

# Why Do We Need a Deliberative Poll?

By Frank Newport

In a democracy, all citizens, regardless of their personal interest in deliberating and studying issues, get an equal voice and say-so in how the country is run. James Fishkin certainly doesn't argue that the ill-informed, non-deliberative American should not have the *right* to have his or her voice heard. He thinks, however, that it is a great shame that not all citizens have chosen to embrace the responsible model of the issue-immersed, interactively intense ideal citizen, and he asserts that this constitutes a great loss for participative democracy.

It is Fishkin's objective to change this state of affairs, by inducing Americans to become more like his idealized, deliberative body—a group of average citizens hotly debating and struggling with the major concerns of our day.

One way for Fishkin to accomplish this and solve the problem of unmotivated, non-deliberative citizens would be to encourage the whole population of Americans to become more issue-involved and talkative. Fishkin has chosen an easier alternative—selecting a random sample of average Americans and spending a weekend molding them into a deliberating citizenry, then measuring the attitudinal result of the changes the process has wrought.

## Artificially Created Knowledge Elites

Of course, Fishkin's intervention into the normal, everyday lifestyles of average, non-deliberative citizens immediately makes them unrepresentative of all the others left behind. If all non-deliberative Americans were sent on sabbatical to Harvard or to the Sorbonne or forced to sit at the national news desk of the *New York Times*, or paid to deliberate issues in focus groups, there is no doubt that their attitudes and opinions would differ from those obtained other-

wise. But what would the resulting opinions tell us? We already know that "knowledge elites" can have different opinions than the public at large—from the bureaucrats and academics who study issues for a living, advise Congress and write scholarly articles, to the "highly interested" respondents who can be identified in standard public opinion polls. The question becomes: what do we do with the data obtained from knowledge elites, particularly those that are artificially created?

The role of traditional polling is to represent the attitudes and opinions of all Americans *as they are*. These voices of average citizens are intended to guide and direct policy, and to function as the bedrock of power in a working democracy. The traditional poll—picking up as it does even the putatively ill-formed pseudo-opinions of non-deliberating issue avoiders—fulfills these important functions. It is this more standard poll that provides a portrait of where the fundamental force of a democracy stands, and can be used to guide policy which will by its nature reflect and be in sync with the citizens on whose behalf it is being formulated. The opinions gathered from an artificial, deliberative group don't fulfill these same functions because the opinions are not necessarily, or even likely to be, in sync with the general population of citizens.

## The British Experience

In the 1994 British experiment in deliberative polling directed by Fishkin, an issue-immersed, deliberating sample registered 38% agreement with a "send more offenders to prison" alternative as an effective way to prevent crime, compared to 57% agreement with the same statement among the common folk—that is, a random sample of British citizens who were not briefed or brought together specifically to deliberate the

issues. The clear implication of Fishkin's idea of the deliberative poll is that the 38% figure is highly important. It represents the utopian state "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."<sup>1</sup>

But what do we do with these results? Since many citizens in a democracy are never going to deliberate and read briefing papers, and since their opinions still count just as much as their deliberating friends, it seems that the 57% number is the more useful. It tells us where the people stand on the issues *as they are*—based on their own life situation and choices about the degree to which they want to be immersed in is-

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sues and deliberation. The higher "prison is effective" number reflects the reality of the average citizen's daily life—his or her fears, concerns, impressions, instincts, environment, and life experiences. It is in this "real life" world that democracy must be played out; it is this real life that forms the philosophic bedrock of decision-making and progress.

To rely on the "informed" survey finding of 38%, even in Fishkin's "prescriptive" sense, is to turn one's back on the average citizen, and to presume that this citizen's life situation and lifestyle do not pass a test of "deliberative" significance.

The 57% number may well be difficult to swallow for many learned, scholarly, issue-immersed intellectuals whose own careful study and deliberation have



## The Deliberative Poll

led them to different conclusions—but it is the essence of democracy that such numbers be given the utmost dignity and respect, for they represent the voice of all the people, just as they are, where they are, and based on who they are.

It may be an admirable dream that the citizens who made up the 57% should in some ideal world study, debate and deliberate before yielding their opinions, and that their attitudes would change if they did. The fact is, however, that the non-deliberating citizens haven't done this and probably don't want to. They are happy to respond in their own ways to questions about crime, and have every right to expect that their opinions will be given the same weight as those of a university professor who studies issues for a living.

### The Virtues of Traditional Polling

The old-fashioned, traditional public opinion poll that is clearly inadequate by Fishkin's standards in fact has a number of specific virtues. For one, it maintains a respect and dignity for every American and the choices that Americans make about the degree to which they want to be issue-immersed and deliberative. It presumes nothing and takes the American "as is" without insisting that the American get an education, read the *New York Times*, attend seminars, or fly to a college campus for a weekend camp meeting.

By its very "interruptive" nature, the traditional poll captures the average citizen *in situ*, and measures that citizen's opinion in the environment and circumstances that form his or her boundaries and reality on a day in and day out basis. The conventional poll increases the chances that policy will both reflect what Americans truly are and what they want. This type of polling allows change to be monitored, because it always has at its base the average American in average states of mind in average settings. It avoids the historic temptation to assume that the average person is not capable of ruling, and that it is necessary to rely on or create different, superior elite groups for guidance or leadership.

It seems in fact that a good deal of the increased mistrust and dissatisfaction with American government in recent years has been a reflection of the people's perception that government is removed and distant from the basic citizens "out there," beyond the beltway, in the real world. The common concerns and beliefs of the average American—prosaic, uninformed and non-deliberative as they may be—are seen as out of sync with the beliefs and actions of the experts who make decisions. Fishkin's great experiment in deliberative polling tends to increase this gulf by purposively downplaying the basic "non-deliberative" beliefs and sentiments of the average citizen until that average citizen has agreed to subject his or her beliefs to extensive briefing by experts and debate with others in a highly artificial, time-compressed university setting.

The deliberative polling idea does not ignore the average citizen in favor of a geographic or ideological elite; it rather ignores the average citizen until that citizen is transformed into something he or she initially is not. Then, and only then, after the deliberative process is imposed, will the average citizen's opinion be deemed worthy of consideration.

### Gains from the Austin Experience

What will happen in Austin may have its greatest value as an expensive experiment in attitude-shift phenomena—the measurement of change under experimentally imposed conditions of forced group dynamics, didactic stimulus material, and the external celebrity which comes from being featured on national television. All of this can conceivably provide substantial insights into the social psychology of attitudes and opinions, and provide "how to" guides for the process of attitude change in a mass society—but will provide much less in terms of the feelings of the people as they live in a democratic society, or understanding what it is these citizens want as they go through life in their natural environments with their own personal choices and motivations.

In fact, if the study of the relationship between changes in deliberation/issue knowledge and attitudes is one's goal, then the traditional public opinion survey already provides much value. Surveys can and often do ask respondents themselves to identify their personal level of interest, concern and knowledge about an issue—even including knowledge tests and reports of having deliberated or discussed the issue with others. The responses of the self-identified deliberative segment can be used for comparison with the average respondent for Fishkin's "prescriptive" purposes, and to speculate about various "what if" scenarios. The deliberative segment in the traditional survey chooses to focus on issues in real-world settings, and is thus projectable to a group of all such citizens for whom an issue has great salience. Fishkin's experimentally induced deliberation must meet the tests applied to any experimental design: Is the operationalization of the experimental conditions both valid (accurately representing the process as it occurs in reality) and reliable (replicable)? Whether his design passes these tests is debatable.

Fishkin's model of a deliberative poll also tends to shortchange the powerful role of salience, self-selection and process in a democracy, including the idea that certain issues always will have more relevance and import to some segments of the population than to others. It seems more important to monitor changes that play themselves out, if and when segments of the non-deliberative masses are convinced in the real world to deliberate and seek enlightenment, than to look at the more artificial results of a weekend experience wherein *all*

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citizens are, at one time, thrust into a deliberative setting.

In the final analysis, why do we need a deliberative poll? There is no doubt that any nationally televised discussion of issues of the day is useful in a democracy. Those who watch the process of deliberation in Austin will gain insights and be stimulated—just as they would from watching C-SPAN, talk programs, or the occasional town meetings on ABC’s Nightline. The experiment will also, in a fashion similar to the focus groups the process resembles in many ways, potentially provide rich insights into the way in which average citizens ask questions and approach issues in intensive group settings.

**Sound Public Policy is Not Based on Intelligence Alone**

But the *results* of the process will not be representative of the “rationally ignorant” masses who aren’t there, and they won’t provide generalizable insights into the normal base of a democratic society—the totality of its citizens. To make policy decisions guided by the results of the deliberative poll would be to effectively disenfranchise the large numbers of citizens who have chosen not to deliberate and study issues—in favor of the elitist assumption that opinions count more if they meet external criteria or a test of having been based on deliberation and study. The deliberative poll’s value of providing an answer to a “what if” scenario of total citizen engagement and thought is of mostly academic interest given its artificiality, and one which can be much more economically and realistically provided by segmenting responses to traditional polls based on existing variations in deliberation. The deliberative poll can and will provide an intriguing model of the bounds of attitude shift under varying conditions of group dynamics, exposure to briefing material, and the sudden if

fleeting celebrity of being on national television, but with questionable relevance to the real world of a democracy, and at great cost.

George Gallup once said, “For the ultimate values of politics and economics, the judgments on which public policy is based do not come from special knowledge or intelligence alone. They are compounded from the day to day experience of the men and women who together make up the society we live in.”<sup>2</sup> It may be that the most productive service pollsters can provide in a democracy is the continued focus on better understanding these men and women and their day to day experiences as they live them, rather than the attempt to mold the democracy’s citizens into something they are not.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> James A. Fishkin, *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), p. 266.



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**How NORC Selected the Deliberative Poll’s Respondents**

By Norman M. Bradburn

The concept of a deliberative poll presents a major challenge to any survey research organization because it involves not only conducting a survey in the usual sense of the term, but also enlisting respondents to participate in an event that takes place over several days at a location that may require considerable travel away from their homes. To understand the nature of this challenge, consider the similarities and differences between an ordinary public opinion survey and the deliberative poll.

The purpose of public opinion surveys is to measure a sample of the population such that the results can be generalized to the population within known bounds of precision. A major consideration is the adequacy of the sample. Did all the members of the universe to which the results are going to be generalized have a known probability of falling into the sample; that is, is the sample unbiased?

When surveys are conducted, however, not all selected respondents are interviewed, and bias can come in during the execution of the survey. One common

indicator of possible bias in the sample is the completion rate. If it is high—say 75-80%—investigators usually don’t worry about the effects of possible bias unless there is reason to believe that some characteristics of interest are very highly correlated with the bias, for example, probability of voting. (It is important to note that a high completion rate itself does not guarantee that the sample is unbiased, nor does a low completion rate, by itself, indicate that the sample is biased.) An investigation of the nature of the non-response is necessary to determine whether any particular sample is biased or not.

In most opinion surveys today, the universe is defined as *households that have telephones*, rather than *total households*. Telephone coverage is very high