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Online "Deliberative Poll" Gives Picture of Informed Public Opinion in Election

In a unique national experiment, a scientific sample of voters nationwide participated in weekly small group discussions to become more informed about the issues in the Presidential election. The resulting shifts of opinion, when contrasted with a control group, reveal what voters think about the issues as they become more informed.

The Process

The experiment, part of *PBS Deliberation Day*, was conducted for *By the People* by the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy and Knowledge Networks. The online process mirrored a parallel process of face to face Deliberative Polling conducted with local PBS stations in 17 cities. The same briefing document served as the basis for discussion in both online and face-to-face. Deliberators met online in small groups in discussions conducted through voice rather than text. Special software allowed the participants to keep track of who was talking and who wished to talk. The participants deliberated for an hour and fifteen minutes every week for five weeks leading up to Deliberation Day on October 16th. At the same time a control group who did not deliberate answered questions before and after. A total of more than 900 participated in this national online experiment, 200 deliberators and 700 in the control groups¹.

The participants were a national random sample selected by Knowledge Networks and provided with either WebTVs or computers and internet access to overcome the digital divide. While the deliberators had somewhat fewer Republicans than the national average and this may have affected the results², their support for Kerry and Bush at the start of the deliberations almost perfectly mirrored support for the candidates as reflected in national polls at the time.

National Security

On the question of whether the war on Iraq had strengthened or weakened US national security, 46% of deliberators thought prior to deliberation the Iraq war had strengthened,

¹ There were two separate control groups in the study – one that only completed the post-survey, and one that completed both the pre- and post- surveys. The figures reported herein are based on comparisons between the treatment group and the post-only control group.

² The deliberative sample had 36.4% Democrats 27.3% Republicans and 32.7 Independents. The 2002 National Election Study had 33.6% Democrats, 31.7% Republicans and 32.7% Independents.

while 32% of deliberators thought it had weakened, national security. After deliberation, the proportion believing the war had strengthened national security fell to 41% and those believing the war had weakened security rose to 40%. These changes contrasted with opinion in our control group, as the mass public had the same views as before our participants deliberated. A majority of participants post-deliberation also believed that the war in Iraq had gotten in the way of the war on terror. However, 57% of deliberators felt that US had been successful in its efforts to prevent leaders hostile to the US from being likely to regain power in Afghanistan.

Economic Issues

The proportion of deliberators saying that the Bush tax cuts should be made permanent fell from 52% pre- to 42% post-deliberation, while support for this among the control group stayed at 51%. Deliberators also thought that US companies should be penalized for outsourcing and that the Bush tax cuts made the deficit too large.

Presidential Leadership

On the question of whether a president, to be a good leader, must be consistent over time, or must adapt to changing circumstances, 17% of the deliberators concluded that consistency was more important than adaptability, compared with 26% of the control group. On the other hand, 68% of the deliberators felt that adaptability was more important than consistency, while only 59% of the control group did so. When applying these theories of presidential leadership to Bush and Kerry, 65% of deliberators felt that Bush emphasized consistency, while only 55% of the control group thought so. 76% of deliberators believed Kerry emphasized adaptability to changing circumstances, while only 67% of the control group thought so.

Candidate Traits

The deliberators were asked to evaluate candidates on some key character traits. While Kerry improved on many of these, he was still behind Bush on the trait, “strong leader,” at the end of the process.

Over the course of deliberation, participants changed their assessments of Kerry’s character. After deliberation, 53% of participants – compared to only 47% pre-deliberation - said that “sincere” described Kerry “extremely” or “pretty” well. This was significantly different from the opinion of the control group, only 42% of whom felt that Kerry was “sincere.” Kerry also received more positive evaluations of his “intelligence” from participants post-deliberation (35% thought that “intelligent” described him “extremely well” after versus only 21% before, and compared to only 29% of the control group). When participants were asked how well they thought “thinks like I do” described Kerry, 48% of participants said after deliberation that the phrase fit him “extremely” or “pretty” well, compared to only 40% before.

Despite these improvements in evaluations of Kerry, Bush retained an advantage on important character traits, with 61% of participants post-deliberation (and 65% of the control group) saying that “strong leader” described him “extremely” or “pretty” well, compared to only 50% of deliberators (and 45% of the control group) who said this about Kerry. Further, 68% of participants perceived Bush as religious pre-deliberation, compared to 76% post-deliberation. Only 28% viewed Kerry as religious before

deliberation, and although the proportion increased during the process, still only 45% described him as “religious” afterwards.

Knowledge

Importantly, participants became significantly more knowledgeable over the course of deliberation, showing considerable learning on key election issues. By the end of the process, deliberators were substantially better informed than the mass public on these issues. For example, 84% of deliberators answered correctly post-deliberation that Iraq had not been directly involved in the September 11 attacks, while only 55% of the control group did so. Further, 78% of participants answered correctly that Kerry had voted for the resolution authorizing the Iraqi war, compared to only 51% of the control group, and 63% were able to identify Pakistan as the country harboring the most Al Qaeda and Taliban members, versus only 37% of the control group. The participants also became more knowledgeable on economic issues. For example, post deliberation 72% correctly identified India as the major destination for white collar jobs outsourced from the US, while only 41% of the control group did so.

Voting

On the question of vote intention, there was a small gain for Kerry compared to Bush, but among our deliberators, vote intention remained essentially deadlocked. Prior to deliberation, 42% of participants intended to vote for Bush, 45% for Kerry, and 12% were undecided. After deliberation, 43% said they intended to vote for Bush, and 49% for Kerry, while 7% remained undecided. Again this result could have been affected by the under representation of Republicans.

Principal investigators for the online Deliberative Poll were Professors James Fishkin and Shanto Iyengar of Stanford University, and Professor Robert Luskin of University of Texas at Austin. Deliberative Polling is a registered trade mark of James Fishkin. Any fees from the trade mark are used to support research at the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy.

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