

Constructing a Modern Democracy, One Forum at a Time

BY MICHAEL HAMILL REMALEY
AND PATTY DINEEN

The way Americans engage in politics and communicate with their leaders continues to evolve. It may never have been the case that simply casting a vote for a particular candidate was sufficient for a citizen to fully voice his or her opinions on the issues of the day. But with the breadth and complexity of issues faced by Americans these days, it stands to reason that we need more sophisticated ways of exploring and articulating public concerns. National Issues Forums, which is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, strives to create meaningful opportunities for citizens to come together to exercise the modern practice of democracy.

National Issues Forums, a nonpartisan, nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums, is using the occasion of the anniversary to call attention to the hundreds of organizations and individuals in communities across the nation producing substantive citizen deliberation on tough issues. The nation's largest network of policy forums, NIF helps Americans find common ground and helps our nation's leaders understand public concerns on issues ranging from immigration and America's global role to local land use and community planning.

NIF forums are dramatically different from the so-called town meetings that became common in the 1960s when governments first began to heed in earnest the call for greater citizen involvement. Public airings of that kind are often either a "stacked deck" meeting dominated by "experts" or a disorganized gripe session that turns into verbal brawling and a free-for-all. But in NIF deliberative forums across America, citizens from all walks of life and political perspectives come together to seek shared understandings of critical issues and search for common ground for action.

"These are not the quaint 'town hall gatherings' of nostalgia," said William Winter, the National Issues Forums Institute chairman and a former governor of Mississippi. "NIF is at the center of a modern movement to ensure that systematic, productive deliberation by real people guides our nation's public discourse. It is a growing movement of committed individuals and organizations who have witnessed important outcomes resulting from forums and believe that increasing the frequency and prominence of deliberation is a crucial antidote to the ills of today's vicious partisan politics."

National Issues Forums is a nonpartisan, informally organized nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums for consideration of public policy issues. National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) is the organization dedicated to supporting the NIF network and the independent organizations holding forums around the country.

NIFI was born in 1981 at a series of conferences held at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The first conference included twenty-five leaders from national and local organizations interested in public policy education. This group determined that the organization should exist as a grassroots nonadvocacy organization that would address a low level of civic literacy through a common agenda of issues of general concern, presented in local programs of national, regional, and local organizations. NIF now includes more than forty Public Policy Institute (PPI) centers across the nation, where each year hundreds of citizens receive training in the process and potential of public deliberation, and nuts and bolts instruction about how to conduct public forums in their communities and tap into the network's resources to help move democracy forward.

Over the past quarter century, NIF has not only supported hundreds, if not thousands, of locally produced forums on a multitude of topics but has also produced dozens of nonpartisan discussion guides used in a variety of settings to help groups discuss controversial topics productively. It has also produced numerous reports on the broader topics of the state of deliberative democracy, deliberative processes, and best practices, as well as on the results of national deliberative discussions on topics such as immigration, America's role in the world, and numerous others.

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WILLIAM WINTER, NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS INSTITUTE
CHAIRMAN AND A FORMER GOVERNOR OF MISSISSIPPI

How NIF Deliberation Works

NIF forums bring together people in high schools, colleges, community colleges, faith-based institutions, clubs and community centers, libraries, and other public spaces to deliberate about issues that are central to the health of the nation and to individual communities. The forums are public events open to anyone who wishes to attend, including members of the media. Forum conveners strive to bring together diverse groups of participants so that they can share a range of experiences and perspectives with each other.

But forums do not attempt to achieve participation that matches a demographically representative sample of the population, as random-sample polls do. Some view the work of such “self-selected” groups as somehow less valuable than that of groups that are scientifically selected cross-sections of the public. Although most forum groups are self-selecting, this does not make the public work done in these forums less useful or important. When you think about it,

most of the work of democracy is done by self-selected groups and individuals; people who register to vote, those who actually show up at the polls in any given election, individuals who decide to run for office, community activists and volunteers, and special-interest groups are just a few examples.

The forums are led by trained, neutral moderators who use discussion guides to frame issues by presenting the overall problem and three or four broad approaches to it. Forum participants work through an issue by considering each approach and examining what appeals to them or concerns them, given the costs, consequences, and trade-offs.

When people meet in a National Issues Forum, they deliberate for up to three hours. Though the deliberations center on frameworks crafted to present an array of approaches or broad strategies for dealing with an issue, the forums are designed to help people realize that even the most complex issues can be approached, understood, discussed, and addressed by ordinary Americans who do not have subject expertise.

Issues frameworks are an essential aspect of the forum process. Issue frameworks present three or more broad approaches to the problem being considered. Each approach is presented with explanations for supporting or opposing it along with some trade-offs and drawbacks. With the help of impartial moderators, people consider each approach or course of action; appraise its risks, uncertainties, sacrifices, and consequences; and work through a group discussion to get to preferences and acceptable costs. What people are asked to do in a forum is work together to carefully consider, and deliberate about, each possible approach to the issue, regardless of their initial personal feelings about the issue. Forums are not intended to change people's minds about issues, although that sometimes happens. Rather, the objective is for people to work together to reach a shared understanding of the issue and uncover, or create, possible ways to deal with the underlying

problems, regardless of their personal feelings. At the end of each forum, moderators and recorders usually ask the group to consider what they agreed on and what common ground for action, if any, they identified. The results of many forums on a particular topic are often analyzed and presented in report form to public leaders and the media.

A recent framework (sometimes referred to as a “discussion guide”) from NIF, “The Energy Problem: Choices for an Uncertain Future,” illustrates how nonideological choices are presented in NIF dialogues.

First, there is a statement of the problem:

America’s way of life seems threatened by unstable sources of energy, while many see growing evidence of environmental damage. As demands for energy escalate, both in this country and in rapidly developing nations, we may soon reach a point of no return. It is time to face the difficult choices that must be made to ensure a sustainable future.

Next, the issue guide lays out three broad approaches to the problem. Sometimes people think of the various approaches in terms of “left, right, and center,” but NIF makes a concerted effort to present the potential strategies as independent of ideological positions, evenhandedly discussing all the choices as equally legitimate and with their own implications. In the new energy discussion guide, these are the general approaches presented:

Approach no. 1: *Unreliable sources—reduce our dependence on foreign energy.* Much of the oil Americans use comes from the Middle East and other politically volatile countries that cannot be relied on to continue supplying our needs. This poses an ongoing threat to our security. The United States has many untapped reserves of oil and natural gas. Our best course of action is to make use of all these possible domestic energy sources.

Approach no. 2: *Get out of the fossil-fuel predicament.* The escalating use of fossil fuels is wreaking havoc on our environment. Most scientists agree that global warming has begun in earnest, and unless we slow down the burning of fossil fuels we face catastrophic climate changes. We must get serious about developing alternative energy sources such as wind farms and solar power, and rethink the use of another clean energy source: nuclear power.

Approach no. 3: *Curb our appetite—reduce our demand for energy.* We are missing the point when we go looking for new sources of energy. What we need to do is find ways to use less energy in the first place or use it more efficiently. The United States is home to less than 5 percent of the world’s population but uses more than 20 percent of its energy. Cutting back on consumption is the cleanest and most workable way to deal with impending shortages.

In the full-issue framework, these three approaches are further explored with proposed actions commonly associated with each way of thinking as well as tradeoffs and criticisms associated with each approach. So dialogue sessions that use the issue frameworks generally lead to rich, wide-ranging discussions that thoroughly consider the major proposals in play in policy circles. Presented with the basic facts and an evenhanded accounting of the possible solutions, time and again average citizens have proven their ability to engage the issues and come to reasoned conclusions.

This is not to say that every forum ends in unanimity. Issues often remain unresolved in the minds of many participants. Sometimes the best outcome is simply that people of differing perspectives learn a thing or two about the thinking of others and come to have respect for their position, even if they don’t agree with it. But more often, participants find common ground and begin to see specific courses of action that have the clear support of the public.

Sometimes the overall conclusion of National Issues Forums confirms conventional wisdom about public opinion, and sometimes it blows conventional wisdom out of the water. Most of the time, it's somewhere in between, providing new insights into public thinking and greater nuance on difficult issues. It is when issues are particularly controversial or complex that these insights can be most helpful to the democratic process.

Leaders can better understand what approaches the public supports and how to talk about them in ways that people understand. The media can also gain a great deal from the learning in National Issues Forums, by understanding which approaches have broad support, seeing what information the public needs so as to come to grips with an issue, and getting a better handle on where people end up in their thinking when they have the information that most policy leaders possess.

Reclaiming the Public's Role

In 2006, NIF engaged citizens across the United States in a “meta” discussion of democracy in America, specifically about whether or not we face a real problem of citizen disengagement; why that might be; and what, if anything, could or should be done about it. The public's conclusion: something's definitely wrong.

According to the Kettering Foundation report detailing the outcomes of the forums, “Public Thinking About Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public's Role,” by Doble Research Associates, people felt that something is dreadfully off track in our democracy: “As people deliberated, many felt alienated from politics and community affairs—and powerless to do much about them. They felt that community engagement has sharply declined over the past few decades. . . . In many forums, people saw themselves as part of the audience, bystanders in the democracy instead of active members with a sense of ownership. Others saw themselves as par-

ticipants at the local level but not nationally. Citing their involvement with community organizations, some felt like citizens in their community but not in the democracy” (p. 1).

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Talking about the causes of these feelings of alienation and disaffection, participants named such things as the loss of public spaces and the retreat of families to “cocoon”-like homes. Many said Americans had become too focused on rights and not enough on responsibilities. The media also got some blame. They were said to exacerbate people's alienation in several ways, including cynical reporting that in turn increases public cynicism and an excessive focus on the divisions among us, which increases polarization. But the political system itself drew the most public despair. The report paraphrased: “Money talks, they asserted; the system responds to special interests, not the broad, general public; the average citizen has no voice and is unrepresented. The idea of genuine reform is a fantasy, they said, because those who are expected to enact the reforms are the ones who benefit from the status quo” (p. 2).

Yet there is the possibility for real change. The members of the public participating in the forums came to this conclusion themselves. According to the Kettering report:

At the beginning, they had seen this issue as something beyond their control—deteriorating moral values, a decline in community life, and an unresponsive political system are all something

they felt powerless to affect. But by the end of the forums, many made connections—saw how community life relates to national affairs, how values education ties into community life, and how they both relate to what goes on in Washington. And how all three add up to something larger than any of them. . . . Public deliberation just might rejuvenate the hope and public mindedness that typify the nation at its best because by the end of the forums, some participants—although by no means all of them—concluded that they, after all, had a significant role to play [p. 2].

In these forums, people came to the conclusion that America can produce a more engaged citizenry—and it was, in part, the deliberation format itself that gave people this hope. More and more people across the nation are experiencing the deliberative process and seeing the potential in it as the public engagement movement grows. The National Issues Forums have been at the forefront of this movement for the past twenty-five years, and it continues to build a small army of committed disciples.

In South Carolina, Barbara Brown has been organizing forums that range in topics from terrorism to how to deal with violent kids. Doing her work through Clemson University, she says: “Dialogue is essential to community building. Considering the current state of our democracy, there is an emerging urgency to this work. Deliberation is not a ‘special’ process—it’s conceptually quite simple—but the end results are phenomenal. It’s not the one thing that will save the world, but it is an important thing that can contribute, especially as more and more communities do it, it makes the nation stronger.”

In New Hampshire, the New England Center of Civic Life has delved into topics that have helped communities deal with diversity issues, determine the level of educational support, and map out the future of communities. They have also looked at

bigger, national issues. The center’s director, Joni Doherty, says: “Ethical choices always involve more than one person. When stalemates occur, it is largely because people can’t communicate productively. Deliberation builds skills necessary for working with others on potentially divisive issues in nonadversarial ways. It’s not about changing fundamental beliefs, but seeing new possibilities. On an individual level, deliberation can cause participants to develop empathy for others, and to see the connections as well as the differences. If everyone walked out of a forum with that perspective, it would have a major impact on democracy.”

The University of Georgia’s Pamela Kleiber, who has been working with the Carter Presidential Library to conduct Public Policy Institutes where community leaders receive training on becoming moderators for forums, talks about deliberation in terms of changing the way issues get addressed: “The mechanism for getting people involved in the issues is National Issues Forums. You can have experts and academics and people who know about the issues, but until you have a process for getting people involved, you really don’t have a real ‘public space.’ NIF creates the public space. I have yet to find anyone else who has a better model to train people on deliberation methods—and they’ve gotten those skills into the hands of so many people.”

Joel Diemond, who has worked with the *Poughkeepsie Journal* for more than a decade to produce widely discussed public forums on a range of national issues, talks about deliberation as a way of getting closer to the kind of democracy that really works the way it should:

Deliberative dialogue shows you what democracy would look like if we, as a nation, chose to change directions. We tend to set up false dichotomies in our politics, but dialogue presents a much better model—one that permits people to admit that there aren’t simple answers, and plenty of mixed feelings. Organizations like

National Issues Forums Institute are absolutely essential. They have had an enormous effect on how tens of thousands of people look at issues and, through the media coverage of forums, how issues have been addressed. NIF is part of a larger movement to reclaim democracy and make it real, and it has been a major player in that movement. They haven't just done issue books, but have done research on deliberation and spread it, even to other countries.

Deliberation has a growing fan base. But even after twenty-five years of committed activity, National Issues Forums faces great challenges in convincing leaders in the political system and the media—and sometimes even citizens themselves—that deliberative forums are more than just “a bunch of people in a room talking.”

Forging Ahead: Democracy Can't Wait

There is a common response that organizers get from people who have just heard about the National Issues Forums for the first time. It goes something like this: “I didn't know there was anything like this: a nonagenda-driven way for people to get together and really, seriously talk together about national issues—and you say it's been around for twenty-five years? Why haven't I heard about it? Why hasn't everybody heard about it by now?”

To say that “they” don't want you to know about substantial ways for Americans to be active participants in politics would be simplistic and conspiratorial. But there are relatively few political and media leaders who have given the deliberative process its due. It should be part of the mandate of both politicians and leaders to take cues from public deliberation, but the deliberative process may be viewed by many politicians and editors as needlessly time-consuming, a distraction from the supposed real work of leaders to negotiate among themselves, or perhaps even a threat to their own power.

So, is anybody really interested in listening to the public? Do deliberative forums make any difference?

A common denominator among these questions is an underlying insecurity about the worth of public opinion, somewhat paradoxically coupled with a commonly held, deeply felt yearning to be heard. If it is true that most Americans believe most other Americans are stupid or ill-informed, it is not surprising that they defer to the experts and the elected leaders. We turn out to be our own harshest critics. Because we fear the answers to these questions may not turn out to be in our favor, we've thickened our civic skin to protect ourselves from disappointment.

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In this sense, there is a kind of “hard outer shell” of indifference toward democracy among many Americans. But the people involved in the National Issues Forums have been scraping away at that crust wherever they have been able to. They've made progress, but it is an ongoing struggle. There are signs that some of our leaders may be ready to start joining those who believe in the positive power of deliberation. In recent years there has been a small, but increasing, number of elected officials and policymakers who are seeking the help of the public. The most important part of this trend is that they are seeking the public's help because they are discovering that they *need* it. It is still just a relative few, but these numbers could increase soon as public engagement gains in popularity and accepted legitimacy.

The National Issues Forums is working to help the public and elected officials reduce the gulf between them. The NIF network is well positioned to help do

this. It has been effective in putting policy questions into a form, or “framework,” that resonates both with members of the public and with policy makers and experts.

NIF is in the business of helping the public and their leaders work on problems together. But there remain basic questions that the public and our elected leaders need to confront: What role should the public play in our democracy today? How does it compare to the reality of what the role is today? What would it take to make the public’s role be what we believe it should be?

Deliberative forums certainly ought to figure into the answers to these questions. The National Issues Forums, experience with public deliberation supplies ample evidence that this mechanism has great potential to bring our nation considerably closer to

the promise of modern democracy. Communities across the nation are joining the deliberative democracy movement, and National Issues Forums is leading the charge.

Reference

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Michael Hamill Remaley is vice president and director of communications at Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan public opinion research and civic engagement organization. Patty Dineen is the contributing editor of National Issues Forums News online. More information and a schedule of upcoming forums are available online at www.nifi.org.
