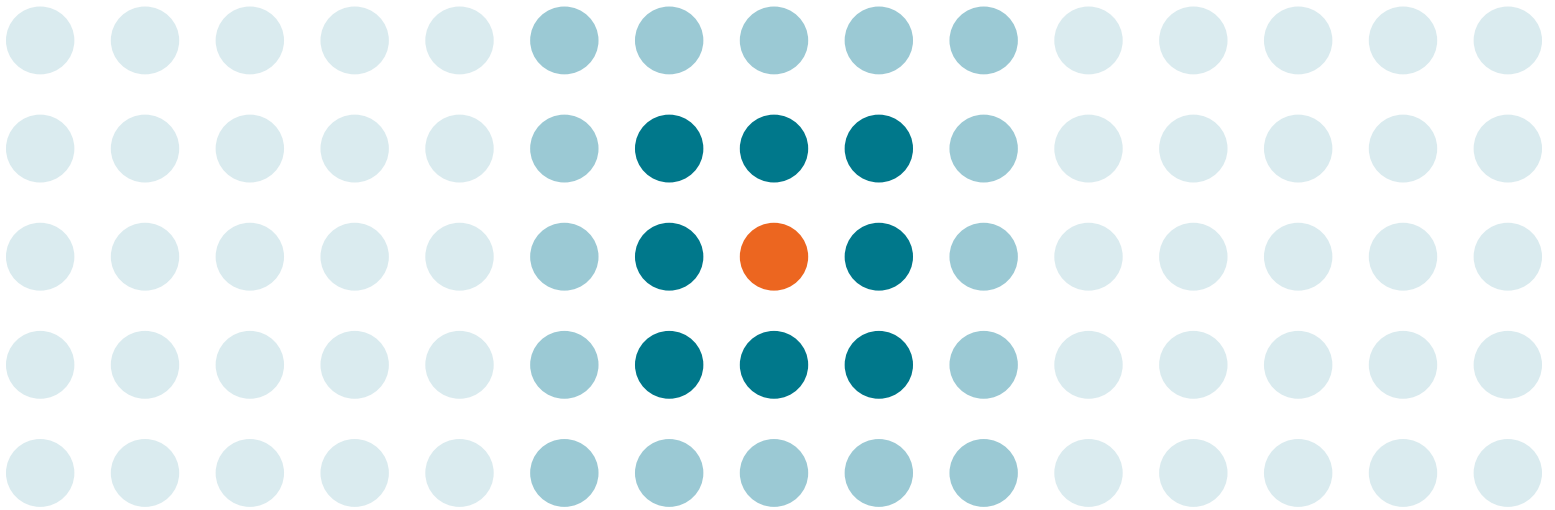




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Beyond Debate

Impacts of Deliberative Issue Framing on
Group Dialogue and Problem Solving

A Research Brief from Public Agenda

by Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman

Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement (CAPE) researches, develops and disseminates new insights and practices that help improve the quality of American public life by building the field of public engagement and citizen-centered politics.

CAPE is dedicated to creating new and better ways for citizens to confront pressing public problems. CAPE is housed within Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit opinion research and public engagement organization founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.

For nearly three decades, Public Agenda has been working in communities to help citizens understand complex problems and create momentum for change by building common ground, managing differences and creating new partnerships. The Center serves the field by advancing three distinct but interrelated strands of work:

- The Public Engagement **Research Project** conducts and disseminates studies that clarify the dynamics and impacts of specific public engagement practices. Among the questions it explores are: What are the short-and-long term impacts of public deliberation on citizens, communities, leadership and public policies? What are the impacts of framing public issues for deliberation in contrast to framing them for purposes of persuasion—and what are the democratic implications of those differences for the media, political and civic leadership and civic participation? Why do deliberative democratic habits and practices take root in some communities more than others? And how can deliberation practices best go to scale, and be applied beyond the level of individual communities?
- The **Digital Engagement Project** experiments with and explores new internet-based tools and their application to engaging citizens in public deliberation and problem-solving. Guiding questions include: Can the internet only be used to link together like-minded people, or are there effective ways to produce greater “boundary-crossing” online, bringing diverse citizens together to better understand their differences? Can blogging contribute to deliberative public engagement, or only to partisan electoral or interest group politics? Is deliberation feasible within online communities?
- The **Theory-Building Project** promotes greater interplay between researchers and practitioners to improve the field's understanding of how public deliberation works and how it can work better. Principal areas and inquiry are: How does the public come to judgment? How does public deliberation relate to political and social change?

Major support for the Center is provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**, the **Rockefeller Brothers Fund** and the **Kettering Foundation**.

For more information on CAPE and Public Agenda's public engagement work, contact **Alison Kadlec**, Vice President, Public Engagement and Director, CAPE, at 212.686.6610 x 40 or akadlec@publicagenda.org. Also, visit the public engagement section of our website at http://publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_home.cfm.

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Foreword

At Public Agenda we believe that the American public deserves the best possible opportunities to engage thoughtfully in public life, and that the quality of our democracy may be judged in large part by whether or not these opportunities exist and are widely available. Furthermore, we believe that various forms of local knowledge and the personal experiences of “ordinary” citizens are important resources for public problem solving but we recognize that, even in this “Information Age,” citizens are too often deprived of the sorts of information and deliberative opportunities that support thoughtful judgment about difficult shared problems.

The hostile partisan rhetoric and media spectacle that dominates and debases public discourse in this country only intensifies the gaps that exist between leaders and the public, thus exacerbating the cynicism that causes so many to roll our eyes and turn away from public life and focus our mental and emotional energy on our immediate, private realm of family and friends.

Despite the fact that the dominant forms of political rhetoric tend to either alienate citizens from public life or draw them out in combative and unproductive ways, our experience tells us that *given the proper conditions* citizens are both able and eager to engage issues across boundaries and come to thoughtful judgments about even the most vexing problems. The research summarized in this article was conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of one key element of these proper conditions: framing issues for deliberation.

For over three decades Public Agenda has been working to present issues in a way that encourages thoughtful judgment through the development of dozens of “Choicework” discussion starters and issue guides. Given how much time

and energy we have dedicated to the development of these materials, and given how much we feel we’ve learned over the years, we think the time is right for us to take a step back to 1) reflect on how we understand and approach framing issues for deliberation, and 2) make clear what we think is at stake when undertaking this work.

When we frame an issue for deliberation, we seek first and foremost to disentangle key elements of a complex problem in such a way that people from a wide range of backgrounds and starting points are able to, together, grapple effectively with a shared problem or constellation of problems. In our view, effective public dialogue and problem solving involves moving beyond the black/white, us/them issue framing that dominates political discourse, and it requires weighing trade-offs and bringing personal knowledge and experience to bear in generating sound judgments. But when it comes to this work of framing issues for deliberation, we have spent far more time doing it than reflecting on how and why we do it.

As we analyzed the qualitative research summarized in this article, we realized that we were producing a kind of validation study. This research has not only affirmed for us that we are on the right track with our approach to deliberative issue framing, but it has also deepened our appreciation of what is to be gained from doing so (and what is lost in its absence). We are already using this research to refine and sharpen our approach to developing Choicework Discussion Starters and we hope it will be useful to others, including public engagement practitioners and researchers, public officials interested in enlisting the energies and knowledge of citizens to tackle tough problems, and groups and individuals working to improve the culture of decision making in their neighborhoods, communities, states and regions.



Introduction

This article discusses research on the impacts of two types of issue framing on the capacity and willingness of groups to engage in productive dialogue and deliberation about complex issues. It builds on and tests ideas presented in Will Friedman’s article “Reframing Framing,” in which Friedman distinguishes between the way in which issue framing is typically used and thought of — as a means of persuasion — and efforts made by organizations like Public Agenda to frame issues in ways that clarify a range of positions and the values conflicts and practical trade-offs involved in any proposed solution to a problem. The first type of issue framing, which Friedman calls “framing to persuade,” involves defining an issue to one’s advantage in the hopes of getting an audience to do what you want it to do. The latter, termed “framing for deliberation,” involves clarifying the range of positions surrounding an issue so that citizens can better decide what they want to do.¹

Our current research has two distinct yet interrelated goals:

- 1) We seek to challenge the mainstream preoccupation with issue framing as the domain of power politics (e.g., partisan and interest group competition for citizen allegiance through persuasive framing) by exploring how a decidedly deliberative approach to issue framing might impact people’s ability to understand and grapple with difficult public problems.
- 2) We seek to better articulate the value of deliberative issue framing in a way that is useful to public engagement practitioners and researchers, leaders and other decision makers, and communities interested in creating the conditions for more productive and thoughtful public involvement in public life.

Instead of viewing framing through the traditional lens as a competitive political mechanism which shapes citizen-consumer preferences for pre-packaged partisan positions on public problems, our research explores how framing an issue for deliberation might help citizens participate more

productively in the democratic work of collaborative problem solving. While there is a vast literature on framing in the social sciences and a growing body of literature in mainstream politics, our research interests do not fit neatly in the context of the existing literature. There has been virtually no formal academic research on framing for deliberation in the sense that we mean it. Even the research which is most relevant to our current efforts is somewhat afield of our primary interest in how issues might be framed to inspire productive, collaborative problem solving.²

Perhaps the greatest difference between our efforts and those of academic researchers is that we are oriented, practically speaking, by our ongoing work on the ground, in lived communities across the country. In part, this research serves as a validation study since it is aimed both at confirming and sharpening what we already have learned from our experience working to create the conditions for productive deliberation in real communities on tough problems.

In his article, Friedman argues that framing issues for deliberation, instead of persuasion, may serve as a valuable “non-partisan civic information management system” that can help ordinary citizens become more effective in navigating complex issues. In our current research we are interested in learning more about the democratic value of this civic information management system by examining the quality of discussions that result from different types of framing.

The overarching hypothesis we sought to test through this research can be summarized as follows: Issues framed in ways that clarify a range of approaches to a public problem, in ways that citizens can readily understand and relate to, lead to more civically healthy conversations (i.e., more civil, interesting and productive dialogue within diverse groups) than issues that are framed according to the standard dualistic debate model that dominates typical media representations of public problems.

¹ Will Friedman (2007) “Reframing Framing” (Occasional Paper #1, Center for Advances in Public Engagement at Public Agenda: New York)

² For an excellent overview of the most relevant literature, see *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World* S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., A. E. Grant (eds): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. See also, G. Lakoff (2008, 2002), R. Entman (1993), J. Druckman (2007, 2003). The closest research that exists to what we attempt here is research being conducted by political scientists, like James Druckman, who examine the impacts of framing effects on citizen competence and the impacts of citizen deliberation on framing effects. While this literature certainly provides useful context, our focus on the impact of framing on citizens’ ability to deliberate effectively is somewhat different. For a more comprehensive list of relevant literature, see Appendix 1.



Methodology

This research is based on eight focus groups on Social Security reform. Four of the groups presented participants with materials that framed the issue for persuasion by presenting two debate-style arguments in a manner consistent with many typical media presentations. The other four groups used materials that framed Social Security for deliberation by presenting it in a “Choicework” format, with a short nonpartisan introduction providing a bit of background and three distinct approaches to the problem, along with several trade-offs involved in each.³

In June of 2008, we conducted the first four focus groups in Englewood, New Jersey. Each was composed of a cross section of local citizens that roughly reflected the nation’s demographic and ideological diversity. Two of these groups used the persuasion materials and two used the deliberation materials.

During the fall of 2008, we conducted four more groups. These were more homogenous in their composition than the first round of groups, comprised exclusively of middle-class respondents under age 30. Two were with Hofstra University students (one a “persuasion group” and one a “deliberation group”) and two were young people new to the workforce in New York City (also one with each framing condition).⁴

All groups were led by a “naïve” moderator (unaware of our research interests and hypotheses), and each began (after a few moments of routine introductions and warm up) with written materials that served to frame the issue and get the conversation going by giving participants something to react to. In all four groups, the moderator followed a simple moderating guide in which he encouraged participants to react to the material they read and have a conversation about it. The researchers observed the focus groups from behind two-way mirrors and had transcripts and DVDs produced in order to study the resulting conversations.

The Findings

Four interrelated patterns distinguished the groups under the two framing conditions. We summarize our observations of these patterns below and then discuss them in greater detail. Given the qualitative nature of the research and the relatively small sample of focus groups, the results should be viewed as suggestive observations, rather than conclusive ones, on the impacts of persuasive vs. deliberative issue framing on people’s conversations about public issues.

Observation 1: Analysis vs. Ideology

We observed that participants in deliberatively framed groups tended to discuss specific ideas related to the topic, such as how the Social Security program operates, whereas participants in persuasively framed groups tended to speak in sweeping, ideological generalizations about the nature of personal responsibility or the relationship between big government and personal freedom.

Observation 2: Curiosity vs. Venting

We observed that deliberative framing led to discussions in which participants expressed greater inquisitiveness about the source and nature of the problems around Social Security than did participants in groups with persuasive frames, which were marked by considerably more venting about things like corporate greed and government corruption.

Observation 3: Hard Choices vs. Easy Answers

Participants in the deliberatively framed groups were more realistic and pragmatic about the difficult choices involved in addressing Social Security problems, while participants in the persuasively framed groups did not articulate a strong grasp of practical choices and tradeoffs and tended to reach for easy answers.

Observation 4: Solution-Oriented Creativity vs. Off-Track Circularity

In the deliberatively framed groups, people’s curiosity seemed to serve as a catalyst for creative brainstorming about possible solutions. In the persuasively framed groups, however, participants tended to get off track in their conversations and either veer permanently into entirely different subjects or have conversations that were repetitive and circular.

³ The two versions of the framed materials are available from the authors at <http://www.publicagenda.org/contact>.

⁴ During the course of this report, focus group respondents who are quoted will be identified by gender, whether they were in one of the more demographically heterogeneous or homogeneous groups, and whether they were exposed to the deliberative or persuasive discussion-starter materials. For example: male, heterogeneous group, deliberative framing.



The Observations in Detail

Analysis vs. Ideology

Participants exposed to the deliberately framed materials tended to talk more about ideas associated with Social Security, such as its history and how it actually works as a system, than participants in the persuasively framed groups. In the groups framed for deliberation, we often heard things like,

When Social Security was created, people weren't expected to be kicking around and playing golf for another 26 years...things are different now and the system needs to be overhauled to reflect that.
– Male, homogenous group, deliberative framing

If Social Security is part of a 'three-legged stool,' it seems like we need to be thinking about how each of those legs works and how much, you know, like, weight each can take...
– Female, heterogeneous group, deliberative framing

Right now I'm a full-time student and I work part time. The government's paying for me to go to school. It's a wonderful thing, because I would never be able to do it right now if I didn't get the grant. If they're going to cut all that kind of stuff out in order to pay for Social Security, a lot of people like me aren't going to be able to have good jobs because we won't be able to get an education. This is the kind of thing we need to think about before we just start saying 'hey, cut all the programs!'
– Female, homogenous group, deliberative framing

In the persuasively framed groups, by contrast, participants were far more likely to talk in broad generalizations about the nature of personal responsibility or the relationship between big government and personal freedom. These conversations were often more overtly ideological and less specifically focused on the issue at hand, such as,

The thing that's great about America is nobody forces you to do anything.
– Male, homogenous group, persuasive framing

When [I] think about Social Security, [I] think about this money that you get from the government. I think about welfare...like government handouts.
– Male, homogenous group, persuasive framing

I think the government has a responsibility to help people who can't help themselves...

– Female, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

All I'm saying is that I think personal responsibility is important.

– Female, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

Curiosity vs. Venting

Participants using the deliberately framed materials tended to ask more questions and spend more time speculating about various aspects of the Social Security problem, while their counterparts in the persuasively framed groups tended to spend more time venting about political corruption and greed.

To be sure, participants in the deliberative groups expressed a good measure of distrust of leaders and concerns about government accountability. Yet they seemed more able to move past their cynicism to ask questions about the nature of the Social Security problem and express greater curiosity about how the problem evolved. Thus, for example, it was more common in the deliberatively framed groups to hear such questions as,

Where did the problem with Social Security come from? I mean, is it just because there are more people retiring now...or is it because there was something wrong with how it was set up originally?

– Male, heterogeneous group, deliberative framing

My question would be the social context in which the Social Security program was created, and then how that's different from now—social, financial, group mentality. My question would be what are the differences between then and now?

– Female, homogenous group, deliberative framing

So, if we were to privatize [Social Security]...what kind of transition would there be to make this new system work for people who are at all different places, from being young workers to those getting ready to retire? How would it work? That's what I'd like to know more about.

– Female, homogenous group, deliberative framing

I have one question that I want to ask...I think the first two options [in the Choicework Discussion Guide] involve, in some capacity, cutting other programs or realigning the government's resources towards certain programs—Social Security in this instance. What other programs—how are we deciding what programs get what, what programs are more important than others, what the government should really do with their money?

—Male, heterogeneous group, deliberative framing

For their part, participants in the groups with the persuasion, debate-style materials tended to spend significantly more time venting about corruption and greed with comments like,

It's all about mismanagement and these politicians that they look for their own pockets to put money in there somehow, some way. I don't know who's doing what to whom, but that's what's going on.

—Female, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

I think [the problem] is fueled by greed. I think it's fueled by just people who only care about the top 2 percent of the rich people. These are the same people that give tax cuts to oil companies. They're the same people that give tax cuts to the big corporations that ship jobs overseas. They don't care about people like us.

—Female, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

The government officials are just trying not to get caught stealing money, having sex with hookers, or getting caught on drugs and alcohol. Never mind attacking a real issue like this. That would be insane.

—Male, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

I think that the core of the matter is—and it was brought up a couple of times here—is that corruption on Wall Street. I think that's the thing that we should be focusing on...I mean—you have to go after the source such as Wall Street, the corruption, with scandals, and corporate bankruptcies. I think that's the important part here.

—Male, homogenous group, persuasive framing

It may seem somewhat odd to juxtapose inquisitiveness and venting as we do here, but we observed that when the conversation got bogged down in venting about corrupt and greedy leaders -- something that was more

frequent in the groups with debate-style persuasively framed materials -- it seemed to circumvent people's curiosity about the nature of the problem. In short, it seemed as though venting about malfeasance furnished a kind of explanatory framework that made it more difficult for participants to be curious or interested in exploring the cause(s) and nature of the Social Security solvency problem. Or, perhaps, it simply gave people an excuse not to work very hard, by falling back on such pat explanations.

Hard Choices vs. Easy Answers

Participants in the deliberatively framed groups offered more realistic and pragmatic comments than those in the persuasion groups, and appeared more willing to recognize the difficult choices involved in reforming Social Security. For instance, members of the deliberatively framed groups said:

The reason that we need to [deal with this problem] is because we have finite resources. We can't spend as much money as we want in every program. It's (a) irresponsible, (b) impractical, and so we have to look at the whole picture of the budget and say, "Well how are we spending money as a society, and how are we valuing responsibility, and how do we define ethics as society?"

—Female, homogenous group, deliberative framing

The problem is that there are just way more people heading into retirement than paying into the system. There's no way around that fact and it's not like we can somehow just pretend that it's about something else. So we have to deal with it.

—Male, heterogeneous group, deliberative framing

Overall, let me just say that I think none of these choices [presented in the Choicework Discussion Guide] alone—I think they're all somewhat rigid. When it comes down to Social Security reform, everyone's going to have to give a little bit—both on the right and the left. There's no magic bullet...

—Male, homogenous group, deliberative framing

For their part, participants in the persuasively framed groups did not tend to express a strong grasp of practical choices and trade-offs involved in either solution presented in their discussion



guide. Rather than acknowledging that tough choices were needed, they were more likely to jump to answers that sounded easy and obvious but appeared to have little substance.

I think we should do both... just make sure that there's enough money there for people and also sort of make sure that people save for themselves and have control over their own money, but also make sure that the government can take care of people who end up at retirement and can't take care of themselves. That's what I'd like to see happen.

– Female, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

I actually think the solution is simple, it's just some people don't like it...

– Male, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

I think we should combine the two choices. I mean, it seems pretty easy. Why can't we have the best of both worlds?

– Female, homogenous group, persuasive framing

Solution-Oriented Creativity vs. Off-Track Circularity

In addition to being more analytical, curious and willing to confront tough choices, we observed that participants in the deliberatively framed groups tended to be more solution-oriented than their counterparts in the persuasively framed groups. In the former, participants appeared to work harder, exploring different directions, ideas and possibilities in more depth. These comments on personal retirement accounts and privatization of Social Security are illustrative:

I assume that you'd be able to have some choices on a retirement fund, since it's your own money that's going in there... Maybe privatization would work if they could figure out a way to help people learn how to pick the right funds and make the right investment choices...

– Male, heterogeneous group, deliberative framing

Yeah, what if they said, "Okay, we got the X, X, X, and X funds or options," and laid it out really clearly so that you could decide whether you want to split it up and put a couple different funds, or whatever the case may be....

– Male, homogenous group, deliberative framing

Someone was saying it could be mandatory [to save], so maybe it could be put into like a frozen account that you won't have access to take out, just to put it in from your paycheck or something like that...

– Female heterogeneous group, deliberative framing

I'd be curious to explore some sort of incremental changes. I think currently FICA taxes only apply until what, the first \$96,000 a year that you make? I'd be curious to talk about raising the retirement age and maybe lowering benefits. I don't know. It's hard, but it seems like things need to happen on lots of fronts...

– Male, homogenous group, deliberative framing

In the groups with the persuasively framed debate-style materials, these sorts of solution-oriented, problem-solving exchanges were less common. Instead, these groups tended to skid across the surface of many topics, sometimes repeatedly. They were also more likely to veer off into unrelated or tangentially related subjects like immigration (with comments about illegal residents claiming benefits) and education (with long conversations about the need for financial education). These groups tended to cover the same ground again and again, with some participants stating and restating the immediate conclusion they had come to upon first reading the debate-style materials.

The following are just a small sampling of virtually identical comments made by participants in the persuasively framed groups.

I'm against privatizing Social Security... I'm against it, it's as simple as that.

– Male, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

I don't trust Wall Street any more than I trust the government... All those guys just looking to make money for themselves could care less about my little account. I don't think it would work, personally, but I don't trust the government to handle it either.

– Female, heterogeneous group, persuasive framing

I'd rather have control of it than have the government have control of it. That's just how I feel about it.

– Male, homogenous group, persuasive framing

Conclusion: Practical Considerations for Productive Politics

One way to integrate our four observations into a single framework is to say that participants in the persuasively framed groups were more likely to express their positions in static terms and circular patterns, while those in the deliberatively framed groups were more dynamic and focused on problem solving. In the former groups, people tended to come to a conclusion early and then cover the same ground again and again. It was as if they had landed once and for all on a position and had less incentive to explore new ideas. The cynicism that was more prevalent in these groups also seemed to hamper people's willingness and ability to engage in creative problem solving and instead appeared to bolster people's static positions.

In the deliberatively framed groups, in which people were provided some background, were stimulated through questions and offered a range of possible approaches rather than a polarized argument, participants were more likely to view the issue as complex and multifaceted. While it is difficult to capture this in quotes, we also observed that the overall tone of the deliberatively framed groups was more collaborative insofar as people held themselves and interacted as though they were working on a problem together, rather than simply reacting to the material and expressing static individual opinions in the presence of others.

What are the implications of these observations for our politics?

Downgrade Debate

The purpose of debate is to win an argument through persuasion, and it is therefore premised on the assumption that there is a clear right answer that will be revealed through the force of the better argument. Because debate is fundamentally competitive, it is a combative mechanism for information distribution and is therefore better suited to a spectatorial model of public life in which citizens stand on the sidelines and watch "experts" battle two sides of an issue in an effort to win the public over to one side or the other.

It is easy to see how a consumer model of citizenship might thrive under these circumstances but is it really best for our democracy that citizens are reduced to spectators and consumers of prepackaged decisions? Is it not reasonable to expect that the soaring levels of dissatisfaction and disengagement that tend to characterize public life (even during heady political times like these) might be directly connected to this

model of information distribution which both underscores the public's exclusion from important public decision-making processes and exacerbates the widespread feeling among citizens that the public is always being manipulated by leaders and the media?

In a society as complex as ours, public deliberation might be viewed as a therapeutic alternative to the consumer/spectator model of politics that seems to only amplify people's sense of alienation from public life. While debates are entertaining to watch and can, in moderation, serve a useful purpose in the American political landscape by helping people differentiate their choices, deliberation operates on a very different set of principles about how people can and should be able to encounter and navigate complex political issues.

Whereas debate is competitive and spectatorial, public deliberation is collaborative and is focused on solving shared problems. As such, it assumes that many people have many pieces of the answer and is therefore fundamentally about listening to understand different points of view and new ideas and discovering new options for addressing a problem.

Upgrade Deliberation and Active, Engaged Citizenship

Having issues framed for deliberation, rather than persuasion, is important because many of the issues we face in our communities and in our nation are highly complex and laden with difficult trade-offs that can be hard to uncover, unpack and get a handle on. This is where the principles of deliberation come in by helping people consider a variety of solutions and approaches and then develop common ground around those approaches together. But it is important to understand that deliberation is not a goal, it is a strategy and tool for overcoming hostile dead-end partisan rhetoric, for ending deadlock, and for helping citizens become vital partners in public problem solving.

Because deliberation is a strategy and a tool, it isn't merely about talking. In successful deliberation, people work to make sense of a problem and come up with specific ideas and actions for moving ahead on solutions. Therefore, the work of public deliberation is a cornerstone of democracy and involves the critical skills of citizenship that allow people to make informed decisions about difficult problems and play a more active role in partnering with leaders in solving the problems we face as a nation.



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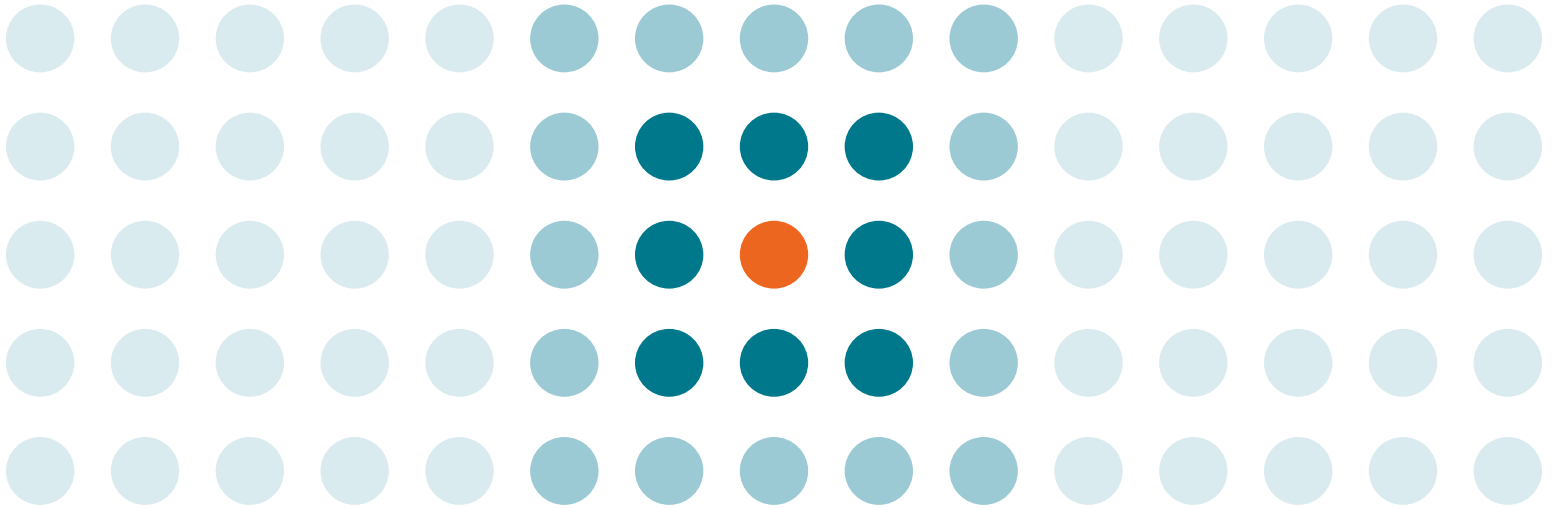
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