

Americans moderate views in deliberative democracy experiment

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Liberal and conservative citizens weighing options for reducing the national debt moderated their views as a result of deliberation in the largest experiment in deliberative democracy ever. They also made hard choices about spending cuts and tax increases, reported political scientists from the University of California, Riverside, UC Berkeley and Harvard University.

Their [study](#) – “The Difference that [Deliberation](#) Makes” – issued Dec. 2 found that 3,500 Americans who participated in a national town hall on the federal budget June 26 came up with some of the same recommendations as the chairs of President Obama’s bipartisan debt commission, but also differed on some important issues. The Obama commission issued its report earlier this week and is expected to take a final vote on the recommendations today.

Participants in the daylong June town hall meetings – convened by the nonpartisan advocacy group America Speaks in 19 cities and online – favored raising taxes on the very wealthy, raising the corporate income tax rate, and establishing a carbon tax and a security transaction tax. They also supported cuts in national defense and military spending.

“The budget deficit and federal debt are clearly issues about which ordinary Americans care a great deal and are willing to make difficult trade-offs,” said Kevin Esterling, associate professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside and one of the study’s authors.

Funded by a \$300,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Esterling and researchers Archon Fung from Harvard Kennedy School and Taeku Lee from UC Berkeley analyzed responses from 3,500 people selected to participate in the national town hall on the U.S. budget and economy as well as a control group chosen to mirror the town hall participants. Those participants represented a cross-section of Americans recruited by local nonpartisan groups to reflect diversity in race, gender, income and political ideology.

America Speaks distributed nonpartisan reading material developed in consultation with an ideologically diverse national advisory committee about the budget and public priorities. Participants were randomly assigned to small groups where they discussed their preferences for allocating money and setting priorities, including how to cut spending and/or raise taxes.

Study participants evaluated 42 reform options that included tax increases and spending cuts. Nearly two-thirds of the groups taking part in the discussion were able to develop compromise packages that would reduce the deficit by \$1 trillion or more. The researchers said an important trend in this deliberation was moderation. Conservatives became more willing to support tax increases and reductions in defense spending and liberals became more willing to decrease spending on some public programs.

Deliberative democracy relies on popular consultation to make policy and encourages citizens to engage in an intellectual way with their government, a process that researchers believe improves knowledge about issues and policies, trust in political institutions and engagement with the political process, said Esterling, who is one of only a few political scientists conducting experimental research on deliberative democracy in the United States.

The idea of deliberative democracy is that when people sit down and talk about issues they are more likely to listen to others and temper their own views, he said. “It might not change your position, but it might help you understand the rationale of people who differ from you. That is important in a democracy. It’s important that we can disagree in a way that’s reasonable and respectful of other opinions.”

“Overall, the Our Budget, Our Economy event appears to have achieved its goals of bringing together a diverse group of ordinary Americans to engage each other in constructive discussion,” the researchers wrote. “Both liberals and conservatives appear to have moderated in their policy views regarding spending cuts and tax increases. And the organizers appear to have been quite successful in creating a forum for open and balanced discussion, based on the self-reports of participants as well as the extensive observation by our 19 on-site research assistants.”

The tendency for liberals and conservatives to moderate their positions is quite encouraging, they researchers wrote.

“Public deliberation helps to reveal the considered opinions of citizens, a kind of opinion policy-makers should care about,” they said.

“At the end of the day, participants at the town hall meetings had the chance to choose a single most important message to politicians. The vast majority of participants indicated they wanted politicians to set aside partisan bickering in favor of finding solutions to America’s problems. This sounds like good advice to us.”

Provided by University of California, Riverside

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