MAKING CHOICES TOGETHER

The Power Of Public Deliberation

October 2003

WHY DELIBERATE?

If you asked the early settlers of Dorchester this question, they might simply say "to make decisions about how to solve problems." If you asked that question with the country's entire history in mind, the answer might be that deliberation both created a public for American democracy and allowed that public to define the public's interest. Surely that is a never-ending role for deliberation.

A range of reasons

If you ask the people who go to forums today, you are likely to hear reasons that range from personal growth to changing the political system.[6]

Some reasons are personal: They want to learn new decision-making skills they can use as citizens, to understand the issues better, to reconnect to the political process, or to regain a sense of agency. They were tired of being on the outside looking in.

Some people have their community in mind, or the role of their institution in the community. They might say they want to strengthen the civic infrastructure. Or they might say their institution was looking for a way to be a catalyst in the community and holding forums made sense, or they were looking for a better way to carry out their organization's mission in the community. Some would say they participate because they care about the common good. Others would tell you they see forums as a way to motivate people to do things in the community.

Many see a connection between what goes on in the community and the tenor of the conversations people have: they wanted a different kind of dialogue, where people could speak "on the same plane" even though they were from different sections of town. Others would say they wanted to be able to formulate their opinions without becoming someone's enemy. They wanted an opportunity to hear other voices.

Changing ways of talking also seems to change relationships, as reflected in the following kinds of comments:

"What you need is a redneck like me and a black fireman over there to come together and talk about crime, and realize the other person is not so bad. We'll . . . leave talking to each other. The attitude of the whole group will improve."

"A shared destiny"

"The more we get together and talk, the more we discover that we have a shared future and a shared destiny."

Another typical comment is: "We wanted a dialogue that taught respect or we were looking for another way to deal with conflict."

People often come to forums looking for a different way to approach issues and deal with community problems. They say things like, "We were concerned

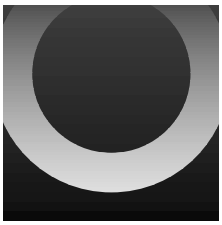
[6] John Doble Research Associates, *Responding to the Critics of Deliberation,* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1996).

about issues that weren't being addressed by the community as a whole. We were tired of having issues framed divisively and wanted a dialogue that would help us manage our problems better. We wanted to understand the 'gray areas' in issues framed around absolutes. We wanted to open up new avenues to do something. We wanted a way to imagine new possibilities that people would act on, or we were looking for a 'stepping stone' to action."

Being concerned about civic action doesn't preclude creating a better relationship with governments. People say they are looking for a better way to govern or a different way to connect to officeholders. People also say they deliberate because they want to create a genuinely public voice in their community and they want officials to hear that voice.

Not everyone finds deliberation useful. Some people leave forums frustrated because their expectations aren't realized as soon as they thought they would be. Most, however, believe the effects are cumulative and are convinced a public dialogue can have a lasting influence. And they do want something that will endure because they don't just want to make improvements, they want a different kind of politics.

If there is any one theme that runs through these varied comments, it is that people see problems they think require more action by more citizens. And they want better informed public action. They see deliberation as the first step. One implication in what they are saying is that, before people can act together as a public, they have to be able to decide *how* to act together.



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WHAT IS PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?

To increase the chances that our decisions will be wise, we can't just sound off, argue over solutions, or clarify our values. We have to struggle with the hard choices that every issue entails, considering the pros and cons of each option. That is deliberation in a nutshell. Deliberation helps us know if our decisions are sound — helps us decide if we are willing to accept the consequences of the action we are about to take.

Most political discussions, however, are debates. Stories in the media turn politics into a never-ending series of contests. People get swept into taking sides; their energy goes into figuring out who or what they're for or against.

Deliberation is different. It is neither a partisan argument where opposing sides try to win nor a casual conversation conducted with polite civility. Public deliberation is a means by which citizens make tough choices about basic purposes and directions for their communities and their country. It is a way of reasoning and talking together.

NIF deliberations are framed in terms of three or four options for dealing with an issue — never just two polar alternatives. Framing an issue in this way discourages the diatribes in which people lash out at one another with simplistic arguments.

It is dialogue for weighing, not a debate for winning

To deliberate is to weigh the benefits and costs of various options based on what is truly valuable to us. Think of the way people used to weigh gold on an old-fashioned scale. How much will each consequence tip the scale? What are the costs and benefits of doing what we want to do? Answering those questions requires a setting in which we can explore and test ideas about how to act.

Deliberation also involves weighing the views of others. Careful listening increases the chances that our choices will be sound because a wide range of people have pooled their experiences and insights. No one person or small group of people has all the experience and insight needed to decide what is best. That is why it is essential for an inclusive group of citizens to combine their perspectives.

While we can't know for certain that we have made the right decision until we have acted, deliberation forces us to anticipate consequences and ask ourselves whether we would be willing to accept the worst possible case. Deliberation is looking before we leap.

It is about what is most valuable to us, not just facts alone

We have to deliberate to decide how to act in a way that achieves what is most valuable to us. When we are faced with a difficult choice, we try to get all the information we can. Facts certainly aren't unimportant, and yet they aren't enough to tell us what we should do. We use deliberation for those questions like, "How should we act?" when there is no fact or certainty that can give us an

answer. Facts tell us what is and we don't have to deliberate about things we know. When making personal choices, for instance, in deciding whether to marry, no one goes to an encyclopedia and looks under "M."

So, public deliberation takes us to facts, important as they are, and beyond, to things no book or expert can tell us, and that is what is truly valuable to us in our common life.

We shouldn't confuse the choices we make about what is most important to us with simple preferences. We are tempted to think of choice as preference because citizens are often treated as though they are political consumers. Picking a candidate or voting in a referendum appears to be much like picking a brand of toothpaste or cereal. When we prefer, we consult our tastes. The consequences are not too great; we can always switch brands. Choice — the kind of decision we make when we marry someone or decide on a career — causes us to dig deeper. Because the consequences are great, we have to think carefully about what they might be and whether or not we can accept them. We have to look inside ourselves to determine what is most valuable to us. These decisions will have serious, long-term consequences.

In making public choices, we seem to be motivated by a reservoir of things that have great meaning in our common life, our deepest concerns and convictions. These are the ends for which we live — such as the security of our families. They are also means or ways of behaving that we cherish — such as having the freedom or opportunity to realize our goals. Few people are unmoved by such considerations.

For example, the issue of terrorism revolves around a very basic concern: security. We are influenced, however, by different notions of security. We value the security that comes from the willingness to take immediate action against all threats; we also value the security that comes from maintaining a strong defensive shield to ward off danger. And we value the security that comes from being on good terms with those who seek to harm us.

Most people are motivated at least to some degree by all three of these notions of security. Most people feel more secure if they are stronger than their enemies or if they feel well protected from them. And most of us would rather be on relatively friendly terms with someone who is a potential threat.

In deliberating on what to do about terrorism, we become painfully aware that we can't be guided by all these considerations and have a coherent consistent policy. We have to make decisions in light of competing motives.

A prerequisite to deliberation: Naming and framing issues in public terms

We can't begin to make effective choices about how to act until we develop a deliberative framework. It must do two things: It must name the problem in public terms — that is, in a way that resonates with us. And it must capture diverse approaches to the problem, approaches that call attention to our everyday concerns.

Unfortunately, Americans often find problems named in a "foreign" language — in technical, expert, highly partisan, or ideological terms. A wide gap often separates the way issues are presented and the way people experience them. This makes it difficult for citizens to see a connection to what they hold dear.

Here is an example of the different take citizens often have on an issue: In the case of stopping the spread of drugs, people tend to see the problem as a family matter rather than simply a matter of enforcing the law or preventing drugs from entering the country. The problem brings into play deep concerns about the

decline of the family and the loss of personal responsibility. That perspective influences the way people "name" the problem. And the name we give a problem influences how we approach it; the name determines who will be available to deal with it and shapes the response that will emerge.

Finding out how the public sees a problem is also the key to finding out how citizens can "get their hands on" problems that require action. As in the case of drugs, when people find things they can do personally through their families or through common action, they are energized by a sense of possibilty.

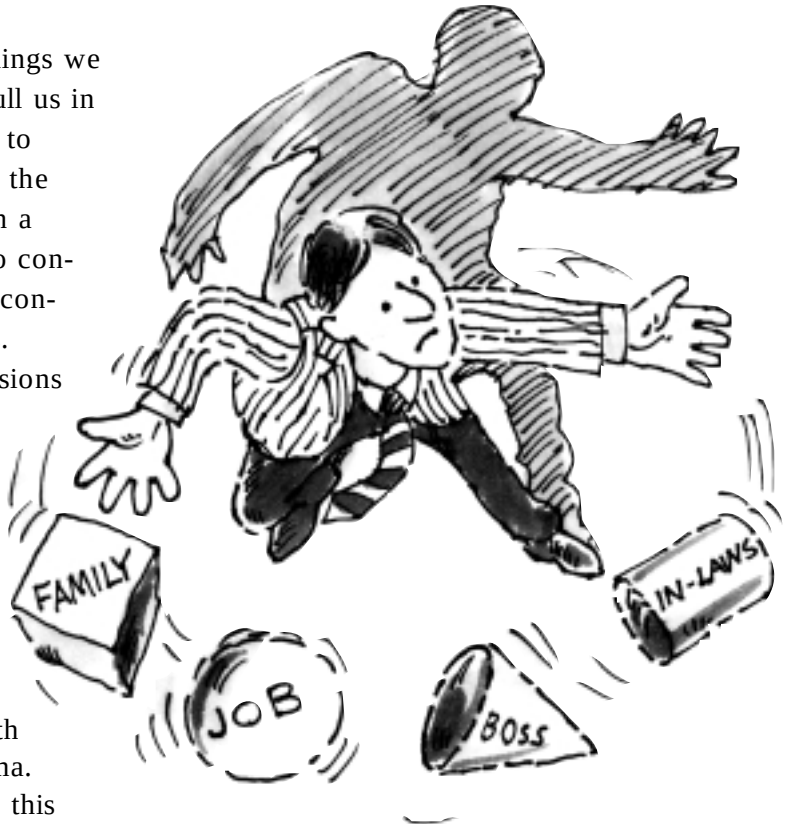
In public deliberation, people have to work through comparable difficulties inherent in all policy decisions. This work requires talking through, *not just talking* about *issues.*

Naming a problem in public terms for common reference gives us a place to begin deliberation, but it masks the conflicts we have about how to deal with the problem. We must confront our conflicting motives — the many things we consider truly valuable and that pull us in different directions when we have to decide how to act. We must frame the various approaches to dealing with a problem in a way that allows us to confront and work through our inner conflicts as well as conflicts among us. Dealing with these conflicts or tensions makes choice work difficult.

For example, when it comes to our health, we want the best care, and we also want the most affordable care. Yet the better the care technically, the more costly and less affordable it is. Any policy for dealing with the costs of technically advanced health care runs squarely into this dilemma. Every option we come up with on this and similar issues will have both positive and negative implications for what we hold dear.

The conflicts we have to deal with in making choices together aren't just conflicts between different individuals or interests, as in environmentalists opposing developers or conservatives opposing liberals. People in one of those camps are not likely to be in the other. When it comes to the things most important to human beings, however, most of us are often in the same camp. Recall the terrorism example and the common motives that surface in that issue.

Despite sharing political motivations, however, different people order and apply what they find valuable in different ways. Imagine it is Friday night. You come home from work late, dead tired. Your spouse, who also had a difficult week, wants to go out to dinner. Your children want you to take them to the movies. Your mother-in-law calls and



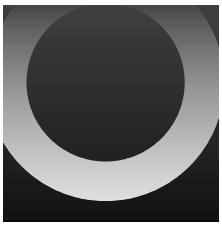
invites you over for dinner. And no sooner have you put down the phone than your boss calls and asks if you would come back to the office for two more hours. Your marriage, your children, your job, and your mother-in-law are all valuable, but you still have to decide what you should do as a family on this particular evening. You can't resolve the dilemma by doing away with one of the things you hold dear. And you can't do everything everyone asks of you. What is more, there is no authority that can give you the "right" answer. You can't escape the dilemma of considering the circumstances, on the one hand, and what you think is most important, on the other, and then doing the hard work of finding the best fit.

That is very much like the dilemma we face in public life when making a policy choice. There is no escaping contradictory pulls and tugs, no escaping the constraints on what we can do — and no escaping the feelings that arise from such dilemmas.

While these conflicts are unavoidable, deliberation helps us recognize that the tensions are not so much between us as among and even within us. That helps us "work through" the strong emotions that are part of any major decision.

"Working through" limitations: Combining reason and emotion

The term "work through" aptly describes what we do in making choices: we have to get past our initial reactions and reach a point where we are again in enough control to make sound choices about our future. As we face up to consequences, we often react with a sense of shock akin to the sense of loss people feel in the face of personal crisis. Daniel Yankelovich, noted survey researcher, tells the story of a man in his mid-fifties who learns that he will not receive the pension he had been counting on for his retirement. At first he is angry, incredulous, suspicious, and depressed. Nonetheless, over time, he regains his composure by "working through" the crisis. He might find an alternative source of income or make some tradeoffs so he can live on less. In any event, he reorients his thinking and emerges from the emotional storms in ways that make it possible for him to act in his best interest.



In public deliberation, people have to work through comparable difficulties inherent in all policy decisions. This work requires talking *through*, not just talking *about* issues.

WHAT DOES DELIBERATION PRODUCE?

Americans are intensely practical. If they spend time deliberating, they want assurances that their efforts will produce something useful. So what are the outcomes of deliberation?

Changes in people

Based on the results of thousands of forums, the initial effects seem to be personal. Repeated deliberations change people. Participants say they get a better handle on issues; that is, they are able to put particular issues in a larger context and make connections between different issues — all of which helps them understand what the issues really mean. People then approach policy questions more realistically. Self-interests tend to broaden. The experience of deliberating with others makes citizens more confident; they feel they own their opinions and are able to voice them.

A study of citizen deliberations by Public Agenda found that about half the participants (53 percent) change their minds. A much larger percentage (71 percent) said they have second thoughts about their opinions, even though they did not change their minds. More than three-fourths (78 percent) say they encountered viewpoints different from their own and thought those views were good.[7]

A single forum isn't likely to change deeply held beliefs about political participation any more than one trip to a gym will convince us of the benefits of regular exercise. But those who have been in a number of forums say they start reading or listening to the news more — and in a different way — looking for the options and their consequences. They also report becoming more involved in civic activities. Perhaps changing opinions of others' opinions prompts people to see new possibilities for working together. Forum participants come to see themselves as political actors, not just clients or consumers.

As one study on the effects of NIF deliberations reported: "People learn that they are capable of understanding complex issues, saying reasonable things about them, reaching reasonable judgments about what to do." The study went on to say that, as people deliberate, they see there is no faceless "they" to blame, that problems arise out of conflicting motives and actions that Americans did or didn't take. For example, deliberative citizens are more likely to say that the desire to spend without raising taxes has intensified the budget deficit. Deliberative forums prompt people to recognize they are often responsible for significant parts of their problems. They then reason that, if they can create problems, they also must have the capacity to begin to manage them more effectively.[8]

Involvement — and a public

These changes are possible because deliberation seems to have the power to get people to take the first step to civic involvement. Deliberation also links these

[7] Steve Farkas and Will Friedman, with Ali Bers, *The Public's Capacity for Deliberation* (New York: Public Agenda for the Kettering Foundation, 1995).

[8] Doble, *Responding to the Critics of Deliberation*, pp. 59-60.

people to one another, creating a public, which is a body of people joined together to deal with common problems.

Researchers from The Harwood Group asked people what kind of setting they look for when deciding whether or not to get involved. They said they look for open, exploratory conversations. They want to be able to weigh carefully all the options for action as well as the views of others. They want to test ideas, not just score points. They want to look at the shades of gray in issues that are often presented in extremes of black and white. They expect all the emotions associated with politics to come out — but without the acrimony that characterizes partisan debate. Although they never used the word, they look for public deliberation.

Americans use deliberative dialogue not only to understand issues but to decide whether they should act publicly. Situations that might prompt individuals to political action — finding drug paraphernalia in the neighborhood, worrying about what happens to a child in school, seeing oil spilled on a beach — lose their motivating power in time. Something else has to happen. People who have those experiences have to find others who will share their concerns, who also see how the problems affect what is valuable to them. They also have to find out if they can get their hands on a problem and really make a difference. Then they get involved. All of that happens — if it happens at all — in a particular kind of public dialogue, a deliberative dialogue.

While deliberation has been presented as something that happens in forums; it is rooted in common conversations. Deliberation may begin in a simple neighborly exchange over a backyard fence. People may start with personal concerns to find out if others share them. The conversation may turn into a larger neighborhood meeting. Eventually a town meeting may be held. Months may go by, even years, but eventually people reach decisions that determine whether and how they act.

In the process, the people who were just individuals living in the same area have become a public, a diverse body of interconnected citizens who share certain problems and who are joined in ways that allow them to act together to deal with those problems.

Civic responsibility

Making choices together in deliberation also promotes civic responsibility. Human beings take more responsibility for what they have participated in choosing than for what someone has chosen for them. Making decisions as a public is claiming responsibility for the future.

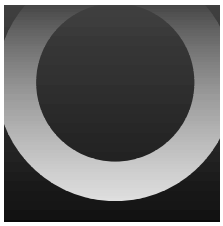
New knowledge

Deliberation allows people to do things they couldn't do as isolated individuals, things that only a public can do. One of the most important is the ability of deliberation to produce a kind of knowledge that isn't available from experts or polls. Scholars call it socially constructed knowledge. It consists of things we can know only when we engage one another — and never when we are alone. You might call this "public knowledge." It tells us:

- how the public sees an issue or the framework people use in approaching the issue;
- what is valuable to people and where the tensions are among the many things that are important;
- what people are or aren't willing to do to solve a problem; what consequences are or aren't acceptable; and

- whether there is any shared sense of direction or possibility for a course of action based on interconnected purposes. (If so, it would amount to common ground for action, which is a range of publicly supportable actions.)

Deliberation produces public knowledge by synthesizing many different experiences and perspectives into a shared framework of meaning.



Imagine that you and your friends are standing around a building, trying to determine its condition so that you can make the decision of whether to repair it or tear it down. You could send your friends out to stand on different sides to inspect the building and then invite them back to give their sense of what should be done. Each person would report on the side he or she faced. Some might see an entrance in good repair, others a deteriorating back wall. Although the group could vote on which point of view to accept, that would only reveal which side was seen by the largest number of people. On the other hand, the group could exchange views, reflect on what they saw, and then integrate their views into a composite. They could blend many angles of vision into something new — a picture of the whole structure, different from any of the points of view with which the group began. By synthesizing many different angles of vision, by seeing things from more than one side, the group could see the whole afresh. Integrating views would more accurately reflect what the building was really like.

Note that deliberation does more than tolerate differences; it uses them. And it doesn't destroy individual differences in a homogeneous amalgam; rather deliberation builds on each perspective in creating its integrated view of the whole.

Changing opinion into judgment

Public knowledge and the interaction that creates it have a very practical purpose: they change individual or popular, often top-of-the-head opinion into more reflective and shared public judgment.

For the country as a whole, the shift from opinion to judgment comes slowly and in stages, according to Daniel Yankelovich. Early in the life of a policy debate, opinions are likely to be ill informed and unstable. When people first become aware of an issue, they react in response to initial impressions and limited information. Opinions fluctuate almost from day to day. Mere awareness of an issue is a long way from stable, consistent, and coherent public judgment. There are many obstacles along the way — such as blaming others and engaging in wishful thinking to avoid difficult decisions. To develop mature judgment, Yankelovich says, people have to explore a variety of choices; they have to overcome a natural resistance to facing costly tradeoffs; they have to look honestly at all the pros and cons; and finally, they have to take a stand, both intellectually and emotionally. It is a long journey.

While this distinction between opinion and judgment isn't usually made, the differences are important.[9] A forum that informs individual opinions about particular issues isn't the same as a deliberative forum that attempts to develop the capacity for public judgment in a group of people.

[9] Yankelovich describes that difference this way: Public opinion has come to mean what public opinion polls measure: the vagaries of the public viewpoint at a moment in time, however vague, confused, ill informed, and clouded with emotion it may be. Public judgment, on the other hand, represents the public's viewpoint after all elements of mere opinion have been distilled from it. Public judgment reflects the public's viewpoint once people have had an opportunity to confront an issue seriously and over an extended period of time. Daniel Yankelovich, "How the Public Learns the Public's Business," *Kettering Review* (Winter 1985), pp. 8-18.

Yankelovich says a deliberative dialogue can "distill" judgment out of mere opinion. The problem with popular opinion is that it's often contradictory and doesn't account for what would happen if a policy were followed over the long term. For example, popular opinion says that the government should provide more services, yet this same opinion also insists that taxes should not be raised. The contradiction is obvious and has to be resolved before anyone should take such opinions seriously. This is also a case where popular opinion may be shortsighted: lower taxes will mean more disposable income in the near term, but schools, social services, and highways will eventually deteriorate without financial support. Are people willing to accept the consequences of the attractive prospect of lower taxes? No one can know what public judgment will be until people face up to the contradictions and the long-term consequences. That's the job of deliberation.

Deliberation works

Over the long term, public deliberation seems to have done what it is supposed to do. Based on their analysis of public responses to thousands of questions on a variety of policy issues over 50 years, public opinion researchers Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro found that, contrary to the perception that citizens are irrational, inconsistent, and fickle, citizens' long-term attitudes have been quite consistent, rational, and stable.[10] They found public attitudes to be stable in that they change incrementally in understandable responses to real change in circumstances. Their attitudes were reasonable in that people had clear reasons for them. And the public's views were consistent in that the policies people favored corresponded to what they considered valuable.

Why have public policy preferences, over time and on the whole, been so consistent, rational, and stable? Page and Shapiro think that it is because the "cool and deliberative sense of the community" prevailed.

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[10] Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

WHAT CAN WE DO WITH THE PRODUCTS OF DELIBERATION?

Even if Americans are convinced that public deliberation produces something, they want to know what can be done with these "products." Many people ask if this kind of public talk has any role in making national policy; others are more interested in how public deliberation might affect community action. Public deliberation's products have two principal uses: One is to make public action — the action citizens take — possible. The other is to inform the policies of governments and, in the process, help change the often troubled relationships between citizens and officeholders.

Make public action possible

Democracies depend on public action. Public action isn't the same as the action of special interest groups; it is comprehensive or inclusive rather than categorical. And it isn't the same as governmental or institutional action, which is uniform, linear, and usually coordinated by some administrative agency. In these cases, the lines of interaction are vertical — from officials down to citizens and from citizens up (or down) to officials. Public action is richly diverse with many people doing their own thing. The lines of interaction are horizontal rather than vertical. It is eye-to-eye, shoulder-to-shoulder, citizen-to-citizen. Public action isn't administratively coordinated, yet it is coherent and mutually reinforcing because all of the actions serve related purposes. Public action is not linear, beginning at one point and ending at another. It is a more organic, ever-repeating, series of activities. An illustration is citizens working together to restore a park by all pitching in to clean up the trash and plant trees. Public action is powerful because each piece reinforces the other, it is complementary, and so the whole of the effort can be greater than the sum of the parts.

Without public action, institutional action is often ineffective. Think of the way a good neighborhood watch program helps a police department do its job. Also, think of the way a good piece of cloth, the sleeve of your jacket, results from the interweaving of vertical and lateral threads. Without both, your elbow would poke out of your sleeve every time you bent your arm.

What stimulates public action and makes it complementary? Public deliberation. While deliberation doesn't end in total agreement, it can point people in a particular direction and give them a foundation for identifying sharable or interconnected purposes. Shared purposes allow for a variety of actions that fit together and reinforce one another because they have the same objectives. Without a sense of purpose and direction, no amount of control can keep all activities pointing toward the same end.

Think of public action as a potluck dinner. What keeps the dinner from being all desserts is that the people discuss beforehand what needs to be done and then divide up the responsibilities. No authority controls potluck dinners; no contracts are ever signed. Still, these dinners happen all the time. They happen because people are aware of what others are doing and don't need to be told what to bring.

Find a way to work together even when we don't agree

A shared sense of direction and an awareness of the interdependence of purposes was described earlier as "common ground for *action*," which is important to distinguish from "seeking common ground," consensus, and compromise.

First of all, common ground for action isn't the same as having something in common, like a love of cats, nor is it the same as compromise. In compromise, people want different things but split the difference. And it is not consensus or agreement, everyone wanting the same thing.

While these forms of unity are wonderful, communities often have to solve their problems with citizens who don't see eye-to-eye and are probably never going to be in agreement. That doesn't mean progress isn't possible.

Deliberation helps us find what is between agreement and disagreement, which is where most of us live our lives. We are seldom in total agreement even with those closest to us — and we aren't in total disagreement either. We are in-between, and that is what deliberation helps us identify — what we can live with.

Inform officials about what is politically possible

One of the questions citizens ask is whether those in government pay any attention to public deliberations. Certainly deliberation produces information (public knowledge) that officeholders need and can't get from any other source. And research shows that those in office look for this kind of help from the public in certain situations. Unfortunately, citizens don't always believe this. Mutual misunderstanding grows out of differences in the way people in and out of government see their roles. And opportunities to change the relationship are missed.

Most officials believe they bear the responsibility for developing and implementing solutions. They see themselves as the guardians of the true public interest. Being responsible means managing the public so that people will accept the solutions they have developed. Their job, as they see it, is "to bring the public along." That involves building broad-based support for a solution and working with the media to ensure that coverage does not sensationalize conflicts. Throughout the process, officials try to shape both public attitudes and the amount of public involvement. As they see it, that is the right way to involve the public. But that is not the way many citizens see their role. More and more, citizens don't want to be "managed," treated as consumers, or sold solutions.

Ironically, from the citizen's point of view, the better officials are as guardians, the more objectionable they can be.

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Guardians may not want people to do much except vote and express grievances, neither of which citizens see as an adequate vehicle for participating fully in politics.

In certain situations, however, the job description for guardians isn't applicable to the problems officials face. They often face situations in which the nature of the problem is unclear, the goals of the public aren't defined, or values are at issue and conflict has gotten out of hand. These are times when they need the public. Officials are frustrated when trade-offs have to be made in situations where there is no public consensus about which choice to make. They also are stymied when political gridlock brought on by interest group conflicts shuts down the machinery of government.

In these situations, officials need citizens, not just as voters, but as active participants in defining what is in the larger public interest.

While citizens despair of having any influence on officeholders, the long-term evidence is that public judgment does, in fact, shape the major policies of our government, though maybe not in the way Americans think it does.

When people ask if public deliberation influences the positions that officeholders and governments take on issues, they often want an unqualified yes or no answer. Either response would miss the way deliberation influences policy, which is gradually and cumulatively. The reality is that although public deliberations can affect policy-making, they rarely do so overnight — and for good reason. Most political issues, even the problems of one community, require that we take time to understand, plan for, and act on them. On major issues, it can take a decade or more to change policy. The role of deliberation is to keep that long journey on track and out of unproductive complaining and blaming.

Does public deliberation eventually affect official policy-making? There is evidence that it does. Fortunately, we have Page and Shapiro's study that found many issues where public opinion developed independent of government policy and paved the way for a change in that policy. For instance, the gradual change toward favoring more pragmatic relations with what we once called Red China shows how public opinion anticipated and provided a foundation for what Presidents Nixon and Carter would do two decades later.

Change relations between citizens and officeholders

Officeholders are often as frustrated by their relationship with citizens as citizens are with them. Officials may genuinely want to work with people but they face some serious obstacles that others need to understand. Officeholders who listen in forums may be attacked for not taking strong positions. They may have trouble working with other officials who think they are too open with the public. Interest groups may attack them for deliberating with citizens rather than negotiating with them. The attacking groups sometimes oppose framing issues in terms other

than those they prefer; they may criticize officials who embrace a larger framework.

Citizens seldom appreciate these problems and so may not do anything to help those in office who would generally like a more productive way of working together. However, if the often counter-productive relationship between people and the government is going to change, citizens are going to have to reach out. Those in deliberative forums have a powerful tool they can use.

Not only is the information produced in deliberative forums useful, the forums themselves create a setting for a better exchange than the usual hearings produce — provided, of course, that citizens let officeholders really participate, which means not insisting that they make speeches or take official positions. They have to be able to explore and test ideas too.

Imagine an official who attends a forum on the condition that he or she be allowed to see how citizens deal with the tough choices before explaining how the "forum" in the legislature or city council has dealt with the same choices. Imagine a setting where citizens don't ask officials the usual question, "What are you going to do for us?" and instead draw officeholders into their deliberations by saying in effect: "Here is what our experiences with this issue are, here is what we see as the tension, and here is how we have tried to resolve that tension (recognizing the downside of the approach we like best). Now tell us what your experiences are, how you see the tension, and how you would try to resolve it." Conversations like these would certainly change the relationship between citizens and officeholders as it is today.

Meet the public's undelegable responsibilities

Finally, it should be said that the work of deliberation and the products from that work are indispensable in helping citizens meet responsibilities that can't be delegated to governments. There are some things that a democratic citizenry must do for a representative government to work. Even the best governments can't create their own legitimacy. They can't define their own purposes, set the standards by which they will operate, or chart the basic directions they are to follow. Although we often expect them to, governments can't make and sustain tough decisions on issues that we as citizens are unwilling to make or support. Only a public can do these things.

Moreover, democratic governments need broad public support if they are to act consistently over the long term. Their foundations are in the common ground for action that only citizens can create. Governments can build common highways for us, but not common ground for action. And governments — even the most powerful — cannot generate the public will needed for effective political action. Governments can command obedience but they cannot create will.

Finally, it is up to us as members of a public to transform private individuals into citizens, people who are political actors. Citizens can create governments but governments can't create citizens. Only citizens can do that because individuals become citizens by joining in public work.

DELIBERATION CHANGES OUR OPINIONS OF OTHERS' OPINIONS

It was a unique approach: Get people from both sides of the abortion issue together in a public forum. The result? People who normally talked to one another only in anger suddenly were listening to each other.

Longtime forum organizer Jule Zimet of El Paso, Texas, said that the forum is one of her favorite examples of how deliberation converts popular opinion, which is comparatively narrow and shallow, into public judgment, which takes into account the important reasons others have for holding different points of view. That conversion is made difficult by the way we're trained. "Our culture trains us to debate people," she said. "So we're always listening for points of disagreement."

Zimet said she has been amazed by the way deliberative forums help people learn to work together after realizing that, in addition to their differences, they have purposes that overlap. But she has been even more amazed by the changes she has seen in herself. "I'd been on one side of that issue for as long as I can remember," she said. While working on the forum, she realized she had assumed if she gave an inch on the issue, "they" would take a mile. "I gained a lot of respect for the other side," she said. Although she did not change her basic position, Zimet said, her views became less black and white and much less harsh.

She has seen similar changes occur in others involved in deliberative forums. One opinionated woman who helped plan the abortion forum also participated in a later forum about freedom of speech. When Zimet asked what the woman thought of inviting a certain person to present an opposing point of view, the woman said, "We need to have that opinion well represented. I don't have to sit next to him." Then, after the forum, Zimet said she found the two of them together. "They were talking about the trends in society that disturbed them both."

"We learn to listen quite differently (through NIF)," Zimet said. "You end up with trust on a very different level. That's the basis for making things happen in a community."

DELIBERATION GAVE FOCUS TO HIS COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

For Robert Arroyo, deliberation has made a difference. Arroyo has a long-standing interest in politics. He's taught political science for years at Fresno City College, where the student population is representative of the surrounding community.

He also has a long-standing interest in community problem solving.

"I'm of Mexican-American descent... I have been, as long as I can remember, conscious of my sociological status in whatever community I've been in," he said. "And I've always been conscious of the need to work in the community to remedy the problems that come along with that status."

It was his interest in solving problems that drew him into what he calls "the community scene," but it was his discovery of National Issues Forums (NIF) and public deliberation that gave a new focus to his efforts.

"When NIF came to my attention [in 1987], I kind of gravitated to it as another way of doing things I've been involved in all along," he said.

In fact, he more than gravitated toward it; he became in his own description an "NIF gadfly," seeing with a scholar's schematic thinking a half dozen or more ways deliberation could be used to improve community life.

He worked with the League of Women Voters on community workshops. He planned strategies for using deliberation in high school social science classes with the local school district's coordinator. He started a deliberation class of his own. He trained forum moderators. He assisted with the California Issues Forums, a statewide program to frame and deliberate on issues like education and state constitutional reform. He put together a Spanish forums program, and then got a Hispanic radio station and newspaper to broaden the deliberations he'd started.

His experiences convinced him that while deliberation isn't a cure-all, it can make a significant difference in communities, he said.

"I think the NIF approach gives quite a bit of promise. ... It's more of a realist's view of the world. If the problem is 100 percent, and if we can make a 10 percent dent in that, I think that's substantial."

DELIBERATION INCREASES THE CAPACITY OF A COMMUNITY TO ACT

The mosquitoes were terrible in Twin Lakes, Ohio. So, when the neighborhood association decided to discuss the problem, the group's president, Bob Walker, wanted to make sure discussion was constructive. "The subject raises a lot of emotional reaction," he said.

Because Walker has extensive experience moderating National Issues Forums, he decided to take a deliberative approach to the relatively mundane local issue of what to do about all those mosquitoes. His experience is one example of how thoroughly deliberation can permeate the way communities address problems.

Walker gathered information about mosquito control from around the country, then created a four-page booklet called, "Those Pesky Mosquitoes," outlining the three most common approaches to the problem. He rented a local community room, got some audiovisual equipment, and sent out a letter inviting people to attend a public forum to weigh the three options. About 50 people came and their deliberation resulted in forming committees that eliminated the insects with a minimum of environmental damage.

Many miles away, Heather Ropes-Gale has also seen forums work in unlikely situations. In Wayne, Nebraska, two Lutheran churches, once separated by language, were united by the problem of gradually diminishing congregations. "One (church) had spoken German and one had spoken English, and that's why there were two — an eon ago," said Ropes-Gale, an NIF convenor. Money and numbers were pressuring them to merge, but the prospect was deeply troubling because of their history.

For a while the parishioners simply avoided the subject. But a few who had been in NIF deliberations suggested the two congregations create a joint forum on an issue where independence, culture, and survival were at stake. That started the two groups on the road to interdependence. Some congregants who were trained in NIF framed the merger issue in characteristic forum style and held meetings. Experience with NIF develops capacities for engaging many other issues deliberatively.

Ropes-Gale says, "I've lived border to border and coast to coast. I was a military wife for ten years. I've done everything from stand-up comedy to selling funerals to finally working here at the Humanities Council. And I have not encountered a group of people anywhere that could not profit from the deliberative method."