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## **First Online Deliberative Opinion Poll®**

### **Reveals Informed Opinions on World Problems**

#### **Democracy Online**

The world's first Online Deliberative Opinion Poll® reveals the potential for a new form of democracy on the Internet. Public consultation on the Internet now occurs primarily through "quick votes" with self-selected samples as well as a few efforts to conduct traditional polling. However, information technology offers new potential for an entirely different form of democracy -- one that is both representative and informed.

A fully representative sample of 280 Americans participated in the online Deliberative Poll. Participants were evenly divided by gender. 30 percent were non-white and 35 percent had high school education or less. Approximately one-third of the participants did not own a home computer with Internet access; they were provided the necessary equipment and technology. Respondents included many participants who would have encountered impediments to participating in an extended public dialogue in person—those who were sick or had significant handicaps or who had small children. The technology made it possible for these individuals to participate over an extended period from the convenience of their home.

Participants met online, in small groups of 10-20 with trained moderators, to discuss the proper role of the United States in world affairs. The fact that participants actually spoke to each other (as opposed to merely typing text messages) made these online discussions personalized and comparable to in-person meetings.

The online discussions began in early December and continued over a period of four weeks (with a break for the holidays). Each group assembled twice a week for an hour, over a period of four weeks. Each week the discussion focused on competing objectives of U.S. foreign policy from the right to strike unilaterally or multilaterally against potential terrorists or other enemies, to promoting the spread of democratic governance in the world, working cooperatively with other nations, adjusting international trade barriers, and combating AIDS and world hunger in developing countries.

In the ordinary course of affairs, most people have little incentive to invest time and effort in acquiring political information: hence the opinions expressed in conventional polls tend

to be top-of-the-head snapshots, quite possibly very different from what they would be if the respondents actually knew or thought more about the issues.

In contrast to the conventional opinion poll, a Deliberative Poll provides participants with sustained opportunities to discuss, learn and reflect on important policy issues. Thus, the opinions expressed are more substantial and well reasoned than those typically given in the course of ordinary public opinion polls.

Prior to each online meeting, participants read carefully balanced and non-partisan briefing materials (designed by the National Issues Forums Institute and the Kettering Foundation) offering an overview of “Americans’ Role in the World”. They also posed clarifying questions to experts who represented a variety of views. The questions and answers were posted on the PBS Online Newshour website: [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/poll\\_main.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/poll_main.html). The briefing materials are also available there.

## **Results**

After deliberation, the participants increased their willingness for the U.S. to take responsibility for problems around the world. These changes were statistically significant when compared to a control group of 303 online respondents who were questioned before and after, but who did not deliberate. The percentages who placed priority on providing food and medical help to poor countries rose from 51% to 67%, on protecting human rights in other countries from 49% to 60%, on protecting weaker nations against aggression from 56% to 68%, and on reducing world poverty from 50% to 60%. The percentage who agreed that ‘global warming is a serious problem and we need to act now’ increased from 49 to 61%. Those who were willing to make sacrifices to deal with environmental problems such as requiring higher mileage from vehicles and cleaner ways of producing electricity rose, even though the questions specified that those changes would require less powerful automobiles and higher electricity rates. There was increased support for foreign aid as a way of promoting democracy abroad (from 33 to 42 %) and increased support for foreign aid spending in general (11% to 22%). There was also increased support, from 42 to 57%, for the notion that foreign assistance should be conducted through “The US and allies acting through the UN and international institutions like the World Bank” (as opposed to the US or its close allies acting themselves). On international trade, the percentage believing that imports cause a loss of jobs went down from 47% to 34% and the percentage in favor of repealing NAFTA went down 44% to 33%.

### **Comparing Two Deliberative Polls: Online and Face-to-Face**

Research on face-to-face deliberative polls, which have been conducted in various countries -- including the United States, Australia, Denmark, Britain, and Bulgaria -- demonstrates that participants become substantially more informed and that their opinions toward the issues in question undergo significant change as a result. This is the first time that the process has been conducted online, and the results show that online discussion and face-to-face discussion produce similar results. This online Deliberative Poll culminated soon after the National Issues Convention, a face-to-face Deliberative Poll in Philadelphia with a national random sample of 340 participants that deliberated with the same briefing materials and took the same questionnaire January 12, 2003.

The picture of public opinion after deliberation from the two projects is strikingly similar, despite the differences in the two processes. Post-deliberation, both samples insist on multilateral support before military intervention, both are more willing to take up responsibility for global problems such as Aids in developing countries, world hunger or the environment. Both are far less likely to agree that we should deal with problems at home first, rather than tackle problems abroad. Both become more knowledgeable about the percentage of foreign aid in the budget and increase the percentage who wish to raise it. Both also increase their knowledge levels on a battery of other items. Both are more willing to make specific sacrifices to help the environment such as requiring higher gas mileage for vehicles. While the face to face changes tended to be somewhat larger, the direction of change was consistently the same: taking more responsibility for serious problems abroad and wanting to deal with those problems cooperatively through international institutions.

On Iraq and international security, both projects added some questions in the post-test about the conditions under which the public would support war. Only 39% of the online deliberators and 37% of the face to face deliberators agreed that: “The US should invade Iraq if the US finds evidence that convinces the US but not the UN Security Council that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.” And only 23% of the online deliberators and 22% of the face-to-face deliberators agreed “The US should invade Iraq if there is no new evidence found by the inspectors, but the US still has reasons to believe that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.” By contrast, if the UN inspectors find evidence that convinces both the US and the UN Security Council, then 77% of the face-to-face deliberators and 68% of the online deliberators would support invasion.

Overall, the online and face-to-face projects present a picture of informed policy preferences: the US should cooperate with other countries on military action and on solving the world’s problems, the US should do more for the environment and for dealing with serious problems in developing countries such as hunger and disease. Both sets of participants were willing to make sacrifices to tackle these problems. Finally, in both cases, participants entered the dialogue as US citizens and left looking a bit more as if they were also citizens of the world.

### **Partners**

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