

# Moving Beyond Polls and Focus Groups

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### The Importance of “Working Through”

In *Coming to Public Judgment* in 1991, Daniel Yankelovich showed how polls and focus groups can be seriously misleading when the public has not made up its mind. More importantly, he identified three stages that the public goes through as it learns, forms its opinions, and reaches judgment: consciousness raising, working through, and resolution.

The second stage, working through, is too often ignored or taken for granted. In part this is because the conventional model of “informing and educating the public” assumes that people move from Stage 1 directly to Stage 3—from being informed to reaching a judgment. This assumption also helps explain why polls can be misleading on issues where people have not made up their minds—when they are still “working through” and have not yet reached resolution. Polls often measure how informed people are about an issue (Stage 1), but they seldom examine how far people have gone in working through the issue (Stage 2). People can be informed about an issue or proposed course of action but not yet have worked through the consequences and reached resolution. Polls taken at this first stage can overestimate the firmness of the views they are measuring and mislead policy makers.

While there are many examples of this, a classic one is the health care reform initiative led by Hillary Clinton during President Bill Clinton’s first term in office. Polls showed strong majority support at the outset (which emboldened the administration to move forward), but that support dropped

to barely a third of the public in a few months. The initial polls had been measuring raw opinion, not considered judgment, and it was easy for opponents to raise public doubts and fears.

More broadly, *Coming to Public Judgment* and the work it has inspired are part of a deeper transformation in how we lead and govern our organizations and societies.<sup>1</sup> Signs of that transformation include the restructuring of corporate and public bureaucracies to be more effective in dealing with rapid change; shifting boundaries between different sectors of society and levels of government; growing demands for a voice on the part of the public and stakeholder groups, resulting in the need for decision makers to consider many more viewpoints and challenges to the legitimacy of many traditional institutions. To succeed in this more interconnected and rapidly changing world, leaders in all sectors are recognizing the need to develop approaches to leadership and governance that are more participatory and more learning based. Today we often take these approaches for granted, forgetting that not so long ago they were rare. Here are some examples of these newer approaches:

- increasing use of executive and staff retreats within organizations in all sectors
- proliferation of conferences and other forums designed to foster dialogue and networking across organizational and other boundaries
- increasing emphasis on team building
- programs to foster diversity and inclusion
- the use of the Internet as a medium for networking, learning, and sharing knowledge around the world
- growing reliance on alternative dispute resolution
- more attention being paid to issues of values
- increasing efforts in all sectors to engage stakeholders in dialogue

Viewpoint Learning, Inc., was established to develop and apply dialogue-based methods that leaders and others can use to facilitate the process of working through (Stage 2 of *Coming to Public Judgment*) and more generally to develop learning-based approaches to leadership and governance in which many more people can participate. All of Viewpoint Learning's techniques build on dialogue as a form of social learning and as the "language" of working through.<sup>2</sup>

## What Is Dialogue?

Dialogue is one of those words that everyone uses, but not always to mean the same thing. Misconceptions about dialogue abound, so it is important first to be clear what dialogue is *not*. For example:

- Dialogue is *not* a way to talk an issue to death (though this can happen when people misuse dialogue or don't know when and how to move from dialogue to decision making or action).
- Dialogue is *not* consensus building. Dialogue provides a better understanding of others' viewpoints, but it does not necessarily create agreement. What it ensures is that any remaining disagreement is based on real differences, not on misunderstanding or mistrust.
- Dialogue is *not* a systematic way of making policy decisions. When used properly, dialogue *precedes* negotiation or decision making; dialogue creates the broader perspective and shared language, the mutual trust and understanding that make subsequent negotiation or decision making more productive.

So if dialogue is *not* these things, what is it? Perhaps the quickest way to understand dialogue is by comparing it to its opposite, debate. Table 5.1 illustrates some of the key differences.

The key point is that debate and dialogue are based on different assumptions and have different purposes. Both are valuable. Dialogue does not replace debate or decision making; it *precedes* them.

Dialogue is a step that is too often left out in our traditional approaches to governance, decision making, and public learning. These approaches tend to be relatively simple—issues arise, key interests advocate for their preferred solution, and a decision is made. This may work well enough when the issues and the possible responses are reasonably well understood, and when those involved share similar assumptions, language, background, and culture. But when, as is increasingly common today, the nature of both the issues and the possible responses is unclear, and when people with very different beliefs, values, or traditions must find common ground, an additional step is needed. That is where dialogue comes in (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2).

Dialogue is the step we can take, before decisions are made, to uncover assumptions, broaden perspectives, build trust, and find common ground.

Whenever we conduct dialogues—whether with the public, business or community leaders, employees, elected officials, or other stakeholders—we begin with a set of ground rules (Fig. 5.3). The rest of this chapter describes

**Table 5.1. Dialogue: The Opposite of Debate**

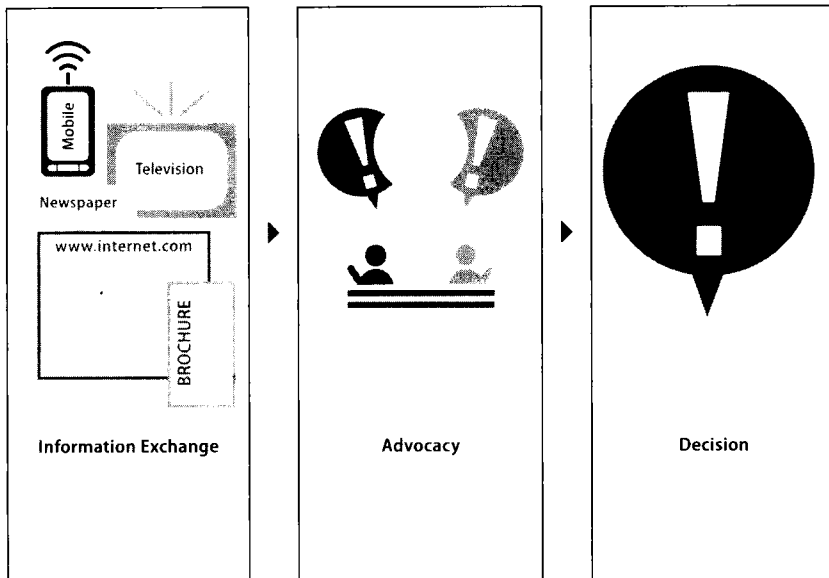
Debate/Advocacy	Dialogue
Assuming there is one right answer (and you have it)	Assuming that others have pieces of the answer
Combative: attempting to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: attempting to find common understanding
About winning	About finding common ground
Listening to find flaws and make counterarguments	Listening to understand
Defending your assumptions	Bringing up your assumptions for inspection and discussion
Searching for weaknesses and flaws in the other position	Searching for strengths and value in the other position
Seeking an outcome that agrees with your position	Discovering new possibilities and opportunities

how we have applied dialogue-based methods to contribute both to more reliable opinion research and to more effective governance.

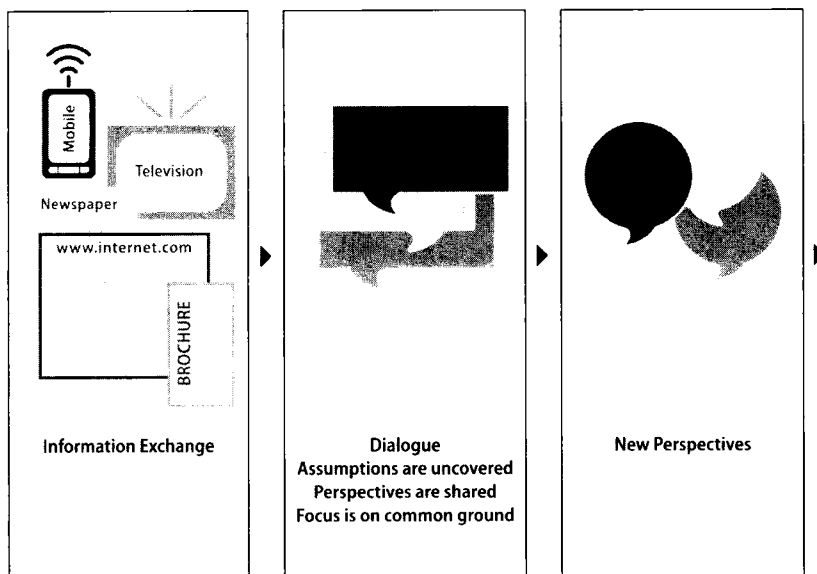
### **More Reliable Opinion Research (Moving Beyond Polls and Focus Groups)**

We developed the Choice-Dialogue methodology, based on the *Coming to Public Judgment* model, to provide insight that polls and focus groups cannot provide and were never intended to provide. Choice-Dialogues provide a way to compress (into an eight-hour day) and track the working-through process, in which dialogue participants come to understand the pros and cons of various choices, struggle with the necessary trade-offs of each, and come to a considered judgment. These dialogues, when conducted with a representative sample, offer deeper insight into the public's learning curve and how best to lead such a learning process on a larger scale.

Choice-Dialogue methodology differs from polls and focus groups in its purpose, advance preparation, and depth of inquiry.



**Figure 5.1. Traditional Decision-Making Models**

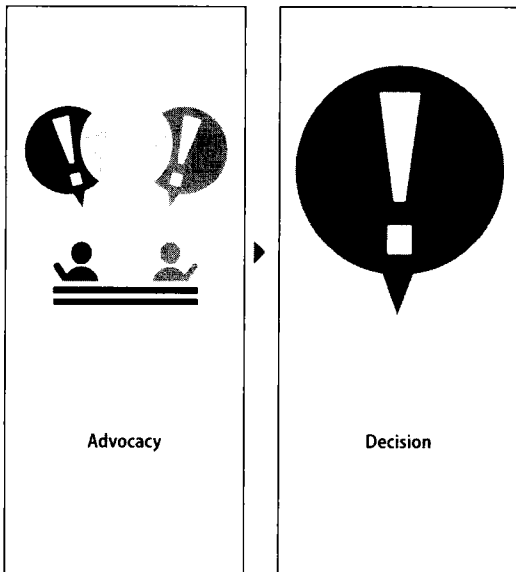


**Figure 5.2. When Dialogue Occurs**

The purpose of dialogue is to understand and learn from one another. You cannot “win” a dialogue.

1. Speak for yourself, not as a representative of a group or special interest.
2. Treat everyone in a dialogue as an equal: leave role, status, and stereotypes at the door.
3. Listen with empathy to the views of others.
4. Be open and listen to others even when you disagree; resist the temptation to rush to judgment.
5. Search for assumptions (especially your own).
6. Look for common ground.
7. Respect all points of view; all points of view will be recorded (without attribution).

**Figure 5.3.**  
**Ground Rules**  
**for Dialogue**



***Purpose***

While polls and focus groups provide an accurate snapshot of people's current thinking, Choice-Dialogues are designed to anticipate the future direction of people's views on important issues where they have not completely made up their minds, or when changed circumstances create new challenges that need to be recognized and addressed. Choice-Dialogues enable people to develop their own fully worked-through views on such issues (in dialogue with their peers) even if they have not previously given an issue much thought. By engaging representative samples of the population in this way, Choice-Dialogues provide unique insight into how people's views change as they learn, and can help identify areas of potential public support where leaders can successfully implement policies consonant with people's core values.

***Advance Preparation***

Choice-Dialogues require highly trained facilitators and the preparation of special workbooks that brief people on the issues. The workbook presents the issue, some basic background information, and (most important) a series of (two to four) values-based choices or scenarios for addressing the issue, written in the language of citizens (not experts). We have found that a format organized around values-based choices is critical because it enables people to absorb and apply complex information quickly. Each scenario consists of an introduction (a brief summary of what it is about), some basic background, a list of "key elements" (what steps would be taken to make this scenario happen), and a set of pros and cons (arguments for and against this scenario made by its supporters and opponents). The most important sections of the workbook (the ones on which participants spend the most time) are the pros and cons and the key elements. The advance preparation of these materials is a critical part of the Choice-Dialogue approach.

***Depth of Inquiry***

Unlike polls and focus groups, Choice-Dialogues are designed to explore how and why people's minds change as they learn. Choice-Dialogues are characterized by a huge amount of learning—participants learn both from the workbook and (more importantly) from one another. Choice-Dialogues are daylong, highly structured dialogues—twenty-four times as long as the average poll and four times as long as the average focus group. Typically, participants spend the morning familiarizing themselves with the scenarios and their pros and cons and developing (in dialogue with one another) their vision of the future they would like to see on the issue in question. They

spend the afternoons testing their preferences against the hard and often painful trade-offs they would need to make to realize their vision. In this process people seldom simply choose one scenario, but instead mix and match to produce their own, revealing a lot about their underlying values and assumptions, the choices they would be willing to support, and the conditions for that support. To encourage learning, the Choice-Dialogue methodology is based on dialogue rather than debate; research and experience show that this is how public opinion really forms, by people talking with friends, neighbors, and coworkers. These eight-hour sessions allow intense social learning, and both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to determine how and why people's views change as they learn.

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We have applied Choice-Dialogue methodology to a wide range of issues across North America, including health care, education, the federal deficit, entitlements, foreign policy, land use, housing, transportation, local budgeting, aging, and environmental sustainability. Two examples follow.

### ***Citizen Values and the Future of Health Care in Canada***

For many years the Canadian Health Care System has been the jewel in the crown and a fundamental element of the Canadian political identity: a first-rate, government-run health care program that provides top-level care to every Canadian.<sup>3</sup> But in recent years, the jewel has tarnished somewhat, and more and more Canadians have complained about rising costs, longer waits, and declining quality. Canada's federal government established a national commission to recommend reforms to address these concerns. Instead of relying solely on consultation with experts and representatives of special interests, the commission wanted to find a way to elicit and incorporate the views of "unorganized" citizens into their recommendations. But they recognized that polls and focus groups alone could not provide the insight they needed. While polls and focus groups clearly demonstrated that the public was dissatisfied with what it viewed as a serious decline in the quality of its health care system, these traditional research methods produced far less clarity about the sorts of solutions the public might be willing to support and the conditions that would make that support a reality.

The commission retained Viewpoint Learning to conduct a series of Choice-Dialogues across the country. In each daylong dialogue, a randomly selected representative sample of Canadians considered four very different values-based scenarios for health care reform. These choices ranged from significant tax increases to a shift toward a more market-based system in which

people with more money could buy better coverage. All had significant support within “elite” circles. The dialogues showed Canadian policy makers that their latitude for action was broader than polls indicated. It also showed how resistant Canadians were to market-based solutions, in contrast to the American public. One proposal in particular, a major reorganization of primary care, had powerful benefits and appeals for Canadians (once they had a chance to work through the implications of this and other choices) that were not clear to policy makers beforehand.

The commission was able to use these insights into the public’s core values on health care as “a compass” (as the staff director of the commission described it) to guide the reform proposals that were subsequently developed and are now being implemented.

### ***Listening to Californians: Bridging the Disconnect***

Viewpoint Learning, with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, undertook a statewide Choice-Dialogue research project in California designed to provide state and local leaders with deeper insight into the views, values, and underlying assumptions of average Californians on some of the key issues and choices facing the state.<sup>4</sup> The purpose was to find practical ways to build the public support needed to effectively address important fiscal and policy challenges, and to improve the relationship between citizens and state and local government. Some dialogues considered issues from general policy areas (health care, K–12 education, and transportation), and some focused more on infrastructure (water, K–12 school facilities, and transportation).

What we found—in every dialogue, in every part of the state, and on every issue examined—was a profound mistrust of government and elected officials. This mistrust was both more intense and more persistent than expected, outstripping the levels measured by polls and focus groups. It emerged as a central underlying issue, shaping all other responses and undermining the ability to build essential public support on issue after issue. The research findings suggested a number of steps that leaders could take to break through this mistrust, build the public support needed to address important fiscal and policy challenges, and improve the relationship between citizens and state and local government.

Based on the interest in these findings expressed by leaders and others, three separate follow-up Choice-Dialogue studies were commissioned to examine three specific policy areas in greater depth: health care (sponsored by the California Endowment), K–12 education (sponsored by the

Hewlett Foundation), and the state budget process (sponsored by California Forward, a nonpartisan group promoting governance reform in California). Leaders from both parties played an active role in the design of these follow-up Choice-Dialogues. For example, on K–12 education we worked closely with representatives of the governor, speaker of the assembly, president pro tem of the state senate, and superintendent of public instruction. These dialogues provided more detail on the public's learning curve on each issue—how the public worked through the choices and trade-offs. They also detailed how the deep mistrust identified in the original study affected each issue and suggested “roadmaps” that leaders could use to build public support for reform in each area. The results were reviewed by leaders and other decision makers in Sacramento and across the state.

## More Effective Governance

Our initial goal was to develop the Choice-Dialogue methodology and apply it to a wide range of issues across North America. Having achieved this, our next step has been to look for better ways to combine research and application—to merge more reliable opinion research with more effective governance.

Our most recent work has aimed to extend the reach and the impact of this dialogue-based methodology in two directions. The first extends the dialogue to build ownership among key leaders (including groups traditionally focused on advocacy) and to experiment with ways of not just informing leaders but also engaging them in an ongoing two-way conversation. The second direction involves broadening the dialogue to include a larger cross section of the public. In other words, we have pursued two objectives:

- *Engaging leaders* early in the process to help frame and clarify the issue and to define the key choices and trade-offs. This approach is designed to ensure that the research is relevant to issues leaders face, to create a sense of authorship, and to increase the likelihood that the results will be heard and used. What we have found repeatedly is that the earlier leaders are involved in the process, the more likely it is that they will pay attention to the results.
- *Scaling up*. While the participants in the eight-hour Choice-Dialogues are deeply affected by the experience, developing the broad public understanding and support needed for significant policy reform

means casting a larger net—building on the insights of the research but using simpler and more targeted methods to engage many more people.

One current project provides a good example of how this approach works in practice and how these two objectives can be combined to reinforce each other.

### ***Voices for Health Care: Advancing Sustainable Health Care Reform in Three States***

Beginning in 2007, Viewpoint Learning, with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, has worked in three states—Mississippi, Ohio, and Kansas—to engage both leaders and the public in a different kind of conversation to advance significant health care reform.<sup>5</sup>

The project's objectives include the following:

- identifying health care reforms to lower costs and improve access that both leaders and the public will support
- defining the roles of employers, the public sector, and individuals in such a system
- revealing potential roadblocks and conditions for support
- creating a roadmap that leaders and others can use to move these health care reforms forward
- developing a growing culture of and capacity for dialogue and civic engagement in each state where this work is conducted

In all these efforts, we have worked closely with local partners—state health care advocacy groups, which in turn brought in nonpartisan policy institutes as co-conveners.

The focus from the beginning has been to build momentum for significant change, with each activity leading naturally to the next. In each state the sequence was as follows:

1. Strategic Dialogues (one in each state), in which health care, political, civic, and business leaders worked together to create scenarios for reform to test with the public in Choice-Dialogues. Strategic Dialogue participants in each state arrived at surprisingly similar conclusions about the roots of the problem and the range of possible solutions that would be required to address it. Leaders participating in the Strategic Dialogues were impressed by the wide range of perspectives

at the table, the shared sense of urgency among people from different sectors, and the variety of expertise and experience represented.

They appreciated the opportunity to move beyond short-term and incremental fixes to consider longer-term health care reform. Most were especially struck by the level of agreement about the need for significant reform and the core values all parties shared: they had not expected to find so much common ground on what could and should be done. Participants ended the day with a growing sense of what might be possible, curiosity about what the Choice-Dialogues would reveal, and interest in the project and its prospects. These sessions built a sense of ownership of the subsequent phases of the project and began to build momentum for broadening public engagement efforts.

2. Nine daylong Choice-Dialogues (three in each state) in which randomly selected, representative samples of the public explored what sort of health care system they wanted to see in the future, grappling with the difficult choices and trade-offs involved. As a starting point, participants used a special workbook constructed around four distinct scenarios for health care reform. These scenarios, based on leaders' conclusions in the Strategic Dialogues, were written in the language of citizens and designed to highlight the key values and trade-offs. These scenarios provided a *starting point only*—participants were free to change or combine them as they saw fit. The four scenarios were as follows:
  - a. Shared responsibility (requiring employers, government, insurers, and providers to share responsibility for fixing the holes in the current employer-based insurance system)
  - b. Increasing personal responsibility (requiring each state resident to have at least minimum health insurance coverage coupled with measures to make coverage more affordable and to increase public education about health)
  - c. Public health insurance for all (creating a state agency to act as a single insurance company for all state residents)
  - d. A coordinated wellness system (ensuring that every state resident has a "medical home" that provides coordinated care and emphasizes wellness and prevention)

In all nine Choice-Dialogues, across three states and a wide range of specific local circumstances, participants followed very similar steps and reached a strikingly consistent set of conclusions. At the outset, participants

in all dialogues quickly agreed that the health care system has major problems and that something significant has to change. Stereotypes about the uninsured began to fall away as people with and without insurance talked directly with one another. As they compared experiences, they realized that the problems affected everyone in the room, insured and uninsured alike, and that in fact they were all paying for the uninsured already. In working it through, they concluded that everyone needed to be covered—but how? They first looked to the employer-based system, which was familiar and offered choice and competition. But they saw that fewer employers could afford coverage, that self-employed and part-time workers had no coverage, and that having to fund health care made companies less competitive. So they asked whether the state could do better.

Participants had major concerns about a state-run system—in particular, that it would restrict choice, cover “freeloaders,” and cost too much. Over the course of the day they worked through each of these concerns in turn. For example, on choice, they agreed that any state system would have to allow choice of providers. But they also agreed that it was unrealistic to have unlimited coverage of treatments and concluded that a state-run system should cover only treatments that had been scientifically proven effective (evidence-based medicine), on condition that there was an appeal mechanism and access to second opinions. Participants also agreed that while the state should provide basic coverage to everyone, employers or individuals should be able to provide supplemental coverage. By the end of the day, strong majorities in all dialogues (including majorities of both liberals and conservatives) supported switching to a publicly run health system that would be paid for by taxes. They also agreed to a number of steps to improve wellness, emphasizing that we not only need to cover everyone but must have a system that makes people healthier. Even more striking, they agreed to pay more in taxes for such a system—on the condition that the funds were earmarked for health care and that there was strong accountability for how funds would be spent. Their basic conclusion was that we are already paying for a system that doesn’t meet our needs; let’s pay for one that does.

3. An Interactive Briefing with leaders, including many who had participated in the Strategic Dialogue as well as others from business, government, health care, and other sectors.<sup>6</sup> Leaders were surprised and encouraged by the amount of common ground identified by Choice-Dialogue participants, and also by their thoughtfulness and their willingness to confront difficult choices. In particular they

were surprised by citizens' openness to a public system, their strong support for preventive care, their support for electronic record keeping, and their broad-based willingness to pay for a system that provides everyone with access to care. The fact that such diverse groups had reached strong conclusions led even the skeptics to conclude that they had more leeway than they had previously thought to engage their constituencies, colleagues, and organizations in a tough-minded conversation about potential reform. The discussion in these sessions focused not only on the substance of the findings but also on ways to build on the results, reach out to other leaders, and continue to engage with the public.

The remaining elements of this project (currently under way) focus on "scaling up" the dialogue to engage a broader cross section of the public. These efforts encourage people to grapple with the difficult choices involved using a variety of structured face-to-face and online methods. Just as important, they allow leaders in each state to develop and deepen local institutional capacity for dialogue and public engagement—around health care as well as other challenges facing their state.

4. Based on the Choice-Dialogue findings, we developed a Meeting-in-a-Box kit that enables leaders, advocates, and others to conduct two-and-a-half-hour, highly structured community conversations about health care reform. The kit includes feedback mechanisms that can be used to measure results and build a list of interested citizens who can continue to engage with the issue over time. Our local partners recruited local facilitators whom we trained in the use of the Meeting-in-a-Box kit, and many community conversations are now under way in each state. Hundreds of people have already participated in Community Conversations. Our local partners also report a number of other tangible benefits: wider awareness of their organizations, increased visibility and credibility as a state leader on health reform, and a growing and more energized network of citizens interested and engaged in the discussion of health care reform.
5. On-Line Dialogue included participants from each of the target states and from across the country. It provided more citizens with an opportunity to engage in a dialogue on health care reform online and to contribute their views. This dialogue was widely promoted by state partners, as well as on the Internet and through Facebook. It included an online Choice-Book—a user-friendly way for individuals

to work through a simplified version of the Choice-Dialogue scenarios. As they worked through the Choice-Book, participants responded to each scenario and completed a brief questionnaire on their values and priorities; at the end of the Choice-Book phase, each participant received a customized report outlining how his or her responses compared to those of most participants. Participants then had the option to sign up for an online “small group dialogue” in which they worked in small, moderated groups to go deeper into the issues and trade-offs raised in the Choice-Book.

6. In parallel with these efforts, we have conducted ongoing outreach through local communications and media activities to heighten public awareness of these efforts and create “buzz” around the need for reform and the specific approaches identified by the public and leaders.

Many leaders who observed the Choice-Dialogues and participated in the Strategic Dialogues and Interactive Briefings were surprised at what they saw. Participants (leaders and “regular” citizens alike) were engaged, passionate, and thoughtful about the choices they had to make, and they were willing to consider sacrifices and trade-offs to create a better system for everyone. Citizens who participated in the Choice-Dialogues were surprised as well; many said it was the first time they had ever been asked to weigh in on an important policy question, and they were eager to stay involved. They also expressed amazement at the level of civility and the power of dialogue to move past partisan division and toward mutual understanding. These sessions revealed a hunger for engagement and a demand for leadership among residents in each of the target states.

The *Voices for Health Care* project provides one promising example of how more reliable opinion research can be combined with efforts to more fully engage leaders and the public in improving governance.

## Challenges and Next Steps

More than seventy-five years of experience with polls has demonstrated their enduring value as a cost-effective way of measuring the views of a large population through scientific sampling. This experience has also taught us some of the major limitations of polling—in particular that it can be misleading when the public has not made up its mind (often the case on complex policy issues). *Coming to Public Judgment* analyzed these limitations and also proposed a way to overcome them.

Our work at Viewpoint Learning, and the examples described in this chapter, are part of an effort to develop new methods of opinion research that do something different: methods whose strength is polls' weakness. These new methods help people make up their minds—accelerating the working-through process. They document the public's learning curve and provide a different kind of insight that can complement and sometimes correct the insight provided by polls and focus groups.

But the question remains: Why do polls and focus groups alone continue to be the methods of choice for hearing the voice of the unorganized public, and for gauging public views and values on all issues, long after *Coming to Public Judgment* showed their limitations? The answers that follow reveal some of the key challenges that lie ahead both for new forms of opinion research like Choice-Dialogues and for efforts to engage more people in governance (especially the unorganized or unaffiliated public).

### ***Most Leaders Understand the Value of Polls but Not Their Limitations***

We need to do a better job of familiarizing leaders with the limitations of polls (when people have not yet made up their minds), and especially with how newer, dialogue-based methods of research and engagement can help them govern more effectively. As our society becomes more fragmented and the number and range of interest groups grow, these new methods can help leaders to better hear and understand the voices of the unorganized public (reaching past interest groups), build public support (especially on gridlock issues), and find common ground. But the first step is to make leaders aware that there are tested alternatives to the traditional top-down model of "informing and educating" the public, and to the more limited insights that polls and focus groups alone can provide.

### ***A Polling Story Is Easier to Tell Than a Dialogue or Deliberation Story***

Fundamental changes in the media and the emergence of new media have contributed to a further fragmentation of the public. For example, it is becoming more common today for people to view only news sources that agree with their own viewpoint. This combined with a shortening of attention spans and a reduced attention to context makes working through and finding common ground even more difficult. We need to find better ways for the media, and especially new media, to tell a deliberation story and to contribute to "scaling up" this sort of dialogue.

One major challenge is that the mainstream media (especially radio and television) tend to focus on conflict and extreme views rather than on finding common ground. Recently, for example, some citizens who had partici-

pated in one of our dialogues were interviewed on a nationally syndicated radio program. The interviewer asked us to send an equal number of people who identified themselves as Republicans and Democrats, which was easy to do. During the interview he repeatedly tried to find areas of disagreement between these groups and was increasingly skeptical and frustrated when the citizens told him that they really did agree on the important questions and that any disagreements were secondary. All the participants, in their own way, tried to get across that the big story for them was precisely that there was not the expected division and that there was far more common ground than any of them had expected. It seemed to us that because the interviewer couldn't identify a conflict or wedge issue, he didn't know how to tell the story. Afterward, one participant remarked to us, "He didn't seem interested that we found common ground on anything. He just wanted us to argue and disagree. Why couldn't he understand that we got past all that stuff?" We are now working with media producers to experiment with ways in which using dialogue to find common ground can be "good television," but much work remains to be done.

***Because These Dialogue-Based Methods Are Relatively New,  
They Cost More***

Bringing down the cost of these better ways of listening to and engaging the unorganized public means enabling more people and organizations to learn these techniques and, over time, institutionalizing an ongoing public capacity for dialogue. We should not have to reinvent the wheel each time we want to bring the voice of the public into the governance process. It should be a regular part of our political culture and how we do public business.

## **Conclusions**

*Coming to Public Judgment* provided critical insight into how the public learns and reaches judgment—that is, into the public's learning curve. That insight has been central to the efforts described in this chapter to develop more reliable methods of opinion research, to engage the public, and to strengthen governance and leadership.

There are a number of key lessons we have learned in this process that can help guide efforts to meet the challenges and take the steps described in the previous section.

### ***The Value of Bringing Together Citizens with Very Different Backgrounds and Viewpoints***

Too often today conversations about public issues take place only among groups of the like-minded. These narrower conversations tend to reinforce polarization of different groups, increase the stereotyping of “others”—those who hold different views and make different assumptions—and limit learning. In a dialogue, by contrast (and unlike a negotiation), the more diverse the perspectives of the participants, the richer the learning and the more productive the outcome. On issue after issue, we have found that when citizens are given an opportunity to look at the bigger picture, to connect the dots, and to engage in dialogue with others from very different backgrounds and perspectives, they think and act more like citizens and less like consumers, they develop a shared community perspective, and they are ready to make and support big changes to advance the common good.

### ***The Power of Building on Common Ground***

Over the years, the clash of interest groups has created or reinforced gridlock on a growing number of issues—education, immigration, health care, taxation, and budgets, to name just a few. *But it is important to realize that this is a gridlock of special interests, not a gridlock of the public.* We have repeatedly found, in our work across the country, that citizens who begin with very different viewpoints can find a remarkable amount of common ground. It is on such areas of common ground that effective leaders can build broad-based public support for action. Building on common ground is a way to increase trust and move toward sustainable solutions, while building on wedge issues tends to reinforce polarization and gridlock.

### ***The Changing Expectations of the Public***

In our work in the United States over the last couple of years, we have seen a change in Americans’ expectations of their leaders and of themselves. This change comes in part from a growing sense of crisis about the direction of the country and (especially) the troubles of the economy—including a growing anxiety that we as a nation are living beyond our means and that leaders are disconnected from citizens’ concerns. Much more than before, Americans are telling us the following:

- They want leaders to provide an honest, straightforward assessment of the challenges facing the nation. They are increasingly suspicious of easy answers and more aware when they are being pandered to or misled; such tactics tend to reinforce mistrust.

- They do not expect leaders to provide all the answers—but they do expect leaders to give people the chance to wrestle with the tough choices and to take citizens' viewpoints seriously.
- They want to be challenged and play a role in problem solving: being asked to consider hard choices is not a poison pill.

These expectations cut across the usual demographic and political categories.

Responding to these expectations will create a major challenge for elected officials at all levels of government. But it also provides opportunities for leaders and for everyone who has been inspired by *Coming to Public Judgment* to make the public's voice a foundation for governance and leadership.