

GREAT DECISIONS

The largest civic-education program on U.S. foreign policy and global affairs

PROGRAM GUIDE



FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION



SINCE 1918, the Foreign Policy Association (FPA) has been devoted to inspiring learning about the world. The FPA achieves its mission through its events, website, publications, and education programs.

The *Great Decisions Program Guide* is produced by the Foreign Policy Association to provide guidelines for starting, leading, and promoting Great Decisions discussion groups in your community. This Guide also directs you to informative topical resources found on the ever-expanding Great Decisions website www.greatdecisions.org.



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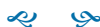
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PART

1

What is Great Decisions?

GREAT DECISIONS is the name shared by a national civic-education program and publication of the Foreign Policy Association. Published annually, the *Great Decisions* briefing book highlights eight of the most thought-provoking foreign policy challenges facing Americans today. *Great Decisions* provides background information, current data, and policy options for each of the eight issues and serves as the focal text for discussion groups.

Begun in 1954, the **GREAT DECISIONS DISCUSSION PROGRAM** is designed to encourage discussion and debate of the important global challenges of our time. The FPA provides materials used by discussion groups to reach informed opinions on the issues and participate in the foreign policy process. The format of the discussion program is intended to promote thoughtful discourse, to bring people together to express their ideas and opinions, and to learn from others—culminating in the opinion balloting process.

What is opinion balloting?

Make your views heard! The Foreign Policy Association believes that public participation is vital to strengthening the democratic

process and encourages citizens to communicate their opinions to policymakers. Participants use opinion ballots found in each copy of *Great Decisions* to express their thoughts on various policy options.

Ballots are completed and returned to FPA for tabulation. The FPA publishes the results in the *National Opinion Ballot Report*. This *Report* is presented to the White House, the departments of State and Defense, members of Congress, the national media, and our readers.

Interested citizens can obtain free copies of the *National Opinion Ballot Report* to distribute or to arrange their own presentation with media and local officials. Contact a customer service representative by calling toll-free **(800) 477-5836** or by email at **sales@fpa.org**. The *Report* is also available quickly, on demand, at **www.greatdecisions.org**.

How can I participate in Great Decisions?

Thousands of Americans across the country participate in Great Decisions discussion groups each year. You can join an existing discussion group and contribute to the dialogue, or you can start your own group and facilitate discussions in your community.



WHAT DO I NEED TO GET STARTED?

Great Decisions discussion groups need the following key ingredients:

- ◆ Discussion group leader(s) and participants
- ◆ Location to hold the meetings
- ◆ Copy of the *Great Decisions* briefing book for each group member

What makes a good discussion group leader?

Group leaders organize individual discussion groups. Some of the

key tasks performed by a discussion group leader typically include:

- ◆ Facilitating a balanced discussion on *Great Decisions* topics in their groups. (See page 10.)
- ◆ Ordering *Great Decisions* briefing books for the members of the group. (See page 9.)
- ◆ Collecting opinion ballots and sending them to the FPA for tabulation and analysis.
- ◆ Distributing the *Great Decisions Update* and *National Opinion Ballot Report* to group participants.

The discussion group leader does not have to be an expert on the issues, but he or she should encourage the most participation from each member of the group.



Can a group have more than one leader?

Yes. The discussion group can determine the roles of all participants before the start of the first session. In some groups, the moderating responsibilities are handled by one person. In others, members take on individual topics to facilitate. Larger groups may benefit from the experience of multiple discussion group leaders and find more continuity over time.

What makes a good discussion group participant?

Discussion group participants play the most important role in any group discussion. Their interest, enthusiasm, and commitment ultimately determine the success of the group. The goal of a discussion group is not each member's mastery of the *Great Decisions* text or to learn a lot of facts, but rather to deepen understanding and sharpen judgment. In the case of a Great Decisions discussion group, this occurs when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints in a focused discussion. The process—democratic discussion among equals—is as important as the content of the text.

For a more comprehensive description of the participant's role, read the supplemental handout that accompanies the Program Guide, "The Role of the Great Decisions Discussion Group Participant," or print the document free at www.greatdecisions.org.



HOW DOES A DISCUSSION GROUP WORK?

A Great Decisions discussion group is composed of interested individuals who want an opportunity to learn about and participate in the foreign policy decision-making process. The group forms when one person organizes others in his or her community who are also interested in discussing and broadening their understanding of international issues. Meetings are organized at homes, the workplace, schools, community centers, places of worship, and libraries.

Participants consider discussion groups a "safe environment" because they provide everyone who wishes to do so with the opportunity to speak. Each participant's point of view carries equal weight and everyone is encouraged to share opinions and ideas. Consensus is not a goal. Discussion group participants do not attempt to "con-

vert” participants, because there is a mutual respect for each member’s experiences, value system, and beliefs. The true focus of the Great Decisions discussion group is the critical examination of all issues and opinions; each recognized as equally valid.



What is an ideal meeting space for a discussion group?

Each discussion group is unique, but a good group leader should ask some key questions when trying to find a space where the discussion group will be held. One might consider a few basics:

- ◆ Does the meeting space have enough room for all participants to sit comfortably?
- ◆ Is the meeting space conveniently located for the members of the group?
- ◆ Will the meeting be held in a place free of noise and distractions?
- ◆ Can chairs be arranged in a circular manner to better enable group participants to see and hear each other well?
- ◆ Does the meeting space have capacity for groups that use the *Great Decisions Television Series on DVD* or other audiovideo material to be used by the group?

- ◆ Will the site assist with promoting the discussion group to its members or the community?

Many Great Decisions discussion groups have also organized as part of daytime programs offered through libraries, YMCAs and YWCAs, Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILR) at local colleges, senior centers, and other community institutions. Other organizations that frequently sponsor Great Decisions discussion groups include the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the League of Women Voters (LWV), the United Nations Association (UNA), and local World Affairs Council (WAC) branches.

What is the ideal format for a discussion group?

Each Great Decisions discussion group has the ability to determine its size, schedule, and some of the activities that take place. The FPA asks only that participants follow the basic program format: First, read the article. Second, discuss and debate the policy options and discussion questions of the topic as a group, and finally, complete and return the opinion ballots to the FPA for tabulation.

Most groups are “peer-led” meaning that individuals read and discuss the articles with other individuals. Some groups are “expert-driven,” meaning that the discussion group leader may elect to bring a guest speaker to introduce a topic, and then moderate the discussion that follows.

How does a group promote their activities?

There are two easy ways to let people in your area know about your Great Decisions discussion group.

1. Obtain promotional brochures and posters available free to discussion group leaders. A great way to expand public awareness of your local Great Decisions discussion group and the program nationally. Contact the FPA to receive materials while supplies last by phone at **800-628-5754**, ext. 250/251, or by email at **programs@fpa.org**.

2. List your discussion group on the Great Decisions website.

Group leaders can list their discussion groups on GreatDecisions.org (see box below) to make it easier for individuals to find information about on-going discussion groups and find out how to join.

How can I get Great Decisions materials for my discussion group?

Great Decisions briefing books, the *Great Decisions Television Series on DVD*, and the *Great Decisions Teacher's Guide* can be ordered from the Foreign Policy Association. Contact a customer service representative by calling toll-free **800-477-5836** or by email at **sales@fpa.org**.

You can also place an order at any time of day by visiting **www.greatdecisions.org** and clicking the “Bookstore” tab to learn more about *Great Decisions* books and other educational materials.



Register your discussion group on GreatDecisions.org

- ◆ Go to **www.greatdecisions.org**.
- ◆ Click “Discussion Groups” to reach the map of discussion groups across the United States.
- ◆ Click “Register” and follow the instructions to join the discussion group network.
- ◆ Enter information about your group, including contact name, email address, meeting location, and a description of the meetings as well as useful resources for your discussion group.

PART

2

Leading the group discussion

The primary role of the Great Decisions discussion group leader is that of a facilitator—to help everyone in the group express his or her views. You can do this by helping people get acquainted and keeping the atmosphere relaxed. Allow group members to respond directly to each other. Don't feel that you must comment after each statement or answer every question posed. You are not expected to be a “font of wisdom;” no specific knowledge of U.S. foreign policy or international affairs is required. Your objective is to create dialogue among the participants. The most effective leaders often say little.

Effective discussion group leaders must remain neutral. Try to avoid expressing your own views and values. Focus instead on the values and beliefs on which participants base their opinions, and make sure that your group considers a wide range of views. Occasionally, you might want to summarize the discussion or ask another group member to do so.

● A Few Simple First Steps ●

The discussion group leader's first job is to create a comfortable at-

mosphere for the group—friendly, relaxed and sociable. This environment allows you to raise the kinds of salient questions that will keep the discussion active and engaging. Keep in mind that the responsibilities can be rotated, giving each member a chance to lead a discussion.

There are a few simple things you can do to establish a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere:

- ◆ Arrange seating so that everyone can see each other, either around a table or in a circle of chairs.
- ◆ Facilitate introductions of participants at the first session. (Consider making nametags if it is a larger group.)
- ◆ Discuss the fundamental roles of a discussion group leader and the participants.

The next important step is to agree on ground rules for discussion. Establish a simple set of guidelines such as:

- ◆ Respect all members' views. All participants should be encouraged to express their honest opinions.
- ◆ Avoid personalizing disagreements. Let members know, as the group leader, that you will not tolerate interruptions, labeling or personal attacks.

These ground rules should be presented to the group. Ask participants if they agree with them and if they would like to suggest others.

A second responsibility is to determine the format and duration of the meeting. Every discussion is different. The way any given discussion develops depends on the participants, the topic, and the amount of time available. As a general guide, one hour of discussion for every eight people provides ample time for each member to participate. (For example, groups which have a dozen or more participants may meet for two hours or more.) Do keep in mind that you want to remain flexible about the time deadline. While a set deadline provides conformity and often serves to move the dialogue ahead

at a brisk pace, it can be counterproductive to end a discussion that is still vigorous and fruitful.

● Format of the Meeting ●

There is no specific format for a Great Decisions discussion group meeting as long as the predetermined topic for analysis is the central component of the discussion. The format is best determined by evaluating your group and its objectives. Feel free to create a format that suits each specific topic to be discussed and that reflects the needs and desires of all participants. For example, invite a speaker or several speakers to one meeting to address the topic. Another week, read and discuss a novel related to the article at hand. Next time, view the *Great Decisions Television Series on DVD* or screen a documentary or even a feature film. Be creative in the format, as the success of the dialogue depends on it.

Set the tone of your group at the start. Informality can be encouraged by serving refreshments before or after each discussion. This gives participants a chance to socialize on a different level and makes everyone more comfortable. A kick-off meeting is a great way to get group members acquainted. You can invite a guest speaker, put together a panel or simply host a reception for the group. A kick-off event can also act as publicity for the discussion group if local reporters are invited to attend and cover the program.

Find more on GreatDecisions.org...

- ◆ “*About Great Decisions*” features timely and useful information for discussion groups at www.greatdecisions.org.
- ◆ “*Great Decisions Across the Nation*” is a series of articles published on the FPA website that share experiences of discussion group leaders from around the country. These articles highlight some of the differences in how programs are organized and how groups conduct their meetings to ensure success.



TECHNIQUES DESIGNED FOR RESULTS DURING THE DISCUSSION

Set the Agenda • State the issues the topic raises at the beginning of the meeting. This can be done by the discussion group leader, a group participant, or an invited guest speaker. The introduction may take the form of an oral summary of the article or it may be a written handout listing the issues relating to the topic. This technique is particularly useful in starting and focusing the discussion. Additionally, this can put people on more equal footing and reassure those less confident about their grasp of the issues.

Define Terms • Many terms used in international affairs are unique to the field. Defining terms will ensure that all participants are on the same track. You might even solicit a definition from a group member which can help revive a wilting dialogue and can serve as a rallying point to concentrate participants' thoughts.

Diversify Sources of Information • Encourage members to seek information from as wide a variety of sources as possible and to share important findings with the group. Have members bring in current newspaper and magazine articles relevant to the topic. Information from these sources enrich the discussion, illuminate the topic, and engage participants.

Make use of related television programs and documentaries, or seek comparative information on a number of websites. Consider asking participants to interview people in their community, such as returned Peace Corps volunteers or exchange students.

Disentangle the Issues • Break down a complex topic into separate parts rather than allow participants to discuss everything at once. This is an effective method for managing a controversial issue while at the same time maintaining order in the group discussion.

Encourage Policy-Oriented Thinking • Participants should be encouraged to consider an issue from the perspective of policymakers. Policy options listed at the end of each *Great Decisions* topic can

be helpful for initiating policy discussions. Keep group members focused on the pros and cons of alternative policies and consequences. Since most people are unaccustomed to formulating policy, this will allow participants to view issues from a new perspective.

Role Play ● Ask each participant, or a group of participants, to present the issue from a designated point of view, e.g., that of the Administration, the House minority whip, a foreign government, the AFL-CIO spokesperson, or the president of Red Cross. The discussion can revolve around the expression of these divergent viewpoints and finding common ground. Have them consider all factors involved: social, political, economic, environmental, etc.

● **Concluding the Meeting** ●

It is often useful to have the group negotiate some sort of common ground (not necessarily a consensus) that will help them develop a broad-based perspective on the issue. Your role is to facilitate this process. Also, provide some time for the group to evaluate the discussion. Ask participants to share their thoughts on the process your group used to discuss and debate the issues, as well as what they learned or will think about in the future. This is also a good time to remind the group about the next meeting, the subject it will cover, and the readings.

At the end of each meeting, the discussion group leader should allow time for group members to fill out the opinion ballot for each topic. Stress the uniqueness of this process and the opportunity it provides for the group to make their views known to foreign policy decision-makers. You may either collect the ballots at the end of each meeting or wait to collect them all at the end of the program. Mail them to the FPA no later than June 30th. (Please do not mail a summary of the results. Each ballot must be tabulated individually.)



CHALLENGES IN LEADING A DISCUSSION GROUP

Being an effective discussion group leader does not hinge upon how much you know, but rather in your ability to draw the most out of each participant and to keep the discussion focused and informative. You embody the idea that foreign policy can be understood by everyone who is willing to take the time to do the background reading in the *Great Decisions* briefing book.

While most discussion sessions will go smoothly, difficulties may arise, as they will in any group process. The following are the most common challenges faced by discussion group leaders and suggestions for dealing with them.

- **Shy or reluctant participants who hesitate to say anything.**

Try to draw these individuals out without putting them on the spot. Perhaps they need a few meetings to feel comfortable enough to share their views with the group. Try your best to make them feel at ease, make frequent eye contact and speak to all group members informally before and after each session. Look for non-verbal cues that may indicate they wish to speak. Once they come forward with a comment, encourage them by conveying interest and asking for more information.

- **An individual who dominates the discussion.**

It is your responsibility to restrain those who want to dominate the discussion. Interrupt if necessary with a gentle but firm reminder that you would like to hear from all members of the group. You might say something like, “We have heard from Bob. Now let’s see what Alice has to say,” or, “Bob, we seem to be wandering off the subject. Let’s see if someone can summarize what we’ve been saying up to now.”

- **Lack of focus among participants.**

Each discussion is different and a lack of focus in the discussion is difficult to judge. If participants have a genuine interest in exploring a closely related topic and the conversation is lively, you may want

to give the members a freer rein. Bring it to the group's attention that they've changed the subject and give them the opportunity to return to the topic at hand. If, however, only a few members are participating in the new subject, leaving the majority of the group feeling bored or frustrated, bring the discussion back to its original focus by stating, "How does this relate to the issue of _____," or, be more direct and say, "That's very interesting but I'd like to return to the issue of _____."

- **Someone volunteers information that you know is false, or participants become stymied in a dispute about a fact and no one knows the answer.**

Ask if anyone knows of any information that contradicts the information put forth. Offer one yourself if no one else does. If there is a fact in question and the point is not essential to the discussion, move on. If the point is central to the discussion, have group members investigate and present the answer at your next meeting. Keep in mind that there may be no generally accepted answer.

- **Lack of interest, with little participation.**

This is a very rare problem but, should it occur, try to introduce a new perspective on the issue. Bring other views of the topic into the discussion, even if no one present holds them. Ask if anyone knows of people who hold alternate views. Ask them to critique these opinions.

- **Tension or open conflict within the group that may deteriorate into personal attacks.**

Discussion group leaders must deal with this problem immediately and assertively. If you have set ground rules, remind the group of them and enforce them. Enlist other group members to assist you in this. Most likely they will be strongly supportive as they made the rules themselves.



PART

3

GreatDecisions.org

Two easy ways to keep up with Great Decisions using the web:

1. Sign up for Great Decisions Online. This free, weekly email newsletter brings the latest Great Decisions program news, resources, special offers, and more to your email inbox.

2. Visit GreatDecisions.org. Find information and resources that can be used to facilitate a more effective discussion group and to keep up with the *Great Decisions* topics. Take advantage of:

Finding and ordering materials • Learn more about Great Decisions materials and how you can place an order through FPA's Online Bookstore.

Resources for each Great Decisions topic • Explore past and present *Great Decisions* topics more in-depth with: Online quizzes, recommended readings, blog posts, Updates (spring and fall), video clips, opinion ballots, and more.

Discussion group map/Register your discussion group • Create a page on FPA's website for your group to help recruit new participants, post a meeting schedule, and/or suggest resources.

Blogs • Web logs written for each topic connect you to the latest news and commentary about the *Great Decisions* topics.



The Foreign Policy Association encourages you to become involved in the Great Decisions discussion program and to promote understanding of world affairs. Please contact us at:

FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

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Many of the ideas and suggestions in this pamphlet come from the *Foreign Policy Association Leadership Handbook*, written and updated by the FPA in 1989, 2000, 2008; and *The Study Circle Handbook*, a publication of the Study Circles Resource Center, Topsfield Foundation, Inc., 1993. The Foreign Policy Association gratefully acknowledges Richard Ten Dyke of Bedford, NY, for providing the photos used in the *Great Decisions Program Guide*.



Thank you for your interest in the Foreign Policy Association and the Great Decisions discussion program. Your participation in the Program supports public education on U.S. foreign policy and global affairs.





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