

The Deliberative Poll

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

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are fatal to its success. One has to do with what is meant by a deliberative process. Collecting and framing issues by focus groups and academic thinkers is surely an unbiased way of starting the process. Inviting the candidates to discuss these issues with the participants is certainly better than having the job done by discussion leaders. But an unbiased beginning does not equate with electoral reality. The other concern has to do with the methodology, that is, the representativeness of the sample, the selection of the issues and the analysis of the data.

The Deliberative Process

First, let's discuss the deliberative process. In Austin, issues will be discussed in small groups and in general sessions. The small groups are designed to increase interaction among the participants about the issues. The 600 people who come to Austin will be divided into 30 groups of 20 participants each. They will meet morning and afternoon for two days. On the evening of the second day they are supposed to meet en masse with the Republican candidates for President. The next morning, if all goes according to plan, they will meet with President Clinton and his entourage. Following that, another questionnaire will be administered.

Fishkin claims his two and a half days' discussion of real issues represents what Americans would think if only they were exposed to a thorough discussion of the issues. But 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. There is nothing deliberative, in the normal sense of the word, about these discussions.

How We Choose Our President

Opinion formation during an election year is more of an evolution than an epiphany. The political year starts with a vague, nonspecific ideal, about what the public would like from the next President. As the candidates become known the public associates them with general positions on pertinent issues. The public also associates many other characteristics with candidates, non-issue characteristics, that give flesh and blood to the "other" substance of candidates. These impressions, too, are shaped by media, the candidates and everyday conversation. This is the deliberative process of a campaign—not what Fishkin is doing. No matter how much deliberating Fishkin's pseudo-survey participants may do, the event cannot be made to mirror the actual deliberative process of a campaign.

In an American political campaign the deliberative process starts with the introduction of an issue by candidates, by the media, or by a public concern that finds a public voice. Presentation of the issue will be incomplete, partisan and cleared or distorted through the prism of special interest groups. The issue will take shape as more people talk about it, while the mediating influence of the media spreads additional information and opinion about the issue far and wide. There will be feedback to the originators of the discussion and a gradual reshaping of the issue. An issue is not static during a campaign. It will change with each new public exposure. There will be interpersonal discussion that goes on casually among co-workers, family, friends and others. Some people in these discussions will have more influence than others. Some will have more infor-

mation from the media than others. All of this will help mold public opinion.

The political campaign and the events of the presidential year will change which issues are meaningful by the time of the election. More importantly, the campaign will change the salient details of the issues that will affect opinion and ultimately the election of a president.

The issues in presidential primaries are not necessarily the issues in the general election and the great issues at the beginning of a presidential election year are not necessarily around at the finish, and those that are may be cast in different terms. A few events from campaigns past will more than make this point. In 1972 during the primaries, we had the great busing controversy supposedly motivating the party switchers who supported George Wallace early on in the campaign. In 1976, the Panama Canal Treaty drove a wedge between Ford and Reagan supporters but was not much of an issue for the fall campaign.

The issues of the 1996 presidential campaign will not be framed by a non-partisan think tank and a group of political scientists. They will fail to represent the right issues, or the most important issues, or the way an issue eventually will be framed at the time of the election. What Fishkin's panel and the candidates will confront are a set of propositions that, at best, represent the present, not election day. The panel will hear the candidates' views for today, not November 5. The artificiality of the experiment will bear little resemblance to either the issues or the candidates' positions on those issues on election day.

Methodological Pitfalls

Fishkin's experiment assumes the participants represent all Americans. That proposition is doubtful. Norman Bradburn, the Senior Vice President for Research at the National Opinion Research Center, supports Fishkin's assumption when he claims that participants in this experiment are a scientific sample of the public. NORC selected the sample using the same rigorous meth-

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ods it uses for its General Social Survey. That survey has a participation rate of about 75%. Bradburn said he was hoping to do better this time, maybe as high as 80%.

But in order to participate in Fishkin's experiment, respondents have to do more than agree to an initial in-home interview. They must agree to a four-day meeting in Austin and a concluding interview on the last day. No one expects that all respondents in the initial opinion survey will agree to go to Austin. If Fishkin's earlier deliberative effort in Great Britain can be used as a model, about 50% of those who were initially interviewed by NORC will make the trip to Texas.

If those figures hold, the response rate for the survey at the conclusion of the Austin meetings would most likely be in the mid-30% range, assuming all participants stay for the four days and complete the second survey. These are not the kind of numbers that lead one to claim the sample is representative of anything. Bradburn's most optimistic assumptions would only raise that number to the low 50% range, and that could only happen if NORC completes 80% of the initial interviews and convinces two-thirds of the respondents to go to Austin.

The fact that the sample was chosen by a reputable organization does not guarantee that a sizable share of the citizens designated by a random selection procedure will actually participate in Austin. I believe that the analog of the response rate, that is, the share of those designated who actually participate, will be worse than any public opinion poll NORC has ever participated in. The likely participation rate borders on the pseudo-poll threshold.

There also will be problems with the analysis of the results that will mislead the media and the public. The

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change in opinion, as measured by the Fishkin poll, will be as much a result of the participants' four days in Austin as the artificial nature of being polled twice on the same material. A proper experiment would have two randomly selected groups of 600. Only one would go to Austin for the group discussion. The change in opinion for the Austin group would be measured against the group that did not go.

Another problem with the analysis will be the absence of a measure of participants' preferences for the candidates. The creators of the questionnaire, concerned that horse race numbers would leak to the press and the purpose of the poll would be subverted, wanted to remain pure against criticism of this kind of journalism. So they left out any questions on candidate preference in the primaries or the general election. While this may sound worthy, presidential elections are not won by issue positions alone. They are won when one candidate has issue positions (and other characteristics) that are more simpatico to more voters than his or her opponents. I cannot imagine a politically meaningful analysis of these data without knowledge of which candidates are preferred by the participants.

A meaningful test of the efficacy of the Austin experience would compare the initial opinions of the 600 partici-

pants to the same questionnaire administered at election time. My bet is that any change measured over the four days will not last until election day. The measured change will be an artifact of being in a test tube. My guess is that by election day the participants will have about the same distribution of opinions as other citizens that did not go through the Austin process.

A Distorted Opinion Poll... ...Another Black Eye

This experiment will give the public a distorted view of what constitutes an opinion poll, and give polling another black eye. There are just too many compromises in this experiment—all endorsed by too many prominent people. Too many things are either missing from the Fishkin experiment or are too artificial. The sample will not be representative. Opinion will be measured and remeasured without a control group. Analysis will be limited by the absence of candidate preference information. Group discussions in front of television cameras will replace discussion with friends, relatives and acquaintances, and will precede the candidates' appearances (if they appear), not follow them. Issues will not necessarily be the right issues nor will they highlight the same details that will be debated in the campaign. The media will not play a role in the process.

We should set aside the notion that deliberative opinion polling, à la Fishkin, can be compared to opinion polling. So what should we conclude from the results of the deliberative opinion poll? Not much, except that P. T. Barnum was right. Fishkin's experiment is the most expensive public opinion poll in history at \$3.85 million. It exceeds the amount budgeted by any national news organization for all pre-election polls it will conduct during the presidential year.



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