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Stanford students put deliberative democracy into action

*In the largest Deliberative Polling experiment focused on young adults, Stanford students saw firsthand how informed discussion can change how people think about the world and each other.*

**BY MELISSA DE WITTE**

As polarization continues to deepen in America, over 600 young adults from across the country did something that feels impossible in these divisive times: They came together for a discussion on policy proposals ranging from Electoral College reform to President Biden’s Civilian Climate Corps, regional minimum wage, universal basic income and the implementation of a new wealth tax. Some of the participants even changed their minds after talking through these ideas with their peers, according to data compiled by Stanford students.

Helping organize the event, called *Shaping Our Future*, was a team of students enrolled in *Deliberative Democracy Practicum: Applying Deliberative Polling*, a hands-on course developed by the Center for Deliberative Democracy (https://cdd.stanford.edu/) (CDD) and the Haas Center for Public Service (https://haas.stanford.edu/) to give students an opportunity to learn quantitative and qualitative research methods by working on a Deliberative Polling (https://cdd.stanford.edu/what-is-deliberative-polling/) project.

The Deliberative Polling method was developed by Stanford scholar James Fishkin (https://profiles.stanford.edu/james-fishkin) and involves putting people together for an informed discussion about issues that the public has said matters to them. Fishkin, along with other scholars affiliated with the CDD, have found that this technique can lead to a depolarized and more democratic society.

“I think that it’s really easy to get caught up with what you believe in and have that echoed back at you through social media or through conversations with friends or social networks where you find yourselves spending most of your time,” said Tara Hein, ’23, a political science major who took the course. “Even if you do want to engage in conversations with people who might have different views, finding those spaces can be really challenging.”
Over the spring quarter, Hein and other students enrolled in the course brainstormed topics for discussion, prepared the pre- and post-event surveys that asked participants about those topics, analyzed the data and wrote a report with their key findings that was released June 21.

Stanford worked in collaboration with a think tank, the Berggruen Institute, and the nonprofit organization Equal Citizens, as well as some 35 campuses from across the country, to recruit a random sample of participants aged between 18 and 29. The research firm Generation Lab also helped.

These collaborative efforts culminated in the largest Deliberative Polling event for that age group to date.

**Power of deliberation**

Over a weekend in May, participants logged on to a customized online platform the CDD designed (https://cdd.stanford.edu/online-deliberation-platform/) in collaboration with the Stanford Crowdsourced Democracy Team (https://voxpopuli.stanford.edu/) to facilitate a structured and equitable conversation with more opportunities for participants to speak up. In addition to attending small group discussions, participants also sat in on two plenary sessions with balanced panels of experts.

In attendance were some 617 young adults. Nearly 70 percent were enrolled in either a community college, a public or private university, a Hispanic-serving institution or a historically Black college or university. Some 19 percent had already completed a higher education degree and 12 percent had neither enrolled nor completed a post-secondary education. About 60 percent identified as Democrat, 25 percent as Independent and 7 percent as Republican. Participants came from 38 states as well as Washington, D.C., with a majority – 81 percent – living in urban or suburban areas. About 56 percent identified themselves as female, 38 percent as male.

While the sample was not nationally representative, it did provide the research team with some surprising insight into the power of deliberation, particularly as a way to lead to more informed opinions, said Alice Siu, (https://cdd.stanford.edu/people/) CDD’s associate director and a co-instructor of the practicum course.

For example, the percentage of people who said they had no opinion on some of the policy proposals decreased after the event. Some 8.1 percent of participants said they had no opinion on universal basic income (UBI). At the end of the weekend, it dropped to only 1.3 percent. Several other policy areas also saw a decrease in “no opinion” responses after the event: On Biden’s idea of a Civilian Climate Corps, 34.4 percent of participants said they had no opinion but after deliberation it changed to 4.7 percent. Ranked choice voting shifted from 14.3 percent to 3.7 percent, and the fractional proportional method of awarding electoral votes decreased from 17.3 percent to 5.3 percent.

“This is a huge feat for democracy, because we want people to be able to formulate their own opinions, thoughts and views on these issues. So having a large number of people forming their own views on these issues over a weekend’s deliberation is a really important finding for us,” Siu said.

For some participants, these conversations also changed their positions, particularly around topics related to UBI and the minimum wage. Prior to the event, 81.6 percent agreed that a minimum wage should reflect differences in the cost of living across the United States. Following deliberation, support dropped to 61.6 percent: People were concerned that businesses might relocate to places with lower wages. Others pointed out that even with a regional minimum wage, disparities still exist within the state itself.
Enthusiasm also waned after discussions about UBI. For example, some 60 percent of participants said the federal government should give cash grants of $1,000. Following deliberation, it dropped to 57 percent. “Drawing from my experience on campus, I certainly did not expect support for UBI and the regional minimum wage to decrease,” said Thay Graciano, ’23. “In observing the conversations in real time, I noticed people were bringing up valid points about why they did not believe that something could be implemented in a way that they thought was fair.”

For example, some participants pointed out that $1,000 is not worth the same across different regions of the United States. Questions were raised about how to fund the program and if wealthier Americans needed the money.

“Despite the left tilt of the sample, participants didn’t just move to their ideological corners, even on key liberal priorities like the minimum wage and UBI,” said Luke Terra (https://haas.stanford.edu/person/luketerra), associate director and director of community-engaged learning and research at Haas and co-instructor of the course. “The drop in support for the regional minimum wage proposal in particular shows the value of exposing people to diverse perspectives on complex policy choices.”

For Aden Beyene, ’24, what made Shaping Our Future effective was the opportunity to hear how people’s backgrounds shape what they believe in.

“For a lot of participants, when they articulated their views, their statements had a similar format. They would begin with ‘I believe such and such, because such and such.’ I think the most salient part of the discussion was the ‘because’ element,” Beyene said. “These participants were speaking from their own experience, their own lived opinions on the subject.”


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