

Yankelovich, D., & Friedman, W. (Eds.). (2010). *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

### Review by Timothy J. Shaffer

We face public issues and challenges that are increasingly labeled “intractable.” To address and respond to these problems, many have called for greater citizen participation in decision-making processes. However, individuals’ lack of knowledge to make informed decisions about public issues often serves as an argument against greater citizen involvement. The public is uninformed, so the argument goes, and those in higher education have limited expectations of them. Further, information affecting us both individually and collectively typically comes through commercialized channels (e.g., media outlets) or from entrenched partisan camps (e.g., political parties, politically aligned think tanks and foundations). Nonetheless, work exists that offers insight into various organizations that have taken it upon themselves to engage the public to address this notion that citizens are unable to make decisions together.

*Toward Wiser Public Judgment* brings “up to date” the findings and insights of Daniel Yankelovich’s *Coming to Public Judgment* (1991). In both volumes, Yankelovich argues (along with others in the second volume) that citizens must “work through” complex issues, and must move beyond answers that are expedient but ineffective for challenging issues facing communities, states, and the nation. To do so, citizens must engage in “public learning” to make sense of conflicting and competing values. Standing in the way of this public learning are media that rely on public opinion polls to assess and understand the positions of citizens.

The book is organized in three parts:

1. an introduction to the concept of public judgment;
2. examples of the application of public judgment; and
3. next steps for strengthening impacts from public judgment.

The first part of the book includes a chapter by Yankelovich about how to achieve sounder public judgment, and then a further reflection on the topic in a dialogue between the book’s two editors. Yankelovich builds on his work of the early 1990s in *Coming to Public Judgment* by stressing that relying on public opinion did little to help make “democracy flourish as it should” (p. 11).

Public opinion dominates the United States' expert-focused culture. Many professionals within institutions—including higher education—often rely on assessments of public opinion without investing the time necessary to move beyond a snapshot and to actually engage in learning with others. Yankelovich departs from his earlier work and offers a framework based on the concept of the “public’s learning curve,” helping the reader understand more fully the ways in which citizens come to wiser public judgment.

Exercising sound judgment requires more time than complex and emotion-laden issues typically receive from media and experts, who often rush the process to come to resolution. Moving beyond uninformed and unorganized public opinion into the realm of public judgment is one of the biggest hurdles citizens face. When issues are complex and there is conflict, people need to go through what Yankelovich calls the learning curve, which includes three stages: (1) consciousness raising, (2) “working through,” and (3) resolution (*pp.* 18–19). The second stage, “working through,” requires time, energy, and commitment, because it is here that citizens wrestle with the tensions present in the options and what these mean for them and for others. We, as a society, are good at raising consciousness and coming to resolution (although the results of these actions toward resolution are questionable). We are, however, “seriously lacking in institutions that can midwife the Stage II phase of *working through*” (*p.* 19). This is the space in which higher education has an opportunity to function as an important institution in democracy.

More than simply providing information, institutions have a role to play in actually bringing citizens together to engage in deliberative discussions on what they care about, and on how to reconcile tensions attributable to these public issues. Rather than simply wishing for institutions to do this type of work, many within the land-grant system and the Cooperative Extension system have embraced this role in public life. Many others in higher education take seriously the belief that their scholarship is connected to communities dealing with “wicked” problems. Some examples from later chapters demonstrate how faculty members and Cooperative Extension educators have utilized particular processes and methods to work with communities to address contentious public issues.

The second part of the book focuses on the application of “working through” public issues through the work of the National Issues Forums, the Kettering Foundation, Public Agenda, and Viewpoint Learning, Inc. Each of these organizations approaches public judgment differently, but they all draw strongly on Yankelovich’s work

and approach to conceptualizing—and implementing—work that takes seriously the voice and thought of citizens. They have also intentionally incorporated a public judgment framework into their efforts. This section of the book offers the reader an opportunity to listen to, and learn from, those who have been engaged in public judgment work in a sustained way. The National Issues Forums, for example, were created to challenge the dominant mode of adversarial public discourse (p. 55). An important theme that emerges from the chapter on the National Issues Forums is the idea of “choice work” as well as “naming and framing” of public issues. Often, issues are “named and framed” by the media or content experts, leaving little work for citizens aside from agreeing with how an issue has been framed.

In their chapter focusing on the work of Public Agenda, Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman articulate a theory of change that goes beyond simply involving citizens in deliberative democratic work to position those doing public engagement within an iterative, multilevel process that creates conditions for citizens, local leaders, and organizations to “not only work *through* issues but also actively work *on* them” (p. 77). In this sense, this work is about engaging in meaningful relationships with multiple community actors to strengthen capacity to engage in public work. The authors’ examples highlight how those engaged in this field work *with* communities—not *for* them—to create spaces in which citizens can participate in public life by deliberating, and then making decisions that lead to action.

Academic professionals engaged in public work can learn from the experiences of individuals in these various organizations that take seriously the commitment to work with citizens as they “name and frame” issues and take action to address challenges. The stories presented in the book tell of professionals taking time to work with communities—seeking ways forward in response to hard choices rather than turning to easy answers, or falling back on outside experts. In their chapter focusing on Viewpoint Learning, Steven A. Rosell and Heidi Gantwerk stress the importance of working through issues by using dialogue in a way that does not talk issues to death nor try to reach consensus when such a goal is artificial. Those engaged in public work should often be reminded of the importance of ensuring that tensions and disagreements are based on real differences, and not simply on misunderstanding or mistrust. Working through contentious issues does not mean that we reach consensus easily or at all. But recognizing and building on shared interests and values and dealing with differences in constructive ways can sometimes lead to unexpected common ground.

The third and final part of the book is a reflection by Will Friedman on two central questions on public judgment politics and deliberative democratic work: (1) How can we strengthen the impacts, both on policy making and on other forms of public problem solving, of efforts to help citizens come to public judgment? And, (2) How can this work, which has been manifested most strongly on the local level, become more central and meaningful to national politics (*pp.* 7–8)?

One limitation to this volume is that the examples are from nonprofit organizations that have missions somewhat different from those of higher education. While those in higher education share many interests with those seeking to increase civic capacity and engagement, the challenges facing this type of work in higher education offer their own dilemmas. These include professional expectations of faculty members, limited resources for engaging citizens in political processes and/or community-based scholarship (the Viewpoint Learning chapter highlights the costs associated with greater citizen participation), and the central question about the “proper” role for academic professionals in public higher education institutions doing engagement work.

Those interested in engaging in public life, and helping to create and sustain spaces in which community members might listen to, talk to, and learn from one another, have a great deal to learn from the stories collected within this volume. As two of the authors wrote, we are challenged because we live in a world that tends to focus on conflict and extreme views rather than on common ground. In one particular instance, citizens who participated in a dialogue with Viewpoint Learning were asked about the points of disagreement among them for a syndicated radio program. During the interview, the citizens (comprised of both Democrats and Republicans) stressed the commonalities they found rather than an expected rigid division of views. The interviewer did not know how to tell the story of what they had done because there was not an easily identifiable “wedge” issue (*pp.* 125–126). A commitment to democracy may not satisfy short-term expectations for easy, media-oriented answers. However, this story illustrates that, given resources and opportunity, citizens can indeed exercise public judgment and accomplish serious public work.

## Reference

Yankelovich, D. (1991). *Coming to public judgment: Making democracy work in a complex world*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

## **About the Reviewer**

**Timothy J. Shaffer** is a Ph.D. candidate at Cornell University. His research interests include historical and contemporary forms of engagement by professionals from institutions such as land-grant universities and the USDA's former Program Study and Discussion initiative. Shaffer earned his bachelor's degree in theology from St. Bonaventure University, and his master's degrees in public administration and theological studies from the University of Dayton.

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