We Have to Choose
Democracy and Deliberative Politics

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Introduction

This book is written primarily for civic organizations, centers, and institutes that sponsor deliberative forums and/or prepare people to conduct such forums. This book is not, however, just about forums or public deliberation. It is primarily about democracy and the role of the citizenry, people who want to join forces in solving problems that threaten their communities and their country. It is about self-rule and putting the public back into the public’s business.

Public deliberation can only be understood in the larger context of democracy. It helps citizens make sound decisions about what policies or collective actions are in their best interest. But it’s more than that; the values that deliberation promotes are integral to all that has to occur in order for people to rule themselves. Taken out of its proper context, deliberation is misunderstood as simply one more technique that can be used in group processes. So to keep this larger context, the book refers to “deliberative politics,” not just deliberation. Actually, “deliberative politics” is shorthand for “deliberative democratic politics” or “deliberative public politics,” which are accurate, but cumbersome, terms.

Since this book will be used by organizations around the world, it should also be noted that deliberation was not invented in the United States. It is an ancient practice with roots in most all cultures.¹ For instance, hieroglyphs depicting deliberation were carved into Egyptian buildings thousands of years ago.

Though not unique to the United States, public deliberation has played a crucial role in shaping the kind of democracy that emerged in this country. Those convening or promoting deliberative forums can benefit from knowing this history because it is part of their history. They are preserving one of the distinctive characteristics of American democracy.²

The first deliberations in what would become the United States occurred in the councils of Native Americans and then in the meetings that produced the Mayflower Compact. The forums

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² This section on deliberation in the colonies is drawn from David Mathews, Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
convened by the colonial town meetings seem to have been deliberative. This collective decision making became a habit and led to the expectation that citizens should have a voice in governing themselves that went beyond electing representatives.

One of the places public deliberation took hold was in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in the 1630s. The Dorchester town square must have been an excellent place for livestock to graze, but the animals escaped through the fences. That led to two problems: first, how to protect the livestock; and second—the issue behind the issue—how to decide how to protect the livestock. Dorchester had no local government to address such problems. It didn’t even have an established forum for discussing public matters. The principal place to gather was in church, and Sunday services were not the place to discuss such worldly matters as cows and goats.

It is a shame the events that followed weren’t recorded in great detail. The exact words of the Dorchester townsfolk weren’t written down. Nonetheless, we can imagine the Reverend John Maverick and other community leaders saying, “We have a problem. We need to talk about it. Let’s meet on Monday.”

Colonists began to meet every month, not just when the cows got out. The Dorchester gathering led to an institution that became a foundation of America’s political system: the town meeting. These early town meetings, however, weren’t at all like today’s town meetings where officials speak and sometimes answer questions. These were occasions in which people could reflect on and, to use John Adams’ word, “maturely” consider the great questions of the day.

The colonists chose not to adopt (as might have been expected) the English municipal form of government. Instead, they ran the colony by town meetings or a “civil body politic.” The meetings had no authority other than the power that came from the promises people made to one another to work together. These mutual promises, or covenants, were the bonds that held the colony together and were the basis for its common endeavors. Drawing authority from the people through the town meetings set a powerful political precedent.

Citizens and public bodies continued their influence throughout the revolutionary and constitutional eras. In time, towns in Massachusetts and other colonies established a network for political action. This network was formalized in 1772, when Samuel Adams established a 21-member “committee of correspondence” to create ties to other towns and to explain the colonists’ position to the world. Within 15 months, all but 2 of the colonies had established their own committees of correspondence. (Correspondence was a substitute for organized meetings, which were often banned.)

By the time of the American Revolution, citizens had to decide whether they wanted independence and whether a war against what was then the world’s greatest power could be successful. John Adams, from the town meetings of Braintree, Massachusetts, took on the task of defending the proposed Declaration of Independence. Adams’ faith in the Revolution was grounded in what he had learned about people and the power of their public forums. To those fearing failure in the Revolution, he replied, “But we shall not fail. The cause will raise up armies; the cause will create navies. The
people, the people, if we are true to them, will carry us, and will carry themselves, gloriously, through this struggle. I care not how fickle other people have been found. I know the people of these Colonies.” As John Adams told his wife, Abigail, public deliberation provided needed time for sober reflection, which was a much-needed antidote to hasty reactions.

The town meeting tradition prompted Thomas Jefferson to declare that “the vigor given to our revolution in its commencement” was rooted in “local assemblies or little republics,” which he believed had “thrown the whole nation into energetic action.” Jefferson understood that without places for the public to create its own voice and to define its interests, the government could not govern effectively. This is the same role that institutes and forum sponsors are playing today.

Democracy based on public deliberation is not direct democracy or an alternative to representative democracy. Choosing representatives requires the sound judgment that deliberation promotes.

Despite its long history, the tradition of public deliberation has been subject to ongoing challenges. Sometimes citizens have been swept into making hasty decisions. Free speech, essential to deliberation, has been repressed on more than one occasion. The assumption that people can make a difference in solving our most complex problems has been questioned, and citizens have often been pushed to the sidelines in our political system. In response, Americans who believe that the citizenry is the cornerstone of our democracy have been

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Land created in common,
Dream nourished in common,
Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on?
If the house is not yet finished,
Don’t be discouraged, builder!
If the fight is not yet won,
Don’t be weary, soldier!
The plan and the pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the warp and woof of America,

—Langston Hughes
promoting various types of deliberation. The Kettering Foundation has used some of its research to prepare briefing books on issues that concern people: education, health care, Social Security, crime, and poverty, to name a few. These are called National Issues Forums (NIF) books because the issues are important to communities nationwide. The books are designed to prompt the same kind of public deliberation that Adams and Jefferson advocated.
Chapter 1: All of Democracy

Sponsors of forums and organizations that introduce citizens to deliberation, which include public policy institutes (ppis), have shared their hopes and frustrations with Kettering. And they have asked the foundation what it is learning about democracy that might help them in their efforts, which involve finding a pedagogy or way to explain deliberation, which has to be learned but can’t be taught through instruction alone.

Perhaps the most important insight Kettering has had is that public deliberation can’t be confined to formally organized forums. Another is that democracy can’t be confined to collective decision making, even if it is done by deliberative means. Thanks to the opportunity to see the deliberation in public meetings using the National Issues Forums books and clones of those books, we have realized that democracy exists at two levels. The more obvious one is at the institutional level, where there are legislatures, executive agencies, and courts. Underneath, there is an organic foundation of ad hoc associations and civic organizations. At the institutional level, citizens are defined by their relationship to government. They are voters, taxpayers, and school board members. At the organic level, citizens are defined by their relationship to other citizens. They are the people who join with others to create a neighborhood watch, to organize a campaign to protect the environment, or to conduct rescue operations after a hurricane.

It turns out that citizens working at the organic level of democracy are also the people most likely to vote for representatives in government. So the two levels are interdependent, not two different kinds of democracy. The democracy that public deliberation serves is primarily organic, yet it isn’t indifferent or antagonistic to representative government. That is obvious in the work of John Maverick and the citizens who laid the organic foundations for democracy and then went on to approve the Constitution.

At the organic level of democracy, collective efforts are made to deal with problems that can’t be solved unless the citizenry acts. This collective action requires a particular kind of decision making because the problems aren’t just technical; they have a normative or moral dimension. Protecting the health of the American people is an example; citizens have an important role to play, and issues like the care of the terminally ill raise all kinds of moral questions. Such problems grow out of a discrepancy between what is happening and what people want to happen. What makes these problems especially difficult are disagreements about what should be happening. There aren’t any experts who can tell citizens what should be; they have to exercise the best judgment they can. And the best way to make sound judgments is by weighing possible causes of action against the various things people consider valuable or believe should be. That is deliberation in a nutshell.
Although a means of making decisions, public deliberation can’t be isolated from what happens before and after a decision is made. Before citizens will make decisions, they have to see a connection between their concerns and political issues. This begins to happen (or doesn’t begin) with who names the problems and the way they are named or described. If the name of a problem doesn’t resonate with what people consider valuable, they lose interest. The same happens, or fails to happen, when options are put forth to deal with a problem. Unless all the options are put on the table and each is presented fairly, with both the pros and cons spelled out, people back away, feeling manipulated. And if the options for action don’t include anything for citizens to do, they feel sidelined—they feel that they can’t make any difference. All of this, including the way citizens implement their decisions and evaluate the results, are deliberative public politics, writ large. Because this kind of politics involves more than decision making, forums can’t be understood without taking into account what happens outside the rooms where they are held. That is true even if the purpose of the forum is purely educational. Forums are a staging area, not the whole stage.

And, as noted, public deliberation also introduces distinctive values into politics. Deliberation has to be nonpartisan, yet it is not value neutral. It values democracy and assumes that citizens have the capacity for effective collective action. It not only puts a premium on respect for the opinions of others but also on fairness and the good of all.

Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time.

—E. B. White
Chapter 2: The Work of Institutes

Of those promoting public deliberation, the most organized are usually the various institutes and centers that Kettering refers to as ppis. These institutes, which are located in nearly every state, vary widely in their objectives. Yet there are commonalities in their missions and in the challenges they encounter. Nearly all of the institutes use the guides in the National Issues Forums (NIF) series, although a number now frame local issues and produce their own books.\(^3\)

Following race riots in Cincinnati in 2001, the institute at Ohio State University helped the city’s civic organizations prepare an issue book with options for improving race relations. It was used in more than 150 forums that reached thousands of citizens, many of whom went on to implement decisions made in these local forums. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, an informal “institute” operates through an ad hoc association of more than 40 organizations, which have been sponsoring forums on NIF issues each year for more than 2 decades. Hundreds of citizens who have participated have gone on to create a number of civic initiatives in the community.\(^4\)

The urge to form partnerships, to link up in collaborative arrangements, is perhaps the oldest, strongest and most fundamental force in nature. There are no solitary, free-living creatures; every form of life is dependent on other forms.

—Lewis Thomas

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\(^3\) For more information on public policy institutes, see the National Issues Forums Institute Web site at http://www.nifi.org.

conversations with other citizens. (Professionals in these programs believe literacy is not just a matter of reading in private; it is the ability to join in the political discourse of democracy.)

An institute in Iowa, Iowa Partners in Learning, has formed one of the strongest networks because it was created by an alliance of organizations. The founding coalition included the association representing teachers, the organization of school boards, and the state department of education. The institute began by organizing deliberative forums on issues important to the future of the state. A year later, the institute analyzed results from the forums and presented them to government agencies. Then Partners began working with communities that wanted the public to be more involved in making decisions on local issues. Rather than providing forum moderators from outside the community, Partners assisted communities in developing their own capacity for deliberation.5

As the community work grew, new members began joining Partners—the parent-teacher organization, the league of cities, the university system, and an agency for rural development within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Why the interest? Participants in Partners said they were looking for an alternative to confrontational politics—an alternative they found in deliberative politics.6 This same theme, providing something other than politics-as-usual, crops up over and over in the work of the public policy institutes.

MISSIONS

A variety of distinctive ways to revitalize American democracy have emerged from the institutes, giving them varied missions.

Community Building: As in the Ohio example, some institutes are dedicated to helping communities respond to local issues that require collective action by the citizenry. These issues have been vehicles for getting to the institutes’ primary objective, which is to strengthen the civic capacity of communities. That includes the capacity to identify the concerns that citizens bring to issues and to fashion options for action that follow from those concerns. Still, the issues are only a means to a greater goal. As one institute founder said, “For us, our mission is building community capacity for sustainable social change, so we ask how can we embed this process in the community.”7

Civic Education: Perhaps because many institutes are on college campuses, a number of them use forums as a means of civic education. In some cases, the students are adult civic leaders from off campus; in others, they are college or secondary school students with their teachers. This statement is typical of what these institute leaders say: “Training our students by doing is

6 This concept of politics has been called by various names; “citizen politics” and “deliberative democracy” are two of the most common. See John Gastil and Peter Levine, eds., The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-first Century (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
7 This remark and other comments in this chapter are drawn from notes on the Developing Deliberative Practice Workshop held March 1-2, 2007, at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio.
very important. We have student government, but that is training for the institutional political system, by letting them do politics as it is and not as it could be. Forums are not only political learning, but also politics as we’d like it to be.”

**Better Relationships:** Other ppis are less interested in either policy issues or community problem solving and more concerned about improving relationships among citizens. Polarization bothers them, as does distrust. They have found that doing the work that deliberation requires helps people understand one another better. Forums are valued as safe spaces where citizens can express themselves freely without being attacked for their opinions. Leaders of these institutes believe that citizens have to “sit down, listen, and establish enough trust to genuinely hear what people are saying.” Deliberation is also used as a means of intervention in situations where conflicts are likely to escalate.

**Social Justice:** Still other institutes are motivated by the conviction that relationships can never be improved without addressing underlying social injustices. Their objective is to bring those who feel disenfranchised and powerless into the political arena and to address underlying issues like discrimination. In the process, they hope to add greater diversity to the political system. This remark reflects the sense of alienation that resonates with the mission of these institutes: “I came to this work simply because I was angry that nobody asked me about the decisions being made in my community. I’d go to town meetings and nobody would listen to me.”

**A Greater Public Voice:** Some institutes respond to citizens who feel that the balance between protecting particular interests and serving the general interest has been lost. These citizens see the importance of both but think that neither should dominate and are concerned about the waning influence of average citizens. Public deliberation is seen as a way of creating a common or public voice that is more than the sum of the voices of particular interests. Involving legislators in the deliberations is often a priority for these institutes, although their ultimate goal is to put the *dēmos* back into democracy.

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

—Abraham Lincoln
The Challenges

Despite lofty missions, public policy institutes must deal with a multitude of everyday problems, such as getting financial support and developing new leadership for the future. And there are logistical problems. Forum sponsors who expect people to leave their normal routines and come out to special meetings, particularly if they live some distance away, are usually disappointed by the turnout. Forums held where people regularly congregate often have better participation. (Some forum sponsors have put abbreviated issue books on restaurant placemats.) Relying on just one, 90-minute forum has been problematic too. People may only get a glimpse of what deliberation is like. Multiple forums, which develop the habit of deliberation, appear to be more effective.

In addition, institutes face unique challenges because of the unique nature of what they do. They are neither purely academic centers nor solely community organizations. Defining themselves, establishing legitimacy, and building support are critical. In some cases, there is an added challenge because scholars are doing research on the work of the institute. So these institutes have to balance community service and policy education with public scholarship.

Identity, legitimacy, and support depend on clearly defined, easily communicated missions. Unfortunately, that is never easy for new organizations with novel objectives. Institutes encounter genuine dilemmas with alternatives that are equally problematic.

Action or Neutrality: Institutes that treat public deliberation as a means of making the collective decisions needed for collective action have to maintain their neutrality in a highly partisan political environment. Yet how can institutes claim to be neutral if the forums they promote take actions that aren’t neutral in their effects?

A Special Technique or a Natural Act: One of the most basic challenges that institutes face in carrying out their missions involves dealing with the perception that NIF-type deliberation is a special technique or methodology and that it requires special skills. There are forms of deliberation that do require skilled moderators to get the desired results, such as deliberating to make a definitive decision on a specific policy question. NIF-type deliberation is different; it is designed to replicate the naturally occurring deliberation that was going on when the Mayflower Compact was being made. It is best suited to stimulating organic deliberative practice and culture. The objective is for participants to see how they can turn the decision making that goes on routinely in civic clubs, citizen boards, and even informal conversations into more public deliberation. Emphasizing deliberation as a natural act, however, runs the risk of confusing it with any and all types of political speech, which obscures deliberation’s distinctive qualities. On the other hand, to emphasize what makes deliberation distinct runs the risk of it appearing to be an expert skill rather than something citizens can practice in everyday life.

This tension over how to treat deliberation also affects institutes that want to make public deliberation a community habit. They recognize that the community has to own it for that to happen. But what quality control should institutes exercise? Is a community “owning” delibera-
tion more important than distinguishing it from its look-alikes (e.g., civil conversation), which don’t have the same effects?

**Reach Out or Stay True:** The issue of control reappears when institutes attempt to form alliances with other organizations. Institutes don’t do well in isolation; those that have been in business for 20 years or more are grounded in networks with other organizations, which are essential in doing the things that have to be done outside forums, such as implementing decisions made during deliberations.

If the media or elected officials are involved in the alliances, institute control can be especially problematic. News organizations accustomed to civic groups with an axe to grind may not understand what the institutes do. When explaining themselves, institutes feel pressure to fit into politics-as-usual. And while alliances with elected officials can help ensure that the results of forums will be heard, the presence of officeholders can also inhibit the free exchange of opinions that deliberation requires. Officials may interrupt this exchange by making speeches or they may be put on the spot to answer specific questions. Still, in a number of places, journalists and officeholders have worked in league with institutes, which has made the outcomes of deliberation more visible. Such collaboration implies give and take, however, and institutes struggle with how much they can adapt what they do to meet the needs of those they collaborate with.

**Teaching or Learning:** All of the institutes face a common challenge in presenting deliberation, which goes back to the question of whether to treat deliberation as a natural act or a special skill. The distinctive qualities of deliberation and the ease with which it is confused with other forms of political discourse suggest the need for a formal curriculum on the nature of choice work and the skills that moderators should have. Structure is appealing to people who expect the institutes to provide explicit instructions about what they should do in forums. Yet creating such a curriculum can give the impression that deliberation is an elite skill or technique. On the other hand, if deliberation is presented as a natural act, the immediate question is why it needs to be explained at all.

Experiments to reconcile these tensions have led some institutes to shift from teaching to learning; that’s done by posing a fundamental problem that confronts both the institute staff and participants. A typical problem might be generating collective action on perennial community issues, such as economic development, education, or health care delivery. The nature of deliberation is discussed, but only in the context of collective action. And in that context—since the community has to act as a whole to deal with these problems—the deliberation that is discussed is not exclusive to forums but rather communitywide and ongoing. In these institute experiments, modeling, coaching, and self-directed learning are more the norm than traditional instruction.

The Partners institute in Iowa became a learning organization early on. The associations that formed Partners were initially attracted by the precision and efficiency of the numerous methods now available for group processes and public engagement efforts. Yet they ultimately opted for a
more do-it-yourself or learn-by-doing politics, which they found in public deliberation. They started their work with the NIF issue books, which are like civic jump ropes; those who use them have to figure out how and provide the necessary energy.

There isn’t any reason not to use efficient techniques when they are appropriate. But whatever means the institutes adopt to achieve their purposes, one thing is certain: the pedagogy they settle on will itself have political consequences. Deliberation will become more or less public—more or less a means for citizens to make a difference—depending on how it is presented.

The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend upon the understanding of one man, but to depend upon the counsel of all.

—Woodrow Wilson

ENDURING DILEMMAS

The challenges that the institutes face, however they deal with them, never go away because the challenges are inherent in a longstanding debate over what role citizens can or should play in a democracy. Do people have the capacity to do the work that democracy requires? If they don’t, how do they develop that capacity? Kettering faces many of the same questions; so the foundation and the institutes are fellow travelers. Charting a course that avoids pitfalls on all sides depends on having some guiding stars to steer by. For Kettering, that guidance has come from what it is learning about the hopes and frustrations of citizens and about how democracy can work as it should.
Chapter 3: What Americans Dislike about Politics

The previous chapter describes what the institutes have told us about their challenges. This chapter recounts what citizens have said to us about their frustrations with politics-as-usual. These concerns have obvious implications for the work of the public policy institutes, as well as other sponsors of deliberative forums.

What do citizens want? There isn’t a single-minded vision guiding everyone, yet there are common themes in what people have been saying about politics for more than 30 years.

The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

“WE CAN’T MAKE A DIFFERENCE”

One of the principal findings from Kettering research is that people from all walks of life complain that they can’t make a difference. Whether citizens are talking about elections, their communities, or major institutions, the refrain is the same. Citizens believe there is little chance that they or “people like them” can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. They blame professional politicians and moneyed interests. Still, researchers continue to hear people saying that they should be making a difference in the system. Although latent, this sense of civic duty is a source of political energy that institutes can tap into.

Having heard many of the same comments since the 1970s, researchers are now reporting some changes. More people are saying that they can make a difference in their communities—at least sometimes—although they quickly add that their influence doesn’t carry over to the national political system.

The reasons citizens don’t think they can make a difference vary. Some feel insignificant when they see the amount of money that is spent on campaigns. It creates the impression that donations count, votes don’t. Americans are also alarmed by hyperpartisanship. Winning appears
to be more important than solving problems. And people worry that the balance between special interests and the general interest has been lost. Many citizens have some attachment to special interests, so they aren’t unaware of their value. Yet, they think that the good of all gets far less consideration than it should in the political system.

Institutes certainly can’t promise to answer all of these complaints. Still, the politics implied in deliberation does have something to say to most of the concerns that trouble Americans. For instance, some institutes are working to counter polarization; others, to build a greater capacity for community problem solving; and still others, to strengthen an inclusive public voice.

**“WE CAN’T COUNT ON OUR FELLOW CITIZENS”**

People love to blame politicians and the “system,” but they also have concerns about their fellow citizens, particularly those who don’t take their civic responsibilities seriously enough to be well-informed. Citizens also feel that mutual trust is missing and that the public is divided to the point that collective work won’t get done. Consequently, taking issues to “the people” or, worse, relying on their decisions, strikes some as either naïve or downright dangerous. In one town, a woman who had initially advocated greater public involvement in education reversed course. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea, she said, “you have so many conflicting opinions about education and problems in general, and we’re certainly not experts.” Others recoil at the thought of airing issues in the community; they believe it will only give more power to the most vocal. Better to keep controversial matters quiet, a realtor advised, lest disputes erupt that would drive property values down. He couldn’t imagine the public marshalling resources and taking concerted action.\(^8\) Leaders with his mindset don’t have confidence in the citizenry (and citizens may not have any confidence in them).

One contribution institutes make, regardless of their missions, is to give citizens a more realistic sense of what their fellow citizens are like. That can occur when people are working together as citizens, beginning with deciding what the issues are and what should be done about them. That is an experience most institutes provide, although the experience is seldom one of full agreement or perfect accord. When people deliberate, they come to understand what causes others to have the opinions they do and what work they are—or aren’t—willing to do to solve common problems.

**“WE’LL NEVER GET UP TO SCALE”**

Even when citizens have confidence in other citizens, they worry that there aren’t enough of them to “count.” Civic entrepreneurs like those found in institutes and the organizations sponsoring forums are constantly being told that their work with small groups limits the influence of what they do, that they need to get “up to scale.” Scale is key in majoritarian politics, but

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We Have to Choose

We have to choose democracy is more than majority rule. Institutes have access to and have made use of studies that document other ways of having effective outreach.

One of the most extensive studies has been done on Tupelo, Mississippi, which went from an impoverished rural community to a flourishing region in a relatively short time. Vaughn Grisham, who did the study, explains that this far-reaching progress didn’t come from a large-scale civic or economic renewal campaign. The success began in small neighborhoods; people started making decisions together and acting on them—using whatever resources were available. Eventually, these groups joined forces to attack problems that affected more than one neighborhood.9

The Tupelo story suggests that the public is not one large mass but rather a conglomeration of small groups, each focused on local problem solving yet capable of joining with other groups on larger issues. As small groups of citizens in Tupelo began to act on local problems, their efforts eventually changed notions about what “the people” could do. This trust in the public led to a novel development strategy: see everybody as a resource; never turn the work over to agencies that don’t involve citizens; build teams. Institutes that work with community teams and not just individuals can take advantage of the same strategy.

“WE DON’T HAVE GOOD LEADERS”

Those who doubt the capabilities of average citizens often wish for better leaders. Leaders are critical even in a democracy based on self-rule. Nothing happens spontaneously; some courageous souls always have to step out first. In communities that are adept at solving or at least managing their problems, however, a great many people step forward. These are “leaderful” communities, meaning that everyone is expected to provide some initiative. The communities have redefined leadership by making it everybody’s business, not just the business of a few, and by not equating leadership with positions of authority. This same concept of leaderfulness is implicit in the work of institutes, even if their mission is not specifically community building. Deliberation has to be leaderful.

Leaders who are effective in problem solving come from every sector of a community, and they have distinctive ways of interacting with other citizens. Traditional leaders are usually intent on getting support for decisions they have already made. They may take months to study an issue and make decisions among themselves yet allow the citizenry little opportunity to do the same. Having agreed on a plan of action, they try to convince people of its merits with a barrage of supporting facts and attractive arguments. The authors of the plan may have deliberated over the pros and cons of various alternatives, but citizens haven’t. Even if these leaders succeed in selling their proposals, their communities will have only a persuaded population, not an engaged public with the political will to act on its own. Leaders in leaderful communities, by comparison, are skilled in fostering public decision making and work.

Leaders in positions of authority also tend to be gatekeepers who control access to money and give or withhold permission for community projects. Leaders in high-achieving communities, in contrast, tend to be door openers who connect people and broaden participation. They look to the community for solutions, not just to an elite of key stakeholders. Vaughn Grisham is fond of citing the owner of the Tupelo newspaper, the late George McLean, who told citizens that if they wanted a better community, they would have to do the work themselves.\textsuperscript{10} McLean isn’t the only leader who has had this insight. In Kansas, Davis Merritt, then editor of the \textit{Wichita Eagle}, insisted: “The only way . . . for the community to be a better place to live is for the people of the community to understand and accept their personal responsibility for what happens.”\textsuperscript{11}

As is true in deliberation, leadership from everyone implies responsibility from everyone. In an area of western Connecticut hard hit by plant closings, one citizen explained the need to claim local responsibility this way: “All workers have to realize that we’re responsible for our own condition. If we don’t devote some time to our unions, our political party, our church organization, and the laws being enacted, we’ll wake up and find ourselves with empty pension funds, bankrupt companies, disproportionate sacrifices, and a run-down community.”\textsuperscript{12}

Furthermore, deliberation often demonstrates to people who are searching for the one correct answer to a problem that there isn’t one solution. Then citizens may realize that they themselves, with their commitment and energy, can be a large part of the answer they have been looking for.

\textsuperscript{10} Grisham, \textit{Tupelo}, 90-91.

\textsuperscript{11} Davis Merritt Jr., December 1992. From the unpublished transcript of the Public Journalism Seminar, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation and New Directions for News, p. 9.

They reason that, if they can create problems, they must have the capacity to manage them more effectively.13

As two founders of a clean water project along the Tennessee River explained, “People have to provide their own hope. Nobody’s going to come along and make everything all better. It’s us. We’re the problem; we’re the solution.”14 When institute participants come to similar insights, it is a sure sign that what the institute is doing has been effective.

**“WE DON’T HAVE THE POWER”**

Power, like leadership, is usually associated with legal or positional authority and comes from having control over resources or people. Another way to think of power is the ability to join forces and form working relationships. This is power with, not over, and it is the kind of power that the institutes promote.

Some people have power over others; some don’t. And those who don’t are seen—and see themselves—as powerless. This perception leads to the assumption that those without power can be empowered only by the already powerful. But if one person empowers another, who really has the power? The power people truly own is generated when their experiences, insights, and talents are combined with the experiences, insights, and talents of others. This relational power is an innate and renewable resource; citizens regenerate it when they use it to do collective work because the work fosters new relationships. A self-reinforcing cycle begins, expands, and picks up energy. New relationships make more collective enterprises possible. And as people work together, they begin to see that they are making a difference. That opens the way to taking more ownership and responsibility, which, in turn, motivates people to continue to work together. Another valid test of an institute’s influence is whether participation expands people’s sense of the power available to them.

**“WE DON’T KNOW WHERE TO START”**

Nothing frustrates citizens more than wanting to be involved but not knowing where to go in order to get started. On the other hand, nothing excites them as much as realizing they can begin where they are. The realization that politics isn’t something politicians do to you but a part of your own life is liberating. Usually, people have to go to specially designated places to practice politics: the voting booth or the jury box. The politics of collaborative problem solving, on the other hand, can begin almost anywhere: a coffee shop, a parking lot at the grocery store, even at someone’s kitchen table. The places where people regularly gather can provide this “public space,” as it is called. The ideal locations are those that are open to more than one congregation, class, constituency, or membership.

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The importance of public space has been documented in a study by Ray Oldenburg. Festivals, Little League baseball games, soccer matches, neighborhood parties, and potluck dinners bring people together. They chat before and after religious services; they talk at weddings and funerals; they sound off in bars and bingo parlors. Conversations in these social settings can lead to more formal deliberations, which may be why Oldenburg calls these the “great good places” of a community. Not all of these social activities lend themselves to democratic practices, however. Those that do have particular characteristics, which are also characteristic of public deliberation. They allow people to get to know one another as citizens as opposed to being known only by reputation—that is, by social status, family background, or institutional position. And conversations are about the well-being of the community as a whole.15

One of the most interesting findings about what people do after they have deliberated is that they don’t necessarily organize more forums. Instead, they take deliberation into all the places where they are involved in making collective decisions with others. An Oklahoma institute, the Partnership for Public Deliberation, held 4 meetings to prepare citizens to lead forums, and 175 people participated. More than 64 percent went on to participate in deliberative forums. An even greater number, 78 percent, took what they had learned about deliberation into the workplace, and 75 percent applied what they had learned in their civic organizations. In addition to community forums, deliberation was introduced into university courses, high school social studies classes, and neighborhood meetings. In Oklahoma, 55 percent of the institute participants said they even deliberated on family issues.16

Given the relevance of deliberation in so many familiar venues, institutes and forum sponsors don’t have to introduce what they are doing as something foreign. They can take the advice of J. Herman Blake, scholar and community organizer, who recommends that people “build on what grows.” One institute leader did just that. Rather than starting by convening a forum, he first looked to see what was already going on

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that needed public deliberation. In his community, school boundaries were being redrawn. Parents were passionate about the issue, and it could have become divisive. So the institute offered its services, and forum sponsors put together an issue book. Citizens responded deliberatively. The results of the forums that followed were impressive. Participants saw how deliberation could temper opinions and behaviors. And the institute saw the importance of starting where the community started.

The chapters that follow respond to the questions the institutes have asked about research on democracy. This research, in most instances, complements what the institutes are already learning about responding to people’s concerns. The objective in reporting on the research is to identify critical moments in politics when there are opportunities to bring our political system closer to the kind of politics that citizens want. Many of the routines common to institutional politics can be opened to citizens, not by doing something different, but by doing what is normally done differently. There appear to be critical moments even in politics-as-usual when citizens could play a stronger role. Institutes can help people spot these opportunities and take advantage of them.
Chapter 4: Deliberative Politics in Real Time

Because the purpose of deliberative forums like those using the NIF issue books is to promote deliberation wherever collective decisions need to be made, it is useful to look at how deliberation can occur in the regular routines of everyday life. Recall what the institute in Oklahoma documented: forum participants often take their experience back into their normal routines. There are opportunities in these routines to introduce deliberation and other democratic practices if people are aware of when these opportunities occur. This chapter presents research on when the regular routines of community life are open to change and what those changes should be if the public is to have a stronger role. Even when forums are used for strictly educational purposes, this frame of reference makes the purpose of public deliberation clearer and the forums more than artificial exercises.

The Path to Civic Engagement

Everyday deliberation doesn’t start with making a decision; it starts much earlier. First, people have to become engaged with a problem by seeing how it affects them. On any given day, some people take the initial step to becoming involved citizens by talking to family and friends about something that bothers them personally. Then they may also try to find out whether anyone outside this close circle is worried. For example, a woman might talk with her family and later her neighbors about drug paraphernalia she saw in the street.\(^\text{17}\) It might be a short conversation, probably over her backyard fence. As in this example, engagement occurs when people see a connection between what is happening around them and their personal concerns. They worry about their jobs, their health, their children’s education. And they keep coming back to these primary concerns,

which remain their political touchstones. When people are asked to consider an issue, they usually begin with the question, does this problem affect me or my family? That is a critical moment in everyday life and an opportunity to begin what can become public deliberation.

As people try to identify a problem, they talk to one another. They move in and out of a great many discussions, which are random and unstructured. Much of what they say may sound like small talk—with a lot of quaint stories thrown in. People are just mulling over what they hear or perhaps testing for a response: What did you see? What do you think it means? Does it worry you? At this stage, they aren’t ready to make decisions; they are still checking out the situation, and that takes time. The instinct to reach out to others and check out their opinions is also part of identifying a problem.

Although most everyone looks for connections, they don’t necessarily see the same ones. In fact, people seldom see the same problem in the same way because their circumstances and experiences aren’t the same. Yet, if citizens recognize they have a stake in solving a problem, albeit for different reasons, they are disposed to deliberate. And they may become aware that even though their interests are different, they are interdependent. On the other hand, when people fail to see these interrelations or to make these connections, they tend to feel isolated and unable to make a difference.

Engagement deepens when people come to see an old problem in a new light. The insight helps them imagine solutions that otherwise are elusive. These insights are often sparked when people hear experiences different from their own. This added perspective reorients them, and the insights increase their confidence that progress is possible. If people don’t come to those insights, they remain stuck in a rut, saying the same things to the same people.

As people gather more and more information, it might seem that they would become confused, that a deluge of facts and opinions would overwhelm them. While institutions break down problems into manageable projects and professionals focus in on discrete phenomena, most people don’t do either. They experience the combined effects of interrelated problems in their everyday lives, and so they try to find out how the different pieces fit together.\footnote{\textsuperscript{18} The Harwood Group, \textit{Strategies for Civil Investing: Foundations and Community-Building} (Dayton, OH: Report to the Kettering Foundation, 1997), 8.} For example, when drugs are the problem, they are never the only problem. People consider a number of contributing factors including everything from the quality of family life, the condition of the economy, and the effectiveness of the police force. They don’t simplify issues; they try to see them in all their complexity.

As citizens become more comfortable with the way they have defined a problem, they begin to identify options for solving it and to decide which option will best serve their purposes. Identifying options and choosing among them present other opportunities to engage citizens. How decisions are made to act on an issue is especially crucial. The point here is that the normal
routines of everyday life are filled with chances to involve more than the usual suspects or key stakeholders in the public’s business.

It should be noted that this process of becoming engaged does not proceed in an orderly, linear fashion. Citizens move back and forth, often retracing their steps. They revisit the question of whether something truly valuable is at stake; they probe beneath the surface for related problems; and they look for connections with other issues. (Forum participants can expect to see the same back-and-forth movement in their deliberations).

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**FROM CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TO ACTION: THE CASE OF SUGGSVILLE**

An engaged citizenry has to do more than identify problems and options for dealing with them. It is equally important to understand how people move on to collective action in real time. There are new opportunities for the public to be more involved along the way.

In order to paint a picture of how collective decision making and collective action occur, the foundation combined examples from community case studies into a composite illustration. The composite town, “Suggsville,” has been drawn from places where conditions were less than ideal in order to reflect the difficulties in mounting collective efforts. Suggsville’s story is included here to give institutes and forum organizers more concrete examples of the critical moments when ordinary community routines can change.

Suggsville is rural and poor. Once a prosperous farming community, the town began to decline during the 1970s, as the agricultural economy floundered. By the 1990s, the unemployment rate had soared above 40 percent. With little else to replace the income from idle farms, a drug

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trade now flourishes. A majority of Suggsville’s children are born to single teenagers. The schools are plagued with low test scores and high dropout rates. Everyone who could leave the town has, especially the young adults who are college educated. Making matters worse, the community is sharply divided: rich and poor, black and white.

As in other communities facing similar problems, the citizens of Suggsville are worried because their property values are dropping, their careers are affected, and their children are going to schools with fewer and fewer resources. After religious services and in the one grocery store that has survived, Suggsvillians meet in small groups to discuss what is happening with friends and neighbors. People make small talk and mull over what others say. No one organizes a forum, yet citizens are already taking the first steps to address their problems.

Then, outside agencies, including several universities, set up programs offering social services, job training, and other assistance. Little changes, however; consultants complain that when they leave, Suggsville goes back to business-as-usual.

One group from a university center, however, realizes that the problem isn’t promoting the right reforms, it’s having the right strategy. The faculty decide that the best thing to do is to back off and try to put worried, frustrated citizens in touch with one another. By this time some people have decided that they need to talk to more than family and friends because the community as a whole needs to act. That is a critical moment—getting the experience of others and their views of the problems. Suggsvillians aren’t quite ready to decide what to do, but some of them begin to contact churches, civic organizations, and businesses that seem essential to any collective effort.

Even though outside agencies are available to call on, Suggsvillians, driven by their frustration with lack of change, eventually decide that no one can solve the town’s problems unless its citizens take matters into their own hands. This is when organized community forums begin.

Though determined to remain in the background, the group from the university helps organize a series of meetings so people can assess the town’s situation and figure out what can be done about their problems.

The call for the residents of Suggsville to meet and talk about the community initially draws the predictable handful. People sit in racially homogeneous clusters—until the chairs are rearranged in a circle and they begin to mingle. After participants get off their favorite soapboxes and stop looking for others to blame, they settle down to identifying their problems. Economic security emerges at the top of the list. Rather than spending their time wishing for some industry to relocate in Suggsville, the forum group picks up on a suggestion that they start locally. They turn their attention to a restaurant that has opened recently; it seems to have the potential to stimulate a modest revival downtown. Unfortunately, that potential isn’t being realized because unemployed men (and youngsters who like to hang out with them) are congregating on the street in front of the restaurant and drinking. Customers shy away.
At the next town meeting, the attendance is larger, and people begin to talk about what can be done to save the restaurant. The police chief argues that the problem is obviously loitering and proposes stricter enforcement of the relevant ordinances. Others hesitate, not because they think the police chief is wrong, but because they have different concerns. A woman suggests that the loitering is symptomatic of a more fundamental problem—widespread alcoholism. A man proposes that a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous be established. Where will it meet? The community is at another opportune moment—people are putting options for action on the table.

As these conversations go on over time (one meeting never accomplishes much of anything), the definition of the problem continues to change as people dig deeper into what is happening in front of the restaurant. Some think youngsters need more adult supervision, particularly after school. That is an option that citizens can act on, and it prompts another critical step in moving forward—committing community resources and organizing collaborative projects. Several community members decide to organize a sports program; others open after-school classes and expand youth services; another group sponsors a band. Suggsville is beginning to invent its future by drawing on local resources and the public work that citizens are willing to do with other citizens. Although the initial projects are small and involve only a handful of people, they prompt other people and organizations to begin their own projects.

As the meetings continue, several people argue that encouraging local businesses is fine, but it will never provide enough jobs to revive the economy. Suggsville has to attract outside investment, they insist. Others quickly point out that the center of town, especially the park, has become so unsightly that no one in their right mind would put a business there. The town needs a facelift. Suggsville’s three-member sanitation crew, however, has all it can do just to keep up with the garbage collection. After one of the forums, some of the people commit themselves to gathering at the park the following Saturday with rakes, mowers, and trash bags. They organize themselves into an efficient workforce by matching the things that need to be done with the people who have the appropriate tools. One group uses axes to clear the fence line; a crew of mowers take on the grassy open space. Those who didn’t bring tools take the rubbish to the trash. The work of cleaning up the park begins to bring about more than physical change. It creates a stronger sense of community. A connected citizenry or public begins to form—a citizenry with the capacity for continued collective decision making and action.

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The most natural right of man, after that of acting on his own, is that of combining his efforts with those of his fellows and acting together. Therefore, the right of association seems to me by nature almost as inalienable as individual liberty.

—Alexis de Tocqueville
During most of the meetings, the recently elected mayor sits quietly, keeping an eye on what is happening. The forums began during the administration of his predecessor, so he feels no obligation to the participants. In fact, he is a bit suspicious of what they are doing. No one makes any demands on the town’s government, although some citizens probably think it strange that the mayor hasn’t offered to help with the cleanup. Nonetheless, even before the citizens arrive at the park, he sends in the town’s garbage crew with trucks and other heavy equipment to remove rusting playground equipment and trim storm-damaged trees, things that can’t easily be done with home tools.

Over the next two years, the ad hoc group that came together to clean the park organizes into a more formal Suggsville Civic Association. New industry doesn’t come to town, but the restaurant holds its own. Drug traffic continues to be a problem; still, people’s vigilance, together with more surveillance by the police department, reduces the trade. The crowd loitering on the streets melts away. The public school isn’t directly involved in any of the economic development projects, yet it benefits from the changes in the civic environment. A new summer recreation program becomes popular with young people, and teenage pregnancies decrease a bit, as do dropouts.

As public policy institutes know, these new civic organizations often develop internal problems. Once the Suggsville association becomes an official body, some of the time that has been spent on projects is drained away by organizational disputes. And, as might be expected, several of the association’s projects don’t work as planned. Fortunately, citizens adjust their strategies and launch more initiatives. Perhaps this momentum has something to do with the way the civic association involves the community in evaluating projects—and the community itself. This is still another critical moment. The association convenes meetings in which citizens can reflect on what they have learned, regardless of whether the projects have succeeded. Success isn’t as important as the lessons that can be used in future projects.

Although Suggsville wouldn’t make anyone’s list of model communities, the town has increased the capacity of its citizens to influence their future. Asked what the two years of citizen decision making and action had produced, one Suggsvillian said, “When people banded together to make this a better place to live, it became a better place to live.”

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Chapter 5: Introducing Democratic Practices at Critical Moments

This and the following chapters are about ways to take advantage of the opportunities that have just been noted; these are opportunities for putting the public back into the public’s business. More seems necessary than simply involving a larger number of people or being open in government. The key is changing the characteristics of what happens at six critical points in everyday politics. We mean by “characteristics” not what is done, but how it is done. The critical moments occur when problems are named, when options are put on the table and a frame of reference is created for decision making, when decisions are made, when resources are committed to implement decisions, when action is organized, and when the results of action are evaluated.

In Suggsville, these opportunities occurred when people were considering whether the problem was just loitering, when they were deciding what actions might be taken, when they were committing themselves to clean up the park, and when, after two years of effort, they were reflecting on what they had learned.

At all of these points, there are opportunities for citizens to exercise control over their future. When they do, they practice democracy in a way that changes the normal routines of politics. At the foundation, we refer to these practices as “democratic,” and this chapter reports on what makes them distinctive. Although all of the practices may not occur in a forum, they all have implications for what needs to happen in one. And they have implications for how people are prepared to lead forums.

Policies are ways of completing tasks. Any type of work can be broken down into tasks. Painting a house, for instance, involves selecting colors, scraping and priming the surface, and applying the paint. Collective action is no different; it is carried on through a series of interrelated activities. And democratic ways of acting have an intrinsic value. Singing in a choir, for example, is intrinsically rewarding; it isn’t just to produce music. Hammering a nail, on the other hand, is typically done for purely utilitarian reasons. Only young children do it for fun. The Greeks made this distinction by calling hammering nails a technique and singing a practice. Democratic practices are genuine practices. They generate their own political energy and provide the satisfaction needed to sustain public life. The work that citizens do with citizens in a democracy has an intrinsic worth to the people involved as well as practical purposes. Institutions, by comparison, usually go about their work with routines that have largely utilitarian purposes. As in hammering nails, the primary value is efficiency.

Citizens are shut out of institutional routines, not necessarily because they aren’t invited to participate in some way, but because the routines open to them were designed to facilitate the
work of institutions and their professional staff, which, important as that is, isn’t the same as the work of citizens. There are distinctive ways that citizens go about the activities inherent in collective efforts, such as the ones that were mentioned in Chapter 4: identifying problems, creating a framework for decision making, and making choices among options for acting.

**Naming Problems in Terms of What Is Most Valuable to Citizens**

As discussed in the section on the path to engagement, the first task in any kind of problem solving is identifying and describing what needs attention. In Suggsville, people began to do that after church and at the grocery store. Their conversations revolved around ordinary questions: What’s bothering you? Why do you care? Are others going to be affected? Kettering wanted to find a term that would capture what is going on politically when people are identifying a problem this way. We have called it “naming.”

Who gets to name a problem and the terms used to describe it are very important. This routine activity can be transformed into a democratic practice when problems are described in ways that reflect people’s experiences and deepest concerns. That opens the door to citizens; everyone becomes a stakeholder. The door stays open when the name is subject to change. Even if deliberation begins with what appears to be a well-defined issue, people are likely to rename it before they have finished making a decision.

Professionals, on the other hand, name problems in ways that mirror their expertise and the solutions their professions provide. That is one of the reasons that professionals and citizens are often on different pages. Even though nothing is wrong with professional names, they don’t normally take into account what citizens experience. For example, people tend to think of drug abuse in terms of what they see happening to families and how it influences young people, not in terms of police interdiction of the drug trade.

Usually professional names are accurate, but they can be so precise that they create the impression that no other names are possible. When that happens, people don’t see their worries reflected in the way problems are presented, so they back off. Furthermore, professional descriptions may give the impression that there is little that citizens can do. The same is often the case with the names used to describe problems in partisan politics.

While professionals want a precise name for a problem, citizens usually have several names because problems are often multifaceted. Recall how the citizens of Suggsville found several ways of describing the problems affecting the restaurant; the names or descriptions ranged from loitering to alcoholism to children without supervision. They were also naming the problem in “public terms,” that is, the names reflected people’s experiences and the concerns that grew out of those experiences.

Crime, for instance, can be described in statistical terms, but people value safety or being secure from danger. And safety cannot be quantified. Recall what happened in Suggsville. The
police chief wasn’t wrong when he described the restaurant’s problem as loitering. However, his
name didn’t address other concerns about why the loitering was occurring and didn’t give
Suggsville’s residents much of a role in solving the problem. Because of the town’s forums,
however, citizens were able to add names that were meaningful to them, and they eventually
described the problem in ways that took into account a number of concerns.

Clearly, naming a problem in public terms isn’t simply describing it in everyday language.
What makes this practice distinctive is that the names capture intangibles that touch on people’s
deepest hopes and most profound apprehensions. These collective or broadly political impera-
tives are similar to the individual needs that Abraham Maslow found common to all human
beings. They are more basic than the interests that grow out of our particular circumstances,
which may change. And they are different from values, which also vary. Furthermore, the things
that are critically important to our collective well-being are common to most everyone. We all
want to be free from danger, secure from economic privation, free to pursue our own interests,
and treated fairly by others—to mention a few of our primal motives.

The things we hold dear can stir us to collective action. In one community that was facing
corruption in high places and egregious crimes on the streets, the citizens asked themselves what
they valued most. Virtually all said that, more than anything else, they wanted to live in a place
that made them proud. Pride is an intangible aspiration rarely mentioned in planning documents
or lists of goals. Yet the need to be proud of their city was a powerful, political imperative.

Perhaps the most valuable insight that comes from people naming problems in their own
terms is the realization that they already know something about the problem and can see how the
problem affects what they consider valuable. As the saying goes, we may not know how to make
shoes, but we know if the ones we have on pinch. The insight (or “aha”) that we can draw valid
knowledge from our collective experience is empowering. And this insight facilitates collective
work because it encourages people to own their problems. Owning problems is a potent source of
the political energy for action.

Recall that when citizens in Suggsville added their names for the problem of protecting the
restaurant, they implicated themselves in solving their problems. People could do something
about the alcoholism that was threatening both the social order and families. They could do
something about the children who suffered when adults took little responsibility for the youngsters’ well-being.

When people name problems in terms of their own experiences, they may also realize that
they are already participating in politics—the politics of solving problems. They don’t have to be
rallied or enlisted. The political world is less like a far-off planet inhabited exclusively by office-

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21 Milton Rokeach and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, “Stability and Change in American Value Priorities, 1968-
holders and policy experts. This realization has occurred in public deliberations because people’s experiences and concerns count as much as professional expertise and data.

**Framing Issues to Identify All the Options**

As a problem is being named, various options for dealing with it are usually put forward. These options grow out of the names people give problems. You can hear this going on in everyday conversations. People ask one another: what do you think we should do about the problem? They usually respond by talking about both their concerns and the actions they favor. Typically, the actions are implicit in the concerns.

Kettering would say that when this happens, people are creating the framework they will use in deciding on what action to take. A public framework collects and presents options for acting on a problem, lays out the advantages and disadvantages of each, and identifies tensions among options.

Every issue is framed in some way, but not all frameworks help citizens make good decisions. Sometimes an issue is framed around a single plan of action to the exclusion of all others. That kind of framework tells citizens to take it or leave it. Another common framework pits two possible solutions against each other, encouraging a debate between advocates of each. Neither of these frameworks promotes the kind of collective decision making that leads to collective action. Public decision making is better served by a distinctive framework, one that includes all the major options (usually three or four) presented fairly; that is, with due regard for the things that people consider valuable. Framing issues this way is a democratic practice.

An option is made up of actions that have the same purpose or that take a community in a particular direction. For instance, in a neighborhood hit hard by a rash of burglaries, most people would probably be concerned about their physical safety, which is surely a basic political motive. Some might want more police officers on the streets. Others might favor a neighborhood watch. Even though each of these actions is different, they both center around one basic concern—

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*I believe in democracy because it releases the energies of every human being.*

-Woodrow Wilson-
safety. In that sense, they are all part of one option, which might be characterized as better law enforcement.

In the neighborhood just described, people are also likely to consider other options for protecting themselves. In addition to concerns about crime, they might be worried about economic stability and social responsibility. Each concern would generate its own proposals for action. And each cluster of actions, centered on its own underlying concern, would make up an option for dealing with the overarching issue, which might be something like “neighborhood revitalization.” Different actions belong in the same option when the objectives of the actions are the same.

When multiple options are included in a framework, it creates a basis for the kind of fair trial that engages citizens. But deliberation isn’t a debate between one group of people who have one concern and another group with different concerns. Take the issue of protecting the American family. When people consider all of the pressures on today’s families, many focus on the importance of the institution of marriage and lament the high divorce rate. These same people may also feel strongly about parental responsibility. And most of them probably worry about what is happening to children when they hear stories of abuse or lack of medical care; they believe in protecting the young. So on just this one issue, people value several things: marriage, parental responsibility, and the well-being of children. Everyone is touched by these concerns, although the depth of the concerns may vary. And yet each concern suggests a different option for acting on the problem.22

Because widely shared concerns are involved, the description of an option has to fairly portray what is valuable to most everyone, “best foot forward.” At the same time, to prompt responsible decision making, the framework as a whole has to present the downsides of every option. For example, even though the institution of marriage might be strengthened by stricter laws limiting divorces, the laws could have unintended and negative consequences. And no option is free of costs. Similarly, there can be tensions among the options, which also have to be captured in the framework. If a city council is trying to protect families, the availability of resources may force them to choose the option that is most cost effective. Even more serious, pursuing one option can sometimes adversely affect another. People want to be secure, and they want to be free. Unfortunately, what makes them secure may limit their freedom, and what expands their freedom may make them less secure. There are also obvious tensions when options move in fundamentally different directions, as in the issue of whether to base our system of social welfare on individual or collective responsibility. (This tension is reflected in the debate over whether to privatize the Social Security System.) When citizens face issues squarely in deliberation, they can’t escape the pull and tug of the things they value most.

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DELIBERATING PUBLICLY TO MAKE SOUND DECISIONS

Once the major options for acting are on the table, a decision has to be made. And that can be done in any number of ways—by voting, by negotiating a consensus, or by deliberating. For citizens to be fully engaged, the decision making is best done in a distinctive fashion, in which citizens weigh the possible consequences of a decision against what is deeply important to them. As you know, Kettering calls this “public deliberation.” When people deliberate with one another, decision making becomes the third of the democratic practices.

In the community concerned about family stability, the town council’s officeholders could have decided which policy to adopt by themselves, or they could have negotiated a settlement with stakeholders like the local social service agencies. In some instances, elected representatives should decide. In others, however, the decision making needs to include the citizenry, particularly when problems require civic as well as government action, and particularly when more than technical solutions have to be considered.

Citizens, however, make different kinds of decisions than the solution-specific decisions that officeholders have to make. Normative considerations—the things that are valuable—are at stake, and these have to be taken into account when citizens decide how to approach an issue. That is different from deciding which technical solution is best.

Of course, citizens can be involved without having to make difficult choices on issues. People may be given opportunities to present their needs or describe the future as they hope it will be, yet not participate in deciding how their needs should be met or how their wishes should be realized. The matter of what citizens can do themselves on their own behalf may never come up. Yet if decision making is to become a public practice, more has to happen than letting people simply express themselves. Citizens have to face up to difficult choices and do the hard work of choosing among them.

As said earlier, public deliberation is weighing the likely consequences of various approaches to a problem against all that we consider truly valuable. It increases the probability that a decision will be sound by helping people determine whether the actions being considered are consistent with what they consider most important for their collective well-being. Although we can’t be certain we have made the right decision until after we have acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate costs and benefits, to ask how high a price we would be willing to pay in order to get what we want. Citizens deliberate on personal matters all the time with family and friends. Public deliberation just expands the number of participants.

Since the purpose of deliberation is to make sound decisions, sound knowledge is essential. There is more than one kind of knowledge, however, particularly for the questions citizens face, which can be answered in more than one way. Knowing which answer is best for the well-being of all requires a knowledge that can’t be found in books alone because the questions aren’t just about facts. People have to determine what the facts mean to them by consulting their experiences, as
well as their sense of what is most important to their well-being. Citizens create this distinctive form of knowledge, which has been called “public knowledge” or “practical wisdom,” as they deliberate. This kind of knowledge is socially constructed. Deliberation, the ancient Greeks explained, is “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.”

This isn’t to say that expert knowledge is unimportant; it is necessary, though it is not sufficient. Institutes working with campaigns to educate citizens might usefully remind the campaigns that what the public needs to know—and the way a citizenry goes about knowing—are different from what experts know and the way they go about knowing. Providing factual information is no substitute for the talk people must do to teach themselves.


Instead of evoking discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any action at all.

—Pericles
Chapter 6: The Effects of Public Deliberation

What is known about the effects of citizens deliberating with citizens? That is probably the question asked most frequently by institutes and forum sponsors. Public deliberation, including the naming and framing that is linked to decision making, can lead to a different way of doing politics, not just a different way of talking (although speaking is a political act: to talk fear is to frighten, to talk reconciliation is to reconcile). To be sure, nothing in the foundation’s research shows that public deliberation is a miracle cure for all that ails the body politic, yet case studies show that it has powerful effects that go beyond its role in decision making. These effects have come primarily from repeated deliberations, not isolated forums.

Setting the Stage for Problem Solving

It would be hard to overestimate the number of bad decisions that have been made as a result of an incomplete understanding of a problem or a misperception of the people affected by it. In public deliberation, people develop a better sense of the problems they face and those who face the problems with them, both of which pave the way for 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 more in relation to the well-being of others.

Forum participants also report becoming more involved in civic activities, perhaps in part because of a better understanding of others. This mutual understanding, which is a by-product of choice work, isn’t political therapy. Most people don’t deliberate because they want to feel better about themselves or their problems; they deliberate because they want to solve their problems.

In addition to developing a shared sense of a problem and a better understanding of the people who are going to have to solve it, the exchange of perceptions in deliberation is crucial to developing new insights and reorienting ideas. Listening to others helps us look at problems

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24 Michael and Suzanne Osborn describe the politics involved in “participative communications” in Alliance for a Better Public Voice (1991). This book was designed for educators in speech communication and published by the Kettering Foundation.

from a different vantage point. A visiting scholar at the foundation liked to make this point by
describing an imaginary bug crawling on a ball. Wherever the bug went, it saw endless space
ahead. But if someone lifted the bug above the ball, it would realize that the space wasn’t infinite
at all; it was really finite. Deliberation helps us get off whatever ball we are on.26

This reorientation affects problem solving. When people come to see their problems in a
different light, they are more likely to identify new actors who can help solve the problems. As
an understanding of the scope of a problem grows, so does the recognition that other resources
are needed to respond to it.

**In this world second thoughts, it seems, are best.**

—Euripides

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**WORKING THROUGH STRONG EMOTIONS**

Deliberation has also been effective in dealing with the emotions that are always a part of
decision making. Public deliberation is more than a purely rational exercise in critical thinking;
feelings are involved. When confronted with a difficult decision, we usually begin by denying
that there is a problem or blaming our troubles on somebody else. Emotions become intense
when what we need to do to solve a problem threatens the things we hold dear. For instance, an
action that might protect us from terrorism might infringe on our privacy.

Decisions are emotion laden and difficult because we have different priorities collec-
tively. We also have different priorities personally that come to the surface in deliberations
and agitate us. Deliberation helps us work through the feelings that result, not to make them
go away, but to reach the point at which we are in control of our emotions. Only then are we
in a position to make sound decisions.27 “Working through” is a good phrase because that is

26 Merab Mamardashvili sometimes told this story with a squirrel rather than a bug. That story is in Bernard

27 Daniel Yankelovich discussed his concept of “working through” problems in chapter 17 of his book *New
exactly what happens when we move from denial or blaming others to facing up to the hard choices inherent in every public decision.

As the public works through issues, it moves through stages. Initially, people may not be sure that what they are being told is a problem is really serious. Later, they may realize there is a problem but aren’t ready to acknowledge that they might be contributing to it. It may be even later still before people are ready to make a decision about solving the problem. Forum sponsors and communities have to take into account where the citizenry is in coming to terms with an issue, and they can use deliberation to help the public avoid getting stuck in one of the stages.

The political system as a whole can also get stuck when emotions take over and polarization blocks progress. This is a constant danger because, as discussed in Chapter 4, political questions are inherently moral—they are about what should be done—and people will always differ on such matters. Moral disagreements are inevitable in politics but, to repeat, the differences can’t be resolved with facts alone. Facts tell us what is, not what should be. Deliberation is useful in dealing with these kinds of issues because it takes into account the differences in what facts mean to different people. That’s why it has been called moral reasoning.

Americans recognize that sensitive issues spark emotions and are reluctant to inflame passions. At the same time, many people would like opportunities to talk about hot topics frankly, provided they could exchange opinions without being attacked personally. They are curious about what others, even those who aren’t like them, think. That has been demonstrated in the high marks forum participants give to meetings where people can express strong opinions without others contesting their right to their beliefs. Recognizing the many concerns that citizens bring to an issue keeps the focus from narrowing to a single concern. Attempts to narrow the focus and disallow other points of view invites conflict. To foster a constructive political environment in communities and on campuses, institutes have introduced deliberation to both local civic organizations and student groups.

The temper and integrity in which a political fight is waged is more important to the health of our society than any particular policy.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

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28 A more detailed account of people’s responses to NIF deliberations is in Chapter 12 of Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) has a more detailed description of this political discourse.
**MOVING BEYOND FIRST REACTIONS AND POPULAR OPINION**

The warning “act in haste, repent at leisure” applies to people collectively as well as individually. As already mentioned, public deliberation helps citizens get beyond first impressions to more shared and reflective opinions, or what some call “public judgment.” Public judgment is not the same as popular opinion, which is often contradictory and shortsighted. Public judgment only emerges after citizens have faced up to the costs and the long-term effects of a popular course of action. Deliberation helps them do that by carefully weighing the potential consequences of possible actions.

The distinction between popular opinion and public judgment is key to the mission of a number of institutes. Dan Yankelovich, the noted analyst of public attitudes, coined the term public judgment to capture a qualitative difference he found between ever-changing opinions early in a political campaign and the stable, consistent, and thoughtful attitudes that often emerged just before the polls opened. Other scholars found collective policy preferences over a 50-year period also to be stable, consistent, and rational. These findings challenge the conventional belief that the public is uninformed, inconsistent, and emotional (easily swayed by passionate appeals). Yankelovich argued that strengthening the public’s capacity for sound judgment is key to strengthening democracy, and that is what several institutes have set out to do using deliberation.

**MAKING PROGRESS WHEN AGREEMENT IS IMPOSSIBLE**

Even though deliberating fosters more shared and reflective judgment, it doesn’t eliminate differences of opinion. People have remained at odds even after gaining a better understanding of why others hold contrary views. Yet this understanding is no small gain. Citizens have been able to move ahead with collective projects because deliberation has helped them map out a broad sense of direction to follow.

Public deliberation’s ability to help people move ahead in the face of differences has been documented in a Public Agenda study. The study shows that deliberation prompted only about half the participants (53 percent) to change their minds on an issue. A much larger percentage (71 percent) had second thoughts about their opinions, so that even though they did not change their minds, they became less rigid. And more than three-fourths (78 percent) said that although they encountered viewpoints that they didn’t agree with, they recognized that the contrary views were valid.

**CREATING NEW RULES**

The Public Agenda study shows that the experience of deliberation can have significant effects on individuals. Equally, if not more important, the habit of deliberation, which was

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29 The term “public judgment” was coined by Daniel Yankelovich in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991).


31 Farkas and Friedman, with Bers, *The Public’s Capacity for Deliberation*, 17.
discussed at the beginning of the chapter, can have significant effects on communities. Anything people do together, whether it’s raising a barn in the old-fashioned way, playing a team sport, or operating a business, generates its own rules. The same is true of choice work. Repeated deliberation instills norms or work rules that influence what goes on outside the forums.

For example, take the work involved in making decisions about how to address community problems. In order to do this work, people have to weigh options for acting to determine how various options might affect the things that they hold dear. And to find out what is dear, people have to listen to one another very carefully. Listening carefully isn’t exactly a “rule,” but maybe that term will do for now if we say more about what we mean. We are talking about pragmatic, situational, or work-inspired incentives for getting a job done. Kettering first became aware of these implicit rules from reports on forums that dealt with highly controversial issues like AIDS and abortion. When the forums began with an agreement among the participants to work toward making decisions and not just talk about the issues, behaviors changed. If someone tried to derail the deliberations, others would usually step in to bring the conversations back on track. The people who brought their groups back to problem solving didn’t appeal to official rules but to the pragmatic, informal ones with comments like, “Are there other ways to see this issue?”

Additional rules are established when forum participants begin to name the problem, a process that was described earlier. If a name is to mean something to most everyone, people have to consider experiences that are different from their own. The group won’t work together otherwise. Rules also develop around creating a framework of options. Americans are suspicious of framings that are weighted in favor of one particular course of action, so creating an acceptable framework imposes a standard of fair mindedness.
Of course, there have been forums where deliberation never took place because there was too little structure. Forum participants were just encouraged to talk and listen. No one suggested there was any work to do, and so no rules developed. At the other extreme, some forum organizers have worried that participants might disrupt the deliberations. Even though that has seldom happened, the anxiety has caused moderators to overstructure meetings. They intervened after every comment, which blocked the person-to-person interaction that makes deliberation productive. Or they imposed written rules of behavior, which stifled an honest exchange of opinions.

**Informing Officeholders**

While fostering new “rules” for the work that citizens do with citizens is a critical contribution, public deliberation’s effects on officeholders and representative government is not insignificant. These effects have been of particular interest to forum sponsors and institutes whose objective is to bring a greater public voice into the political system. Officeholders who have listened in on people doing choice work have found that deliberation offers them information they can’t get from polls, focus groups, or hearings with constituents.

Learning how citizens name issues reveals the deeper motives and concerns people share. Seeing citizens work through conflicts and discover what is valuable to them as a public redefines 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.

Admittedly, watching deliberation unfold in forums may strike officials as akin to watching wallpaper peel. It is slow and messy. And it doesn’t produce the quantifiable conclusions that polls do. Still, it shows how citizens go about thinking when they struggle with difficult decisions. You might call this public thinking, to distinguish it from the way professionals reason or political leaders make decisions. Public thinking isn’t a superior form of thinking; it is just another of the distinctive things that citizens do in their work.

**Learning Democracy**

Arguably, public deliberation’s most profound effect is its ability to give people a new perspective on democracy and their role in it. Deliberation among citizens gives people a personal experience with democracy at a grassroots or organic level. At institutes and elsewhere, public deliberation has been used to expose students to this less common understanding of how self-rule works and what they can do as citizens.

At Wake Forest University, two faculty members, Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, used forums, plus classroom instruction, to find out what the effects might be on students’ understanding of democracy and of themselves as political actors. They compared students in this experiment with classmates who had little or no exposure to public deliberation. Over the four years of their college career, students in the democracy experiment were introduced to deliberation at
multiple sites: in classrooms, in the campus community, and in the town where the university is located. Deliberation was not presented as just a way of conducting forums, but rather as a way of living democratically.\textsuperscript{32}

The impact that this experiment had on the students was profound. As one participant said, it affected everything she did. She and her classmates developed a different sense of what self-rule means, especially an appreciation of the need for citizens to work together. Compared to the students who weren’t in the study, participants were more likely to believe politics involved more than electing representatives. That understanding gave them an expanded sense of the many ways they could be effective political actors.

Students in the Wake Forest experiment were also more, not less, likely to vote—even though they knew that the elections were not the be-all and end-all of democracy. And 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 the students appear to have distinguished between service to others and collective work \textit{with} others, which is significant for institutes interested in political education.

Chapter 7: Implementing Deliberative Decisions

Public deliberation, for all of its benefits, is more than an end in itself; it is a pathway to collective action. The ability to act together gives citizens the power they need in order to make a difference in politics. Just as there are critical moments in the routines of politics-as-usual that create opportunities to rename issues, create broader frameworks, and decide matters deliberatively, there are also critical moments when it comes to implementing decisions. Institutes and forum sponsors can benefit from knowing what follows after collective decision making, even if they concentrate primarily on forums. The democratic practices involved in implementing decisions complete the explanations of how deliberative politics fits into democracy. The three practices discussed in this chapter have to do with committing resources, organizing complementary action, and learning together. These practices, like those that precede them, have distinctive characteristics that give citizens the power to shape their future.

IDENTIFYING RESOURCES/MAKING COMMITMENTS

Even in communities where citizens have deliberated over an issue and made decisions about what they think should be done, business-as-usual often takes over when it comes to implementing the decision. Citizens are often pushed to the sidelines. Institutions may take into account what people have decided in deliberation yet fall back on the familiar routines of institutional planning once the deliberation is over. Officials assume that after the people have spoken, it’s time for officeholders to follow up. Institutional plans don’t usually include provisions for collective action by citizens.

Planning makes sense for institutions but doesn’t fit with what citizens must do because the resources needed to implement institutional plans are different from those needed to launch collective action. If municipal agencies like the ones responsible for street repair or the water supply are called on to follow through on a public decision, they normally have the legal authority, equipment, and personnel to implement it. The democratic public, on the other hand, can’t command people or deploy equipment, and it seldom has any legal authority.

There is also a widely shared perception that citizens can’t do much because the problems in modern society only yield to scientific knowledge and technical skills. For instance, we were once told that rebuilding New Orleans after Katrina was primarily a job for the Corps of Engineers since only the Corps could repair levees. Citizens don’t repair levees by hand anymore, but rebuilding a community isn’t just a matter of replacing physical structures.

While some professionals may believe they are the only ones capable of acting and that citizens merely play supporting roles, this assumption has been challenged by scholars like Ronald
Heifetz at Harvard University. Heifetz, who was trained as a physician before teaching govern-
ment, points out that even though doctors can treat purely medical disabilities like a broken arm, 
other illnesses like diabetes require people to do certain things as well (like controlling their diets).
The same is true of many political problems: there is a technical remedy for some (rebuilding 
levees) though not for others (countering the rise in crime). Citizens have to act on the latter.33

What resources can citizens draw on? This question has to be anticipated in deliberations 
even if the objective of the forum is educational. The most important decisions people make in 
deliberations is whether they can do anything to solve the problem they are considering. There 

isn’t much question about the resources of the educated middle class or their abilities; there is 
much more skepticism, however, about people with little education and limited skills. John 
McKnight and his colleague, John Kretzmann, have challenged this perception in their research. 
They have found untapped talents among even the poorest neighbors that can be combined into 
collective capacities.34 Citizens have experiences to share, personal skills to draw on, and reser-
voirs of courage to offer. Limited material resources are offset when citizens exercise their 
ability to work together, which they do through ad hoc associations and local institutions.

Once resources are identified, they have to be made available. This is the moment of truth: 
are people really serious? In Suggsville, people began to volunteer their time and money as they 
made decisions about ways to revive the town. This commitment of resources is a key democ-

ratic practice.

Nothing would have happened in Suggsville if citizens hadn’t stepped forward to establish a 
chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous, start after-school programs for young people, and clean up 
the local park. Making such commitments isn’t spontaneous or magical, nor is it done by institu-
tional planning. People step forward because something valuable is at stake and because they see 
the possibility that they can make a difference. Although citizens don’t always do what they 
intend, they are more likely to follow through when they have committed themselves in public. 
As the colonists did in the Mayflower Compact, they make covenants with one another, which 
are equivalent to the contracts that institutions make.

Typically, Americans can’t be coerced into cooperating. They do what they have pledged to 
do because their fellow citizens expect it of them, which is why covenants are binding even 

though they can’t be enforced legally as contracts can. Covenants are enforced by pressure.35

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33 Ronald A. Heifetz and Riley M. Sinder, “Political Leadership: Managing the Public’s Problem Solving,” in 

34 John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward find-
ing and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighbor-
hood Innovations Network, Northwestern University, 1993) and John L. McKnight, “Do No Harm: Policy Options 

35 More information on covenants is in Daniel J. Elazar and John Kincaid, “Covenant and Polity,” New Convers-
sations 4 (Fall 1979): 4-8.
One community leader explained the high attendance at his association’s meetings this way: “If you don’t show up, somebody will say something to you about it.”

Deliberations may be followed by mutual promises, either at forums or subsequent meetings. 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. Commitments don’t just come at the end of deliberation, however; participation in deliberation is itself making a commitment.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.
—Margaret Mead

**ORGANIZING PUBLIC ACTING**

Just as the public has its own unique resources and distinctive way of obligating them, it also has its own distinctive way of acting. How any action is organized is critical. Government agencies act on behalf of the public through laws, regulations, and bureaucratic coordination; people act individually by volunteering for civic projects. Both are beneficial, but neither is public acting. Public acting is made up of a variety of actions taken by groups of citizens. It is particularly evident in natural disasters before government agencies are in a position to assist. These civic actions complement or reinforce one another through what is called “self-organizing.” Self-organized public action, another democratic practice, depends on a shared objective that allows a variety of actions to be mutually reinforcing without bureaucratic coordination. Deliberative forums can create this shared sense of direction.

36 Barbara Brown, telephone conversation with Anne Thomason, September 13, 2004.

People may commit resources in forums as they did in South Carolina or, more commonly, they form small groups to act after forums as they did in Suggsville. Because these groups usually need more resources or a particular resource they don’t have, they seek out other groups and form alliances. Cooperation comes from reciprocal agreements. One group promises another, we will do thus and so if you will do thus and so. Reciprocity builds connections between groups, something that has long been recognized as essential to effective political organizing. The more far-reaching the connections, the more diverse the resources that can be brought to bear on a problem.

Rather than substituting for official action, public action supplements it. The case for adding public action to institutional action is based on (1) the unique resources citizens can contribute, (2) the energy people bring to a civic enterprise when they are intrinsically motivated, (3) lower “transaction costs” (the cost of getting something done), and (4) enhanced productivity. When groups of citizens share a general sense of direction and are self-motivated, their efforts tend to mesh and reinforce one another, provided there is ongoing communication among groups, which is needed to create reciprocal agreements. (In Suggsville, there had to be enough communication between the groups so that everyone showed up at the park on the same day). This complementarity increases productivity; the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. And even though public acting requires a degree of coordination, the coordination isn’t administratively regulated and, consequently, doesn’t have administrative expenses.

The payoff for citizens joining forces in collective action isn’t limited to the concrete products of their work. Working together, as one community organizer pointed out, builds trust. As noted before, when people work together, they get a more realistic sense of what they can expect from one another. This is political trust, which isn’t quite the same as personal trust and shouldn’t be confused with it. Citizens are often strangers, and they need to know when they can and can’t depend on others. Working together over time makes that easier to do.

We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness; we get wholeness only through reciprocal relations, through infinitely expanding reciprocal relations.

—Mary Parker Follett
LEARNING AS A PUBLIC

Perhaps the most critical moment of all in politics comes when people evaluate what they have accomplished. Acting is typically followed by some type of assessment. When the citizenry or community learns about itself, as well as the results of a project, and the citizenry itself is doing the evaluation, Kettering would say that collective or “civic” learning is going on. It is another democratic practice.

Unfortunately, civic learning is often blocked even before it starts. There’s little time for reflection; the media declares the action to be beneficial, harmful, or inconsequential in a matter of days. Individuals pass judgment at work or in the supermarket. Official evaluation can bypass citizens entirely. Professional evaluators are brought in to make “objective” assessments using quantitative indicators of success based on a predetermined goal. The citizenry as a whole doesn’t learn a great deal from chance conversations, the media’s conclusions, or the professional evaluations.

There isn’t anything wrong with professional evaluations, editorial opinions, or personal reactions. They all have valid purposes. Yet none of these give the public a role. A community never learns en masse; it learns in small groups just the way it acts. And it is in these small groups that the citizenry has a role. The community as a whole learns when the conclusions from small groups are communicated to one another. The result is not one universal conclusion but rather many lessons being learned.

In civic learning, the citizenry itself learns, and the learning is reflected in changes in the way the public goes about its business. In other words, the unit of learning is the public or community, and the measure of learning is change. Another distinctive characteristic of civic learning has to do with what is being evaluated. When a community learns, both the objectives of the civic efforts and the results have to be on the table for inspection. As people learn, they may realize that what first seemed most valuable turned out not to be so important. That’s different from measuring outcomes against fixed, predetermined goals.

Liberty without learning is always in peril; learning without liberty is always in vain.

—John F. Kennedy
The citizens of Suggsville could have measured their success by counting customers at the restaurant or the number of arrests for drinking in public. Some probably did. But the community had even larger objectives, which couldn’t be measured. People wanted to overcome the fatalism that had grown as the town went into decline. And they needed to know how well they worked as a group. So they asked themselves simple but profound questions: How are we doing as a community? What are we learning? Are the things we are doing getting us anywhere? Are we creating the kind of community we want?

When people learn collectively, they rename, reframe, and decide again—after the fact. They deliberate in reverse; deliberation teaches people after they have acted, just as it does before. The questions afterward are much the same. Should we have done what we did? Was it really consistent with what we thought was most important?

Deliberation is a form of civic learning, and so are the other democratic practices. Discovering how people name issues is learning; developing a framework for decision making is learning; deciding the best course to follow is learning. Determining who will commit their resources is learning. Organizing complementary public action is learning. Learning is a distinctive political mode or manner of operating. And that is why some institutes have reorganized themselves as learning organizations; they want the politics implied in what they do to be consistent with the politics they encourage.

Keeping up the momentum behind civic initiatives is crucial because systemic problems never really go away. Democracy’s answer to maintaining momentum is through continuous learning. Self-rule assumes that people are ultimately their own sovereigns. They must figure out what to do because there is no other sovereign authority that can tell them. And the way citizens figure out what to do is by learning from their experiences.

Communities that approach their work as a series of experiments—and study those experiments to improve their performance—have an edge on communities that are so wedded to early success that they quit as soon as the results aren’t what they want. Communities that are in a learning mode have a better chance of staying the course.

Collective or civic learning encourages people to make incremental improvements and not be dissuaded when first attempts don’t turn out as hoped. Even failure has its uses when people are learning; they figure out how to fail intelligently. They profit from their mistakes. Learning communities are like ideal students who read everything assigned and then go to the library to find out more. These communities don’t copy a model, follow a case study, or use a formula. Imitation, they say, is limitation. Certainly they study what others have done, but they adapt what they see to their own circumstances.
Chapter 8: Integrating Democratic Practices into Politics-as-Usual

Institutes and forum sponsors have made impressive contributions to what some have described as a movement toward a more deliberative form of democracy. Even if this is not a movement, the expanding universe of civic organizations sponsoring some type of deliberative forums in the United States and other countries is impressive. It includes citizen juries, study circles, and forums based on the National Issues Forums books.

National Issues Forums

The NIF issue books have been used in every region of the country by schools, colleges, and libraries; by study circles and civic organizations; by religious groups; by senior citizen centers and youth clubs; by neighborhood and tenants’ associations—even by prisons. A survey of the organizations using the NIF materials located some 4,000. More than 800,000 issue books have been distributed or sold. And that is only a partial measure of participation because the books are often photocopied, and “issues in brief” are downloaded from the Web.

Equally significant, some organizations have prepared their own issue books for deliberative forums—among them the American Bar Association, the Farm Foundation, and the Southern Growth Policies Board. And outside the United States, organizations in 32 other countries, from Russia to South Africa, have held forums using their own choice books.
TAKING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES INTO EVERYDAY POLITICS

The growth of various types of deliberative forums, however, may not be a true measure of their ultimate value to democracy. Their most significant contribution may be using deliberation to stimulate other democratic practices and so influence the political culture. The message in public deliberation is that, as one scholar put it, the political is more than politics, just as there is more to self-rule than representative government.

In their book on deliberative democracy, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that democratic practices like deliberation belong anywhere and everywhere collective decisions are being made. There is no one right place to begin. Yet beginning in a democratic fashion—that is, with mutual consent—is essential if the objective is to strengthen self-rule. Jay Rosen, one of the foundation’s adjunct scholars, put the matter succinctly: the way citizens enter politics has to be consistent with the politics they want to flourish.

A COMMUNITY AS A FORUM WRIT LARGE

Democratic practices aren’t confined to one particular place or time. A community with all of its “great good places” could be thought of as the ultimate forum. Colonial settlers had something like this in mind when they referred to their communities as “civil bodies politic.”

This way of thinking has led to an interesting experiment in an Ohio community to see if democratic practices can be taken into regular community routines by seizing the opportunities that occur at critical points in politics-as-usual. A colleague at the foundation who lives in a nearby rural village faced with urban sprawl is trying to identify these opportunities. The issue had already become polarized, with developers on one side and preservationists on the other. She

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began attending meetings to see if her neighbors would consider modifications in what they were doing—changes that would open the way to democratic practices. She posed new questions: Does anyone see another side to this problem? Are there other options we should consider? Almost everyone thinks we should do this, but are there any negative consequences we ought to think about? She took her experiences from the deliberative forums into the larger political arena, doing exactly what Gutmann and Thompson had in mind. Her suggestions prompted an initiative to reframe the issue of development so there would be more than a growth-no growth debate. The goal of the initiative wasn’t simply to resolve the issue at hand but to begin a different way of addressing community problems.

Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.

—John Dewey

**ALIGNING Routines WITH PRACTICES**

Throughout this book, a distinction has been drawn between the institutional and organic spheres of politics or between what professionals do and what citizens do. At the same time, the book argues that the two can have a complementary and productive relationship. As institutes and forum sponsors build alliances with other organizations, they might want to look at ways of aligning professional routines and democratic practices.

Citizens name problems, frame issues, decide issues, implement decisions, act, and learn. Institutions also name, frame, decide, implement, act, and learn. Each democratic practice has its counterpart in an institutional routine. Professionals, however, aren’t likely to stop doing what the best practice in their field dictates—and they shouldn’t. Neither should they try to do the collective work that only citizens can do. Still, it would seem possible for institutions to go about their work in ways that make it easier for citizens to do their work.

What was said before about the benefits of public deliberations for officeholders applies here. Institutions can certainly be aware that citizens have their own distinctive ways of naming, framing, and so on. Professionals can benefit from knowing the names that citizens give issues because the names reveal what is truly important to people. This information can improve expert
diagnoses. Similarly, institutional framing of issues can be strengthened by knowing what is in a public framing. On the other side of the coin, sharing the names that institutions give problems and their frameworks with citizens might make people more receptive to the expertise that professionals believe is often discounted. At a minimum, institutions can be sensitive to the ways that their names and frameworks can unintentionally shut out citizens.

What is the incentive for institutions and the professionals who work in them to make the effort? National emergencies give a painfully clear picture of how much even our largest institutions and most expert professionals depend on the work of citizens.

The Center for Biosecurity at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center recently shared a study advocating community engagement as a means of responding to catastrophic health crises. These calamities require the collective efforts of citizens, “not just those who serve in an official capacity.” This report notes, however, that “emergency authorities . . . have mistakenly interpreted citizen-led interventions . . . as evidence of failure on the part of responders. In reality, government leaders, public health and safety professionals, and communities at-large have complementary and mutually supportive roles to play.” Citizens working together, not just heroic individuals, have to carry out search and rescue missions, provide medical aid, and meet the social needs of victims—all with institutional support, when available. Individual defensive measures, such as stockpiling food and water, don’t provide the security that only “resilient neighborhoods” can, according to these biosecurity experts.39

Without a doubt, citizens in some communities may not be prepared to carry out their responsibilities. There are cases where they have panicked and resorted to self-protective measures at the expense of others, but that is less likely to happen when democratic practices have become community habits.

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Democracy Reconsidered

This book started with one theme: public deliberation is best understood in a democratic context. From that point on, the book discusses what it takes for democracy to work as it should—from the perspective of citizens.

From that perspective, the central issue is, how can people make a difference in shaping their future? That’s more than an academic question because modern societies aren’t disposed to believe the citizenry can do much—perhaps because we live in a technological, global world that depends heavily on professionals and their expertise. Consequently, some have reduced sovereign citizens to amateur status, and people are acutely aware of this. They feel pushed to the sidelines of democracy, yet they aren’t content to stay there. They insist on being able to make a greater difference, at the polls and beyond. They just aren’t sure how.

Public deliberation isn’t a complete answer to “how.” Nonetheless, it can be part of the answer. Its contributions are more than the results of forums, regardless of how many forums there are. And the effects of public deliberation aren’t fully measured by changes in policy. It turns out that deliberating with other citizens can lead to a profoundly different understanding of democracy. People have realized that politics doesn’t have to be like the politics they abhor. And they have a better sense of what they can do to make it better. They have discovered the power to change within themselves.

This power has profound implications for forum sponsors and institutes whose business is introducing public deliberation. In grappling with their challenges, they can take heart from

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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
indications that people may have an instinct for reasoning together. A student of deliberative work said it as well as anyone ever has: “The process of deliberation helped me to move beyond my habits of thought, perception, and closed-mindedness. Deliberative pedagogy is not about being taught but about waking up.”

This report, *We Have to Choose: Democracy and Deliberative Politics*, is based on a larger work, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, which was published in January 2006.