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Should we have security cameras at Denison?

Paul A. Djupe

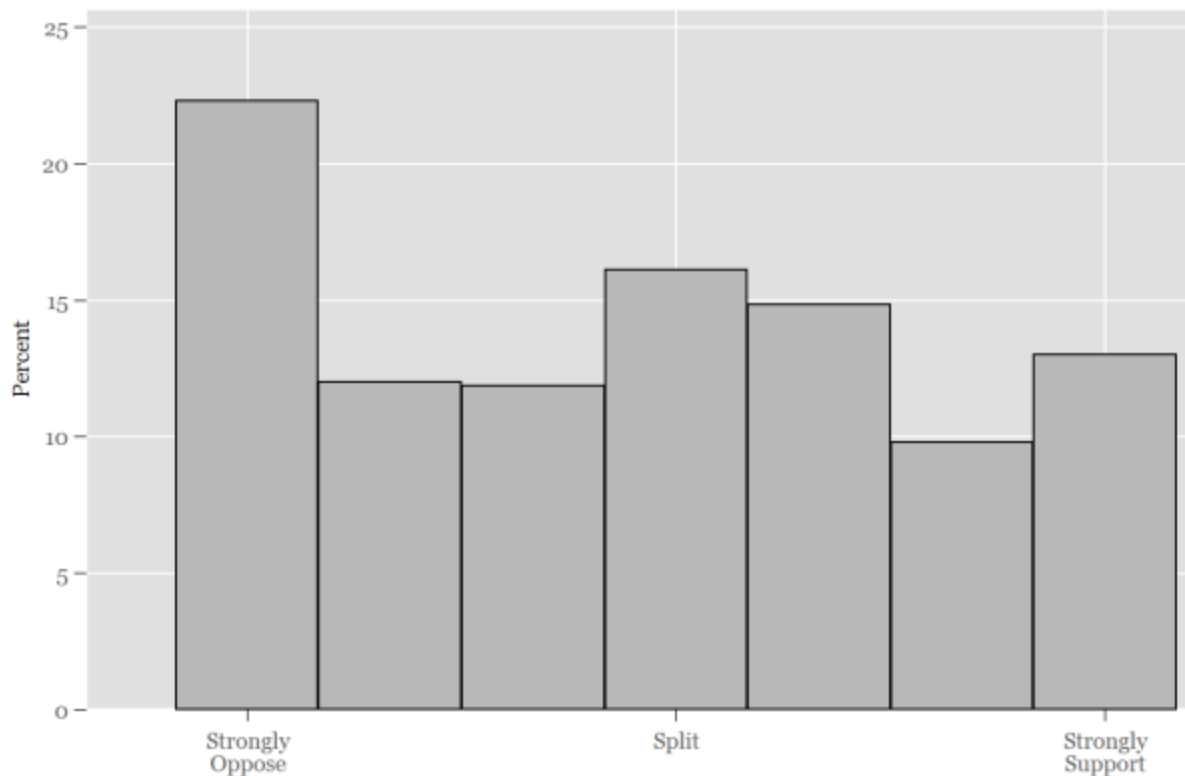
November 20, 2017

By Paul A. Djupe and Oliver Gladfelter

We get it. Democrats hate Republicans and Republicans hate Democrats. Democrats could be arguing in favor of tax cuts for the rich and Republicans would howl about the inhumanity of that proposal. So it would seem that political discussion is dead. Or is it? Would political discussion be as dysfunctional at Denison?

Our senior seminar in Political Science had enough faith in the democratic process to check this out. We partnered with DCGA senators (thanks Nathaniel Beach!), who are debating a proposal to add security cameras to residence halls and entrances, and hosted a public student forum to talk through this proposal. We had already surveyed students on their attitudes about security cameras in early October^[1] and their opinions were all over the map, a bit more opposed than supportive as Figure 1 below shows (46% were opposed, 16% split, and 38% in support). That is, there's a lot of disagreement on campus about security cameras! Would people remain polarized if they came together to discuss it?

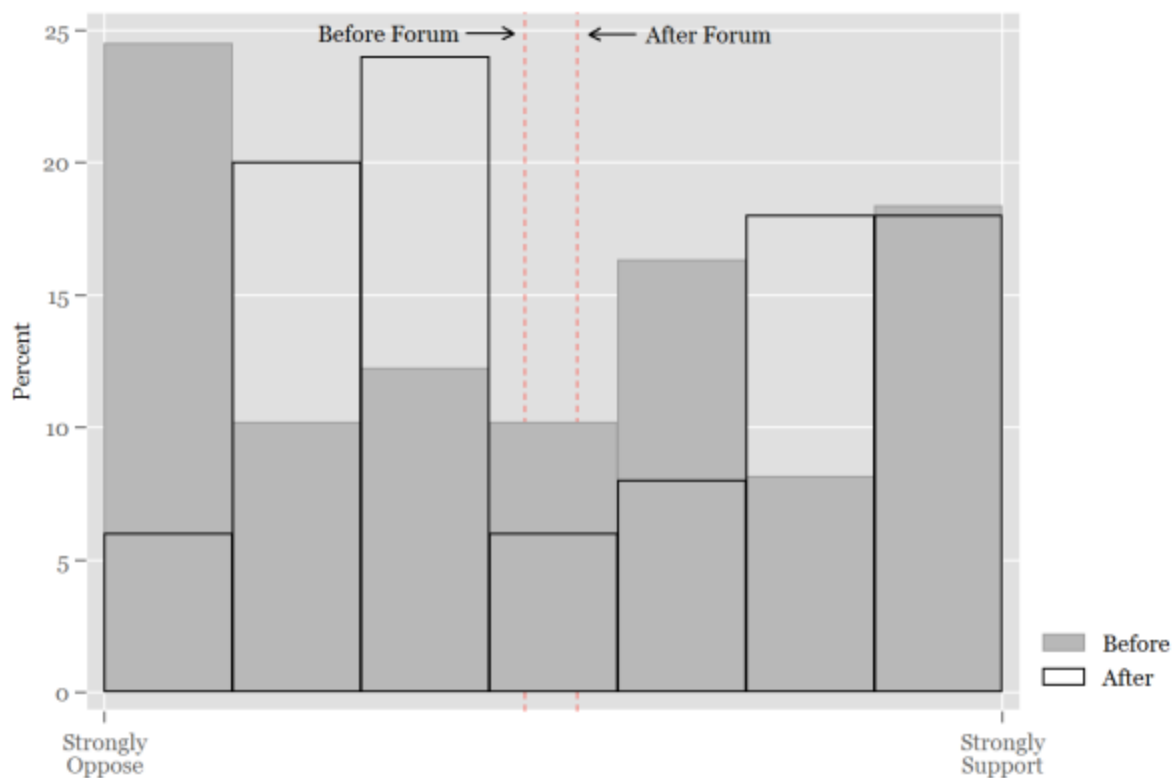
Figure 1 – Opinion in October was More Opposed than Supportive of Security Cameras



We invited everyone who responded to the initial survey to participate. Most could not because of prior commitments or lack of interest but a number could. In the end we had 50 participate and those 50 had the same opinion distribution as the initial sample (3.74 vs 3.81, $p=.81$ – not close to a significant difference). We got together on Monday, November 6, ate some pizza, and went off in small groups to talk about security cameras and compose a policy of their own about cameras (we'll talk about this in a coming post).

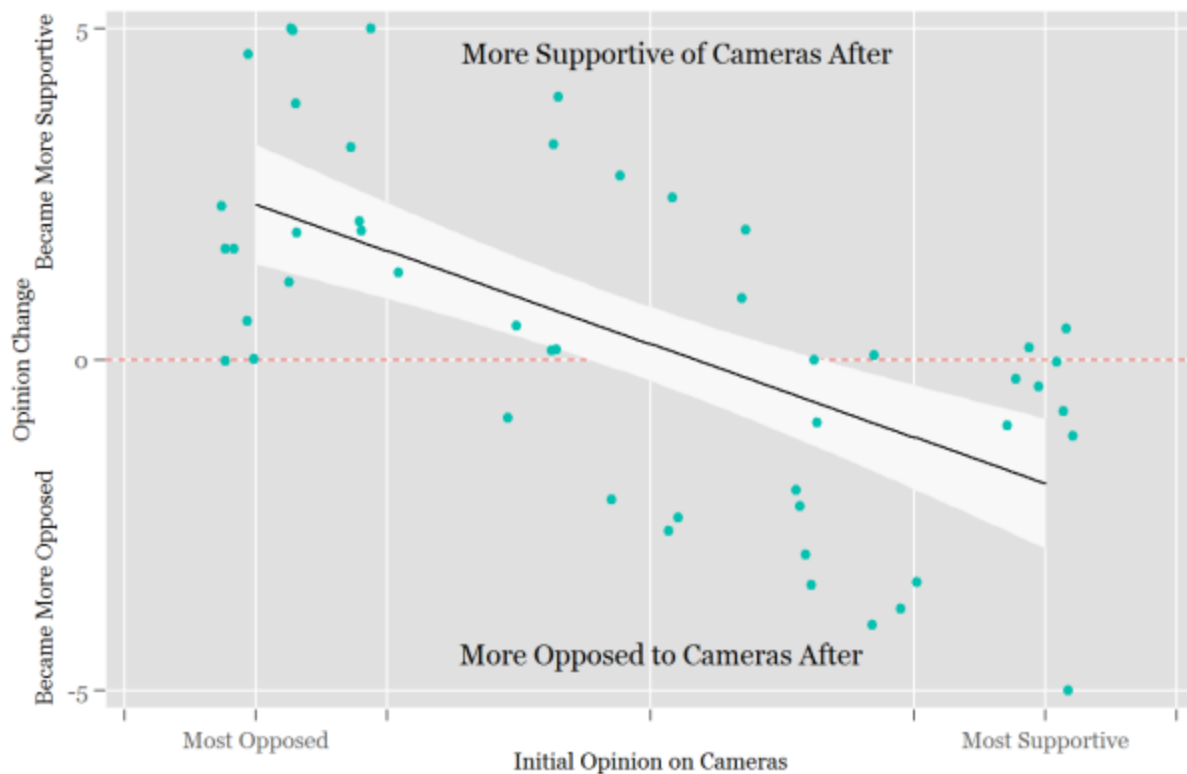
What came out of it? Figure 2 below shows their starting positions (gray bars) and the distribution of ending positions (hollow bars). The mean shift was .3 – not large – but it did move consistently toward more support of cameras. There was a huge reduction in staunchly opposed positions – they dropped by 20 percentage points.

Figure 2 – Support Shifted To More Support for Security Cameras Through Forum Participation



That gives us a hint about opinion shifts, but seeing the individual opinion changes is worth it. Figure 3 below lines people up by their starting position (on the horizontal, x axis). If their dots are on the zero line (25% of students), their opinion didn't move. If they are above the zero line, they became more supportive of cameras. If they were below the zero line, they became more opposed to cameras. It is clear that participants moderated their opinions. Those initially opposed became more supportive; those initially supportive became less so.

Figure 3 – Most Everyone Moderated their Opinion on Cameras



It's important to point out that a good amount of research on deliberative forums, which is what this was, does not find this. Instead they find no change or even polarization, where participants move toward the poles, not toward the center. And Denison participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with the experience – 92% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their deliberation experience (only 4% were unsatisfied).

Notably, this is what we found the last time we did this with the contentious issue of speech codes on campus. We don't think it's surprising that Denison might be different, not just that we can talk through difficult issues respectfully, but that we can listen to others and rethink our positions. In an era of such deep political polarization, we can't tell you how important this is. And it sure dumps some hot water on the notion that snowflake millennials can't handle disagreement.

Paul Djupe is a local cyclist who happens to have taught political science at Denison since the Harry Potter series was first published. You can learn more about his work at pauldjupe.com.

Oliver Gladfelter is a huge advocate of procrastination and spends most of his time finding new ways to waste time. He also studies political science on the side.

Aside from Oliver and Paul, the Seminar participants are Katie Elia, Hannibal George, Manny Giraldo, David Jaben, Patrick Mangano, Caroline Mills, John Pera, Nick Petrosky, Angie Phifer, Perley Provost, Lauren Somers, and Jason Wesseling.

Notes

1. Always a concern about survey data is whether the 33% response rate (775/2350) returned opinions representative of the population. The survey response looks pretty good. Fast Facts suggests that we nailed the gender split of 43% men and 57% women; the web says that 80% of students are out-of-staters, while 74% of the respondents are from outside of Ohio. It's a safe assumption class sizes are roughly equal and that's true in our survey data (25% first, 27% soph, 25% junior, and 23% senior). US News and World Report indicates that 30% of the campus is involved with Greek life and our survey data shows 29% are so involved. This is good evidence that the survey data are representative.