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# A New Land



## What Kind of Government Should We Have?

*It is the spring of 1787. Our republic is unstable and the liberty we won just four years ago is threatened. What should we do?*



### **OPTION ONE:** Strengthen the Current Partnership Among Equals

The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union need to be amended. The current central government lacks the power to raise funds, make binding decisions, or hold states accountable. We must figure out a workable balance between giving the central government more power and respecting the states' autonomy.



### **OPTION TWO:** Create a Strong Central Government

We need a strong central government, with proportional representation from each state, to protect our liberty and ensure the rights of citizens. A republican form of federal government will safeguard our economic stability and physical security.



### **OPTION THREE:** Let States Govern Themselves

We should dissolve the Confederation and let the states govern themselves as independent republics, allowing each to determine its voting and citizenship rights. Local government works best, and we have proven that we can unite in the face of a common threat if the need arises.

## ★ National Issues Forums

Why are we here? What are we going to do?

We are here to move toward a public decision on a difficult issue through **choice work**.

How do we do that?

We do that by engaging in a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- understand the **pros** and **cons** of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs.
- know the **strategic facts** and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- **work through** the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

## ★ Kinds of Forums

Many NIF groups choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two to two-and-a-half hours.

Other groups, however, plan for multiple sessions or study circles to allow participants greater opportunity to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings while others might devote a separate session to each option. And still others plan ahead for a session after the forum for participants to come back together and consider next steps.

In some communities, people begin their examination of an issue in a large-group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse is also helpful—starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums are about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

## ★ Stages of a Forum

### Welcome

The convenor or moderator introduces the NIF program.

### Ground rules

Participants and the moderator review desired outcomes and agree on ground rules.

### Getting started

One good way to start is for participants to take a few minutes to talk about their personal experiences with the issue and tell their stories. Sometimes the convenor or moderator begins by showing a starter video that reviews the problems underlying the issue.

### Deliberation

Participants examine all the options. An approximately equal amount of time should be spent on each option.

### Ending the forum

Participants reflect on what has been achieved.

## ★ If This Is Your First Experience as a Moderator

### You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Read the issue guide thoroughly. Consider questions that get to the heart of the issue and think through the essence of each option. This is a critical part of preparation.

### Stay focused on what the forum is about—deliberation.

Ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each option, the trade-offs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them. (Sample questions begin on Page 5.) Listen to others; remain neutral.

### Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's difficult to move on to another option when there is so much more that could be said. But in order to make progress, participants need time to weigh all the major options fairly. Be mindful of the time.

### Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

In many ways, this is the most important work the group will do. The moderator will provide reminders that time is passing, but it is up to all the participants to help preserve the time to reflect on what they have said and what they might want to do about it.

## ★ Common Ground Rules

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. Groups often use ground rules such as these:

- everyone is encouraged to participate,
- no one or two individuals should dominate,
- the discussion should focus on the options,
- all the major options should be considered fairly,
- they will maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion, and
- they will listen to each other.

## ★ Ending a Forum: Reflections

Before ending a forum, take time to reflect, both individually and as a group, on what has been achieved. Consider the following kinds of questions:

### **I. Individual reflections**

How has your thinking about the issue changed?

How has your thinking about other people's views changed?

How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

### **II. Group reflections**

What didn't we work through?

Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?

Which trade-offs are we willing to make to move in a shared direction?

Which are we unwilling to make?

### **III. Next-step reflections**

What do we still need to talk about?

How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?

Do we want to meet again?

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## What Kind of Government Should We Have?

### ★ Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

This issue guide is part of the National Issues Forums' Historic Decisions series. Most guides published by the National Issues Forums Institute seek to stimulate deliberation by diverse groups of citizens about current public problems. This one focuses on a time in the past: 1787, just before the Constitution was written, negotiated, and adopted at the Constitutional Convention. All of the actions proposed in this issue book are based on ideas or proposals that were being considered in 1787. But these ideas were generated in a society in which many Americans were excluded from public discussions and democratic governance. Deliberative forums based on this issue guide will be more effective if they include diverse perspectives, including ones that were not heard in 1787.

### OPTION ONE

- Poor attendance at meetings is hampering the Confederation Congress's ability to make decisions. Would you support a policy in which a state would lose their vote on an issue if their delegate fails to attend the scheduled session, regardless of the precarious state of travel in our young Confederation?
- Giving Congress limited rights to collect tariffs would support a national militia, a post office, and an arbitration court. Would you favor giving the Congress this power, even if tariffs might increase the cost of imported goods?
- Do you agree that amendments to the Articles of Confederation should require a two-thirds majority vote, rather than the current unanimous one, even though a dissenting state would be forced to go along with a decision it doesn't support?
- Would you support the creation of a joint judicial system for arbitrating interstate commerce and border disputes, even if it undermines the sovereignty of individual states?

Questions continued on Page 6.

## Questions, continued.

### OPTION TWO

- Would you support a new federal constitution with a representative legislature proportional to each state's population even if it results in smaller states losing some of their influence and power?
- What are the disadvantages you see in having a federal army and navy?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of appointing an executive for a seven-year term? What are the alternatives?
- The establishment of national standards for citizenship and voting could result in men without property, women, and free Africans losing voting rights they have gained in some states. Would such standards be worth this possible trade-off?

### OPTION THREE

- What are the downsides of disbanding the Congress of the Confederation?
- This option favors making states responsible for their own defense, but allows that national armies and navies could be raised as needed. What are the trade-offs of having multiple armies?
- Would you favor arbitrating criminal and civil cases at the state or local level, even if it might foster tyranny by the majority?
- This option would allow each state to determine the legal rights and citizenship privileges of its individuals. What effects could this have on travel and commerce?

## ★ The Role of the Moderator

- Provide an overview of the deliberation process
- Ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- Encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- Remain neutral

Another important job for the moderator is to fill out the Moderator Response sheet at the end of this guide and return it to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

## ★ For More Information

To order issue guides or starter videos for this issue, visit [store.nifi.org](http://store.nifi.org), call 1-800-600-4060, or e-mail [info@ait.net](mailto:info@ait.net). Other issue guides and videos may also be ordered from this source.

For more information or to make comments, visit the National Issues Forums Institute website at [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org) or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: [forums@nifi.org](mailto:forums@nifi.org).

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### Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

Moderator's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Date and location (state) where forum was held \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the audience of your forum, including city and state, diversity, and age and number of participants.

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What elements of this issue seemed most difficult for the participants? \_\_\_\_\_

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What common concerns were most apparent? \_\_\_\_\_

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What things did participants appear to hold most valuable as they wrestled with trade-offs? Describe.

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Which trade-offs were participants most comfortable with? Describe. \_\_\_\_\_

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Which trade-offs did the participants struggle with the most? Describe. \_\_\_\_\_

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Did the group identify shared directions for action? \_\_\_\_\_

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Return to:  
National Issues Forums Institute  
100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459