

The History of the Choices Program and Methodology



The Choices Program has its origins in research begun in 1982 by the Center for Foreign Policy Development at Brown University in collaboration with the Public Agenda Foundation. The methodology at the core of all Choices curriculum units was used from 1985-1988 as a research tool to understand how the American public was thinking about U.S.-Soviet relations.

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Alternative "Futures" as a Research Tool

Between 1985-88, Brown University's Center for Foreign Policy Development, in collaboration with the Public Agenda Foundation, conducted extensive research designed to understand public attitudes toward the Soviet Union and nuclear arms. The objective of *The Public, the Soviets, and Nuclear Arms* was to understand how the American public thinks about these twin concerns and then to communicate the findings to elected officials and policy makers so that they could better craft policies that would have long-term public support.

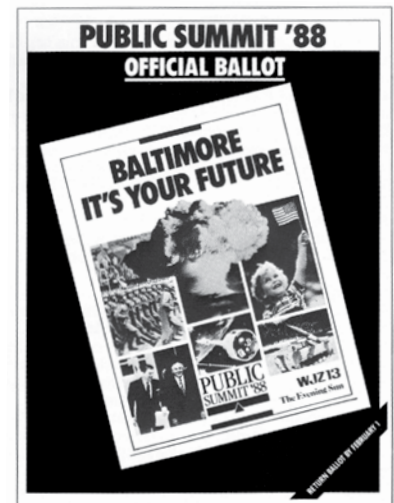
In order to study public thinking on these questions, the research team and its National Advisory Council developed a framework of four alternative "Futures" as a research tool designed to engage the American public in consideration of these issues in terms appropriate to the non-expert. The



Senators Paul Sarbanes (MD) and Claiborne Pell (RI) hear testimony on the Futures at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Futures presented contrasting policy directions along with their risks and trade-offs. They were carefully researched and developed to be valid from the point of view of experts and accessible and engaging from the point of view of the public. In four cities—Baltimore, Nashville, San Antonio, and Seattle—the Futures were presented to general audiences through the local newspapers and television stations. Under the title of Public Summit '88, the newspapers and television stations provided information and sponsored programs on the four Futures and the issues they raised over a four-week period. The campaigns culminated in a balloting process in which more than 76,000 people voted for the Future and accompanying policies they felt would best ensure U.S. security. In five cities (the above four plus Chicago) the research team also conducted "Citizen Review Panels"(1) in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of public opinion. Almost 1,000 citizens, chosen to be broadly representative of the population as a whole, participated in these review panels.(2)

The results of this research were presented in briefings to the National Security Council, to major committees in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, to the staffs of all major presidential candidates, to other governmental groups, and to the press and foreign policy groups.



The Public Summit '88 ballot was distributed by the newspapers to citizens in four American cities.

Theoretical Foundation—Public Choices vs. Expert Choices

The research that formed the foundation of *The Public, the Soviets, and Nuclear Arms* and the Choices Program's methodology is grounded in an understanding that, in a democracy, the public and the experts have interrelated roles to play in the framing of public policy. As Richard Smoke, former Research Director at Brown University's Center for Foreign Policy Development explained, experts can clarify the goals and trade-offs the nation must consider and lay out specific policy choices along with their costs and risks. Experts, however, have no special insight into which goals should have priority and which risks are worth taking. These are decisions of national scope—public choices—that all Americans must make together. The experts' attention to the consequences and feasibility of various policies acts as a counter to any wishful thinking on the part of the public. The public, on the other hand, can criticize policies that do not match the public's priorities. Finally, the public and the experts are also interrelated in the implementation of policy. While the public can voice support for broad policy directions, it requires expertise to create policy to implement these preferences.(3)

Applying the Choices Approach to the Classroom

The results from the Citizen Review Panels taking place during *The Public, the Soviets, and Nuclear Arms* demonstrated that after people had the opportunity to consider alternative policy directions and share their views in a carefully constructed discussion format, their own opinions became more complete and their understandings of the issues increased. Following Public Summit '88, Brown University launched the Choices Program in order to bring the advantages of this approach to the classroom. The program focused initially on the development of curricular materials that engage high school students in consideration of current international policy issues. Adapting the research approach developed during *The Public, the Soviets, and Nuclear Arms*, all Choices units include a framework of policy alternatives that challenges students to consider multiple perspectives and to think critically about the issue. Students must understand the history leading up to the issue, identify the values that drive contrasting perspectives, weigh the risks and trade-offs of alternative policies, and come to their own judgments, reflecting their own values and priorities.

The Choices Program also applies this approach to historical turning points, putting students in the role of decision makers at critical moments in history. Through careful examination of the history leading up to a turning point, students gain a contextualized understanding of the values and culture of the period from the perspective of those who lived it. Students then explore the questions and choices that confronted people at that historical moment. Finally, they analyze the decisions made and reflect on the relevance of those decisions for our world today.

Today, Choices has more than thirty units addressing topics such as *The United Nations: Challenges and Change*, *Responding to Terrorism: Challenges for Democracy*, *Confronting Genocide: Never Again?*, and *The Limits of Power: The United States in Vietnam*. A publication list is available online. Shorter lessons on current issues are posted online in *Teaching with the News*. Choices course materials are used annually in more than 7,500 secondary schools nationwide.

Library Discussions

Drawing on the earlier research and the experience of Choices in the classroom, in 1992 Choices launched a new initiative to bring consideration of contested international issues to local communities across the country. Applying the Choices methodology to public discussion, Choices public programs



Students from Nashville's Montgomery Bell Academy debate the future of U.S.-Soviet relations at during Public Summit '88.

engage general audiences in deliberation on our changing international role and the implications for domestic policy, and help the public participate constructively in the policymaking process.⁽⁴⁾ With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Choices Library Program has conducted multi-session series in more than 500 libraries in 38 states

Bringing Students to Their State Capitols

In 1997, Choices launched the Capitol Forum on America's Future, a program drawing on previous work with schools and community programs to engage high school students and teachers from a range of school districts in each participating state in consideration of the future direction of U.S. policy. The Capitol Forum is a collaboration among the Choices Program, the Secretary of State in participating states, and other statewide organizations whose missions support international education, youth civic engagement.

1 Citizen Review Panels were first used in 1987 by the Public Agenda Foundation to gauge public reactions to reforms of the social welfare system.

2 Update, (Providence, RI: Center for Foreign Policy Development, Affiliated with the Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Vol 3, No 1, July, 1988), p. 2-4.

3 Richard Smoke, *The Public, The Soviets, and Nuclear Arms: Four Futures: Alternatives for Public Debate and Policy Development* (Providence, RI: Center for Foreign Policy Development at Brown University & the Public Agenda Foundation, 1987), pp. 5-7. Daniel Yankelovich, president of the Public Agenda Foundation and a member of the Executive Committee of the National Council of "The Public, The Soviets, and Nuclear Arms," writes about 'public choice' in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991). An earlier reference appears in an article by Yankelovich in *Kettering Review* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1985).