

# The Next Big Step in Deliberative Democracy

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*“Deliberative democracy seeks to offer techniques for engaging the public and expressing the public voice.”*

**I**n coming years, deliberative democracy is likely to play a more central role in our system of governance. We expect this to happen not just in the United States, but also in democratic countries everywhere.

One reason to expect progress is that the deliberative democracy movement, though still in its infancy, shows promise of correcting a serious flaw in our current democratic practice—a flaw that is too urgent to neglect. For democracy to work properly, viable mechanisms must exist for expressing the will of the people. It is not necessary for the public to be as well informed as elites and experts; not only is this goal futile, it may not even be desirable. But for democracy to work as it should, it is necessary that the public be reasonably attentive and engaged with the key pros and cons of vitally important issues—for example, the war in Iraq, illegal immigration, energy independence.

For a variety of reasons, in today’s America the mechanisms designed to engage the public and express its will are failing. We need new ways to make average Americans feel they have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Nothing undercuts public engagement as much as the conviction that your voice doesn’t count. We also need to forge better connections between elected representatives and the public.

Apart from elections, two other mechanisms exist for engaging and expressing the public will: the variety of media that inform and entertain us and the advocacy of interest groups. Unfortunately, whatever other utility they may have, neither one is meeting this cardinal requirement of our democracy. All too often, they are part of the problem rather than the solution. Deliberative democracy seeks to

correct this failing and to offer better techniques for engaging the public and expressing the public voice.

In the next few years, a variety of deliberative democracy methods, which are now being developed and tested, will, we believe, win broader public acceptance. In this article, we propose to elaborate the need for, and the promise of, the new deliberative democracy methods, describing their current strengths and limitations in order to identify the most important unanswered questions they pose. We will then describe our own distinctive approach, present examples of what we are learning, and forecast where the next big advances in the deliberative democracy movement are likely to come from.

The deliberative democracy movement includes a wide range of practitioners and theoreticians, all approaching the field from the perspective of their own backgrounds and areas of expertise. Jim Fishkin, the originator of deliberative polling, is a political scientist. Carolyn Lukensmeyer, founder of *AmericaSpeaks*, has a background in organizational development and public administration. The National Issues Forums, with the encouragement of the Kettering Foundation, has refined and enriched the discussion group methodology. Public Agenda and Viewpoint Learning (the present writers' two organizations) bring to the field a background in public-opinion research, dialogue, and governance. Many other organizations, including Study Circles, the Public Conversations Project, the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, and scores of local centers and initiatives are responding to the growing demand for public dialogue and deliberation.

All deliberative democracy practitioners share certain core convictions: They believe that a more robust and active public engage-

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## Mechanisms designed to engage the public and express its will are failing.

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ment is indispensable to our democracy; they recognize the limitations of the existing paradigms for public engagement; and all of them see the need to provide the public with opportunities to engage in a more active and complex process of deliberation than currently prevails.

Here are two imagined examples of the kinds of problems that deliberative democracy hopes to address and solve:

- 1) Centerville is a small city of several hundred thousand people badly in need of better community services. Residents yearn for improved services but balk when it comes to paying for them. They believe their tax money will be wasted, while their political leaders believe the public is being irresponsible. The result: everyone is frustrated—Centerville's political and civic leaders as



well as its residents. This is the kind of gridlock that public engagement, done correctly, should be able to resolve.

- 2) The nation's health-care system is in crisis. Its costs are spinning out of control both for the government and the private sector (causing some of our largest companies to lose their competitive edge). In its magnitude, the threat of rising health-care costs dwarfs every other fiscal problem our nation faces. Yet, even with the world's most expensive and sophisticated health care, 45 million Americans lack health insurance. Public concern is growing, but people are confused by spin on every side as special interests succeed in blocking significant reform. Public engagement, done effectively, should be able to break through this gridlock

At every level—local, regional, national—gridlock issues like these are piling up. Why? Several fundamental trends have converged to make traditional ways of engaging the public less legitimate and effective. These include:

#### **Fiercer Interest Group Conflict**

The number and diversity of stakeholders and special interests whose views need to be taken into account have multiplied in recent years. When our systems of governance were first developed those whose voices “counted” were

relatively few, and they usually shared similar “establishment” backgrounds. So a small group, with relatively homogeneous views, could make decisions that would be accepted as legitimate by the larger public. Today, more voices need to

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## Neither media nor special interest advocacy build public understanding and trust.

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be taken into account (economic interests, ethnic and religious groups, seniors, political minorities, environmentalists, and so on), and the new players often bring different frameworks and assumptions to the table. This makes finding common ground far more difficult.

#### **Unsatisfied Demand for Voice**

For the last three decades, our research has tracked a growing insistence by the public for a greater voice in decisions that affect them, coupled with declining deference to authority. This trend has been compounded in recent years by a dramatic increase in public mistrust of virtually all institutions. Twice before in the past 75 years, America has found itself plunged into a prolonged period of mistrust: first, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and then in the 1960s and 1970s—the Vietnam/Watergate era. The current wave of mistrust began in 2001, in the aftermath of the Enron scandals, and shows no signs of abating.



### Changing Role of Media

The media and the Internet loom ever larger in our daily lives. The growing numbers of narrowly targeted media outlets allow Americans to get their news and commentary from sources that reflect their own viewpoint. People gravitate to niche media to avoid cognitive dissonance, and the proliferation of media leads to less shared experience as people choose media that shield them from being exposed to points of view other than their own. This fragmentation threatens to overwhelm what Hannah Arendt termed *public space*, where the public discourse so essential to a healthy democracy can take place. The polarization that characterizes much of today's political discourse is accentuated when people heed only voices that share their predilections.

As traditional ways of engaging the public grow less effective, polarization spreads. Yet this is less a gridlock of the public than of elites and special interests. We have found that, when given the opportunity and the structure to work through complex issues, average citizens with very different viewpoints are able to adopt a pragmatic attitude and find a remarkable amount of common ground. Elites and special interests are more locked into fixed positions and rigid ideological stances. Unfortunately, neither the media nor special interest advocacy—the two principal ways of engaging the public—seem able to build the kind of public understanding, trust, and support that the nation needs if it is to move beyond polarization and strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of our governance system.

Neither of these deeply entrenched methods succeeds in engaging the public. Indeed, they fan mistrust. Neither approach enables people to work through difficult issues and move beyond “raw opinion”—a condition that makes effective democracy difficult to achieve. Fifteen years ago, Daniel Yankelovich, in *Coming to Public Judgment*, defined raw opinion as “a state of public inattention, wishful thinking, mistrust, volatility of views, self-concern, and failure to do the hard thinking required to come to grips with complex issues.” Sad to say, raw opinion prevails more than ever in today's America on most issues of grave concern to the nation.

We do not claim that every complicated issue requires serious public engagement. Many issues can be resolved by expert technical solutions and, while public support may be helpful, it is not essential. Certain issues, however, do need a responsible level of public engagement. These are issues where majorities of the public are worried, their feelings are intense, and they are convinced that alternative solutions are possible.

Issues like health-care reform and energy independence are prime examples. For issues like these, a higher level of public engagement is key to breaking through the gridlock of special interests and to creating sustainable solutions. On issues of this sort the public will reject out-of-hand solutions that do not reflect their common sense and core values. The administration's failed Social Security reform proposal is an example of what can happen when the public is not part of the conversation around a crucial issue. How to maintain adequate funding for Social Security is, in the public mind, a clear and urgent problem that calls for government action.

But the president's solution involved injecting an element of risk into a program that the public values precisely because it is risk-free. Rescuing a risk-free benefit by making it riskier runs counter to the public's basic

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## On most issues, Americans procrastinate in making up their minds.

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common sense, and it put the president at cross purposes with the public.

The deliberative democracy movement offers new methods for engaging the public that can potentially correct these failings. Its methods give people the *time and structure* they need to think through where they really stand. The deliberative democracy paradigm takes into account the way people actually form convictions. The appeal of this approach is that it meets the growing demand of Americans for a stronger voice in the decisions that affect their lives. At the same time, it gives political and civic leaders tools they need to reach past special interests to engage the public more effectively.

The movement takes advantage of several substantial achievements and builds its future on them. It can point to a growing number of success stories that, while not yet transformative of the nation's political practice, show that deliberative democracy creates important new possibilities. For example, Viewpoint Learning's special purpose dialogue methods consistently show that randomly selected groups of average Americans can succeed in moving from raw opinion to

thoughtful considered judgment on a variety of complex issues within the space of a single intense day of dialogue and deliberation—a process that under ordinary conditions might take weeks, months, or years.

Increasing numbers of scholars and practitioners, too, are working in the field on a wide range of issues, both local and national, coming closer to creating the critical mass needed to make deliberative methods more widely accepted. And as mistrust, gridlock, and the inadequacy of more traditional governance methods grows more evident, there is increasing interest in finding new ways to escape from this impasse of democracy and to build the public understanding and public support that is needed for effective and legitimate political action.

Viewpoint Learning and Public Agenda have a point of departure that differs somewhat from that of other participants in the deliberative democracy field. It comes from struggling with an anomaly in survey research with the public, our field of specialization. The anomaly is that sometimes survey results accurately reflect people's convictions and behavior and sometimes they do not—and there is no commonly accepted way to distinguish when they do and when they don't.



Struggles with this anomaly were the subject of *Coming to Public Judgment*, in the 1990s, demonstrating that public-opinion polls are predictive only when people have truly made up their minds on controversial issues but don't reveal whether people have or haven't made up their minds and how tentative or firm people are in their judgments. On most issues, especially value-laden and conflict-ridden ones, Americans procrastinate in making up their minds unless motivated to do otherwise. Media doctrine to the contrary, people rarely make up their minds merely by becoming better informed; and on particularly troubled issues, making up one's mind is almost never a simple one-step process; it is a laborious multistage effort ordinarily requiring months, years, even decades. On almost all complex issues, the process gets bogged down in conflicting emotion, wishful thinking, denial, lack of engagement, and concern with self.

Extensive research conducted by Viewpoint Learning and Public Agenda in subsequent years provides confirmatory evidence that the dominant "public education" model, wherein leaders and experts inform and instruct a passive public, is largely ineffective on controversial, emotion-laden issues. The key to successful engagement requires shifting from top-down communication towards two-way dialogue in which leaders and the public listen and learn from one another. Leaders and experts are initially resistant to the shift to dialogue. ("We are the experts; the public learns from us, we have nothing to learn from the public.") But happily, most experts become less resistant when they realize that politically sustainable solutions to important issues depend not

only on technical expertise but also—and critically—on public support and the "values" input that can come only from the public.

People make up their minds in a three-stage process, each with its own substages. The process starts with consciousness raising (Stage I), evolves into "working through" the possible solutions and their consequences (an often stormy Stage II), and gradually move toward resolution as they reconcile proposed solutions with their core values (Stage III). This process can be compressed experimentally from weeks and months into a single day-long dialogue that we call *ChoiceDialogues*<sup>™</sup>. ChoiceDialogues follow strict rules of engagement. They require considerable advance preparation of materials, in particular a set of values-based options to focus the dialogue on the key elements of the issue and to help people move through a great deal of material quickly and constructively. Research based on before-and-after measures demonstrates that sizeable shifts in participant outlook have taken place during these dialogues. They point the direction in which public opinion will evolve over time.



ChoiceDialogues yield an insightful picture of how leaders can win greater public support (if the right kind of leadership is exercised) and a road map for leaders hoping to craft significant, sustainable change. Certainly bringing leaders into this process at an early stage makes real change more likely. And participating in this process builds social capital, trust, mutual respect, and mutual understanding. Significantly, in these dialogues, people unobtrusively shift from a self-centered to a community perspective.

**V**iewpoint Learning and Public Agenda have conducted many research and engagement projects over the past decade. They demonstrate the power and potential of deliberative democracy methods to restore the public space on which healthy democracy depends, to give voice to the public, and to inform political decision making, especially when leaders are involved early in the process. The five case studies that follow present examples of these methods in action.

### **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 of Canadian political identity: a first rate, government-run health-care program that provided top-level care to every Canadian. But in recent years, the jewel has tarnished somewhat, and more and more Canadians have complained about rising costs, increasing waits, and declining quality. In 2001, 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 they viewed as a serious decline in the quality of their health-care system, these traditional means of soliciting public input were far less clear when it came to understanding what sorts of solutions the public might be willing to support and the conditions for that support.

The commission retained Viewpoint Learning to conduct a series of ChoiceDialogues around the nation. In each day-long dialogue, a randomly selected representative sample of Canadians considered four, very different, values-based health-care reforms. These choices ranged from significant tax increases to pay for increasingly expensive public health care to a shift towards a more market-based system in which people with money could buy better coverage. All had significant support within "elite" circles. The dialogues showed Canadian policymakers that their latitude for action was far broader than polls indicated. It also showed how resistant Canadians were to market-based solutions. One proposal in particular had powerful benefits and appeal for Canadians (once they had a chance to work through the implications of this and other choices) that had not been clear to policymakers beforehand.

The commission was able to use these insights into the public's core values on health

care as a compass in their subsequent conversations with experts and special interests (as was reflected in their final report to governments, entitled “Building on Values”). The project provided leaders with information that could not have been achieved any other way, information that guided the reform proposals that were subsequently developed and are now being implemented.

### The Housing Crisis in San Mateo County, California

In the Bay area’s San Mateo County, a two-bedroom fixer upper can easily cost upwards of \$700,000, and a family of four making less than \$60,000 is considered below the poverty line. The cost of housing has led to a crisis for residents and employers alike; it is a crisis that affects not only low-income families, but anyone who wants access to a good doctor, high quality teachers, or people to work in all of the high-tech firms, shops, and restaurants that make the county such an appealing place to live. Recently a small and committed group of civic leaders representing all sectors of society (health care, government, education, real estate, environment, and so on) came together to address the issue of San Mateo’s housing crisis.

This group, called the “Nachos,” was frustrated with typical win/lose advocacy struggles around housing issues, which generally lead to gridlock. They suspected that the disconnect between the public and officials would make it impossible to bring

about the dramatic increase in available, affordable housing the county desperately needed. The group felt that the best role they could play was as a facilitator in the largest

## Successful engagement requires shifting from top-down communication towards two-way dialogue.

sense: a convener of ways to engage the public thoughtfully and reconnect them with decision makers in order to create momentum for change.

The Nachos commissioned Viewpoint Learning to initiate a public-engagement process. The process began with a series of countywide ChoiceDialogues in which representative, random samples of the public worked through several very different approaches to dealing with the housing crisis.

Their conclusions were clear and consistent, showing that once the public had an opportunity to work through the alternatives

they strongly favored approaches that involved increasing density along main transportation corridors in the county. The next step was to convene two Stakeholder Dialogues, in which key leaders (elected officials, C.E.O.’s, housing advocates, developers, health and education leaders) came together with some of the citizens who had participated in the ChoiceDialogues to further clarify and



advance the citizens' vision for the future of the county and develop action plans.

These sessions proved to be powerful for the participants, who were surprised by the amount of common ground they discovered and, as a result, more hopeful about achieving

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## A different kind of conversation, based on dialogue rather than debate.

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solutions. Using the results of these dialogues as a road map, the Nachos are now planning to scale up their engagement efforts to more citizens and leaders alike, building the support needed for effective change to resolve the housing crisis.

### **The Future of Morgan Hill, California—A “Community Conversation”**

The Northern California city of Morgan Hill is home to many Silicon Valley commuters. A longstanding low tax/low service philosophy combined with a decade of sound fiscal management and thoughtful long-term planning has left Morgan Hill in a better position than many municipalities to deal with looming financial challenges. But cuts in the state budget and decreases in city tax revenues, coupled with increasing costs, mean that residents of Morgan Hill will soon face a difficult choice: either cut essential services or raise additional revenues. Polls show that residents oppose service cuts and seek improved services; but they also indicate substantial opposition to suggestions for raising revenues.

To find ways to break through this impasse, the City Council asked Viewpoint Learning to design a “community conversation” bringing Morgan Hill’s residents together to reexamine what kind of city they want, what services they expect, what they are willing to pay for and under what conditions. Working with city leaders, we developed a “dialogue-in-a-box” that included a streamlined set of choices for the city’s future, a detailed leader’s guide, and a video that quickly laid out the critical information and the ground rules of dialogue. Leaders from Morgan Hill are currently using their dialogue-in-a-box kit to directly engage residents in a conversation about the future direction of the city.

These meetings are designed to be a very different kind of conversation, one based on dialogue rather than debate. Participants in these meetings report they have learned a great deal from the materials and from one another and many came away with a broader understanding of the challenges facing the city and ideas about the steps necessary to achieve a new level of taxes and services. So far, the city council has held more than 30 meetings at public and private venues around the city, providing invaluable insight into the core values of residents to build public support and understanding for the difficult decisions that lie ahead.

### **Addressing Property Tax Reform in New Jersey**

Many New Jerseyans have long been dissatisfied with the structure of their tax system—a system that relies very heavily on local property taxes. The result is a distribution of the tax burden among individuals and jurisdictions that is widely believed to

be unfair and inequitable. Many citizens, business leaders, and current and former public officials shared a frustration with the inability of elected officials—indeed, of the political system itself—to resolve this long-standing issue. A New Jersey-based grassroots organization called Coalition for the Public Good asked Public Agenda to create a different kind of forum in which residents from across the state could engage complex questions of tax reform and demonstrate that reasonable solutions to the current gridlock are possible. Public Agenda helped the coalition to organize and conduct a major statewide “Citizen’s Tax Assembly,” a two-day event held in the capitol building in Trenton.

The New Jersey Citizens’ Tax Assembly brought together close to 100 diverse “delegates” from every county in the state to engage one another in a dialogue on possible approaches to tax reform. Public Agenda created print and video “choice work” discussion starter materials for the two-day assembly, and trained moderators and recorders who facilitated small discussion groups throughout the assembly, engaging participants in the detailed analysis and negotiations and concluding in a set of concerns, values, priorities, and recommendations.

The Coalition for the Public Good produced a report on the assembly and took their recommendations directly to the New Jersey Legislature in a set of special hearings. The coalition then held an additional statewide follow-up assembly, in which the same delegates reassembled to continue refining their recommendations and to tackle the issues in more detail. More recently, the group organized four regional tax forums each with its own set of delegates, in order to expand the

number of citizens involved in the process of deliberation. Currently, the coalition is working to influence the deliberations of a new task force recently created by the state legislature to consider holding a property tax constitutional convention. Clearly, the citizens of

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## Can we scale up public engagement from hundreds of participants to hundreds of thousands?

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New Jersey are willing and able to partner with the state’s leaders and elected officials and take action on this complex and contentious issue.

### **A Vision for the Future of Air Travel in San Diego**

Flying into San Diego International Airport, known locally as Lindbergh Field, could not be more convenient. Small and manageable, the airport is only a few miles from downtown and within a 30-minute drive for most of the county’s population. But San Diego County is growing and Lindbergh Field’s single runway will be hard pressed to meet the needs of this high-tech city 15 years from now. Developable land is



scarce, and the only thing residents want to see near their neighborhood less than an airport is a nuclear power plant. For decades, the issue has been gridlocked, fought over by powerful special interests, including the business community, homeowners associations, the military, and environmentalists. But the law requires the San Diego County Airport Authority to put a solution on the ballot for voters to decide.

It will be at least 15 years before the airport reaches capacity, which is about as long as it takes to build a new airport, and the consequences of inaction are far off and abstract. However, when representative samples of San Diegans from around the county worked together in a series of Viewpoint Learning's ChoiceDialogues to discuss this traditional "NIMBY" issue, they came to agree that steps needed to be taken now to put in place a better solution to San Diego's future airport requirements. There was also surprising agreement on the nature of those steps and the future directions that made sense. This represented a real change from where the ChoiceDialogue participants had begun.

Wanting to bring more people from around the county into the conversation, the Airport Authority asked Viewpoint Learning to design and conduct an online dialogue. Almost 800 people signed up through the *San Diego Union Tribune's* highly trafficked Web site to participate in a two-week online experience, using *Small Group Dialogue* software, created by WebLab. Thousands more read daily postings of each of the small groups as they worked their way through the same set of scenarios and tradeoffs and ultimately came to a similar set of conclusions as the participants in the more elaborate and

expensive face-to-face ChoiceDialogues.

The results of the online dialogues demonstrated support for moving forward with some decisions unpopular with special interests—previously the only voices at the table. And the effects continue to be felt. Upon conclusion of the online dialogue, many participants wanted to keep talking and formed a group that now meets regularly. At many Airport Authority meetings, participants from the Web dialogue attend and speak publicly in support of the conclusions reached online. For the first time, the voice of the unorganized public is represented at the table, which previously had featured only special interest advocacy. On an issue where NIMBY attitudes traditionally reign, this holds the promise of breaking through and finding a viable solution to gridlock.

**T**he potential of the deliberative democracy movement is just beginning to attract attention, but its success is far from assured. The field is full of unanswered questions:

- How can we integrate all of the competing methods and theories that deliberative democracy has generated? How do we know which methods are appropriate for which issues so as to avoid a "one size fits all" approach? Some issues do not merit—or need—the time and effort that deliberative democracy requires; on the other hand, most gridlock issues demand extraordinary effort. How can the high costs of many deliberative democracy efforts be reduced?
- How can we scale up public engagement experiments from hundreds of participants to hundreds of thousands or even millions

of people? What is the critical mass needed to create enough “buzz” to achieve momentum and to spread public engagement spontaneously? What is the best way to conduct dialogue among people with very different backgrounds, assumptions, and viewpoints?

- How can public engagement be crafted into a useful political strategy? How can we bring elected leaders into this process at an earlier stage to better connect public dialogue with political decision making? When is more public engagement necessary or even desirable, and when is it not?
- Current cultural trends indicate shorter attention spans, greater fragmentation, more polarization, more partisanship, and less tolerance for time-consuming rational discourse. Public engagement pushes in the opposite direction. Can it take hold in the current cultural climate? How can technology assist? How can the media help? What would motivate it to do so?

These are challenging questions, as yet unanswered. Sufficient progress has been made to date, however, that real breakthroughs are possible in the near future. Perhaps the most important focus of the deliberative democracy movement will relate to scale: how to take successful experiments now conducted at the research and local community level and scale these up to engage the population-at-large on issues of major national concern. In the online *Journal of Public Deliberation*, Will Friedman, one of the authors of this article, has pointed out that:

On the national level where public opinion changes slowly and mysteriously

... it makes more sense to think about trying to achieve a critical mass of public judgment rather than a broad-based maturation of opinion across the

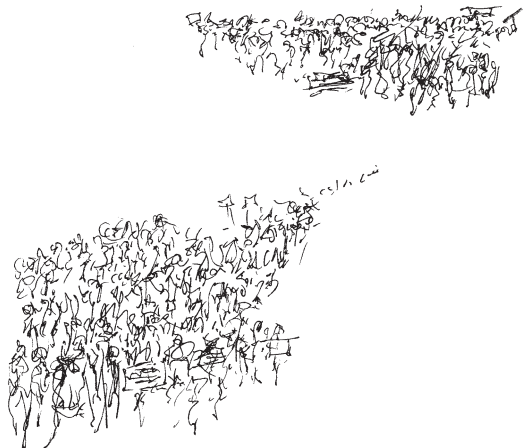
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The objective is to provide opportunities for the public to take greater control.

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American population. This can mean, for instance, enough judgment by enough people to begin to change and improve the climate of opinion on an issue, diminish political paralysis, and allow the policy debate to evolve.

Friedman cites, as an example, an initiative on the budget deficit that Public Agenda and Viewpoint Learning are conducting in partnership with the Concord Coalition, the Heritage Foundation, and the Brookings Institution. That project’s goal is to generate realistic public engagement on the budget



and deficit—trying, in other words, to help public and leadership opinion mature to the point at which the issue is effectively removed from “third-rail” status and leaders can suggest innovative and bold proposals without fear.

The objective of larger scale engagement is not only to create dialogue between leaders and the public, but to provide opportunities for the public to take greater control of the dialogue process, thereby creating social capital, community, “buzz,” and ownership. Finding better ways to do this is essential to overcoming the constraints imposed by special interest advocacy and media-based models of engagement. It is also essential to restoring the public space in American

life. The public holds the key to ending most stalemates. If leaders turn to the public to break through the gridlock of special interests, citizens will almost always find common ground even on the most challenging, value-laden issues. We need new public-engagement methods to discover and create that common ground.

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