

Poll reveals how 'deliberative' discussion can shift public opinion

Informed discussion can profoundly affect people's positions on issues of mutual interest, according to an innovative poll conducted at the University.

"The New Haven Regional Dialogue, a Deliberative Poll," held March 1-3, showed dramatic changes of opinion on the issue of local revenue sharing.

A randomly selected and representative sample of residents of the 15 towns in the New Haven region spent the weekend considering various aspects of regional policy, listening to each other's views and perspectives, and questioning experts, advocates and decision-makers. When this cross-section of the region's residents completed their discussions, they supported voluntary revenue sharing among towns and state provision of incentives to encourage sharing of new revenues from commercial development, according to a poll of participants.

When first interviewed, 80% of participants said they agreed with the statement: "My town should maintain local control over all of its tax revenues from new businesses and industries." After deliberation, support for the proposition fell to 42%.

By contrast, voluntary agreements for sharing of incremental revenue showed a dramatic increase in

support. Before deliberation, 64% agreed with the statement: "My town should try for a voluntary agreement with other towns in the region to share some tax revenues from new businesses and industries." After deliberation, support for that viewpoint rose to 81%. Support also increased from 68% to 80% for the state's providing "incentives for towns in the region to share some tax revenues for new businesses and industry."

On a separate issue, the future of Tweed New Haven Airport, participants showed little change of opinion. Both before and after the weekend a strong majority of 73% continued to favor expanding commercial passenger service "to provide more flights to more places." The support after the weekend was slightly more equivocal, with those "strongly agreeing" moving from 49% to 41% and those "agreeing somewhat" increasing from 24% to 32%. One possible reason for this disparity may be exposure to the environmental and personal issues that expansion of the airport will encompass, suggest the event organizers, adding that further analysis of the discussions may help to reveal what questions remain unanswered for those who support the idea of airport expansion.

Participants also showed dramatic increases in their levels of information. For example, before the weekend, only 8% knew that Connecticut law allows communities to share property tax revenues. After the weekend, 69% knew. The percentage of participants who knew that the rate of job growth in the New Haven region was less than the national average during the 1990s rose from 44% to 75%.

Evaluations of the process by the participants were strongly positive. A large majority thought that the members of their small groups "participated relatively equally in the discussion" (87%), that the moderator "did not try to influence the group with his or her own views" (94%) and that the process as a whole was highly valuable (79% giving it an 8, 9 or 10 on a 0-10 scale).

The participants in the weekend's deliberations were a representative sample of 136 residents of the population of the entire New Haven region. They were representative of the region on key socio-demographic and attitudinal items when compared to a baseline survey of 1,032 area residents.

The Regional Deliberative Poll was designed by Yale faculty members Cynthia Farrar and Donald

Green in collaboration with the inventors of the technique, professors James Fishkin and Robert Luskin, both of the University of Texas at Austin. Since Fishkin originated the concept in 1988, 18 Deliberative Polls have been held in the United States and abroad.

Over the next two weeks, participants will have an opportunity to meet with the chief elected officials in their towns to discuss their views about regional issues. Farrar said that organizers of the event will be undertaking further analysis of the Dialogue to provide public officials and policymakers with more nuanced information about the views and concerns of an informed and reflective citizen body.

The Regional Dialogue was sponsored by the Connecticut League of Women Voters Education Fund and supported by the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven and other civic organizations in south central Connecticut. The project's major funders include the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Community Foundation, the Renée B. Fisher Foundation and Yale University. Additional funding was provided by Fannie Mae, William C. Graustein, New Haven Savings Bank, the Regional Water Authority, United Way of Greater New Haven and United Illuminating.