

“ **Traditional polling 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.** ”

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.”² 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:

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

² 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

The Deliberative Poll

(over 90% of all households have telephones), but there are some known biases. For example, very poor households and Hispanic households have lower coverage, and the elderly have more difficulty being interviewed on the telephone. Increasingly, telephone samples are subject to biases arising from low completion rates—due to the use of answering machines and caller ID to screen calls.

For the deliberative poll, we felt that it was important to include all citizens in the sampling frame and to get a high completion rate. Therefore, we opted for an area probability sample with personal visits to the households to interview respondents. The universe for the National Issues Convention is all US citizens living in the 50 states, 18 years of age or older who speak English well enough to be interviewed in English. The universe is not restricted to those who are registered to vote, only to those eligible to vote for president.

Considerable thought was given to the exclusion of non-English speakers from the universe. We were not able to obtain reliable data on the percentage of adult citizens who do not speak English, but consultation with experts on immigration suggested that the proportion of citizens who do not speak English well enough to be interviewed is small. Since a major purpose of this event is for people to engage in deliberative discussion of issues, lack of knowledge of English would make it difficult to be a meaningful participant in the discussion groups. The criterion we adopted is whether the sampled person could respond to the interview. This criterion does not require that respondents be fluent in English, only that they speak and understand it well enough to engage in the particular type of conversation that constitutes a public opinion interview.

Using NORC's Standard Sample Frame

Sampling from this universe is done using NORC's standard area probability sample frame, the frame that is used for the General Social Survey and other national probability samples. The frame

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is stratified by region, and by the proportion of the population aged 18 and over. A list of addresses is drawn from a previous listing of addresses NORC enumerators use in sampled blocks and rural areas. For flexibility in adjusting sample size and sample control purposes, the addresses are divided into replicate samples, each one of which is a proper sample of households in the 50 states. The replicates are fielded in batches so that we can adjust the sample size during the course of field work if we find that we have misestimated some parameter, such as the eligibility rate.

For cost reasons NORC, like other survey organizations that do area probability sampling, uses some clustering in sample selection; addresses may be grouped for sampling purposes. Ordinarily, clustering is not noticed because respondents are interviewed separately and do not have contact with one another, at least not in relation to the survey. In the deliberative poll, where respondents will work together for several days, it is possible that some respondents may know one another before the event. The clustering is done so that no contiguous households will fall into the sample.

NORC interviewers, specially trained for this survey, are given assignments throughout the country consisting of addresses to be screened for eligible respondents. They go to the households in person, list the people living in the household who meet the eligibility criteria and, then, use a “Kish table” to select the person to be interviewed. (A “Kish table” is a mechanism for randomly selecting a respondent within a household that takes account of the number of eligible respondents in the household). The person thus selected be-

comes the designated respondent (and designated delegate to the National Issues Convention). No substitutions are allowed. The response rate is calculated by the number of completed interviews divided by the number of eligibles.

We are not able, of course, to get 100% completion rates. Sometimes people are unavailable throughout the entire field period; they may seldom be at home and are never contacted, or they may simply refuse to be interviewed. Most non-response is due to unavailability or lack of contact rather than refusal. Very high completion rates (90+%) are possible but resources usually do not allow us to get them. Rates in the high 70's to low 80's, however, are possible, although increasingly difficult to obtain. The General Social Survey, which is in many ways comparable to our initial interview, obtains response rates in that range. Our goal for the deliberative poll is an 80% completion rate; we are making every effort to achieve that within the allotted six-week field period.

Interviewers don't mention the National Issues Convention until after the completion of the initial interview in order not to bias either the willingness of the respondent to participate in the interview or, possibly, the responses to the initial interview. Only at the conclusion does the interviewer extend the invitation to come to Austin and participate in the National Issues Convention and explain what the event will be like. Up to this point, the survey is identical to any other area probability survey of individuals. We have intentionally tried to keep it that way so that the results will be comparable to any ordinary opinion survey.

After the Initial Interview

NORC interviewers were trained in recruiting respondents to be delegates to the Convention. They were given briefing materials that describe the event, what is being offered to the respondents, and what they are expected to do in Austin. We prepared a set of questions commonly asked and the answers to them. We also provided them an 800 number to call if they had any further questions. The interviewers also have a letter of invitation from the President of the University of Texas, a folder with descriptive materials about the Convention and the city of Austin, reprints of newspaper articles on the event, and a reprint of a *Parade* magazine article which appeared during the middle of the field period. (The interviewers had reprints to use in advance of its publication). In addition, PBS had prepared a short video tape in which Jim Lehrer described the event and stressed the importance of the respondent's participation.

Respondents were asked to come to Austin from Thursday, January 18 to Sunday, January 21 to participate in discussions on major issues facing the nation. Transportation and all expenses for the trip are being paid for by the sponsors, and each participant receives \$300 to cover other expenses. Delegates may bring a companion, but will have pay for the companion's transportation, at a reduced fare provided by American Airlines. (The hotel will be free assuming that the companion shares the room with the delegate.) Since an event like this has never been attempted in the US, we have no idea what propor-

tion of the respondents will come. That is the challenge for the survey organization.

After respondents agree to become delegates, they are assigned to one of 30 small groups within which they will carry out their deliberations. Delegates are randomly assigned to groups so that each group will be a small random sample of the whole. Discussion materials prepared by the National Issues Forum and the Public Agenda Foundation will be sent to the delegates shortly before they leave for Austin.

Credibility Depends on Representativeness

The credibility of the event depends heavily on the representativeness of those who come to Austin. Even if we attain a very high completion rate in the initial survey, the sample in Austin may be biased if there is selective attrition in the sample. Conventional wisdom says that those who are wealthier, younger, better educated, more politically interested, more likely to vote, more used to traveling, etc. will be more likely to come. Evidence from the British experience, however, suggests that conventional wisdom might be wrong. At this point we do not know.

Because this point is so important, we are making every effort to minimize non-participation. As we do with non-respondents to the interview, we will do extensive follow-ups to persuade reluctant respondents to come. We have set up procedures to find out what problems need to be overcome for respondents to

feel comfortable about attending. For example, we have set up a special fund to pay for extra costs in cases of need. Most often these needs involve health concerns—respondents may have special requirements such that they must have a companion, or special facilities in Austin. If their employer does not want to give them time off, we are prepared to contact the employer and make the case for the importance of their attending. We have also set in place a network of persons charged with keeping in contact with the delegates between the time they have agreed to come and their arrival in Austin. We expect that some proportion of those who say they will come will later have doubts and want to back out. We will make every effort to keep them motivated to participate.

We will not get everyone to come. But we are in a different position here than when we assess the nature of bias from non-response in a cross-sectional interview. We have interviewed everyone and can compare the responses of those who come and those who do not come. If there turns out to be biases in the sample, we will have considerable data about the nature of the biases to use in analyzing the effects of participation.

The challenges in carrying out a deliberative poll are enormous. We look forward to reporting how well we have met them.



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Fishkin's National Issues Convention Has Real Scientific Merit

By Philip E. Converse

I signed on with the National Issues Convention project about ten months ago because, simply, I was fascinated by what the results might be. I have no doubt that there is considerable scientific merit in this enterprise, and I am grateful to Everett Ladd for inviting me to express my opinion on it.

Although I had long been aware of Fishkin's work, my first close view of it came

from a videotape of his "deliberative poll" in Britain in 1994. As I became engrossed in the proceedings, I naively asked a better informed colleague how the citizens I was watching in group discussion had been assembled. I was delighted to learn that they were part of a national probability sample; this meant to me a kind of generalizability that the event otherwise would utterly lack. On my private, intuitive "10-point scale of information value," the video suddenly