in public deliberation and not a separate activity. Who the political actors should be, what resources they have, what would cause them to commit their resources, and how they would organize their actions are all on the table when people weigh options and work through tensions. The consideration of action is part of deliberative politics, even if the deliberations are only done for purely educational purposes.

The Results: When public deliberations have been held for the purpose of stimulating the collective action of citizens, there have been tangible benefits to communities. In Sumter, South Carolina, for instance, teenagers held forums on what to do about drug abuse. The meetings prompted participants to commit themselves to prevention projects, which eventually helped some youngsters find jobs and make their way out of the drug culture. This is one of many examples, and the reasons for such results aren't difficult to see.

When people deliberate, they develop a better sense of the issues they face, as well as a better understanding of others who face the issues with them. Deliberation often results in redefining the problem at hand, which



opens the door to fresh insights and constructive change. Participants in repeated deliberations say they get a better handle on issues; that is, they are able to put problems in a larger context and see connections between them.

People also tend to approach policy questions more realistically. Self-interests broaden, and shared concerns become easier to identify. Citizens talk more about what they ought to do and come to see their personal well-being in relationship to the well-being of others. And listening to others helps them develop new insights.

Governments, as well as communities, also benefit from public deliberation. Given the slow pace of fundamental policy change, it is unrealistic to expect deliberation to have an immediate effect; nonetheless, scholars have been able to document what they believe is the gradual influence of deliberation on major policy shifts. The more immediate effects come from giving officeholders a better understanding of the unique “public voice” that emerges from deliberation. Officials who listen to people deliberate can get information they can’t get from polls, focus groups, or meetings with constituents. Hearing citizens name issues in their terms reveals the deeper concerns people share. And seeing citizens work through conflicts shows what is most valuable to the public, as well as what is really at issue. Public deliberation also helps officeholders locate the boundaries of the politically permissible—what people will and won’t do to solve a problem. Those boundaries are useful to know, especially when officeholders think they have to cross them.

Both governments and communities benefit when public deliberation moves citizens beyond first impressions to more shared and reflective opinions, or what some call “public judgment.” It only emerges after citizens have faced up to the costs and the long-term effects of a popular course of action. Public judgment isn’t the same as popular opinion, which is often contradictory and shortsighted. Even though deliberating fosters more shared and reflective judgment, it doesn’t eliminate differences of opinion. People have remained at odds, but they have gained a better understanding of why others hold contrary views. And that understanding is no small gain.



Experience in public deliberation can also affect the way young people understand our political system and their role in it. Two Wake Forest University professors, Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, used forums along with classroom instruction to find out what the effects might be on students’ understanding of democracy and of themselves as political actors. Over the four years of their college career, students in the experiment were introduced to deliberation in the campus community and in the town where the university is located. Then Harriger and McMillan compared what these students had learned with what their classmates, who had little or no exposure to public deliberation, had learned. The impact of the experiment was profound. Unlike the students not in the experiment, who thought of citizenship primarily as exercising individual rights, those in the Harriger/McMillan classes were more inclined to think of citizenship in terms

of responsibilities. And they had learned how they could carry out those responsibilities through collective decision making and action.

Having access to the results of thousands of National Issues Forums over the last quarter century, as well as more informal deliberations, the foundation has come away with one central finding: the greatest benefit of public deliberation may be in its power to stimulate civic learning, not just in students, but in communities and the citizenry itself. This is the kind of learning that prompts innovation. The ancient Greeks referred to deliberation as the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act. A democracy depends on this collective learning because it depends on imaginative responses to ever-changing challenges.

For more complete descriptions of public deliberation, see *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* and *We Have to Choose: Democracy and Deliberative Politics*.



The image displays three covers of issue books from the National Issues Forum series. The top-left cover, titled "The Energy Problem: Choices for an Uncertain Future," features a hand holding a globe and a collage of energy-related images like a wind turbine and a car. The top-right cover, "Making Ends Meet: Is There a Way to Help Working Americans?," shows a cartoon woman overwhelmed by a flood of papers and bills. The bottom-center cover, "The Soaring Cost of Health Care," depicts a medical monitor with a red line graph showing a sharp increase, surrounded by medical supplies like a syringe and pills.

Kettering produces “self-starters” for public deliberation in issue books for citizens that cover many issues of concern nationwide. These are the guides for deliberation in the National Issues Forums series. Other organizations, such as the American Bar Association and Southern Growth Policies Board, produce their own issue books, as do many public policy institutes and community organizations.

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