

THE DOMESTIC POLICY ASSOCIATION AND ITS NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

A Venture in Reactivating Popular Sovereignty

Honors Symposium Paper

by

Michele L. Archie

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“We still carry out the business of government under that (our constitutional) framework. It works, and to an extraordinary degree...Part of the credit, certainly, is attributable to the ingenuity of the system of checks and balances written into the U.S. Constitution. But to my mind it is due even more to the fact that it was and remains understood that, although we the people have delegated limited responsibilities to those who hold public office in the interest of all of us, we, nevertheless, retain ultimate responsibility. We cannot delegate it; it belongs to us. We may fulfill it well or poorly, but we still have it.”

-- Elliot Richardson¹

The Domestic Policy Association (DPA) was formed in 1981 by a small group of educational and community organizations as a response to the notion that the American public lacked the means to fulfill this “ultimate responsibility” well. The perception of these organizations was that a decline in the quality of public life and a widening of the “gap” between citizens and policymakers were distancing citizens from their role in governing. Their specific concern lay with the way in which the nation determines its domestic policy; and their primary purpose in organizing the DPA was to “create a new (and continuing) kind of dialogue based on informed public discussion of national issues.”² The Domestic Policy Association is a rapidly-expanding, nationwide, voluntary network of local organizations (including institutions of higher and continuing education, libraries, museums, historical associations, religious organizations, civic and professional associations, community television, student groups, senior citizen centers, and ad hoc local groups) that are linked by their sponsorship of a particular type of community forum call the National Issues Forums (NIF).

The DPA provides national coherence to the National Issues Forums program by coordinating the annual selection of three discussion issues by local forums organizers, by distributing issue booklets and other discussion materials for each topic, by organizing follow-up programs to the local forums with national policymakers, and by requiring that local forums remain truly nonpartisan and that they attempt to encourage maximum interaction among participants. Reflected in the issue books is a common model for public policy education that can be thought of as “working through” an issue. Together, by examining and discussing realistic policy options and their underlying values, this model assumes that citizens can move “from first opinions to more reflective second opinions, searching for acceptable common ground and shared judgments.”³

Although the National Issues Forums are united by the common objective of creating a better way for people to learn about public policy and to participate in its formulation, and although the DPA does provide organizational coherence and support, the implementation of local forums retains a flexibility that allows for local control and adaptation. The responsibility for funding and recruiting personnel for the forums rests with the sponsoring organization. Forum organizers or “convenors” control the staging of local forums by establishing steering committees or by drawing on the resources of their organizations to adapt the general NIF model to local circumstances. Formats for National Issues Forums may range from large town hall style meetings to small study groups in local homes, depending on the needs and capabilities of the local organization and participating individuals.⁴ The primary characteristic of the Domestic Policy

Association is that it is a loose network of autonomous local organizations; this characteristic underlies the details of its functioning.

A fundamental principle of American democracy is popular sovereignty, or in Elliot Richardson's terms, the "ultimate responsibility" of the people for their governing. The DPA views itself and the Forums program as an organ of popular sovereignty and as a response to the unacceptably undemocratic character of domestic policymaking. By surveying something of the historical and theoretical democratic tradition into which the DPA places itself and the NIF, a fuller understanding of the National Issues Forums is possible. The DPA perceives itself as an extension of the tradition of popular sovereignty as a phenomenon of early American history. Deriving its mandate from that democratic principle, the DPA/NIF may be located and appraised, more specifically, within the tradition of public forums as instruments of popular sovereignty in the United States.

1. Popular Sovereignty as an Historical Phenomenon and as a Principle of American Democracy

Early American history, from its colonial beginnings, is a history marked by individual and community self-reliance. The New World was populated primarily by people who had been, at the very least, independent enough to step from European docks into an uncertain future; and many of these colonists held strong opinions regarding the desirability of broader freedoms, rights, and responsibilities than European governments and societies generally granted their citizens. Far from the central authority of European governments, the American colonists exercised and demanded a degree of authority over their affairs that often frustrated the efforts of colonial government authorities to retain the control of the colonial powers.

Because of the religious basis of many colonial communities, the local church often served as a center for public as well as church meetings. The Congregational Church system of neighborhood societies was, in fact, one of the earliest colonial institutions for public participation and education. Perhaps partially because of church precedents and influence and probably in large part because of the exigencies of community self-governance, many colonial towns institutionalized town meetings as a format for the discussion and resolution of public issues.

As an institution, the town meeting transcended a purely governmental role, although town meetings did directly determine local policy. These meetings, however, were open not only to the adult males allowed to vote under colonial law, but to everyone; they served as forums for discussion and debate of significant local issues and for the airing and resolution of grievances. The town meetings were the basis of communities built on mutual commitments and bonds that grew out of the town discussions; and the power of these self-governing communities was not the power of an imposed government as much as it was the power of a real, interactive community effort.

To speak of the town meetings in such a brief and general manner may seem to gloss over the real limitations and imperfections of individual cases. Town meetings, of course, approached to a greater or lesser degree the ideal of the preceding paragraph; and their participants naturally held a wide range of conceptions of, and goals for, the meetings. Nonetheless, as an historical institution, the town meetings exemplified

community self-reliance and defined by their practice the fundamental reliance on the people and the relation of the people to their government that would form the foundations of the principle of popular sovereignty in American democracy.

Popular sovereignty was much more than an abstract principle to those involved in determining the course of the American Revolution; it was assumed in their actions as much as it was expressed in their writing and in their talk. The town meetings became communications and action networks under the organization of committees of correspondence. Support for the Declaration of Independence (which rests on the notion of the “consent of the governed”) was drawn from the people through town organizations. Local militia were organized. Individual state constitutions were drafted, like that of Massachusetts, in a difficult and lengthy process based on the consent of the townspeople. The decision to confederate and the eventual drafting of the United States Constitution were likewise based in lengthy and often conflict-ridden discussion and the approval of the people.

Popular sovereignty is not an effortless basis for governing, nor, as is often pointed out, is it the most efficient. John Adams, for example, certainly realized the time and difficulties involved in the process of the people considering and discussing a large and important question such as the declaration of their independence from Britain:

Time has been given for the whole people maturely to consider the great question of independence, and to ripen their judgments, dissipate their fears, and allure their hopes, by discussing it in newspapers and pamphlets, by debating it in assemblies, conventions, committees of safety and inspection, in town and county meetings, as well as in private conversations, so that the whole people, in every colony of the thirteen, have adopted it as their own act.

But he also recognized the importance of such deliberation and decision. “This will cement the Union and avoid those heats, and perhaps convulsions, which might have been occasioned by such a declaration six months ago.”⁵

John Adams also wrote that “A constitution is a standard, a pillar, and a bond” only when “it is understood, approved and beloved” by the people who are governed by it; and Thomas Paine observed that a constitution “is not the act of a government, but of a people constituting a government.” The Constitution, adopted by a sovereign people, was actually designed to limit, in significant ways, the sovereignty of the people in national government in order to prevent the misuse of power by an unfit and tyrannical majority. In the national government established by the original Constitution, only the House of Representatives was elected by popular vote and given the mandate of representation. The President, the Senate, and the Supreme Court had other purposes within the governmental structure, and were not popularly elected; in the complex scheme of governance established by the framers of the Constitution, the separation of powers within government would preserve the liberty of the people by assuring that no one group would control governmental power.⁶ The national system “was meant to rescue democracy from oblivion at the national level by permitting some form of democratic capability and to protect us from the abuses of a majoritarian tyranny.”⁷

Insofar as the government established by the Constitution relied on the sovereignty of the people, it was an indirect reliance (the members of the House were popularly-elected representatives) rather than a direct reliance (like the town meeting). In this scheme, supreme power is still vested in the people; but it is exercised by them indirectly through a system in which representative authority is delegated in free elections. Since 1789, the Constitution has undergone changes that have increased the representativeness of certain major governmental institutions: the Senate is now popularly elected, as is, in effect, the President.⁸ Arguably, then, the national government of the United States today relies more on the sovereignty of the people than did the original scheme of governance.

While the New England town meeting did not survive as a governmental institution in the national scheme, the tradition of direct democracy is still active in America, largely in local communities and voluntary associations. But there is a tendency among Americans, especially in our increasingly complex political, social, and economic environment, to believe that the institutions of indirect democracy are the only locus of real political power. People holding this opinion may see the Constitution as the end of the small, direct democracies and the beginning of a large, impersonalized, bureaucratized system of government. Some critics of direct democracy see this change as beneficial; but many Americans view the predominance of indirect government with a kind of helplessness, and perhaps cynicism, that derives from the belief that the process of governing does not actually involve them, that the accountability of public officials to the people is only a superficial, rhetorical kind of accountability that removes from the citizens their own ability to be politically effective. The best that can be hoped for in such a view is that the individual can protect his own interests and freedoms against the encroachment of a governmental process that he cannot actually control. This perception constitutes the “gap” between citizens and policymakers to which the DPA/NIF responds.

The view that government is not what it should be, then, often leads to citizens staking off the “private sector” from government interference and abandoning the “public sector” to the indirect institutions of government. The perception of contradiction and tension within democracy has not led to an acceptance and integration of direct and indirect forms in one governmental process based largely on popular sovereignty; rather, it has led to a denial of their interdependence and to an arguably weak American democracy. The government is widely perceived as a political “system” into which individual grievances and desires are fed, through which these interests are processed and weighed against each other, and from which issue the solutions and services that will satisfy those individual interests. The hollowness and incompleteness of this view of government are reflected in citizen apathy, selfishness, and powerlessness. This is not the political community of sovereign people to which the Constitution entrusts much of the carrying out of its general principles; it is an aggregate of individual interests and separate voices which are increasingly willing to give over to the government the responsibility for making the Constitution work. These perceptions indicate the decline in the quality of public life that underlies the DPA/NIF purpose.

In 20th century United States, popular sovereignty is not as vigorous as it might be, nor as respected. Many Americans, it seems, do not believe that “We the People” are the decisive voice in governing, but rather that “they” (governmental officials and institutions) have ultimate control; and there is not a common perception that “they” are

doing a very good or very democratic job of governing. The perpetuation of popular sovereignty, the existence of a representative government, the maintenance of official accountability, indeed the survival and operation of our democracy in all its forms, all depend on the existence and actions of an informed, participating citizenry. The Constitution provides within its framework of general principles and possibility for the creation and maintenance of a strong, participatory, democratic governing process even at the national level; but it does not guarantee the existence or operation of such a practice at any level. The very flexibility of the Constitution that allows for the creation of a strong democracy also allows the possibility that such a democracy will not be created or maintained.⁹ The freedom and, importantly, the responsibility to choose and create the governmental process lies with the citizens of this country; and it is not a decision that can be made once and for all. Popular sovereignty is the on-going process of the people constituting their government.

Popular sovereignty, as an historical phenomenon and as a democratic principle, relies on an educated and civically responsible citizenry. John Adams, for example, argued in 1763 that the American colonies could be independent largely because they possessed such a citizenry. “The American system of public education,” suggests Leonard P. Oliver in his study of American public issue forums (The Art of Citizenship: Public Issues Forums), grew out of the recognition that “popular sovereignty must be an empty or even destructive ideal if it existed without a populace sufficiently informed about the issues it must judge.”¹⁰ If civic education is elemental in the practice of popular sovereignty, its foremost objective must be to create and sustain a public that is capable of being sovereign. The challenge of civic education, then is to provide a public context in which can occur “the development of a citizenry capable of genuinely public thinking and political judgment and thus able to envision a common future in terms of genuinely common goods.”¹¹

3. Public Forums in United States History

The recognition of the importance and challenge of civic education lies at the heart of America’s diverse (albeit sporadic) heritage of institutionalized public discussion. The New England town meeting is possibly the best known example of an American institution for civic education and participation in public life; but from colonial times to present, other public forum movements have achieved local and national significance.

In The Art of Citizenship, Len Oliver notes several examples of “early forms of citizen education and public discussion” during the period from colonial times to World War I. Cotton Mather’s eighteenth-century “neighborhood societies” provided a formal structure of neighborhood forums to discuss and solve community “disorders.” The establishment of an independent democratic nation, Oliver suggests, prompted the more modern form of adult civic education evident in Josiah Holbrook’s turn-of-the-century Lyceum Movement. The Lyceum was the first attempt to create a nationwide structure of local voluntary citizen education. This significant national institutionalization of community discussion and problem-solving, however, had declined substantially by the late 1830’s. After the Civil War, Reverend John Vincent revived the basic Lyceum idea in the Chautauqua Assembly and Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. Lasting

forty years, the Chautauqua movement encompassed local forms of public issue discussion and study that Vincent hoped would increase the participation of informed citizens in politics, aiding in the solution of pressing contemporary issues.

The Progressive era of the early 1900's saw the growth of other public issue discussion vehicles such as University extension programs, the model for which was established by University of Wisconsin president, Charles Von Hise. In 1914, the Smith-Hughes Act designated the first federal funds for discussion forums, authorizing the Cooperative Extension Service to promote better rural citizenship and better farming. Other progressive organizations such as women's clubs and later, the League of Women Voters, as well as private organizations like Jane Addams' "settlement house network" encouraged citizen participation in government, using the common identity of "citizen" to counterbalance divisive social problems of the time.

In the years immediately preceding World War I, Boston's Ford Hall brought together diverse local forum efforts into a national system under its "Open Forum National Council." The Ford Hall forums' promotion of public issue discussion in a lecture format, however, was brought to a halt by the war; and the concept of public discussion forums did not receive significant attention again until the Great Depression.¹²

Modern national forum movements (from the Great Depression to the present), Oliver argues, have tended to "arise in periods of national unrest or when enlightened individuals saw in public issue discussion a means to make the democratic experiment work through informed citizen education and participation."¹³ In The Art of Citizenship, Oliver presents seven case studies of modern forum programs to illustrate some of the models for organized public issue discussion, using the case studies as a means to discover some of the fundamental principles that guide modern American forum movements.

Oliver's study includes two programs triggered by the Great Depression. The Studebaker Forums (1932-40) began in Des Moines, Iowa, and were established nationwide when their founder, John W. Studebaker, became U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1934. Eventually funded by the U.S. government, these locally-run forums sought, as a civic education program, to stimulate "public discussion, intelligent choices, and social cooperation" regarding the social, economic, and political problems of the day. The other Depression-era program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Schools of Philosophy" and Farmer Discussion Forums (1935-40) sought to diffuse potential opposition to national economic and farm policies from dissatisfied farmers by initiating a national program of farmer discussion groups to "stimulate...more thinking...(on) the broader implications of the national agricultural program."¹⁴

The case studies also include three national post-World War II forum programs. The Foreign Policy Association's "Great Decisions" program (1955-present) is a privately-funded attempt to encourage citizen discussion of the complex foreign policy issues of the nuclear age. The forums, which cover eight different topics in an annual spring discussion series, are sponsored by local organizations in communities across the country. The second post-war program, the National Endowment for the Humanities' Bicentennial American Issues Forum (1975-76), heavily funded by the NEH with additional private-sector support, was a nine-month program that involved citizens across the country in discussions of nine monthly and thirty-six weekly topics related to the American people, culture, and political and social institutions. The AIF included locally-

sponsored regional, state, and community forums as well as media-based means of disseminating information and stimulating discussion in a Bicentennial reflection on the two hundred years of American existence. The third post-war forum program studied by Oliver is the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' National Energy Forum (1980), which was a nationwide publicly- and privately-financed program of energy issues discussions coordinated by regional and local community colleges. Following a ten-week "calendar of issues," the forum program also used media programming to generate discussion about its central theme, "Energy and the Way We Live."

Oliver includes one metropolitan model for citizen participation and one on-going foreign example to round out his case studies of modern forum movements. "Metropolitan or regional citizens leagues," he asserts, "are effective devices for citizen research and education on pressing policy issues and hold the potential for open public forums—locally or nationally." The case study concentrates on citizens leagues in Minneapolis-St. Paul (1952-present), Jacksonville (1975-present), Syracuse (1978-present), identifying citizens leagues as "nonpartisan, nonprofit, incorporated regional membership organizations which identify important policy issues, analyze them, discuss their findings with members and the public and submit recommendations to policymakers." While holding public forums is not the primary goal of the leagues, each league studied uses public forums to communicate and implement its ideas and to encourage the broadest possible public discussion of its reports and recommendations. Oliver includes these citizens leagues because they exemplify "citizen involvement in understanding and participation in public issues and policymaking."

Oliver's last case study, the Swedish Study Circles (1903-present) now comprise "the most pervasive and innovative of Sweden's subsidized adult education institutions."¹⁵ Study Circles are informal groups that meet for well-planned studies of subjects or problem areas determined in advance by the government, by the ten national study circle associations, or by the local study circle groups. Topics are more varied and individually chosen than those in any American program, ranging from the aesthetic or intellectual to the highly ideological, depending on group interest; and at times, Study Circles are purely voluntary; and participants are free to choose what interests them from the multiplicity of sponsors and topics. One out of every three adults participates annually in study circles, which are found in every community; no American public forum has ever, Oliver notes, involved such a large percentage or cross-section of the adult population, or allowed such a "democratic choice of topics."¹⁶

Oliver finds the history of public movements in the United States to be a history marked by discontinuity, yet despite that fact, he holds that "there is public support for the concept and an abstract recognition of the desirability, even necessity, for such purposes. Whenever such national programs are mounted, the public has responded positively."¹⁷ Looking at American programs in comparison with the Swedish study circles, however, points out the relative continuity and success of the Swedish groups, and their breadth of coverage and appeal. Oliver points to some dissimilarities in Swedish and American societies that may help to account for the differences. One of these is that, while both are democratic and both accept the idea that an "informed and educated populace is the heart of a successful democracy," Swedish democracy "stresses citizenship responsibilities for involvement in electoral politics whereas the United States

system has always emphasized almost equally the citizen's freedom from government, the right to pursue one's own interests and forget about broader societal concerns." If this difference helps account for the "comparatively limited appeal or duration" of American public forums, it also, as Oliver suggests, points to their "importance in the on-going struggle between social responsibility and self-indulgent citizen withdrawal from the political process."¹⁸

4. The National Issues Forums in the Context of American Public Forums

When Len Oliver's study of American public forums was completed in 1983, the Domestic Policy Association had existed for two years, had completed one season of NIF discussions, and was preparing for its second, and dramatically expanding 1983-84 forum season. Oliver notes that the DPA, even in its infancy, "combine(d) the best and most successful elements of the public forum movements documented in this study."¹⁹ That these characteristics were evident so early in the existence of the DPA/NIF is largely a result of the awareness of, and reliance on, the precedents of earlier programs by the DPA originators. The forum program that the DPA planners envisioned would "do for domestic policy what the Great Decisions Program of the Foreign Policy Association has done for foreign policy issues."²⁰ While avoiding some of the problems they perceived within the successful, but short-lived, NEH American Issues Forum and the AACJC Energy and the Way We Live program.²¹ Especially since the DPA self-consciously places its National Issues Forums program within this context of American public forums, Oliver's analysis of public issues forums provides a framework within which to analyze the NIF. From his case studies of the American forum programs, Oliver derives a list of specific issues to consider in relation to the "general problem of developing coordinated (and sustained) national open forum programs for discussion of policy issues." In The Art of Citizenship, Oliver conducts a summary analysis of the DPA/NIF according to his list of forum characteristics,²² but a more complete analysis is possible and instructive four years after he completed his study.

AN OVERRIDING SENSE OF MISSION: COMPLEX NATIONAL PROGRAMS ARE HELD TOGETHER BY A SET OF PRINCIPLES, A SENSE OF MISSION, AND A SENSE OF IDENTITY.

A planning phase report offers a simple justification for the Domestic Policy Association that forms the basis for a unifying sense of mission:

- 1) The bedrock of a sound democracy is...informed participation. A democratic society also requires an understanding of where self-interests merge into common interests.
- 2) Our particular democracy utilizes its "convening institutions" (those that...convene...the public for a variety of civic purposes—they include colleges, universities, museums, libraries, and other cultural and educational institutions) to provide the public discussion that is essential to its soundness.

3) The convening institutions could...materially enhance the quality and effectiveness of their programs...(by collaborating) on a selected number of major policy issues each year...Concentrating not just on issues but on what people agree upon in discussing issues would be a great help in fulfilling a basic requirement of a democratic society—defining the common good.²³

In the DPA perception, the intrinsic good of public participation is difficult to separate from the instrumental good of leading to more democratic governing and society. Public participation (“sharing in,” or acts of belonging in, public life) develops the public side of human nature and public skills; it is educative and it leads to an apprehension of community good.

The general DPA model of public policy education is based on public conversation about important issues. “Public talk,” David Mathews, President of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, a part of the DPA network that provides national-level support, suggests, “requires hard thinking, careful listening, making tough choices and reaching shared judgments.” Although this kind of civic education is not easy, the Forums assume its necessity, “reflect(ing) a conviction that all democracies depend on conversation and the quality of those conversations is directly related to the quality of the democracy.”²⁴ Enabling people to be better citizens is accomplished in the DPA scheme by opening an arena in which citizenship can be learned and carried on.

Additionally, a sense of common purpose is premised upon the perception of a missing element from the overall “conversation” of democracy. Specifically, the NIF, like other American forum programs, seeks to bridge a perceived and widening “chasm between the American people and our major institutions of leadership.”²⁵ The DPA is united by the common goal of facilitating informed citizen influence on public life and on policy making.

CENTRALIZED OR DECENTRALIZED MANAGEMENT: CENTRALIZED NATIONAL MANAGEMENT CAN BE COSTLY AND DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN, ESPECIALLY IF THE PROGRAM IS HEAVILY DEPENDENT ON FEDERAL FUNDS.

The DPA was established as a grassroots organization purposefully and explicitly without the incentive of federal funds or of substantial financing from any central source. One assumption that continues to underlie the association is that each institution or group is responsible for securing local financial support for its programming, and that each retains broad authority to structure its own forums according to local and organizational needs.

The primary role of the national DPA organization is in developing national support for the autonomous convening institutions. Nationally, as established by the early DPA/NIF organizers, national organizations, interested foundations, and individuals would support the convening groups through the instrumentality of the DPA in several areas, including: providing the NIF with national visibility; facilitating local co-sponsorship by providing information to and liaison with national organizations; channeling conference results to national policymakers; preparing sound, balanced,

educational materials; coordinating approaches to media use; assisting efforts to secure funding; and sources of support for common projects (educational materials, films, etc.).²⁶ Among the foundations that currently provide essential services for the NIF program are: the Benton Foundation (annual citizen and policymaker teleconference), the Johnson Foundation (convenor and moderator training, audiocassettes and videocassettes on forum topics), the Kettering Foundation (day-to-day coordination, program staff), and the Public Agenda Foundation (issue books and questionnaire analysis).²⁷

TIMING OF THE PROGRAM: THE MOST EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS APPEAR TO HAVE A FOCUSED TIME PERIOD, AS IT IS DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN PUBLIC DISCUSSION OVER MANY MONTHS.

The “forum season” for each annual group of three topics lasts from September 15 to January 15. Convening organizations establish their local forum schedules within those broad limits; and given the local flexibility of the program, schedules vary in different communities: some schedule a single session for each topic, while others favor more extended discussions. The National Issues Forums calendar begins in September:

SEPT.	Moderator training. Forums begin Sept. 15
OCT.	Forums.
NOV.	Forums. Convenors nominate next year’s topics.
DEC.	Forums.
JAN.	Forums through Jan. 15. New issues announced.
FEB.	Steering committees/local convenors regroup and begin preparation for next round of forums.
MAR.	Presidential Library Conference: citizen/policymaker conference.
APR./MAY	Washington Week: briefings at White House, Congress, national organizations; teleconference between policymakers and citizens around the country.
JUNE	Training and orientation around the country.
JULY	Convenors Workshop. Issue books arrive, convenors plan fall series.
AUG.	Fall forums plans completed and local publicity efforts under way. ²⁸

LOCAL SPONSORSHIP: NEW COALITIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY DISCUSSION ARE USEFUL AND EFFECTIVE IN GENERATING INTEREST, SUPPORT, AND RESOURCES, BUT SUSTAINING AND INSTITUTIONALIZING SUCH COALITIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT WITHOUT EXCEPTIONAL LOCAL LEADERSHIP.

The DPA does not compete with the existing organizations that are encompassed within its network; rather, it serves as an umbrella of national support under which

participating organizations have access to materials and shared resources that allow them to establish their local National Issues Forums program. The collaboration of individual groups allows common objectives to be reached and the state of the art of public forums to be advanced; but the strength of the DPA network lies in committed local leadership and sponsorship, which is evidenced in its rapid growth (from 22 pilot sites in the fall of 1982 to over 200 communities in the fall of 1986) and in the local institutionalization of the NIF in many communities with sustained local support.²⁹

Local sponsorship allows individuals interested in public discussion an opportunity to provide a community service and to enhance the organizational mission of their institutions. Sponsoring the NIF most often means building new local coalitions for public policy discussion in order to combine necessary institutional and community resources. Sustaining these coalitions, as Len Oliver suggests, relies on exceptional local leadership; but in an informal survey of thirteen DPA/NIF convenors that Oliver conducted in 1985, most thought that their institutions would continue to sponsor the NIF if they happened to leave the program, a response that seems to indicate that the program can be locally institutionalized in a relatively short time period.³⁰

USE OF NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS CAN ENDORSE, LEGITIMIZE, AND PUBLICIZE PROGRAMS, BUT THEY CANNOT ENSURE THE LOCAL INTEREST AND LEADERSHIP TO SUSTAIN THE FORUM PROGRAM.

Although the early DPA/NIF organizers agreed to “seek the participation of national organizations as full partners in the venture,” no decisions were made at the time as to how to accomplish that partnership. The national organizations consulted in these early planning meetings (e.g. the League of Women Voters, PTA, AAUW, AFL/CIO, the National Conference of Christians and Jews) indicated that a collaborative relationship between the DPA and national organizations would be mutually beneficial. The national organizations, it was agreed, could offer the DPA services, materials, communication networks, and possible funding.³¹

Despite these early plans, collaborations with national organizations has not been, thus far, a predominant characteristic of the DPA/NIF program. In 1985, however, NIF and the National Council for the Social Studies began their collaboration in the NIF in the Classroom program, designed to involve students and teachers in a forum program adapted for classroom use. Also in 1985, the DPA began collaborating with the Laubach Literacy Action network in order to introduce the NIF into the literacy education efforts of Laubach.³² Additionally, recent and on-going discussions with a nationwide fraternal service organization indicate that interest in such collaboration still exists on both parts, and point out the probability of future involvement of national organizations with the DPA network.

ISSUE SELECTION: WHO SELECTS THE ISSUES DOES NOT SEEM AS IMPORTANT TO THE PUBLIC AS ARE THE RELEVANCE, TIMELINESS, AND FAIRNESS OF THE ISSUES PRESENTED.

Each November, local convenors nominate possible issues for the next year's discussions. From these nominations, the convenors vote for three issues and the DPA announces them in January. According to early DPA guidelines, "issues should be general enough to allow considerable flexibility for local programming but specific enough to engender common debate."³³ Issues must be clearly defined: not broad and unmanageable "topics" like the high cost of living or rural development, and not inappropriately narrow "problems" like "why the courts are so lenient with criminals." An appropriate NIF issue is "a matter of special public importance which can be resolved in any of several ways."³⁴ Examples of issues used in past years are: "Crime: What We Fear and What Can Be Done," "The Farm Crisis: Who's in Trouble and How to Respond," "Priorities for the Nation's Schools," "The Soaring Cost of Health Care," and "The Soviets: What is the Conflict About?"

Issues chosen have both national significance and direct local effects. They are broadly accessible and addressed in practical terms that also allow participants to explore "the linkage between local concerns and national policy and to assess the inter-relatedness of one action to another and to the overall governing process." Issues must also have relevance to national policy debates so that the results of forums will have an acknowledged application to policymaking.³⁵

MATERIALS: MATERIALS THAT ARE LOW-COST AND GOOD QUALITY AND THAT SHOW THE VARIOUS SIDES OR ASPECTS TO AN ISSUE ARE CRUCIAL

The "linchpins" in the NIF discussions are the DPA issue books, which provide substantive unity and a common starting point for diverse discussions within the network. The Public Agenda Foundation collaborates with the DPA in compiling these concise treatments that present the issues in a non-partisan, balanced manner that concentrates primarily on providing that information essential to defining the central dilemma and to demonstrating the costs of various alternatives. The issue books, available as one booklet for each of the three yearly issues or a combination of three issues in one book, are widely acclaimed as well-written, fair-minded presentations that are written at a reading level that is understandable to a wide range of readers.³⁶ Moderator discussion guides complement the issue books.

Other materials available from the DPA at a nominal cost include thirty-minute issue summaries on audiocassettes, videotaped issue summaries for opening forums, brief written summaries of each issue suitable for publication, orientation/background videotapes for moderators, steering committees, and other selected audiences, and general promotion materials such as brochures, flyers, posters, and camera-ready art for forum organizers. Other materials that the DPA makes available to enhance local programs include a Leaders/Convenors Handbook, a DPA newsletter and special reports, the Kettering Review, and a yearly report on the Fall forums entitled On Second Thought. Also, because of the local emphasis of the NIF, locally generated program and promotional materials are also useful in the context of community forum programs.³⁷

USE OF MEDIA: LOCAL AND NATIONAL MEDIA ARE USEFUL TOOLS FOR FORUM PROGRAMS.

The mass media is not geared for face-to-face discussions and public consideration of issues; but the media can be used by local groups as an effective supplement to their forums. For some forums, mass media can be a promotional vehicle. Additionally, many use mass media as a complement to their programs, especially using print media or television or radio to reach larger audiences. Non-mass media such as audio- or videocassettes are also used to enhance forum discussion. The DPA utilizes satellite teleconferencing capabilities in order to link forum sites around the country with national policymakers and experts at the annual Washington Week conference so that citizens not attending can also join in the Washington Week conversations.³⁸

LEADERSHIP TRAINING: MOST OF THE MAJOR FORUM PROGRAMS HAVE CONDUCTED TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR ORGANIZING AND CONDUCTING DISCUSSIONS.

National, state, and local convenor workshops and moderator training sessions bring new and experienced convenors and moderators together to exchange ideas and to learn about organizing and conducting discussions. For the convenors, the conferences and workshops concentrate on establishing and maintaining local forum organizations and selecting formats. Moderator training (moderators are the people who actually run the forum meetings) emphasizes the neutrality of the forum setting and the importance of keeping people involved in the discussion and of encouraging diverse viewpoints. Well-prepared and trained moderators are crucial to the success of the forums, so most convenors provide some type of moderator training, although the specific form of preparation may vary from one-to-one sessions to videotapes, and from role playing to using the DPA Moderator Guide, or be a combination of approaches. The DPA makes instructional materials and training assistance available throughout the network.³⁹

FORMATS FOR DISCUSSION: WHATEVER THE FORMAT USED, THE CENTRAL VALUE OF THE PROGRAMS IS THE STIMULUS OF FACE-TO-FACE DISCUSSIONS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE.

Local sponsors choose formats that coincide with both the NIF program objectives and the needs and characteristics of their local organizations and audiences. The central value of face-to-face issue discussion can be maintained in a variety of formats, including the often-used format of a panel discussion followed by small group discussions as well as smaller group discussions and study circle formats. Based on the results of the background studies for his DPA Reports from the Field, Len Oliver discerns that “local convenors...have strong interests in (the future use of) smaller groups (discussion groups in larger forums,(and) self-standing study circles) to enhance the ‘working through’ process; in more sustained sessions (as opposed to one-time forums);

(and) in increasing the quality of public discussion (rather) than in (just) enlarging their audiences.” Emphasizing the public discussion format rather than individual issues provides more continuous audiences interested more in public discussion itself rather than in a particular issue.

In Oliver’s survey of a small group of NIF convenors, the typical convenor conducts four forums or study circles in the annual forum series, with an average attendance of about twenty-four participants each. Public forums, of course, attract larger audiences (average of about thirty-five), while a study circle format averages about twelve participants each. Public sites (such as university and college auditoriums, public schools, community and senior center meeting rooms, and churches) are the commonest NIF locations, although forums are held in a variety of other locations, as well.⁴⁰

GETTING BEYOND THE TYPICAL FORUM AUDIENCE: IN ORDER TO ATTRACT OTHER THAN TRADITIONAL FORUM AUDIENCES, FORUM ISSUES MUST BE BROADLY APPLICABLE AND ACCESSIBLE, SITES SHOULD BE LOCAL AND NON-THREATENING, AND NON-TRADITIONAL SPONSORS (E.G. LABOR AND MINORITY SPONSORS) ACTIVELY SOUGHT OUT.

The National Issues Forums generally attract an audience that is predominantly middle or upper class, over thirty-five years of age, equally divided between male and female, with a substantial representation of retirees. Convenors seem to be dissatisfied with their audience demographics, wishing to bring in other groups including minorities, lower income people, blue collar workers, and younger people. As possible strategies for broadening their audiences, convenors propose increased promotion to targeted groups and inclusion of their representatives in leadership roles in the local forum effort.⁴¹

In 1985, the DPA sought out ways to include in issues discussions those non-traditional forum audiences that are outside of the political mainstream. In addition to the NIF in the Classroom program, the DPA began an important collaboration with Laubach Literacy Action, with the support of B. Dalton Booksellers and the Kettering Foundation to include in issues discussions immigrants, prisoners, rural and urban poor, and adults learning to read and write by introducing the National Issues Forums process and adapted materials to adults in literacy classes. For Laubach, the project adds a context to literacy programs in which learning to read and write are meaningful, and in which personal discussion skills can be learned and a sense of personal competency developed. For the DPA, the program’s goal is “introducing issues discussion to those who are separated from the mainstream of public life by barriers of race, age, rural and urban isolation, or poverty.”⁴² Although most NIF-Laubach discussions to date have occurred in the context of literacy classes, the project’s eventual goal is to include Laubach participants in communitywide forums, in order to broaden the perspective of all forum participants.⁴³

In 1985, the NIF-Laubach program got an enthusiastic response from inmates and teachers in the program’s one convening prison: the Hennepin County Adult Corrections Facility in Plymouth, Minnesota. Instructors in the Hennepin programs found that inmates, temporarily removed from society, had a strong desire to participate in issues discussions. In 1986, the NIF program was expanded to nine prisons; some of the forums were run through literacy classes while others occurred in advanced college courses. The

corrections educators involved agreed that the NIF program offers not just new information, but also opportunities for inmates to develop skills necessary to responsible citizenship, both in the discussions themselves and in communicating the results to policymakers.⁴⁴ The DPA has an opportunity, through programs like the literacy and corrections programs, to enable a broader spectrum of people to become more practiced citizens.

CITIZEN OPINION RESPONSES: THE PUBLIC FORUM PROGRAMS EXAMINED IN THIS STUDY WHICH ARE STILL FUNCTIONING HAVE BUILT-IN MECHANISMS FOR ASSESSING PARTICIPANT VIEWS ON THE ISSUES DISCUSSED AND SOME LINK WITH POLICYMAKERS.

The issue books contain questionnaires for participants to complete before and after the forums which are designed to measure citizens' opinions on the policy options and priorities discussed, and to ascertain whether the forum itself significantly altered attitudes and responses. The Public Agenda Foundation collaborates with the DPA in analyzing the questionnaire results, providing the DPA with the capacity to report forum results and summaries to policymakers;⁴⁵ but because of the limitations of the sample and the nature of the Forums discussions, these results are synthesized each year in a report entitled On Second Thought. In the analysis, special attention is given to identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, questions in which there was a significant response shift in the pre- and post-forum questionnaires, and important value considerations.

Analyzing the National Issues Forums program within Oliver's framework of forum characteristics indicates that DPA/NIF "falls within the mold of those public forum movements that have demonstrated unusual longevity in a history more marked by the discontinuity of such programs." But, Oliver suggests that DPA differs from previous forums in three significant ways that may further strengthen the program. These are:

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONAL INVESTMENT: The network organization of the DPA demands that communities have a stake not only in their local forum programs but also in the national effort. Because this local dependence is a key concept in DPA's long-range planning, the program differs significantly from the other national programs studied. Oliver suggests that "by starting small, by not ploughing substantial funding into local forums, DPA over time has the potential of creating a new nationwide, loose-knit network for citizen discussion of important national issues—regardless of outside funding."⁴⁶ Indeed, in his 1986 Reports from the Field, Oliver finds that, "in this fifth year of the DPA/NIF program, we can report an active, expanding network of organizations committed to the DPA/NIF concept."⁴⁷

A DISTINCT METHODOLOGY: The Domestic Policy Association, unlike the other forum programs studied, claims for the NIF an evolving, yet distinct methodology encompassing four basic steps:

- 1) Personalizing the national issues so citizens can identify with the choices inherent in any public issue.
--The issue books help provide a common definition of the problem and offer a modest package of essential information about the central dilemma and the various alternatives that are presented in a form understandable to a lay public.
- 2) Distinguishing among the choices to permit citizen opinions to emerge with participants fully aware of the trade-offs when one choice is made over another.
--The forum discussions ideally focus on the values that underlie alternative approaches to an issue, operating from the assumptions that there are costs to every alternative, that people have reasons for their differing choices, and that there may be merit to previously unconsidered options.
- 3) Permitting full airing of differences of viewpoints in public forums, with encouragement to participants to move from their “first opinions: to “second and third opinions” based on evidence and rational argumentation.
- 4) Providing a setting in which forum participants can “work through” an issue to find the levels where they can agree and find some common ground.
--The forum discussions ideally move participants in the direction of facing political reality in which public decisions involve hard choices, complex tradeoffs, or the decision to defer certain initiatives. The hard work of reaching public judgment (consensus) may not be completed within the short time frame of the forums; but the forums can be useful in helping people to think realistically and communally and in establishing, perhaps, some general areas of community agreement.⁴⁸

The concept of “working through” (the process by which citizens digest information about an issue and arrive at a more considered and public judgment) is central to the DPA method; it consists of considerably more than ingesting new facts and it calls attention to the fact that coming to terms with an issue is a process that involves much more than raising awareness levels or airing grievances. The assumption implicit in the “working through” concept is that as people move toward a commonly agreeable choice, there will be tradeoffs and there will be difficult sacrifices. Because people generally approach government with the assumption that it will and can fill their needs if they adequately express them, “working through” is an unexpected and demanding method of addressing issues that is, however, realistic in the modern political environment.⁴⁹

Although there is significant controversy over whether “working through” occurs in a complete and ideal form within the forums, or occurs at all, Len Oliver maintains that it is a useful concept for moderators and convenors to use in assessing the effectiveness of their forum discussions.⁵⁰ Even as Oliver acknowledges that this evolving methodology based on “working through” is primarily a set of principles in need of more research, he asserts that the concept is crucial to the uniqueness of the DPA.⁵¹

CITIZEN-POLICYMAKER LINKAGES: Whatever the status of the “working through” methodology, a central objective of the NIF remains to find common counsel through discussion of public issues and to communicate that counsel to policymakers. Oliver notes, in The Art of Citizenship, that the DPA “seems to have made great initial strides by building in (direct) citizen-policymaker linkages from the start.” Nationally, DPA organized the yearly Presidential Library Conference and Washington Week briefings and teleconference; and on the local level, convenors do, and are encouraged to, find ways to involve policymakers early in their DPA programs using such formats as city-wide or regional “results-reporting” forums, written reports to local, state and national policymakers, informal meetings between small groups of forum participants and locally important policymakers, and invitations to policymakers to participate in local downlinks to the national teleconference.

By engaging public- and private-sector leaders in direct exchanges with citizens on the issues discussed in the forums, the “DPA distinguishes its program as more of an activist force to influence policymaking than the other three movements (studied) which simply use opinion ballots, study group reports, or direct testimony to policymakers (in public hearings).” Certainly, the results of pre- and post-forum opinion questionnaires form the substantial basis for the citizens’ presentations; but meeting with policymakers face-to-face introduces an unusual opportunity for citizen-policymaker exchange and conversation about national issues.⁵²

In 1983, when Len Oliver completed The Art of Citizenship, he wrote that “given the historical discontinuity of public forum movements documented in this study, it is hard to be sanguine about yet another national public discussion attempt.” Yet, based on the early growth of the DPA network, the long-term view of its leadership, the investment of local communities in the network and in locally institutionalized forums, and the beginnings of policymaker recognition of DPA’s potential contributions, Oliver seemed willing to express qualified optimism for the future success of the DPA.⁵³ Three years later, in his 1986 draft of Reports from the Field, Oliver was more openly enthusiastic about DPA’s achievements and future prospects, reporting an active and expanding network of organizations, “each developing in its own way coincident with (its own) traditions, characteristics, and needs,” yet all connected by a commitment to the DPA/NIF concept and, more fundamentally, by a strong belief in and a commitment to an informed, participating citizenry as the driving force to make popular sovereignty work. Based on the responses of local convenors in his study, Oliver anticipates that DPA/NIF development in the next few years will occur within the existing framework of program characteristics and objectives; he expects that local convenors will make specific efforts to expand to new audiences, increase community support and recognition, encourage the “working through” process, involve more public figures and policymakers, expand support of local organizations and leadership, make greater use of the smaller study circle concept, and generate discussion of local issues using local materials.⁵⁴

5. Developing the DPA/NIF Future

By adopting the fundamental objective of creating a better way for people to learn about public policy and to participate in its formulation, the Domestic Policy Association and its National Issues Forums program assume the challenge of taking part in the venture of popular sovereignty. Public issues forums throughout the history of the United States have undertaken the same challenge with varying degrees of success and longevity; and viewed in the context of the American forum tradition, the NIF seems to possess those attributes that will place it in the ranks of the effective and sustained programs of public discussion. As Oliver suggests, however, the DPA/NIF possesses unique characteristics that distinguish it from the general program model. These elements add a particular character to the DPA's own definition of success: its organization not only must foster public discussion, it also must be a network based on significant local investment and autonomy; the forums not only must concentrate on public issues, but they also must address central policy concerns and various alternatives in terms of underlying values and tradeoffs, moving participants toward a truly public judgment; the linkage with policymakers must not rely exclusively on the results of opinion surveys, it also must be based on direct citizen-policymaker exchange and discussion.

One of the assumptions implicit in the operation of the DPA and the NIF is that both the network and the program are evolving entities. Considered in terms of its traditional and unique characteristics, the evolution of the DPA/NIF is prompted by the interplay of, and by tensions between, various of these characteristics; and the evolution takes the form of decisions made and actions taken that give these characteristics their place in the conceptual framework that is manifest in the actual functioning of the DPA network and NIF program.

Ideas and seemingly abstract concepts have an important role in DPA development because they are inseparable from the operation of the program. DPA evolution has been from its earliest origins, and continues to be, based on actions and decisions which are informed by conversations that take place within the organization. In large measure, the DPA network is a communications network for the local NIF convenors; such events as convenor or moderator workshops and training sessions, Washington Week, and the Presidential Library Conference serve additionally as occasions for interaction with others in the organization, and encourage the sharing of ideas, techniques, and experiences. Also, most of the convenors Len Oliver surveyed for his Reports from the Field communicated regularly with other convenors and most wanted increased communication, since it was agreed that such exchange improved local programs.⁵⁵ The DPA network is increasingly becoming interested in learning from itself. Reports from the Field, for example, was prompted by convenors' desire to learn from the experiences and ideas of their colleagues in the network. Oliver's report was the first systematic attempt to gather information about what happens within the DPA network; but recently, a DPA assessment group of six convenors and a Kettering Foundation staff liaison formed. Initially concerned with how local groups are operating and how they are defining success, the DPA assessment group may put later effort into assessing the validity of the "working through" methodology.⁵⁶ Additionally, a group of twenty convenors and a Kettering staff liaison have been meeting as the Citizen and Policymaker assessment group, working to coordinate and foster local participation in targeting and involving policymakers.

Other conversations that inform the evolution of the DPA/NIF are the conceptual discussions that occur within and between staff of the various foundations that are active in the DPA network and that provide support to the convening institutions within it. Discussions like these are important to the DPA/NIF because they provide the kind of in-depth treatment of particular problems or issues that the convenors cannot provide because of limitations on their time and on their ability to meet together. The foundations are able to include outside resources in their discussions as a source of new ideas, analyses, and criticisms; but these resources are included as contributors to the entire conversation rather than as experts with ready-made answers. Often, convenors also specifically contribute to these discussions, which, at their best, provide an approach to development that is both reflective and innovative. The in-depth conceptual discussions at the staff level bear upon the ideas that help provide national coherence and direction to the DPA; their influence may enter the network in memos that, for example, offer suggestions to convenors about certain aspects of the program, and other materials such as issue books that are distributed throughout the DPA organization and to other groups (like policymakers) on its behalf, or they may be manifest in the structure of the national programs (Washington Week, convenors workshops, etc.) that these foundations plan and staff, or they may be actualized in other aspects of the program's planning or operation. Because of their influence within the network and because of their concern with issues of fundamental importance to the DPA/NIF, staff-level conversations are indicative of possible directions and areas of concern for the continuing development of the network and the program.

Recent and on-going discussions at the staff level, specifically involving the participation and coordination of the staff of the Kettering Foundation (which supports the operations needs of the national DPA organization), have a common origin in the question of how better to involve policymakers in the NIF. The question initially focused attention on finding techniques, language and means of access through which to explain the DPA/NIF to policymakers (especially on the national level, and particularly in Congress) in order to stimulate their interest in listening to forum participants. The original idea was to explain the NIF program in terms of program characteristics and sponsorship, using the "working through" process and the public judgment it engenders to describe what the forums accomplish and how the policymaker can productively listen to this alternate source of information.⁵⁷ Because explaining the program to policymakers involves understanding not only the policymakers' needs but also the program itself better, discussing and examining critically this issue of participant/policymaker communication has also prompted a greater questioning of existing assumptions about the NIF, and especially about the validity and results of the "working through" process.

The discussion of how to foster better communications between NIF participants and policymakers has broadened into a conceptual conversation that reveals certain tensions existing among various interpretations of the NIF program objectives and results. Among the many voices in the conversation, two basic positions predominate, reflecting distinct emphasis in their proposals for improving the citizen/policymaker link. One general position involves, and can be designated, a "product" orientation, while the other is primarily concerned with "action." Although the positions are not entirely exclusive of one another because they suggest relative emphases and varying

interpretations within the framework of common assumptions and objectives that underlie the DPA/NIF, they do suggest fundamentally different directions for program and organization development.

The central claim of those who espouse a product orientation is that the DPA's fundamental purpose is to influence public policy using the results of the forums. While the informational and educational functions that are embodied in the forum discussions are important in their own right, their primary value is their instrumentality to that central goal. The unique capacity of the NIF lies in educating citizens so that they can provide policymakers with judgments informed by public discussion. Whether the forum outcomes are, or should be, (as they are represented in different versions of this same general agreement) specific policy recommendations, areas of local, state, or regional consensus and disagreement, or a sense of policy direction or public permission based on underlying values, the product position focuses on reporting those results to policymakers so that citizen discussion can be brought to bear on national domestic policymaking.

The product position proposes to improve the link between participants and policymakers by discovering what kind of input policymakers want and would find useful from the forum participants, and then shaping the operation and the product of the DPA/NIF to fit the requirements and language of policymaking. It utilizes a data-oriented mode of communication, relying on summaries and analyses of forum discussions and questionnaires as the basis for face-to-face citizen presentations of their forum results to policymakers. The effectiveness of the NIF program is measurable in terms of the number of policymakers who invest time into the participant/policymaker events and into other meetings designed to aid in program development, and in the legitimacy the policymakers ascribe to the NIF product. Since the issues discussed are national issues, the product orientation emphasizes national-level policymakers in its results reporting, seeking to be most effective where the national policy decisions are made.

Because of the need to provide effective national-level input to policymakers, the product proposals entail a significant increase in national-level support and organization within the DPA in order to assure capabilities for the collection and interpretation of results, maintenance of an effective presence in Washington, and nation-wide DPA coordination. The proposals, while not detracting from the importance of including policymakers from other levels, would also require an increased commitment by the convenors to the effort to influence national policymakers, since convenors are the key links between participants and policymakers in many of the reporting schemes.

Considering the perception of the widening gap between citizens and policymakers that was key in the development of the DPA, the fundamentally conservative approach to policymaking represented by the product orientation seems inconsistent. By seeking to shape the operation and results of the forums to fit the demands and language of policymakers, the product position works within the status quo, emphasizing the gap between citizens and policymakers by attempting to bridge it rather than narrow it. The product orientation treats discussion among citizens and discussion among policymakers as two fundamentally different activities; and it seeks to bridge the gap between them first by shaping citizen discussion to more closely resemble policymaker discussion so that its results can be used as inputs in the policymaking discussion. Citizen discussion, however, will never become policy discussion in this

scheme because the “bridge” of citizen-to-policymaker discussion based on results (product) reporting emphasizes the distinct nature of the two kinds of conversation, recognizing the language and structure of policymaker discussion as the real political form, so that the forum products must be understandable in the usual language and accepted routes of citizen input in the process of government policymaking in order to be political.

Many of those who approach the DPA/NIF with an action orientation begin with a fundamental criticism of the product position that rests on the notion that results-oriented reporting practices do not reflect the quality of the forum conversations. From the action perspective, discussion is key to both public policy education and to public participation in policy formation. The effectiveness of the forums cannot be separated from the quality and nature of their conversations; and trying to distill the active conversation into a product to report is inconsistent, detracting from the unique potential and value of the NIF program.

Because the action position emphasizes the forum process (discussion), it proposes to improve communication between citizens and policymakers by involving them in the same conversations. The DPA is viewed primarily as a communications network, facilitating long-term, issue-focused discussions about the structures and values of society. From the action perspective, involving both citizens and policymakers together, as much as is feasible, in all aspects of the forum program (from actual issue discussions to conversations about the program itself and issue selection) combines education and participation in the same process, enhancing the quality of both. The action orientation is realistic in that it recognizes the limitations on the time and commitment of citizens, especially those in a policymaking role. It does not expect that every citizen will be involved in every part of the program; but it does seek to foster wide participation in the full range of the program.

The action orientation involves a much more localized focus than does the product orientation (although the national level is also important) because it seeks to broaden policy discussion, concentrating its efforts locally to include citizens and policymakers from all levels of government. It also recognizes a broader view of the word “policymaker” itself, including in its conception people in positions of authority and influence outside of government as well as within it, and acknowledging the importance of local, state, and regional government policymakers, as equal to that of national policymakers.

In general, the specific manifestations of the action position in the foundation-level conceptual conversations seem to operate from a common interpretation of the nature of political discussion that differs from that of the product orientation. The action orientation underscores the importance of creating one public conversation that can encompass all exchanges about issues of public concern as legitimate and political parts of the discussion, no matter what the specified authority of the citizens involved. The need for a common language is also recognized by the action position; but since it does not define “political” according to the present conventions, it does not accept that the common language must be that of government policymakers. In the action conception, the forums can be instrumental in developing a common public language by providing a context within which it can be developed in the discussions of citizens and policymakers.

In practice, the two positions are not as dichotomous as they appear on paper; and interpreting them as “orientation” acknowledges that strategies and techniques associated with one position may be useful to the other and that specific proposals and points of view within the conversation about DPA/NIF do not fall into two strictly defined “camps.” The two positions may even complement each other in a politically realistic program. The action and product orientation are, however, separate and largely contradictory tendencies within the discussion that imply fundamentally different courses for program development. The product orientation has a certain attractiveness because it operates within existing policymaking structures and conventions, primarily seeking to inform citizen participation rather than to alter the attitudes and communications between citizens and policymakers; thus it appears to be more politically realistic and easily implemented than the action orientation. Also, because effectiveness is defined in terms of policymaker interest in hearing forum results and recognition of their legitimacy and usefulness, this model of citizen influence on policy formulation lends itself relatively well to concrete, results-based evaluation. These characteristics and others of the product position are expeditious in a program whose objective is to create a better way for people to learn about public policy and to participate in its formulation; and, in general, this orientation characterizes the present operation of the DPA/NIF. But given the background of the forum program, a fundamentally action-oriented position is more consonant with the general framework of assumptions, goals, traditions, and characteristics that grounds the DPA/NIF.

As a response to the stagnant character of popular sovereignty in the modern United States, the DPA seeks to participate in reuniting people with their role in governing through the NIF, which is meant to narrow the perceived gap between citizens and policymakers and be instrumental in improving the quality of public life. When the NIF is seen as a means for reactivating the principle of popular sovereignty in an environment marked by a private rather than a public orientation, it is clear that the first objective of the program must be to allow the creation of a public that can be sovereign. The action orientation implies that people can only become citizens by acting as citizens; a view that is entirely consistent with the DPA conviction that the best way for people to learn about public policy issues and to define the common good is by discussing them together in an informed manner.

Acting and conversing as citizens requires the use of a community vocabulary of “we can” rather than an individual vocabulary of “I want.” Whereas the product position uses the “we can” vocabulary in conversations among citizens, but distills it into the language of “we want” or “we think” for the purposes of reporting to policymakers, the action orientation extends the vocabulary of “we can” into the realm of all public discussions, not only those between citizens. Without denying the differences in responsibilities, structures, and language that sometimes must exist between people with policymaking authority and those without, the action position seeks, at some level, to involve all people (policy authority or no) in a common conversation as citizens. This conversation, of which the NIF is a part, is the essential activity in the on-going creation of an informed, civically responsible, and actively sovereign public.

Because of their national emphasis and dependence on results, many of the proposals of the product orientation necessitate strong centralized national DPA organization. Because the action position places highest priority on the public quality of

NIF conversations and the breadth of participation (supporting the NIF goal of getting beyond the typical forum audience), it reinforces and expands the local emphasis that has thus far been a characteristic of the NIF. Sponsorship, funding, and organization of the forums remains on the local level; but under the action-oriented proposals, the local forums are also the key locales for the involvement of policymakers in the NIF discussions. Because policymakers are involved in the program as citizens of a certain community, the difficulty that arises under the product orientation of trying to report the quality and nature of the discussion process as well as its results does not appear so strongly in the action orientation. The DPA was created by collaborating organizations united in the common venture of building a “network for a continuous and coordinated policy forum.”⁵⁸ In an action-oriented conception, the national organization exists primarily to facilitate communication and sharing of resources within the network. The national organization is important to the legitimacy and recognition of local forums and it serves practical functions in the coordination and operation of the network; but in the action orientation, it is not the focus of attention.

Unrestricted by the limitations of a prescribed product, forums in the action orientation retain broad flexibility in the formats and carrying out of their discussions. Because the central objective is to actively participate in the creation and maintenance of public living, an action-oriented NIF would foster local experimentation with formats that might, for example, attract a broader range of participants, encourage more discussion, sharpen public thinking, or involve people more fully in acting together as citizens. The action orientation does not deny that results reporting might be a useful or necessary component of some public discussions, but commonly-held conversations provide a context in which the results, if used, may be meaningful and better understood.

Product orientation judges the outcomes of the public, deliberative forum talk immediately after it occurs, using opinion questionnaires in current forum practice, revealing an assumption that the important (or measurable) effects of the forums happen within the forums themselves. Action orientation, on the other hand, acknowledges the forums as a part of the entire and continuing public conversation. This position seems to clash with the DPA methodology’s central tenet of “working through,” but it does so only if “working through” is claimed to be completed within the forum discussions themselves. Within the action orientation, “working through” can be identified with the overall process of talking publicly and arriving at public judgments (“we can”). Thus identified, “working through” is not restricted to the forums; rather, the forum discussions, which concentrate on structures and values in our society and how policy issues are related to these, are a part of the “working through” process.⁵⁹

The action orientation provides the DPA/NIF with a challenging vision that draws on its founding principles and traditions, responding to the fundamental dissatisfaction with present political reality in a manner that envisions and allows the creation of a new political reality. It seeks to reactivate popular sovereignty as a primary characteristic of American life. It accepts the mandate of citizen education, involving people (with and without specified policy authority) in a common educational and participatory process of acting as citizens. It reinforces positive aspects of the tradition of public forums, and allows for the evolution of that tradition. But if the action orientation is challenging because it involves a difficult process of changing the attitudes, language, and conventions that structure present public exchanges; it is even more challenging in its

vision of a future political reality in which citizenship is an on-going, active responsibility that is continually creating the public. As a primary but not inflexible emphasis, the action orientation provides for the DPA/NIF an opportunity to make a unique, lasting, and significant contribution to the traditions of popular sovereignty and public issues forums in the United States, and importantly, to the quality of American public living.

END NOTES

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- ²⁶ Domestic Policy Association, "Recorder's Report on Domestic Policy Association Planning Conference II," (Wingspread Conference Center, Racine, WI, 13-14 July 1981), pp. 3-4. Unpublished report.
- ²⁷ Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 12.
- ²⁸ Ibid., pp. 8-9.
- ²⁹ The preceding treatment of the DPA network relies on: Ibid., p. 2; "Recorder's Report on DPA Planning Conference I," p. 4. "Recorder's Report on DPA Planning Conference II," pp. 4-5. Leonard P. Oliver, "Report from the Field," (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, Nov. 1986), section I, p. 4. Unpublished draft.
- ³⁰ "Reports from the Field," section III, pp. 2-4. The Art of Citizenship, p. 31.
- ³¹ "Recorder's Report DPA Planning Conference II," pp. 19-20.
- ³² Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 3.
- ³³ "Recorder's Report DPA Planning Conference I," p. 6.
- ³⁴ Keith Melville, "Guidelines for Productive Community Discussions," (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 3 Jan. 1986), p. 3. Unpublished memorandum.

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- ³⁵ “Recorder’s Report DPA Planning Conference I,” p. 6.
- ³⁶ Ibid., pp. 6-7.
- ³⁷ Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 13. “Reports from the Field,” section III, pp. 11-12.
- ³⁸ Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 10. “Reports from the Field,” section III, p. 7.
- ³⁹ Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 12.
- ⁴⁰ “Reports from the Field”, section III, pp. 7-8 and p. 22.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., section III, p. 9.
- ⁴² Special Report: National Issues Forums Corrections Project, (Dayton, OH: Domestic Policy Association, 1986), pp. 7.
- ⁴³ Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 3.
- ⁴⁴ Special Report: National Issues Forums Corrections Project, (Dayton, OH: Domestic Policy Association, 1986), pp. 1-6.
- ⁴⁵ Introducing the National Issues Forum, p. 9.
- ⁴⁶ The Art of Citizenship, p. 39.
- ⁴⁷ The Art of Citizenship, p. 39.
- ⁴⁸ “Reports from the Field,” p. 22.
- ⁴⁹ The preceding description of the DPA methodology derives from “Guidelines,” pp. 9-11; and The Art of Citizenship, pp. 39-40.
- ⁵⁰ “Guidelines,” pp. 5-7.
- ⁵¹ Remarks taken from Kettering Foundation, “Synopsis of Conceptual Issues Group Meeting,” (Hueston Woods Conference Center, Oxford, OH, 16 Dec. 1986), p.2. Unpublished report.
- ⁵² The Art of Citizenship, p. 39.
- ⁵³ “Reports from the Field,” pp. 16-17.
- ⁵⁴ The Art of Citizenship, pp. 39-40.
- ⁵⁵ The Art of Citizenship, pp. 40-41.
- ⁵⁶ “Reports from the Field,” pp. 19-23.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 18.
- ⁵⁸ Personal interview with Joyce Young, 17 March 1987.
- ⁵⁹ David Mathews, “Public-to-Policymaker Project,” (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 30 May 1986). Unpublished memorandum.
- , “A Brief Memo (1st Draft) to Policymakers on Meeting with NIF Groups,” (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 6 June 1986). Unpublished memorandum.
- ⁶⁰ “Planning Phase Report,” p. 3.
- ⁶¹ The general background for the preceding treatment of the “product” and the “action” orientations was derived from sources already listed and from other unpublished sources including memoranda, meeting transcripts, personal conversations, and meetings.

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