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A 35-Year Experiment in Public Deliberation

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Abstract

In the late 1970s, a small group of academics and former government officials began an initiative that led to the creation of a network of National Issues Forums (NIF) in 1981. NIF-style deliberation is based on the assumption that the greatest challenge in collective decision making is dealing with the tensions that result when many of the things most people hold dear are brought into conflict by the necessity to act on a problem. Public deliberation is a naturally occurring phenomenon that makes use of the human faculty for judgment. The most powerful insight from the NIF experiment has been the recognition that democracy depends on constant learning and that deliberation is a form of learning.

Keywords

civic life, democracy, public deliberation

In the late 1970s, a small group of academics and former government officials began an initiative that led to the creation of a network of National Issues Forums (NIF) in 1981. (Speech communication scholars have contributed to NIF, from Annabel Hagood's pioneering work in the late 1970s, to a monograph on deliberation by Michael and Suzanne Osborn in 1991, to studies done after that by Barnett and Kimberly Pearce, and to recent research by scholars who have been helping the Kettering Foundation to understand deliberation in everyday talk.) NIF forums promote public deliberation on major nationwide issues and are organized, conducted, and funded by a host of civic, educational, and religious organizations throughout the country.

Kettering Foundation research is used to create citizen briefing books on major issues for NIF sponsors and other organizations now promoting public deliberation. These issues range from the rising costs of health care to the complexities of immigration policy.

Deliberative forums, which are examples of what I would call organic, citizen-based democracy, are one response to Americans who feel marginalized by the political system yet want to make a difference. Lani Guinier, one of the country's leading champions of voter registration, has said that the voting booth doesn't provide enough room for the public to do all it must. She has argued that deliberative practices create opportunities for people to do things that they can't do in a polling place. For example, deliberative forums allow people to name problems in their own terms rather than just professional, partisan ones. Citizens can frame issues to identify more than the usual two opposing options for action. And they can set in motion civic actions that are mutually reinforcing. The NIF experiment is intended to help people to get off the sidelines and take a stronger hand in shaping their future.

The first sponsors of National Issues Forums believed implicitly that democracy, or self-rule, depends on the joint work that citizens do to solve common problems. This work requires people to make decisions together about what they are willing to do. And in order for the decisions to be sound and reflect good judgment, they should be made deliberatively.

NIF-style deliberation is based on the assumption that the greatest challenge in collective decision making is dealing with the tensions that result when many of the things most people hold dear are brought into conflict by the necessity to act on a problem. This is to say that the most difficult decisions aren't merely about what strategy is best as a practical consideration. The hardest choices are more about what *should* be done than what *can* be done. Ironic as it may seem, the tensions in decision making don't seem to be the result of people having vastly different notions of what "should be," or what is dear or valuable. By things "valuable," I don't mean "values" per se. Rather, I am talking about the fundamentals of life—the collective equivalents of food and shelter. Examples: the need to be free from coercion and protected from danger. We value both, yet in a given situation, what protects us may also curtail our personal freedoms. So we have difficult choices to make that require weighing possible courses of action or options against the various things we hold dear. That weighing is what is meant by deliberation in the NIF experiment.

While this "choice work" is demanding, research showed that public deliberation is a naturally occurring phenomenon that makes use of the human faculty for judgment. Its impact is evident in the maturing of public attitudes over time, as Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have shown.

Dan Yankelovich also discovered the influence of public deliberation in changes in the quality of attitudes at the end of certain elections. Such studies reinforced the sense that the mission of the NIF forums wasn't to introduce deliberation as though it were something foreign, but rather to distinguish it from other legitimate forms of public discourse and to encourage it wherever collective decisions are made.

Although deliberation goes on daily and has been around so long that it is depicted in Egyptian hieroglyphics, those involved in the NIF experiment quickly learned that the value of what they were doing was open to challenge. Public deliberation was often discounted as "just talk," divorced from action. Of course, it has been persuasively argued by Michael Delli Carpini and others that talk *is* action and has an intrinsic value. Nonetheless, for most people, the outcomes of forums have to be useful in solving problems in order to be taken seriously, which is why deliberative decision making came to be seen as an integral part of public acting, not something separate from or preceding action. Public deliberation proved to be more than deciding "yes" or "no" as in a jury trial. It is integral to ways of working together that allow citizens to exercise a stronger hand in molding their future. More and more in the NIF network, deliberation came to be seen as a doorway into a broader understanding of democracy and the role of citizens (Mathews 119-125).

Even though NIF participants didn't usually try to reach a unanimous decision in favor of one particular solution to a problem, they were often able to lay out a broad direction for moving forward on issues that could only be dealt with by a range of civic initiatives. And the forums proved to be a counterforce to polarization on highly contentious issues like how voting district boundaries should be set or where new schools ought to be located. Deliberations have also been used to influence individual behaviors such as when alcohol has been abused on college campuses or when a lack of examinations is associated with increased breast cancer rates.

Some NIF users have been experimenting with sharing what happens in their forums with elected and appointed officials. Officeholders are often puzzled by what comes out of public deliberation because it isn't data like polls or focus groups provide. Still, while public deliberation doesn't necessarily result in specific instructions for officials, it can identify what is and isn't politically permissible—what the citizenry will and won't accept to solve a problem. It's a window into how the public thinks when confronted with hard choices. Recently, some government agencies have begun to tap into that thinking. On issues like combatting avian flu, the Centers for Disease Control has used deliberation in crafting immunization policies that it hopes will be acceptable to the public. And the Southern Growth Policies Board has used results from its deliberative forums in recommending policies to governors and legislators.

By recounting this history of the NIF experiment, I am not saying that all of the forums have been truly deliberative or that public deliberation is a cure-all for everything that ails our democracy. In framing issues to promote unbiased deliberations, it has been difficult for framers not to telegraph a particular conclusion they want forum participants to reach. And forum participants have sometimes had difficulty giving all the options for action a fair hearing, particularly if the option is unpopular. Polite discussion has been a way of avoiding working through tensions.

In looking back at this ongoing experiment, I would say that the most powerful insight has been the recognition that democracy depends on constant learning and that deliberation is a form of learning. By rejecting the authority of sole rulers, democracy came to depend on the citizenry's collective learning to decide what should be done in the body politic. The ancient Greeks recognized this connection when they described deliberation (logis/phronesis) as a means of teaching themselves (Mathews 81-82).

Public deliberation teaches in many ways. It involves learning about the experiences of others and what they hold valuable. That occurs as people give their own names to common problems. Deliberation also involves identifying options for action that grow out of people's concerns. And weighing those options against all that is valuable exercises our faculties for judgment.

Deliberating also instructs people in the inevitable tensions that arise in decision making because it is never possible to realize everything we hold dear without making painful trade-offs. And as deciding moves into implementing, deliberation helps people recognize their own resources and make connections among different civic initiatives that can bring about mutual reinforcement. People have opportunities to learn through everything that goes on in choice work. No wonder a deliberative pedagogy has grown up around the use of deliberation in classrooms.

A college student who was introduced to deliberative decision making wrote that what he had learned wasn't just about deliberating but about himself. He learned his voice had more power than he realized. He could express opinions, weigh options with others, and make better decisions. He felt that he and his fellow students could create a community that was more than "various individuals squawking over hard pressed issues," a community that was reasonably coherent and reasonably cohesive. And he knew how to make his own community stronger: it could begin by joining his voice with others. This is probably the most valuable lesson that public deliberation or choice work teaches.

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David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation, a nonprofit research foundation rooted in the American tradition of invention. Prior to his work with the foundation, Mathews was president of the University of Alabama from 1969 to 1980 and served as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration. Mathews has served on the boards of a variety of organizations, currently including the Gerald R. Ford Foundation, National Issues Forums Institute, Southern Institute on Children and Families, and Public Agenda. He has received numerous awards, and in 2007, the Alabama Center for Civic Life was renamed in his honor. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is also the recipient of 17 honorary degrees. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His most recent book is *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).