

THE IDEA OF A DELIBERATIVE OPINION POLL

By James S. Fishkin

[Excerpted from *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*, by James S. Fishkin, published by Yale University Press. Copyright © 1991 by Yale University. Reproduced by permission. Following the excerpt is a review of Fishkin's book and argument, by Michael W. Traugott.] James S. Fishkin holds the Darrell K. Royal Regents Chair in Government, Law and Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin.

An ordinary opinion poll models what the public thinks, given how little it knows. A deliberative opinion poll models what the public *would* think, if it had a more adequate chance to think about the questions at issue. Among other uses, deliberative opinion polls offer a way out of the dilemma which, as we will see, has afflicted American efforts to bring greater democracy to presidential selection. On the one hand, the proliferation of mass primaries has largely emptied the process of deliberation. On the other hand, a return to the smoked-filled rooms that once dominated candidate selection would sacrifice political equality. We seem to face a forced choice between politically equal but relatively incompetent masses and politically unequal but relatively more competent elites.

Institutions designed on the model of the deliberative opinion poll escape this dilemma. They embody political equality because everyone has an equal chance of being represented in the national sample of participants. But they also embody deliberation because they immerse a selected group of citizens in intensive, face-to-face debate.

Imagine a new beginning to the process of selecting a president. A crucial fact about the American process of candidate selection is that it is extremely "front-loaded": that is, early results greatly influence those which follow. Hence, a different process at the outset could have a dramatic effect on the eventual results. In this new beginning, a national sample of the citizen voting age population is transported to a single site for at least several days.¹ These "delegates" are given the opportunity to interact in person with the major candidates of each party. Democratic delegates go to the Democratic

events, Republicans to the Republican events; independents are asked beforehand to choose one or the other. In some portions of the event, the entire convention meets together. Some of the candidate appearances before these groups are individual, while some are in debate formats. Many of these occasions for questioning and interaction are broadcast on national television. After debating the issues with the candidates and with each other, the delegates are polled on their preferences on both the candidates and the issues.

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If this event were formally institutionalized, it would amount to what I have called a "National Caucus." It would be charged with selecting a certain number of at-large delegates to the national conventions of the two major parties. The number of delegates need not be large. The number selected in Iowa or New Hampshire, for example, is quite small. Those two states have an extraordinary impact on the selection process because of the timing of their events and the ensuing media attention, not because of the number of delegates selected.

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Would deliberative opinion polls come out differently from normal opinion polls? Citizens of mass publics show little in the way of knowledge, sophistica-

tion, or consistency in their beliefs and opinions. On many issues, about four out of five citizens do not have stable, nonrandom opinions; they have what the political psychologists call "non-attitudes" or "pseudo-opinions." Russell Neuman explains that "most respondents feel obliged to have an opinion, in effect, to help the interviewer out." Even when citizens are "asked if they have thought about an issue enough to have an opinion, 80 to 90 percent of the population selects an alternative in response to most questions. In effect, opinions are invented on the spot."²

We do not know to what degree deliberative opinion polls would contribute to thoughtful, self-reflective opinion formation. However, it would seem likely that many of these 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.

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We also have to note that we are creating a situation where people do not merely become more knowledgeable and sophisticated. They interact, face-to-face, with others who are also becoming more knowledgeable and sophisticated. We cannot know, at this point, what changes in the distribution of opinion might result. We are creating an interactive, deliberative, and knowledgeable community that purports to offer a model of what the electorate would come to be if somehow it could be similarly interactive, deliberative, and knowledgeable.

What would it mean for the entire electorate to be so engaged in face-to-face

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-