

Fishkin's "Deliberative Poll" is Flawed Science and Dubious Democracy

By Everett Carl Ladd

Viewed from one perspective, Jim Fishkin's idea is unassailably meritorious. As he states in the excerpt from *The Voice of the People*, which leads this symposium, he would take a national sample of the electorate, bring them from all over the country to a single place, immerse them in a discussion of the issues, provide for intensive small-group deliberations, and expose them to competing experts and politicians. Who could object to any well-intentioned effort to get rank-and-file Americans to probe more deeply into some of the great issues of the day? The work that Fishkin and his team have undertaken is unquestionably well-intentioned.

But at this level, the effort is also entirely unexceptional. Each election year, many thousands of "citizen forums" and "meet the candidates" nights are held in cities and towns all across the United States. Fishkin points out that two of the organizations with which he is collaborating have been active in this area for some time. "The work of the Public Agenda Foundation combined with that of the Kettering Foundation to support the work of a nationwide network of citizen deliberators, the National Issues Forums (NIF). About 3,200 citizen forums around the country are held each year under the auspices of NIF" (Fishkin, p. 164). The League of Women Voters is, if anything, even more active in providing background information on key issues and sponsoring forums where citizens can gather to hear firsthand what candidates for school boards, town councils, etc., have to say about issues important to the community.

What makes Fishkin's project different from all the others isn't, then, its attempt to encourage deliberation among citizens. Rather, it's the extravagant claim he makes for how we should interpret the "before and after" public opin-

ion results of one particular citizen convocation.

[This] deliberative poll is not meant to describe or predict public opinion. Rather it prescribes. It has a recommending force: these are the conclusions people would come to, were they better informed on the issues and had the opportunity and motivation to examine those issues seriously. It allows a microcosm of the country to make recommendations to us all after it has had the chance to think through the issues. If such a poll were broadcast before an election or a referendum, it could dramatically affect the outcome [p. 162, emphasis is mine].

A few pages later, Fishkin returns to this theme, stressing again just how bold a departure he intends:

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 [p. 173, emphasis is mine].

Fishkin thus promises to advance American democracy in a remarkably painless way. It's not possible, he grants, to get the entire citizenry to participate in the deliberative manner he posits as the ideal. But, *mirabile dictu*, that's not necessary! All of us can sit in the comfort of our living rooms and watch six hours of public television's coverage, five hours of live broadcasts from Austin on January 19-21, and a special prime-time report on January 26. We will thus learn

what we really would be thinking about the great issues of the day if only we were willing to give the time their consideration deserves. Presumably, if we follow this evolving prescriptive exercise to its logical conclusion, we should see the inadequately formed views we had held prior to the Austin forum as a kind of "false consciousness," bred of inadequate attention, and exposure to too many TV sound bites and attack ads. And if we believe this, we should seriously consider adopting the views which the Austin 600 arrived at—for, after all, that's where we all would be if only we had been properly motivated.

Jim Fishkin is explicit about the purpose of his experiment. He wants to influence the course of US politics. If anyone has any doubts about this, he should consider the event's timing. The Austin 600 will meet January 18-21, and six hours of their proceedings will be televised nationally in late January—four weeks before New Hampshire's primary. Voters are to be influenced by a contrived media event staged just before democracy's most authentic acts—free and open elections—are to commence.

Doubtful Democratic Theory

In the early years of this century, the Progressives advanced a radically new idea about democracy and the role of individual citizens in it. They posited an ideal that Walter Lippman was to ridicule in his great book, *The Phantom Public* (1925)—of an omniscient citizenry able to decide all the great questions. Lippman thought this drastic revision of democratic theory posited something both unattainable and dangerous. He stated his preference for the older standards which had guided American democratic experience from the time of independence, which posited a populace playing a role at once large and limited. People could not know everything about the candidates and issues, but they could know enough to impose their views and values as to the general direction the country should take, and could make reasonable choices among

The Deliberative Poll

candidates as to those most likely and best able to get it there.

Perhaps the finest articulation of this “classical” understanding of democracy is that provided by Ernest Barker in *Reflections on Government* (1942). Writing after decades in which the democratic ideal had been mocked and disparaged by totalitarian powers and their apologists, and in the midst of a great war that would determine democracy’s very existence, Barker argued that a general public, for all its inattentiveness and the passions that at times beset it, has—given *properly constituted democratic institutions*—sufficient capability to choose wisely. It could play its part in a process Barker thus described:

The electorate cannot be regarded by itself, or in isolation, or as if it were a sovereign which was the beginning and the end, initiating everything and concluding everything. It is part of the system of discussion, which has both to take over and to hand on the torch in such a way as will best keep it burning and bright.... (Barker, p. 41).

The idea is, then, that ordinary citizens, even if not possessing detailed and expert information can, nonetheless, know their own interests and values and from them intelligently, rationally, set the polity’s direction.

Moreover, the limited nature of the citizenry’s political engagement represents a desirable counterbalance to the more ideologically constrained and demanding outlook of elites. American democracy is, after all, *liberal* democracy—based on the idea that the reach of the state should be limited. A less engaged populace limits the political absorption of the political class—or, to put it in contemporary terms, counterbalances the overwhelming attention to government and politics “inside the beltway.”

What Has Research in Fact Shown About the Public’s Capabilities?

In their response to critics (pp. 45-49 that follow), James Fishkin and Rob-

ert Luskin insist that there’s a consensus among experts that “most people show remarkable lack of knowledge about politics (p. 46). That is but part of a yet larger claim that underlies Fishkin’s argument in *The Voice of the People* and that would justify the National Issues Convention experiment. To wit: That ordinary citizens don’t have views sufficiently informed and developed in real life to merit the weight ordinary polls give them, and hence that a special event must be staged to show the country what it really would think about the big issues if only it were properly informed.

In support of their argument that the public-of-everyday-life is grossly deficient, Fishkin and Luskin offer such disparaging assessments as that “a large proportion of Tom Foley’s constituents, during his 1994 re-election campaign, thought the district would retain the Speakership, regardless of who won”. Luskin asserts that “half the sample [in one study]—about the proportion that might be expected from random guessing—generally admits to having no idea where the parties stand or places them incorrectly” (p. 46).

Such arguments suggest that Fishkin and Luskin might have gotten too immersed in the political science literature of one time period—the late 1940s into the 1960s. This was indeed a period when the literature of political science portrayed the public as so grossly uninformed on political affairs as to be fundamentally incoherent in policy judgments. But later research in the field has long-since confined these early misunderstandings to the margins of disciplinary understanding. Writing in (and of) *The Rational Public* (1992, p. 8), Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have nicely summarized this shift of interpretation within political science literature of the last three decades.

During and after the 1960s, a number of researchers joined V. O. Key, Jr. (1966), in challenging various aspects of the early voting research and championing the position that ordinary Americans are “responsible” or “rational.” They showed that citizens’ perceptions

of the policy stands of parties and candidates were considerably more clear and accurate when the stands themselves were more distinct: in the highly ideological presidential election of 1964, for example, as opposed to that of 1956, or in the primaries rather than the general election of 1968 (Pomper 1972; Page and Brody 1972; Page 1978). In elections with sharper contrasts between candidates, voters also seemed to pay more attention to issues when they cast their ballots, and to have more highly structured liberal-conservative belief systems (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979)...In addition, the use of more sophisticated analytical methods involving perceived issue distances between candidates and voters seemed to reveal more issue voting in general than had previously been discovered (Page and Jones 1979)....

It was, as Page and Shapiro observe, a notably accomplished political scientist, V. O. Key, Jr., who started the field on the course of rejecting the interpretation Fishkin and Luskin describe as “the consensus.” Reanalyzing Gallup data of the then-preceding three decades, Key wrote *The Responsible Electorate* (1966), whose title frames his central conclusions. “The perverse and unorthodox argument of this little book,” Key wrote impishly, is that voters are not fools” (p. 7). Here, he was in fact affirming an earlier view, one consistent with the findings of most of the pioneers—academic and non-academic—of opinion research in the United States. George Gallup (with Rae, 1940) Elmo Roper (1957), and Archibald Crossley described a public that was “rational” and an electorate that was “responsible.” So did Harwood Childs (1965), Leonard Doob (1948), and William Albig (1939).

Recent research has enlarged upon these earlier understandings. For example, political scientist Stanley Feldman (1988) has described research demonstrating that political preferences and attitudes of much of the general public, while not constrained by “ideological reasoning” as is common with political leaders and activists, are meaningfully informed and anchored by “core

beliefs and values." See, too, the important recent work by William Mayer (1992).

I must conclude this part of my disagreement with James Fishkin with a personal biographical note. For nearly 20 years as director of the Roper Center, I've been reviewing public opinion findings on a continuing and systematic basis. I analyzed and wrote about these data and the picture they collectively provide of the ideational worlds of rank-and-file citizens in each of the 66 issues of *Public Opinion* magazine, and I've continued to do so in each of the now 37 issues of *Public Perspective*, as well as in other journal articles and in books and monographs. The public I've seen in this extensive research shows great coherence and stability in its underlying political values and judgments. It repeatedly asserts central political ideas and ideals, and uses them to guide choice on both policies and candidates. This isn't the place for an extended review of these findings and arguments, but the dozen works or so cited in the references (Ladd, 1969...1995) will provide the interested reader with a useful starting point. I cannot find Fishkin's and Luskin's public in the extensive survey data herein analyzed.

I don't propose to glorify ignorance in a citizenry. The American people aren't ignorant. They aren't non-participatory. The American people, surveys show—if we need such evidence—understand democratic norms and hold coherently to central political goals and values. They already play, for all of the imperfections of the process, the role American democratic understanding has long posited. They have supported American democracy successfully for more than two centuries—and show no signs of flagging now, despite all the tut-tutting in more "sophisticated" circles. We don't want this general populace to be like elites. We want it to stand back from the hubbub of politics-as-game and assert broad, guiding values. In this view, elites' handling of aspects of the polity today—television coverage, for example, and the government feeding

frenzy known as interest-group liberalism—is what's broken. The public at large isn't what's broken—but is instead the system's strength.

Big Problems With the Science

But it's not only the democratic theory contained in Fishkin's experiment, and his understanding of what polling has found on people's democratic capacities, that's flawed. There are big problems, too, underlying the science in his new experiment. It's just not true that the Austin 600 will show the country, as Fishkin claims, "the conclusions people would come to, were they better informed on the issues and had the opportunity and motivation to examine those issues seriously" (Fishkin, p. 162). A large body of scientific findings challenge the experiment's central assumptions. How so?

1. **First, it should be acknowledged that drawing the sample is not a principal problem.** Norman Bradburn describes the processes that the National Opinion Research Center is using to select 600 participants for the Austin event. Bradburn and his NORC colleagues are careful, sophisticated methodologists. They can be counted upon to do an excellent job in sample selection. I'm not arguing that this part of the process is without difficulties—several of which Bradburn and Philip Converse both discuss in their articles. But the problems here are generally manageable.

2. **One real problem arises because Fishkin's project promises to be a classic illustration of the "Hawthorne Effect"**—which John Adair has ably discussed in his symposium contribution. Participants are being singled out and put on national television. They are being told that they are part of a critically important democratic experiment. I have no doubt that this will be good for them—that many among the participants will become a bit more thoughtful citizens as a result. But PBS will not be airing six hours on the proceedings because 600 Americans are having a valu-

able civics lesson. It will be doing so on the claim that the views of the 600 coming out of the experiment represent where the millions of non-participants might be were they only made party to adequate deliberation. It is the claim that the Austin event produces something representative in the highest sense—of what we all should, and would, be thinking on some key issues—that is the danger.

As Adair points out, several components of the Hawthorne Effect "may be inescapably present" in the Fishkin experiment (p. 16). "They [participants] know this is a novel experiment, and that its success depends on their behavior. They will be highly sensitive to cues to guide their responses. Will the evidence they are to judge be truly balanced, or will subtle expectancies be transmitted? In short, will they respond normally 'on stage,' independent of any biases, or be susceptible to pressures known to produce social artifact"?

None of these problems had to arise. The Austin convocation could have been billed as nothing more than how one group of Americans came to view things in the intense, hothouse atmosphere of a highly publicized experiment.

3. **Fishkin's experiment neglects lessons from decades of research on group dynamics.** Whenever a group is assembled and its members interact, a distinctive social dynamic is put in play. For example, strong personalities often arise who, depending where they happen to stand on an issue under discussion, will channel the discussion in a particular direction—which may well differ from those followed—or that would be followed—in other, equally "representative" groups. In other words, even if the group were entirely representative of the country according to the criteria NORC employs, it becomes unrepresentative as its members partake in a distinguishing set of social interactions and information flows. As Scott Tindale points out in his contribution to this symposium, Fishkin's claim as to the "similitude of his experimental

The Deliberative Poll

sample to a 'theoretically' informed populace" lacks support in the research literature on small-group dynamics (p. 18).

Philip Converse notes (p.13) that the group gathered in Austin is also 30 groups—of 20 persons each, into which participants will be assigned for part of the proceedings. There will indeed be a distinct set of dynamics in the interplay of the 600 and their presenters, and then 30 separate subsets of small-group interactions. Converse is right that, after the fact, researchers can productively study the impact of all this, but public television can't possibly come to grips with the effects "on the fly" in its January coverage.

Researchers experienced in the conduct of focus groups will recognize the problems Tindale discusses from the group-dynamics literature generally. However carefully managed, each group of intensely interacting participants is made special and different through its interaction. In most regards, that's just fine. There's a problem only when the group's resulting opinions are billed as a higher and representative form of public opinion.

4. All of us can imagine a situation where a group is assembled prior to the start of the campaign and "brainwashed" by skilled indoctrinators. These participants might be given information that is subtly distorted, posed in such a way as to lead them on "right-thinking" grounds to certain conclusions. In a democracy it's always nice to be able to say that "the people are on my side," and we can envision some who might help see to it that a particular assembly "came out right." Happily, James Fishkin and his collaborators have no such intent. What's more, people such as my long-time friend Daniel Yankelovich and his colleagues in the Public Agenda Foundation have spent many years assembling briefing materials and subjecting them to the kind of review that eliminates gross biases.

Nonetheless, the briefing materials that will be given to the partici-

pants on the three complex topics they will discuss—foreign affairs, the status and needs of American families, and the US economy—will inevitably be highly selective and thus in one sense biased. Some important dimensions of the three topics *will* be covered—and other important dimensions will, inevitably, *be left out*. The group of presenters at the convention—while balanced in partisan terms—will together give a distinctive twist to the overall information flow. The three topics themselves are but one relatively small part of the rich ideational world of Campaign '96. (Were this not enough, the questions being posed to participants before and after the convention are also but one selective, necessarily incomplete effort to find out what they think on very complex issues.)

Once more, this is all well and good—so long as it's recognized that the briefings can't in fact be neutral. Democracy assumes thousands upon thousands of groups of citizens being bombarded with a vast array of competing claims and arguments. No single group setting or presentation is free from selectivity and incompleteness. Still, over the many months of a campaign, the pluralistic interplay of hundreds and thousands of forums help achieve balance. In contrast to this, Fishkin would take one group and one set of presentations and urge the country to generalize from the responses that result.

A high level of elite or expert dissensus prevails on many large social questions. Consider, for example, the performance of the US economy. Some elements are in the realm of consensus—and are thus where firm knowledge can be presented succinctly. But many other critical elements are subject to deep divisions even as to the basic facts.

What's the economy's recent growth performance? This question figures prominently in one of the three topics the Austin 600 will discuss. Two large bodies of relevant data stand in direct contradiction. Surveys taken by the Census Bureau (Current Population

Reports), in which cross sections of the public are asked about their earnings, show that income for a large proportion of the population has stagnated over the last quarter-century. But another body of data, on the country's gross domestic product, shows growth over this span that is high and close to the average the US has sustained historically. How does one summarize this and other such contradictions adequately for 600 participants, many of whom have little independent training in confronting the problems of methodology which lie behind the divergent results?

I have been given an opportunity to review an earlier draft of the briefing materials developed by the Fishkin project team for the Austin participants on the economic dimension. Jim Fishkin has described to me at length the intense revision process that these materials are undergoing as *Public Perspective* goes to press, and he has urged me not to quote from the preliminary version. I understand his concerns, and I will not quote from the material. What's more, I'm confident the review made of inadequacies in the earlier draft will lead to helpful revisions. Nonetheless, I must note that nothing in this briefing material encourages me on the underlying problem—that complex questions on which there is extensive elite dissensus even as to the basic facts are not readily summarized in a few pages for a general audience. There is bound to be bias, however careful the screening.

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What's the answer? It is, of course, to show the regular processes of democratic life their proper respect. Pluralistic American democracy has an answer for all of the problems posed by the faulty science of the Fishkin experiment. Let the elaborate give-and-take of a thousand groups attempting to influence the millions of citizens achieve its equipoise. Democracy rests on firm ground. In particular, the limits and incompleteness of any one event or discussion are compensated for in a proper democratic system—which the US is—through the vast numbers and interplay