

**October 20, 2004**

**VOTERS**

## **Taking the Town-Hall Pulse, for the Election and Beyond**

By **JOHN TIERNEY**

**A**s an undecided "security mom" in a battleground state, Kim Garcia was already one of America's most intensely scrutinized voters when she sat down in a classroom at Carnegie Mellon University on Saturday morning. But Mrs. Garcia, a nurse in Pittsburgh, was about to experience a whole new level of attention.

She was one of more than 1,500 randomly chosen voters in 17 cities participating in what was probably the largest, and certainly the most scientific, town-hall meeting of any presidential campaign. It may also have been the longest: eight hours of discussing the issues, watching informational videos, questioning experts and filling out surveys.

To the political scientists running this "deliberative poll," the results showed that Americans could transcend the bitter partisan rhetoric this year to become more tolerant of others' views, better informed about issues and possibly more inclined to vote for [Senator John Kerry](#).

To some skeptics, in academia as well as in Mrs. Garcia's group, it was mainly a chance for the loudest and most articulate to sound off to a captive audience of voters not about to change their minds. But even the skeptics acknowledged that this new form of polling could be a promising technique for resolving issues less complex than the presidency.

Mrs. Garcia, who is 44 and has two daughters, started the day as the lone undecided voter in a group with five favoring Mr. Kerry and four favoring [President Bush](#). When they discussed the economy, she sided with the Kerry voters who criticized outsourcing. Complaining about the lack of jobs in Pittsburgh, she said that her husband, a mechanic at the struggling US Airways, could soon be out of work.

But when terrorism and the war in Iraq were discussed, she sided with the Bush voters against Pat Gallaway, a retired educator, who said that American violence only begat more violence in Iraq. "I don't think any individual really wants to make war," Ms. Gallaway said.

Mrs. Garcia looked incredulous. "So why are they having so many car bombs?" she asked.

Mrs. Garcia's views on the war moderated, though, after she and the other voters put questions to a panel of academic experts. It was an ideological mix of experts, but those favoring a Kerry multinational approach were the most outspoken, and at the end of the day Mrs. Garcia said their remarks left her inclined to vote for Mr. Kerry.

That was typical of the results among the other undecided voters in the national sample, who were significantly more likely to move toward Mr. Kerry than Mr. Bush, said James Fishkin, a political science professor at Stanford University who directed the experiment. But Professor Fishkin warned against reading too much into that result, because there were a disproportionate number of Republican no-shows, and the preponderance of Democrats might have swayed the undecideds.

When the results of the final poll were weighted to compensate for the missing Republicans, Mr. Kerry led Mr. Bush, 48 percent to 42 percent, with 7 percent undecided. In the poll taken ahead of time, Mr. Kerry had led by 42 percent to 41 percent, with 15 percent undecided. The most important results, Professor Fishkin said, were other changes measured in before-and-after surveys of the 1,535 voters. Across the political spectrum, he said, voters became more knowledgeable on specific issues, like the outsourcing of jobs and how Mr. Kerry voted on the resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq, and their views became more moderate on most issues.

"We've shown that even during a highly polarized election, people can actually reach some mutual understanding when they spend some time learning about the issues and talking to people very different from themselves," Professor Fishkin said. "This is a picture of what democracy could be like if people had a dialogue and heard more than the usual campaign sound bites."

This experiment, which was sponsored by local public television stations and will be featured in a PBS program on Thursday, is likely to have results that endure beyond the election, Professor Fishkin said. "We've found that people who participate in these deliberative polls are more likely to go on to vote and contribute to candidates and get involved in their communities," he said. "This is a mechanism for creating social capital."

Some, though, questioned how useful this exercise was for a presidential election. Arthur Lupia, a political science professor at the University of Michigan, said that deliberative polling worked best when applied to relatively simple local issues, like how to run a public utility or whether to expand an airport - situations where a representative sample of the public could learn enough to reach a consensus more useful than a poll of voters who knew little about an issue.

"If you and I have some basic values in common and there's a problem we both want to solve, then coming together and sharing information works great," Professor Lupia said. "But when people fundamentally disagree on what they're trying to accomplish, as Democrats and Republicans do today about the direction of the country, then coming together and talking doesn't change their minds. They

commonly just tune each other out."

Aside from Mrs. Garcia, no one else in her group said the day of deliberation had swayed his or her vote. Helen Rusenko, a retired office worker and Bush supporter, did not sound uplifted by the experience.

"What I learned today is that some people don't think any further than the end of their nose," Ms. Rusenko said, alluding to the opponents of the Iraq war.

Most, though, said they had enjoyed themselves and learned at least a few things from the experts and their neighbors. "It was a long day, but it was worth it to hear concerns from people you don't normally talk to," Mrs. Garcia said. After she and the others received their \$75 stipend for participating, most said they would be willing to endure it again, free of charge.

[Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company](#) |