

Science and Citizenship at the NIC

by Catherine Flavin & Regina Dougherty

From the armadillo races to the small group discussions, our status as observers at the National Issues Convention allowed us to witness much during our three days at the University of Texas. Depending on who you talked to, the NIC was a giant step toward the restoration of bottom-up democracy, a benign but futile attempt at citizen engagement, or a dubious and dangerous experiment in public manipulation. Media coverage of the NIC, as it unfolded in the weeks following, did nothing to dispel this profound sense of ambiguity. Consider the front-page headlines of two Texas dailies from the Monday after: "Convention Delegates Say Idea Worked" read the Austin-American Statesman; "Delegates, Analysts Say Issues Conference Fell Short," replied the Dallas Morning News. Alternately billed as "a poll with a human face" and "the Waterworld of focus groups," there is much to be both praised and criticized in the deliberative opinion poll. As both witnesses to and reviewers of Professor Fishkin's project, we offer a combination commentary-critique of his theory and its realization in Austin this past January.

If reactions to the National Issues Convention seem irreconcilable, perhaps it is because Jim Fishkin tried to do two wholly incompatible things. First, he tried to rescue the national electoral process from the stranglehold of political consultants and media elites by imbuing it with a healthy dose of active citizen participation. For this, Fishkin should be praised. His effort to provide a diverse group of Americans with conditions that encourage thoughtful discussion and mutual respect is certainly commendable.

But Fishkin also tried to quantify the benefits that such conditions afford through a public opinion poll. His wager may have been on the citizens, but he secured his bet with social science collateral. This was a mistake. While the poll ostensibly made his project more legitimate, in reality it devalued the deliberative process by distracting attention from it. The survey encouraged journalists to focus on the "before and after" results, and gave the critics the methodological ammunition needed to shoot down the entire project.

Lost in the melee was the true force of the undertaking. What the NIC demonstrated is that, given the chance, American citizens are willing and able to participate in a national politics that expects them to do more than just react to media images and campaign rhetoric.

Political Will and Practical Wisdom

Time and again we are bombarded with images of the apathetic citizen. Often portrayed as disinterested in, even incapable of, intelligently participating in the governing process, the average American is relegated to the role of political spectator. What we found at the National Issues Convention was a group of Americans enthusiastic about and capable of contributing to the national debate. While perhaps lacking specific facts, delegates were armed with an abundance of a practical wisdom, rooted in life experience. They were competent and thorough in their discussion of the issues. Hardly deluded by the idealism of the weekend—they too recognized

some of the limitations of the NIC—the delegates were still hopeful about its possible effects.

Notwithstanding the attractions of a \$300 stipend, free airfare, meals and hotel accommodations, many delegates were simply eager for the chance to take part in a national experiment of this kind. A curious Minnesota delegate closed his dental office for the weekend, and, like many, battled ice storms and travel delays to get to Austin. For a manager of a McDonald's restaurant in Illinois, the financial support made her decision easier, but she was more than willing to participate in what she perceived to be "an important political event."

Indeed, the NIC provided the rare opportunity for sustained discussion of three broad topics: foreign policy, the economy and the American family. Engaged in almost incessant debate of the issues, the delegates explored such complex and weighty questions as what defines our national interest, what incentives encourage economic growth, how we might achieve equal opportunity, and develop strategies to sustain

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struggling American families. They talked not only in the scheduled seminar-style sessions, but in the hallways, hotels and restrooms.

“I came because I wanted to listen, to hear what these people were going to say, not because I wanted to talk,” Bryan Sween of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota explained. “Then I was pulled in. People asked what I thought, and I realized I had something to add.” Other delegates voiced similar sentiments, and the Convention did appear to provide what

Fishkin had hoped for — “a social context that effectively motivates people to ... express their views.”¹ Of the groups we observed, participation in the discussions was broad, and most of the delegates were heard from, although there were some exceptions. A few voices were softer than the others or

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even silent, and there was anecdotal evidence that women and minorities spoke less.

But if it is the caliber of the discussions, not the amount of participation that we are interested in, there was certainly evidence of its overall high quality. There were unmistakable signs of meaningful deliberation in the small group discussions. The delegates were willing to acknowledge the complexity of the issues being considered and to entertain several points of view, thus avoiding the highly polarized debates that seem to characterize so much national political discourse. The discussions were for the most part civil but not unemotional. While rancorous exchanges were rare, delegates were nonetheless passionately engaged. There were clear indications of people struggling within themselves, as well as with each other. In approaching a more public judgment, delegates began to move from “I” to “we” when talking about what needs to be done. The face-to-face discussions encouraged the delegates to pass up private interests in favor of public goods, to step into other people’s stories, and to share their own.

Indeed, people were most compelling, their arguments most effective, when they told their own stories and talked about what they knew. During the Friday afternoon session on the American economy, delegates Pat

Elmore, a Republican entrepreneur from California, and James Lewis, a GM worker from Michigan and a Democrat, became involved in a heated debate over wages and the state of the American economy. A union member, Lewis complained of what he sees as the unfair distribution of wealth in this country,

arguing that business owners’ concern for profit often superseded their concern for workers. Elmore relayed his experience as a small business owner, challenged with providing good wages and benefits for employees while remaining competitive with larger firms.

And, during the foreign policy discussion, many delegates in one group insisted that the US unequivocally must have a clearly defined national interest before getting involved in overseas conflicts. Delegate Herman Blizzard talked about his experience as a soldier who had visited Dachau after World War II as a personnel officer in the 7708 War Crimes Group. Reminding his fellow delegates of the cruelties people can

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inflict on others, he insisted: “From history we know we have a responsibility to humankind. And, simply, it is easier to put out a brush fire than it is to put out a big forest fire.” Under the specter of the holocaust, the discussion moved to con-

sider the importance of protecting human rights while at the same time promoting national interests.

Overall, one of the most interesting aspects of the NIC was the way in which it blurred the boundaries that presently divide so much of American society. In an era of gated communities, “chocolate cites and vanilla suburbs,”² the NIC brought people together across racial and economic lines. Along with diverse backgrounds came diverse perspectives. Presented with viewpoints they may not have considered before, many delegates found the comments of the other group members useful in thinking about the issues, and discovered that people with opinions very different from their own had good reasons for what they think. As David Mathews, President of the Kettering Foundation, argued, “The most profound effect of deliberation is to change my opinion of your opinions.... This creates a sense of possibility.”

This process of discussion, this sense of possibility, was the heart of the National Issues Convention. Rather than being left to rely on newspaper headlines and television soundbites, the delegates were able to hear competing arguments and encouraged to consider complex alternatives, both of which are crucial for meaningful, ongoing public discourse. Having shown themselves capable of giving serious consideration

to different points of view and to the agenda set by the NIC organizers, the delegates also exhibited another desirable quality for citizenship — the capacity to be critical of the process.

Polling America

Take, for instance, a few delegate evaluations of the NIC. Scott Furukawa of Painesville, Ohio, recognized that the equality among them was ephemeral. Paid the same stipend and armed with the same information, the delegates seemed to come to the convention on equal grounds: "Everyone walked in here basically equal. No one looked down at anybody, no one looked at anyone funny. Too bad," he added, "the world doesn't really work like this."

Others were concerned by their exchanges with the candidates. After a weekend of active participation in the small group discussions, most of the delegates during the question and answer sessions were merely spectators. Clay Bowen of Boulder, Colorado observed, "We went from talking to each other to listening to talking heads. All of a sudden, there was much more emphasis placed on the candidates."

Moving the focus from dialogue among delegates to an exchange between citizens and elites also concerned Ammar Bourouba, a student from Brooklyn New York. "In this group," he explained, "we needed to be friends first before we could talk. I'm not friends with Al Gore or Dick Lugar. The candidates changed things. Really, you need to be friends to be in conversation." Many of his peers agreed, arguing that they did not come to the table with the same rhetorical skills and political savvy as the presidential hopefuls. Bourouba talked about how the vice president could direct discussion and handle the questions, answering only those he wanted to be asked. Lacking the candidates' experience, he was disappointed for the delegates, many of whom he thought "were not prepared for the dodge."

The Benefits of Participation

By drawing citizens to the National Issues Convention, Fishkin hoped to reconnect them to the American political system and to encourage further participation. For Fishkin, participation "is a form of connectedness to the system that expresses our collective political identity."³ Low voter turnout, an unfortunate reality of contemporary American politics, then, understandably alarms him, for it indicates a sense of alienation. Indeed, participation in politics forges bonds between citizens and their government, while its absence weakens them.

One of the rallying cries of the NIC was that "Real politics is not about what happens in Washington; real politics involves the citizens." Because it immersed 459 citizens in discussions of issues of national import, the Convention affirmed their connections to seemingly remote matters.

Convinced that participation not only remedies individual alienation, Fishkin expects that the educative effects of the weekend will reach to communities far beyond Austin. His

hope, it seems, is that the NIC will be a spark of citizenship, lit on the flint of deliberation, and that it will be carried home and spread to others by the chosen 459. "As Tocqueville showed," he writes, "the norms of community involvement tend to carry over from one activity to another. People learn to work in combination, and the networks created from one association are a resource for other efforts."⁴

Stories do circulate about how the NIC participants have been changed by the process, and how they are endeavoring to change others. Janet Thorne, a delegate from Lansing, Michigan has infuriated her spouse by continually turning the television channel from his favorite program to the news. She has determined that they will *both* make better informed choices this November. Herman Blizzard has been in touch with Wrightsville's League of Women Voters, and is talking with community members about his experience at the NIC. Pat Elmore has decided to run for an open seat on his local school

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board. Tara Fitzgerald of Metheun, Massachusetts, Larry Hooten of Bedford, Indiana and many others who attended the NIC are trying to set up similar forums in their own communities.

The Wrongheadedness of the Poll

What is wrong with using a public opinion poll to measure such changes? From survey design to research methodology, critics have challenged the actual survey instrument on a number of fronts. We have no interest in entering this dispute. Because of the flawed theoretical underpinnings of Professor Fishkin's project, we reject the idea of the poll entirely.

In the theory behind the National Issues Convention, Fishkin appropriates the concept of the Athenian lot, not as an analogy, but as the theoretical equivalent of random sampling.⁵ Using the Greeks to buttress his vision of what America's democratic process should look like, he makes the dubious assertion that representativeness in statistical terms gives the "Austin public" the power to make recommendations to — even to speak for — the American public. Fishkin fails to mention that for the Greeks, the concept of political representation was utterly alien, if not patently offensive, to freedom.

The Athenian citizens who were drawn by lot to participate in assemblies and councils were not there in the name of representation. The lot was an institution designed to get

citizens to *act*. Participating in politics, Aristotle believed, enlarges our moral abilities and our sense of justice. It is something that we should all *do*. Deliberation, then, is akin to exercise: You are as unlikely to experience the effects of someone else's deliberation as your body is to benefit from someone else's exercise. Does Fishkin really want the chosen 459 to "exercise" for the nearly 200 million voting-age Americans?

The poll does not have a recommending force; it is the Convention itself that does. The events of the weekend suggest that if you give people access to information and the chance to discuss it with others, some beneficial things happen. First, they gain an understanding, if not a genuine sympathy, for a side of an issue they may never have considered before. Second, they gain confidence. People discover that they have opinions about the issues that are worth listening to.

In short, engaging citizens in a vigorous discussion on the important issues of the day will increase their sense of political efficacy. Democratic theorists have argued this for centuries,⁶ and the National Issues Convention serves as a

powerful reminder. For this reason, the NIC is a welcome addition to the typical election year in which, at least on the national level, little sustained citizen dialogue actually takes place.

The benefits, however, are in no way generalizable, and we shouldn't want them to be. Political empowerment and a breadth of view must neces-

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sarily be gained at the individual level. So, what happened in Austin was important insofar as it changed the people who were in attendance. If this change then translates into the more active participation of others in the delegates' local communities, so much the better.

On the national front, the NIC suggests that if democratic politics is to be about capable citizens making informed and deliberate decisions, some investments need to be made. Providing Americans with the chance to come together in an environment that encourages thoughtful consideration of important issues is something that scholars and politicians alike should be vigorously promoting.

Endnotes

¹James Fishkin, *Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 143.

²Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 9. West attributes this phrase to musician George Clinton.

³Fishkin, *Voice of the People*, p. 44.

⁴Fishkin, *Voice of the People*, p. 151.

⁵See, for example, James Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), especially Chapter 8; and *Voice of the People*, especially Chapter 2 and page 169.

⁶See, for example, John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861); Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).



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NIC Survey Findings

Editor's Note: Public Perspective invited James Fishkin and his colleagues to discuss the findings of the survey they conducted of respondents' views before attending the National Issues Convention, and then upon its conclusion. Due to demands on their time, they asked that the article be scheduled for the June issue rather than this one.

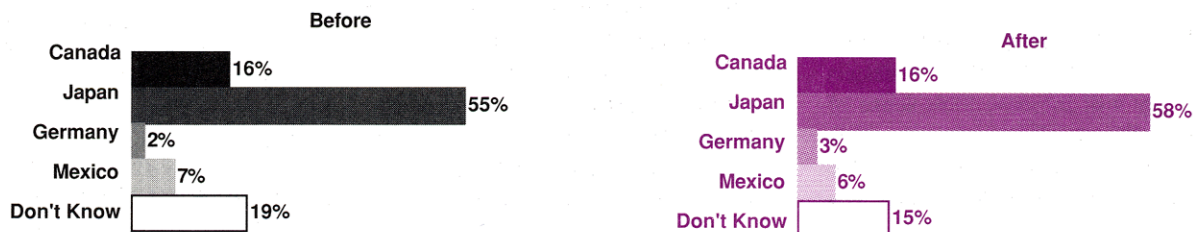
In general, the pattern of "before" and "after" responses follows expected lines. When NIC briefing materials gave participants new information in an area where many had not been knowledgeable, the "after" responses showed the benefits. For example, many who had thought foreign aid was the biggest item in the federal budget abandoned that erroneous position following NIC discussion of the facts.

Question: Which does the U.S. spend most on...?



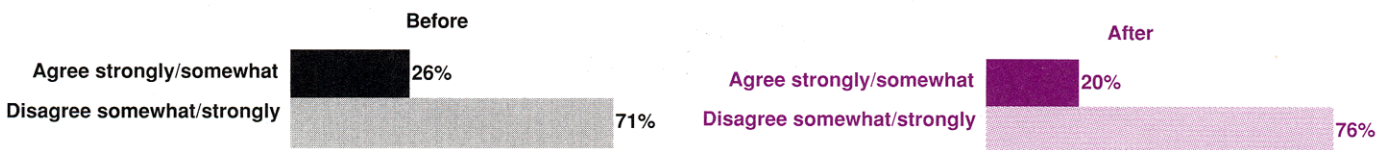
On the other hand—again not surprisingly—when the Convention didn't touch a factual question, the aggregate "after" answers remained unchanged. For instance, virtually identical majorities said in both rounds of interviews that Japan is America's biggest trade partner—an error that can be readily understood given the press's heavy coverage of the gap between U.S. imports from Japan and exports to it.

Question: With which of the following countries does the U.S. conduct the most international trade...?



When questions dealt with areas where public thinking has been established over the course of modern political experience, the post-NIC answers differed little from the pre-NIC; whereas complex questions that the public hasn't thought through, like the flat tax, showed big shifts after extended NIC discussions.

Question: Do you agree or disagree with this statement: This country would be better off if we just stayed at home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world?



Question: Do you favor or oppose the following ideas for the United States tax system...Replace the current graduated income tax with a flat tax that would tax everyone's income at the same rate?

