



Deliberative Polling: Combining the Virtues of Deliberation and Polling in Gauging Public Opinion

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In the sphere of public policy, political scientists have found that citizens are often uninformed about public issues. And when they talk about politics, they seldom talk to others with an opposing point of view. Disagreement is assumed to be uncomfortable in policy and political talk. However, this does not bode well for the process of forming public opinion or measuring it. Deliberative Polling, a relatively new public opinion research methodology, tries to mitigate these dilemmas by combining the virtues of public opinion polls with those of the deliberative process of discussion among citizens and consultation with experts. The result is a gauge of informed public opinion when people are given the chance to deliberate with those unlike themselves.

This is how the process works: First, a random and representative sample of citizens is selected and they fill out a questionnaire on their demographic profile, policy attitudes, empirical premises, values and political knowledge on a given issue. This issue is pre-determined by a sponsoring organisation and it can range from national policy to municipal decisions. For example, the Deliberative Polling method was used to measure public opinion about nuclear energy in the state of Vermont in US and demand for municipal works in Zeguo township, China. Then, a sub-set of this sample, still representative and large enough to be able to generalise the findings, is selected for the deliberative stage of the process.

Selected participants are then given a package of briefing materials that lay out the arguments on different sides of the issues to be deliberated and they are expected to read these materials before the group deliberation sessions in the next phase. Participants typically pay more attention to the issues in this interim period; some do research while others talk about it with friends and family. These are some examples of “positive externalities” that accrue to Deliberative Polling.

Moving on to the deliberation phase, participants may go through two types of interaction: online and/or face-to-face discussions, typically in small groups of 10 to 20. For online sessions, participants are assigned to a forum which they sign on to at a stipulated time. They then chat about the issue through online text or voice conference. Due to the technological nature of online deliberation, organisers must ensure that participants are

supplied with the necessary equipment and have the know-how for the process, or else, help in the form of a remote technician should ideally be at hand. Online sessions can happen once or twice a week for an hour each.

After the online phase, face-to-face deliberation commences. Participants gather at the selected venue to discuss the given issue in their small groups. During this phase they will also have access to a panel of experts, representing different sides of the issues to be discussed. Throughout the process, all discussions, online or face-to-face, are monitored by well-trained moderators whose main purpose is not to direct the discussion but to maintain decorum and, where necessary, to draw reticent participants into the discussion. They are expected to adopt a minimalist approach so as not to affect the outcome of the deliberation.

At the end of the deliberation phase, participants fill out an augmented questionnaire, similar to the one given at the start. In this questionnaire, questions on demographic details are removed and other questions on the Deliberative Polling experience are added. Through a comparison of these answers with those given at the start, analysts can measure changes in opinion, political attitudes and the like.

Apart from the tested sample, Deliberative Polls usually include a control group that is not subject to the deliberation process. This control group would be given the same questionnaire at the start and the end of the Deliberative Polling period to see if there are any changes in opinion or political attitudes. Comparing the findings of the two groups will confirm if any opinion change is caused solely by the Deliberative Poll, and not any extrinsic factors like sentiment-changing world events to which the control group would have been exposed to as well.

Aims of Deliberative Polling

It is important to note that Deliberative Polling does not aim to arrive at a decision on the issue. No voting is involved in the process. However, Deliberative Polling hopes to reveal the public's more considered opinions when it is given a chance to deliberate in an informed manner. Past findings of Deliberative Polling show that when participants get a chance to talk to others unlike them regarding substantive policy issues, they tend to shift from their previous opinions that were arrived at without much thought. The concept of Deliberative Polling was pioneered by Dr James Fishskin at Stanford University in the United States. One of his early and leading collaborators is Dr Robert Luskin, currently an Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Last January, the Institute of Policy Studies, together with the Communications and New Media Department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Civil Service College, invited Dr Luskin to discuss this methodology with interested stakeholders in Singapore.

Dr Luskin provided the background to the development and practice of Deliberative Polling, from which the above account is drawn.

Commenting on the benefits of Deliberative Polling as well as its shortcomings, Dr Luskin pointed out that having invested heavily in it, commissioning agencies typically feel a financial and moral obligation to abide by its findings. Besides, Deliberative Polling

generates media reports and documentaries that enhance public knowledge about an issue, and their results provide invaluable material for think tanks and social science research. However, Dr Luskin highlighted that Deliberative Polling may not impact policy decisions every time. As there is no binding commitment, policy makers may choose to set aside the findings and proceed with their own conclusions. Deliberative Polling may provide input that is useful but not necessarily compelling.

Deliberative Polling: Concerns

Dr Luskin also held up some concerns shared by fellow social science researchers. Some academics have contended that Deliberative Polling samples cannot be representative. Due to the time-consuming nature of the exercise, attrition rates are high and they suspect the remaining sample suffers from a self-selecting bias. Dr Luskin said that one of the key advantages of Deliberative Polling was its representativeness and maintaining it was crucial. Where attrition is unavoidable, his research shows that those who are less well educated, more socially marginal and less interested in the topic tend to drop out of the study. However, he also noted that the size of this attrition sample was usually inconsequential to results.

As to why Deliberative Polling is considered superior to Focus Group Discussions or Townhall Meetings as small and interactive group processes, Dr Luskin pointed out that they have limitations. For example, Focus Groups are typically not representative and participants tend to be carefully selected for various reasons. As such, they are not random or representative. Townhall Meetings, on the other hand, tend to attract lobbyists and those with strong points of view, while marginalising views from moderates. A Deliberative Poll overcomes both these limitations by involving a sample as representative of the population as possible. Measures are put in place to ensure this, said Dr Luskin. For example, at-the-doorstep substitution (eg. husband turns up wishing to substitute his wife as a participant) is strictly not allowed.

Another common concern was one involving incentives. What would incentivise anyone to participate in a protracted exercise like Deliberative Polling? Dr Luskin said that the excitement of meeting new people and the material incentive of an all-expenses paid trip to a hotel may motivate people to join the exercise. In some cases, organisers pay a small honorarium and the amount varies depending on the level of interest and complexity of the topic. Since incentives are key in attracting participants, will the exercise wind up with a self-selecting sample? Dr Luskin said his studies showed that such a bias was inconsequential to results.

Other worries included affluent participants driving the discussion more than marginalized groups, or men influencing the discussion more than women. But Dr Luskin said that these worries were not borne out by his actual experience.

Deliberative Polling in Singapore

With regard to Deliberative Polling in the Singapore context, one pertinent concern would be the representativeness of the exercise given technological limitations of elderly folk in Singapore. This might be a barrier to sampling 100 percent of the population, thus marring

the representativeness of the study. Dr Luskin explained that researchers have traditionally taken two approaches to this problem. The first involves equipping participants with the essential tools (computers, Internet access) and skills to participate in online deliberative polls, but this would be a necessarily costly route. Another approach involves recruiting a large pool of people already online, and using statistical matching procedures to approximate a random sample.

Aside from technological issues, language may be a hurdle for certain segments of the population. Dr Luskin suggested that translators could be engaged for the exercise, and indeed, he has convened Deliberative Polls in Europe where translators were heavily involved.

On the plus side, Singapore's compact size makes face-to-face deliberations much easier than in large countries. Dr Luskin felt this would make for more frequent and less onerous exercises in Deliberative Polling.

Yet, the most salient barrier might still be culture. Those from conservative societies are generally thought to shy away from speaking up in group settings while members of liberal societies might be bolder in voicing their views. Having done deliberative polls in China and Japan, Dr Luskin said that those in more conservative societies indeed took longer to warm up, but they gained momentum once the discussion got underway. To his surprise, cultural specificities did not pose as big a problem as he had expected.

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