

Magic Town: Jimmy Stewart Demonstrates the “Hawthorne Effect”

by Everett C. Ladd

In three articles that follow, *Public Perspective* returns to the “deliberative poll” idea that University of Texas political scientist James Fishkin advanced through the work of the National Issues Convention that he and Public Television convened in Austin, Texas in late January. Fishkin argued that the views which conventional survey research measures are typically so poorly formed and inchoate that they shouldn’t be taken seriously. Using the survey resources of the National Opinion Research Center, Fishkin and his colleagues interviewed a national cross-section of the public on a range of policy questions in the manner of a conventional poll, then brought a group of the respondents to Austin for three days of policy discussion, and finally, reinterviewed them to see if as a result their views had changed. In *The Voice of the People*, Fishkin argues that this exercise “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...it could dramatically affect the outcome” [p. 162]. That is, if this microcosm were to change its mind as a result of its deliberations, the idea is that *the entire country would also come to similar conclusions* if only it were given the opportunity to be so properly informed.

In our December criticism of the deliberative poll concept, we included a thoughtful review by University of Manitoba psychologist John G. Adair of the social science literature on what has come to be known as the Hawthorne Effect. This label derives from research that took place in the 1920s at a Bell System plant, the Hawthorne Works. Adair noted that the literature on the Hawthorne Effect centers on the ways in

which people are made self-conscious about their participation in an experiment—an effect that changes both their views about relevant issues and their behavior. “A common concern in social research is whether research participants are behaving normally, as they would if the ‘microscope’ of the social scientist weren’t focused on their behavior” [*Public Perspective*, December/January 1996, p. 14].

Public Perspective argued that part of what Fishkin would likely accomplish through the NIC wouldn’t be so much the therapeutic effects of deliberation as the Hawthorne-like impact of making NIC participants aware of their involvement in a great experiment. We took no issue, of course, with measuring their response to being engaged in a citizenship experiment. We objected emphatically to any suggestion that their subsequent views reflected where all America would be if only it were properly informed.

Interestingly enough, Hollywood had given us much earlier a vivid (and immensely entertaining) demonstration of the Hawthorne Effect, in a 1947 Republic Pictures production, based on a story by Robert Riskin and Joseph Krungold, that starred Jimmy Stewart and Jane Wyman.

Pollster Lawrence “Rip” Smith (played by Stewart) runs the Institute for Public Opinion. Despite its leader’s smarts, IPO is going belly-up. Smith keeps searching for a way to be profitable. A letter from a friend points the way—to a “magic town” called Grandview. Its denizens are an exact microcosm of the entire country—demographically, and even more astounding, attitudinally. In fact, all the pollster needed to do was sit around a pot-bellied stove in a Grandview assembly room and listen to what people were saying, to get an exact portrait of American public opinion.

How Grandviewites Took Becoming Special

*O.K. ...you’re the typical American; now act like it....
Watch this town grow, all we have to do is take advantage
of the opportunity....*

*We’re already known from coast to coast; people are
coming in on every train....*

I don’t blame them; who wouldn’t want to live in the perfect town....

I’ll just have to build another hotel....

Lived here all my life; never knew we were so terrific....

Rip Smith saw a polling gold mine: What a fantastic way to cut interviewing costs! But, and this is intriguing in a popular movie, he sees a serious methodological problem. Early in the dialog Smith opines: “We’re going to have to poll the same people over and over again; this thing’s liable to be good for years; but sooner or later they’re going to get self-conscious—that’s fatal—the people in that town can’t know what we’re doing there.” His polling colleague, Ike Sloan, chimes in, “Let’s pray these good people stay average, that they don’t change.”

Rip, Ike, and a statistician named Twiddle, come to Grandview portraying themselves as insurance agents. Of course, the truth comes out. It came out in the NIC because Jim Fishkin boasted of it; it came out in Magic Town because Rip got heavy with the town's leading journalist, Mary Peterson [played by Wyman]. Through her reporting, Smith is revealed as a polling expert, and Grandview as a miracle town that has been the perfect barometer of national opinion for a half century.

That's heady stuff for the locals. They lose their heads. And, if Grandview is a perfect reflection of what all America at its best thinks, an investigator has only to take up residence and imbibe. A dim-witted but enterprising mayor sets up over 20 polling booths around the city. Anticipating Fishkin, each is equipped with a reference library, because "we want to make sure that folks are thinking right." Of course, Grandview opinion is valuable proprietary data: "Everybody will be instructed not to give opinions to outsiders, only to our own official polltakers."

The town's fall comes quickly. The first Grandview poll (in the self-conscious new order) yields results obviously out of touch with national thinking. Grandview responses, compared to sensible Gallup readings of the day, became the object of national derision. The town's ultimate disgrace is administered by the country's leading radio commentator (Lowell Thomas), who delivers the essential homily: "So this little town that's always been right, turned out to be ridiculously wrong. They were so completely out of tune with the country, people are beginning to wonder where Grandview is. Certainly it can't be in the United States."

That is, once made self-conscious, this "mathematically perfect community" quickly becomes representative of nothing—a doomed social science experiment.



The Emperor Has No Clothes

by Warren J. Mitofsky

Now that the National Issues Convention is history, we should take note of what we have learned—if anything. The key question, James Fishkin told us, was whether the country would come to different conclusions about issues if those issues were seriously deliberated by the American public. Presumably, the country would be better off if its citizens were more thoughtful about important matters of general concern. That is a wonderful hypothesis and I take his point quite seriously.

Fishkin attempted to test his hypothesis by bringing a representative sample of citizens to Austin, Texas, in mid-January to deliberate "the issues" and to kick off the presidential campaign. All the presidential candidates were supposed to assist in those deliberations. Fishkin's point was to create "a more thoughtful and representative way of launching the [presidential] primary season." Only 12% of Democrats and 8% of Republicans participated in primaries in 1992, he told us, which gave a lot of influence to a handful of voters. He led us to believe his televised classroom would produce a better showing in 1996.

Let's look at the record and see how well Fishkin succeeded. What did his civic-minded backers achieve for their \$4,000,000? And what about NORC—how did it do for its \$500,000, (which may be a record for the most expensive public opinion survey per respondent ever conducted)?

Americans were supposed to watch as their televised fellow citizens in the NIC classroom discussed issues among themselves and with the presidential candidates. This new-found thoughtfulness about the issues would take them and us beyond sound-bite journalism, all for the good of the country. To this end, the Public Broadcasting Service presented 5 hours and 30 minutes of air time over three days, an hour less than originally planned due to President Clinton's absence. The leading presidential candidates did not cooperate. In addition to the President, Bob Dole and Pat Buchanan declined to appear. Steve Forbes, Lamar Alexander and Phil Gramm appeared via satellite. Only Richard Lugar and Vice President Gore came in person.

Victory is Declared

In a post-NIC press release, the sponsors used the approach George Aiken (R-Vt.) proposed for ending US involve-

“*Average citizens are not likely to change their opinions very much based upon a discussion with strangers of topics they have not thought much about and really do not care about strongly. Opinion change is an evolutionary process. It takes place over time and is aided by relatives, friends and associates, the kind of people we talk to on a regular basis.*”