

## Executive Summary:

### America in One Room: Pennsylvania

Over the weekend of June 5-9, a representative sample of registered Pennsylvania voters gathered in Philadelphia to deliberate in depth about issues facing the state and the nation. When first contacted, they answered an extensive questionnaire about policy proposals from across the political spectrum that could possibly address key issues facing the state and the nation. At the end of the weekend they completed the same questionnaire. 175 voters from across the state were successfully recruited to participate in the discussions. Another 502 were assigned to a control group that completed the same questionnaires over the same period, but did not deliberate. The process is called [Deliberative Polling®](#) and followed the format of 160 previous projects around the world. Like the other [America in One Room](#) events, this experiment was sponsored and convened by [Helena](#), a global problem solving organization working with the [Deliberative Democracy Lab](#) at Stanford University and [Public Opinion Strategies](#), a leading public opinion research firm that conducted the recruitment and selection of the samples and administered the survey questionnaires.

What would the voters of Pennsylvania really think about the issues if they discussed them in depth in a civil and evidence-based environment for a long weekend? Summary results are sketched below.

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## Attitudes toward Democracy

Participation in the deliberative process had a surprising effect on lessening dissatisfaction with our democracy. When asked how “*our democracy and electoral system are working now*” 75% of the overall sample were **dissatisfied** at the start. After a weekend of deliberating with fellow citizens, in randomly assigned small groups, this level dropped to 54%, a shift of 21 points. For Republicans this dissatisfaction dropped 16 points (57% to 41%), for Democrats, dissatisfaction dropped 24 points (from 91% to 66%) and for independents, dissatisfaction with our democracy dropped 23 points, from 79% to 56%. The very act of considering our difficult choices together lessened the current widespread discontent and created a bit more optimism about democratic possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

## Education

For public colleges and universities, there was substantial concern about the high cost of tuition. A proposal that “*Pennsylvania should implement tuition caps for public colleges and universities*” got supermajority support both before and after deliberation (81% dropping slightly to 77% overall). But support for a more extreme solution to offer “free tuition” at public colleges and universities dropped significantly with deliberation from 60% to 46% as participants discussed the budgetary effects on the universities and the fact that many lower income students already get financial aid.

This proposal about free speech on college campuses dropped significantly but still had overall support: “*On college and university campuses, a clear and accessible reporting system should be implemented for students to voice concerns about free speech violations, including anonymity options to protect their identity.*” This proposal started at 79% overall but dropped 16 points with deliberation to 63%. Democrats decreased their support from 84% to 68%, Republicans from 74% to 57% and independents from 75% to 66%. Participants weighed arguments that this proposal could protect unpopular views against the concern that anonymous and even false reporting could chill free speech.

Two other education proposals focused on school choice: “*Pennsylvania should lower the eligibility requirements for school voucher programs*” and “*Pennsylvania should amend its constitution to directly fund each child's education at the school they choose.*” Both increased suggestively (but not with statistical significance) in overall support but fell well short of majority support (the eligibility proposal went from 29% to 40% while the direct funding of each child's education went from 34% to 40%).

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<sup>1</sup> “Leaners” are included with party members. “Independents” refers to those participants who are not members or leaners toward one of the two major parties.

There was supermajority support, both before and after deliberation for *“Students should be required to pass a general civic literacy test to graduate from high school.”* Support was more than 70% from Republicans, Democrats and independents after deliberation. Despite considering issues about “teaching to the test” the participants apparently embraced the idea of trying to create more informed citizens and building community.

Similarly, there was supermajority support for two proposals addressing trade schools: *“Pennsylvania should subsidize trade schools and accessible pathways to employment.”* And *“Pennsylvania should work with companies to guarantee job opportunities for some percentage of students upon graduation from trade schools.”* Support rose for both ending at about 81% overall.

However, support for a “baby bonds” proposal dropped significantly: *“Pennsylvania should fund a bond for each child born that will accumulate in value until the child turns 18. At that time, they could use it for higher education or something else to help start up their lives.”* Overall support dropped 11 points from 45% to 34%. Democrats initially supported this at the level of 57% but this dropped to 50% with deliberation. Independents dropped from 48% to 27% and Republicans dropped from 32% to 18%. As participants weighed the long term benefits against the budget impact and effect on other programs their initial enthusiasm diminished.

## Democratic Processes

Dissatisfaction with our democratic processes applied to specific institutions. When asked whether we should *“Keep the current system of electing representatives in single-member districts”* the overall support, before and after deliberation never exceeded 34%. But apart from term limits, there were mostly disparate views about what should be done with our elections and related democratic institutions.

There were two proposals for term limits, one for state legislators and the other for federal judges. The first was: *“Pennsylvania should impose term limits on state legislators, where, after a certain number of terms, legislators may never run again or hold office.”* This proposal had 78% support, both before and after deliberation with strong support from both Republicans and Democrats and to a lesser extent from independents. The sample weighed whether term limits would reduce incumbency advantages against whether they would reduce voter choice (the chance to re-elect an incumbent). In the end they seemed to want new representatives through term limits.

A second term limit proposal applied to federal judges: *“After an 18 year term, federal judges should not be eligible for reappointment.”* This proposal ended up with 75% support with Republicans starting out at that level and Democrats moving significantly from 70% to 77%.

Predictable appointment cycles would allow for fresh perspectives. While there was some concern for the transition, there seemed to be little support for our current system of lifetime appointments.

There was also overwhelming support for another judicial proposal: *“The Supreme Court should have the same binding code of ethics that other federal judges have.”* Overall support after deliberation ended very high at 86% with Republicans, Democrats and independents all supporting at 77% or above.

Returning to elections, there was broad and increasing support for *“Making sure everyone who wants to vote can do so.”* Overall support for this general goal increased significantly from 83% to 96%. Republicans increased from 71% to 93%, a gain of 22 points. Democrats started very high and went slightly higher (95 to 97%). Independents went up 17 points from 83% to 100%.

A proposal to increase voting access with in-person early voting gained support: *“Pennsylvania should allow for in-person early voting at least 11 days before an election.”* Overall this changed from 61% support to 71%, with Republicans moving from minority to majority support (43% to 57%), Democrats starting very high and moving slightly higher (80% to 86%) and independents increasing from 49% to 65%.

Protecting voters from intimidation had supermajority support both before and after deliberation: *“Establish criminal penalties for misleading, deceiving, or intimidating eligible voters from voting.”* Overall support started very high (90%) and ended at 87% with Republicans, Democrats and independents all supporting it at 81% or more.

Other measures to ensure the integrity of the ballot also had strong or even supermajority support after deliberation. *“Install video monitors at all drop boxes for ballots”* increased slightly ending with 68% support. Democrats notably rose from 50% to 59%, independents from 68% to 76% and Republicans steady in their support ending at 69%. Weighing concerns about voter privacy and arguments that voter fraud was rare against the increase in public confidence and the deterrence of any possible tampering if the proposal were implemented, the sample came out in favor. Another voting security measure was: *“Require voting jurisdictions to conduct an audit of a random sample of ballots in each election to ensure that the votes have been accurately counted.”* It had supermajority support before and after deliberation. Overall support ended at 77% with Democrats at 69%, Republicans at 84% and independents at 90%. Voters seemed impressed by the arguments about building public confidence in elections and the efficiency of auditing random samples rather than the expense of full recounts.

On another voting security measure, the Democrats moved to support an initially Republican position: *“Require all voters to provide a government-issued photo identification, obtained with proof of citizenship, when voting.”* The overall movement was 68% to 73% but

notably the Democrats increased significantly from minority to majority support moving from 48% to 57%. Even after weighing the issue of whether such measures would impede participation from the poor, the sample embraced the benefits in public confidence about voting security.

On some other voting reforms, there was majority support both before and after deliberation. For the proposal: *“Pennsylvania should use nonpartisan primaries, so that all voters are able to choose the top two candidates who would face each other in the general election,”* the change was modest, with overall support ending at 61%, Republicans at 56%, Democrats at 63% and independents at 82%.

Support for ranked choice voting, on the other hand, gained significantly for local elections but still rose only to 37% support in this deliberation. Most voters seemed unfamiliar with it and many seemed daunted by its apparent complexity. There was a significant increase in agreement that *“Ranked-choice voting is too complicated to use”* going from 16% to 46% overall with an especially large rise of 39 points among Republicans (from 21% to 59%).

By contrast, there was increased bi-partisan support for an informal form of direct democracy: *“The Pennsylvania government should use technology to allow the public to create petitions regarding policy issues and have them answered by the governor.”* This had strong support across both major parties and independents rising overall from 70% to 82% with Republican support increasing significantly from 73% to 87%.

Lastly, a proposal to spread deliberation garnered impressive support: *“Promote opportunities for people of diverse views and backgrounds (including high school and college students) to deliberate with one another on issues confronting their communities and the country at large.”* This proposal increased significantly from 79% to 87% with Democrats moving from 87% to 96%, Republicans moving marginally from 73% to 77% and independents moving from 72% to 94%. The participants, having experienced the value of deliberation for themselves over the weekend, were willing to endorse it for others.

## Immigration

On the highly contested issue of immigration, there was significant movement on selected issues. Support for *“Increase the number of visas for low skilled workers”* rose dramatically from 25% at the start to 50% overall after deliberation, an increase of 25 points. There was even greater movement from minority to majority support among Democrats, who went from 41% to 69%, a rise of 28 points. Republicans increased significantly as well, but starting from a much lower base, moving from 9% to 29%. Independents also rose from 21% to 53%. Participants considered the issue of worker shortages in construction, agriculture and hospitality against arguments that there could be a strain on resources needed for US citizens.

*“Increase the number of visas for highly skilled workers”* started high and stayed high at about 56%. Participants weighed the need for skilled workers in certain industries versus whether increasing the number of visas could increase competition for American workers. They mostly came out in favor of increased visas.

There was also a significant increase in support for DACA: *“Implement state level protections for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (“DACA”), which protects from deportation children brought to the U.S. by parents who entered illegally.”* Overall support rose significantly from minority to majority support, from 45% to 56%, with Republicans increasing their support significantly by 21 points from 18% to 38%. Democrats were more than 70% both before and after deliberation.

Other immigration proposals started and ended with only minority support or went even lower. There was only about 43% support, before and after deliberation for *“Reduce the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the U.S.”* The proposal to *“Require undocumented immigrants to return to home countries before applying to live and work in the U.S.”* ended at 45%. However, *“The U.S. should issue automatic green cards for vetted noncitizen graduates of U.S. colleges and universities”* started at 41% overall and went significantly lower to 30%. Support from Democrats dropped significantly by 16 points from 58% to 41% and independents dropped from 27% to 19%. The deliberators weighed the benefit of keeping skilled workers in the US against more job competition for US citizens and brain drain from other countries.

## Public Service

There were two proposals supporting a period of public service by young people. The first used incentives for voluntary participation: *“Pennsylvania should provide significant incentives to young people to participate in one year of state-level public service.”* This had supermajority support before and after rising overall from 74% to 79% support with Republicans, Democrats and independents all above 75%. Participants weighed the benefits of bringing people together to address public needs versus the cost and administrative burden.

However, a similar proposal for mandatory public service by young people aged 18-29 had only minority support both before and after deliberation (ending at 35% overall). In this case the benefits were overwhelmed by a concern for individual freedom of choice.

## Housing

Several proposals dealt with the affordability and availability of housing:

*“Pennsylvania should convert underutilized state land into affordable housing”* had modest majority support both before and after deliberation, ending at 53% overall. Support for *“Pennsylvania should legalize the addition of accessory dwellings or ‘granny units’”* increased notably from 55% to 68% overall, with Democrats increasing support by 20 points from 55% to 75%, Republicans increasing from 56% to 62% and independents stayed steady at 51%. The participants weighed the benefits of an increase in affordable housing and the prospect of added income for homeowners against the potential for overcrowding and zoning concerns. After deliberation, 80% agreed with the empirical premise that *“Currently vacant or underutilized properties represent a missed opportunity for addressing pressing housing needs.”*

One way to deal with the cost of housing is to limit rent hikes. However, there was a significant decrease in overall support for *“Pennsylvania should limit annual rent hikes to 5% of the current rent plus the local inflation rate, or 10% of the current rent, depending on the lower price.”* Democrats lowered their support from 74% to 57%, a significant drop of 17 points, accounting for much of the overall change. The participants weighed the protection for current renters versus the effect of rent control on the supply of housing over the long term.

*“Pennsylvania should create a grant program investing in Community Land Trusts for affordable housing.”* Support for this proposal dropped 22 points from 66% to 44%. Democrats lowered their support 26 points from 81% to 55%, Republicans from 54% to 44% with independents steady before and after at around 41%. While Community Land



Trusts can help make housing affordable long term, there were questions about the need for outside donors and the degree of community control.

Support for the proposal, *“Pennsylvania should protect single-family-only zoning”* rose significantly overall from 46% to 61%, mostly powered by a dramatic rise among Republicans from 53% to 81%, a gain of 27 points. Participants weighed arguments such as protecting property values and support for local decision making versus the limits on the housing supply and on access for low income families.

## Health Care

Several of the health care-related proposals concerned the state’s rural areas.

*“Pennsylvania should offer tax credits to healthcare providers or facilities that expand services in underserved rural areas.”* This had overwhelming bipartisan support rising from 84% to 88%. Republicans increased significantly from 81% to 87%, Democrats expressed strong support at 88% both before and after, while independents rose from 77% to 90%. Participants weighed access to health care and addressing rural health disparities against arguments about costs and the effectiveness of tax credits.

Support jumped even more dramatically when the incentives were offered at the individual level for healthcare workers: *“Pennsylvania should incentivize healthcare professionals to work in underserved areas through loan forgiveness programs.”* Overall support increased significantly from 83% to 94%, a rise of 11 points. Republicans increased even more from 72% to 89%, a rise of 17 points, Democrats increased from 93% to 100%, a rise of 7 points and independents increased from 81% to 90%. Participants weighed the merits of attracting health care professionals to areas where they were truly needed versus the cost and questions about the effectiveness of such incentives.

*“The Pennsylvania Department of Health should offer grants to hospitals in rural communities to hire nurses and physicians to live and work there.”* This proposal had supermajority support before and after at 85% even though Republican support decreased significantly from 83% to 72% while Democrat support increased from 89% to 97% and independents increased from 73% to 94%. Participants weighed many of the same arguments about recruitment and retention of health care professionals in rural areas, versus issues of cost and effectiveness.

At the national level the agenda included: *“Congress should repeal the Affordable Care Act and replace it with grants to state governments to create their own systems.”* There was little support for this proposal either before or after. Overall, it was approved by only 28% both before and after, even though Republicans gave it bare majority support (52%) by the end of the deliberations.



Another national health care proposal was that *“The U.S. should allow weight loss medications (e.g. Ozempic) to be covered by Medicare and Medicaid.”* Initial support dropped significantly from 68% to 59% mostly because of a significant drop among Republicans (15 points falling from 68% to 52%). The participants weighed the health benefits of expanding access to these drugs against the burgeoning costs.

Lastly, a proposal that *“Pennsylvania should require able-bodied Medicaid recipients to work 20 hours per week or participate in job training to maintain benefits”* remained largely unchanged at majority support of 59%. Participants weighed arguments about encouraging self-sufficiency and upward mobility through work against arguments about administrative complexity and burdensome reporting requirements that could unintentionally disqualify some recipients.

## World Affairs

There was a significant rise in support for *“The U.S. should encourage building new generation nuclear plants that minimize waste and safety risks.”* Support overall increased significantly from 65% to 79% with Republicans increasing 13 points from 72% to 84%, Democrats increasing from 61% to 75% and independents from 56% to 74%. Participants weighed the benefits of low carbon emissions and improved safety against the problems of nuclear waste management and high water usage.

Also on climate and energy, while there was little support for carbon pricing (only 34% after deliberation) there was majority support after deliberation (55%) that *“The U.S. should work with other like-minded nations to adopt strong policies to achieve Net Zero, and to encourage all nations to contribute to a Net Zero global economy.”*

There was a massive change in opinion about a current geopolitical challenge: *“The United States should provide military support for Taiwan in the case of a Chinese invasion.”* Overall support doubled with deliberation from 35% to 69%. Republicans increased from 42% to 72%, an increase of 30 points while Democrats increased from 30% to 69%, an increase of 40 points (independents increased from 29% to 56%). Participants weighed issues of democracy support and deterrence against the risks of escalation and the economic impact of conflict.

There was also a dramatic increase in support for: *“The U.S. should establish a Resilient Resource Reserve to insulate American producers from external risks.”* Overall, support rose significantly from 45% to 72%, a gain of 27 points with Republicans, Democrats and independents all gaining substantially. Participants weighed issues of national security about access to critical minerals against issues of market interference.

Despite these concerns about global uncertainty and instability, the participants had little interest in increasing defense spending: *“The U.S. should increase its defense spending by 5 percent per year to meet rising global challenges and ensure military readiness as a superpower.”* This proposal dropped from 44% to 29% overall, fueled largely by a decline in support from Republicans who went from 59% to 38%, a drop of 21 points. Participants weighed global threats from China, Russia, Iran and North Korea against the increasing expense of such an investment and whether or not we already had sufficient deterrence.

By contrast, there was increased support for soft power and diplomacy: *“The U.S. should use diplomacy and financial support to promote democracy and human rights throughout the world.”* Support increased overall from 60% to 70% with Republicans increasing dramatically 46% to 65% (and independents increasing from 52% to 71%). Participants weighed the argument that we benefit from countering authoritarian influence around the world against the idea that we should emphasize American security and economic interests over idealistic goals.

### **Efficacy and Mutual Respect**

Participants came out of the deliberations with an increased sense of political efficacy: Agreement that *“I have opinions about politics that are worth listening to”* increased significantly from 81% to 91% and these high levels applied to both major parties and to independents.

There were also striking increases in mutual respect coming out of the deliberations. When asked about *“the people who disagree strongly with you”* there was an increase from 72% to 91% in those responding *“I respect their point of view though it is different from mine.”* This high level applied to both major parties and to independents. There was a similar significant increase in agreement that *“They have good reasons; there just are better ones on the other side.”* Overall this view increased from 30% to 45% with Republicans increasing from 27% to 43%, Democrats from 32% to 49%. Lastly there was a significant increase in how to resolve differences: *“I would be willing to compromise to find a solution we both can support.”* This view increased from 81% to 89% and applied across the political spectrum after deliberation.

## Evaluations

At the end of the final questionnaire, the participants were asked some evaluation questions about the components of the process and the event as a whole. *“The small group discussions”* and *“the briefing materials”* were both rated as valuable by 96%. The *“plenary sessions”* were valuable according to 84% and the *“event as a whole”* got that rating from 97%.

80% also thought *“The members of my group participated relatively equally in the discussions”* while 93% thought *“The important aspects of the issues were covered in the group discussions.”* Reflecting on the overall experience, 93% concluded *“I learned a lot about people very different from me - about what they and their lives are like.”*

James Fishkin, Director of the Deliberative Democracy Lab at Stanford University commented:

*“A weekend of deliberation transformed these voters. They moved closer together on many of the most divisive issues. They emerged with greater mutual respect and a sense that their opinions were worth listening to. Their conclusions offer a roadmap to what matters to voters when they have a chance to really think about our common problems”*