

deliberation? As a thought experiment, we might imagine the sample being repeated innumerable times with the same stimulus from candidates until virtually everyone is included. Of course, such a scenario is entirely imaginary and impractical. Nevertheless, it helps us visualize the hypothetical, truly deliberative society of which the deliberative opinion poll is giving us a sample. It is because we can appreciate the moral force of democracy in such a hypothetical, truly deliberative society that we should pay attention to the results of a deliberative opinion poll in our actual society.

The deliberative opinion poll provides a setting in which a representative microcosm of the mass public can become deliberative. Of course, it would be an even greater accomplishment, from the standpoint of democratic theory, if the entire mass public were to become deliberative. But such a result must be considered the province of utopian speculation.

Endnotes

¹My colleague, the statistical expert Mel Hinich, has calculated that if a simple random sample

were employed, the margin of error would be plus or minus 4 percent for polls involving the entire sample. Depending on the split between Democrats and Republicans, the margin of error for polls of just one party in such a sample would range between 3 and 6 percent.
²W. Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 23. See also Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), where the notion of a nonattitude was coined.

THE "DELIBERATIVE OPINION POLL" IS A WELL-INTENDED BUT FLAWED IDEA

By Michael W. Traugott

James Fishkin's new book, *Democracy and Deliberation*, raises interesting questions about the degree to which Greek democratic ideals and mechanisms continue to translate well to modern nation-states. One of his main agenda items is the design of new institutions that will serve these original democratic principles.

While admitting that he may suffer from "polis envy" (p. 90), Fishkin is especially interested in the prospects of returning to a form of Laslett's "face to face society." In conjunction with the upcoming presidential nomination process, he advocates the use of a "deliberative opinion poll" for assessing popular preferences for candidates and issues "to alter the way the race is started" (p. 5). This is a provocative proposal which is unlikely to produce the results that Fishkin desires. It would yield different data than a standard public opinion poll, but data just as likely to have flaws.

Fishkin is well versed in recent literature about such topics as the "plebiscitary president" (Lowi); the role of the media in contemporary campaigns (Orren and Polsby); the use of polls by candidates and the media (Sabato; Bartels); declin-

ing turnout (Burnham; Wolfinger and Rosenstone); and some of the methodological problems of trying to measure weakly held attitudes or "non attitudes" (Converse; Neuman). Most importantly, he understands the consequence of the "front loading" of the presidential primary process (Polsby and Orren) and of the "winnowing" role of the media (Matthews). He knows where the action is and wants to do something about it.

With an eye toward increasing the level of consideration that goes into the candidate selection process, the idea behind the deliberative opinion poll is to select a random sample of citizens and bring them together to meet with the candidates, listen to the candidates' views and ask them questions. The hoped-for result: a considered opinion about policy alternatives and candidate preference. Fishkin suggests that such a poll "models what the electorate would think if, hypothetically, it could be immersed in intensive deliberative processes" (p. 81). He understands that such an event must take place early in the year, timed to have as much impact on the pre-nomination campaign as the New Hampshire primary returns.

What Fishkin is proposing is another kind of "mediality" or "pseudo-event" (Boorstin) for the beginning of the pre-nomination phase of the presidential campaign. While the concept of a deliberative opinion poll is grounded in normative concerns derived from democratic theory, the event itself is designed to become a heavily covered media event that has the potential to influence subsequent mass and elite decision making.

Fishkin's use of the term "poll" to describe his invention is inappropriate; his device has little in common with contemporary survey research. Since individuals are being assembled for the purpose of interacting with each other, "caucus" would be a more appropriate way to describe the process by which potential voters would be assembled to discuss current affairs and come to a collective judgment.

A critical question for Fishkin is, "Would deliberative opinion polls come out differently from normal opinion polls?" (p. 82) There is no question that they would produce different data. But his clear suggestion that they would pro-

duce superior data, from the perspective of the democratic theorists who expect that citizens would be able to deliberate together about issues and candidates, is highly questionable.

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) seriously considered sponsoring James Fishkin's deliberative poll idea and televising a "National Issues Convention" this month. That will not happen, but plans are being made to give the idea a real-world test in 1996. This is intended as a cautionary note.

The Need to Disclose Methods

Current survey practice, supported by codes of conduct promulgated by such professional organizations as the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations, and the National Council on Public Polls requires that elements of survey methodology be disclosed. This provides a reasonably sophisticated consumer with information to evaluate data quality and, therefore, the plausibility of inferences drawn from the analysis.

In the case of traditional survey research, these include the method of selecting respondents, the response rate, and selected attributes of the questionnaire. The first two items get at the matter of the representative nature of the sample, while the latter is directed at the potential problem of bias that could be introduced by either individual question wordings or context effects.

There are directly analogous issues associated with a deliberative opinion poll. Consumers of the data (citizens and reporters) ought to know the method of sampling participants (the sample design) and the response rate that resulted in, say, 600 people travelling to a central location. A comparison should be made between relevant characteristics of the reference population (all registered voters in the United States, for example), the sample (those who show up to deliberate), and the refusals. These are the minimum data needed to assess the representativeness of the subjects in the proposed experiment.

A deliberative opinion poll is just as subject to potential problems of bias from nonresponse or sampling error as a regular public opinion poll. In a multi-survey world, other data are usually available to serve as "points of reckoning" in assessing a particular result or observation. These include references such as results from asking the same question in an earlier survey, asking a slightly different question of a similar sample, or asking the same question of a similar sample at about the same time. But the cost of implementing a deliberative opinion poll means there will not be any data from other equivalent inquiries to serve as guides for evaluating the initial experiment.

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Protecting the Confidentiality of Participants

In survey research, the anonymity of respondents and the confidentiality of their responses is guaranteed. This is done both out of concern for the respondents as human subjects and for the quality of the information they provide. Answers to survey questions are thought to be more "truthful"—that is reflective of true underlying attitudes and opinions—when they are offered under these conditions. In the deliberative opinion poll, particularly as Fishkin envisions it implemented for heavy televised coverage, participants will be sampled and assembled to deliberate in front of cameras. Thus, their privacy will be eliminated. This visibility will affect their deliberations, as well as their expressions of views and preferences, in a number of predictable ways.

It is imperative that the names and addresses of the participants be kept from the candidates (and their consultants) so they cannot be contacted in advance. Knowing the participants' views could assist the candidates in preparing for their

encounter, and preliminary contacts could contaminate the validity of the entire effort. This means keeping reporters away from the participants before the event, as well as afterwards.

The participants will become semi-public figures as soon as they are selected, and increasingly so when the cameras go on. Many will succumb to self-imposed pressures to consider their views in light of expectations, resulting in "socially desirable" responses. For some, this will more than offset their feelings of civic duty and responsibility. In any case, the multiple roles they are playing will alter and distort personal views in the context of a social and group responsibility.

In order to counteract or preclude some of these possibilities, an allowance should be made for time to elapse between the assembly of the participants and the presentation of the results of their deliberations. Certainly, enough time should be permitted that they can disperse and return home to their "regular" lives.

Furthermore, no identifying information should be released about the participants in the poll. They must be guaranteed that no members of the media will contact them afterwards. If it is anticipated that they might be reassembled (or surveyed later using regular telephone methods), the participants must be notified of this in advance. And the effects of such disclosure on response rates should also be reported.

Problems of Group Dynamics

Public opinion at the individual level can be influenced by assessments of what others are thinking. Reference groups play an important role in this process, as can the consideration of whether one's own views correspond to a perception of the majority and minority views. The "spiral of silence" formulation is one attempt to explain how perceptions of majority views can affect individuals (Noelle-Neumann), but assembling participants in a group at one location introduces other issues of group dynamics.

Acknowledging that there is no way to predict the degree to which a deliberative opinion poll would contribute to "thoughtful, self-reflective opinion formation," Fishkin suggests "it would seem likely that many...non-attitudes or pseudo-opinions would be replaced by views that are better rationalized and supported and perhaps more consistent with other elements of the respondents' belief systems." (p. 83) There is a substantial body of social psychological literature that suggests that characteristics of the deliberative process can have a very important effect on eventual decisions. While the goal of deliberation is a laudable one, the process of group interaction will produce substantially different results than if the participants consider alternatives and are asked questions in private.

The outcome of group decision making depends on a number of factors, among them, the size of the group and whether it deliberates all together or in subgroups; variations in the interpersonal skills of group members; whether facilitators are provided to assist the group in its task; and whether a "vocal minority" is present and active in the group. Participants will be differentially interested in their task, and "social loafing" is likely to take place (Harkins, Latane, and Williams). Conceptually, this is closely related to non-attitudes in traditional survey research.

The Effects of Rules of the Game

Sometime during their stay, participants will be asked to express their opinions or preferences. Information should also be provided to journalists and the audience about the nature of questioning to take place (what are the items the participants will be asked to respond to), the timing of the questioning relative to the deliberations, and the methodology of questioning (anonymous individual responses, for example, as opposed to a show of hands when all participants are

assembled in a single auditorium). These are all factors that affect the quality and outcome of the deliberations.

The "end game" of the proceeding may be the most important part of the process. What rules will guide the final "decision making?" Will a candidate have to receive support from a majority of his or her "partisans" in attendance, or will the simple distribution of preferences be announced? At some point near the end of the process, will all the participants be brought together to reach a set of "final" decisions about candidate and policy preferences? These questions require thought to insure that all the participants have the same quality of discussion and are asked the same set of questions after their deliberations are completed.

Conclusion

James Fishkin's proposal for a deliberative opinion poll is a well-intended but misguided attempt to correct some of what ails contemporary democracy in the United States. While it has certain intuitive appeals, it is also likely to produce serious unintended consequences in its application. These are all the more potentially consequential because of the intention to hold this event at the start of the formal part of the presidential nomination process, when reporting of it can have its maximum impact, and to provide heavy media coverage.

Increasing the issue content of the nomination process and the deliberative basis for public opinion formation are laudable goals. But the event Fishkin envisions is not likely to produce data that are representative of either the American public or the decisions that citizens would make if they were left at home, in their neighborhoods, or at work. Media coverage of a deliberative opinion poll will stimulate discussion of the campaign and what is at stake in it, but the event itself is

likely to turn into another media-centered event that the candidates and their handlers will turn to their advantage.

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