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>> Political Fix

How Do We Get American Politics Back on Track?

MANY AMERICANS, today, are deeply concerned about the forces shaping American politics—from partisan rancor and congressional gridlock to the high cost of political campaigns and the growing influence of special-interest groups. How do we address these problems and get our political machinery back on track?

OPTION ONE

Break the Grip of Special Interests

The key to addressing gridlock and dysfunction in American politics is to rein in special interests and curb the influence of big money.

OPTION TWO

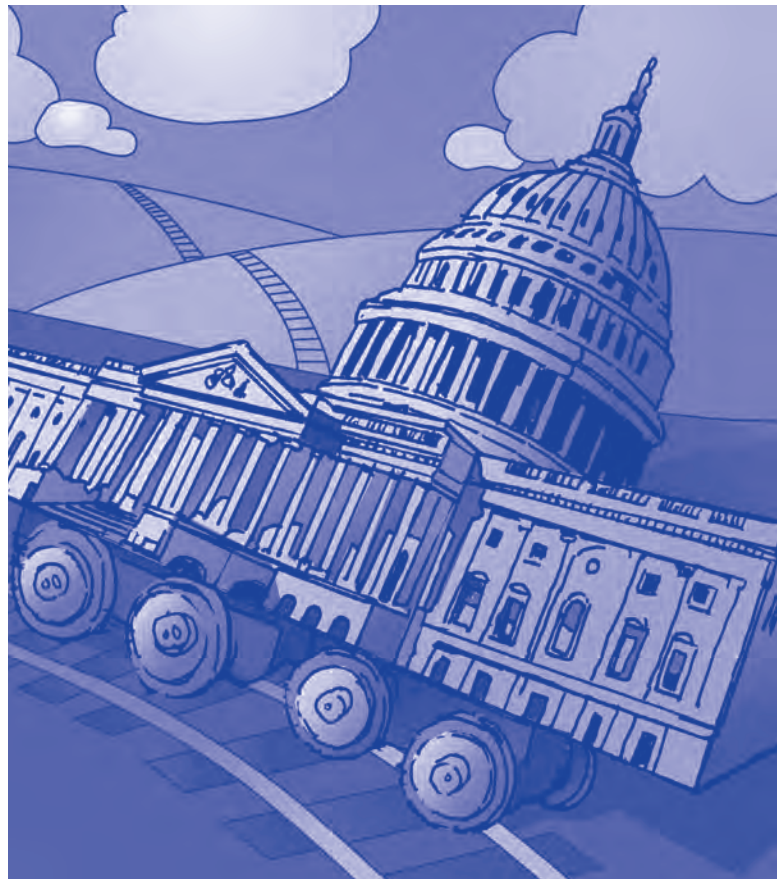
Increase Responsibility

Our best hope of fixing American politics is to restore individual responsibility in communities and at every level of government.

OPTION THREE

Fix the Mechanisms of Government

Our political structures are no longer responsive to the will of the people. We need to make electoral and procedural changes to get the system working again.



>>National Issues Forums and Study Guides

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.

>>Forums or Study Circles—or Both?

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 is 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.

Questionnaire

Participants complete the questionnaire.

>>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.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

Sometimes it's hard 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.

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.

>>Beginning a Forum

Before the deliberation begins, it is important for participants to review guidelines for their discussion. They should agree that:

- 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

Before ending a forum, take a few minutes 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 peoples' 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 in this forum about ourselves?

Do we want to meet again?

>> Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

As you examine this issue together you will undoubtedly think of questions that are at the heart of what makes the issue compelling. In some forums, certain questions might arise that could derail the deliberation by veering into partisan political debate. It will be important to remember that, as a group, you are dealing with broader underlying concerns that are not defined by party affiliation and that your work here is to dig down to the basic values that define us as human beings and as Americans rather than as liberals and conservatives. It is helpful to consider, ahead of time, broad questions that need to be addressed in each option. Here are some examples:

O P T I O N O N E

- Do you think the representative or senator you voted for is unduly influenced by lobbyists or other special interests? What about those officeholders you did not vote for?
- Election campaigns are prohibitively expensive. Are there ways to limit the amount of money candidates can spend without infringing on free speech rights?
- Is there anything really wrong with thanking big campaign donors by inviting them to meet the president at the White House, say, or to other celebratory events?
- Do you think the source and amount of all campaign contributions should be public information? Or should people have the right to support a candidate or cause anonymously? What about unpopular causes?

O P T I O N T W O

- We all know that the avalanche of campaign material we are subjected to in a given election includes half-truths and downright lies as well as useful information. Is there a way to sort out fact from fiction? How can we trust what we see or hear?
- Do you think your elected officials in Congress and in the State House always—or at least, usually—act with the best interests of the public at heart?
- How, if at all, have the Internet and other social media affected the political discourse in this country?
- Has your participation in the political life of your community, state, or the nation changed over the years? If so, in what way?

Questions continued on Page 6.

Questions, continued.

O P T I O N T H R E E

- Do we still need the Senate's filibuster rule to protect the rights of the minority?
- More people would probably participate in elections if they could vote over a weekend or on the Internet. What might be the downside?
- Would it improve the political process if we had strict rules limiting the number of weeks in which candidates could campaign for office? Would that provide an unfair advantage to incumbents?
- What if electoral districts were drawn by independent commissions instead of elected officials? What would be the advantages and drawbacks?

>>Questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum—and in the national NIF network. Filled out after the forum, they serve multiple purposes. They give participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had and give them a chance to add to what was said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside the forum. As one means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others—to officeholders, to the media, and to other citizens.

A national report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of the reports they generate on the outcomes of local forums.

Please return completed questionnaires to your moderator or to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>>The Role of the Moderator

- to provide an overview of the deliberation process
- to ask probing questions about what's at stake in each issue and each option
- to encourage participants to direct their questions and responses to one another
- to 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 with the questionnaires to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

>>For More Information

To order issue guides or starter tapes for this issue, visit store.nifi.org, call 1-800-600-4060, or e-mail info@ait.net. Other issue guides and tapes 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 or call NIFI at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, e-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum to National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

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.

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

What common concerns were most apparent? _____

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

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

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

Did the group identify shared directions for action? _____

Return with questionnaires to:
National Issues Forums Institute
100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777