



By the People

BY MARK ANDERSEN
Lincoln Journal Star

Jim Holechek verged on annoyance. An anonymous telephone caller wanted his thoughts on the Iraq war, the Bush tax cuts and expanding Nebraska's gambling.

Holechek's name had been drawn at random from a list of Lancaster County residents. It was a kind of lottery, but instead of a jackpot, he'd won an opportunity to spend a full Saturday hashing out the big problems of the state, nation and world with other members of his community.

They wouldn't be sold a position or asked to give money. It wouldn't be about recording sound bites for a campaign.

They, the people, would drive the agenda. Experts including a senator, military general and professors in history and international relations would answer their questions.

Their struggle to find answers to questions of homeland security and counterterrorism would be broadcast to the state and nation as part of public television's "By the People" project.

Holechek, a Lincoln educator, found his attitude changing from slightly annoyed to intrigued.

"I'm usually miffed by these calls, but it sounded interesting," he said last week.

He has some thoughts on the Iraq war. "I think it was ill-conceived. The neighboring country is where the emphasis should have been placed. It's the desire on the part of the son (George W. Bush) to right the wrong of the father."

When he meets the 150 other lottery winners Saturday at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's City Campus Union,

Area leaders and regular folks will gather in Lincoln for a televised forum on the top issues of the day as part of a national project.

Holechek will undoubtedly meet many who disagree with him — vehemently.

Among 634 residents polled for the program, 40 percent believe the Iraq war will have been worth the cost when all is said and done. Nearly 16 percent believe it strongly.

But the group also includes the likes of 10-year Air Force veteran Todd Williams, who supports the Iraq war but has concerns.

"The Iraq thing?" said Williams, whose biggest issue was gambling. "I understand why he went in. But the reservists shouldn't be in there. They have jobs at home."

Holechek also will hear from the likes of participant Kim Rekart, who struggled uncomfortably with the issues, sorting out conflicting thoughts.

"I heard on the news last night that we've

lost 900 men and women since George Bush said, "Mission accomplished," he said. "Is it worth it to those people who lost those boys and girls? I don't think so."

Restaurant manager Aylin Yesilcimen views the question from a personal but shifting perspective.

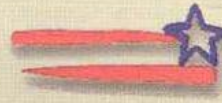
"I feel a different way every day," she said. "Unfortunately, a lot of people I know are over there or are going over."

"By the People," the program in which they will take part, is based on a deliberative opinion poll method developed by Stanford University Professor James Fishkin.

It follows this recipe:

- Gather ordinary citizens at random from one community.
- Give them background material.

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To watch the forum

Nebraska Educational Television Network will present coverage of Lincoln's "By the People" forum on "Statewide" Oct. 15. The national "By the People" program will air Oct. 21 at 10 p.m. on NETV; it will air Oct. 23 at 11 p.m. and Oct. 26 at 9 p.m. on NETV2.

Go to: www.pbs.org/newshour/btp/ for more information.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KIM STOLZER AND JIM COLBURN/Lincoln Journal Star

Rekart (From left), Lana Gabel, Todd Williams and Aylin Yesilcimen will take part in the "By the People" forum.

People

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Engage them in small-group discussions and allow them to question diverse experts.

Use surveys to measure changes in opinion before and after.

The same formula will be used in about 16 communities around the nation a week after Lincoln's meeting, which was scheduled early here because of football.

Informed discussion about opposing viewpoints is what makes deliberative polling different, Fishkin said by telephone last week.

"An ordinary poll gives a snapshot of what the public's thinking, even if it's not paying much attention," he said.

Over the years, studies have repeatedly shown that most people, both inside the United States and outside of it, tend not to be informed on public policy issues.

They have little reason to be, Fishkin said.

When a person has just one vote among millions, it's rational that he or she spends time learning how to judge home values, fix cars or do his or her job instead of paying attention to the intricacies of foreign affairs.

Sometimes, Fishkin said, opinions reported in traditional polls don't even really exist.

"They're phantom opinions."

Since most people don't like to admit they don't know something, they often pick a position at random, Fishkin said.

This was demonstrated in 1995, when The Washington Post polled people on proposals to repeal the Public Affairs Act of 1975. Opinions on the question varied greatly, depending on whether Republicans or Democrats were said to support the idea. And about half of those polled expressed opinions.

"There was no Public Affairs Act of 1975," Fishkin said.

The results of deliberative polling, meanwhile, show that when people become informed, when they discuss a variety of different views, when they feel their voice matters, they're smart.

"Normally, they don't seem smart," Fishkin said, "because they're not paying attention."

His process seeks to answer the question: "What would the public think if the public got a chance to think about it?"

He'd like to make it a formal part of the country's political process, what he'd call Deliberation Day, a day of discussion in communities across the country.

A crucial part of democracy is coming to understand competing points of view to come to some mutual understanding, he said.

It's an idea swimming against modern political culture.

Today, even when people talk about politics, Fishkin said, they generally talk with people who are like them, people who believe the same things.

Tarik Abdel-Monem of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center said the news media are collectively moving in the same direction. Journalism is becoming more a shouting match and less a forum for discussion, he said. Every night on television it's the same extreme voices, the same spin-masters selling a candidate rather than providing intelligent context.

The result, Fishkin said, pushes candidates to deliver negative messages. That turns off the middle ground of opinion holders but animates radicals.

"It distorts what most of us would like democracy to be," he said. "We've replaced (James) Madison with Madison Avenue."

This year's presidential campaign is a case in point.

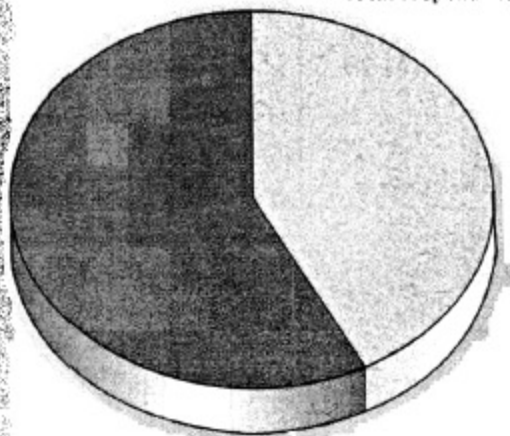
"We've now had a serious debate about the war," Fishkin said, "but it's (about) the one that happened 30 years ago, and it's the history of two particular people in that war."

By the People

A survey of 634 Lancaster County residents found strong divisions on issues of expanded Nebraska gambling, the Iraq war and making the Bush tax cuts permanent. These and other issues will be debated and discussed Oct. 9 and later broadcast as part of "By the People" projects of PBS and NETV.

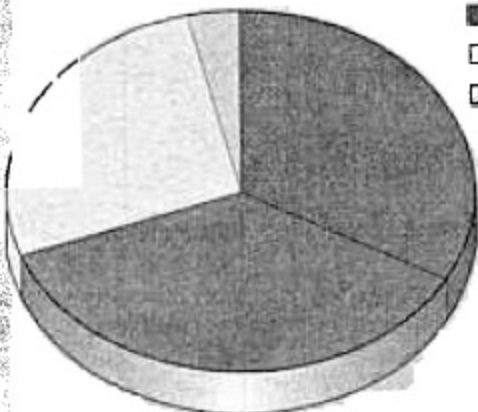
What is your sex?

Male 42.6%
Female 57.4%
Total respondents 634



Do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican or independent?

Democrat 33%
Republican 36.5%
Independent 26.9%
Other 3.5%



Polling was done between Aug. 5 and Sept. 29 by the Bureau of Sociological Research on behalf of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center. Results are shown for people who took a position, regardless of whether they believed it firmly or only somewhat. Results for those who answered didn't know or hadn't thought about it are not shown.

This country faces hard choices in both foreign and domestic policy, he said, but the public has little understanding of the issues and little incentive to come to terms with them.

The Lincoln forum will be the third in Nebraska on the "By the People" project. Kearney hosted one in January and Omaha last year.



MAHBOUB

It is fitting that "By the People" is coming here.

Coincidence or not, the phrase stands notably in the famous last line of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "... That we here highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Even if the threat to democracy is a failure to engage in serious discussion, the warning reminds us of the stakes.

Some who will participate in Saturday's forum are more captivat-

ed by issues other than the Iraq war.

Todd Williams is tired of seeing the state's gambling money go across state borders when Nebraska could be reaping some benefits.

Lana Gabel, who refinishes furniture, also feels strongly about gambling.

"I don't think we should have gambling," she said. "We have enough vices."

But in Kearney, Abdel-Monem said, "What really got people's blood boiling was war and national security."

Expert panelists on hand to answer questions and present views in Lincoln will be Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson, Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke of the Nebraska National Guard, UNL political science Professor Patrice McMahon, Yale University history Professor Paul Kennedy and Samira Mahboub, a Lincoln resident raised and educated in Afghanistan.

Currently, 290 Nebraska National Guard members are in Iraq and neighboring Kuwait. They soon will be joined by 160 guard members from the 1075th truck company. Overall, about 130,000, of which 40,000 are National Guard and Reserve, are there.

"Coming from military side," Lempke said, "people look at me for

being an advocate for our action in Iraq. The major thing I try to do is explain, from a military perspective, the logic of why Iraq might be a worthy target in the fight against terrorism."

People pretty well agree Afghanistan was a worthy target, but Iraq is a little different situation.

The concern, Lempke said, is that a terrorist faction of Islamic extremists will seek an ally that will help them create weapons of mass destruction. They might turn to Iraq because of its recent history.

"Currently what is going on over there is going in the right direction," he said. The coalition needs to provide a certain amount of stability to give the government a chance to develop and become ingrained in everyday lives.

Lempke sees parallels to U.S. action in the former Yugoslavia, where he spent time.

What he saw in Bosnia, and what he suspects will occur in Iraq, is that the younger generations not steeped in religious hatred will see the benefits of being part of a world economy.

Over time, people will realize their living conditions have improved and will support the government instead of radical elements.

The key is time.

"It's going to take awhile for freedom and democracy and participation in the world economy to take hold."

How long? Nobody knows, Lempke said.



LEMPKE

Lempke said. Patrice McMahon said she supported removing Saddam Hussein from Iraq with the help of the international community, but she saw broad international support as essential.

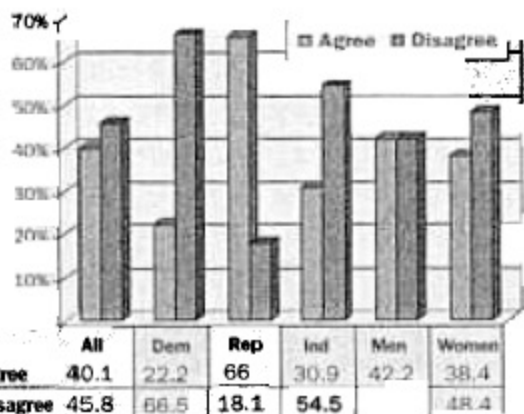
"This (international) coalition of the willing is nonsense," she said. "They were bully bribed and bought into the coalition."

Her beliefs, too, come from time she spent in Bosnia.

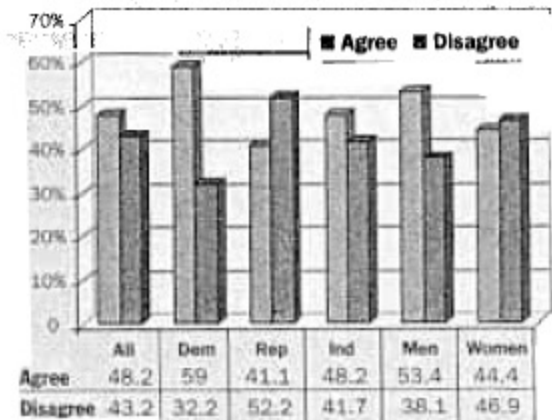
"I know what Bosnia is, and it's certainly not a success story and it's certainly not a failure," she said.

"What Bosnia demonstrates is

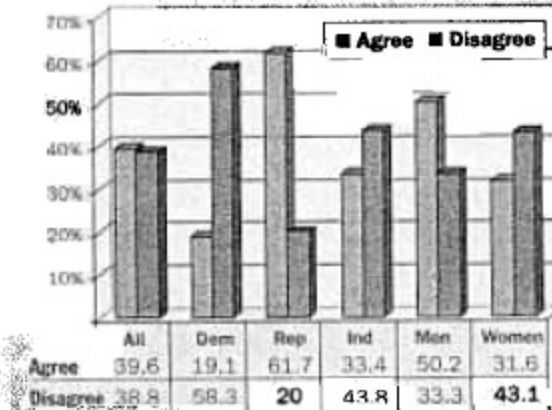
By the time we leave Iraq, will the results have been worth the cost?



Should gambling be legalized in Nebraska?



Should the Bush administration tax cuts be made permanent?



GRAPHICS BY KIM STOLZER/Lincoln Journal Star

Public presentations

Two presentations that are part of Lincoln's By the People program will be free and open to the public.

"American Power in a Fractured World" will be from 10 a.m. to noon Oct. 8 at the Wick Alumni Center, UNL downtown campus, 16th and R streets.

"Global Instability" will be from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Wick Alumni Center.

"American Power" will feature Professor Paul Kennedy, director of International Security Studies at Yale University, best known for his work on "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers," a highly debated book now translated into 20 languages.

The presentation will touch on ideological divisions, strategic decision making, globalization, and the implications and consequences of imperial diplomacy and hegemony.

It is presented by the Thomas C. Sorensen Public Policy Seminar Series.

"Global Instability" will feature four professors debating what they see is the most important threat to world security and stability. Joining Kennedy will be Thomas Borstelmann, professor of modern world history at UNL; Craig MacPhee, professor of economics at UNL; and David Rapkin, associate professor of political science at UNL.

Sponsors

Sponsors of Lincoln's "By the People" program are MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, NETV, the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Leadership Lincoln.

that there are some successes and some failures and a lot of fuzziness in between."

Nation building takes a long time and a lot of money.

"For me the question is not will it be worth it, but at what cost to us?"

The cost of nation building in Iraq will be staggering, she said. It's not a question of whether the United States can do it but whether it is willing to forgo Social Security, health care, new books in schools.

"At some time we have to admit what we're paying for Iraq," she said. "We do need to think about the war on terror but we need to talk about the war on terror in our ports and our airports."

She sees a split developing between fiscally conservative Sunbelt Republicans and the interventionist, proactive missionary element led by President Bush.

Bill Kelly, executive producer of News/Public Affairs for Nebraska ETV Network, said those who participated in earlier "By the People" forums felt engaged by the discussions.

"What we heard was, 'I like hearing from some of my neighbors that I don't agree with.'"

The things they normally tune out on when watching broadcasts suddenly seem relevant when a small businessperson is talking about the benefits of a conservative economic policy or someone who is unemployed is talking about his or her needs.

"It humanizes in a way that is really useful," Kelly said.

Afterward, although not a lot of opinions change, there's moderation on both sides, he said.

"It really is true," said Gail Leftwich, who leads the national "By the People" initiative for McNeil/Lehrer Productions. "Give people a chance to come together and to be taken seriously, and they take it."

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