

The “Deliberative Opinion Poll” Comes to Texas—and to Campaign ‘96

In late January, public television will air six hours of programming from a novel experiment being held in Austin. Six hundred Americans, chosen by rigorous sampling methods, will be interviewed as to their views on three big clusters of issues, then brought together for intensive briefings, discussions, and presentations on these issues, and then administered the same survey near the event’s close. James Fishkin, who originated this “deliberative poll” idea and brought the Austin convention into being, argues that the experiment “has a recommending force.” As Americans compare the group’s “before and after” opinions, we are supposed to find those expressed at the convention’s end “the conclusions [the general public] would come to, were they better informed on the issues and had the opportunity and motivation to examine those issues seriously. It allows a microcosm of the country to make recommendations to us all....”

Public Perspective believes that the Fishkin experiment raises critically important issues in democratic theory on the one hand, and the science of social science on the other. We invited James Fishkin and eight other distinguished researchers to address these issues in the symposium that follows.

Bringing Deliberation to Democracy

By James S. Fishkin

“This weekend has proved to me—don’t be apathetic, find out about your subject. What I like about it is that we have covered such a wide range of opinions, that the opinion furthest away from me has made me think and strengthened my own opinion.” So said Carmel Meredith, a participant in the first nationally televised “deliberative poll,” reflecting on a long weekend of intensive discussions with a national random sample of citizens from her country, Great Britain. She is filling out a new questionnaire and contrasting it with the one she filled out four weeks earlier—before she had participated in the process of citizen deliberation. “The questionnaire that I filled in four weeks ago, I might as well rip up now and put in the bin. It was an absolute waste of time—because I didn’t know enough about it.”

Meredith is one of three hundred randomly selected voters in Great Britain who participated in the world’s first nationally televised deliberative poll, in May 1994. Channel 4, one of Britain’s four national broadcast networks, made a reality of my proposal for a new institution—the deliberative poll—as a

means of giving voice to public views that represent all the people under conditions where they can also think about the issues in question. Since then, the Public Broadcasting Service, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, the nation’s eleven presidential libraries (six Republican and five Democratic), and the University of Texas at Austin have announced a joint plan to conduct the same kind of deliberative poll in the United States at the beginning of the 1996 presidential selection season.

The deliberative poll is unlike any poll or survey ever conducted. Ordinary polls model what the public is thinking, even though the public may not be thinking very much or paying much attention. A deliberative poll attempts to model what the public would think, had it a better opportunity to consider the questions at issue.

The idea is simple. Take a national random sample of the electorate and transport those people from all over the country to a single place. Immerse the sample in the issues, with carefully balanced briefing materials, with intensive

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discussions in small groups, and with the chance to question competing experts and politicians. At the end of several days of working through the issues face to face, poll the participants in detail. The resulting survey offers a representation of the considered judgments of the public—the views the entire country would come to if it had the same experience of behaving more like ideal citizens immersed in the issues for an extended period.

A deliberative poll is not meant to describe or predict public opinion. Rather it prescribes. It has a recommending force: these are the conclusions people would come to, were they better informed on the issues and had the opportunity and motivation to examine those issues seriously. It allows a microcosm of the country to make recommendations to us all after it has had the chance to think through the issues. If such a poll were broadcast before an election or a referendum, it could dramatically affect the outcome.

A deliberative poll takes the two technologies, polling and television, that

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have given us a superficial form of mass democracy, and harnesses them to a new and constructive purpose—giving voice to the people under conditions where the people can think....

[In 1993] I went to England on a long-planned sabbatical and managed to persuade the television network Channel 4 and the newspaper the *Independent* to be the first to try out the process on a national basis and on national television.

Roger Jowell, the director of Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR, the independent British research organization that conducted the survey), commented to me, on seeing the entire sample gathered for dinner in one room: "I've selected thousands of national random samples, but I've never seen one—no one has." The reason is that by the conventions of survey research, one would never wish to see a sample gathered together. After all, the people might talk to each other; they might discuss the issues and as a result become more informed or change their views. In that sense, they would become unrepresentative of ordinary unreflective public opinion. In my view, they would become representative of something else—representative of the public the people would become if everyone had a comparable opportunity to behave more like ideal citizens and discuss the issues face to face with other voters and with political leaders.

The deliberative poll has not developed in a vacuum. It builds on important work in encouraging citizen deliberation. It also builds on the movement toward public journalism.... Most efforts to realize public or civic journalism rely on conventional opinion polling to formulate the "people's agenda," however, and Jay Rosen criticizes the press for having accepted those polls as the appropriate measure of public opinion. He cites the pioneering work of survey researcher Daniel Yankelovich, who distinguishes between "public opinion" and "public judgment." The latter represents what people think, on those occasions when they have had a chance to

confront a range of conflicting arguments and conflicting values and arrive, after face-to-face deliberation, at a considered judgment. Public journalism can be thought of as focusing on one single task: "to improve the chances that public opinion will evolve into public judgment."¹....

The work of the Public Agenda Foundation combined with that of the Kettering Foundation to support the work of a nationwide network of citizen deliberators, the National Issues Forums (NIF). About 3,200 citizen forums around the country are held each year under the auspices of NIF. As David Mathews, the president of the Kettering Foundation, explains, the collaborators in NIF "wanted to develop a different type of public forum, one that would deal with issues from the public's perspective. That meant going beyond technical, ideological and legislative positions to find out how each issue affects what is most valuable to people."²....

Two representatives of the Kettering Foundation, Bob Kingston and John Doble, helped frame the briefing materials in the British deliberative poll and helped train the moderators for the small group discussion. With similar help, the briefing materials and moderator training for the American project will have the benefit of Kettering and the NIF. In that way, the deliberative process pioneered by NIF in citizen forums around the country can be brought to national television with a statistically representative microcosm to create a public voice that speaks for the people—a public voice that is both representative and deliberative.

We gathered the national random sample for the first deliberative poll, April 15-17, 1994, at the Granada Television Studio in Manchester, England. We attracted participants by paying their expenses, offering them a small honorarium, telling them they would be on national television, and advising them that they would be part of an important experiment in democracy....

The sample was selected by SCPR

from forty randomly chosen polling districts in forty randomly chosen constituencies around the country. First, we conducted a baseline survey in people's homes, face to face. We needed to find out what people thought before they were invited to come to the weekend. We interviewed 869 citizens, randomly chosen from the electoral register. This survey had a high response rate—74 percent. It gives an excellent picture of the public's attitudes on the issue in question: "Rising Crime: What Can We Do about It?" The survey is highly representative of the entire country in age, class, geographical location, gender, education, and every other important dimension. But this baseline survey was not the deliberative poll. It was only the beginning of the process.

Voters were invited to the Manchester event only after they completed the baseline survey. The three hundred who took up the invitation to come to Manchester for the weekend were, in every important respect, indistinguishable from the 869 who took the baseline survey....

As a starting point on the issue of crime, the weekend sample was an almost perfect representation of the nation gathered together in a single place. The challenge for the experiment was whether the participants would change over the course of the weekend. If a deliberative poll gave results identical to an ordinary poll, it would not be worth investing in such an elaborate project again.

Change, however, was not a worry. The members of the sample began to change from the moment they received our invitation. Knowing that they would be on national television, they began discussing the topic with family and friends, they began to read newspapers and listen to the media with more care, they began reading the briefing materials we sent them. Their views thus immediately became unrepresentative of public opinion in the conventional sense. But those views also became representative in an important new sense. They became representative of the views the

entire country would come to if it were populated by persons closer to ideal citizens—people who were motivated to be engaged by the issues and who debated them over an extended period....

The voters who came to Manchester changed in dramatic and coherent ways. They remained tough on crime (they continued to insist that prison should be “tougher and more unpleasant” and that “the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence” for some crimes), but they offered, by the end, a much more complex appreciation of the problem.... They became, at least on this one issue, more thoughtful and engaged citizens.

What did the event accomplish? It demonstrated the viability of a different form of opinion polling and, in a sense, a different form of democracy. As we have seen, Americans have long struggled with how to adapt democracy to the large nation-state. Face-to-face democracy cannot be applied to large states. Even in Rhode Island, the anti-Federalists could not gather everyone together to hear all the arguments on either side. It was for this reason that the Federalists boycotted the referendum on the US Constitution and said that the only appropriate method for making a decision was the elected state convention. A representation of the people, in the form of those elected to go to the convention, would be able to hear all the competing arguments and make an informed decision....

Democracy, even in the elitist sense of the Founders, was only revived by the notion of elected representation. But another form of representation lay hidden in the dust of history. It was employed by the legislative commissions, citizens' juries and the Council in ancient Athens (the crucial body that set the agenda for meetings of the citizen Assembly). This other method was selection by lot or random sampling. In one sense the use of random sampling in politics was revived by opinion polling. After all, what is a random sample, at bottom, but a lottery? But in the ancient Greek form, and in the form employed

in the deliberative poll, opinions are taken not from isolated citizens but from citizens meeting together, deliberating on common problems. These polls represent the considered judgments of the polity, not the top-of-the-head reactions of isolated citizens. Institutions that speak for the people need to be both representative and deliberative. The ancient Greek innovation was a random sample of citizens who deliberated together and in that way realized both values. And this is the form I propose to adapt to the television age.

If this new—and very old—form of democracy were employed in a general election, at the beginning of the primary season, or before a referendum, then the recommending force of the public's considered judgments, broadcast on national television, might well make a difference to the outcome.... When broadcast on national television and disseminated in the press, the deliberative poll can affect the public's conclusions, but it can also affect the way that public frames and understands issues. If televised deliberative polls succeed in communicating the deliberative process, they can help transform the public agenda to the agenda of an engaged public—to an agenda citizens will care about, and be attracted by, because it will be framed in terms that speak to their concerns in ordinary life....

The American project, at the beginning of the presidential selection season, can be expected to have a major effect on candidates and issues. During the invisible primary the national broadcasting of the considered judgments of the entire country, in microcosm, could provide for a more thoughtful and representative way of launching the primary season and launching the debate. In 1992 only 12 percent of Democrats and 8 percent of Republicans in the relevant states participated in the primary process. As we have seen, the arbitrariness in the ordering of the primaries increases the influence of tiny, self-selected electorates in determining the outcome for the rest of us. Furthermore, given the increasing domination of television as the key medium of public discourse, the

primary process has become a duel of attack ads and sound bites fighting for the attention of an inattentive public. The deliberative poll would insert a rational dialogue at the start, one that represents the entire country in one room, under conditions where it can think through the issues. Given the increasingly front-loaded character of the primary calendar, approximately 70 percent of the delegates will be selected in seven weeks in 1996: the entire country has been turned into one giant television battleground, one huge California primary, if you will. The new and constructive use of television offered by the deliberative poll will give us a thoughtful prelude to the accelerated process to follow. The deliberative poll may, in fact, be the one time when the country will be able to pause, take a deep breath, and think through the issues. The rest of the primary season will then proceed with the speed of a shrinking sound bite.

Most ambitiously, the deliberative poll can be thought of as an actual sample from a hypothetical society—the deliberative and engaged society we do not have. Ideally, we should get everyone thinking and discussing the issues. But as we have seen the forces of rational ignorance are powerful. Yet although we cannot get everyone actively engaged under most conditions, through the deliberative poll we can do the experiment and get the microcosm engaged—and then broadcast the results to everyone else. Citizens in the microcosm are not subject to rational ignorance. Instead of one insignificant vote in millions each of them has an important role to play in a nationally televised event. With true engagement and attention from the microcosm this representation of the public's judgment becomes a voice worth listening to....

At the National Issues Convention, scheduled for mid-January 1996, we intend to identify, far in advance, several key issue areas, based on analyses of such standard public opinion research as polls and focus groups. We shall use standard public opinion research because we are interested in beginning where the public begins. We must select issues

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that speak to the people's concerns and that facilitate posing the problems in terms they can understand. Working with the Kettering Foundation and the Public Agenda Foundation, we shall adapt briefing materials appropriate for ordinary citizens as an initial background on the issues. Those briefings will be reviewed for both balance and accuracy by a distinguished bipartisan committee chaired by former Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and former Republican Congressman Bill Frenzel. Candidates who wish to provide materials on these issues will be invited to do so. We expect that the citizens invited to participate will prepare seriously for the event. Knowing that they will be on national television, and knowing that the issues are important, they are likely to read the materials, discuss the issues with friends and family, and pay more attention to the media. From the moment they are invited, they begin to become unrepre-

sentative of mass opinion as it is. But they begin to become representative of our ideal public.

The logic is very simple. If we take a microcosm of the entire country and subject it to a certain experience, and if the microcosm (behaving in the way we would like ideal citizens to behave in seriously deliberating about the issues) then comes to different conclusions about those issues, our inference is simply that if, somehow, the entire country were subjected to the same experience as the microcosm, then hypothetically the entire country would also come to similar conclusions.

Of course, it is unlikely the entire country ever would approximate the experiences of a deliberative poll. Even when there is an intense debate, it may well be dominated by attack ads and misleading sound bites. But the point is

that if, somehow, the public were enabled to behave more like ideal citizens, then the deliberative poll offers a representation of what the conclusions might look like. That representation should have a prescriptive value. It is an opportunity for the country, in microcosm, to make recommendations to itself through television under conditions where it can arrive at considered judgments.

Endnotes

¹Jay Rosen, "Politics, Vision, and the Press: Toward a Public Agenda for Journalism," in *The New News and the Old News: The Press and Politics in the 1990s* (NY: Twentieth Century Fund, 1990) pp. 70-8.

²David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 108.



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It's Not Deliberative and It's Not a Poll

By Warren J. Mitofsky

James Fishkin calls his new "unprecedented experiment" a deliberative opinion poll. He says it will "represent the considered judgments the public would come to, if people were really engaged to become more informed and to think about the issues." Never before has so much social science talent and money been focused around a so-called poll. The event will prove misleading to the American public, and it's a dubious use of the nearly \$4 million that have been contributed to the undertaking.

For four days in January, 600 Americans will gather in Austin, Texas, with presidential candidates to deliberate the key issues of the 1996 campaign. The 600 are supposed to be a scientific sample of all potential voters in the country. Their opinions on the vital issues of the

day will be recorded ahead of time and then collected again at the conclusion of the gathering. Changes in their opinions will be attributed to their

exposure to the politicians and the small group discussions of the issues.

The underlying assumption for this gathering is that a presidential campaign does not provide ordinary citizens with the information they should have about the country's pressing issues. Even if they did have the information, the argument goes, people would not deliberate about the issues thoughtfully, and would fail to explore their nuances. Without the information and the deliberation people cannot make an informed choice for President, we are told.

So Fishkin and his colleagues will frame the issues that he and the supporters of the deliberative project think are so vital to the future of democracy. They

will create an agenda and the setting for a discussion of *their* issues that meets *their* criteria for deliberation.

The elitism of these assumptions has not hindered reputable and concerned institutions from sponsoring this event. Nor has it hindered distinguished social scientists from participating in the details and oversight of the experiment. And just so the rest of the American public will know what "real" deliberation is all about, PBS will commit considerable broadcast time to this project.

There are two substantive problems with this experiment, problems which

“*This experiment's spoon feeding of issues is not an adequate simulation of a real-life deliberative process any more than painting by numbers represents art.*”