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**National Contact: John Brinkley
(240) 461-9837**

"Deliberative Poll" Shows Americans' Views on Iraq, Trade

After day-long "Citizen Deliberations" this weekend, Americans from across the United States said they believed establishing democracy in Iraq was less important than ensuring the country has a stable government.

Also, they were strongly in favor of involving the United Nations or other countries in the rebuilding of Iraq, and rejected the notion that the United States should be able to unilaterally invade other countries that appear to pose a threat, unless we have international support.

In Baton Rouge, though, participants' views diverged from the national trend (see results below).

They expressed their views in a unique national/local experiment in civic dialogue that took place Saturday in ten cities around the country. In each, a scientific random sample of the community was invited to consider America's national security and trade policies. And in each city a "control group" of citizens who did not deliberate was asked the same questions. Altogether, 725 citizens deliberated in the ten cities and their views were compared to those of 1580 respondents in the control groups and to their own pre-deliberation views.

The participants spent the day learning about issues related to America's role in the world and discussing them among themselves and with bipartisan panels of experts. At the end of the day, they were scientifically surveyed via a process called Deliberative Polling. The results were released Sunday by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions' *By the People* project.

Only 31% of the participants thought it was "absolutely or extremely important" that "a democracy be established in Iraq" compared to 51% of the control group. But more participants thought it was "absolutely or extremely important" that "a *stable* government be established in Iraq, even if it is not democratic" (82% of the participants compared to 72% of the control group). And 52% of the participants, compared to 43% of the control group thought that "the war in Iraq has gotten in the way of the war on terror." Furthermore, participants became significantly less tolerant of the cost of the U.S. presence in Iraq over the course of deliberation; only 38% of participants post-deliberation agreed that "by the time we leave Iraq, the results will have been worth the cost in lives and dollars," compared to 45% of the participants prior to deliberation.

Support for involving other countries and/or the UN in Iraq was very high among both participants and the control group, with 82% and 75% respectively agreeing that

“the US should share its control of Iraq with other countries or the UN in return for their sharing more of the military and financial burden.” Similarly, opposition to unilateralism as a general policy was high in both groups, with 56% of participants, and 50% of the control group rejecting the statement that “in general, the US should be willing to invade other countries we believe pose a serious and immediate threat, even if we don’t have a lot of international support.”

On trade, the participants expressed deep ambivalence after deliberation. More participants than members of the control group thought that NAFTA had helped the American economy "a lot or somewhat" (39% of the participants compared to only 21% of the control group). And 38% of participants supported free global competition without special protections (such as subsidies) for American industries, while only 28% of the control group did so. But participants were skeptical that more free trade would bring more jobs. Only 43% of the participants compared to 54% of the control group agreed that "on the whole more free trade means more jobs, because we can sell more goods abroad."

By the end of their deliberations, the participants were dramatically more informed than the control group. For example, 89% could correctly identify the parties to NAFTA compared to only 43% of the control group; 59% could correctly answer whether the WTO supported the US steel tariffs that President Bush had removed, compared to only 43% of the control group; and 61% knew that we had an international force of many countries in the first Gulf War, compared to only 41% of the control group.

Participants were generally representative of their communities in terms of gender, race, income, religion and occupation. But they were more highly educated and included fewer republicans. 84% had at least some college compared to 74% of the control group and 28% said they were Republicans compared to 33% of the control groups. Democrats comprised 37% of the participants compared to 34% of the control groups and Independents were 27% of the participant and 27% of the control groups. (9% of the participants and 7% of the control groups answered "no party preference" or "other".)

Professor James Fishkin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, said "these experiments offer a glimpse of democratic possibilities-- what our politics would be like if people became more informed and talked to others who had different points of view. Instead of offering their impression of sound bites and headlines, these citizens are working through difficult issues, learning key facts and coming to an informed judgment. Their voices are well worth listening to."

The Citizen Deliberations were sponsored by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions' *By the People* project and a network of local and national organizations in Rochester, NY; Pittsburgh, PA; Sarasota, FL; Baton Rouge, LA; Kansas City, MO; Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN; Green Bay, WI; central Nebraska, San Diego, CA; and Seattle, WA.

A second round of deliberations is planned for October, just before the presidential elections. They will take place in a much larger number of cities and involve substantially more people.

BATON ROUGE RESULTS

Iraq

Participants became less tolerant of the cost of the war in Iraq, with the percent who agreed that the war would be worth the cost in lives and dollars decreasing from 56% to 48% (*non-sig change*). Support for multilateralism in Iraq was high – at over 60% - both among participants and in the control group, but it was lower than in most other locations. Support for unilateralism as a general U.S. policy increased significantly for participants post-deliberation, from 37% to 60%, and opposition decreased accordingly (50% to 29%). This put the level of support for unilateralism well above that for the control group (41%).

Participants were less dissatisfied than the control group with the progress being made in rebuilding Iraq; only 16% of participants thought the rebuilding was going poorly, while 30% of the control group thought so. (Participants were also more satisfied with the progress of rebuilding than the control group – 68% versus 54% - but not significantly so.) Participants were less concerned than the control group with the establishment of democracy in Iraq (40% thought it was important, compared with 59% of the control group). They were more concerned than the control group that a stable government be established in Iraq (85% versus 74%), but again not significantly so. However, participants were significantly more in favor of U.S. promotion of democracy *generally* than was the control group.

In contrast with most locations, a majority of participants (and a plurality – 49% - of the control group) did **not** believe that the war in Iraq had impeded the war on terror (only 34 to 35% of participants thought it had).

Trade

Participants' opinion about NAFTA's influence on the US economy improved somewhat over the course of the deliberation, with the percent who believed it had helped the American economy increasing from 23% to 48%. This put the post-deliberation participants much more favorably-disposed towards NAFTA than the control group, only 24% of whom believed NAFTA had helped the US economy. Similarly, 38% of participants supported free global competition without special protections (such as subsidies) for American industries, while only 23% of the control group did so. In contrast with most other locations, participants in Baton Rouge also became less concerned about the impact of free trade on jobs, with the percentage who disagreed with the proposal that free trade creates jobs decreasing significantly from 34 to 21%, putting the post-deliberation participants in line with the control group, 18% of whom disagreed with that statement. Post-deliberation participants were in fact *more tolerant* of the WTO than the control group, with 42% disagreeing with the statement that the US should obey WTO decisions that go against it, as compared to only 27% of the control group.

Knowledge

Participants made substantial knowledge gains and were significantly better informed post-deliberation than control group members on a number of items, both in the area of national security and in the area of trade. The proportion of participants who were able to correctly determine the general ideological position of the two major parties on national security was 76%, as compared to only 54% of the control group. 90% of participants correctly rejected the statement that Iraq's oil revenues were paying for the current occupation and rebuilding of the country, compared with only 61% of the control group. Furthermore, 47% of participants correctly identified the WTO position on U.S. steel tariffs, as compared to only 14% of the control group. And 85% of participants (versus only 31% of the control group) correctly identified the countries that are part of NAFTA.