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

After day-long "Citizen Deliberations," Americans from ten cities across the United States said they believed establishing a democracy in Iraq was less important than ensuring the country has a stable government. They also strongly favored 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, without international support.

In San Diego (see results below), the results reflected the national trend in most though not all respects.

They expressed their views in a unique experiment in civic dialogue that took place Saturday in Baton Rouge, Green Bay, Kansas City, Kearney, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Rochester, San Diego, Sarasota, and Seattle. In each city, a scientific random sample of the community was invited to consider America's national security and trade policies, while a randomly selected "control group" of citizens receiving no such invitation was asked the same questions. Across the ten cities, the participants numbered 725, and the control group members 1580.

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®. Thus, the contrast between the participants and the control group provides a picture of the ways in which public opinion on these issues might look different if people had more information and spent more time thinking about them. The results were released Sunday by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions' *By the People* project.

On national security, the participants had greater reservations than the control group about current policies in Iraq. They saw more tradeoff with the war on terror: 52%, compared to 43% of the control group thought that "the war in Iraq has gotten in the way of the war on terror." They attached greater importance to involving other countries and/or the UN: 82%, compared to 75% of the control group, agreed 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." They had more modest goals. Only 31%, compared to 51% of the control group, thought it was "absolutely or extremely important" that "a democracy be established in Iraq," while 82%, compared to 72% of the control group thought it was "absolutely or extremely important" that "a *stable* government be established [there], even if it is not democratic." And over the course of deliberation, they became uneasy about the cost of the war. Before deliberating, 45%

agreed that “by the time we leave Iraq, the results will have been worth the cost in lives and dollars”; after deliberating only 38% did so. They were also more opposed to unilateralism more generally: Fifty-six percent, compared to 50% of the control group, rejected 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 were more open to the idea of free trade than the control group was, even though they recognized that it might cost some jobs. They were more skeptical that more free trade would bring more jobs. Only 43%, 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.” But at the same time they took a more favorable view of NAFTA: 39%, compared to only 21% of the control group, thought that NAFTA had helped the American economy “a lot or somewhat.” And they gave greater support to free trade in general: 38%, compared to only 28% of the control group, supported the principle of free global competition without special protections (such as subsidies) for American industries.

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

The participants were generally representative of their communities in terms of gender, race, income, religion and occupation, although 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 group. (Democrats comprised 37% of the participants, compared to 34% of the control group.)

Professor James Fishkin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford, 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 by 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.

SAN DIEGO RESULTS

Iraq

In most respects, the results in San Diego closely mirrored those for participants nationally. 54% of participants believed that the war in Iraq had impeded the war on terror, compared with only 44% of the control group. There were very high levels of support for involving other countries and/or the UN in Iraq, with 81% of participants and 79% of the control group 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.” The participants were less concerned about the establishment of democracy in Iraq than was the control group (36% versus 51% believing it was important), while they were more concerned than the control group with establishing a stable government there (81% of participants versus 71% of the control group). In contrast with the larger national picture, however, the San Diego participants were no less tolerant of the cost of the war in Iraq than was the control group.

Trade

As with participants nationally, those in San Diego were more supportive of free trade generally than their control group counterparts; 45% of participants supported free global competition without special protections (such as subsidies) for American industries, while only 37% of the control group did so. And participants’ assessment of NAFTA’s impact on the US economy became more favorable over the course of the deliberation, with the proportion who believed it had helped the economy increasing from 26% pre- to 46% post-deliberation (compared with 32% of the control group who believed so). San Diego participants were about as skeptical as participants nationally regarding the impact of free trade on jobs, moreover, with 31% of participants (compared to only 19% of the control group) disagreeing with the statement that “on the whole more free trade means more jobs, because we can sell more goods abroad.”

Knowledge

As with participants nationally, those in San Diego showed significant gains in knowledge in both the areas of national security and trade. 83% of participants correctly rejected the statement that “Iraq’s oil revenues are currently paying for the occupation and rebuilding of Iraq,” compared with only 65% of the control group; 64% correctly identified the WTO position on US steel tariffs (compared with only 23% of the control group); and 92% correctly identified the parties to NAFTA (compared with only 57% of the control group).