

Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University

Political Communications Lab, Stanford University

First Online Deliberative Opinion Poll®

Reveals Informed Opinions on World Problems

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Democracy Online

The world's first Online Deliberative Opinion Poll® reveals the potential for a new form of democracy on the Internet. Public consultation on the Internet now occurs primarily through "quick votes" with self-selected samples. There are also a few efforts to conduct traditional polling. But information technology now offers new potential for an entirely different form of Internet democracy -- one that is both representative and informed.

A scientifically selected and representative sample of 280 Americans participated in the online Deliberative Poll. The participants were evenly divided by gender. 30 percent were non-white and 35 percent had high school education or less. Approximately one-third did not own a home computer with Internet access. (They were provided the necessary equipment and technology.) Many might have had trouble participating in an extended public dialogue in person, for instance because they were sick, because they had significant handicaps, or because they had small children at home (7% said they had a disability of some sort).

Participants met online, in small groups of 10-20, and were led by trained moderators, to discuss the role of the United States in world affairs. The software allowed the participants literally to speak to each other (as opposed to merely typing text messages), which made these online discussions relatively comparable to in-person discussions.

The online discussions began in early December and continued over a period of four weeks with a break for the holidays. Each group assembled twice a week for an hour to exchange views and talk about competing objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

The sequence of topics began with the right to strike unilaterally versus multilaterally against potential terrorists or other enemies. The topic then moved on to the possibility of promoting the spread of democratic governance in the world, then to working cooperatively with other nations, to adjusting international trade barriers, and to dealing with AIDS and world hunger in developing countries.

Deliberative Polling

In the ordinary course of affairs, most people have little incentive to invest time and effort in acquiring political information. Hence the opinions expressed in conventional polls tend to be top-of-the-head, and quite possibly very different from what they would be if the respondents actually knew or thought more about the issues. By contrast, a Deliberative Poll provides its participants with sustained opportunities for learning, discussion, and reflection, enabling them to form more substantial and better reasoned opinions.

Prior to each online meeting, participants read carefully balanced, non-partisan briefing materials (designed by the National Issues Forums Institute and the Kettering Foundation) offering an overview of “Americans’ Role in the World”. They also posed clarifying questions to experts, selected by the Online Newshour, who represented competing viewpoints. The questions and answers were posted periodically on the PBS Online Newshour website: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/poll_main.html. Responses from the Online Newshour were incorporated into the deliberations as the weeks proceeded. The briefing materials are available on that site as are detailed results.

Results

After deliberating, the participants increased their willingness to take responsibility for problems around the world. These changes were statistically significant when compared to those from a control group of 303 online respondents who were questioned at the beginning and end of the interval over which the deliberations took place but did not themselves deliberate

- The percentages who placed priority on providing food and medical help to poor countries rose from 51% to 67%
- Those who placed priority on protecting human rights in other countries rose from 49% to 60%
- On protecting weaker nations against aggression from 56% to 68%, and
- On reducing world poverty from 50% to 60%.
- The percentage who agreed that ‘global warming is a serious problem, and we need to act now’ rose from 49% to 61%.
- The percentage who were willing to make sacrifices to deal with environmental problems such as requiring higher mileage from vehicles and cleaner ways of producing electricity rose, even though the questions stipulated that those changes might require less powerful automobiles and higher electricity rates (from 70% to 77% for automobiles and from 50% to 58% for electricity).
- There was also increased support for foreign aid as a way of promoting democracy abroad (from 33% to 42 %) and for foreign aid spending in general (11% to 22%).
- In addition, there was increased agreement with the notion that foreign assistance should be conducted through “The US and allies acting through the UN and international institutions like the World Bank” as opposed to the US or its close allies acting themselves (a rise from 42% to 57%).

- On international trade, the percentage who agreed that imports cause a loss of jobs declined from 47% to 34% and the percentage who wanted to repeal NAFTA declined from 44% to 33%.

Comparing Two Deliberative Polls: Online and Face to Face

This was the first online Deliberative Poll, but there have been more than twenty face-to-face Deliberative Polls in the United States, Australia, Denmark, Britain, and Bulgaria. In the face-to-face version, the participants are brought to a single site to deliberate over a weekend, alternating between discussions in small, randomly assigned groups led by trained moderators and putting questions formed in the groups to panels of policy experts and policy makers. The results generally show that the participants become substantially more informed and that their opinions change significantly in consequence.

This first online Deliberative Poll culminated soon after the National Issues Convention - a face-to-face Deliberative Poll in Philadelphia with a national random sample of 340 participants that deliberated with the same briefing materials and took the same questionnaire on January 12, 2003. The biggest differences were in the mode of discussion (online versus face-to-face), the mode of measurement (online questionnaire both before and after deliberation versus telephone interview before and self-administered questionnaire after), the expert panelists and their answers, and the temporal spacing of the discussions (spread over several weeks versus concentrated over a weekend).

Despite these differences, the online and face-to-face Deliberative Polls yielded strikingly similar pictures of deliberative public opinion regarding U.S. foreign policy. Post-deliberation, both online and face-to-face deliberators insist on multilateral support before military intervention, both are more willing to take up responsibility for global problems such as AIDS in developing countries, world hunger or the environment. Both are far *less* likely to agree that we should deal with problems at home first, rather than tackle problems abroad. Both become more knowledgeable about the percentage of foreign aid in the budget and increases the percentage who wish to raise it. Both also increase their knowledge levels on a battery of other items. Both are more willing to make specific sacrifices to help the environment such as requiring higher gas mileage for vehicles. While the face to face changes tended to be somewhat larger, the direction of change was consistently the same: taking more responsibility for serious problems abroad and wanting to deal with those problems cooperatively through international institutions.

On Iraq and international security, both projects added some questions in the post-test about the conditions under which the public would support war. Only 39% of the online deliberators and 37% of the face to face deliberators agreed that: "The US should invade Iraq if the US finds evidence that convinces the US but not the UN Security Council that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction."

Only 23% of the online deliberators and 22% of the face to face deliberators agreed that "The US should invade Iraq if there is no new evidence found by the inspectors, but the US still has reasons to believe that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction."

By contrast, if the UN inspectors found evidence that convinced both the US and the UN Security Council, then 77% of the face to face deliberators and 68% of the online deliberators would support invasion.

Overall, the online and face to face projects present a picture of informed public opinion that wants the US to cooperate with other countries on initiating military action and on solving the world's problems. Both samples want to do more for the environment and for dealing with serious problems in developing countries such as hunger and disease. Both increase their support for spending and for making sacrifices in order to tackle these problems. In both cases, the random sample entered the dialogue as US citizens and they left it looking a bit more as if they were also citizens of the world.

Partners

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