Explore More

GREAT DECISIONS
The largest civic-education program on U.S. foreign policy and global affairs
Program Guide
The Great Decisions Program

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.

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.

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Great Decisions is the name shared by a program and a 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 debate and discussion of the important global issues of our time. The program provides materials that help people reach informed opinions on the issues and participate in the foreign policy process. The format of the program is intended to promote thoughtful discourse, and to bring people together to express their ideas and opinions, and learn from others. The program culminates in the opinion balloting process.

The Foreign Policy Association believes that 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. FPA publishes the results along with commentary in the National Opinion Ballot Report. This Report is presented to the White House, the departments of state and defense, members of Congress and the national media.
Interested citizens are able to download the National Opinion Ballot Report on demand at www.greatdecisions.org to distribute or arrange their own presentation with media and local officials.

Copies of the National Opinion Ballot Report are available free upon request.

Contact a customer service representative at (800) 477-5836 or by email at sales@fpa.org. The Report can be downloaded at www.greatdecisions.org.

**How can I participate in Great Decisions?**

Thousands of Americans across the country participate in Great Decisions 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.

**Part 2**

**ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSION GROUP**

What do I need to get started?
Great Decisions Discussion Groups need the following key ingredients:
- A Discussion Group leader and participants.
- Locations to hold the meetings.
- Copy of the Great Decisions briefing book for each member of the group.

What makes a good discussion group leader?
Group Leaders perform the important task of organizing individual discussion groups.
Discussion Group Leaders:
- Lead a balanced discussion on Great Decisions topics in their groups.
- Order Great Decisions briefing books for the members of the group.
- Collect opinion ballots and send them to FPA for tabulation and analysis.
- Distribute Great Decisions Updates and National Opinion Ballot Reports to group members.
The discussion group leader does not have to be an expert on the issues, but he or she should be able to 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 other groups, members will 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 discussion group. Their interest, enthusiasm and commitment ultimately determine the success of the group. The goal of a discussion group is not a participant’s mastery of the *Great Decisions* text or to learn a lot of facts, but rather to deepen understanding and sharpen judgment. This can occur in a focused discussion, where people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process—democratic discussion among equals—is as important as the content of the text.
Part 3
STARTING A GROUP

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. A discussion group forms when one person organizes others in his or her community who are also interested in discussing 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 “convert” 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.
Running Your Discussion Group

GROUP SIZE
Group size will vary widely based on the number of interested participants and the venue. Existing Great Decisions group range from three to 700 participants. There is no set minimum or maximum number of participants for any given group—this is entirely at your discretion. If the demand is high and your discussion group has over 30 participants, you should break up the discussion into smaller groups of 10 to 15 to ensure participation.

There are steps you can take to encourage participation and to get a rough head count, such as requiring all participants pre-register for a group. This will give you a better idea of how many books are needed, what venue would be best and how many volunteers you’ll need.

PROGRAM CHECKLIST
The following items should be in place before each meeting:
• Inform staff, any speakers and participants of the location and time of the meeting.

• If you have a speaker, confirm the details—including the time, location and program format—with them a few days before the meeting.
• Post signs directing participants to the meeting.

• Prepare the room for the meeting by setting up the right number of chairs, testing audio/visual equipment and putting out materials. Make sure there is a chair or podium for the speaker.

• Make sure all participants have their program materials and set up a form for any walk-ins to order additional materials.

• Prepare your introduction and acknowledgements, and always make sure to include any private funders.

• Send out reminder emails to pre-registered guests.

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 the group to see and hear each other well?

• Does the meeting space have audio/visual capacity for groups that use the Great Decisions Television Series on DVD or other video material?

• 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.
Part 3

What is an Ideal Meeting Space for a Discussion Group?

Some potential program partners could include:

- Arts and humanities organizations (historical, societies, museums, cultural centers, book clubs)
- Community centers
- Religious organizations
- Retirement communities
- Professional associations
- Community colleges
- Universities
- Libraries
- Social justice agencies
- Community action coalitions
- Fraternal organizations
- Local businesses
- Minority group associations
- Local chapters of national organizations
Additional organizations can help to arrange Great Decisions Discussion Groups. To learn more, contact your local:

- American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)
- American Association of University Women (AAUW)
- Council for International Visitors (CIV)
- General Federation of Women’s Clubs
- Kiwanis Clubs
- League of Women Voters (LWV)
- Rotary Clubs
- United Nations Associations (UNA)
- World Affairs Councils (WAC)

All of these organizations can assist your promotional efforts by boosting your network and providing you with more opportunities to advertise your group. If you choose to partner with an organization or organizations, you’ll have a wider audience for newsletters, emails, mailing and online marketing. Be sure to mention these partnerships in press releases, advertisements, articles and PSAs for the sales of your group and your partners.

What is the ideal format for a discussion group?

A benefit to planning a Great Decisions Discussion Group is the flexibility that each group has in determining its size, schedule and some of the activities that take place. FPA asks only that participants follow the basic program format: first, read the article; second, discuss the policy options and discussion questions of the topic as a group; and finally, complete the opinion ballot and return it to 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 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 our Sales Department at 800-477-5836 or our sales@fpa.org.

You can also place an order through FPA’s Online Bookstore. Visit www.fpa.org and click the “Bookstore” tab to learn more about Great Decisions books and other educational materials.

**PROMOTIONAL CAMPAIGN**

To attract participants, you will have to organize and initiate an effective promotional campaign. In this chapter, you can find some suggestions and sample promotional material to begin marketing your program.
PROGRAM SUPPORT MATERIALS
The Foreign Policy Association can provide the following promotional materials to your group:
• Posters
• Bookmarks
• National Opinion Ballot Reports
• Brochures

To obtain promotional materials, email sales@fpa.org

EXTERNAL PROMOTION
Great Decisions groups open to the public will need to promote their group externally. Here are some examples of how to do so.

• Add an article announcing the formation of your Great Decisions group in a newsletter. Here you can explain what Great Decisions is to interested parties.

• Print flyers indicating the location, time and cost (if applicable) of the program, and pair them with free promotional materials from the Foreign Policy Association. Put these anywhere community programming is typically advertised, such as coffee shops, town bulletin boards and local restaurants and shops.

• Post an announcement on your organizations’ town’s or personal web page.

• Make an announcement at community events when relevant.

• Start an event page or group on Facebook.
• A week before each program, coordinate an e-blast with a local organization, or start one of your own. Be sure to include the topic, speaker (if applicable), time and location.

• Pass out flyers/brochures (free from the FPA) around town.

Finally, don’t forget to add your information to the Great Decisions group directory. This will not only add your group to the larger database, but it will also give you a web page to refer to. Make sure you include the name of the group leader(s), contact information, location (of the meetings and the city you’re in), if it’s open to the public and how often your group will meet (weekly, biweekly, monthly, etc.).

FPA also compiles a list of news articles and announcements about Discussion Groups nationwide. If you would like to be included, feel free to email a link to us at editorial@fpa.org.

COMMUNITY GROUP AND PROMOTION
Partnering with other local groups can be beneficial in numerous ways, such as helping provide co-presenters, financial partnerships, goods and services, volunteers and marketing and outreach. Identifying groups that you’ve worked with in the past or ones you’d like to work with in the future is the best way to start. Assess the resonance of your project plans with these potential partners to determine if the relationship would be mutually beneficial. (See list on page 7 * Note: use “some potential program partners”)

Part 3

Promotional Campaign

Promotional Support Materials

External Promotion
Part 4
LEADING THE 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 atmosphere 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 name tags if it is a larger group.)

• Discuss the fundamental roles of a Discussion Group leader and the
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 time constraints. 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 meet-
ing 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...


- “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 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 enriches the discussion, illuminates the topic and engages 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 Topics
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 the 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 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 on 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
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.

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.

   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 FPAs Online Bookstore.

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

   **Discussion group map/Register your group**
   Create a page on FPAs website for your group to help recruit new participants, post a meeting schedule and/or suggest resources.

   **Blogs**
   Web logs written for each Great Decisions topic connect you to the latest related news and commentary.
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
Sales Department
470 Park Avenue South • New York, NY 10016
Toll-free (800) 628-5754 ext. 246 • sales@fpa.org


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.
Great Decisions group participants are the most important element of any discussion program. The interest, enthusiasm and commitment of each participant ultimately determine the successful dynamics of the group.

The goal of a discussion group is not to master the eight topics of the *Great Decisions* briefing book, but rather to deepen one’s awareness and understanding of these important issues as they relate to and shape U.S. foreign policy objectives.

A good discussion is characterized by the informed and thought-provoking dialogue between individuals like you!

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**A few key points**

**Make an effort to attend all meetings**  ● The comfort level of the group depends on the familiarity with other participants, not just as acquaintances or members of the same organization, but as peers in this particular group with its own special history and fellowship.

**Communicate with the discussion group facilitator**  ● The discussion group facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas and soliciting clarification of unclear points. The facilitator may need advice from the group members when this is necessary. Chances are you are not alone when you don’t understand what someone has said.

**Help keep the discussion on track**  ● Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how your points are related to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

**Address your remarks to the group rather than to the facilitator**  ● Address your questions to a particular participant; especially one who you think may have special insight. Don’t hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas, but avoid judging their ideas, suggestions or perceptions.

**Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you**  ● Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants’ point of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to
respect people who disagree with you. They have reasons for their beliefs that are usually valid or reasonable. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with. This level of comprehension and empathy will make you a much better advocate for whatever position you come to.

**Listen carefully to others**  ● Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak. Keep a pen handy to jot down your thoughts; this may help you listen more attentively since you will not be concerned about losing the point you want to make.

**Speak your mind freely, but don’t monopolize the discussion**  ● Expressing your ideas is important, but discussion groups are most successful when more views are shared. Leave room for other group members to get their points across.

**Don’t withdraw from the discussion**  ● You have a responsibility beyond that of listening. Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience for all. Contributing your opinions, questions and experiences adds to the knowledge that group members gain from one another.

**Engage in friendly disagreement**  ● Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don’t be afraid to play devil’s advocate, but don’t go overboard. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself and others whether reason or emotion is running the show.

**Humor and a pleasant manner go far in making a point**  ● A belligerent attitude may prevent acceptance of your assertions. Be aware that aggressive body language can close you off from the group.

**Maintain an open mind**  ● You don’t score points by rigidly sticking to your earlier statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider.

**Think critically**  ● Don’t accept without question the statements made by authors of the readings, the facilitator or other participants. Carefully consider all information presented. Be on the lookout for deceptive argument techniques such as bandwagon or scare tactics, personal attack, faulty deductive reasoning and vague generalizations.

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