
Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation

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At the heart of any notion of democracy is some element of public input into the policy-making process. Inputs can take the form of direct democracy or parliamentary democracy or both. Parliamentary democracy is a form of representative democracy, in which the electorate determines who its representatives are; the majority party or coalition forms the government; and the government decides public policies. Historically, British democracy has been representative democracy. Direct democracy is manifest in a referendum or an initiative, in which electors vote directly for or against adopting a policy. Institutions of direct democracy are prominent in Switzerland and in American states such as California, but they have been very unusual in the past in Britain. Tony Blair has made the promotion of more popular inputs in public policy a leading feature of his approach to government, for example endorsing the idea of national referendums on electoral systems and on joining the European Monetary Union.

But the distribution of votes in elections and referendums is not necessarily a good indicator of public preferences. One obvious source of error is low turnout: voters and non-voters may differ significantly in their preferences. A more fundamental difficulty is the amount of knowledge and thought underlying the votes that are cast. Substantial scholarly research has produced an overwhelming consensus on the obvious: most people know very little and have thought very little about most policy issues.¹ While there is disagreement about how much the lack of information and interest affects people's views, it is possible that voting preferences would be noticeably different if everyone was more knowledgeable about, attentive to and reflective about the issues involved. Even if every voter were fully informed and deliberated about major public policies, there is the possibility that no party reflects all their views. In a two-party system in which a red and a blue party compete for control of government, a voter who prefers yellow may be unrepresented. Furthermore, when several issues are important, a voter may prefer the policy of different parties on different issues.

Public opinion polls have become a kind of advisory input to policy-making between elections, but much the same objections can be made to the results of public opinion polls highlighted in the media. There can be difficulties in recruiting a representative sample because some groups are hard to locate or unwilling to be interviewed, as in the British general election of 1992 when the opinion polls unanimously

predicted a Labour victory. At least a part of their error (and some scholars say most) was attributable to unrepresentative samples.² Some opinions are difficult to measure, especially if people hold conflicting views that lead them to vary their answers according to how a question is worded. The fundamental problem with conventional public opinion polls concerns the quality of the responses.

Respondents in public opinion polls are often asked to give off-the-cuff responses to questions of public policy that are usually of limited interest to most voters. Whether to oblige the interviewer or to avoid appearing ignorant, they usually comply, even when they are offered the chance to say that they 'don't know' or 'haven't thought much about the question'. Thus, large proportions of random samples of the American public supported or opposed the non-existent Public Affairs Act of 1975 – and, more recently, the equally non-existent legislation to repeal it. Responses with little or no prior information or commitment are what Philip Converse famously termed 'non-attitudes'.³ Responses manufactured on the spot are not necessarily what respondents would say in answer to the same questions if they had had some information and time to think or discuss with others what was involved.

The interaction between an interviewer and a respondent is not a discussion, for interviewers are explicitly instructed not to provide information or venture their own ideas or opinions when asking respondents to give theirs. While this avoids the risk of interviewers influencing respondents, the situation is politically unrealistic: just as policy-makers only take decisions after endless discussions and exchanges of opinions, so individuals arrive at firm opinions by engaging in conversation about them with friends, family, people at work and so on.

On most issues, a relatively limited portion of the public has well-formed policy preferences; most people do not pay enough attention to current affairs to have solidly based opinions about most major issues. They are, in Anthony Downs's well-known phrase, 'rationally ignorant'.⁴ In a country with tens of millions of electors, such as Britain or the United States, no one vote is likely to affect the outcome of any election or referendum. This is a strong disincentive to learn or think much about politics and policy. Why spend a lot of time and effort becoming more informed about the merits of competing policy alternatives?

The deficit of citizens is not just a matter of factual information or of time to think about issues. It is also a matter of deliberation, that is discussing issues with others with different experiences, holding different views and representing varied and sometimes conflicting interests. Ordinary people simply do not discuss politics a great deal, and when they do, it is chiefly with others like themselves and of a similar cast of mind, for everyone moves in limited social circles and selects conversational partners partly on the grounds that their friends and companions think as they do.

How much does this matter? Evidence from various experiments and statistical simulations with survey data indicates that increasing the deliberation and information of citizens does have some influence on policy preferences and votes.⁵ There is a gap between what citizens initially say they would prefer and, given more information and the opportunity to reflect, what they then think. This gap must trouble anyone concerned with democracy. The spirit of democracy requires that government reflects and responds to the public's opinions—but less so when these are 'non-attitudes' or unconsidered opinions instead of statement by people who have become informed and thought seriously about the issues. Until recently, politicians have had to rely on snap opinion polls or anecdotal examples of often uninformed voters, as this has been the only available direct expressions of the public's views. Not only has this strengthened the influence of elected representatives and parties in policy-making but also that of non-elected gatekeepers who organise the discussion of public policy in television and in the press.

Frustration with inadequate methods of assessing public opinion has led researchers around the world to devise fresh means of eliciting evidence of more informed and reflective public opinion. *Focus Groups* are the longest-established method of discovering how voters discuss issues and see politics from the perspective of very limited information and reflection. The *Choice Questionnaire* developed by Peter Neijens, Wilem Saris and their colleagues in the Netherlands and imported by Hanspeter Kriesi and Danielle Bütschi to Switzerland introduces relevant information about policies while conducting a survey interview.⁶ The *Televote* developed by Ted Becker and Christa Daryl Slaton interviews a random sample, tells the respondents they will be re-interviewed and sends them briefing materials to be read between interview and reinterview.⁷ Another approach is to gather small groups of citizens together to discuss policy issues over periods of a few days. The *Citizen Juries* pioneered by the Jefferson Center in Minnesota and introduced in Britain by the Institute for Public Policy Research involves small group deliberations and opportunities to question expert 'witnesses'.⁸ *Planning Cells*, developed by Pieter Dienel and his colleagues in Germany, not only provide information but also 'coax participants toward processing it on rational lines'.⁹ *Consensus Conferences*, developed in Denmark and brought by the Science Museum to the UK, bring small (and sometimes large) groups together to discuss and try to reach a set of agreed conclusions about policy issues.¹⁰

We have developed *Deliberative Polling* to meet the simultaneous requirements of providing voters with information about public policies, giving them also opportunities to discuss the information with people of diverse views, and measuring the resultant change.¹¹ A deliberative poll begins by interviewing a random sample of the population. Following the interview, respondents are invited to come to a

conference centre for a weekend of face-to-face discussions and are sent a balanced package of background information to encourage learning and thinking about an issue. These materials are made available to the general public and are often certified by an advisory board for balance and accuracy. During the weekend, discussions are held in randomly assigned small groups chaired by an impartial moderator, and they alternate with question-and-answer plenary sessions with experts and policy-makers on the issue. After a weekend of information and discussion, in both small groups and plenary sessions, participants complete the same questionnaire as when first contacted. In this way, a deliberative poll can measure the extent to which opinions change as a result of exposure to information and discussion. Changes in opinion have often been substantial. Whereas the 'before' results are just like those from any other random survey of public opinion, the 'after' figures represent what public opinion would be like if everyone had an opportunity to become informed by experts on all sides and to reflect on issues by discussing them with people of diverse views.

We see deliberative polling as offering various significant advantages when compared to other forms of public consultation. First of all, it provides opportunities for extended discussion and deliberation. It is difficult to process new information about complex issues during the course of an interview, as in the choice questionnaire. Without discussion, it is also difficult to gain a full appreciation of the competing arguments or the circumstances and interests behind them. In asking respondents to read the materials and discuss the issues with friends and family, the televote, seeks to generate some deliberation, but there is no assurance that they will do so and even if they do, the conversations will tend to be with people with similar backgrounds and views. In contrast, in deliberative polling each participant spends a great deal of time talking to others of diverse views. Not only do moderators ensure consideration of all the major arguments for and against major policy options, but random assignment to small groups produces discussion among people who think and vote differently and would not normally be exposed to one another.

The representativeness of those involved in deliberative polling is another important consideration. Without a random sample of hundreds of people there can be no assurance that the results of asking people to discuss questions bear any resemblance to what would be obtained if the whole population could be given the same experience. Other methods of encouraging deliberation, such as focus groups, citizen juries, consensus conferences and planning cells fall particularly short on this point. Citizen juries are usually not randomly selected and in any case normally consist of a dozen or so people, far too few to reflect a random cross-section of the population. Whatever their number, the participants in consensus conferences are substantially self-selected, typically from advertisements placed in newspapers. Planning

cells employ random samples from a number of localities, but pooling the groups does not create a national sample. Moreover, variations in activities from cell to cell raise questions about whether those involved are being exposed to the same variety of views.

In deliberative polling, samples are relatively large and random. The initial survey normally interviews about a thousand people and the participants in the deliberative weekend number several hundred. The overall response rate in the initial interview is similar to that in the best public opinion surveys and the samples are representative of the population as a whole. Although there are occasional statistically significant differences between the characteristics of the initial interviewees and those participating in subsequent deliberative discussions, these have been relatively few and modest. The participant samples have represented both the initial survey sample (the 'before' measure) and the general population remarkably well.

The purpose of deliberative polls is also distinct. consensus conferences, as the name implies, citizen juries and planning cells all tend to seek a collective, consensual decision among participants. However, induced consensus not only masks differences of opinion, which are normal in policy-orientated discussions; it also opens the door to excessive influence by 'opinion leaders'. In contrast, deliberative polling seeks neither. The moderators who conduct the small group discussions are trained to make sure that nobody feels under pressure to agree with anyone else and the groups are under no pressure to reach a consensus. The aim is for each participant to become better informed and refine their individual views, whether in opposition to or in support of preponderant opinion. Our interest is not in reaching an agreed verdict but in measuring opinions—and opinion change—by pre- and post-deliberation confidential questionnaires. The distinctive result of a deliberative poll is the evidence it reveals of the scale and direction of change in opinions before and after exposure to information and alternative opinions. The poll also shows who changes, in what ways and by how much. Deliberative polling is not like a jury or committee meeting, seeking agreement about a decision; it is more like an idealised version of an election campaign where opinions and behaviour at the end of a campaign are likely to be more informed and, as a result, to differ from what they were at the start.

The late eighteenth century American Constitution starts with the words 'We, the people', and the political values underlying many different methods of direct democracy flourished first in the United States. Contemporary American campaign practices are often drawn on for lessons in conducting campaigns in Britain and in other established democracies. Deliberative polling has much more cosmopolitan origins, for it was heavily influenced by discussions between James Fishkin, an American, and Peter Laslett, a Cambridge political theorist, and the first poll was undertaken in Britain in 1994. Of the total of 16 polls,

five national Polls have been undertaken in Britain funded by Channel Four Television, with the help of Granada Television and the National Centre for Social Research, and each has been nationally televised. The topics have been how to reduce and deal with crime (1994), Britain's future in Europe (1995), the monarchy (1996), the economic issues in the General Election (1997), and the future of the NHS (1998). On the eve of the United States presidential nomination campaigns of 1996, we conducted a nationally televised poll about family policy, the future of the national economy and America's role in the world. The Poll, conducted with the support of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and the University of Texas, involved televised dialogues with a panel of Republican presidential candidates, as well as with Vice-President Gore. In addition, we have conducted nine local or regional deliberative polls, eight of them on electric utility matters in Texas and neighbouring states. Lastly, we collaborated in a nationally televised poll in Australia before the 1999 referendum on whether or not Australia should cease to have a monarch and become a republic. Conducted with Issues Deliberation Australia, The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Nine Network's Sixty Minutes programme, the Australian newspaper and the Australian National University, it reached a large portion of the Australian public, providing considered judgments of an informed microcosm before people voted on a complex constitutional issue.

Does information and deliberation make much difference? Every deliberative poll to date has yielded sizeable and statistically significant changes of opinion on a large proportion of the policy items covered. The greatest opportunity for deliberation arises when laws require that public consultation be undertaken before a binding government decision is taken. In Texas, a statutory requirement for public consultation was introduced for energy resource decisions by regulated electric utilities. When Converse wrote about 'non-attitudes' in the early 1960s, one of his key examples of pseudo-opinions concerned attitudes toward the government's role in electric power. Now, nearly forty years later, we have been able to discover not only what more informed opinions on such questions would be like, but to insert them into the policy-making process, having conducted eight polls on energy issues in Texas and neighbouring states.

Because most people have little information about the relationship between conservation issues and energy use, the response to a one-shot survey of public opinion is likely to be heavily influenced by the questions asked. If questions focus on environmental protection, a non-economic good, then a majority of people may be in favour. If they focus on the desirability of keeping energy prices down, this may produce results unfavourable to environmentalists. A deliberative poll gives people information about the costs and benefits of both environmental protection and cheap energy — and exposes individuals to arguments for giving

each priority. The results of polling in Texas in 1996 show the major changes in opinion of Texans before participation in a weekend deliberation on the issues. Before becoming informed, when people were asked if they were prepared to pay at least \$1 more a month for more environmentally friendly renewable energy resources, in three polls an average of 55% said they would do so. After participation in a weekend discussion, an average of 88% said they would. Moreover, the proportion giving first priority to energy conservation rose an average of 31%, focusing attention on reducing energy demands rather than on choices between alternative sources of energy. These polls registered far greater public interest in and sensitivity towards environmental concerns than policymakers had expected, and have led to the largest-ever investments by Texas in renewable energy (such as wind and solar power), conservation subsidies for low income consumers, and, most recently, lower prices for customers buying renewable energy.

The Australian referendum on the monarchy posed a single question, asking people whether or not they wished to replace a Governor General representing the Queen with a President chosen by Parliament. Symbolically, the issue was whether or not Australia should become a republic, an important issue in a land where the population increasingly has no British ancestors or only very distant British antecedents. The method of choosing the President became an issue during the campaign, because appointment by Parliament appeared 'undemocratic' in that it denied popular choice of the head of state. A representative sample of 347 Australian voters participated in a deliberative poll in Canberra shortly before the 1999 referendum. During the weekend they were exposed to the rationale of Parliament appointing a President by a two-thirds majority (so that the president would not overshadow the legitimate authority of a Prime Minister accountable to Parliament) and the desirability of a head of state who would be above the political fray and not to have to stand for office. In consequence, the number favouring a directly elected President plummeted from 50% to 19%. After listening to advocates of each side, the percentage of participants favouring a republic with a president chosen by the proposed model increased from 53% to 73%.

The deliberative poll before the 1997 British general election exposed participants in the weekend discussion to Liberal Democrat policies alongside those of the two main parties—in a context where there was time to reflect and discuss the pros and cons of voting for a party that receives little media attention during the life of a Parliament. In consequence, the proportion expressing an intention of voting Liberal Democrat increased by 22 percentage points, drawn almost equally from the ranks of previous Conservative and Labour supporters and 'don't knows'. When we checked after the election how the participants had actually voted in the election, we found that they did indeed vote according to their new-found preferences.¹²

In the deliberative poll we conducted before the start of the American Presidential primary process in 1996, the preliminary survey found that most people wanted to get rid of foreign aid. They also had the impression that foreign aid consumed a major part of the federal budget, a view that was wildly inaccurate. Participants in the weekend deliberations about issues were given documentary evidence that by any measure foreign aid was about one per cent of federal spending. This was a revelation to many participants, and it increased the proportion in the sample thinking the current level of spending on foreign aid is about right from 26% to 41%. Equally important, presidential candidates who were cross-questioned by our sample could not get away with any of the usual platitudes about such a complicated subject.

Televising substantial parts of all the national deliberative polls at peak times increases the impact of such polling. Television multiplies the audience for deliberation, so that millions of viewers acquire more knowledge about a contentious issue and see that there is more than one point of view. They are thus stimulated to re-evaluate their previously held opinions, whether shallow or firm. Because the central figures in polling are a cross-section of ordinary voters, viewers can identify with actual participants in the deliberation; they are not simply passive spectators watching a public argument between candidates or an aggressive interview.

Deliberative polls are intended to complement the familiar institutions of representative democracy rather than supplant them, for there is always a need for deliberation on major issues by small groups, whether in Cabinet committees, party caucuses or Parliament. The real issue is not to deflect policy-makers from being influenced in their deliberations by what the public thinks but to expose them to what a more informed state of public opinion would be like.

Today, only a minority of elected office-holders will defend the traditional idea that they are elected to form their own judgments about public policy; most proclaim that they are also there to give voice to the wishes of the people. But the voices that claim to speak for the people are themselves unrepresentative, such as journalists, editors and proprietors of the popular and elite media. Most media-sponsored opinion polls provide little information about popular attitudes, focusing instead on the horse race aspect of politics — which party is in the lead? — or tabulating the current state of “non-attitudes” and snap judgements about current issues. Similarly, reports of public opinion based on chats with taxi drivers or speedily convened focus groups are, at best, reflections of uninformed opinions, and probably unrepresentative ones as well. Although it is axiomatic that snap judgements generally make for poor policies, that is precisely what opinion polls are designed to measure.

Democratic governance ought also to reflect what the public would think if it had the opportunity to reflect on the issues of the moment.

The merit of deliberative polling is that it employs social science methods to produce evidence about informed public opinion. Every aspect of the process is designed to give participants a chance to consider a topic in a balanced way, discussing information about all sides of a case in small groups and with balanced panels of experts, politicians and decision-makers with different points of view, and then to register their opinions in questionnaires that insulate individuals from social pressures to conform.

Of course, citizens do not normally have the opportunity to form their opinions after careful deliberation. Nor are they obliged to do so. Politicians are elected to do that job for them. But to the extent that politicians want to take account of the opinions of ordinary citizens in policy-making, they would be wise to treat ordinary poll data about most specific policy issues with caution. Snap judgments can quickly change when an issue becomes more widely debated. And there is little doubt that democracy would work better if politicians could somehow be better informed about the likely direction of such changes.

The aim of deliberative polling is to provide inputs into current policy deliberations. In the absence of such inputs, politicians come up with decisions that they hope are also consistent with the views of their constituents, but which may fail to reflect what those constituents would want if they had a modicum information and the time to make considered judgments. While organising such a poll costs a substantial sum of money, the mistakes of government cost even more.

Deliberative polling gives insights into how electors can produce better-reasoned preferences grounded in evidence about the complexities of controversial public issues, offering a reliable and valid quantitative representation of majority (and also minority) opinions about major issues—and how these opinions change after due deliberation. The method is not suitable for every problem facing government. Crisis measures require instant decisions. It is especially suitable on issues about which the public is likely to have little information or when the choice of a public policy depends on trade-offs between competing goods. It can help the public articulate considered opinions. As such, it is both a social science experiment and a form of public education in the broadest sense.

The Deliberative Polling project has benefited from the efforts of many collaborators. The term itself is a registered trade mark, and the Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Texas uses fees from the trade mark to support research. An earlier version of this article appeared in the UK Ceed Bulletin.

- 1 See R.C. Luskin, 'Measuring Political Sophistication', *American Journal of Political Science*, November 1987; M.X. Delli Carpini and S. Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, Yale UP, 1996.
- 2 See R. Jowell et al, 'The 1992 British Election: the Failure of the Polls', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57, Summer 1993.
- 3 See P.E. Converse, 'Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue' in E.R. Tufte, (ed.), *The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems*, Addison-Wesley, 1970.

- 4 A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper and Row, 1956.
- 5 In the way of statistical simulation, see L. Bartels, 'Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, February 1996, and Delli Carpini and Keeter, *op. cit.*
- 6 See P. Neijens, *The Choice Questionnaire*, Free University Press, 1987.
- 7 C.D. Slaton, *Televote: Expanding Citizen Participation in the Quantum Age*, Praeger, 1992.
- 8 See A. Coote and J. Lenaghan, *Citizens' Juries: Theory into Practice*, IPPR, 1997.
- 9 See P.C. Dienel and O. Renn, 'Planning Cells: A Gate to Fractal Mediation' in O. Renn, T. Webler and P. Wiedemann (eds), *Fairness and Competence in Citizen Participation: Evaluating Models for Environmental Discourse*, Kluwer, 1995.
- 10 See 'Consensus Conferences' in R.E. Sclove, *Democracy and Technology*, Guilford Press, 1995.
- 11 For an account of Deliberative Polling and its rationale see J.S. Fishkin, *The Voice of the People*, Yale UP, 1997.
- 12 See J.S. Fishkin and R.C. Luskin, 'Bringing Deliberation to the Democratic Dialogue' in M. McCombs (ed.), *A Poll with a Human Face: The National Issues Convention Experiment in Political Communication*, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.