Interactivity Foundation Final Report:
Communication Processes and Outcomes of IF Public Discussions

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Executive Summary

This report is the product of a year-long study consisting of over 25 hours of field observations in six different locations on five different topics. These observational data were supplemented with follow-up interviews with 16 participants and four facilitators, as well as pre-discussion/post-discussion surveys. The first section of this report provides a detailed description of our methods of data collection and analysis. Generally speaking, our goals with this research project were threefold:

1. Investigate why people decide to participate in IF discussions
2. Analyze how different perspectives are expressed and responded to in IF discussions
3. Explore what participants find meaningful or memorable after the discussion.

Each of these goals serves as a distinct section in the report that follows.

Moving chronologically through the IF discussion process (before, during, and after), the second section of this report provides a description of why people decide to participate in the first place. Respondents report learning about IF discussions predominately through personal invitations from facilitators or friends. One facilitator referred to this recruiting strategy as working within "trust networks." Participants who did not report receiving personal invitations claimed to have learned about IF through public advertisements, website postings, and meeting announcements.

Upon receiving an invitation to attend or accessing an advertisement of the event, participants chose to devote their evening to discussion for a variety of reasons. Interest in the topic served as a motivating factor when the advertised subject seemed especially relevant to current news or controversial public policy. Some participants sought out IF discussions in order to participate in a process of intellectual and/or interpersonal engagement that they felt was otherwise lacking in their lives.

Regardless of whether the reason to attend was topic or process oriented, many of the participants also attended in order to gain or maintain familiarity with something with which they were previously unfamiliar. That is, newcomers often reported choosing to attend as a way to meet new people or expose themselves to new ideas or processes. Regular attendees began to view the meetings as a way to build and maintain social relationships.

Over this year-long study we observed a great variety of discussions. Among the similarities, however, was that participants expressed disagreement in the course of discussing these topics and then overwhelmingly avoided labeling said disagreements with any words that might suggest conflict. When probed, interviewees provided insights and examples of differences in "opinion" and "ideas." The third major section of this report outlines the role of disagreement in IF public discussions.

Based on our research we do believe that disagreement is evident in IF discussions, and our field notes and the transcripts of the discussion meetings demonstrate four different disagreement strategies that are evident in IF public discussions:

1. *Direct challenge* refers to disagreement that happens when one person makes a statement and another person challenges or contradicts it.
2. *Disagreement by addition* refers to instances in which participants would begin their sentences with words like "yes, and…" or "I agree. Also…" or "Additionally…" and then follow up with something that contradicted or took issue with something the prior speaker had just claimed. This was the most common strategy observed in IF discussions.
3. *Speaking through/taking issue with the Report* refers to a common strategy in which participants align themselves with or against the discussion report rather than disagreeing directly with another group member.
4. *Haggling over details* refers to a preoccupation with minor details tangential to the IF discussion. Disagreements of these sorts were described as unproductive by participants and facilitators alike.

With all of these strategies, group members look to facilitators to help them negotiate their differences. Yet, it seems that group members and facilitators do not always share a common understanding of when and what kind of disagreement is helpful. We illustrate this claim with an extended example (pp. 14-16) from one discussion. We suggest it may be helpful for facilitators and IF fellows to reflect on how these different perceptions shape the flow of the discussion.

Finally, the fourth major section of this report considers what participants do and remember after the discussion. After the dinner plates are cleared away and the discussion draws to a close, participants tend to remember the respectful nature of conversation above and beyond any particular comment, set of facts, or policy possibility. In their interviews, participants placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of the facilitator in creating safe space, demonstrating respect, and helping all group members express ideas in meaningful and civil ways.

Two other factors—newcomers and the food—appear to play a memorable role in IF public discussions. Sometimes newcomers came in with an "agenda" or spoke argumentatively. In these situations, participants complimented facilitators' efforts to mitigate newcomer expectations and guide the conversation to maintain the IF process. Often, though, newcomers were deeply appreciated for bringing fresh perspective, information, and enthusiasm. Similarly, food served two very different purposes in participants' memories. Sharing a meal brings participants together relationally and makes the conversation less formal, but there are also rules around sharing meals together that make more familiar groups appreciate the food for its role in regimenting their meeting time. Finally, most participants reported that they later talked with family members or friends about their experience, focusing primarily on the process itself. These participants tend to be fairly politically liberal, civically engaged, and well informed. Although respondent feedback tended to be extremely positive, two recurrent critiques were offered. First, some participants felt that their groups were lacking in demographic or ideological diversity; and second, a number of respondents remarked that they left discussions feeling excited and educated, but uncertain as to what to do with that energy. These participants desired further guidance regarding possible avenues for action.

Our goal with this report was to summarize, organize, and illustrate our findings from a year-long study of IF public discussions. We hope that it proves to be a useful resource for IF leadership in thinking about current and future directions for the foundation's development.

Research Goals and Methods

The goal of our research was to better understand communicative aspects of the IF public discussion process and the influence that the discussions have on participants. Specifically we studied (1) *what brings participants to participate* in IF public discussions*, (2) how different perspectives and disagreement are expressed and responded to* in IF public discussions, and (3) *what participants find meaningful or memorable* after the discussions.

Study Rationale
Deliberative discussion is widely celebrated for its ability to expose citizens to divergent viewpoints and information that they may not otherwise encounter in their daily lives. Yet, past research has shown that group members often find it difficult to express divergent opinions, especially if they feel they are in the minority. This can detract from the overall quality of the discussion and lead potentially productive differences to be stilted or suppressed. However, there are some interesting features of the IF process that make it different from many other deliberative events. First, IF discussion guides provide a wide variety of policy possibilities, and the discussions are intentionally designed to be exploratory, rather than decision-oriented. Moreover, IF public discussion participants are recruited in a wide variety of ways but there is not a systematic attempt to have demographically representative diversity in each group (unlike deliberative polling or some other kinds of deliberative forums). Given this process, some IF discussion groups could be (or, at least, perceive themselves to be) fairly homogenous. We believe that these features of the discussion design may shape how people express and respond to disagreement, and our research aimed to uncover these discussion dynamics.

Additionally, we studied why people decided to participate in public discussions and some of the outcomes participants reported experiencing after the discussion. Research on public deliberation and dialogue shows that the respectful discussion of cross-cutting political views and information can motivate participants to examine their own positions, carefully consider opinions and perspectives they might have otherwise dismissed, and potentially even motivate them to take further civic action after the discussions end. This empowering and educative function of public discussion is widely celebrated by deliberative theorists and practitioners, but there is still much to learn about how discussion of different possibilities might influence citizens' opinions and actions. Thus, we also examined some of the longer-term effects of participating in IF citizen discussions.

In particular we designed our study to examine the extent to which participants exhibit any changes in their civic attitudes and behaviors after participating in the IF discussions. Through our follow-up interviews and questionnaires we explored whether and how participants reported any shifts in their thinking as a result of the discussion. We anticipated that active engagement in IF discussions may shape how people think about particular issues, how they conceive of themselves as civic actors, and potentially even their faith in civic institutions and politicians. We also asked them whether they had talked with anyone else about their experience in the IF discussions and, if so, what that conversation was about. Moreover, we attempted to measure any changes in their civic behavior such as voting, volunteering, or participating in community-minded events as a result of their participation in IF citizen discussions.

Study Procedures and Data

Over the course of one year, we observed three sets of discussions in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area and three sets of discussions in communities in and around Madison, Wisconsin. Some of these discussions were divided into multiple sessions, and so in total, we observed eight discussion sessions. Each session lasted between three and four hours, for a total of approximately 25 hours of field observations.[1]

Four of these discussions were held by groups who meet on a regular basis (DC Discussion Club, Howard University "Bison Salon," and two of the discussions in Wisconsin). In these sessions we observed that at least a subset of the participants in the group knew each other from previous IF discussions. One session we observed (Renton, VA) was what might be considered a more typical or traditional IF public discussion where the facilitator recruited a group to meet for two weekly sessions. Although a few of the participants seemed to know each other, this was not a standing group. The session in Madison, WI was a larger event with approximately 25 participants who met in three or four small groups for two weekly sessions. In the course of our research we observed groups discussing a variety of IF reports: *The Future of Higher Education, Food: What Might Be For Dinner, Helping Out: Humanitarian Policy for Global Security*, and drafts of reports on *The Future of the Family* and *The Future of Arts and Society*. Given this variety we believe that our research was able to include many of the different manifestations of the IF public discussions.

At the beginning of each session, we introduced ourselves as visiting researchers and passed out informed consent forms to anyone who did not receive an electronic version in advance. We also distributed pre-discussion surveys (see Appendix A) to people who had not received them electronically, but most groups preferred to have those sent via email instead. Participation in the research was, of course, optional and we had a total of 28 respondents to the pre-survey.

Although we asked permission to audio record all sessions, on a few occasions facilitators expressed concern that audio recording might comprise participants' sense of the forum as a "safe space" for open discussion. In these instances, we relied solely on our copious field notes to reconstruct the event. We did audio record discussions at three places in the Washington, D.C. area—(1) a public library downtown, (2) a suburban restaurant, and (3) a nature center on the outskirts of the city. We also audio recorded one discussion at an upscale restaurant in the resort town of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. These audio recordings were then transcribed, resulting in 184 pages of single-spaced text.

Following observations of each discussion, we conducted interviews with a total of 16 participants and four facilitators. These interviews include at least one participant from each of the discussion groups we observed. We conducted these interviews within approximately three weeks after the discussion session so that participants could remember details from the event.[2] All follow-up

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[1] We also observed one session in Parkersburg, WV as a pilot study to test our data collection methods. Because that was a pilot study, those data are not included in this report.

[2] Initially we planned to delay the interviews for 4-6 months after the session so that we could measure differences in civic engagement. We found that this delay was too much for participants as they had trouble remembering details about the IF discussion. So, after our pilot discussion we decided to do the interviews as soon after the discussion as possible and give the survey six months after the discussion.

interviews were conducted over the phone and were digitally recorded. These audio recordings were also transcribed, resulting in 212 pages of single-spaced text.

The interviews asked some of the same questions as the pre-survey to help assess aspects of participants' civic attitudes and behaviors. The bulk of the interview, however, asked participants to reflect on what was meaningful to them about the discussion, describe what they remembered about any specific disagreements they remembered from the discussion, and explain what they had done since the discussion (see Appendix B for full interview protocol). Our design also included a six-month follow-up questionnaire with many of the same questions as the pre-survey and a couple of open-ended questions to get input from participants about their experiences (see Appendix C). Despite repeated reminders to participants we received only ten responses to the six-month survey. Although this does not provide us with enough data points to statistically test pre and post discussion differences, we present descriptive data in this report as illustrative. Given this limitation, most of our results about participants' experiences and reported behaviors come from their interviews.

For the purposes of this report we have assigned pseudonyms to all participants in order to respect their confidentiality. In the sections that follow we provide the results of our research, presenting summaries of both the quantitative and qualitative data.[3]

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[3] Quotes from interviews and transcripts are presented verbatim except that a few have been edited for clarity. This editing involved removing repeated words or phrases that do not add to the meaning of the quote (e.g., we sometimes deleted extra "ums" and "you knows?") to aid readability.

Why Do People Come to IF Public Discussions?

Our first research question simply asks: why do people come to participate in IF public discussions? People reported learning about the IF discussion primarily through personal invitation or seeing a public announcement. Their interest in the topic or having good discussions was also relevant to their choice to participate. Finally, there were some differences between new participants and those who were part of ongoing groups.

Personal Invitations and Public Announcements
Participants reported two different ways they learned about the discussion meeting: they were personally invited or they heard about the discussion through a public ad or announcement. About two thirds of the participants who took our pre-survey said they were invited to participate by either the facilitator or by a friend (68%, n=19). A smaller group said they came because they saw a public ad (flyer, posting on meetup.com, etc.) or heard an announcement about the IF discussion at another meeting they were attending (32%, n=9).

Slightly less than half of the survey respondents said that they were 'not at all familiar' with the facilitator prior to the discussion (46%, n=13) while the rest indicated that they were 'very familiar' (43%, n=12) or 'somewhat familiar' (11%, n=3) with the facilitator prior to attending the IF discussion. Results are nearly identical for participants' reported familiarity with the IF process. Those who were unfamiliar with the facilitator were also new to the process and vice versa.

Interest in Topic or Discussion Process
Several survey participants indicated that the discussion topic interested them (21%, n=6), which was another reason they decided to participate. Like the survey respondents, many interviewees also described their interest in the topic as an important reason for their participation. They often described their interest as related to some larger political discourse like news or controversial public policy. The following quotes from two participants illustrate that connection.

> "I'm so interested in education. I think the topic is so important… This is probably pretty idealistic to say it, but I think it would solve a lot of our problems. You know, a lot of core problems of society I think would be addressed with more education. And education doesn't have to take the form of higher education, but that was kind of the aim here. And I'm so distressed by Wisconsin's um, attack on education and attack on teachers."

> "[The announcement about the IF discussion] caught my eye I think partly because, um, there just seems to be so much ugliness in the media and no one seems to be having mature, nice [conversation] … I thought, 'Wow. This really looks interesting' –especially the one on the family and what a family looks like, um, because where I am at in my life and things I've been through. It's just a really interesting subject to me and I thought, you know, I'll just go and just listen and be kind of part of this and talk about it."

In addition to interest in the topic, several interviewees also described being interested in having the quality of discussion that IF promotes, which is something they did not have as much of in other parts of their lives. For example, one participant described not having a lot of opportunities to have deeper reflective conversations with friends or family members.

"I mean, people aren't very interested, that I find. I'm interested in having these kinds of discussions, and people sometimes will have discussions, but generally speaking, I find people, I don't know, their attention span isn't that long? I don't know what it is. But anyway, they're just—they just aren't as—I find, unless— [laughs] There's just—I don't know. I have more interest in these kinds of discussions than most people do, I guess, in my own experience."

Familiarity with IF Process and/or People
During the interviews several participants commented about why they came to the discussion and how they felt early on. The interviews show that participants have different sentiments at the beginning of the discussion that seem to be based on their familiarity with the IF process and the people involved.

Newcomers expressed general interest and a sense of not knowing what to expect. For example, one participant who was new to the IF process, said, "I just moved here and so I thought it would be fun to sort of reach out and talk to people. I didn't know what it would be like at all. I thought that would be interesting." Another noted, "I had no preconceived notions at all prior to walking in. I read this stuff online we were referred to and, at that point, I decided I was completely in, if not over my head, at least in alien territory. And if I went in two ears wide open and one mouth shut then I might enjoy it more. And uh, it pretty well worked out that way."

Another new participant described what it was like to attend his first meeting after being invited by the facilitator.

> "So I sort of went into it, 'okay, well I'm just going to see what happens here.' So I, at the first meeting … I probably hung back at first for a while, you know. But, the interesting thing is … I was looking for an introduction around the table. 'This is who I am, this is where I work, this is what my life's like, and this is [laughter] why I'm here.' You know? It was just sort of like people just started talking. I didn't know if people had participated in the past. I didn't know if they were brand new. I didn't know if they knew more than I did or less than I did. So that was sort of at first, it was like, 'oh I'm sort of- don't know what's going on here.'
>
> Maybe this is surprising- but the way it went on that first meeting I went to it… it didn't matter where they came from, it didn't matter what their backgrounds were, it didn't matter where they worked, it didn't matter what their family situation was, or anything else. So yeah, again, maybe it's credit to the facilitator - it didn't make any difference. So, I quickly got over my - anxiety's maybe too strong a word - my- my sort of natural want for knowing everything about who I was talking to."

This participant's description is notable because he found that some of his expectations about how a meeting would go were unmet (i.e., expecting everyone to do a general introduction). Usually unmet expectations cause people to feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied. Yet in this case, he quickly found that this did not deter from his ability to comfortably and productively participate in the conversation. It may be the case that the lack of emphasis on individuals' unique characteristics

and background allowed participants to focus on the discussion process with relatively equal authority on the topic.

Participants in groups who met regularly had somewhat different experiences. These interviewees describe the IF discussions as a way to build and maintain social relationships, as evident in the following interview of a married couple who had participated in many IF discussions.

Harold: I thought some of the topics that the group took on were really important, and, that struck me. But what did bother me the most was, it was hard to keep—the group had a lot of trouble staying on track, and, uh, that's the reason I dropped out of the discussions.

Opal: Yeah, he had far less patience with that than I did. And for me, it was—it was annoying enough, but I figured, you know, a lot of those women, this was the big deal of the month for them! [laughs] So, all right, if you want to tell a whole bunch of stories that have nothing to do with the topic, fine. You know? [laughs]

As Harold and Opal show us, familiarity can sometimes lead groups to discuss things that are not centrally focused on the topic. A consistent finding in group communication research is that groups balance both task and relational goals, and the IF discussions that meet regularly are no exception. However, even interviewees who have come to know each other very well note that the IF discussions give them a way to talk with each other that is different from their everyday interaction. As another member of Opal's discussion group mentioned,

"I know most of the people… I've known them for a few years. I've just known them from the pool, actually, from our pool group that [the IF facilitator] belongs to also. We go to exercise, and then we sit around and talk afterwards and eat [laughs] and things like that. And, you get some impression of what kinds of people they are, but it's not a real personal type situation, and I don't think anyone would stand up to say 'you're wrong' or any occasion like that. But, uh, I've had people say, 'I don't discuss that, period.' That happens occasionally in just everyday conversation. But it [IF discussions] just makes you feel a little bit more open that if you do have an opinion, you can say it and not be batted down for it. But someone else can also refute it as it comes along, and that's good.

Summary
In sum, participants primarily come to discussions because they are invited by the facilitator, but only about half of them believe they know the facilitator very well. Participants also come because they are interested in the topic and/or want to have a particular kind of conversation –one that the IF process makes possible. There is a notable difference between participants who are new to the process and those who participate in groups that meet regularly. IF may wish to consider the differences between these two groups and what each finds meaningful about the public discussions.

How Does Disagreement Happen During IF Public Discussions?

Our second research question asks how participants express and respond to disagreement during IF public discussions and what they find meaningful about these disagreements. To answer this question we draw from our observations and transcripts of the meetings themselves and the interviews we conducted after the discussions. The following section provides our results. First, we found that there are four primary ways that people disagree during IF public discussions: through *direct challenge, disagreement by addition, speaking through/taking issue with the report,* and *haggling over details*. Second, our data suggest that group members and facilitators do not always have the same expectations and interpretations of disagreement. We discuss each of these below.

Different Ways Participants Disagree

Many interviewees were reluctant to talk about "disagreement" or "conflict" in IF public discussions. The following comments (from two different interviewees) were typical responses to our questions about whether they remembered any disagreement during the IF discussion.

> "Not a real conflict. I think people had different ideas that were in conflict, but as far as the participants being—you know, acting conflicted, I don't think that occurred."

> "Oh, that's hard, gosh. I can't remember any time we really had a disagreement that amounted to anything. Um, I know there were occasions when some people didn't have the same idea, the same information, on which to base a discussion. And so we would have a little discussion about these different options that someone else had brought up. Um, but it was never threatening, it was—it was just informational."

This kind of response was typical in our interviews. Most interviewees expressed discomfort in labeling any kind of interaction a "conflict" and many were hesitant to talk about "disagreement." Like the participants quoted here, they framed differences as based on different ideas or information, which should be "discussed," but not in a "threatening" way. When probed further to talk about different "opinions" or "ideas," the interviewees were able to offer examples and insights.

We think this discomfort with the label of "disagreement" is interesting as deliberative theory widely celebrates disagreement as important in helping participants enlarge their perspectives, see arguments on various sides of an issue, and come to better understand those with opinions that differ from their own. These general principles are also evident in the IF discussions, yet many interviewees seemed hesitant to label what they experience as "disagreement." Based on our research we believe that disagreement is evident in IF discussions, and our field notes and the transcripts of the discussion meetings demonstrate four different disagreement strategies that are evident in IF public discussions.

Direct Challenge
The first way we see IF participants disagreeing with each other is through *direct challenges*. We list this first because it is the most conceptually obvious disagreement strategy: Disagreement happens when one person makes a statement and another person challenges or contradicts it. It

was not the most common disagreement strategy, but it is one we witnessed being used in most of the discussions we observed. Understanding the participants' perspectives on direct challenges also helps frame the other strategies we observed.

During discussions the direct challenges usually began with comments like "I don't think that's true" or "I don't see things that way" or even, "I would challenge you on that." Typically they were directed to a particular other group member and seemed to require a response from that person. In this way the direct challenge was often the beginning of a series of contradictory statements where two participants took turns articulating their positions. During interviews the participants described these occasions as "a little back and forth at the table" and "not a row, but sort of a –I had one opinion, somebody else had a different opinion."

Direct challenges on their own were typically not construed as inherently negative, but they seemed to be a little risky. That is, several interviewees described these kinds of direct challenges as "unproductive" if they went on for an extended period of time. A rural Wisconsin participant described a direct challenge that she attributed to "strong personalities that got in the way for them to really resolve" the disagreement. In this case she thought the disagreement,

> "went on too long… I think maybe if they realized sooner that they weren't gonna get anywhere they should have dropped it…. Because it took time from where we could have been productive."

Other interviewees also saw direct challenges as potentially damaging, and they looked to the facilitator to step in and redirect the discussion. One of the DC-based participants described a past experience with what she saw as a group member with a "negative attitude." She noted,

> "any non-assertive person would have been squashed by this individual, and… it was pretty frustrating. It was pretty, you know, heated –it got a little heated and [the facilitator] controlled it. I mean, he brought it back. But this guy was hard to control."

Several other participants echoed this sentiment: Direct challenges can be productive, especially if they are done in a way that participants view as "respectful." But, if direct challenges lead to extended back and forth exchange or arguments, then they risk becoming unproductive and detracting from the group's experience. In these cases, participants want the facilitator's help to both keep the group "on track" in the discussion and help maintain positive relationships. As one member of a regularly meeting group said, "we went back and forth" on one of the policy possibilities and how it would affect their lives. The interviewee had strong opinions on the issue and noted that their discussion "got a little tense."

> "But, fortunately [the facilitator] was able to steer the discussion in a more neutral –to a more neutral place. I know that she got input on both sides of that issue… In the end, after everybody was leaving, those who disagreed with me, for example, said 'That's OK. I still love you' [laughs]."

Finally, our data also suggest that different cultural groups may vary on how they understand direct challenges, and perhaps disagreement more broadly. For example, we observed many more instances of direct challenges in the more urban DC-based groups than we did in the rural Wisconsin groups. Direct challenges occurred in all the groups we observed, but during the interviews participants seemed to view these challenges differently. For several of the Wisconsin groups we observed, interviewees described direct challenges not only as unproductive, but as "threatening." In contrast, several interviewees from the Howard Alumni group described direct challenges as very positive and our field observations show that direct challenges were fairly common in the DC Discussion club. As one interviewee from Howard noted, "Disagreeing in part is good, because it causes people to think, and it also causes them to understand." We do not want to make sweeping generalizations about types of people based on a limited amount of data. We do think it is worth considering how cultural assumptions about politeness, communication style, and appropriate interactions undergird participants' view of disagreement during IF discussions.

Disagreement by Addition
The second disagreement strategy was the most common in our observations. We call it *disagreement by addition* because participants would begin their sentences with words like "yes, and…" or "I agree. Also…" or "Additionally…" and then follow on with something that contradicted or took issue with something the prior speaker had just claimed. In essence, disagreement by addition allowed participants to contradict a fellow group member while still respecting or appreciating that person's position. Disagreement by addition doesn't show agreement on the issue, but shows a kind of respectful relationship among participants.

Several interviewees described disagreements that we argue are part of this category. One participant described it as beginning with "clarification" and nonverbal validation of the other person. When asked about disagreements she said,

> "I thought there was more clarification, where someone would ask someone a question, 'do you mean this?' Um, I never felt like there was really anybody that was put off by anything anyone said. … Definitely listening in a group situation like this is a sign of respect to me. And not interrupting … I think it was beyond that giving credence to what people are saying by, you know, nodding the heads or, you know body language, or you know, "Yeah, I see your point", a comment like that… I always try to say, 'Yeah, I see your point of view' or, 'I understand that, but what about this aspect?'"

Other interviewees also noted similar approaches to disagreement in their groups. As Opal indicates in the quote below, the end result of this kind of disagreement by addition is the accumulation of a variety of opinions, which allows people to be heard. She said that the typical pattern in her group is,

> "everyone kind of steps aside to allow the other person to express themselves and you know, just kind of take in the other person's point of view. When we do the wrap-up and the summary at the end, uh, we just say, 'Well, this was discussed and that was discussed, this was offered as an alternative, this was offered as a suggestion,' and stuff like that. So that everybody's issues can air."

It seems that disagreement through addition is a way that participants can express divergent opinions and ideas in a way that they view as respectful, civil, and appropriate. Unlike direct challenges, disagreement through addition was not viewed as threatening. It seems likely that this strategy is good for bringing out a wide range of perspectives, but does not engage participants in a serious weighing of tradeoffs in contrasting possibilities because opinions are primarily accumulated and appreciated. If facilitators wish to push participants to systematically analyze the different opinions and contrast the possibilities in a more critical way, they may need to help participants engage in strategies that go beyond disagreement by addition.

Speaking Through or Taking Issue With the Report
Another very common strategy we saw was for participants to speak through or take issue with the IF Discussion Guide. At times, participants would align themselves with one possibility as presented in the report but rather than using examples from their own experience or offer opinions that they claimed as their own, they would say things like "A good thing about this possibility is…" or "This possibility actually does account for that" or "I think what they mean in this possibility is..." Other times the report itself became the target of the disagreement. Rather than directly contradicting a fellow group member, a participant could disagree with a particular possibility or critique how the possibility was stated. As one interviewee noted, "I guess what this points to is two different people can read it two different ways and you can interpret –infer two different things or more than two different things from what's written on the paper." In these situations, disagreeing with the report could potentially be less relationally threatening than disagreeing with a fellow group member.

At times, some IF facilitators explicitly asked the group to "test out" or give feedback about the report. When this happened group members engaged in a great deal of discussion about the report itself. As one interviewee noted, this kind of critique can sometimes get in the way of discussing the issues themselves in more depth.

> "I think that the people in attendance in general disagreed with the material that was presented. So you know we were disagreeing with the, um, organization's way of putting a couple of the topics. So that was something that we talked about for a while. I think it was, um, people didn't like the way the discussion was organized. Because that - there was a booklet that we were following along with and it seemed to me that people expressed a lot of concern that it was dumbed down…. I kind of thought it was a little bit dumbed down too, but you know I - I thought it was still worth talking about."

Some interviewees reported seeing this critique of the possibilities as part of their job during IF public discussions. Another interviewee noted that he thought disagreeing with or about the report could be productive.

> "I love that kind of stuff. I think - I think it's positive. Because, I think you can very quickly go into a mode where you're – 'Oh, well that sounds reasonable enough. I'll go with that.' Because it takes more energy to disagree with something than it does to - to go with the flow. I mean, and part of my thinking is, 'well, I'm gonna commit two or three hours on a night to something like this I may as well put something into this, because otherwise I could just sit at home and not do anything or do something different.'

> So I think it's positive to challenge each other because otherwise then you're just, you know, I feel like we were being asked to sort of critique or evaluate something with this Report so we may as well pull out every single thing we can find if we would not have said or - or we question the way it was written, or we perhaps would have written it a different way. So I figured that was part of our role to do that. And I don't expect everyone to agree with me… I think it's a healthy thing."

In sum, the report plays an important role in the IF public discussions and seems to be the target of participants' disagreement. Sometimes they align themselves with the report, other times they vary in their interpretations and disagree about what the report "really" means, or they take issue with the report as a whole. In all of these situations we see the report as playing an important role in facilitating disagreement in a way that can be seen as productive and safe by the participants.

Haggling over Details

The final way we see disagreement happening in IF public discussions is through what we're calling *haggling over details*. Although taking issue with the report and getting into some conceptual depth is seen as valuable, it can go awry if group members become very detail oriented. When participants would disagree about the small details of a particular policy possibility, they engaged in a kind of argument about minor issues that are not central to the IF discussion. Both participants and facilitators described this kind of haggling over the details of a report as unproductive.

There is a fine line between taking issue with the report and haggling over details and it seems to be somewhat in tension with the exploratory nature of the IF process. If facilitators want participants to explore what the possibility would be like if taken to logical extremes, it makes sense that at least some participants would drive down to a level of details (such as having an extended exchange about who would pay for the increase in divorce lawyers that might come from a particular policy possibility related to families). In our observations we noted that facilitators typically intervened to bring participants back to a more conceptual level when interactions seemed to move the group too far from the overall discussion goal.

These four strategies show that participants have an awareness of both the task and relational goals of the group and they make choices about how to engage with one another when expressing contrary ideas. Most participants value difference, and they express appreciation for the "civil" and "respectful" nature of the IF discussions. Participants may vary in their understanding of when disagreement is productive/unproductive or safe/threatening, and they look to the IF facilitator to help manage group members' disagreements.

Facilitator and Participants' Perspectives

The expectation that facilitators should intervene in "unproductive" conflicts is understandable. Yet, this can also be tricky as our research also suggests that facilitators and participants have different expectations and interpretations regarding disagreement. Because our research involved observation and interviews we were able to ask participants to reflect on events that we had witnessed in their groups. Moreover, we were also able to talk informally with facilitators about our observations and, in a few cases, interview facilitators. This triangulation of data allowed us to

see different perspectives on the same events and can help illuminate how facilitators' and participants' views may vary.

One interaction that stood out to us occurred during the Madison, WI discussion event and we focus on it here as an example. Because we were not able to record this meeting these observations come from our field notes rather than a full transcript. Early in the group discussion on the first night, the facilitator asked the group to go around and engage in "general conversation about different concerns you have about higher education. What is at stake? What comes to mind?" The participants took turns expressing their views while others listened quietly.

The last person to go was Lydia, a retired librarian in her sixties who commented, "I'm worried about humanities because they are not 'producers of job'." She expressed concern that funding cuts to humanities departments posed a serious risk to the state of higher education. She argued that "humanities are the basis of learning how to learn" and students ought to take humanities while in college. Her comments sparked a direct challenge from Greg, another participant, who had previously introduced himself as an "entrepreneur in business" and had already had his turn in the go-around. Greg commented,

> "I would challenge you on that. Are you laying preconceived notions on people? [Are you] assigning values to someone who has a pure science mind?"

Lydia replied,
> "I understand where that comes from, but I have a different perspective. [Because so many people take humanities-based classes at college]… I think people end up with humanities training whether they mean to or not."

Lydia went on to describe the values of the humanities and researcher field notes indicate that she seemed to be saying that all students should take humanities courses regardless of their major, as part of a liberal arts requirement. Greg asked,

> "And likewise for those lost souls who find themselves in philosophy, should they be required to take science?"

Lydia replied simply, "Absolutely." At this point the facilitator stepped in to say that she just wanted to "clarify" that Lydia is talking about "availability" of the humanities, not making them "required." Greg replied, "Oh, I didn't hear that" in what Lydia had said. He then turned to the facilitator and said "Thanks" for the clarification. Lydia did not reply. The facilitator then redirected the conversation by posing a new question to the group.

Was this a productive disagreement? We asked Greg, Lydia, the facilitator, and one other group member to reflect on this during their individual interviews.

Lydia vividly remembered that moment and stated, "That might be the best example of where I thought it was a very civil discussion." Unlike family arguments she described having around the dinner table, no one raised their voices or banged on the tables. It was very "respectful." She went on,

> "People backed up their opinions with examples and with, you know, life experience. And I thought, they're entitled to their opinion, but I don't think it swayed me. As opposed to other discussions, I don't think it swayed me at all. In fact, it probably entrenched my opinion more because now I really feel like [laugh], oh my god we really have to fight this fight!"

Greg, on the other hand, did not remember this particular moment even when prompted by the interviewer. However, he too had very positive memories of the discussion and described it as both productive and civil. When asked about what stood out to him about the discussion he said,

> "the collegiality. The uh, goodwill, the caliber of people there. It really was a polite, no strings attached um, social conversation... It was really fun. It's not very fun to have a discussion in an echo chamber. I felt that I was really picking up a lot within the discussion group"

In this situation, both of the participants directly involved in the disagreement (a direct challenge and a back-and-forth exchange) seemed to view it positively, as part of a civil and respectful dialogue. It is interesting that Greg, the challenger, did not explicitly remember this disagreement while Lydia, who was challenged, vividly recalled it as an important event in the discussion: one that helped her articulate her views and "fight that fight" in a "real" way. This illustrates how participants' specific roles in the disagreement color their perception of the interaction.

This positional understanding is especially highlighted when we look at the facilitator's perception. In her interview this facilitator spent a great deal of time talking about this particular disagreement. She described it as

> "a point in my group where, at the beginning where a debate kind of atmosphere was gonna begin between two people and so much so that I saw the woman –the woman involved— getting kinda red and blotchy in response to this guy sort of like attacking her."

This perception of the event is not entirely unlike Lydia's, but the language of "debate" and "attack" give the scene a very different meaning. In this case the facilitator saw Greg's challenge and the ensuing exchange as negative. She articulated that this negative judgment was partially because of the tone of the challenge, but also because the timing was inappropriate –it was too early in the discussion to go into these kinds of details. Early in the discussion, she argued, participants are supposed to be articulating their values and concerns, not criticizing each other's positions. As a facilitator she worried that this exchange would set a tone of debate for the rest of the group's time together.

So, the facilitator intervened in the conversation by reframing Lydia's argument. During her interview the facilitator described her strategy as trying to "soften the edges of where they were going because all of the sudden they were just getting polarized."

> "I'm not there to shift the nature of the conversation and yet my –I see my job predominately to create a safe space. So, I felt that it was important that I –that I didn't–

that I did my job and that I stepped in and made sure that we were on the same page in terms of what everybody's ideas were validated, including that gentleman's. That was the thing—to find a way to not invalidate you, rather to say, 'where's the common ground?'"

From these quotes we can see that the facilitator had a heightened awareness of both the relational dimension of the group and the timing involved in the IF process. We can also see that her perception of the situation was different from the participants', but this difference is not necessarily a negative thing. The facilitator's intervention and reframing helped shape the exchange and likely influenced how the participants remembered the event.

Finally, we also interviewed one other participant from this group who had things to say about this disagreement. Rick was not actively involved in the disagreement and although he remembered the event and what it felt like in the group, he did not remember details about the content. As he said, "I don't think it [the disagreement] was really productive… In the discussion at the table I remember thinking, this doesn't matter! [laugh] So, I guess I felt like, I'm not going to contribute to this and make it go back and forth one more time." Rick approved of the facilitator's approach to the disagreement. From his perspective, "it was handled in a very delicate way."

The preceding analysis shows that each person we talked to had a different perspective on the disagreement. It makes sense that people's understandings of an interaction are influenced by their role in the discussion. In this situation the two people involved in the disagreement viewed it as productive and civil while the observer and facilitator did not. It is not our aim with this report to argue for whose perception is "right" here. We simply wish to highlight that facilitators likely have different perceptions than their participants, and it may be helpful for facilitators and IF fellows to reflect on how those different perceptions shape the flow of the discussion.

Summary
In sum, we found that during the IF public discussions participants used four different strategies for engaging in disagreement. These are: Direct Challenge, Disagreement by Addition, Talking through or Taking issue with the Report, and Haggling over Details. Disagreement by Addition and Taking Issue with the Report were the most common and seemed to help preserve the relational climate and good rapport within the group by allowing participants to disagree in a safe, non-threatening way. Direct challenges were sometimes seen as productive, but they can threaten the relationships within the group if they are not done in "civil" and "respectful" ways. Haggling over details in the report was seen as unproductive because the focus on small details steered the group away from the task at hand.

With all of these strategies, group members look to facilitators to help them negotiate their differences. Yet, it seems that group members and facilitators do not always share a common understanding of when and what kind of disagreement is helpful. Facilitators' unique role gives them a heightened awareness of group process and authority to shape the group interaction. Facilitators can use this awareness and authority to move the group in productive ways, but ought to also consider how different group members in different places in the discussion view the value of a particular disagreement.

What do Participants Do and Remember After the Discussion?

Our final research question asks about the potential impact that IF public discussions have on participants. Specifically we asked: What do participants find meaningful from the IF public discussions and how do discussions influence their subsequent civic attitudes and behaviors? To answer these questions we draw on the post-discussion interviews and the surveys we collected approximately six months later.

What Participants Remember as Meaningful

During the interviews we asked participants what they remembered most from the discussions or what "stood out" to them. Initially our goal was to prompt them to remember a particular event. Some interviewees did describe a particular situation or moment during their discussions, but many of them made more general statements about what the appreciated about the discussion.

Respectful Conversation

By far the most common response to our question had to do with the overall respectful quality of the discussion. Almost all interviewees answered this question by saying something like "the collegiality" or "respectful conversation" or "it was very nice to be able to put out ideas in a very safe environment." There are many participant comments that make this point, and it was often the starting point for the rest of the interview. We offer the following brief examples as illustrations of the participants' appreciation of the tone or quality of the IF discussion.

> "The feature that I was most um, appreciative of was the civil discussion. You know, there was room for everyone's views and sometimes they were—at our table, sometimes they were diametrically opposed, but there wasn't a one-upmanship, and there wasn't a 'I'm right and you're wrong.' I thought that was really interesting."

> "I just think that everybody was able to say what they felt, nobody interrupted, nobody argued. The people gave nice feedback [like] 'you know, that's a great thought. I hadn't thought about that.' There was no anger... I mean you just look at all the dialogue that's going on politically and whatever and it's just so ugly. It's nice to be where people will listen to other people and listen to what they have to say and not attack them."

This second quote highlights one of the communication behaviors that participants noticed and described as important: listening. As one interviewee commented, "definitely listening in a group situation like this is a sign of respect to me." In contrast to other kinds of political discourse, the IF public discussions gave people a chance to talk to each other in a space where they could speak respectfully and listen to each other. Participants found it meaningful not only to be heard by others, but also to listen to and learn from one another. Another interviewee describes this listening as a way to empower group members.

> "What I remember the most is that once you give people the opportunity to participate, it sparks something that allows people to voice concerns and to begin to feel that they can speak or are coming up with a solution to something that is a social or a political problem."

Interviewees also described the facilitator as playing a key role in setting the tone and maintaining the quality of respectful conversation throughout. Our interview questions did not specifically ask

participants to comment on the facilitator, yet many participants noted that the facilitator managed the conversation well. A few interviewees even described specific facilitator comments. For example, one interviewee noted,

> "I remember distinctly [the facilitator] saying, 'if you're somebody who can really participate or talks a lot, think about uh, challenging yourself to um, be a listener. And if you're usually a listener in these sorts of situations, just see what it's like to be a talker.' And I've done that even at business meetings, you know, if I feel like there's a situation -- I just try to grow from every meeting and evaluate afterwards how to say things more concisely. Or I just wait [more than I used to] and I would generally then be asked to speak. So that one comment really stuck out."

In their interviews, participants placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of the facilitator in creating safe space, demonstrating respect, and helping all group members express ideas in meaningful and civil ways. As the above quote demonstrates, interviewees were also sometimes inspired to try to use the conversation habits they learned in IF public discussions in other situations in their lives. We return to this point later, but it is worth noting here that the specific comment struck the participant as important and powerful in shaping the IF discussion.

Bringing in Newcomers
Another thing that participants remembered as important was when newcomers joined their groups. This was especially true in groups that meet regularly and had built relationships and expectations for how the conversation would go. In these situations having a new person in the group made a big difference. Sometimes having newcomers in the group created difficulty. One interviewee described having a particular newcomer as a negative experience because the new group member was very argumentative and, in the eyes of the interviewee, came in with the goal of persuading others. Another interviewee made a similar comment that one new member came with the "agenda" of "educating" the group, which he found frustrating. In both of these cases the interviewees described how important the facilitator was in mitigating the newcomer's expectations and guiding the conversation to maintain the IF process.

However, all of the other comments painted newcomers in a more positive light. For the most part interviewees appreciated that the newcomer brought fresh perspectives, information, and enthusiasm. The following two excerpts from two different interviewees illustrate this point.

> "What I remember most is that there were new individuals that joined us that had not participated before. It was interesting that the newest members sometimes are the most engaged, because they're so excited about havin' an opportunity to share their opinion, and there's no apprehension and there's no anxiety.

> "[When a new person joined the group] I think it brought up more possibilities for us, more choices to be made. The more information you have, the better conclusions you can come to. And I felt that he added something to our discussion that would help us come to a more reasonable conclusion. I can't remember any particular thing he said that changed my mind, but I know that I felt comfortable talking with him"

These observations about newcomers can be helpful for IF facilitators who host groups that meet on a regular basis. Although there is a benefit to building group cohesion and climate by meeting regularly, there is also a chance that eventually the conversations will become predictable and participants will not learn as much as they might like. Bringing in newcomers can be beneficial to these groups. Facilitators ought to consider how well a new member would fit with the current group and what the newcomer could bring, and should also be aware of the newcomer's expectations and need to be socialized into the goals and process of IF discussions.

The Food
Finally, it is notable (although perhaps unsurprising) that participants commented quite a bit about the food. Participants appreciated having the food and described it as central to the IF discussion. Several interviewees characterized the IF discussion as happening "over a nice dinner and—you know, it's a great dinner conversation." Another mentioned that she appreciated people giving up personal time to come to the discussion.

> "Well, really what stands out to me about the whole discussion process is that people come together around dinnertime, which is helping me, because I know that people are professional and they have families. So it seemed to me like it was rushed time, a critical time of their day that they were giving up to actually have that discussion."

Food was important not only as nourishment for the body but because it helped set the tone for the quality of the discussion. As one participant noted, "The ultimate social lubricant is good food… I can't imagine that that doesn't contribute to goodwill." Similar comments were made by other participants and by the facilitators we interviewed. One facilitator commented,

> "What is that, if you break bread with your enemy you become friends? Or it's harder to be enemies? I mean, there's just something to be said about sitting down at the dinner table and breaking bread, sharing food, um and having drinks that sort of takes out the tension. So, it just informalizes the process… When we formalize the process that's when you start getting entrenched into debate. When you informalize it, then you can have discussions."

The venue also seemed to matter to participants. During our observations we were struck by how many different formats there were for the relationship of the food to the discussion of the report. We saw discussions in restaurants and in public meeting spaces and we heard about discussions happening in people's homes. We also saw discussion happening before a meal, after a meal, and during a meal. These different formats may shape how participants consider food and the meaningfulness they attribute to it. For example, during one discussion we observed, group members were asked what they thought about the fact that they held their meetings in a restaurant.

Opal: I think this kind of venue works very well, because it's prescribed. If you have it at someone's home, there's always a tendency for it to drag out to seven hours, where people—where you're shoving them out the door. This way everybody figures, by 10 or so we're done.

Martha: Also I think… it becomes impersonal. Many of these topics, some people might be arguing about. But here we never argue. I know we have different political

opinions, and we keep that here (*gestures to self*). I mean, we keep it to ourselves. We can talk about our political opinions in different ways and still love each other. I mean, we have never had an argument before, but who's to say we couldn't somewhere along the way?

Ruth: So are you saying it's more conducive to being civil in a restaurant or less?

Martha: Correct. You're more apt to mind your manners.

Opal: It's not personal, where in someone's home, you might feel more relaxed and you might say something that you really didn't want to say.

Denise: This is neutral territory.

This exchange struck us as interesting because it offers a different perspective from the earlier quotes on the intimacy of food. It seems that participants find the food to be meaningful because it brings them closer relationally and makes the conversation less formal. However, for this group that met regularly, holding the discussion in a restaurant was a good way to temper that informality so that participants would "mind their manners" and maintain a civil conversation. In all of the different formats and locations, participants noted that food was a meaningful and important part of the IF public discussion process.

Participants' Civic Attitudes and Behaviors
In the six-month follow up surveys, 8 out of 10 participants said they had talked with family members or friends about their experiences in the IF public discussions. Most of the participants noted that their conversations were about the discussion process itself. In their qualitative comments they noted they told others "how it was interesting to have a group of people come together to just talk about important issues for our society" and how the discussion was structured to promote listening.

A few participants described drawing on ideas they had been exposed to during the IF discussion. As one person noted, "there have been instances that family and friends will take note of the IF booklets, which raises their interest. Interestingly enough, I have also found myself mentioning the discussion session to others when I see something in the media." Participants also saw the IF discussions as a counterpoint to other types of discourse about public issues and told friends and family members about their experiences as an example. One commented, 'in a time in which minds often seem to be made up quickly and only data which supports one's conclusion is considered and processed, can we, as a society, hope to reach conclusions based on data, not dogma?" Another told a friend "how much I wished everyone could communicate that productively."

We also heard these same themes from interviewees who commented that they have talked to others about their experiences in the IF discussion. Several interviewees also described learning new communication skills during the IF discussion and then trying to use them in other conversations in their lives. In addition to the example provided earlier, other interviewees

described listening differently in work meetings or with family members. So, not only did participants appreciate the kind of communication they experienced with IF public discussions, they also tried to use good communication strategies they learned from IF and told others about the value of their experiences.

Given the low response rate on our six-month survey, we are not able to make statistically supported claims about changes in civic engagement that result from participating in IF discussions. This question is also complicated by the fact that many of the participants in our study have chosen to involve themselves in IF public discussions on a regular basis. That is, they have made it part of their everyday lives to participate in monthly discussions of policy possibilities. So, attempting to measure how much impact a particular discussion has on their subsequent civic attitudes and behaviors is difficult.

Nonetheless, we can use our quantitative data to show some general things about the participants' civic attitudes and behaviors. According to our pre-discussion surveys participants largely identified themselves as democrats (64%, n=18) or independent (25%, n=7). Most of them described the strength of their political affiliation as "strong" (39%, n=11) or "somewhat strong" (32%, n=9). There were only 7% of the respondents who identified as republican. We suspect that these demographic descriptors are not representative of all IF discussions (it is certainly not representative of the results of our pilot study in Parkersburg, WV) and is likely a result of the particular discussions we observed.

Our pre and post surveys also show that IF participants in our study are fairly politically engaged. Most participants reported voting on a regular basis, reading political news, talking about politics, and attending public meetings. Some of them signed petitions and/or wrote letters to public officials. They tended not to attend political protests or post political links using social media.

The figures on the following pages provide results for various civic behavior questions we asked.

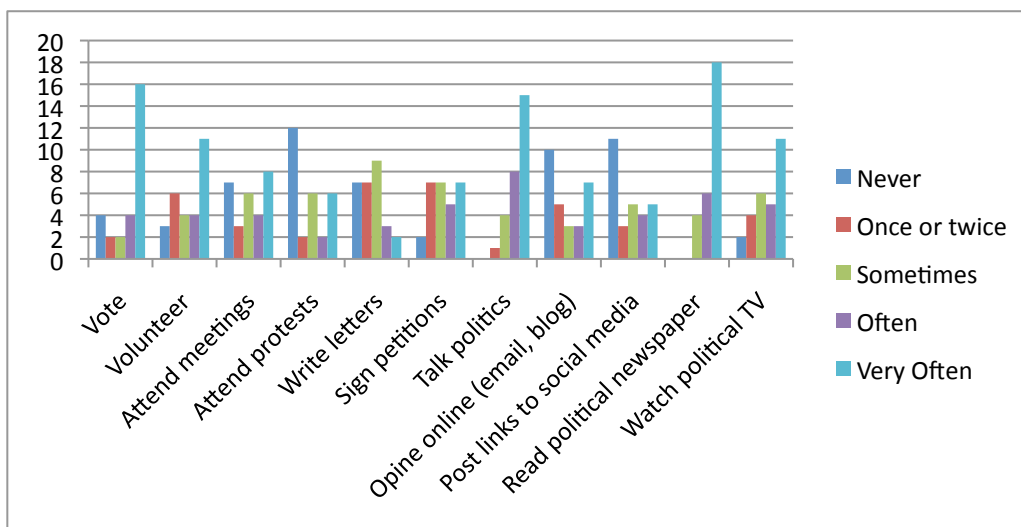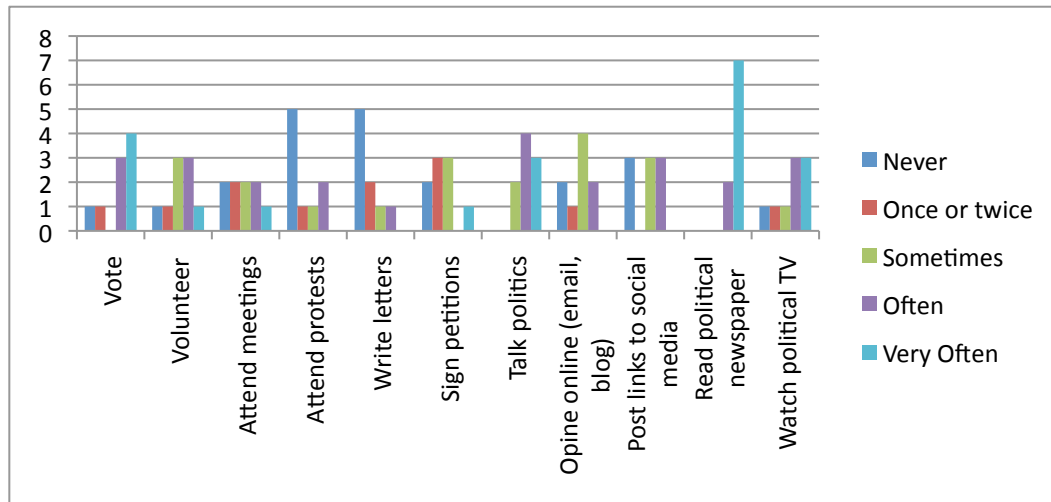Figure One: Political Engagement Activities Indicated in Pre-Discussion Survey

Figure Two: Political Engagement Activities Indicated in Post-Discussion Survey

We also asked respondents about how much they trusted different groups to work in the best interest of the public. Both pre and post surveys show that respondents indicated a moderate level of trust in various groups such as politicians, community groups, people with different political opinions, and other members of the community. They indicated lower levels of trust for politicians than other categories and tended to put more trust into community groups and members of the public.

This description of participant characteristics is not surprising to us. It makes sense that people who have a generally positive sense of trust for the public but are somewhat (not completely) skeptical about politicians would be drawn to participate in IF public discussions. This general trust and sense of good will toward fellow citizens and those with different opinions and beliefs is likely a benefit to the quality of the discussion. These characteristics are worth noting, though, as they help demonstrate the beliefs of the people who choose to participate in IF public discussions.

The figures on the following page provide the results of these questions about participants' civic attitudes.

Figure Three: Participants' Trust in Various Groups Indicated in Pre-Discussion Survey
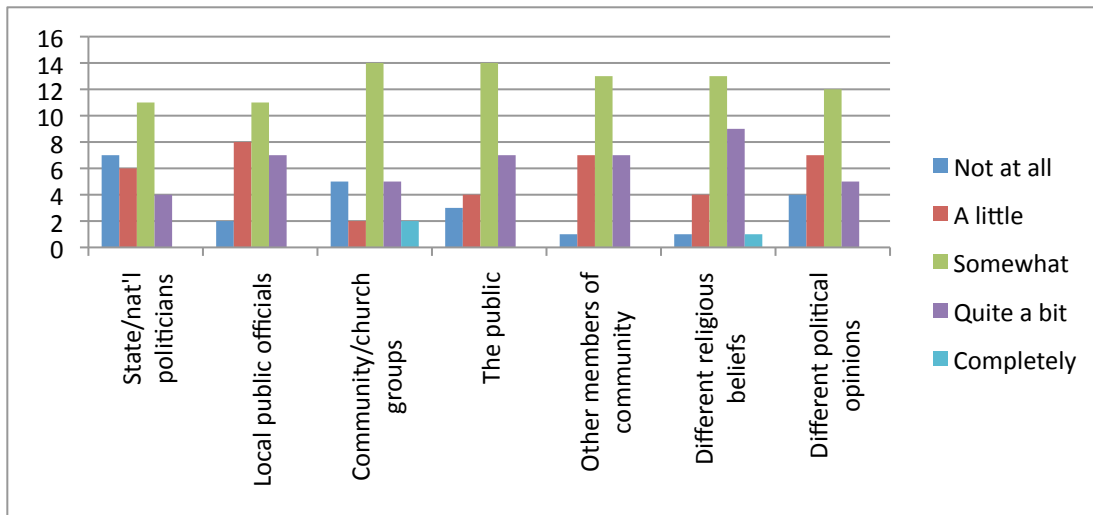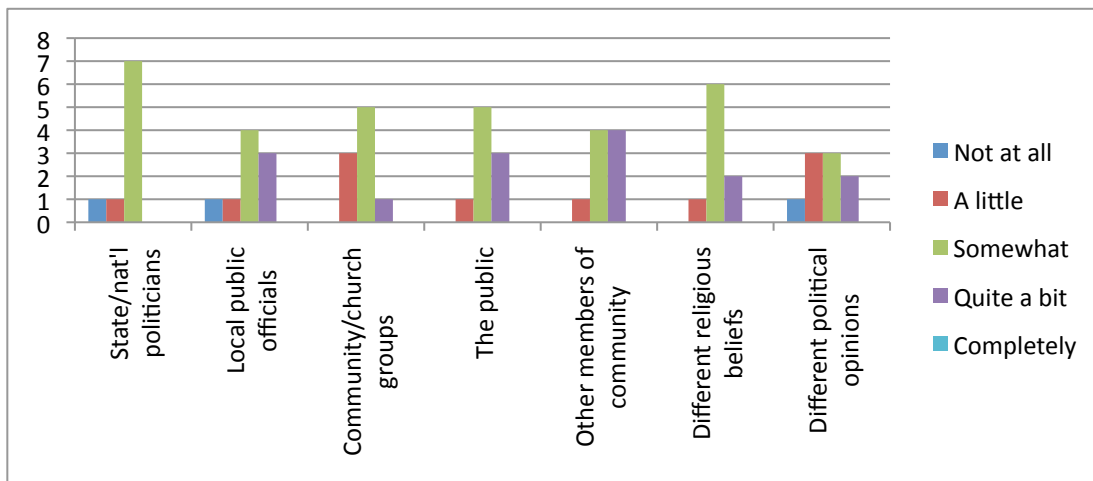

Figure Four: Participants' Trust in Various Groups Indicated in Post-Discussion Survey

In sum, the survey results show that participants in the IF public discussions we observed tend to be fairly politically liberal, civically engaged, and well informed. They tend to trust civic organizations and their fellow citizens and have a moderate level of trust in public leaders. Although we were not able to statistically test changes in attitude or behaviors, qualitative comments indicate that participants described talking to their friends and family members about their experiences and trying out their discussion skills in other aspects of their lives.

Participant Feedback and Critiques

The final result we wish to provide here provides some feedback on possible future directions for IF to consider. During interviews and informal conversations we had with participants we saw two issues coming up multiple times. Participants sometimes wished the discussion groups were more

diverse and they often left discussions feeling excited and educated but wishing they knew what kind of actions to take next.

The theme of diversity is one that we think is particularly important for IF to consider. As discussed earlier, participants involved in our study seemed at least somewhat comfortable with disagreement (if it was done in a "respectful" way) and largely appreciated having newcomers in the group. Several of them also commented explicitly on what they saw as a kind of homogeneity in their group. As one interviewee in Madison, WI mentioned,

> "I think, I think if anything our discussions over the two weeks suffered from being a little too homogeneous. You know? That it was easy for us to agree. We all sort of have similar backgrounds even though we're very dissimilar. You know? We had either been to the university or we lived in that community so I think, I think anytime that we could push and pull those kinds of 'yeah buts, what about this?' it would strengthen the conversation."

Participants in other many of the other discussions we observed made some similar comments. Several participants also described wishing that they had some concrete actions to take after the discussion was over.

We see these two critiques as the flip side of the benefits participants articulate about the IF process. One the one hand, participants appreciate the safety and collegiality of a respectful conversation and they look to the facilitator to provide a process that minimizes the threat of polarized conversation. And participants are critical of newcomers who come in with an "agenda" of persuasion that goes against the core values of IF's public discussions. Yet, they sometimes wish that there was more diversity in the group despite the fact that more ideologically diverse groups may increase the chance of potentially "disrespectful" presentation of opposing views.

Similarly, participants appreciate the openness of IF discussions and the fact that they are not pushed to agree with any particular position or come to a decision as a group. One participant articulated this clearly in his interview when he described other groups he has been part of who are charged with writing a report that makes a singular, concrete argument and suggestion for action. In these cases, conversation can be very contentious as group members fight for their own position to dominate. The lack of any singular outcome in the IF discussion group was key to his positive experience. In his words,

> "Because this was not a professional group, because this was not factions at all, but it was simply a charrette, a discussion group, there was no ego involved. And I think, because of that, people –rather than figuring out, 'how do I protect my turf?' or 'how do I erode the turf that I don't like?'—can just have a nice civil discourse."

Yet, after the discussion was over many participants felt excited to take some kind of action, but were not sure what it would be. This tension related to outcome is something that we believe is worthy of further consideration and discussion by IF fellows.

Concluding Thoughts

In this study, we had an opportunity to observe a great deal of variety in how IF public discussions are coordinated and experienced. Three different levels of familiarity among group members seem to account for meaningful differences in the dynamics of discussion.

First, some groups meet regularly and function in many ways like a book club. These groups have high interpersonal familiarity and know the facilitator well. Often, these participants view the discussion group as an opportunity to build and maintain social relationships. These groups rely on facilitators to steer them back on track when they get off-topic. They also tend to find conversational rhythms, which help them to feel comfortable, but can become predictable if not disrupted occasionally by new participants, ideas, and energy.

The second type of group is the exact opposite—a gathering of virtual strangers. In some of the events we observed, participants had very little knowledge of one another or the facilitator. In these situations, more work may need to be done by facilitators to thoroughly describe the IF process and philosophy, lay ground rules, and build relational comfort at the beginning of discussion sessions. The third type of group consists of both regulars and newcomers. As such, facilitators are tasked with recognizing and managing possible differences among participants in communicative norms. However, these groups also contain within them a wealth of resources as new members bring fresh ideas and regular members bring familiarity with the IF process.

Looking ahead, IF may wish to consider how these different types of groups engage in public discussion and the extent to which their needs may vary. For instance, some of the groups that meet regularly (like the DC discussion club, which meets monthly, or the group in Lake Geneva, WI, which at the time of this research had met on twelve different occasions) have developed a kind of IF process expertise. It seems likely that they could be given a different kind of follow-up survey, for example, that taps into their expertise or helps IF develop future ideas.

Another topic for consideration involves the characteristics of the participants and how that influences their approach to disagreement. Though the discussion guides provide a range of perspectives with which to engage, the participants tend to see themselves as somewhat homogenous. The groups we observed were fairly politically liberal, civically engaged, and well informed. Personal invitations appear to currently be the most effective means for recruiting these participants, which may explain the tendency toward similarity. Overwhelmingly, though, participants noted that civil disagreement enriched their experiences and some thought that a greater representation of diverse perspectives was desirable. Diversity is a longstanding and challenging issue for public dialogue and deliberation practitioners in many different organizations. It may be worth considering how well the current recruitment practices are allowing IF to reach its goals for the public discussions.

Across these discussion dynamics, participants overwhelmingly remembered the conversation as respectful, emphasizing the importance of listening and the role of the facilitator in creating a safe space and helping group members express ideas in meaningful and civil ways. Although participants choose different communication strategies when they engaged in disagreement, the most common strategies emphasize respect for each other and an attempt to minimize relational

threats. There seem to be some cultural or regional differences in participants' approaches to disagreement during public discussions and IF facilitators are tasked with responding appropriately to guide the public discussion well. Given these differences, facilitators need to have flexible communication styles to not only listen to and assess the group's interaction patterns, but also to respond in a way that group members find appropriate. This task is complicated by the fact that each person's perception of disagreement events is colored by the role he or she has in the group. Thus, facilitators and participants do not always see events in the same way. We hope our example of Lydia and Greg's disagreement helps illustrate some of those differences and can provide some food for thought for IF fellows and facilitators. Facilitation is an immensely complex job and requires facilitators to be mindful of task, relational, process, and contextual meanings in group discussions. IF may wish to consider how these differences in perception could best be addressed either in facilitator training or in public discussions themselves.

Finally, looking to the future, IF fellows might consider that some participants left discussions feeling energized but uncertain as to appropriate directions for action. We see this critiques as an outgrowth of the emergent, exploratory conversation involved in the IF process. IF does not have the goal of organizing groups for social change or engaging people in direct political action. Because the public discussions are aimed at exploration, it makes sense that some people would leave the discussion unsure about what action to take. Perhaps, though, IF could consider ways to point participants to resources for action if they wish to do something concrete beyond the scope of the discussion itself. Care would need to be taken to ensure that these resources are nonpartisan and legitimate, but the presentation of options for action may help these participants feel that they know what they could do as a next step.

Overall we were struck by the overwhelming enthusiasm and passion that participants had for these public discussions. We hope that our presentation of findings and reflections for future steps are useful to IF and can help spark new ideas for refining what is already a valuable process of public discussion.

Appendix A: Pre-Discussion Survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research on the Interactivity Foundation's Citizen Discussions. As described earlier, your participation in this research is voluntary and your answers to these questions, and your comments during the discussion, will be kept confidential. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have about the research project.

These questions help us learn a little bit about you and get your initial reaction to the IF citizen discussion.

1. Please provide us with some general information about yourself

      Name: _____

      Age: _____   Occupation: _____

      Are you male or female? (circle one)

2. How did you hear about this IF citizen discussion? Why did you decide to participate this citizen discussion? (example: invited by facilitator, found on meetup.com, have a friend in the discussion group, etc.)

3. Have you ever participated in an IF citizen discussion before? If so, how many times? What did you think of those previous discussions?

5. Use a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 means "not at all familiar" and 5 means "very familiar") to answer the following. Before this discussion, how familiar were you with…

      _____ The topic for this discussion?
      _____ The IF Discussion Process?
      _____ The facilitator for this discussion?
      _____ Other people in this discussion group?

Briefly explain:

The last few questions help us understand more about your ideas about politics.

6. Which of the following best describes your political affiliation?
      _____ Republican
      _____ Democrat
      _____ Libertarian
      _____ Tea Party
      _____ Green Party
      _____ Other (please specify: _____)

How strong do you think your affiliation is with this political party? (circle one)
1= almost none,   2= a little,   3= somewhat,   4= strongly,   5= very strong

7. In the past year, how many times have you done any of the following? Rate each item.
     (Rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning "never" and 5 being "very often")

      _____ Voted in a state or national election?
      _____ Volunteered in a community organization?
      _____ Attended a public meeting?
      _____ Attended a public protest?
      _____ Written a letter to a public leader?
      _____ Signed a petition for a public issue?
      _____ Talked about politics with friends or family?
      _____ Posted a political opinion online (in a blog or email)?
      _____ Posted a link to a news story on Facebook, twitter, or some other social media?
      _____ Read political news from a newspaper (print or online)?
      _____ Watched political news on TV?

Please provide any other information you would like us to know about your answers.

8. When you think about political issues, how much do you trust the following groups to make good
   decisions for the public?
     (Rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning "not at all" and 5 being "completely")

      _____ Politicians at the state or national level?
      _____ Local public officials (mayor, city council, school board, etc.)?
      _____ Local community or church-related groups?
      _____ The public (U.S. citizens in general)?
      _____ Other members of your community?
      _____ People with different religious beliefs than yours?
      _____ People with different political opinions than yours?

Is there anything you would like us to know to explain your answers?

9. Are you interested in participating in a follow-up interview to discuss your reflections on the IF Citizen
   Discussion Process? The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. These interviews will help us
   understand what participants get out of citizen discussions and can help IF further develop their discussion
   processes. Your answers will be completely confidential and your name will not be shared with IF. If you
   are willing, please provide your contact information below (email address and/or telephone number).

   Thank you so much!

Appendix B: Post-Discussion Interview Protocol

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about your participation in the Interactivity Foundation citizen discussions. As described earlier, your participation in this research is voluntary and your answers to these questions, and your comments during the discussion, will be kept confidential. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have about the research project.

We'd like to ask you a few questions about what you remember most about the IF discussion you participated in a few months ago.

1. When you look back at your participation in the IF citizen discussion, what stands out to you? This could be a topic you discussed, something about the conversation itself, something that someone else said, etc.
   a. What do you remember most?
   b. Why does this stand out? What makes it stick in your memory?
   c. What do you think about this?

2. What was the biggest surprise from the discussion?
   a. What was surprising about this?
   b. What do you think of it?

3. Can you tell me about a time during the discussion that there was a disagreement or conflict that stands out to you? What did you think of that?

4. How would you describe your opinion on the topic you discussed?
   a. Did any of the possibilities described fit with your own position on the topic?
   b. What did you think about the other possibilities?
   c. Did your opinion about the topic change at all through the discussion? If so, how?

5. Have you discussed the IF citizen discussion with anyone else?
   a. Who? (friend, family member, etc.)
   b. How did it come up?
   c. What did you discuss? (process, topic, a particular possibility, etc.)

6. If you were to describe the IF citizen discussion process to a friend or acquaintance, how would you describe it?
   a. How is it similar to or different from other conversations you have about public issues?

7. Do you think that participating in the IF discussion has influenced the way you talk to other people about public issues? Why or why not?

8. Since you participated in the IF discussion, how many times have you done the following? Rate each item. (Rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning "never" and 5 being "very often")

   _____ Voted in a state or national election?
   _____ Volunteered in a community organization?
   _____ Attended a public meeting?
   _____ Attended a public protest?
   _____ Written a letter to a public leader?

_____ Signed a petition for a public issue?
_____ Talked about politics with friends or family?
_____ Posted a political opinion online (in a blog or email)?
_____ Posted a link to a news story on Facebook, twitter, or some other social media?
_____ Read political news from a newspaper (print or online)?
_____ Watched political news on TV?

Is there anything you would like us to know to explain your answers?

9. When you think about political issues, how much do you trust the following groups to make good decisions for the public? (Rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning "not at all" and 5 being "completely")

_____ Politicians at the state or national level?
_____ Local public officials (mayor, city council, school board, etc.)?
_____ Local community or church-related groups?
_____ The public (U.S. citizens in general)?
_____ Other members of your community?
_____ People with different religious beliefs than yours?
_____ People with different political opinions than yours?

Is there anything you would like us to know to explain your answers?

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your participation in the IF citizen discussions?

Thanks so much for your participation.

Appendix C: Six-Month Follow up Survey[4]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research on the Interactivity Foundation's Citizen Discussions. Your participation is voluntary and your answers to these questions, and your comments during the discussion, will be kept confidential. The researchers, Dr. Laura Black (blackl1@ohio.edu) and Anna Wiederhold (aw275709@ohio.edu), are happy to answer any questions you might have about the research project.

1. Several months ago, you participated in an Interactivity Foundation (IF) Citizen Discussion. To begin, we would like to learn a little bit about yourself and the discussion group.

    Name: _____

    Age: _____   Occupation: _____

    Are you male, female, or prefer not to answer? (circle one)

2. Where was your discussion group meeting? Who facilitated the IF discussion you attended?

    The following questions ask you to reflect on lasting impressions from the discussion you participated in several months ago.

3. Since the time that you attended the IF discussion, have you talked about your participation in that discussion with anyone else?   (Yes, No)

    If yes, please tell us more about how you talked with others about your participation in that discussion. Who did you talk to (friend, family member, etc.)? How did it come up? What did you discuss (process, topic, possibilities, etc.)?

4. When you think back to the IF citizen discussion that you participated in months ago, what stands out to you as particularly memorable now? (This could be a topic you discussed, something about the conversation itself, something someone said, etc.). Please explain.

5. In the past six months, have you participated in more IF citizen discussions? (Yes, No)

The next few questions help us understand more about your ideas about politics and community involvement.

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[4] This survey was delivered online using Qualtrics, a program similar to Survey Monkey. The online survey displayed questions differently, but we provide them here in this format to increase readability.

6. Since the time that you attended the IF discussion, how many times have you done any of the following? (Rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning "never" and 5 being "very often")

_____ Voted in a state or national election?
_____ Volunteered in a community organization?
_____ Attended a public meeting?
_____ Attended a public protest?
_____ Written a letter to a public leader?
_____ Signed a petition for a public issue?
_____ Talked about politics with friends or family?
_____ Posted a political opinion online (in a blog or email)?
_____ Posted a link to a news story on Facebook, twitter, or some other social media?
_____ Read political news from a newspaper (print or online)?
_____ Watched political news on TV?

Is there anything you would like us to know to explain your answers?

7. When you think about political issues, how much do you trust the following groups to make good decisions for the public? (Rate from 1-5 with 1 meaning "not at all" and 5 being "completely")

_____ Politicians at the state or national level?
_____ Local public officials (mayor, city council, school board, etc.)?
_____ Local community or church-related groups?
_____ The public (U.S. citizens in general)?
_____ Other members of your community?
_____ People with different religious beliefs than yours?
_____ People with different political opinions than yours?

Is there anything you would like us to know to explain your answers?

8. Which of the following best describes your political affiliation?
_____ Republican
_____ Democrat
_____ Libertarian
_____ Tea Party
_____ Green Party
_____ Other (please specify: _____)

How strong do you think your affiliation is with this political party? (circle one)
1= almost none,   2= a little,   3= somewhat,   4= strongly,   5= very strong

9. Thank you for participating in this survey. Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share with us about your participation in the IF citizen discussions?