



By the People is partnering with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation on the Dialogues in Democracy project.

Results of a National Online Dialogue: Rethinking the Role of Citizens in our Democracy

A national experiment in public online deliberation, sponsored by By the People in partnership with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as part of the Dialogues in Democracy project, reveals what citizens would think about their role in a democracy-if only they became more informed about the issues and talked about them together. Over 1,300 citizens from around the country participated in this experiment over four weeks in fall 2007. A nationally representative sample was recruited and randomly assigned to deliberate about the issues (301 participants) or to simply answer survey questions before and after (1,000 person control group). The results show that once people talk about the issues and become more informed about them, they change their views in significant, and sometimes surprising, ways.

"We put all of America in a virtual room to consider the future of citizenship," said James Fishkin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, which conducted the poll in conjunction with YouGov America. "The results are thoughtful and balanced and deserve to be considered by policymakers everywhere." Sample results will be featured on the By the People national broadcast, airing in January on PBS.

The discussions focused on four aspects of the role of citizens in a democracy: political participation, exercising choice, becoming informed and public service. The discussions focused on four aspects of the role of citizens in a democracy: political participation, exercising choice, becoming informed and public service. In each case there were statistically significant changes of opinion and gains in information. The sample learned a lot and changed its views. In fact, 39 out of 56 policy questions (66%) changed significantly among the deliberators from the beginning to the end of the process.

Participation

When citizens deliberated, they increased their sense that political participation was important, but they were selective about which proposals should encourage it. The percentage thinking "voting in elections" was "important to being a good citizen" rose from 90 to 96% and the percentage believing that "increasing political participation" was "important" rose from 88 to 93%. Support for "allowing Election Day registration" went up from 47 to 54% and support for "allowing felons to vote after they have served their sentences" went up from 52 to 62%. However, support for "making election day a national holiday" went down from 58 to 49%. And there was increased opposition to compulsory voting as in Australia. Opposition to "fining people who don't vote" increased from 68 to 78%. In general, participants supported voluntary methods for making the system more participatory and inclusive but they resisted compulsion and thought a national holiday unnecessary.

Exercising Choice

When citizens deliberated, they increased their sense that the current system did not offer voters enough choice. However they were, once again, selective about remedies. The percentage agreeing that "elections in the United States do not currently provide enough choice for voters" increased from 59 to 68%.

Support for "Making it easier for 3rd party candidates to get on the ballot" increased from 70 to 79%. Participants also increased their support for a national primary. The percentage agreeing it would be "effective in increasing choice for voters" to "require all state presidential primaries to be on the same day" increased from 48 to 66%. Support for the notion that "every voter should have an equal say in selecting our presidential candidates, no matter where he or she lives" rose from 84 to 90%. Clearly, there was a sense that states outside the early primary states should have a say in presidential selection and a national primary would facilitate this goal.

However, support for term limits went down. The percentage approving term limits for members of Congress declined from 69 to 59%. Participants thought that "people should have the right to vote for legislators who are doing a good job no matter how long they have been in office" (support increased slightly but significantly from 60 to 63%).

Becoming Informed

When citizens deliberated, the percentage believing in the "importance of discussing politics with others" increased from 67 to 81% and the percentage believing in the "importance of being informed about politics and political issues" increased from 92 to 97%. However, they were, once again, selective in the proposals they would support for enabling citizens to become better informed.

The percentage supporting a requirement that "broadcasters air more public affairs programming" increased from 51 to 69%. And the percentage supporting "free TV air time for candidates" increased from 57 to 71%. There was also a belief that "political

candidates should focus more on policy issues in their campaigns" (those agreeing increased from 88 to 97%) and that political candidates now "focus too much on attacking other candidates in their campaigns (increasing slightly but significantly from 90 to 93%).

However, support decreased sharply for subsidizing internet access as a way of helping citizens become more informed. The percentage supporting the use of "public funds to see to it that everyone has access to the internet" went down from 44 to 33%. And there was little change in support for providing public funding for non-partisan civic education groups to inform voters. This idea shifted from 49 to 52% (a small change that was not statistically significant).

Public Service

After deliberation, there was increasing agreement with the general importance of public service. The percentage subscribing to "the importance of serving one's country through military or other public service" increased from 72 to 79%. But the deliberators emphasized the expansion of opportunities for voluntary public service rather than any form of compulsion.

The percentage who agreed with "keeping public service voluntary but expanding public service programs like AmeriCorps and Peace Corps" increased from 66 to 78%. There was also increased agreement that "public service obligations should be the same for men and women" (rising from 69 to 76%.) And there was increased opposition to compulsory service. "Requiring a period of public service from everyone, in either the military or a civilian program" fell in support from 44 to 32%

Respondents increasingly felt that "mandatory public service runs contrary to the idea of liberty" (those agreeing rose from 53 to 64%). In particular, there was increasing opposition to a draft. Opposition to required military service rose from 68 to 76%. There was also increasing agreement that the all volunteer military had advantages (it "ensures that military personnel are motivated and suited to military life" according to a percentage that rose from 61 to 68%). Support fell from 47 to 44% for the notion that "Having an all volunteer military shifts the burden of service on to poor people who have fewer educational and professional opportunities.

Knowledge

Participants were asked a battery of eight knowledge questions related to the topics discussed.. All of them showed statistically significant increases over the course of the deliberation. The percentage knowing who must register with the selective service system increased 21 points (from 60 to 81%) while the percentage knowing which country has compulsory voting increased 16 points from 13 to 29 points. Overall, the eight knowledge questions showed an average gain of 11 points.

Summary

In general, deliberation moved the participants to feel an increased value in each of the general goals for citizens-participation, exercising choice, becoming informed and serving one's country. But in each case, they increasingly embraced voluntary and inclusive solutions and rejected compulsion-whether in the form of compulsory voting or compulsory public service. They were selective about remedies and defied ideological categories. They rejected term limits, subsidies for internet access, making election day a national holiday and all forms of compulsory public service including a draft. They embraced same day registration, voluntary public service, free TV air time for candidates, easier third party access to the ballot, voting rights for felons and having all presidential primaries on the same day. The result is a picture of representative and informed opinion. All of the changes noted here were statistically significant, both for the deliberators themselves and in comparison to the control group of participants who did not deliberate.