

less ignorant.⁴ However, if I am part of a sample of a few hundred in a nationally televised deliberative poll, I have a real incentive to invest a lot of time and effort attempting to understand the issues. I have the opportunity to make those opinions count when they will make a difference in a highly visible event. Of course, just by broadcasting and publishing the results, we will not impart wisdom to the entire mass public. But we will at least inform citizens around the country of the conclusions they would collectively arrive at if they were seriously engaged by the issues.

It is now widely accepted that many of the “opinions” reported by polls and surveys are “non-attitudes” or pseudo-opinions.⁵ Respondents are asked questions about which they have no knowledge, and no settled opinion. Therefore, instead of making informed judgments, they simply choose one of the alternatives offered. In effect, they make up an opinion on the spot. The random volatility of these opinions over time is one of the clues to the lack of thought that has gone into them. Yet these pseudo-opinions are reported solemnly by the media as if they were firm and settled. As the media disseminate those views, they take on an additional life of their own. As the late V.O. Key argued, television and polling together operate as a kind of echo chamber.⁶ Poll results are broadcast, citizens have vague impressions of the results and bounce them back in future polls. Very little thinking is going on in this process. The aspiration of the deliberative poll is to insert a real voice of the people, its considered judgments, into the echo chamber of-

fered by the media.

Imagine what would happen if the deliberative poll were inserted into the beginning of the American presidential selection process. The two defining features of the deliberative poll, that it is representative and deliberative, would offer a dramatically different start to the process, a new version of the “invisible primary,” the period before the first official events when momentum for both issues and candidacies is born.

Rather than small, self-selected electorates in unrepresentative states we would have a national-random sample. Rather than sound-bite campaigning or the ritual of endlessly repeated stump speeches, we would get a deliberative and in-depth examination of the candidates and the issues at the moment when it could make a difference—the beginning.

The British have already announced that they will make the deliberative poll the centerpiece of one network’s television coverage of their next General Election.⁷ With luck, the process they have pioneered may be used to bring deliberative democracy to our next venture in presidential selection. The hope is that we can use the two technologies, polling and television, that have, thus far, combined to give us a superficial form of mass democracy. Through survey research, we can select the sample and formulate and tabulate the questions. Through television, we can attract the citizens and the candidates and disseminate the results. The result may be a new

method for bringing power to the people, but under conditions where the people can think about the power they are to exercise.

Endnotes:

¹ For a detailed discussion of the deliberative opinion poll see my *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

² See for example, comments of Robert Worcester on the deliberative poll on the NBC Nightly News, May 7, 1994.

³ For an excellent summary of the approach of the National Issues Forums in facilitating small group discussion of issues, see the recent book by David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

⁵ See Philip E. Converse, “Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue,” in Edward R. Tuft, ed., *The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1970). See also Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁶ V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 2.

⁷ “Channel 4 to Introduce Radical Polling Method,” *Broadcast* (May 6, 1994), p. 3.

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What, Really, Should We Think About “The Deliberative Poll?”

By Norman L. Webb

The Experiment

The topic of the national-level survey was rising crime. This survey was carried out by SCPR, a highly reliable British research organization. Interviews were completed with 869 respondents, a success rate of 74%, which is high under the prevailing conditions in Britain. After the initial inter-

Over the weekend of April 15th, 1994 there occurred in Manchester, England an event which was definitely a “first,” the realization of Professor James Fishkin’s controversial concept of the deliberative opinion poll. Being a British pollster intrigued by this new method of analyzing public opinion, I felt compelled to offer an analysis and commentary.

view the sample was recruited to participate in the Manchester weekend, with everything paid and a gift of \$75. In all, 302 respondents accepted and kept the faith by appearing for the deliberative process. At first sight this seems disappointing—only 26% of the original sample. However, such a rate is more common than many people think: Television meter and consumer pan-

els all over the Western world regularly deal with such returns. Fortunately, independent checks can be done to justify the accuracy of low response rates. Fishkin's participants were demographically similar to the original 869, which is at least reassuring, but more importantly, their views about crime mirrored those of the initial sample. In practical terms, if the reasons for sample attrition or observed bias are uncorrelated with the purpose of the study, you're in the clear. Therefore, Jim Fishkin's procedures were sound until the sample arrived in Manchester.

Unfortunately, upon their arrival I became a layman, because with a curiously Marxist echo Jim Fishkin is not content to observe the political world, he wants to change it—and in practical terms he imposes the opportunity for change on his sample, and gratifyingly they have responded with a substantial shift in the balance of their views. The details of this have been reported elsewhere (*Public Perspective*, pp. 27-29), but there are still questions arising in the acceptance of these findings and the use of this method. First among them: is the shift in opinion long-term or temporary? Also, how can one be certain that the materials used for deliberation are indeed balanced. In *this* instance I have no quarrel with the materials. Providing balance, however, is no easy task. A more technical concern is the effect on any statistical evaluation of the final poll results. The 302 observations can no longer be said to be independent of one another. While the answers to these questions are not readily available without further research, one thing is certain: Something happened, and Jim Fishkin and his sample caucus have collaborated to make it happen. Whether he is a crazy visionary or a far-seeing prophet is a question that remains to be answered.

Statistics as Entertainment

In Fishkin's original proposal which was to be carried out in the US in 1992, the experiment centered on a primary election debate to be televised live over three days. One can imagine the possible distortions occurring in the responses of participants appearing live before TV cameras, and the problems involved in protecting participants from outside influence. In contrast,

the Manchester deliberation avoided these pitfalls by not appearing on TV or in *The Independent* until three weeks after the sample caucus. Further, the policy of the producers was to confine taping to only two of the twenty groups, mainly leaving the rest alone. This was preferred to camera roving for more sensational events or people. Even this provided a wealth of material for a two-hour program. Yet the groups deliberated, listened and finally recorded their post-deliberation views in peace and without interference.

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Statistics have been used to measure audiences for a couple of generations now, from billboards to the press and television. But statistics *as* show business are rare. However, the general impression I received was that the program was a success in audience terms, given the serious nature of the subject and the competition from purely entertainment programming on other channels. So, however irreverent this may sound, as showbiz it worked. And readership figures for the time indicate that approximately one million people had the opportunity to read about it in the next day's *Independent*.

The Future

Will the deliberative poll become a feature of the democratic process? I can hardly imagine any legislation building it into the system. First, it is difficult to conceive what the official procedure might be, and second, politicians who have gained power without it would be reluctant to accept another power base with a sophisticated method of agenda setting. For deliberative polling to become a feature of the political scene, it will need to develop with the support of the media, just as it did this time in Britain.

To succeed more generally, deliberative polling has to force itself to be heard, as pioneer polling organizations did two gen-

erations ago. Not only does it need cooperation from the media, but also support from the political establishment and the general public. The former, instinctively for the *status quo*, will only be dragged into working with it out of necessity. The public, on the other hand, may provoke this necessity. It depends upon their attitude after exposure to more material like the Fishkin television program, where viewers saw people like themselves receiving information about crime, debating and discussing, and modifying their opinions in the light of the experience.

If the public is exposed to more deliberative opinion polls, then a mixture of two tendencies will emerge. There are the cynical who will either reject the sample as a stunt, or the deliberative process as indoctrination—anything to protect present convictions or indifference. Or, there are the open-minded, who will identify the sample as containing “people like me” and further believe “There with the grace of being more informed go I.” If the latter comes to be, the politicians, recognizing a new element of opinion, will take notice.

One must remember there was a time (about thirty years ago in Britain and earlier than that in the US) when opinion polls were not treated seriously. Now, for all their shortcomings they are very much part of the democratic process, and both the public and politicians take them seriously. People now accept the fact that a sample has spoken for them with each opinion poll they read.

As an afterthought, I suggest that Fishkin's main success in this first experiment was covering a hot topic, like rising crime, which concerns the British greatly. However, one cannot cite this success as a precursor to covering topics like election primaries where the topic is not of utmost concern. In the US, where candidate personalities matter, future deliberative experiments may not measure informed public opinion on election issues, but rather who makes the more persuasive presentation during deliberations.

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