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Nebraska Immigration: Deliberative Polling and Civic Engagement on Broadcast and New Media Coverage

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Abstract

Data were analyzed from an October 2007 deliberative poll event in Omaha, Nebraska. The focus of pre-event survey questions was on the usefulness of media sources on the coverage of the global immigration issue. The goal of the project was to promote civic engagement of citizens on an important public issue. The focus of post-event survey questions was on attention paid to media. Additionally, a post-event focus group explored public opinion on credibility of various news sources. While the deliberative poll produced some evidence of short-term effects in terms of citizens learning about the immigration issue, attitudes about media credibility appeared to be well established before the event and based on personal experiences. These beliefs may also have influenced the course of dialogue within the deliberative poll event. The method proved valuable for exploring in-depth views about controversial issues.

Nebraska Immigration: Deliberative Polling and Civic Engagement on Broadcast and New Media Coverage

Immigration has been a contentious issue across the United States. As undocumented workers cross the U.S./Mexico border and fill job openings, some Americans have criticized federal government policies and their impact. Analysts point out that half of immigrant workers come to the U.S. from Mexico but the public, confused by a lack of issue education and superficial media coverage, may not be able to distinguish between legal and illegal workers:

People used to read newspapers and listen to the news regularly; today, headlines and the ten-second sound bite may form the depth of news knowledge... The Internet and blogosphere have contributed to negative attitudes about immigration, as they quickly and widely disseminate myths and misconceptions, as well as vitriolic commentary (Strategic Discussions for Nebraska 2008: 4).

Research on how people use media and obtain gratification from content date to the 1940s and it has been found that prior motivations and selectivity impact potential influences on social issues (Baran and Davis 2000: 256). In brief, the public seeks information that reinforces

goals, needs, and orientations.

From a social utility perspective, we often talk about what we read, see, and hear. In the view of Dominick (2009), media use has “conversational currency” because “media provide a common ground for social conversations...” (40). While such conversations typically happen within one’s primary groups, it is also possible to bring people together in social settings that are designed to cultivate and develop beliefs about public issues. Such conversation is one way to activate engagement of citizens on important public issues.

Deliberative Polling

In response to the limitations of public opinion polls to represent informed opinion in a democracy, Fishkin and his colleagues have developed a deliberative poll method that includes providing people with information on public issues before seeking their opinions (Luskin et al. 2002). Deliberative polling can be used “when policy makers or the media want citizen input on subjects as diverse as health care, immigration, or foreign policy...” (Fishkin and Rosell 2004: 55). A daylong event may provide people with an opportunity to learn about complexities of issues. Additionally, deliberative polls often have been paired with the videotaping for a later public television broadcast. The results of deliberative polls provide researchers with information about opinion formation in “a quasi-experiment” (Fishkin and Luskin 2005: 188). Further, the discovery of informed opinion on a controversial issue, such as immigration, is designed to provide policy makers with valuable information in advance of possible legislation. From a communication perspective, deliberative polls not only address the problem of uninformed public opinion, they also may trigger democratic interest among a disinterested public (Sturgis et al. 2005: 30).

Deliberative polls may be related to civic engagement movement, that seeks to broaden public discussion beyond political elites and mass media. While a deliberative poll can produce

group effects by changing opinion in more than one direction, the focus on a single issue "...can translate into sizeable shifts in the distribution of collective preferences" (Sturgis 2003: 474). In the case of immigration, some of the important context for the public involves immigrants filling minimum wage or sub-minimum wage jobs in "...primarily the agricultural, construction, manufacturing, hospitality and domestic-work sectors" (Murphey 2006: 339). As such, arguments often are reduced to the problem of illegal immigration versus the need to fill jobs that are unappealing to most citizens. In Nebraska, the meatpacking industry, agriculture, and construction provide ample opportunities for legal and illegal immigrants to find work. Against this backdrop as well as a concurrent and intense national immigration debate, a 2007 deliberative poll in Omaha sought to explore the issue.

Research Questions

RQ1: How useful was media information about the immigration issue to deliberative poll participants?

RQ2: How credible were various news sources on the immigration issue?

RQ3: What was the impact of the deliberative poll event on participants?

Methodology

Data were analyzed from an October 2007 deliberative poll event in Omaha, Nebraska. One hundred Omaha residents gathered on the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus to engage in a *By The People: Dialogues in Democracy* deliberation (University of Nebraska Public Policy Center 2007). The local project was part of a larger national PBS television dialogue research effort. The deliberative polling methodology was developed in the United States in 1996 and has been adopted by researchers in various foreign countries (Center for Deliberative Democracy 2008). In brief, research subjects are administered a pre-event survey, attend local discussions and then are surveyed again following the small group and large group deliberations.

In this study, media questions were asked within the context of a broader collection of data before the deliberative dialogue.

Sampling

In the present study, the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center contracted with the University of Nebraska – Lincoln Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR) to recruit participants from within the Omaha city limits. BOSR began with 3,091 random telephone numbers, over-sampling African-American and Hispanic/Latino neighborhoods. In September 2007 BOSR sent 2,120 pre-notification letters and then made contact through telephone calls and contact with 1,956 households in the sample. Of these, 542 respondents completed the pre-event survey, 179 agreed to attend the deliberation, 89 indicated they might attend and 274 declined. BOSR followed up with two informational mailings and telephone calls. Participants were given a briefing booklet summarizing the various Nebraska immigration issues. A total of 189 individuals agreed to participate, including ten from the original uncertain group. In the end, a total of 100 actually attended the October 14, 2007 event. While participants constituted a non-probability sample, they reflected a diverse group of Omahans on a wide range of demographic variables and were similar to other deliberative polling groups across the nation. Out of these participants, 51 percent identified themselves as Democrats, 21 percent as Republicans, 23 percent as Independents, and five percent as Other. Respondents were paid \$75 each.

Survey Instruments

Local and national survey questions were focused on immigration and civic engagement (University of Nebraska Public Policy Center 2007). The focus of pre-event survey questions was on the usefulness of media sources on the coverage of the global immigration issue. Respondents participated in one of ten breakout discussion groups on issues related to immigration. Afterward, post-event survey questions asked for information on the amount of

attention respondents paid to media. Additionally, a post-event focus group explored public opinion on credibility of various news sources.

Focus Group

During the final survey, participants who expressed an interest in mass media issues were asked to remain to participate in a post-event focus group. Six participants agreed to do so and responded to a set of structured focus group questions.

Results

The pre-event survey data revealed a broad range of useful media types. While there was an emphasis on traditional media, usefulness of Internet news was increasing (see Table 1, N=101).

Table 1: Pre-Event Usefulness of Media Information about Immigration Issue

Media Type	Not Useful	Useful	Very Useful	DK/Other
Network TV News	5.9	46.5	42.6	5.0
Cable News	9.9	37.6	42.6	9.9
Local TV News	9.9	47.5	37.6	5.0
The Local Newspaper	12.9	49.5	31.7	5.9
National News Magazines	16.8	46.5	21.8	14.9
Local Radio News	22.8	39.6	28.7	8.9
Talk Radio	26.7	40.6	24.8	7.9
Internet News	22.8	32.7	22.8	21.7
Blogs	43.6	13.9	3.0	39.5

Bold numbers reflect the largest percentage for each media type.

The respondents were asked which best described their view of media coverage on the immigration issue: “news media are more liberal on the issue than my personal view” (7.9 percent); “news media are more conservative on the issue than my personal view” (32.7 percent); “news media mirror my personal view on the issue” (34.7 percent); “don’t know” (24.7 percent). The results suggested a higher proportion of liberal leaning responses.

A majority of respondents used television, radio and newspapers on a daily basis (see

Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency of Using Media Types for General News

Media Type	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
Television	86.1	10.9	0.0	1.0	2.0
Radio	55.4	14.9	3.0	13.9	12.8
Newspapers	54.5	26.7	4.0	8.9	5.9
Internet	30.7	17.8	8.9	9.9	32.7
Magazines	8.9	19.8	23.8	32.7	14.8

Bold numbers reflect the largest percentage for each media type.

Television, newspapers and radio also were seen as the most credible news sources for information about the immigration issue (see Table 3).

Table 3. Credibility of News Sources on the Immigration Issue

Media Type	Not	Neutral	Fairly	Very	DK/Other
Television	9.9	16.8	53.5	15.8	4.0
Newspapers	7.9	15.8	55.4	15.8	5.1
Magazines	7.9	35.6	42.6	5.0	8.9
Radio	12.9	20.8	50.5	12.9	2.9
Internet	11.9	31.7	39.6	6.9	9.9

Group Assignment

At the event, participants were randomly assigned into ten different discussion groups. Participants completed a second survey about immigration and civic engagement issues. At this point, participants were given written and video briefing materials about immigration issues in Nebraska. The groups then convened for breakout sessions moderated by trained discussion leaders. Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET) and the present research group videotaped some of the discussions, moving from group to group. Additionally, trained note-takers summarized all discussion. In general, the group discussions focused on the following topics: undocumented immigrants, education, language, employment, economic impact

identification of workers, health insurance, and social security. Mass media were rarely mentioned.

At the end of small group sessions, the 100 participants reconvened at a plenary that featured a state lawmaker, an immigration attorney, and a professor. A television moderator from NET led the discussion that was videotaped for a later broadcast. At the end of the final session, participants completed a post-event survey about immigration and civic engagement issues.

Post-Event Survey Data

A post-event survey reflected a balance between media use and interpersonal talk about the immigration issue after participation in the deliberative polling (see Table 4).

Table 4: Activities Following Event Compared to Usual Behavior

Activities	Much <	<	Usual	>	Much >	DK/Other
Paid attention to TV, radio, or newspaper stories about political issues	1.9	6.8	47.6	26.2	12.6	4.8
Talked with family, friends, or coworkers about political issues	3.9	4.9	39.8	34.0	12.6	4.7
Searched for information about political issues on the Web or in the library	10.7	17.5	35.0	21.4	9.7	5.6

Focus Group Data

Six participants who expressed an interest in media issues stayed after the polling event had ended and took part in a focus group. There were three men and three women. Among men, all three were Caucasian, with two under 50 years of age and one older than 50. Among women,

one was Latina, one was African-American, and one was Caucasian. In terms of age, one was under 50 while the other two women were over 50.

Focus group members were asked for their perceptions of the prime media source for the public's information about immigration. Specifically, they were asked: "Which media is your primary information source when it comes to immigration?" Four of the six focus group members mentioned television (that included cable television news, public television news, and local television news), one mentioned newspapers and one mentioned the Internet. All three females responded that it was television, while males mentioned television along with newspapers and Internet sites. The heavy Internet user, Peter, sampled major national newspapers as well as the entire political spectrum. Similarly, a heavy cable television news user, David, mentioned CNN, FOX, and MSNBC. One focus group member, Ruby, mentioned only television generically and would not be more specific. Two other group members, Donna and Lonnie, mentioned the convenience of cable television news. The primary newspaper user, Joseph, was interested in local issues.

Further, respondents also were asked: "Which media do you think are most influential?" Four respondents pointed to cable television news, one to newspaper and one to network television news:

Peter: "I still think major newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* are the most influential. I believe local newspapers are the most influential in their own markets. I tend to dismiss local TV news because it tends to be pretty superficial."

Ruby: "I try to read the local newspaper and I thought they were the most influential, but my kids don't read the paper or watch TV, but they get all their information over the Internet, and they seem as well informed from that as my husband and I are."

Focus group members were also asked: “Which media do you think are most reliable and least reliable?” Three of the six focus group members perceive the local newspaper as most reliable, and four of the six members perceive the Internet as least reliable. For example, Joseph, was a heavy local newspaper user and this influenced him:

Joseph: “To me the farther you are away from a story, the less accurate you’re going to be... The Internet, without a doubt. Anybody can put anything on there without accreditation or follow-up, or back-up, or supporting documentation.”

But Donna was the only focus group member emphasizing the Internet as the most reliable source:

Donna: “There was a time you couldn’t believe anything in the National Enquirer, but now it’s like I make sure I get in the aisle where it’s sold... There is a lot of truth on the Internet, because people are not afraid. There’s a sense of anonymity. They’ll say things on there they can back up.”

All six participants agreed that talk radio is one of the least reliable media sources.

Focus group members were asked to look beyond mass media and describe other good sources for immigration information: “Besides media, who or what do you consider a good source on immigration topics? Why?” Focus group members emphasized the value of personal experience and observation of local immigrants. Additionally, they talked about obtaining information through their local schools, churches, and visits to ethnic restaurants:

David: “This is a radical idea, but immigrants just might be a good source of information...or just something as simple as visiting 24th Street on a regular basis or visiting the restaurants. There is no substitute for personal experience...or for first-hand experiences and contact. Show me somebody like a teacher or somebody in social services, and I’ll show you somebody that I’d like to listen to.”

Joseph: “If you want to know about immigration or the latest scoop, go ask someone who’s in the process, or is hiding from the process, or is looking to find out about the process.”

Ruby, a Latina focus group member, was the only participant of the six currently living in a predominantly immigrant area of Omaha. Her daughters attended a local high school and brought information about immigrants home. She synthesized a multitude of observations about immigrants over time:

Ruby: “Watching how they live, and realizing that their customs are not the same as ours, but if you give them a chance and sit back, they watch to see what we are doing and they try to live the same way we are.”

Another focus group member, Donna, hires immigrants and talks to them about issues.

Finally, four of the six focus group members had some connection to the local school system and explained that this led to learning about immigration issues.

There were two final questions asked of focus group members. First, they were asked: “After hearing opinions expressed today which of you, if any, may re-evaluate the quality of information from your preferred media sources?” Nobody said they would. Second, they were asked: “After hearing what you heard today, will you go out and seek a different source of media information?” Donna, a cable television news user, responded that Peter, an Internet user, had convinced her to go look at some of his suggested websites.

Discussion

While the deliberative poll produced some evidence of short-term effects in terms of citizens learning about the immigration issue, attitudes about media credibility, based upon the focus group, appeared to be well-established before the event and based on personal experiences. These beliefs may also have influenced the course of dialogue within the deliberative poll event.

The method proved valuable for exploring in-depth views about controversial issues. Although a deliberative polling event is conducted with a relatively small number of people, the results reflect the context of an intense, daylong interaction on a specific issue.

Education may reduce public confusion about the immigration issue and the deliberative polling approach offers useful context. Structured discussion appeared to promote formation of opinions on controversial aspects of the immigration problem. Such discussion may trigger civic engagement and allow for public sentiments to reach media and lawmakers.

Participants utilized deliberative poll briefing facts to help frame their discussions. They reported traditional media remained most useful but this was in combination with Internet sources. Radio, television, and newspapers were judged as the most credible news sources on the immigration issue.

The post-event focus group highlighted the importance of both elite national news media, particularly newspapers and cable television networks, and the local newspaper. The Internet served as a supplemental source for additional information. The deliberative poll appeared to have some impact on participant interest in media stories about immigration and their desire to talk about the issue with others. The activation of civic engagement on important public issues goes beyond what typically happens in private settings where news is consumed. Citizens process media stories, but it is civic conversation that helps people articulate their views. The Omaha event led to short-term crystallization of opinions.

However, waning media and public interest in the immigration issue followed because of the 2008 presidential election and worsening global economy. Among competing issues for political, media, and public agendas the immigration issue and its possible solutions took a backseat to the more pressing issues of the day.

Future research should study opinion formation over time, across a wider range of political viewpoints. A limitation of the current study was that the attendees of the deliberative poll event leaned slightly liberal in their overall political perspectives. In the end, states such as Nebraska have less control over immigration law than the federal government. The deliberative polling method may be valuable as a mechanism for measuring and using national public opinion on important issues.

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