

Polling exercise shows influence on voters' opinions

Information changes minds

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By Jack Kelly, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh was one of 10 communities across the country that took part yesterday in an experiment in "deliberative polling," an effort to determine how much public opinion changes on issues when voters are provided information about those issues.

Voters in Pittsburgh; Baton Rouge, La.; Green Bay, Wis.; Minneapolis; Sarasota Fla.; Rochester N.Y.; Seattle; Kansas City; San Diego; and Kearney, Neb. were asked their opinions on questions pertaining to national security and international trade policy before spending a day discussing these issues in a small group and asking questions of an expert panel. They were then polled again.

Respondents nationwide were less likely to support the war in Iraq and less likely to support free trade at the end of the deliberations.

At the beginning of the deliberative poll, 43 percent agreed that "the war in Iraq has gotten in the way of the war on terror," while 51 percent disagreed. In the final poll, 55 percent agreed and only 33 percent disagreed.

In the initial poll, 58 percent agreed that "on the whole, more free trade means more jobs, because we can sell more goods abroad." Only 42 percent agreed in the final poll.

But though support for free trade generally fell, support for the North American Free Trade Agreement grew. In the initial poll, 20 percent of respondents said NAFTA has helped the U.S. economy, while 55 percent said it had hurt. In the second poll, 30 percent said it had helped, and only 48 percent said it had hurt.

On most of the questions, the change was less in what people believed than in the intensity with which they believed it.

In the first poll, 18 percent of respondents agreed strongly with the statement: "By the time we leave Iraq, the results will have been worth the cost in lives and dollars," while 17 percent agreed somewhat. Forty eight percent of respondents disagreed strongly, 15 percent disagreed somewhat.

In the second poll, those who supported the statement were still at 33 percent, but the number who agreed strongly had fallen to 13 percent, while the number who agreed somewhat rose to 20 percent. Those who disagreed strongly fell to 41 percent.

The deliberative polls were sponsored nationally by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions with support from the Hewlett Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Local sponsors were Carnegie Mellon University and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The Post-Gazette

was a "media sponsor" for the Pittsburgh event.

At the beginning, 46 percent of participants identified themselves as Democrats; 22 percent as Republicans, and 28 percent as independents.

The 84 participants for the deliberative poll in Pittsburgh were selected randomly from people living in area codes beginning with 152. They were paid \$75 each for taking part.

Participants were given materials to read on Iraq, the war on terror, and NAFTA and related issues. The morning was spent discussing these issues in groups of eight to 10, and preparing questions on them to ask an expert panel.

Each discussion group was balanced by age, sex, socioeconomic status, and political party affiliation.

After listening to the responses of the panel, which consisted of University of Pittsburgh professors Davis Bobrow and William Keller; Schuyler Foerster of the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh; and Dan Simpson of the Post-Gazette, a retired ambassador, gathered again in their groups to hash over what they had heard and to vote again on the poll questions.

Most who took part said the day was pleasant and informative.

"I feel privileged to have been asked to be here, and privileged to get to know all of you," Ramon Cotero, 68, public works manager for the Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments, told the other four men and three women who took part in discussion group 10.

"I think I'll pay attention more [to public issues]," said Lisa Johnson, 29, a homemaker in Pittsburgh. "Now it's more interesting."

"I've learned more from you people than from the experts," said Joseph Shepler, 66, a retired Chatham College professor.

"I was pretty well informed about Iraq, but I got a better understanding of tariffs and economics," said Donna Leonard, 58, a retired elementary school teacher.

But opinions on the issues didn't change much.

Shepler, an outspoken liberal, said his opinions were "pretty much the same, but a little more moderate."

"I enjoyed hearing other people's opinions, not that I agreed with them," said Ally Boyle, 19, of Baldwin.

Boyle said she wanted to attend the session because "my Dad is in Kuwait (with the Air Force) and I wanted to put my input in."

Shepler said he came because "the pay was good and there was a free lunch."

Deliberative polling is the brainchild of Prof. James Fishkin of Stanford University. Another round of deliberative polls will be held in Pittsburgh and the other cities in October. Carnegie-Mellon is developing software that will make it possible to conduct deliberative polls on-line.

