

Deliberation and Democracy

A Report From the Fifteenth Anniversary Colloquium of the
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Is public deliberation possible in a contemporary democracy? If so, what are the conditions under which it thrives or wilts? Can a deliberative citizenry have real influence on pressing public policy issues? What would a deliberative society look like, and what steps might be taken toward achieving it?

These were some of the key questions taken up at the National Issues Forums' (NIF) Fifteenth Anniversary Colloquium in late June 1997. Leading scholars, journalists, foundation leaders, public opinion researchers, civic activists and thoughtful citizens, along with NIF practitioners from across the country, came together at L'Enfant Plaza Hotel in Washington, D.C. to assess NIF's achievements and to examine more broadly the strengths and limitations of public deliberation in making democracy work.

Convened by the Kettering Foundation, the three-hour meeting came at the end of a two-day series of programs that brought together representatives of more than 50 organizations involved in civic work in the United States and abroad. "What we hope to accomplish in this gathering," Kettering Foundation president David Mathews noted in his opening remarks, "is to see if we can get a better fix on the challenges that stand in the way of making American democracy work as it should.... I think all of us have invested a considerable portion of our lives and careers in this question. This gives us a chance to compare what we are finding, what we are learning, and what we see as the challenges at the end of the century."

In one sense, the fifteenth anniversary celebration of the work of NIF was an odd occasion to ask whether public deliberation is possible. The forums convened by the thousands of voluntary associations, libraries, colleges, prisons, labor unions, senior groups and other civic organizations that make up the NIF network are, one might say, living examples of public deliberation. Furthermore, research indicates that deliberative forums offer a range of important benefits to individual citizens and to the nation's public life, from increased civic

awareness and political judgment, to greater public involvement and a heightened sense of political efficacy among forum participants.

But while the work of NIF suggests that there is indeed a role for public deliberation in strengthening democratic politics, the subject is nevertheless a thorny and elusive one. One might ask, for example, whether it is realistic to expect anything of value to emerge from local community forums, given the scale of the global economy and the forces that are raised against democracy today. Perhaps, as Michael Sandel of Harvard University wondered, we are “being too optimistic about the possibility of transplanting the laboratory successes represented by NIF into American public life generally?”

The question elicited spirited conversation and a variety of responses, which in turn raised new questions. David Mathews used the metaphor of an authors’ conversation. “I think everybody in this room, from one wall to the other, is writing a book,” he remarked. Some “books” deal with the process and the dynamics of group deliberation. Others grapple with the relationship between deliberation and effective political action. Another set of “books” examines the broader social and political challenges to deliberation. “I don’t think there has ever been a meeting of these authors, as it were,” Mathews said. “But the notion of having all of the authors in one room to discuss their books seem[s] to me to be right profitable.”

Are we being too optimistic about the possibility of transplanting the laboratory successes represented by NIF into American public life generally?

Michael Sandel
Harvard University

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION

When Virginia passed a welfare reform law recently that relegated many poor women to the streets, a group of concerned citizens in Norfolk gathered together one Saturday morning in the basement of a neighborhood church to discuss what could be done about it. It was a diverse assembly of some 50 people, both white and black, poor and middle class. As they deliberated on the issue, a wide range of viewpoints were expressed. Some of the participants were members of the local welfare rights organization and denounced the new law. Others felt that a new association should be established to provide services to those negatively affected by the legislation.

“I talked to a lot of these people afterwards,” said Lew Friedland, journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin. “Some of them were real conservative Baptist ministers who thought the welfare reform law was just great, and they were happy that it had been passed. Others were poor African American women who thought it was the worst disaster that was ever going to hit the community.” But after deliberating for an hour and a half, the group elected to create a local governing organization aimed at working with local and state officials to alleviate the problem.

The point of deliberation is to voice the public's conception of its problems and bring it to the dialogue.

Wanda Minor
NIF Practitioner

“To me, that was the essence of deliberation,” Friedland observed. “Much of the deliberation that goes on takes place over these very specific kinds of problem solving situations,” he said. “There is real debate and real governance going on there, and real demands are made on public officials when that governance takes place.”

Martha McCoy, executive director of the Study Circles Resource Center, recalled another case where public deliberation played a key role in the political process. Citizens forums were held in twelve communities throughout the state of Oklahoma in the hope of addressing the state’s pressing criminal justice problem. After lengthy deliberations, the forum participants outlined a series of specific action steps toward confronting the corrections issue. According to McCoy, the outcome of the statewide forums-process subsequently influenced a state bill on the issue.

The deliberative process is valuable because, as Wanda Minor, an NIF convenor from Birmingham, Alabama, put it, “the public’s conception of its problems is different from the policy elite definition of problems. Part of the point of [deliberation] is to voice the public’s conception of its problems and bring it to the dialogue. It’s the people’s problems.”

The rationale for public deliberation could be summed up as the idea that “if the problem is ours, the solution must be ours.” Democratic politics, by definition, can only function well with the active participation of citizens. In order for citizens to be actors, however, they must be included in the process of setting policy directions and making choices. And making choices involves deliberation — the careful weighing of various policy alternatives in situations where there may be reasons for deciding on one course of action, but equally compelling reasons for deciding on another.

Jay Rosen, director of the Project on Public Life and the Press, observed that the process of deliberation helps a public to know itself. “Deliberation and the National Issues Forums are a way for people to see themselves as a public, and a way for others — policy-makers, journalists, leaders in the community — to see people as a public,” Rosen said. “If we can increase the number, variety, and richness of the opportunities for seeing people as a public, maybe we will have one.”

Citizen deliberation can also influence public policy in significant ways. James Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Texas at Austin, observed that deliberation can affect public policy through the media, by changing the attitudes of decision-makers, by becoming part of the decision-making process, or by changing the media — which, he said, “is why the work of the civic journalists is so important.”

The rewards of deliberation can also be measured at the personal level in a heightened sense of civic identity, moral engagement and common purpose. “One of the things that I think often gets overlooked is the impact on the individual who participates at a forum, and the capacities it creates in that person’s life,” said Mark Miller, a long-time NIF practitioner from Indiana. “The value of deliberation is not so much the result — did it build a park or did it change a vote. It’s the deliberation itself, because that’s how people change. And things don’t change until people change.”

While most participants spoke of public deliberation as a means toward a democratic end, several people said it can also serve as an end in itself since it is “intrinsically satisfying,” in the words of James Fishkin. But this idea met with disfavor from several in the group who argued that unless the process is aimed at a specific outcome, it is merely an opiate of the people, a therapeutic exercise. To deliberate together because it is inherently satisfying is, as Michael Sandel put it, “to confuse a good that accompanies the activity” with “the point or the purpose” of the activity. Deliberation “makes no sense,” he said, unless it has some guiding purpose.

In some of the most valuable forums that I've attended, deliberation is a kind of permission-giving, or direction-setting.

Keith Melville
Public Agenda

This idea was echoed by a number of participants who pointed to the essential link between deliberation and political agency. “Power without deliberation is undemocratic, despotic and dangerous,” noted Benjamin Barber, political scientist at Rutgers University. “But deliberation

without power is irrelevant, fraudulent, and cynicism-breeding. It burns people out. They talk and talk and realize nothing has changed, nothing happens. In the end they decide that talking is no better than voting.” Michael Sandel of Harvard University agreed. Unless deliberation is “tied to effective power or the possibility of mobilizing effective power,” he said, “we can’t realize those goods either.”

A number of people took issue with the idea that public deliberation is primarily a process of problem-solving. As Keith Melville of Public Agenda remarked, problem-solving “isn’t necessarily what deliberation does best. In some of the most valuable forums that I’ve attended, [deliberation is] a kind of permission-giving, or direction-setting, that is really quite different from talking about a specific problem.”

Pat Scully, executive director of the Washington DC-based Congressional Exchange, expanded on this theme. His organization endeavors to bring citizens and members of Congress together in dialogue and mutual exchange.

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Pat Scully
Congressional Exchange

“When I tried to get this project off the ground,” he said, “I assumed that the big stumbling block would be the office holders. But as I began interviewing civic leaders around the country, again and again the tough sell was with them. What I heard talking to many of these civic activists was that it wasn’t about instrumental politics. Many people are turned off completely by that kind of politics. What they are trying to do is form relationships. We are sometimes shy of talking about the importance of relationship-building to deliberation because it sounds squishy, it sounds soft. But I’ve heard time and time again from people that that is what is important to them. They don’t only want to tell public officials, ‘Here is what we think you should be doing.’ Often it is simply, ‘We want you to understand what is going on in our lives.’”

According to Scully, deliberation should be seen as encompassing a variety of benefits. While it can be seen as a tool for problem-solving, on the one hand, it can also be used to deepen and enhance relationships, on the other. The former serves a more narrow purpose, sometimes referred to as “instrumental politics,” while the latter contributes to the formation of “social capital” — the networks and norms of trust and reciprocity that are the essence of healthy communities. As Scully observed, “it’s not an either/or situation.”

IS PUBLIC DELIBERATION POSSIBLE?

The question of whether or not public deliberation is possible is one that has haunted political thinkers dating back to Aristotle and his contemporaries. The problem, as Walter Lippmann famously stated it in his 1925 book *The Phantom Public*, is “whether it is possible for [the public] to find a way of acting effectively upon highly complex affairs by very simple means.” As Lippmann saw it, public policy issues are simply too technical and multifarious in a contemporary democracy to be understood by the people at large. The political environment is “complex,” he wrote, yet the individual’s “political capacity is simple.” The public is therefore “a mere phantom,” an “abstraction.”

Walter Lippmann’s formulation set the stage for a lively discussion about the public and its role in the democratic process. Several participants stressed that Lippmann’s idea of a phantom public did not reflect their personal experiences.

“I’ve been in so many communities where it doesn’t take a whole lot of persuasion to collect a group of people together,” said Mike Score, an NIF practitioner from Ann Arbor, Michigan. “If it were so rare or such a phantom, it would be much more difficult to convene groups and engage in deliberation.”

The essence of journalism depends on a public that is not a phantom, but is in fact alert, alive and engaged.

Cole Campbell
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Though Lippmann is best remembered for his political analysis, he was first and foremost a journalist, and his legacy has had a lasting influence on the profession. Many journalists today operate on the assumption that the public is a phantom. This expresses itself as a kind of media bias — not an ideological bias so much as a bias about what constitutes news. Jan Schaffer, a former editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* who now directs the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, observed that today’s reporters do not know how to cover citizens engaged in public deliberation. “It doesn’t fit into the current templates of journalism as we know it today. It doesn’t fit into the ‘inverted pyramid’ style of writing. It doesn’t fit into the ‘anecdotal lead,’ because there is no cosmic ‘every man’ or ‘every person’ to lead the story with.”

Cole Campbell, editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, concurred. “I think journalism at its essence is a democratic art and depends on the existence of a public. Yet since the days of Walter Lippmann (the only intellectual that journalists claim as their own), we have been in denial about that.” At bottom, he said, the rationale for news is that people need to be able to

talk to each other about common problems and build for common solutions. “The essence of journalism depends on a public that is not a phantom, but is in fact alert, alive and engaged,” according to Campbell. “Fortunately, in the last couple of years, I’ve seen this public wherever I’ve looked. If you don’t believe it’s there, you can’t see it; if you look for it, you see it.”

Journalists are not the only ones who fail to “see” the public. As Benjamin Barber pointed out, social scientists and public opinion experts also speak of the public in very narrow terms. “They offer a model of politics that says, citizens are private clients of government. Pollsters say what we want from them is the expression of private prejudices. I’ve never heard a pollster ask, ‘What would be good for this country?’ They say, ‘What do *you* want?’ But they never pose the question, ‘What do we need and want for our whole community and our fellow citizens, not just for ourselves?’... When you ask people that question, they’re perfectly capable of responding intelligently and deliberatively.”

Lippmann complained that most people were unable to understand issues in their full complexity and therefore had to reconstruct them on a simpler model. People do this, he said, “through the medium of fictions.” But according to those at the colloquium, it is precisely this problem that prevents us from seeing the public. We are stuck with simplistic models and outdated fictions. Quoting Raymond Williams, Jay Rosen remarked that “there are no masses, there are only ways of seeing people as masses. ... You can’t actually find a person — a ‘mass man’ or a ‘mass woman.’ The masses don’t exist. But ways of looking at people as masses, ways of addressing people as masses, those exist. Those are real. So we might alter Williams’s statement and say something similar about the public. There is no public that you can go out and touch.... There are only ways of seeing people as a public.”

Rosen went on to say that “we are no longer in a world where the models of politics we have used up to now can work.” We live at a critical juncture of human history, a world that is no longer what it was and not yet what it will be. This dilemma is reflected in the conflicting paradigms with which we speak of the public. James Fishkin elaborated: “When deliberation does not happen, it’s because we are a prisoner of our conceptions. If we think of politics and discussion as a spectator sport, and if we think of citizenship as something that has been reduced to just the act of voting, then it’s very easy to come to some dispiriting conclusions.”

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Jay Rosen
Project on Public Life and the Press

The question of whether or not public deliberation is possible today depends largely on how we perceive the public and its role in the political process. Richard Harwood of the Washington-based Harwood Group, a public issues research firm, summed up the point by saying that whether we work in newspapers, in public agencies, or in academia, it always comes down to a critical question: “What happens when you look in the mirror? What notion of society are you operating within? Are you in a society which is made up of segmentation, niche marketing, isolation, and fragmentation? Or are you in a society that operates with a sense of wholeness, perspective, voices, ambivalence, and connections?” The difference is one of perspective — but it is a perspective that profoundly influences the quality of our political discourse.

WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO DELIBERATION?

If public deliberation is possible, why is it such a rare feature of American public life today? This question surfaced at several points during the colloquium. “If it’s possible, why don’t we have it,” Benjamin Barber asked. “What is it in our system institutionally and attitudinally that prevents us from having a system that we know very well can work?”

People mounted a variety of responses to this question. Jan Schaffer observed that while deliberation may be possible in NIF-style forums, it is considerably harder in the broader setting of American public life. “Yes, public deliberation is possible,” Schaffer said, “but it is not being done spontaneously. It is being done self-consciously and in very prescribed venues — in National Issues Forums, through civic journalism projects, through deliberative polling exercises.” There is a great deal of talk going on in public places across the country, she said,

but it never gains the momentum required to “really affect public policy.... The question is not, ‘Is public deliberation possible?’ but, ‘Can it become natural and spontaneous?’”

But several discussants brushed aside the idea that deliberation only occurs in “laboratories” or prescribed venues. Cole Campbell, for example, stressed that people really do deliberate. “It happens all the time. Rich Harwood has gone out and described where it happens. Harry Boyte and others have said, This is how Americans actually talk to each other. And Tocqueville said, Look here, these people talk to each other; they solve problems.”

The idea that NIF represents an unnatural or idealized form of deliberation is a kind of “professionalized reversal [of] the way the world really works,” Campbell continued. When scholars refer to citizen deliberation using phrases like “spontaneous sociability” or when journalists say, “Isn’t that quaint; look, a citizen,” they are falling back on old stereotypes that do not reflect the realities of American public life today. The challenge, he said, is not to invent new opportunities for citizens to deliberate, so much as pay attention to the many that already exist.

Even so, fostering deliberation is increasingly difficult in the context of America’s eroding sense of community, observed Michael Sandel. Many Americans do not see any value in talk at the local level when the major political and economic decisions affecting their lives are made at the national, and even global, level. This is exacerbated, he said, by the increasing reluctance many feel toward identifying with common purposes. “We don’t have a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility, partly due to the fact that we live behind gated communities with a growing gap between rich and poor.”

We tend to deliberate too often with those who share our own opinions, and we do not cross the lines.

William Winter
National Issues Forums Institute

Eddie Williams, president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, commented that effective deliberation depends in large measure on “who is in the room and who is at the table.” Yet, he said, we live in a political culture marked by ideological, racial, generational, and other divisions that effectively rule out any sense of mutual responsibility. “We can talk,” he said. “Quite often, though, when the issue gets complicated or touchy, we talk past one another, or we create code words that may sound warm and fuzzy but may be interpreted in a hostile way.”

William Winter, Chairman of the National Issues Forums Institute, concurred. “We tend to deliberate too often with those who share our own opinions, and we do not cross the lines.” The first step in coming together to solve problems, Winter said, involves talking to each other in a way that recognizes the “huge fault lines” of race, education and economic circumstance.

This problem largely depends on how issues are framed, according to Martha McCoy. “How do you define the problem broadly enough that people from all walks of life not only feel welcome, or open to come to the table, but really want to be there because they see it is relevant to community problem-solving?”

And what happens when the community grows too large? Iris Marion Young of the University of Pittsburgh pointed out that it is increasingly difficult to have a political process informed by deliberation in a polity of some 260 million people. As the space between people grows, it becomes harder for “society to talk to itself.” It splinters into rival factions which define themselves by their opposition to one another, and the dialogue eventually breaks down.

“One of the central problems,” Benjamin Barber said, “is that participation and talk work best at the local level. But,

increasingly, power is central and even global, which means where we talk about things and where power is being exercised are pulling further and further apart. So we can sit in our local towns and have conversations about what we think are power issues. But the decisions about the global environment and the global economy are being made far away from us and our conversations have little to do with it.” The result, he said, is that deliberation can breed cynicism and burn people out.

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Benjamin Barber
Rutgers University

Another obstacle to public deliberation involves the way the process itself is understood. T.S. Eliot once remarked that “when a word acquires a universally sacred character, as has today the word ‘democracy,’ I begin to wonder, whether, by all it attempts to mean, it still means anything at all.” According to David Mathews, this dilemma now applies to the word ‘deliberation.’ The word is bandied about to the point where it begins to lose its meaning.

TOWARD A MORE DELIBERATIVE SOCIETY

How well is our democracy functioning today, and what are some of the steps that could be taken toward fostering a more robust civil society for the 21st century? The question evoked a variety of responses, from expanding the institutional settings for public discourse to activating our imaginations and asking ourselves what a more deliberative society might look like.

One of the most pressing questions as we look to the future is how to move beyond politics as “a spectator sport on television,” according to James Fishkin. An agenda for the next ten or fifteen years should concentrate on “the process of institutional innovation,” he said. That involves identifying new and broader “social contexts” for deliberation, as well as finding ways to overcome the “imprisoning conceptions” that currently pervade our thinking about citizenship.

We also need to pay greater attention to the next generation of democrats, in the view of Tim Walch of the Hoover Presidential Library. “Why are we not teaching deliberation in the classroom?” he asked. “Deliberation is a way of thinking about problem-solving, and it’s got a direct application.” He described his experiences convening a series of forums with sixth and seventh-graders. “It worked wonderfully well. They came up with amazing conclusions that probably would shock their parents.”

Another important issue, according to several participants, is the importance of noticing and calling attention to the deliberative efforts that are already underway in communities around the country. This work also involves acknowledging the value of informal public

talk and moral reflection, since these activities often serve as precursors (and sometimes by-products) of public deliberation. Richard Harwood said that his research indicates that the process of deliberation is not limited to the period of group discussion, but takes place over time. A great deal of deliberation occurs “outside the room, in the parking lot, elsewhere.” We need to think about deliberation “organically,” he said, “in the context of how society actually operates.”

The task of creating a more democratic future is also a task of the imagination, as Jay Rosen put it. “I think the real deficit that we have in trying to struggle toward a better democracy is a

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Jay Rosen
Project on Public Life and the Press

deficit of the imagination. We don't see it well enough. Perhaps, if we combine a number of important principles, we can see it a little bit better.”

Toward that end, Rosen offered a couple of concrete images of what a deliberative society might look like. In the congressional debates that preceded the Persian Gulf War, Rosen noted, the Congress actually took on the character of a deliberative body. “Anybody who watched that debate could see almost every single argument for and against going to war in the discussion. There were a variety of values being displayed. People spoke from their heart. They spoke from their personal convictions. They spoke with a degree of respect over the gravity of the situation. Of course, this was striking ... because it differs so much from what we ordinarily see from our Congress.” This observation, Rosen said, was originally made by E.J. Dionne in his 1991 book *Why Americans Hate Politics*.

There are moments in our history when democratic possibilities are realizable. And there are times when they are not. I suggest we are in one of those eras when democratic possibilities are realizable.

David Mathews
Kettering Foundation

“Another image to place in your mind,”

Rosen continued, “are the national party conventions.” There is a moment during the conventions, known as the roll call, when each state is called upon to cast their votes for a particular nominee. The roll call is “fun and engaging,” Rosen said, because having all the states report one at a time conveys a dramatic sense of being one nation. “Now, in that case, all we're getting is their numbers. But suppose we were getting the results of their deliberations,” Rosen suggested. “‘The great state of Ohio has deliberated on the question of campaign finance reform. Here is what we talked about. Here is what we struggled with. Here are some of the common values we found.’ Imagine a roll call of a deliberative nature.” Images such as these are helpful, Rosen concluded, because they allow us to envisage “a different political world.”

As the colloquium drew to a close, David Mathews observed that the discussion had revolved around three general themes. Picking up on the metaphor of an authors conversation, he said “there are, in fact, three different kinds of books being written.” The first set of “books” deals with the basic rationale for deliberation. Some of these explore the procedural aspects of political decision-making and how deliberation affects this process; others deal with the “transformational properties” of group deliberation; and yet others look at deliberation as a tool for building relationships and fostering social capital.

A second set of “books” stress that deliberation is a natural phenomenon that occurs spontaneously among citizens, but that it goes largely unrecognized. These books, Mathews said, are “about why it is unrecognized, why you can’t see it, and what are the things that stand in the way.” Finally, there are those who focus on the broader challenges to deliberation today, such as the widening rift between community decision-making and global power; the deepening racial, educational and economic divisions in our society; and the general lack of a deliberative ethos in our workplaces, schools and families.

In his concluding remarks, Mathews reflected on our unique moment in history. “I suggest that we are in one of those eras when democratic possibilities are realizable. One of the most engaging questions we can ask ourselves now is: If it fails, as it has so often, what will cause it to fail?” No matter what sort of “book” we happen to be writing, he said, that is the question to which we need to address ourselves today.