

Definition of Civic Reasoning and Discourse

In one of its initial tasks, the committee of this initiative sought to define the processes of what civic reasoning and discourse entails. Led by steering committee member Peter Levine, the committee developed a shared definition of civic reasoning and discourse:

To reason civically is to ask what we should do, where “we” is a group of any size, outside the family, to which the individual belongs. Examples include a small group deciding how to fundraise for an event or the American public asking what the United States should do or not do in the Middle East. The question always has an ethical dimension: which means and which ends should we chose? It is plural because individuals rarely have the wisdom or power to think and act alone; even apparently solitary civic acts (like casting a secret ballot) are deeply influenced by communication in groups. Civic reasoning is ultimately about decisions and actions, even if a group is not empowered to act. (For instance, students deliberating about what the US should do in the Middle East are not in a position to decide, but can form opinions about state action.) And the question requires a rigorous empirical understanding of the situation, the most relevant institutions, and the likely outcomes of various decisions. Emotions—from empathy to righteous indignation—also provide input for civic reasoning and should be influenced by reasoning.

Discourse is necessary because discussing with others is our best way of combatting our individual cognitive and ethical limitations and biases. But discourse can go badly because of group-think, propaganda, bias, lack of empathy, exclusion of perspectives, and other dysfunctions. Thus education (broadly defined) should motivate people to feel part of groups that reason together about what to do and should strengthen their dispositions, skills, and knowledge so that they reason well. Putting the results of a discussion into practice and reflecting on the outcome is one way to learn civic reasoning, but it is also possible to learn from simulations, observations, data, history, and the lived experiences of students.