

Deliberative Polling: A Synopsis

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Most ordinary citizens know, have thought, and have talked very little about politics. On the fairly rare occasions they do talk about it, it is with people like themselves, holding similar views. That is public opinion, as it is. But what of a more considered public opinion? What *would* people think if they actually knew and had thought more about policy choices—and had talked more with people from other walks of life, holding different points of view? That is the question Deliberative Polling seeks to answer.

The limitations of public opinion as it is create problems for public officials wanting to get meaningful public input to policy decisions. Public hearings and the like tend to draw sparse attendance and are often dominated by vocal, unrepresentative minorities. Conventional surveys, well enough conducted, are representative but harvest opinions resting on little prior thought or information and little exposure to opposing views or to people from other walks of life.

Deliberative Polling provides a way of obtaining public input that is both considered on the one hand and representative on the other. A Deliberative Poll (DP) draws and interviews a random sample of the public, then invites them to a common site to discuss the issues for a day or a weekend. The participants are sent balanced briefing materials laying out the major arguments for and against the policy proposals under discussion. Onsite, they alternate between discussing the issues in randomly assigned small groups, led by moderators trained to intervene as little and as neutrally as possible, and questioning balance panels of policy experts in plenary sessions. At the end, they complete the same questionnaire as at the beginning.

My colleague James Fishkin and I have done dozens of DPs around the world—at the local, regional, national, and even multinational level, and in a sizable number of countries, including the U.S., the U.K., Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, Australia, Brazil, Hungary, Japan, and China. In every case, the participants learn a lot. In almost every case, their opinions change, not only at the individual level but in the aggregate. That is, not only do many people change their views, but the changes are usually more in one direction than the other. The results paint a picture of a more informed public, thinking harder and talking more with people very different from themselves, holding very different views, as well as one of how that public differs from one we actually have.

The following are excerpts from a document by Prof Fishkin

the center for
deliberative democracy

Deliberative Polling®: Toward a Better-Informed Democracy”

Professor James S. Fishkin, Director

Stanford University

Deliberative Polling®: Executive Summary

The Problem

Citizens are often uninformed about key public issues. Conventional polls represent the public's surface impressions of sound bites and headlines. The public, subject to what social scientists have called "rational ignorance," has little reason to confront trade-offs or invest time and effort in acquiring information or coming to a considered judgment.

The Process

Deliberative Polling® is an attempt to use television and public opinion research in a new and constructive way. A random, representative sample is first polled on the targeted issues. After this baseline poll, members of the sample are invited to gather at a single place for a weekend in order to discuss the issues. Carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly available. The participants engage in dialogue with competing experts and political leaders based on questions they develop in small group discussions with trained moderators. Parts of the weekend events are broadcast on television, either live or in taped and edited form. After the deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues.

History

Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University originated the concept of Deliberative Polling® in 1988. He has served as either Director or Academic Advisor for all of the Deliberative Polling® events conducted thus far. Previously he was the Director of the Center for Deliberative Polling® at the University of Texas at Austin. The Austin Center was moved to Stanford on Sept 1, 2003 and will continue under the new name Center for Deliberative Democracy. The Center will focus on research and application of Deliberative Polling®.

Deliberative Polling is a registered trademark and fees from the trademark go to the Center to support research. The Center for Deliberative Democracy has received generous support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and from Stanford University.

Professor Robert C. Luskin of the Department of Government at the University of Texas in Austin is a Senior Fellow at the Center in Stanford. He is a recognized expert on public opinion and on research methodology.

The Center's Senior Advisors are Dr. Charls E. Walker and Dan Werner. Dr. Walker is a former Deputy Secretary of the Treasury. Dan Werner is President of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and was Co-executive Producer of the National Issues Convention broadcasts.

Deliberative Polling® experiments have been conducted over twenty two times in the U.S. and abroad.

- There have been five national Deliberative Polls in Britain conducted by the television network Channel Four.
- Two national Deliberative Polls have been conducted in Australia, the first before the November 1999 referendum on Australia's possibly changing from a monarchy to a republic and the second, on reconciliation with the Aboriginals in February 2001. These events, broadcast on national television were a collaboration with Issues Deliberation Australia, involving national random samples of Australians brought to Canberra for three days of discussions in dialogue with experts and key political leaders.
- In August, 2000, we collaborated with the Danish publication Monday Morning and scholars at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense to mount a national Deliberative Poll before the Danish national referendum on the Euro. The weekend's proceedings were televised at length by Danish Broadcasting.

- In the U.S. there have been two events at the national level as well as ten local versions. The National Issues Convention, a collaboration of the University of Texas, PBS, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, was broadcast from Austin in January 1996. In January of 2003, the first online Deliberative Poll culminated soon after a face-to-face Deliberative Poll in Philadelphia with a national random sample of 340 participants that deliberated with the same briefing materials and took the same questionnaire.
- Eight regulated public utilities have conducted Deliberative Polls in their service territories in cooperation with the Public Utility Commission of the State of Texas--Central Power and Light (Corpus Christi), West Texas Utilities (Abilene) and South West Electric Power (Shreveport, La.), El Paso Electric (El Paso, TX), Houston Lighting and Power (Houston), Entergy (Beaumont, TX) Southwestern Public Service (Amarillo) and Texas Utilities (Dallas). The success of those polls led the PUC to require that the public be consulted on public utility policies after it has had an opportunity to become informed on the issues. In November 1999, the Nike Foundation and Oregon Public Broadcasting conducted a Deliberative Polling® process on education issues with students drawn, system-wide, from the Portland public school system. In March 2002, a local Deliberative Polling® experiment was held at Yale with the fifteen towns in the New Haven metropolitan area on regional economic cooperation between the city and suburbs.

Results

Each experiment conducted thus far has gathered a highly representative sample together at a single place. Each time, there were dramatic, statistically significant changes in views. The result is a poll with a human face. The process has the statistical representativeness of a scientific sample but it also has the concreteness and immediacy of a focus group or a discussion group. Taped and edited accounts of the small group discussions provide an opportunity for the public to reframe the issues in terms that connect with ordinary people.

The weekend samples have typically ranged in size from approximately 200 in the utility polls to a high of 466 at the 1996 National Issues Convention. The process provides the data to evaluate both the representativeness of each microcosm and the statistical significance of the changes in opinion. A very partial listing of significant changes is detailed in Tab 2.

Applications

Deliberative Polling® is especially suitable for issues where the public may have little knowledge or information, or where the public may have failed to confront the trade-offs applying to public policy. It is a social science experiment and a form of public education in the broadest sense.

Deliberative Polling®, 1994-2000:
How Participants Change (Selected Results)

The National Issues Convention January 1996, Austin, Texas

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
<i>In Favor Of:</i>			
"A tax reduction for savings"	66	83	+17
"Flat Tax"	44	30	-14
"Education and Training" (agree that we are now spending "too little")	72	86	+14
"Foreign aid" (agree that current level is "about right")	26	41	+15
"Safety net for welfare and health care" should be turned over to the states "to decide how much to give"	50	63	+13
"Make divorce harder to get" (as a way of strengthening the family)	36	57	+21
"Military cooperation with other nations to address trouble spots in the world" (agree strongly that U.S. should continue)	21	38	+17
"Biggest problem facing the American family" is "economic pressure"	36	51	+15
"Biggest problem facing the American family" is "breakdown of traditional values"	58	48	-10

Deliberative Polling® on Crime 1994 (Britain)

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
<i>Agree That:</i>			
"Sending more offenders to prison" is "an effective way of fighting crime"	57	38	-19
"The rules in court should be LESS on the side of the accused"	42	52	+10
"Suspects should have the right to remain silent under police questioning"	36	50	+14
<i>Disagree That:</i>			
"The police should sometimes be able to 'bend the rules' to get a conviction (strongly disagree)"	37	46	+ 9
"First time burglar, aged 16" should be sent to an ordinary prison (strongly against)"	33	50	+17

British Deliberative Polling® on Europe 1995 (Britain)

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
<i>Agree That:</i>			
Britain is a lot better off in the EU than out of it	45	60	+15
Closer links with EU would make Britain stronger economically	51	67	+16
If we left EU Britain would lose its best chance of real progress	40	53	+13
With single currency, Britain would lose control of its own economic policy	62	50	-12

British Deliberative Polling® on the General Election

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
<i>Voting Intention:</i>			
Conservative	26	19	-7
Labour	47	39	-8
Liberal Democrat	11	33	+22
<i>Agree that:</i>			
"Government should do more to unite fully with European Union"	36	49	+13%
"Unless Britain keeps its own currency, it will lose too much control over its own economic policy"	69	48	-19

Australia Deliberates, October 1999

A nationally representative random sample of 347 Australian voters were assembled over the weekend of October 22-24, 1999 at Old Parliament House in Canberra to discuss the issues involved in the referendum in Australia's first ever Deliberative Poll.

The event was organized by Issues Deliberation Australia, in collaboration with the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and in consultation with the Centers for Deliberative Polling and Australian Studies at the University of Texas. It was broadcast by ABC (the Australian Broadcasting Corp) and by the "Sixty Minutes" program on the Nine Network. In addition, The Australian newspaper was a partner in the event.

Participants attending the Australia Deliberates were first interviewed in early September, about six weeks prior to being invited to attend the deliberations. They were then polled at the end of the weekend, following wide-ranging discussions and questioning of experts from all sides of the debate.

The Main Results

When Australians had the opportunity to discuss intensely the referendum on the republic, opinion shifted dramatically.

- there was a 20 percentage point increase in 'yes' voters, from 53 to 73 percent.
- support for the direct election of the President collapsed, from 50 to 19 percent.

- levels of political information increased very substantially, notably in relation to the role and powers of the President.
- 84 percent believed that the monarchy represents British interests, compared to 64 percent before the deliberations.
- fewer believed that the change is expensive or that the Referendum is a distraction from other problems.
- there was a dramatic increase in the proportions who believe that the President should be non-political-up from 53 to 88 percent.
- after the weekend few believed that the Australian flag would change as a result of a yes vote at the referendum-down from 59 to 8 percent.

Support for the republican model in the referendum increased dramatically between the first poll, in early September, and the Deliberative Poll. The proportion of the participants supporting the republican model increased from 53 percent prior to the deliberations to 73 percent afterwards. Following the deliberations, there were no uncommitted voters.

On the referendum question

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
<i>Approve the proposed alteration to the constitution?</i>			
Yes	53	73	+20
No	40	27	-13
Uncommitted	7	-	-7

The referendum question involved the model of a President appointed by Parliament. But the public debate focused on direct election. Hence the Deliberative Poll probed attitudes about all three alternatives-the status quo, the appointed model and direct election.

Support for the direct election model as a first choice collapsed following the weekend's deliberations, with most of the participants favoring the model in the referendum proposal. Half of the participants favored a direct election model prior to the weekend, but only 19 percent did so after they had more information. A majority (61 percent) opted for the proposed model, the appointment of the President by Parliament.

First choice model

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
Change to a republic with a President directly elected by the people	50	19	-31
Change to a republic with a President appointed by Parliament	20	61	+41
Not change anything, keeping the Queen and the Governor-General in their current roles	26	15	-11
None, don't know	4	5	+1

Major Increases in Levels of Political Knowledge

During the course of the weekend, levels of basic political information increased dramatically among the participants, and this was a major factor underlying the changes in opinions noted above. Prior to the weekend, just over half believed that they had enough information to vote on the republic; after the weekend, three out of 10 believed that they had enough information.

The most dramatic change was in relation to the role of the President. Prior to the deliberations, just 16 percent understood that the Prime Minister could remove the President at any time but must obtain approval from the House of Representatives; after the deliberations, 73 percent possessed this information, an increase of 57 percentage points.

Changes in Political Knowledge

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
Currently know enough to be able to vote on republic	57	78	+21
Powers of president same relative to current Governor-General	61	87	+26
Queen appoints the Governor-General only on advice of Prime Minister	39	85	+46
President would be no more powerful than Governor-General is now	61	76	+15

Australian Deliberative Polling® on Aboriginal Reconciliation

On February 16-18, 2001 a national random sample of the Australian people was brought to the Old Parliament House in Canberra for a national Deliberative Poll that was broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corp.

The summary below is from the March 6, 2001 press conference convened by Dr. Pamela Ryan, Managing Director of Issues Deliberation Australia, the principal sponsoring organization. The Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Texas, Austin was one of the co-sponsors of this project. More information on the Australian Deliberative Polls is available at <http://www.ida.org.au>.

Summary of Main Findings

When Australians had the opportunity to discuss and question intensely the diverse range of issues under the general topic of Reconciliation, opinion shifted dramatically.

- Perception of reconciliation as an important issue facing the nation rose dramatically from 31% (31%) prior to deliberations to 60% (63%) following deliberations.
- Perception of disadvantage of indigenous Australians in relation to other Australians rose dramatically: from 52% (51%) prior to deliberation to 80% (82%) post deliberation.
- Levels of political knowledge in relation to indigenous issues, government services and political leaders also rose substantially, with gains in knowledge ranging from 11(9) to 50 (52) percentage points depending on the item.

Correlating significantly with changes in perceptions of the importance of the issue, changes in perceptions of levels of indigenous disadvantage and increases in levels of political knowledge, were levels of support for a range of national initiatives:

- formal acknowledgement that Australia was occupied without consent of indigenous Australians: 68% (67%) to 81% (82%);
- formal acknowledgement that indigenous Australians were the original owners of the land and waters: 73% (74%) to 81% (82%);
- an apology to the "stolen generation": 46% (45%) to 68% (70%).
- In contrast, support for some initiatives remained relatively unchanged before and after deliberations:
- a treaty or set of agreements between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians;
- allocation of special seats in parliament for indigenous Australians

Where support increased for other initiatives, such as land rights and compensation to 'the stolen generation', support was based on specific conditions, such as proof of historical/cultural links with the land, and proof of physical, emotional, financial and cultural deprivation as a result of removal.

In terms of government focus for the future: following deliberation, support for education as the key priority rose significantly from 42% to 59% (42%-55%), while health, unemployment and housing all dropped by an average of ten percentage points.

[Note: first percentages quoted are those controlled for indigenous participation in group discussion, sample size =240, percentages in parentheses are those for the complete national random sample of 344]

Opinions on Deliberative Polling®

"Deliberative Polling® is the most promising innovation in democratic practice of which I am aware. I hope that in the coming century, it will be widely adopted in the United States and other democratic countries."

Robert A. Dahl
Sterling Professor of Political Science Emeritus
Yale University

"An innovative method for bridging the chasm between the electors and the elected"

Walter Shapiro
Time Magazine

"Deliberative Polling® combines two familiar techniques--sample surveys and focus groups--into a powerful new technique for gauging informed public opinion. I think it is the most innovative approach to studying public opinion since the development of scientific polling in the 1930's"

Norman Bradburn
Senior Vice President for Research, National Opinion Research
Center at the University of Chicago

"From the point of view of citizenship and democratic values, the Deliberative polling® design is a delightfully fresh departure. From the scientific point of view, it holds promise of carrying us well beyond what we have learned to date from standard opinion surveys about how voters process new information bearing on their political beliefs. This is a visionary kind of inquiry."

Philip E. Converse

Professor Emeritus, The University of Michigan
co-author, *The American Voter*

"An exciting concept... It has the potential to dramatically change a generally detached electorate contained in small self-indulgent pens, bounded by ignorance and cynicism, into a far-better informed and involved body of voters, unbounded in their urges to fully comprehend the issues they define and then to participate in the process to see their studied views become active reality."

Jane Ely

Columnist, Houston Chronicle

"Is there not something enlightening, indeed heartening, in watching voters who mirror us all wrestling with issues, listening with respect to the views of others, trying to find consensus?...[a] promising, important, innovation in American democracy."

Neal R. Peirce

Nationally Syndicated Columnist

"The potential contribution [of Deliberative Polling] to a better-informed democracy is great . . . It is in the interest of all that it should be encouraged."

The Independent (London)

Editorial "Knowledge Can Change Minds"

"Deliberative Polling (as developed by Professor James Fishkin at the University of Texas has the potential to show policymakers and the public what well-informed citizens would think about complex issues. This potential was demonstrated at the National Issues Convention in Austin as well as in other Deliberative Polls held locally in Texas and nationally in Great Britain. In my judgment, this kind of research could be of great use to the legislative process as well as to efforts to better inform the public."

Representative Bill Archer

R., Texas, and Chairman, House Ways and Means Committee

"I think it's a wonderful development. And if there is anybody in this group who wonders whether or not this is going anywhere or has accomplished anything, you should stop wondering because I think it has been a tremendous success. I think you have started something great here. And I think that the great Barbara Jordan, who died this past week, should be remembered for many things, but among them should be her work in helping to make this whole event and process happen."

Vice President Al Gore

National Issues Convention broadcast, January 16, 1996

Contact Information on Deliberative Democracy

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