Deliberative Practicum Results Analysis

In the 10 weeks of this practicum, our class saw deliberative democracy in action as we implemented a deliberative polling event. From the early stages of crafting the policy proposals that participants discussed, to analyzing the results of the project, we learned how to conduct social science research. Heading into the experiment, I was curious about the projects’ ability to promote the understanding of different viewpoints and the presence of political polarization in the deliberations. From analyzing the results, I discovered that deliberations allowed for the sharing of different ideas and even opinion changes; it also decreased the overall effects of polarization among students.

I. Initial Questions

a. Promoting the Understanding of Different Viewpoints

During project implementation, I researched how scholars defined deliberative democracy to guide my understanding of the project. At the core deliberative democracy, “recognizes the need for effective justification of positions, stressing the pursuit of reciprocal understanding across those who have different frameworks or ideologies [and] valuing of inclusion and reflection.”¹ Deliberative democracy differs from representative democracy because it emphasizes communication and the understanding of different opinions, instead of focusing on votes and polling. However, deliberative democracy is not in tension with

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representative democracy; rather, it can be an extension. Deliberation focuses on the exploration of different opinions that precede voting and allows for a more informed and rich understanding of political issues when approaching the polls.² Thus, as Gutmann and Thompson explain in their “Deliberating about Bioethics” article, a deliberative experiment should aim to “encourage public-spirited perspective on policy issues,” “promote mutually respectful decision-making,” and, “enhance the quality of opinions through informed and substantive debate.”³ Drawing from my research, I wondered: Would our experiment mediate differences in opinions and promote the understanding of new viewpoints? Would students’ opinions change post-deliberation?

b. The Presence of Political Polarization

Before analyzing the results of the project, I also wondered how ideologically-driven participants would be, and whether participants with different ideologies would have serious conflicts. During my time at Stanford, I noticed that generally, students who held liberal viewpoints felt more comfortable expressing their perspectives than students who held conservative viewpoints. Whether it be in the classroom, or at the lunch table, I rarely heard people openly identify themselves as Republicans. In fact, I have never met a student who identified as a Trump supporter. However, I often heard people openly belittle and talk negatively about Trump supporters and Stanford College Republicans (SCR). From my experience at school, I would categorize Stanford as a university with a majority of students who hold liberal views. It is likely that some students are more conservative than they present

themselves, but silence their non-consensus voices for fear of being judged. In the last years, Trump’s presidency has largely exacerbated the divide between liberals and conservatives, and Democrats and Republicans. The rise of negative partisanship has intensified anger towards the opposing party, making “animosity the prime motivator in partisans’ political lives,” according to Stanford political scientists Iyengar and Krupenkin.\footnote{Iyengar, S., & Krupenkin, M. (2018). The strengthening of partisan affect. \textit{Political Psychology}, \textit{39}, 201-218. doi:10.1111/pops.12487} I wondered if students would mention their political affiliation when discussing the proposals, and whether or not they would be treated differently by students from opposing parties. Seeing as conservative views are voiced less on campus, I wondered if students with conservative views would feel comfortable enough to speak, and how other students would react to hearing these minority views. I hoped that our project would allow all students to share their opinions and encourage respectful, meaningful political debate.

II. Project Results

a. Promoting Understanding of Different Viewpoints

Results from the project revealed that deliberation mediated differences in opinions and promoted the understanding of new viewpoints. From observing the recordings of the sessions, students rarely reached consensus. Instead, among many groups, different students would disagree on different issues, and ask each other questions to understand the opposing argument. In some groups, students lacked fully-formed opinions and seemed to ponder out loud, forming their opinions with the help of their peers. The presence of moderators also encouraged more
students to participate and for students to have respectful debates. Even in sessions where students firmly disagreed with each other, they were very receptive to viewpoints from the other side. In the March 2nd 16:30 session, firm disagreement was present on the topic of universal basic income and baby bonds. When discussing baby bonds, the first ten participants that spoke shared that they preferred baby bonds over universal basic income. Following these ten participants, the student who held a conflicting view said, “I know this is an unpopular opinion, but I don’t prefer baby bonds to UBI because it doesn’t do enough… it provides so much less money and doesn’t help enough with student debt. A UBI system that’s more generous with funds would be more effective.” Overall, among the students in the session, eleven students preferred baby bonds while two students preferred universal basic income. However, the eleven students did not shut out the opinions of the other two students. Students who held the majority opinion would respond directly to the two students’ perspectives in their contributions. For example, one student responded, “I think we’re shortchanging baby bonds by only viewing it through student debt. These baby bonds could address more… short-term debt.” Another example of a session where differences were mediated is the March 2nd 8:30 deliberation. In this group, one student appeared to be the outlier and expressed more traditionally conservative views for all proposals. However, although almost all other students disagreed with this student’s views, the other students were very interested to hear their opposing side. Students would respond with “You do raise a good point” and “that is a fair point.”

Not only did the deliberations allow for the discussion of different viewpoints, it also caused opinion change among students. In the pre-survey and post-survey, students indicated their opinions towards proposals, with 0-4 as opposition and 6-10 as support. Survey results revealed that the mean rating for universal basic income decreased from 7.66 to 6.86. The mean
rating for baby bonds also decreased from 7.85 to 7.79. These numbers show that overall support for these proposals decreased. Opinion change may have resulted from several factors. First, students had access to briefing materials, and might have changed their positions after becoming more informed about the different policies. Second, the project exposed students to the viewpoints of their peers, who come from diverse backgrounds and hold various political views. Third, the nature of the discussions were open-ended, allowing students to converse freely and ask each other questions. Our project was implemented specifically with these three factors, to encourage students to entertain both sides of the debate for all proposals. Quantitative results showed that our project achieved the goal of promoting the sharing of different ideas, in which students listened, and even revised, their opinions in light of new information from their classmates.

b. Presence of Political Polarization

Results from the project revealed that deliberation lacked substantial political polarization. Even in the session with the only student who identified as “Lean Republican,” the discussion flowed smoothly without conflicts. Students did not refer to their political affiliation when expressing their views, and students did not respond with anger or animosity to views from opposing ideologies. Furthermore, quantitative results from the project revealed that deliberation overall decreased the effects of polarization.

The pre-survey revealed that among the forty-four participants, thirty-one students identified themselves as Democrats and thirteen students identified as Independent. Nobody identified as a Republican. I was initially concerned about the level of analysis I could conduct regarding political polarization, given that none of the students identified as Republican. To
investigate whether truly none of the students shared the views of the Republican party, or students felt uncomfortable identifying as Republican, I looked at the answers for Question 17 of the pre-survey. The question asked students to choose between “Lean Democrat”, “Not Lean,” and “Lean Republican.” Among the forty-four participants, one student chose “Lean Republican”; that student also cited Fox News, a cable network that speaks more favorably of the Republican Party, as one of their sources of news. Thirty-one students did not choose any of those three answer choices, and their responses were marked as “N/A”; it could be possible that a portion of these students also held more conservative views, even if they did not specify their lean. Question 17 shows that there was not a complete absence of students who held more conservative news. This suggested that the presence of political polarization in deliberation was still possible, because participants did not all identify with only one political party. Although our sample was more homogeneous with the majority of students identifying as Democrat, the pre-survey revealed that a few students held moderate, or even conservative views.

Depending on party affiliation, I made predictions of how partisans might respond to the policy proposals. For example, I predicted that a student who leaned Democrat would speak more favorably towards the implementation of government programs, like baby bonds and universal basic income, than a student who leaned Republican. To see whether political polarization was present, I studied the March 2nd 8:30 session, which included the only student who identified as “Lean Republican” (Student A), 3 students who identified as Independent, and 4 students who identified as Democrat in the pre-survey. I focused on this session because I believed it had the most potential for polarization, as it included the only student who identified as “Lean Republican.”
Student A expressed more traditionally conservative views than the other participants and seemed to be the outlier. The student spoke less favorably about universal basic income and baby bonds and expressed concerns that the government would increase taxes to fund these programs. The student said, “I don’t think it’s right for you to feel obligated to pay for other people,” (in response to paying taxes for the programs). Other participants responded with: (1) “Couldn’t it be argued that it’s your duty to your fellow citizens to help support and raise the next generation who benefit from these programs?”; (2) “Everyone got to where they are because of people behind them… we have a fundamental responsibility to set that forward in motion.” Although other participants disagreed, the presence of animosity or anger was completely absent. Student A was receptive to other opinions, and participants continued to ask Student A questions to understand their viewpoint. In this group, participants did not give their political affiliation as their reasoning behind their policy references, or react very negatively to views from opposing ideologies. I found that this was a pattern in all sessions. In fact in most sessions, participants chose not to reveal their political party at all. Thus, conversations from deliberation suggested that people from different political parties can still come together to discuss political issues, without conflict or tension.

Qualitative analysis from the results also revealed that overall, deliberation decreased the effects of polarization. When answering questions in the pre-survey and post-survey, participants provided their opinions on the proposals before and after deliberation. Answers from 0-4 signaled opposition, while answers from 6-10 signaled support. Results showed that there was movement from students to more moderate positions. Looking at students who identified as Democrats, their support for several of the more liberal proposals decreased. For Question 2_1, which proposes universal basic income, Democrats went from 7.32 in the pre-survey to 6.32 in
the post-survey. For Question 2_5, which proposed capping executive pay, Democrats went from 7.03 in the pre-survey to 5.48 in the post-survey. Among students who identified as Independents, many also changed positions on proposals. For Question 2_5, some even flipped sides. Independents went from 6.39 in the pre-survey to 4.46 in the post-survey. Also, in the pre-survey, 0% of Independents categorized themselves as in the middle, 76.% percent favored the proposal, and 23.1% opposed. In the post-survey, 7.7% moved to the middle position, and only 30.8% favored the proposal. Altogether, total support for Question 2_5 decreased by nearly 30%, from 72.7% to 43.2%. These results are interesting, because they signify changes in opinion and shifts to more moderate positions. These results suggest that deliberation actually diminished the effects of polarization. As students were exposed to different viewpoints and asked to think about the pros and cons of each proposal, their viewpoints also changed.

III. Recommendations for Future Projects

In our project, we hoped deliberation would spark discussions that encouraged the sharing of reasonable ideas. The goal of the project was not for students to reach consensus on every issue, but to promote the freedom of all types of thought and expression. This goal was achieved. Survey results revealed that deliberation mediated differences in opinions and promoted the understanding of new viewpoints, and decreased the effects of polarization. However, several factors could be altered in future deliberative projects to improve the quality of results. First, moderator influence should be uniform in all sessions, to ensure that all students have the chance and time to speak, and to freely form their opinions. In future sessions, moderators could go through more extensive training to understand their role, or human moderators could be replaced with the live moderating platform. Second, it would be interesting
to increase the sample size of participants to include undergraduate and graduate students in future projects. This project focused on Stanford freshmen enrolled in a specific class, and is not completely reflective of what the general Stanford population looks like. Third, future projects could include participants who did not already know each other. In this project, students already knew each other prior to deliberation, and this could have affected the ways they spoke. Perhaps students who were strangers would speak differently in deliberation.
Bibliography:


