Public Deliberation and National Issues Forums
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The National Issues Forums (NIF) is an important player in the burgeoning civic engagement movement. The focus of this movement is to strengthen democracy by engaging more citizens in the work of shaping and implementing public policy.

NIF is a nonpartisan, nationwide network of civic, educational, and professional groups and individuals that organize deliberative forums on critical issues in communities across the country. Meetings are held in homes, libraries, churches, schools, and even prisons. NIF’s parent organization, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) works with NIF groups around the country who want to convene and conduct forums. It coordinates the activities of the NIF network, publishes study guides and other materials used in the local forums, and shares information about current activities in the network.

The Kettering Foundation, named for inventor Charles F. Kettering of Dayton, Ohio, is a key partner in this enterprise (www.kettering.org). Headquarterd in Dayton, Ohio, with offices in New York and Washington D.C., the foundation conducts research in the United States and around the world seeking answers to a central question: What does it take to make democracy work as it should?

A critical and perhaps most important answer to that question is citizen involvement. Citizens who are acting together with others in their community to address common problems can make sound decisions about their future. This is often described as “Voting Plus” behavior—that is, not just voting, but also working with other citizens to connect with elected representatives. Abraham Lincoln described democracy as government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” But if the people are not involved and a small percentage of the population controls the formation and implementation of public policy, a democracy can easily evolve into a plutocracy or oligarchy.

The next question, then, is: “What does it take to get citizens involved?” Researchers and practitioners have revealed three conditions:
1. Citizens need to have an understanding of an issue and how it might affect them.

2. Citizens need to feel they have a voice and a process for putting into words how they feel about the issue.

3. Citizens need to be connected with others who share their concerns.

The National Issues Forums were begun in 1981 to respond to those needs and has, in the ensuing 30-plus years, provided a rich resource for research, which the Kettering Foundation shares with others.¹

Each year, the foundation identifies timely issues of national importance. Kettering staff members monitor media coverage and publications and seek input from many sources to focus on an average of three new issues each. The next job is to work with groups to name and frame each issue. Using that framework, a writer is employed to produce a study guide for use in the forums.

This material is then copyrighted and published by NIFI. These guides contain a description of the issue (called “naming”) and three options that might be pursued to deal with the issue (called “framing”). The guide does not advocate a solution, but instead describes specific actions that might be taken and the drawbacks or tradeoffs that each might produce. These guides are listed on the NIFI website (www.nifi.org), where they can be downloaded or purchased in hard-copy format.

A current issue guide, for example, is entitled “America’s Role in the World: What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century?” It offers the following three options: 1. National security means safeguarding the United States (military preparedness); 2. National security depends on putting our economic house in order (economic strength); or, 3. National security means recognizing that global threats are our greatest challenge (operating in the international arena).

At least three options are presented in order to avoid a polarization that often develops from an either-or debate. Participants in a forum may also craft a fourth option that borrows from the other three. The importance of the process lies in the fact that individuals are able to think through the options and decide which is most consistent with what they feel is most important.

Each forum is led by a moderator who is neither an expert on the subject, nor an advocate for any particular solution. He or she is the discussion leader who keeps the deliberation on topic.

¹ To read more on this, see David Mathews, THE ECOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY, Kettering Foundation Press, 2013.
and ensures that everyone has an opportunity to contribute. NIFI offers moderator-training sessions, both in person and by webinar, and provides a Moderator’s Guide for each issue.

There is a protocol that is advocated for each forum. First, people talk best—and most civilly—when they face each other. Therefore, participants sit in a circle or around a table. Second, each issue—as noted above—suggests at least three possible courses of action. Participants work deliberatively through all the options before deciding on which course of action they can agree. At the end of the forum, which typically runs one-and-a-half hours, the participants share their conclusions verbally and in questionnaires they are asked to fill out.

The completed questionnaires are provided to the foundation for analysis. Kettering then produces a research report describing the findings from the forums. These reports are made available through both the NIFI and Kettering websites and often, at a press conference in Washington, D.C. These reports are valuable because they provide input from citizens who have studied the issue, as opposed to “off-the-cuff” answers from respondents to polls.

What does this have to do with civic education? Interestingly enough, while NIFI was focused on getting citizens informed and involved, some of the heaviest use of NIF issue guides has been by teachers, both at the university and the K-12 levels. This is motivated by the conclusion that the best way to produce engaged citizens is to expose them to the process while they are still students. But many teachers are also motivated by the desire to develop the critical thinking skills of students. College professors in a variety of fields use issue guides to help their students understand an issue and learn how to think about it deliberatively.

NIFI has also successfully exposed high school and middle school students to the deliberation process, including those as early as the fifth grade level. For example, a middle school in Auburn, Ala., recently involved all 600 of its students in a forum on bullying, as part of a statewide set of forums being conducted by the David Mathews Center for Civic Life in Alabama.

The efforts to involve citizens and to prepare young people for a lifetime of civic engagement are critical to preserving and strengthening our system of democratic government.