DELIBERATION AT THE
NATIONAL ISSUES CONVENTION
AN OBSERVER’S NOTES

BY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Political philosophy is often a counterfactual discussion of how a political system might work if certain impossibilities were true. But yesterday’s impossibilities can become today’s unlikely scenarios and tomorrow’s realities. In this sense, Jim Fishkin’s work on deliberation has transformed from hypothetical writings into actual programs. Those interested in Fishkin’s philosophical concerns should study carefully the nature and impact of the events that drew inspiration from his early ideas on deliberation.

Fishkin has provided the spark for many public forums that resemble his early idea for a “deliberative opinion poll,” but the January, 1996, National Issues Convention (NIC) was his boldest (and most expensive) attempt to bring together a national random sample for a series of face-to-face meetings on public issues.1 After a failed attempt to hold the NIC in 1992, Fishkin garnered the financial and logistical support necessary for holding the convention in 1996. Planned to lead into the presidential primaries, the NIC included not only small group discussions among random groups of citizens but also televised question-and-answer periods with policy experts and presidential candidates.

In scrutinizing this multifaceted event, one can ask many questions about its outcome. What influence did it have on the presidential election? Was the final group of participants a representative sample of the American public? Did citizens change their minds on public issues after participating in the NIC? All of these are important questions, but this essay focuses on a single, fundamental question: Was the NIC deliberative?

A deliberative convention would be characterized by the following features:

- Participants attempted to both develop clear personal opinions on policy issues and reach better understandings of the public’s judgment on these issues.
- Participants alternately stated views, ideas, and concerns, listened and responded to what others said, and integrated what they learned with what they previously believed.
- Discussion groups considered alternative approaches to public problems and carefully evaluated those policies using clear and consistent criteria.2

This report does not provide a definitive assessment of deliberation at the NIC, but it does contribute toward one. As an observer at the NIC, I watched three discussion sessions with an eye toward deliberation, and this report summarizes my observations. In addition to my personal comments and interpretations, I have tried to provide detailed descriptions of key junctures in the group discussions so that the reader can see the details that lie beneath my general conclusions.

What I found was both clear evidence of deliberation and indications that many of the participants were engaging in heated debate,

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2This definition of deliberation comes from chapter one of Understanding Public Deliberation (Albuquerque, NM: Institute for Public Policy, 1995), co-authored by John Gastil, Gina Adam, and Hank Jenkins-Smith.
casual conversation, and many other things that were not deliberation. On balance, though, I believe there was considerable deliberation in the groups I observed.

The following pages explain how I arrived at that judgment. I begin by describing the participants’ attitudes as they arrived at the NIC. I then review each of the three group meetings that participants held on U.S. foreign policy, the U.S. economy, and the American family, respectively. Finally, I summarize my observations and make recommendations for future issues conventions.

2. THE ARRIVAL

Talking with the NIC participants, I was struck by how many were altogether uncertain what the NIC would entail. Because of the generous stipend offered to participants, many had feared it was a scam. One woman said she didn’t decide to go to the NIC until she got a round-trip ticket in the mail. When she arrived at the Austin airport, she was not at all certain that anyone would be there to greet her. None of the participants that I spoke with had ever been involved in anything like the NIC, and whereas the optimistic participants jumped at the opportunity, many others were intimidated by the prospect of traveling across the country to discuss politics with fellow citizens and presidential candidates.

“\textit{We’re not getting something for nothing. This is going to be hard work.}”

---NIC participant

Once the participants began congregating on the U.T.-Austin campus, however, they saw that the NIC was a real and unprecedented event. Some also began to recognize for the first time that the success of the event depended almost entirely upon their own cooperation. A participant I spoke with that evening said he was overcome with a sense of responsibility:

“\textit{We’re not getting something for nothing. This is going to be hard work.}”

Others had already developed this sense, partly as a result of their conversation with the field interviewer who first approached them to participate in the NIC survey. “I told the interviewer that I didn’t have strong enough opinions to come,” one woman reported, “but [the interviewer] was persistent and said, ‘You represent a lot of people.’ I had heard about these polls and asked, ‘How come I’m never polled?’ Well, bingo! So here I am.”

The organization of the event reinforced these beliefs, as participants were constantly the center of attention and were treated with the utmost respect by the NIC staff and others. This was apparent in the formal gatherings, where participants sat in a large circle around the center stage of the televised events. But this high regard for attendees was also noticeable when they were between meetings or simply walking the campus. More than once I saw tired, cranky NIC staff jump to attention when a participant entered the room with a humble request for directions or materials.

In sum, as participants became acclimated to the NIC, most appeared to feel a profound sense of purpose and responsibility conducive to serious

\footnote{In my notes, I wrote as many verbatim quotes as possible, but some of the quotes in this report are partly paraphrases of participants’ original statements.}
Deliberation at the National Issues Convention

3. REASSESSING AMERICA’S ROLE IN THE WORLD

After one afternoon and evening of adjustment to their new surroundings, participants were asked to go right to work, deliberating on the first of three issues on their agenda. Each of the three sessions would last three hours and twenty minutes, beginning with a long discussion followed by a brief break and ending with a shorter wrap-up session. To ensure cohesion and continuity across these three discussions, each participant was assigned to a group of ten to twenty people and stayed with that group throughout the convention.

Participants got the first chance to meet their discussion partners at 9am on Friday, January 18, the day after their arrival. In the group I observed, there were eleven people ranging in age from roughly thirty to seventy, with eight women and three men. With the exception of one African-American woman, all participants were White. Within a large square room, the group sat in classroom chairs forming a horseshoe that pointed toward the chalkboard at the front. The moderator, Albert, sat at the opening of the horseshoe, and a handful of observers, including myself, sat in a line behind the group.

The topic of the first discussion was America’s role in the world. Most participants had already read the four page briefing on the subject that the NIC provided in its booklet, Issues ’96. Using the format of the National Issues Forums (NIF) books, this discussion guide outlined three choices: a focus on domestic needs, a solo superpower foreign policy based on national interest, and a multilateral foreign policy based on humanitarian objectives and international agreements.

PRELIMINARIES

Albert began the first session with a fifteen minute introduction to the NIC discussion process, which was based on the NIF model he had used many times previous to the NIC. Albert began by listing differences between heated debate and reasoned deliberation. He emphasized the need for attentive listening and honest sharing, and he said that participants should not think in terms of winning or losing arguments.

Albert said that the group’s goal was to intelligently discuss policy risks, benefits, costs, and consequences. He encouraged participants to reflect not only upon what each other said but also on what those not present might say were they in the room however, I used pseudonyms for both moderators and participants to respect the privacy of NIC attendees, none of whom gave the author permission to use their real names. This also discourages the reader from taking into account personal characteristics of moderators or participants with whom they are acquainted.
with the eleven participants. Albert reminded the group that they might come to agreement on some matters but that they wouldn’t necessarily reach consensus. So long as they came to understand where they agreed and where they disagreed, the group would have done its job well.

After Albert’s introduction, the participants introduced themselves one-by-one in a round robin format. Participants shared similar stories about how they learned of the survey and why they came. Many did not consider themselves very politically active and were surprised to be asked to participate into a national conversation. All expressed an enthusiasm about the process and were visibly excited, if somewhat bewildered.

**THE POLICY EXPERTS SPEAK**

After the last participant introduced himself, Albert gave a five minute overview of the three foreign policy choices in *Issues ’96*. He then began discussion of the first choice—the need to refocus attention on domestic problems.

After only a few minutes, the dynamics of the discussion became established: Daniel, a middle aged businessman, and Peter, an older veteran, had a wealth of information on defense policy and international affairs. These two men shared similar views but complementary information bases; yielding to each other like senators sharing speaking time, they held the floor for the vast majority of the discussion.

Albert interjected occasionally to get Daniel and Peter back on track, but the other participants were generally quiet. The two most vocal participants exchanged similar views about the dangers posed by Russia, China, and North Korea and the relative merits of investment in weapons research versus expenditures on increased troop strength.

Daniel and Peter’s conversation was eventually interrupted when Megan broke into the discussion. She expressed the view underlying the third choice when she raised questions about the ethics of trading with China, which, she asserted, practices female circumcision and infanticide. She was shaking and sobbing as she spoke, and it was clear that talking about human rights atrocities in China was upsetting her. She finished by addressing a question to Daniel and Peter. She asked, “Why do we *trade* with them?”

Daniel explained that trading gives the U.S. leverage in diplomatic exchanges with China, such as when the U.S. has negotiated the release of prominent political dissidents.

This pattern—conversation between “policy experts,” participant question, expert answers—repeated itself throughout the discussion. This dynamic alternately contributed to and detracted from deliberation.

Such exchanges contributed to deliberation because they provided the group with new information, much of which was accurate. They also gave the group the opportunity to hear a particular perspective on foreign policy and ask questions, such as Meagan’s, to clarify the nuances of this view. As I have observed elsewhere, it is probably common for some members of a deliberative group to play the role of “theoretical expert,” and their comments can
help a group understand the more abstract aspects of a public problem.\textsuperscript{6}

On the other hand, this group did not have the benefit of conflicting expert opinions. Daniel and Peter’s contributions might have been more if they had contrasted different approaches to foreign policy. As it was, this group did not discuss alternative views in depth, partly because Daniel and Peter quickly dismissed them, as happened later in the discussion.

\textbf{AIMLESS CONVERSATION}

After Daniel and answered Meagan’s question about China, the group exchanged a flurry of brief, weakly linked comments on current foreign affairs. This quickly broke down into simultaneous two- and three-person conversations among adjacent participants.

Albert tried to bring the group back together and provide a focus for discussion. “What are we going to tell our government?” he asked. The question seemed to catch the participants off guard. No one answered it directly.

Instead, the conversation turned to a discussion of the tradeoff between national interests and humanitarian concerns, such as saving lives in foreign countries. This then digressed into a conversation about the lack of voluntary contributions to private charities because of their tarnished reputations.

Despite Albert’s forceful moderator style, there were many aimless conversations like this throughout the discussion. During these times, speaking and listening were more balanced among participants, but the content of the discussion was less relevant to the problem at-hand.

By taking up valuable group discussion time, these digressions detracted from deliberation. They also interfered with the deliberative process by jarring the group off track. Although deliberation can follow a winding and circling path, it still needs one. A string of random comments that resemble awkward conversations at cocktail parties can move the group away from more focused and sustained discussion.

Nonetheless, this group demonstrated how quickly a single comment can lift a group back on track. One woman’s interjection returned the group to its difficult task of weighing policy choices. Making one of the only remarks favoring the first choice, the participant asked, “But what about starving kids here in the U.S.?”

\textbf{PERSONAL VIEWS OF WAR}

Just when the discussion was about to move

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toward a direct consideration of Choice One, Albert steered the group toward the second choice, which advocated a foreign policy based on national self-interest. As with the previous choice, little was said about the choice itself. This discussion was more personal, though, and Peter and Daniel played a less prominent role.

\textsuperscript{6}Gastil et al., \textit{Understanding Public Deliberation}, pp. 73-76. I also discussed the effect of unbalanced expertise on group deliberation in chapters 4 and 5 of \textit{Democracy in Small Groups} (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993).
One participant chose to talk about her own experience with war as a daughter and mother. Her father had served in World War II, and it was hard for her to hear her children—raised in the 1960’s—speak so critically of the U.S. and its military engagements. It was clear that the moral ambiguity of U.S. foreign policy had a personal meaning for her, as it stretched her loyalties between her respect for her father’s patriotism and her attempt to relate to her children’s skepticism.

These personal remarks prompted the only other man in the group to speak at length for the first time. He said that he had served in Vietnam, and he believed that it was a war the U.S. never should have fought. Even with a dramatic technological edge over the North Vietnamese, he explained, the U.S. could never “win” that war because of the physical and political landscape upon which it was waged.

This segment of the discussion did not clarify the nature of the second choice outlined in Issues ’96. Nor did it clearly move the discussion forward along a logical path from problem analysis to solution.

The personal comments mentioned above were digressions; nonetheless, they aided group deliberation. First, this portion of the discussion drew out two relatively quiet participants. The winding conversation reached a point where it felt appropriate to share their own, personal experiences of past wars. These participants were not ready to make abstract policy arguments like those put forward by Daniel and Peter; it was only by speaking on a personal level that they were able to become active participants in the discussion.

Second, these comments made a tangible contribution to the discussion. Both self-disclosures reconnected the foreign policy issue to important feelings such as pride, frustration, and anguish. These reminiscences on the emotional and tactical difficulties of war set the stage for the subsequent discussion of humanitarian intervention in the world.

**REJECTING HUMANITARIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

After a few more minutes of conversation, Albert shifted the group to the third choice, a multilateral approach to foreign policy based on humanitarianism as much as national interest. This time Albert began the discussion with a very narrow question, which was loaded with a clear set of assumptions. Cuba, Albert argued, is more humanitarian and democratic than China, yet the U.S. boycotts Cuba and not China. He asked, “Is this a good policy?”

Participants responded quickly. Daniel and Peter said in unison, “Trade with Cuba,” and another participant talked about how poor Cuba is. She ended by exclaiming, “They can’t even go to McDonald’s but once a year it costs so much!”

Then Laurie, a relatively quiet participant, tried to enter the conversation, but the moderator signaled for a more talkative person to speak. Moments later, Laurie by-passed the moderator altogether and jumped in.

Then Laurie, a relatively quiet participant, tried to enter the conversation, but the moderator signaled for Peter to speak. Moments later, Laurie bypassed the moderator altogether and jumped in. She asked fellow group members what would be the consequences of a conditional trade policy. In a clear attempt to articulate a rationale for the third choice, Laurie said that she would like the U.S. to trade only with nations that meet certain humanitarian criteria.
Daniel and Peter fielded the question and rejected Laurie’s argument out of hand. Returning to their earlier statements, they argued for what President Reagan called “constructive engagement”—the establishment of economic ties without threat of sanction as a means of developing mutual trust and, ultimately, gaining influence over a nation’s human rights policies. Also, they claimed, with enough market exchanges between nations, U.S. economic ideals will infiltrate the trading partner’s culture, as may be happening in China.

Joan, speaking for the first time since the initial round-robin, agreed with this view by arguing that the U.S. should only intervene when there is a clear national interest at stake. She rejected a humanitarian foreign policy because it would steer the U.S. away from more pressing domestic and international concerns.

PROMPTING DELIBERATION

Albert interjected again, as he had done throughout the discussion by either summarizing someone’s statement or asking a probing question. This time, he raised several questions about the issue.

It took Albert several minutes to go through the series of questions he had developed for the group to consider. Once he finished, the time had come for the group to break. So, with these questions still dangling, the group took a recess.

Although Albert was upbeat when I spoke with him during the break, it was apparent that he and some group participants were feeling the frustration of time constraints. Albert’s questions were all important in that they revealed many ambiguities and gaps in the group’s deliberations. The problem was that the group had little discussion time left to address these.

Perhaps participants would continue to churn Albert’s questions in their own minds later that afternoon, in conversations with one another over lunch, or in the weeks that followed the NIC. Such reflection triggered by the group’s deliberation is important, but it is unobservable to a witness like myself, who can not record every participant’s private conversation and silent thought. Although invisible, these fruits of group deliberation no doubt existed, and one should note them on the ledger when estimating the total value of the NIC.

FORMULATING QUESTIONS

When the group returned from its break, two participants commented on the experience to that point. Andrea said that she had learned a lot during the discussion, and Megan said she changed her mind about the wisdom of cutting off trade ties with China. From their remarks, it was apparent that they had both viewed Daniel and Peter as insightful and well-informed and had appreciated their many comments during the preceding discussion.

The next task for the group was to develop a set of questions for experts and presidential candidates, who were to begin arriving the following evening. Each group

7On the difficulty of observing and measuring deliberation, see Gastil et al., Understanding Public Deliberation, chapter 3 and pp. 102-104. Few deliberative theorists have grappled with the measurement of face-to-face deliberation, and my own work has tried to address this problem. My M.A. thesis, “Democratic deliberation” (Masters Abstracts 30-04M, 1992), originally used an elaborate coding mechanism to count different types of speech but ultimately moved toward a more qualitative analysis that I used exclusively in Democracy in Small Groups. In Understanding Public Deliberation, the same move was made when analyzing transcripts of an on-line forum. On measurement of deliberative speech, see my articles “A definition of small group democracy” (Small Group Research 24, 1993) and “Undemocratic discourse” (Discourse & Society 3, 1992).
was responsible for writing down questions, but Albert and the attendees were unsure how a subset of these questions would be selected and presented to the candidates. A clearer understanding of this process might have made participants feel more integral to the NIC.

Albert helped the group design its questions by first dividing the group into teams of two to three people each. These subgroups talked among themselves, and each participant suggested one or more questions. Some of these concerned factual issues about which participants were curious, whereas other questions were designed to elicit revealing responses from the candidates.

After a quarter-hour of small group discussions, the group reconvened and each subgroup reported the questions it had developed. Albert helped the group clarify the purpose and phrasing of questions, and the group removed any redundancy in its final list, which included the following inquiries:

- How can the U.S. use economic leverage to serve humanitarian ends?
- Why don’t we trade with Cuba?
- Will we really be in Bosnia for only one year?
- Why don’t we ask China what they can do for us?

Albert reminded the group that PBS had originally feared that the public would come up with too few questions for the presidential candidates. Joan said that when she heard this, “I thought, ‘What is the matter with these people?’ They’re really out of touch. I was insulted.” Indeed, the group had no difficulty generating many questions, and it showed restraint in reducing its initial list to a shorter one that encompassed the group’s central concerns yet showed the diversity of ideas in the group.

In particular, the group responded favorably to an eccentric question about what China could do for the U.S. Joan, who had been relatively quiet during the discussion, raised this question in an attempt to improve U.S. foreign policy. She liked the idea that the U.S. act more humbly and admit that it, too, needs to learn from other countries.

More generally, this final session was relatively balanced in the distribution of speaking time, with participants like Joan stepping forward to present questions or offer comments on others’ questions. Albert continued to play the role of active discussion leader, but Daniel and Peter were not as dominant as they were before the break.

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8 The staff of the News Hour with Jim Lehrer, who directed the televised portions of the NIC for PBS, later read through piles of these questions and made selections based on relevance, wording, variety, and other unspecified criteria.
4. FAIRNESS VERSUS THE FREE MARKET

For better or worse, I did not see this first group evolve as it moved to the second topic. Instead, I opted for diversity and moved to another part of the Austin campus to watch a different group during the 2pm to 5:20pm Friday afternoon discussion on the U.S. economy.

Compared to the morning session, this second group appeared both a bit relaxed and downright tired. I had begun to notice that the participants at the NIC were not uniformly enthusiastic about group deliberation. One member of this group, Larry, had arrived late on a red-eye flight from Indiana. He had suffered a string of flight delays due to bad weather, and he arrived in Austin exhausted. He was sleeping on a couch in a large office behind the meeting room. Another participant, Malcolm, was already sitting in his chair when I arrived, and he was falling asleep even before the discussion began.

Aside from disrupted sleep patterns and normal post-lunch nap instincts, it appeared that some participants were approaching the NIC not so much as an inspiring challenge to hold a national conversation as an unusual opportunity to skip work and travel with a few strangers. Before this second session, I had struck up a casual conversation with a group of men in the twenties and thirties. They had not previously met, but they had already befriended one another. They were skeptical about the purpose and effect of the NIC. Why would the powers-that-be pay attention to a bunch of average citizens? The NIC held no political significance for them. It was simply a vacation.

The group sat in tall, leather chairs in a tight ellipse, running along the walls of a small, hot room that normally served as a meeting room or reception area. Two observers sat together in a far corner behind the participants, and the moderator, Becky, sat at the front of the room.

The topic for this second session was the U.S. economic system. The Issues ’96 discussion guide presented three different approaches to economic policy: reliance upon free market forces, government intervention in the economy to reduce market inequalities, and public education conversant that this was true, but all remained skeptical about its ultimate effect on the political process. The lack of any clear connection between the NIC and the presidential primaries indicates that at least in the short term, they were right on that point.

I have no idea what proportion of the participants shared this view of the NIC, and I suspect that the second group’s drowsiness was more the result of physical fatigue than indifference. Including the two aforementioned somnambulants, this group had seventeen members ranging in age from early twenties to late sixties, including six women and eleven men. The group was mostly White, but a third of the participants were African-American.

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9Briefly leaving my role as objective observer, I explained to these participants that the people who put the NIC together were doing it out of a genuine respect for the public. I convinced at least one
and job programs to ensure equal economic opportunity.

PERFORMING THE REPUBLICAN-DEMOCRAT DEBATE ON THE MINIMUM WAGE

As with the previous group, the discussion officially moved from the first to the third choice, but in reality, the only clear indication of such a progression was the periodic positioning of a mile marker by the moderator, who informed the group that it was about to discuss Choice One—the free market system. From there, the discussion took on a life of its own, addressing all three choices simultaneously.

The first topic of discussion was the minimum wage, which Jason suggested raising. Scott, sitting just two chairs over from Jason, responded by leading his fellow participant through a series of questions, as if in a Socratic dialogue. The questions inexorably led Jason to the conclusion that raising the minimum wage will drive up inflation and, in turn, reduce real wage values. Jason saw the logic of the wage-inflation cycle but rejected the conclusion.

Once Scott had presented his argument and Jason had rejected it, discussion on that topic ended. No participants attempted to reconcile the opposing views, and none scrutinized Scott’s relatively technical argument.

I couldn’t help seeing a parallel with the current national debate between Democrats and Republicans. Jason, a working age African-American, had argued for the fairness of a higher minimum wage, a position that President Clinton and the Congressional Democrats hope will drive a wedge between working class Americans and the Republican Party. Scott, a retired White male, presented the Republican retort, which had some logical force but no emotional grip.

This exchange paralleled the national debate in another respect. Like an evening news contrast piece, this discussion of the minimum wage was little more than one person stating a view then another person stating an opposite view. Scott tried drawing Jason into a question-and-answer format designed to prove Scott’s point, but the back-and-forth between them did not last long.

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When a complex policy issue debate is reduced to a quick contrast of viewpoints, the people observing the exchange are left without vital information necessary to reach sound judgment. In this case, Scott’s empirical claims about the nature of the U.S. economy went unchallenged, whereas Jason’s emotional pleas were unexamined. Since there was no careful scrutiny of these two views, I suspect that the group gained little from its brief discussion of the minimum wage.
THE VALUE OF UNDIRECTED TALK: A CONVERSATION ON GREED, POVERTY, AND TAXES

Having dropped this specific dispute, Scott moved the discussion to a more abstract level by asserting that U.S. economic policy should rest upon the assumption that “greed is a natural human trait.”

To my surprise, the moderator interrupted him and half-jokingly chided him, “Oh, come on.” No matter what the moderator’s was intended to convey, it had the clear effect of discrediting Scott’s dim view of human nature, which happens to be the bedrock of neoclassical economics.

Across the room, Brenda took this opportunity to support to Jason’s argument: “Couldn’t the government require businesses to pay living wages?” Rick, sitting beside her, added that such a wage should probably vary geographically, just as federal wages have a “locality pay adjustment” to take into account regional variations in the cost of living. This idea triggered a debate about whether a variable minimum wage would create dramatic migration flows, as one participant claimed has happened with differential welfare benefits across states.

After a minute or two, Scott and Ron, two proud, conservative White participants, shifted the discussion back to their own views. Scott began to explain how unemployment can be good because it holds down inflation. As he elaborated on this point, his choice of terminology revealed a formal background in economics. Ron added to Scott’s comments by stating this view more starkly: “Poverty is good. It creates an incentive—something to strive for.”

“Poverty is good,” said one White participant in a matter-of-fact tone. “It creates an incentive—something to strive for.” An African-American participant said, with intentional understatement, “This must be a cultural difference...” The moderator joined in the discussion as a participant. She said, with obvious cynicism, that this the basic purpose of the U.S. Constitution was to protect property rights. “Why are four percent supposed to be unemployed?” Jason asked.

“There are jobs,” Mark replied. “That’s what kills me.” Mark then explained that he has a tenant who simply refuses to work.

Lewis, a young African-American man who had not spoken previously, said that it’s not easy to find work. In his own case, he explained, he has to go through the job service to look for work, and he often winds up with temporary jobs.

An older woman said that “temp” jobs, such as those Lewis holds, are being exploited by employers who use them as “long interviews.” Mark agreed that “temping” is a losing proposition: you don’t get benefits, and you’re unlikely to get hired for a permanent position.
Lewis took his point farther, though, than Mark would: “The free market system doesn’t work,” he said flatly.

Alan picked up on the emerging theme of greedy businesspeople and referred to his own boss (and the boss’ son, who is rising in the ranks “faster than seems fair”). Alan said that his boss spends profits on expensive trips to clubs and resorts. “Why can’t he invest those dollars back in the employees and the company?” Alan asked.

“But he made the company,” Mark answered the rhetorical question. “He earned the right to do that.”

Okay, but it’s rude,” Alan responded. On this point Mark agreed. It may be legal to brag about one’s riches and squander them on luxuries, but that doesn’t make it right.

This exchange led to a discussion of corporate responsibility and taxation. Once more, the discussion turned into a disagreement between Jason and Scott. Jason argued that businesses should help pay for public services, such as schools, and Scott replied that any taxes on business are passed right on to the consumer.

With others making a brief comment at times, Jason and Scott continued to disagree, slowly moving their focus toward progressive versus flat tax rates. After Scott asserted that taxes on the wealthiest five percent of Americans provide forty-three percent of total federal revenue, Jason began to understand that he and Scott agreed about what a “fair share” of the tax burden means. Jason said that he could now support the flat tax--so long as the rich pay their percentage just like everyone else.

With this final topic, Scott, Jason, Lewis, and the other active group members had steered the group all the way from a discussion of human greed to the flat tax. Although the rambling group conversation sometimes wandered into a fog of vagueness or a thicket of irrelevancies, its innocent wandering permitted participants to stumble upon points of agreement. A conservative participant acknowledged the problem of corporate greed, but not due to the force of an unrelenting colleague’s argument. And a liberal came to see virtue in the flat tax, which just popped into the conversation.

The moderator yanked the group off track and asked an esoteric question about calculating a living wage. Shortly thereafter, two group members who had been wavering between the worlds of night and daylight went fast asleep.

Had the group followed a more structured discussion path, such attitudinal compromises may not have occurred.

**CONVERSATIONAL DERAILMENT**

Yanking the group off the track that had led to the flat tax, the moderator intervened to ask a surprisingly esoteric question: “How should we calculate a living wage?”

The group had already had trouble holding sustained discussion on less technical issues, such as the tradeoff between unemployment and inflation. Scott and others tossed around meaningful terms like “cost of living index,” but the group as a whole made no headway.

Two group members who had been wavering between the worlds of night and daylight went fast asleep. Fortunately, only one was snoring, and his noises were muffled by his hunched shoulder, upon which his chin was resting.
Whereas the spontaneous movement from one subject to another had led the group to new insights, the moderator’s topic shift seemed artificial. The group’s train had been shifting tracks at every intersection; its directional change depended solely upon the balance of its weight when it encountered a split in the rails. By contrast, the moderator had acted as a conductor with a single destination in mind and yanked a lever to jerk the train onto the desired track. The jolt was so sudden that it derailed the group altogether, and it skidded to a halt on a barren conversational embankment.

**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**

After righting itself, the group resumed its discussion. Jason, Scott, Mark, and other men led the group through a sea of topics ranging from campaign finance reform to taxes. As had happened twice before, the conversation eventually reached a disagreement between those who wanted economic reforms and those who viewed people’s economic problems as indications of their own, personal failings. For the first time, however, Scott and Mark parted company.

“We do have equal opportunity,” Mark asserted. Scott disagreed. “Basic education isn’t equal for all kids...”

(later)

Mark: **“Well, education may be the place to focus on equality.”**

“We do have equal opportunity,” Mark asserted.

Scott disagreed. “Basic education isn’t equal for all kids,” he insisted. He gave the example of an inner-city school in California where vandals destroyed a school and the children’s classes were canceled indefinitely. That kind of thing doesn’t happen in affluent neighborhoods, Scott pointed out.

Another participant, Tom, took Mark’s side. “It starts in the home,” he said. “Too many teenagers are having babies. You can’t legislate that away. We do have equal opportunity. Anyone with the motivation can go to junior college, get a Ph.D., and get their slice of the pie.”

Perhaps fearing a group shift toward this view, Becky, the moderator, once again slipped herself into the discussion. She asked if any participants had young children in inner-city schools. None responded affirmatively. Failing to induce a description of this perspective, she articulated it herself by saying that children in inner-city schools simply lack the educational resources and advantages that other children have.

While Becky expressed this view, a brief, quiet exchange took place, and one of the African-American participants made a joke that triggered laughter among all of the other African-Americans, including Malcolm, who had just woken up. Lewis, in particular, began giggling somewhat uncontrollably, apparently trapped in the awkward spiral of laughter followed by an awareness of its inappropriateness that, in turn, causes renewed snickering. Some of the White group members smiled, but none appeared to have heard—or at least not understood—the joke. Perhaps I was mistaken, but I thought I perceived a brief, uncomfortable cultural distance between the White and African-American participants in the group.

After a brief silence, Mark retreated from his earlier stance. “Well, education may be the place to focus on equality,” he acknowledged. He suggested that schools should be open twenty hours a day, and retired people could mentor the kids.

Becky saw that one of the quieter participants agreed and said, “Rhonda,
you’re nodding your head. What do you think?” In reply, though, Rhonda simply said that she agreed with Mark.

A moment later, Becky tried again to intervene on behalf of a female participant: “Melba’s starting to say something, guys.” This time, Becky elicited a more detailed response, which moved from Melba’s experience in educational programs to her witnessing of welfare fraud.

**GROUP PARTICIPATION**

Shortly thereafter, the group took its break. As the participants left the room, I took an inventory of those participants who had been relatively quiet. Of the group of seventeen, five participants had not said a word during the entire two hour period; four were women, and two were African-American. In addition, one African-American man and a White woman said almost nothing.

The moderator tried to involve the quieter participants (except those peacefully sleeping) but had no success. The only woman who spoke regularly was Melba, who made brief interjections about her own experience or the economic problems her friends have faced.

I wondered how the discussion would have been different if the quieter group members had been vocal. Would they have introduced a different perspective or bolstered a view that was already expressed? What might have prompted them to participate? Some may have remained quiet out of habit or reticence, but for others, it seemed they were simply not interested in the discussion.

As I listened to these participants talk among themselves during the break, I overheard another group’s members talking about their experience, which sounded very different. Their discussion of this issue had been loud and spirited. The group had talked at length about why people are on welfare.

One conversant proudly proclaimed that on that issue, “I don’t care what other people’s views are.”

Was the boisterousness of this other group conducive to more meaningful exchanges? Or was the subdued and polite discussion I had witnessed more likely to spark new thoughts and reconsiderations of preexisting views?

When the group returned from its break,

>“Ron convinced me that poverty is good,” Jason joked, and the entire group laughed out loud. In a serious tone, Jason added that he did come to understand the need for entrepreneurial incentives--something he hadn’t thought about before.

Jason made an effort to acknowledge the disagreements from the discussion but also reaffirm the group’s sense of mutuality. “Ron convinced me that poverty is good,” he joked, and the entire group immediately laughed out loud. He added, in a serious tone, that he did come to understand the need for entrepreneurial incentives--something he hadn’t thought about before.

Other participants also made comments that positively characterized the group’s shared experience of the discussion. One said that it’s clear there are no easy solutions to economic problems, which also told the group that it shouldn’t be discouraged by its inability to reach any conclusions. Another said that the discussion helped the group see the links between economic policy initiatives and their long-term consequences; this comment suggested that the group hadn’t found solutions but at least had made the link from possible solutions to likely outcomes.
FORMULATING QUESTIONS
After a series of comments such as these, Becky shifted the group to its final task, the design of questions for expert and candidate panels. Unlike the first group, this one was a free-for-all, and every question suggested was recorded by an assistant. (Each group had one or two Austinitians serving as official group gophers.) Whereas the first group had written four questions, this group wrote approximately thirty. There was no attempt to clarify the wording of the questions or avoid redundancy. One after another, a participant would suggest a topic for a question, and the assistant or a participant would take a blank sheet and write it down. In no sense, then, did the questions reflect group judgments, and in some cases, the wording of the questions was not even formulated by participants themselves.

After a few minutes, Becky went even farther by suggesting questions. Each one she suggested embraced a liberal policy initiative that did not yet pertain to a group question. In this way, the moderator directly influenced some of the questions that the group wrote.

POWERLESS PARTICIPANTS AT A CITIZENS’ FORUM
As the last few questions were suggested and written, one participant said that he wanted more control over the format for the candidate-participant interactions. He wanted candidates to hear the questions impromptu. (This was the official policy of the News Hour staff, but neither the participants nor the moderator knew it.) Another participant suggested that the questions be selected at random to keep the News Hour staff from filtering out controversial ones.

Of course, neither of these things happened, as there was no means by which the participants could influence the format. The moderator assured them that this was the case, explaining that the News Hour had to use a tested format to ensure a quality broadcast.

I wondered how the NIC would have been different if the participants had greater control over the format of the televised exchanges. In its planning stages, at least one NIC organizer told me that citizens might have control over the process itself, but this idea did not prevail. If they had been empowered to plan the citizen-candidate dialogues, what format would citizens have chosen? Would this power have made them feel even more central to the NIC?

The participants I spoke with felt that they were the centerpiece of the NIC, and they were grateful for the planning that others had put into the event. The publication of Issues ’96 and the coordination of group deliberation made the participants’ jobs easier. But I think it may have been a mistake to exclude them from the planning of the candidate exchanges and to obscure the process whereby citizen questions were selected for candidates. At the very least, these decisions left some participants feeling like outsiders—a perception that inhibits deliberation by undermining participants’ sense of responsibility.
5. COMPARING VISIONS OF THE IDEAL FAMILY

The third and final session I observed was a sharp contrast with the second one. The fourteen participants in the third group met from 8:30am to 11:50am on Saturday morning, and they were wide awake. The group had eight women and six men. Young women and middle-aged men made up the bulk of this group, and aside from one Cuban-American woman, all participants were White, non-Hispanic. Roughly half of the group was under thirty-five years of age.

The group sat in swiveling chairs in a wide, oblong circle within a large classroom. Observers sat in the corners of the room, and the moderator, Rhonda, seated herself at one of the ends of the ellipse of swiveling office chairs.

The liveliness of this group may have been due partly to the topic, the American family--something with which all participants had direct experience. The Issues '96 discussion guide had suggested three general approaches to addressing the family problems Americans currently face. The first solution was to return to traditional values by changing schools, laws, and popular culture to enshrine older, traditional conceptions of the virtuous family. The second solution would focus on the needs of children by holding parents responsible for supporting and educating children and providing school-based sex education and other forms of assistance to make certain that children receive the information they need to become productive adults. The third choice suggested that the government provide families with financial assistance to help them support their children.

Unlike the two previous groups, the third group was very lively, and the five most frequent speakers were all women.

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PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND “FAMILY VALUES”

By the time I entered the room, the group had already begun discussing the first two choices. The moderator was playing a very passive role, lying back in her chair and listening to the group. The only times I heard her speak at length were when she read an appropriate paragraph from Issues '96 to shift the discussion toward another policy choice.

Unlike the two previous groups, this group was very lively, and the discussion was not dominated by two or three voices. In addition, the five most frequent speakers were all women, including four younger women and Ruth, the one retired woman in the group. These women had different life experiences and distinct viewpoints, and their exchanges always brought out a variety of ideas about how to improve the condition of the American family.

The clearest disagreement was between Ruth and her younger counterparts. During the discussion of parental responsibility, Ruth explained that as a parent, she had done “everything” with her children. She sent them off to school, met them when they returned, and took them wherever they needed to go. When her children became parents themselves, Ruth reinforced this parenting ethic by refusing to baby-sit for them when they wanted some time away from their own kids.

One of the younger participants, Tracy, said that such a policy is not necessarily best for the parents. She referred to a talk show
she’d seen where a psychologist emphasized the need for parents to have time alone to nurture their relationship. Other women supported Tracy’s view, and it became apparent that many participants had picked up ideas about parenting in part from daytime talk shows. References to such programs came up throughout the entire discussion.

Ruth responded by softening her view somewhat: “I’m not saying it’s right for everyone,” she acknowledged. “It’s just good for me.” Having made this qualification, Ruth reiterated her view, and in doing so, she used two or three common phrases that conservative politicians and pundits have introduced into the vernacular. “Family values,” in particular, came up often during Ruth’s remarks. The presence of these phrases was not as noteworthy as their awkward placement among otherwise straightforward syntax. Ruth appeared to be fitting the political words into her sentences so as to use the “correct” terminology, even if it wasn’t the best choice of words for what she wished to say.

LINGUISTIC NORMS

Ruth’s qualified statement on parenting was also interesting because it paralleled two other events in the discussion. Shortly after Ruth’s remarks, I heard an equally cautious statement by a male participant, Tim, who had previously identified himself as a fundamentalist Christian. Tim said that he believed the homosexual lifestyle was incompatible with the American family ideal, and he considered gays and lesbians to be committing sins against God.

In addition, though, Tim felt it necessary to add that he opposed “gay bashers” who persecute homosexuals and hate not only the sin but also the sinner. He went even farther by acknowledging that “kids these days” (an oft-repeated phrase with no intended irony) lead different lives and have their own set of values. He implied that his own views partly reflect a generation gap, instead of simply a chasm between the righteous and heretical.

Another incident is noteworthy because it never took place. Based on the remarks I heard at the beginning of the discussion, it was apparent that some participants had strong negative feelings toward the welfare system and the people who abuse it. However, one such comment prompted Tracy to tell a tearful personal story about why she was on welfare.

Tracy’s doctor had diagnosed her cancer as terminal, and she expected to live only two more years. She had an infant daughter, and she had decided to spend the last few months of her life raising her young child rather than working until death. The emotional self-disclosure held the group’s rapt attention.

After Tracy told her personal story, no participants uttered any negative comments about welfare. Tracy had personalized the welfare issue, and it may have seemed to some participants that even criticizing the system as a whole would have questioned indirectly the responsibility of her personal decision to receive welfare while caring for her daughter. Although topics such as welfare were not debated openly for the remainder of the discussion, participants continued to disagree about other aspects of parenting.
SUSTAINED DISAGREEMENT AND BAWDY HUMOR

One such exchange revealed the good humor that participants maintained even amidst disagreement. Barry, a father himself, insisted that parents can decide for themselves how and where to live and how to raise their children.

“...parents can decide for themselves how and where to live and how to raise their children."

To this, a woman replied, “Yes, but children don’t have that freedom.”

“But the kids can do what they want when they grow up,” Barry pointed out.

“But kids don’t have dreams anymore.”

Rick, one of the more vocal men, chimed in at this point, steering the topic back toward an earlier topic—the entertainment industry. He said that children’s minds aren’t developing properly because they’re watching too much junk at the movies and on television. “I’m not getting a satellite TV,” Rick said, “because my kid would watch too much 2am television. There’s only so many orifices on a body.”

Rick’s off-the-wall critique of the redundant images of late night pornographic television programs caught the group by surprise, and one-by-one, as they deciphered his remark, the participants began laughing uncontrollably. Rick had jumped the previous track of the discussion, but he had landed on another that the group stayed on for several minutes. And, in the process, he also had reduced some tension that was building from a string of serious disagreements and personal revelations.

The discussion of television eventually led to one about corporal punishment. As usual, the women in the group were most vocal on this topic. The younger women generally endorsed more liberal approaches to discipline, and Ruth (the oldest woman present) recommended that parents spank disobedient children. At one point, the moderator managed to draw out a quieter male participant, but his rather blunt comment did not win over many participants. “Some kids don’t get beat enough!” he exclaimed.

Other participants suggested that “beating” is precisely what spanking can lead to, and they suggested other forms of punishment—such as grounding—as nonviolent alternatives.

Ruth responded by again invoking her own personal experience. “My father slapped me once,” she said, “and I never resented it. I loved him.” Her closing words were powerful because they implied that opponents of corporal punishment doubted her devotion to her father.

All participants admitted the issue became more complicated when teachers were the ones administering the physical punishment. The group also agreed that what schools need to focus on is teaching
kids about life and providing them with the information they need to make intelligent choices as young adults.

Phil, a young man who had not spoken yet, joined the conversation at this point, partly due to Rhonda’s attempt to draw him out. He said that he thought sex education is best taught at home. His father had sat him down and made certain that he understood everything he needed to know about sex. Then, after patiently explaining sex to his son, Phil’s father reportedly said, “But if you do it before you’re eighteen, I’m gonna cut your dick off.”

Again, the group broke into laughter. The raw vulgarity of the quote matched the frankness of the group’s discussion of sexual education, and it set the tone for a series of humorous—yet serious—remarks on the sexual mores of past and present generations of teenagers and young adults.

**FORMULATING QUESTIONS**

After a short break, Rhonda took on a much more active role as moderator and guided the group toward a set of questions to ask policy experts and presidential candidates. During the two previous discussions, this group had already established a procedure for question formulation that began with the identification of common ground and moved toward a question.

In light of its many moral debates, it is not surprising that the group’s first recognizable piece of common ground was, “There are many different ideas about what traditional values are.” Beyond that, the group had difficulty arriving at a consensus or formulating a question.

Like the clerk at a Quaker business meeting, Rhonda attempted to discern the group’s views, wrote this discernment as a statement or question, then elicited group feedback on the veracity of her representation of the group’s views. Nearly every time, someone in the group said that Rhonda’s words did not encompass his or her own perspective, and the group then debated various grammatical amendments.

One difficult issue for the group was the choice between recommendations and regulations. Whereas the group agreed that couples should learn better parenting skills, participants disagreed about whether society should simply tell parents to learn skills or mandate by law that parents get such education.

The group did get to the point where they agreed on the statement, “In our educational curriculum, we must prepare our children to become responsible adults.” Rick even suggested that this take precedence over traditional subjects: “I don’t care if you know Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492, but I do want you to know that if you screw, you get pregnant.”

The group got stuck again when it had to decide whether to focus on current or future generations of parents. For some, the present generation of children appeared to be at grave risk, whereas others saw the problem as one about to escalate with the next generation of parents.

Amidst this ongoing conflict, participants tried to reconcile different experiences and opinions. Referring to the efficacy of a blanket approach to family problems, one man said, “I’m hearing from [another participant] that the problems in the inner city are far worse than in Blaine, Washington.”

Comments such as these appeared to reinforce the mutual respect that had developed among the members of this group; such respect, in turn, made it easier to work through enduring disagreements. This particular group did not reach consensus on many topics related to the American family, but participants did appear to gain a better appreciation for why they disagreed with one another.
After this third deliberative session, the NIC participants ate lunch, took a four hour break, then seated themselves for a question-and-answer session with policy experts and Republican candidates, respectively. The next morning, Vice President Al Gore answered questions, then the participants met for the last time for final deliberations and the post-NIC survey.

None of these events bore any resemblance to the three group sessions just described, but the interactions with experts and candidates may have nonetheless influenced participants’ views. Thus, when the NIC survey team announced the pre- and post-convention results, it was impossible to know whether the observed attitude changes stemmed from engaging in face-to-face deliberation or witnessing expert and candidate debate.

**EVIDENCE OF DELIBERATION**

In any case, one shouldn’t focus solely at attitude change to determine whether deliberation has taken place. Instead, one can scrutinize the conversations themselves and look for evidence of listening, reflection, and response, as well as the pursuit of public judgment and the distribution of speaking and listening roles.

The last three sections of this report show that to some degree, all of these features were present in the three groups I observed. The vast majority of participants were listening to what others had to say, as evidenced by numerous comments that accurately referenced other participants’ earlier statements. A few participants acknowledged that another person’s argument or personal story influenced their views on an issue, which suggests that at least sometimes participants reflected upon what was said. More often, participants would meaningfully respond to one another directly without changing their original viewpoint. This also counts as potential deliberation, since a deliberative exchange need not change a participant’s mind.

Especially in the third group, there was evidence that the discussions also developed participants’ public perspectives— that is, their understanding of “how society, upon deliberating, believes we should proceed.”

During its question-development phase, this group tried to clarify its points of agreement and disagreement. The group made the most progress toward the point at which it could gauge where society, with its conflicting views, would ultimately stand on an issue.

The clearest failing may have been the distribution of speaking and listening roles. In the first group, two male participants played the role of theoretical expert and guided most of the discussion. In the second group, three or four male participants used their personal and technical expertise to dominate most of the group’s time. The third group also had some silent members (all men, in contrast to the other groups), but everyone participated and the majority of the citizens present spoke regularly during the group’s deliberations.

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11 In fact, I think it is better to conceptualize attitude change as one of the possible cognitive effects of deliberation, rather than being a necessary component of the deliberative process. See Gastil et al., *Understanding Public Deliberation*, pp. 15, 47-49, 99-101.

Although speaking and listening roles were nowhere near balanced, at least the dominant speakers left the groups’ conversations open to new topics and controversial statements. The unstructured periods of discussion sometimes led to new insights and relevant topics that the prepared discussion materials did not address. Also, the sense of common purpose, the demonstration of mutual respect, and the good sense of humor shared by most participants created a group atmosphere tolerant of conflicting views.

LIMTED DEBATE
At the same time, the group discussions at the NIC did not approximate any rigorous conception of the deliberative ideal. Among the problems discussed above, the most serious may be the self-imposed constraints that group members placed upon their conversations.

In the first group, the two most vocal participants agreed with one another on virtually every foreign policy issue, and this may have suppressed contrary views. At least one participant who disagreed restrained herself by phrasing her dissent as a question, which the experts gladly answered. No participant felt prepared to challenge their assertions about the virtues of neo-conservative foreign policy and the futility of humanitarianism, and the moderator restrained himself from raising questions about the limits of their views.

The second group’s conversation was limited by a reluctance to address controversial issues in empirical and emotional depth. The disputes in this group usually fell along class, ethnic, and generational lines, with older, “white collar” or retired White participants defending the free market and younger, “blue collar” African-Americans favoring government intervention or regulations. There was disagreement in abundance, but the group lacked sustained controversy. Logical inconsistencies, inaccurate economic statistics, and incoherent arguments were not identified as such, and both sides of each debate appeared content to state their view, hear out the opposition, and leave it at that.

The third group appeared to avoid some topics out of politeness, rather than intimidation or carelessness. The group dodged the controversial subject of government assistance after one participant explained the painful reasons that she went on welfare. The group also stepped back from its debate on corporal punishment when a participant insisted that it was good that her father slapped her and that this in no way diminished her love for him. The personalization of political issues in this group resulted in a more powerful and moving conversation, but when mixed with politeness norms, this sometimes made continued disagreement exceedingly uncomfortable.

More generally, the discussion in this third group raised an important question about expressing conservative versus liberal views in a face-to-face group. Modern liberalism has a relatively optimistic view of human nature, whereas Reaganesque conservatism touts individual responsibility and often blames poverty on lethargy and immorality. When both poor and wealthy sit side-by-side, the conservative argument can sound mean.

When a welfare recipient or an unemployed worker personalize an issue by describing their own problems, a conservative retort can sound downright disrespectful or, at the very least, patronizing. Seated among strangers in a public setting, a participant might think twice before expressing a legitimate political viewpoint if that expression might come across as an insult.
INEQUALITY AND DELIBERATION

Inequalities among participants were another limitation upon deliberation at the NIC. Some participants thought the convention was extremely important, whereas others viewed it as something akin to a vacation with no real political force. This inequality of interest amounted to disparate motivations to deliberate during group meetings.

Some participants were motivated yet lacking in group conversational skills or resources. The more vocal participants appeared comfortable speaking in public settings: they were not shy about their views; they spoke directly to others; and they timed their interjections so as to “take the floor” without pushing anyone off of it. Others were too hesitant, spoke nervously, and could not find an entry into a rapid conversation. Still others may have had the requisite social skills but lacked the energy to join in due to sleep deprivation (from flight schedules beyond their control as well as more avoidable causes).

The third inequality was the most unavoidable: there was a tremendous knowledge gap between the most politically active and informed participants and the least knowledgeable ones. Some participants had sophisticated theoretical understandings of the issues discussed, and others could speak authoritatively from their own personal experience.

But many participants had not thought or talked about foreign policy, the U.S. economy, or the American family in as much detail or with any degree of abstraction. These participants came to the NIC to learn, and many did not recognize the contributions they could have made to discussions of all three topics.

TOWARD A MORE DELIBERATIVE ISSUES CONVENTION

The NIC was designed to enhance deliberation, and in many respects it succeeded. The organizers created a serious atmosphere in which participants felt both a sense of privilege and responsibility. The decision to preselect issues and provide discussion guides was wise, as it gave participants a clear focus. Similarly, the use of professional moderators helped structure discussion and keep participants within necessary topical and temporal constraints.

However, some changes in the planning and structure of a future NIC could make it even more deliberative. Four changes, in particular, might help.
Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Participants’ Information Bases.**
   Provide all literate participants with full-length issue books. Participants who have difficulty reading should receive issue books on tape and/or books written at lower reading levels. These books will provide less knowledgeable participants with more information but also greater confidence that they enter the NIC with a basic understanding of each issue.

2. **Clarify Participants’ Roles.**
   Explain to participants what their role is at the NIC. The field interviewer who first met participants might convey this, as could a phone call to each participant one week before the NIC. Participants need to understand that the NIC depends upon their contributions of both personal experiences and abstract ideas. Participants might also be encouraged to talk about these issues with family, friends, and neighbors before coming to the NIC.

3. **Provide Moderators with Uniform Training.**
   Moderators need more thorough training, even if they have years of experience leading forums. NIF moderators have developed different styles, but only some of these are appropriate to an NIC. Moderators are most helpful when they
   (a) prod the group only when it gets off the topic or tries to sidestep a clear disagreement,
   (b) refrain from injecting their own personal views into the discussion, and
   (c) facilitate the question-generation process, rather than directing it.

4. **Let Participants Shape the NIC Format.**
   Participants should have more control over the question-and-answer session with the expert and candidate panels. Perhaps a special committee—with a representative from each group—could work out a procedure during an evening session. The committee might choose from among three options, rather than crafting its own procedure. If organizers don’t want to yield that power, then at least they should make the format transparent so that participants know how questions are selected and why the given format was chosen.

Together, these four changes should foster deliberation by compensating for unequal levels of knowledge and motivation. Improved group moderation should, at the very least, keep moderators from interfering with deliberation, and limited participant control over the question-and-answer format should send a clear message that this is the citizens’ convention.