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Democracy's Challenge

Reclaiming the Public's Role

Fed up with politics and a widening partisan divide, many Americans are turning away from public life. We are, most of us, spectators rather than participants in a political process that seems to have little to do with citizens. What has gone wrong, and what should we do about it?

APPROACH ONE

Democratic Values:

Rebuilding democracy's moral foundation

As a nation, we have become self-indulgent and self-absorbed, inclined to accept neither hard choices nor sacrifice. The emphasis on individual rights and personal freedom has undermined democracy. In recent decades, the moral curriculum has been neglected; this is a key element in our public troubles.

APPROACH TWO

Web of Connections:

Reinventing citizenship

Democracy requires the ability to work together on common concerns—civic skills that most people learn in clubs, church groups, and local associations. The public square is emptying because many Americans aren't making the civic connections that form the habits and sharpen the skills of citizenship.

APPROACH THREE

By the People:

Bringing the public back into politics

Government is no longer “of, by and for the people.” Governance is something politicians do, not something that involves us. In a democratic nation where the people are supposed to be sovereign, citizens have lost control of the government. The political system has to be fixed so citizens once again have a central place in it.



Approaches and Choices: Choice Work and NIF

If you're preparing to moderate a National Issues Forum, then you've become familiar with the structure of deliberative dialogue that NIF supports. Discussion guides, starter tapes, and deliberative forums focus on approaches, sometimes also called "choices" or "options" in NIF material.

And you also know that each approach represents a distinctly different way of approaching an issue, with its own set of benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs.

This structure undergirds the basic premise of public deliberation—that citizens in a democracy have a responsibility, and need opportunities, to make choices about how they want to live together, how they want to act together, and how they want their government to function.

Sometimes, forum participants find these uses of the word *choice* confusing. Some assume that they are being asked to choose one of the approaches. And, of course, they are not.

Many moderators find it helpful to clarify, at the beginning of the forum, that the work of the forum is to weigh each approach, to "work through" consequences and tradeoffs, and to form a shared sense of what's at stake in the issue. They make it clear that, by developing shared directions for public action, forum participants are laying the foundation for making public choices together.

If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator:

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Reading the issue book thoroughly, considering questions that get to the heart of the issue, and thinking through the essence of each approach is the critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Your natural curiosity and your interest in understanding diverse views will be your greatest assets; they're probably what got you here in the first place. So use them to ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each approach, the tradeoffs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

No matter the level of experience, most moderators find timekeeping to be a challenge. National Issues Forums examine complicated issues, worthy of deep discussion. Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach with so much more that could be said. But in order to deliberate—to really make progress on the issue—participants need the opportunity to weigh *all* the major approaches.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

Between allowing time for participants to lay out their personal concerns about the issue at the beginning of the forum and the demanding work of deliberating in depth on each of the approaches, it's easy to find yourself at the end of the forum with little time left to reflect on what's been said. But, in many ways, this is the most important work the group will do—if they have time to do it. Explain clearly at the outset that it is important to reserve this time, and then enlist the participants' support in working with you to preserve it.

Your Role as a Moderator:

- to provide an overview of the process of deliberation—the rationale for the kind of work the participants are getting ready to do
- to ask questions that probe deeply into what's at stake in the issue and in each choice
- to encourage participants to direct their responses and questions toward one another
- to remain neutral throughout the discussion, while encouraging participants to explore all facets of their own and others' opinions
- to keep track of the time, so participants can move through a discussion of each of the major approaches and into an ending period of reflections

The Role of the Recorder:

- to support deliberation by reminding forum participants of their key concerns, the areas of greatest disagreement, and the benefits and tradeoffs their discussion highlighted
- to create a written record of the group's work that might feed into future meetings of the group or additional forums
- to help inform other members of the community about the outcomes of the deliberation
- to capture the tensions, tradeoffs, and common ground for action
- to express main ideas in clearly written, brief phrases

Forums or Study Circles—or Both?

Many NIF convenors choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two and one-half hours.

Other convenors, however, arrange multiple sessions or study circles to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings; while others might devote a separate session to each approach. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

Some communities begin their examination of an issue in a large group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

Guidelines for National Issues Forums and Study Circles

At the beginning of deliberative discussion, most moderators review these guidelines with participants. (A free poster with these guidelines is available to use in your forum. To request a poster, call 1-800-600-4060.)

The moderator will guide the discussion yet remain neutral. The moderator will make sure that:

- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- The discussion will focus on the approaches.
- All the major choices or positions on the issue are considered.
- An atmosphere for discussion and analysis of the alternatives is maintained.
- We listen to each other.

The Importance of the Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had. And they give participants an opportunity to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside of the forum. As a means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, to other citizens.

Nationally, a report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the

questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of reports on the outcomes of local forums.

So it is very important that you, as the forum moderator, take a few minutes to gather and return the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute. Please include the Moderator Response sheet on page 12 with your contact information so that follow up for the national report is possible.

Return completed questionnaires to:

National Issues Forums Institute
100 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777

Communicating about Your Forums

Another important role of the moderator is to communicate with the NIF network about the forums you are conducting in your community. Please post the dates and locations of your forums by e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

Democracy's Challenge

Reclaiming the Public's Role

Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue with forum participants, you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes this issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions will likely arise that could derail deliberations. In this case, there is some risk that the conversation could be sidetracked by complaints about the government and suggestions for what elected officials should do. It will be important to remind participants that the focus of this issue is the role *citizens* can play in affecting needed changes. Moderators find it very helpful to consider ahead of time, the basic, broad questions that need to be addressed in each approach. Here are some possible questions for this issue.

A P P R O A C H O N E Democratic Values: Rebuilding democracy's moral foundation

- Many people worry about the erosion of values on which democracy depends. Which values would you consider to be most important?
- Should character education be part of public-school curriculum? Which values should be taught?
- What role should religion play in reinforcing the values necessary in a democracy?
- Are there sacrifices you would be willing to make for the public good?

A P P R O A C H T W O Web of Connections: Reinventing citizenship

- What kinds of "public spaces" does your community offer? How important do you think they are to the practice of citizenship?
- Does it seem to you that people in your community participate less than they did a generation ago in organizations like Scouts, Little League, or volunteer fire departments?
- Do you think high-school students should be required to perform community service in order to graduate?
- Considering the other demands on our time, is it realistic to expect people to devote time to community organizations?

A P P R O A C H T H R E E By the People: Bringing the public back into politics

- Do you think elected and appointed officials are less responsive than they used to be?
- How could citizens' views be formulated and communicated so that elected officials would listen and act on them?
- How important do you think money is in the political process?
- Would you favor limiting the length and cost of political campaigns?

Democracy's Challenge

>> Comparing Approaches

WHILE MOST AMERICANS are still proud of living in a country that is governed by and for the people, many of them are no longer sure that Abraham Lincoln's vision of a democracy has withstood the test of time. They have become increasingly disaffected with a process that appears to have nudged its citizens onto the sidelines and increasingly disillusioned with politicians who appear disinterested in what they have to say.

Too many Americans today have retreated from the public places, meetings, and associations at which they traditionally met to say what they thought and do what needed to be done to improve their communities and their nation. They have, so to speak, opted out. Politics is no longer working for them, they say.

We have all read proposals for reforming the ways that government and politics operate. Most of them depend on government initiatives. This book is about what *citizens* can do. It suggests that citizens themselves can and should provide the motivating power that will rekindle the vibrant relationship that a democracy demands between the government and its people.

While there is no widespread agreement on how this can be done, *Democracy's Challenge* provides a framework for a discussion of the possibilities. It presents three perspectives on the problem, each of which suggests a somewhat different course of action. An outline for talking through this knotty issue appears on these pages.

APPROACH ONE

>> Democratic Values

Rebuilding democracy's moral foundation

We're steadily eroding the important moral truths that are the bedrock of democracy. We talk about our rights as citizens but rarely consider our obligations. We need to nurture family life, teach important values like responsibility and sacrifice, and require the kind of service from citizens that used to be automatic.

What can be done?

- Schools should integrate character education into the curriculum.
- Divorce laws should be tightened, premarital counseling should be readily available, and counseling for individuals in troubled marriages should be required.
- Public policy should reward marriage and discourage childbirth outside of marriage by ending the "marriage penalty" in the tax code.
- Television networks should agree to a code of content that reinforces social responsibility rather than undermining it.
- The U.S. government should require all young people to serve a minimum of one year of public service, either in the military or a national service corps.



What others say

- Declining moral values are not the main reason for our public troubles. Our behavior as individuals is more responsible today than it was in preceding decades. Crime rates, teen pregnancies, fatalities from drunk driving, and violence against women within families are all down.
- Most Americans do not want to legislate morality.
- We should respect the division between church and state. Bringing faith and morality into a discussion of politics and public policy is a slippery slope.
- Americans are as religious as ever. The U.S. continues to be one of the most religiously observant countries in the world.

APPROACH TWO**>> Web of Connections**
Reinventing citizenship

Democracy needs the skills that citizens learn in associations, clubs, unions, and neighborhood groups, but Americans take part in these civic activities less often than they once did. It's in places like these that we come together, figure out how to get along, and learn how to solve common problems. We need to rebuild that web of connections.

What can be done?

- Schools should place more emphasis on teaching the habits and skills of citizenship. All high schools should offer civics courses.
- Young people should be required to perform community service as part of their high-school experience.
- Communities need public spaces. All neighborhoods should be designed to make it easier for citizens to connect with one another.
- Citizens should make time to participate in community organizations and collective problem solving.
- Workplace policies should offer the flexibility and incentives people need to take an active part in community activities. Government entities should offer tax incentives to businesses that do that.

**What others say**

- This approach has a mistaken sense of the problem. Civic involvement is desirable, but it is unlikely to happen if our values and priorities do not change first.
- Spending more time in civic associations is not practical in today's society in which both parents often work.
- It would be more useful to try to reform government than to reform citizens.

APPROACH THREE**>> By the People**
Bringing the public back into politics

The nation is no longer "of, by, and for" the people. Government too often does the people's business without any public input. We should strive for a society in which citizens share the work of setting the public agenda with government officials. This requires significant commitments of time and energy from citizens and substantial reforms to bring elected officials' focus back to the people's issues.

What can be done?

- Create new occasions for public deliberation, such as National Issues Forums, Study Circles, America Speaks, and National Issues Conventions.
- Institute neighborhood councils as places in which citizens can be brought into the decision-making process in their communities.
- Reduce the length of political campaigns and their costs.
- Expand public financing of political campaigns.

**What others say**

- Our system is a representative democracy, not a direct democracy. If we are not happy with our representatives, we can vote them out.
- This approach expects far more of Americans than they are willing to give. Most Americans do not want to become involved in politics. They want the assurance of knowing that someone is running the country and keeping order so they can get on with their lives.
- Money is part of politics. The presence of money is one way competing interests in a democratic society make their voices heard.

Suggested Format for an NIF Forum or Study Circle

Welcome

Let participants know who is sponsoring the forum/study circle. Stress the co-sponsorship if several organizations are involved.

Ground Rules

MAKE CLEAR THAT THE FORUM IS NOT A DEBATE. Stress that there is work to do and that work is to move toward making a choice on a public-policy issue. The work will be done through deliberation. Review the paragraph "How Do We Do It?" (see page 11). The responsibility for doing the work of deliberation belongs to the group. Deliberation is necessary because there are competing approaches to solving the problem.

Starter Video

Explain that the video reviews the problems underlying the issue, then briefly examines three or four public-policy alternatives. In so doing, it sets the stage for deliberation. (Starter videos for each issue book are available from National Issues Forums Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH 45441.)

Personal Stake

In the first few minutes, connect the issue to people's lives and concerns by getting participants to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. This sharing makes the issue genuine, human rather than abstract. Some questions you might ask include: "Has anyone had a personal experience that illustrates the problems associated with this issue?" "Within your family, or circle of friends, is this an important issue?" "What aspects of the issue are most important to you?" "How does the issue affect people?"

The Forum/Study Circle Deliberation

Consistent with what deliberation is, moderators ask basic types of questions in a forum:

What Is Valuable to Us?

This question gets at why making public choices is so difficult: the approaches turn on things that people care about very deeply, such as being secure or being treated fairly. This question can take many forms:

- How has this issue affected you personally? (Usually asked at the beginning.)
- What things are most valuable to people who support this option?
- What is appealing about this approach?
- What makes this approach a good idea—or a bad idea?

What Are the Costs or Consequences Associated with the Various Approaches?

This question can take as long as it prompts people to think about the likely effects of various approaches on what is valuable to them. Examples include:

- What would result from doing what this approach proposes?
- What could be some of the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
- Can you give an example of what you think would happen?
- Does anyone have a different estimate of costs or consequences?

What Are the Tensions or Conflicts in This Issue That We Have to Work Through?

As a forum progresses, moderators will ask questions that draw out conflicts or tensions that people have to work through. They might ask:

- What do you see as the tension between the approaches?
- Where are the conflicts that grow out of what we've said about this issue?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?
- What are the "gray areas"?
- What remains unresolved for this group?

Ending a Forum/Study Circle

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes to reflect both individually and as a group on what has been accomplished. Questions like the following have been useful:

I. Individual Reflections

- How has your thinking about the issue changed?
- How has your thinking about other people's views changed?
- How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group Reflections

- What didn't we work through?
- Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?
- What tradeoffs are we, or are we not, willing to make to move in a shared direction?

III. Next-Step Reflections

- What do we still need to talk about?
- How can we use what we learned in this forum about ourselves?
- Do we want to meet again?

Questionnaire (Post-Forum)

The questionnaire is one way to face the conflict within ourselves. Often we discover aspects of each choice we hold most valuable. Yet, the things we care deeply about are often in conflict. Please return the questionnaires and the Moderator Response sheet on page 12 after the forum.

Suggested Time Line

Stages of a Forum/Study Circle

15% for Opening

- Welcome** — The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.
- Ground Rules** — Participants review desired outcomes of the forum.
- Starter Video** — The starter video sets the tone for the discussion.
- Personal Stake** — Connect the issue to people's lives and concerns.

65% for Deliberation

- Deliberation** — Participants examine all the choices.

20% for Ending the Forum/Study Circle

- Ending the Forum** — Reflect on what has been accomplished.
- Questionnaire** — Participants complete questionnaire.

NIF Forums and Study Circles

Why Are We Here? What Are We Going to Do?

We are here to move toward a public decision or CHOICE on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

How Do We Do It?

Through a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the PROS and CONS of each approach, its benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs.
- know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations — the things people consider to be most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others; appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

How Can We Know Whether We Are Making Progress?

By constantly testing your group:

- Can your group make the best case for the approach least favored?
- Can your group identify the negative effects of the approach most favored?

For More Information

To order *Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public's Role* issue book and starter tape call 1-800-600-4060, fax (937) 435-7367, or mail to National Issues Forums Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH 45441. Other issue books and tapes may also be ordered from this source.

Moderator guides and forum posters are also available.

For other information and to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute Web site at www.nifi.org or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ Date and location of forum _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, age of participants, and number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult to the participants?

What common concerns were most apparent?

Were there tradeoffs most participants would accept? Describe.

Were there tradeoffs most participants would not accept? Describe.

Did the group identify shared directions for action?

Return with questionnaires to:
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