

Experimenting With Artificial Democracy

By Brian C. Tringali

The catalyst for the argument that James Fishkin sets forth in *Democracy & Deliberation* and discusses in his latest work, *The Voice of the People*, is that the practice of democracy in the US has run amok. Fishkin expresses genuine concern about low voter turnout as a "worrisome symptom" of a failing democracy. He then goes further by expounding the dangers of a troubled democracy where the citizenry who do vote are uninformed and thus inadequately prepared to cast a vote. With this concern foremost on his mind, Fishkin has laid the groundwork for an experiment with artificial democracy.

Fishkin opines that his experiment in deliberative polling will be "representative of the public that the people would become if everyone had a comparable opportunity to behave more like ideal citizens," that is, if they had a chance to "really" think about the issues and make a more informed decision about the candidates for which they vote.

It is obviously not Fishkin's intention to set up compulsory standards for citizenship or to suggest that only those informed to a minimum standard should be allowed to vote. Indeed, all of us who labor in the political process share the goal of heightened voter attention and participation, and to that degree we share Fishkin's concerns about democracy.

Fishkin's goal is to survey a "representative public" after feeding it perfect information. This will result in an informed electorate whose decisions, through television and other media, can be used to positively influence a less informed public. But, Fishkin's experiment is hampered by a questionable premise and faulty methodology.

At Odds With the Methodology

Before we examine the premise of Fishkin's logic, let's assume for

argument's sake that an "informed" decision by our citizens would somehow be best for our collective future. From time to time most of us have felt that the public should have been better informed and that an election went the wrong way. However, many of the fundamental tenets of research contradict the methodological foundations of the deliberative poll.

For many it is clear that the greatest weakness of laboratory experimentation lies in its artificial nature. Of course, the most common method for handling the

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effects of this artificial situation is the use of a control group, which in this case would call for administering the same survey to a representative sample not attending the Austin event.

Without a control it will not be known whether the participants in Austin are responding more to the attention given to them during the course of the weekend or to the new information they are exposed to. (For a further explanation of this social science artifact known as the Hawthorne Effect, see pp 14-16.) The very act of placing cameras among this group of participants is going to change the way they respond to the

information. The net result is a sort of "social Doppler effect" in which altered process becomes impossible to separate from altered perceptions.

Another methodological flaw is the representativeness of the sample. No matter what efforts are made to make this experiment a representative subset of the population, they will fail. The main reason, although there are many, is commonly called "creaming." The result of getting 600 registered voters from across the country in a city for a weekend is that only the most interested will involve themselves in the process. By definition, we will not see the average voter in attendance. As Fishkin is all too aware, the average voter has neither the time nor the interest to participate.

Perfect Information

The main vehicle the experiment hopes to use in altering opinion is a briefing book put together by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. The selection of what participants will see and hear has more to do with the outcome of this process than any other factor. Fishkin has already made a decision to focus the discussions on only three issues—the economy, our nation's role in the world, and the role of the family. All of these issues are important (and important to a vote decision) but this is hardly inclusive of the issues that will drive the 1996 election. If this briefing material is an attempt to correct for the problem of inadequate information, it is destined to fail. Voters make decisions in a greater social context, where day-to-day life has impact on these decisions. It is important for Fishkin to understand—as others involved in the election process do—that it is impossible for any single voter to ever receive perfect information.

More importantly, does the ideal voter need to have perfect information? As long as a potential voter has access to information, without having too much of a time constraint finding it, is that not what is required of democracy?

The Deliberative Poll

The Impact of the Media

Another major point of contention with the Fishkin experiment falls on how the deliberative poll results will be used. Standard polling (i.e., polling not associated with the strategic objectives of an election campaign) is used as a predictive tool for elections, to offer

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insights into the vote-decision process. Fishkin’s experiment, on the other hand, with its use of a television spotlight to amplify its influence, attempts to alter the decision-making process of the general public. With eleven collective hours of television coverage, PBS will be the chief distributor of the deliberation. In effect, Fishkin and his colleagues will attempt to influence public opinion at the time when it is most likely to be influential—the start of the presidential primary process. Given methodological concerns, it would seem highly inappropriate to use the results of this experiment in an attempt to steer the election.

Methodological shortcomings aside, another concern lies with the premise behind Fishkin’s theory for this experiment. Our collective definition of democracy includes the view that each

of us is granted freedom of choice, including the freedom to vote with limited information about the candidates and their views, or even not to vote at all.

While most pundits would agree that a more involved, better informed electorate is desirable, Fishkin and PBS are making a value judgment about democracy. In their minds, the primary problem with democracy is not with those who fail to vote, but rather that those who do vote act from inadequate knowledge.

The question remains, how much information is close enough to perfect to allow a citizen to vote without letting the democratic process down. Voter participation is already enough of a problem without complicating matters with the issue of how we would act if only better informed. More importantly, in the political process, are “uninformed” opinions less valid than “informed” opinions? By definition, democracy as a form of governing seems to argue otherwise.

Fishkin and his supporters need to realize what most political pollsters are already aware of: When voters are largely unconcerned about the world going on around them, including their government, they are less likely to seek out new information about the candidates running for office or the issues of the day. Voters who are at peace with the status quo are simply more inclined to re-elect incumbents to office. Despite that fact, voters across this country changed the control of Congress in 1994 and may do the same in 1996 at the presidential level.

Evolving Democracy

What Fishkin has been struggling with is a growing perception that our form of government needs to evolve from a phase of representative democracy to a phase of participatory democracy. It is true, today citizens are looking for more immediate access and participation in the political process, regardless of whether they plan to use that access or not. The challenges associated with this new demand on democracy are ones that we are ill-prepared for, but one of the solutions may indeed be a better information exchange between the electorate and the elected. However, we must not ignore the incipient risk that those who govern may become too responsive to the impulsive whims of a short-sighted electorate. The reality is that voters today, or at least a segment of them, are better informed and more involved than ever before.

One fact that we live with in a democracy is that we might not always like the decisions our fellow voters come to or the way the process unfolds. But just as with every relationship in our lives, our relationship with our government is only likely to be as good or as bad as the effort we put into it. We might all agree that a democracy should seek to promote active citizenship to the greatest degree possible. And on that point, at least, we can agree with Fishkin.



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**Following the center section, James Fishkin and Everett Ladd debate the “Deliberative Poll’s” Merits
[Please see pp. 41-49]**