Collaboration at Stanford leads to Mongolian parliament passing law on public opinion polling

A meeting between Stanford communications Professor James Fishkin and Gombojav Zandanshatar, a member of Mongolia’s parliament, inspired a new law that requires an in-depth method of public opinion polling to take place before an amendment to Mongolia’s constitution can be enacted.

BY MILENKO MARTINOVICH
A meeting three years ago between a Stanford communications professor and a Mongolian diplomat has led to a historic outcome.

The Mongolian government recently passed a law requiring that an immersive research method that analyzes public opinion developed by Stanford’s James Fishkin (https://profiles.stanford.edu/james-fishkin) be conducted before its constitution could be amended. According to Fishkin, who devised the process called deliberative polling (http://cdd.stanford.edu/what-is-deliberative-polling/) almost 30 years ago, it marks the first time that a country has incorporated the process into its law.

A voice for the people
Fishkin's method provides citizens an up-close examination of important issues.

Researchers survey a random sample of a specific area – like a city, region or nation – on specific issues. The researchers then invite members of that sample to a central location where they engage in moderated, small-group discussions, then pose questions to gathered policy experts and political leaders regarding those issues. The discussions are based on carefully vetted and balanced briefing materials. This comprehensive analysis of the issues allows citizens to look past the headlines and partisan chatter that can cloud political processes.

“Here we see what people would really think if they got engaged in considering the arguments for and against the various proposals,” Fishkin said.

By polling the sample before and after the meetings, usually spanning two days, researchers can track how public opinion changes when citizens are informed in a meaningful way. The changes in opinion that occur give policymakers insight into how the greater population would feel on these issues if all citizens were as informed and engaged.
Fishkin's method has been conducted more than 70 times in 26 countries with intriguing results. For example, in 2011, South Koreans were surveyed on the issues and potential consequences involving unification with North Korea.

Before deliberations, only 48 percent of South Koreans believed unification would benefit South Korea and 53 percent believed South Korea should possess nuclear weapons.

After deliberations, 73 percent of South Koreans saw benefits in unification and only 34 percent believed the country should possess nuclear weapons.


Another advantage to the innovative method, Fishkin said, is the use of confidential questionnaires. He said confidentiality eliminates social pressure to reach a consensus, as in a jury verdict, where there is a tendency to align with the majority.

“This is all common-sensical, but it works to get people to listen to other people and consider arguments they might not have considered,” Fishkin said.

Success in Mongolia

While a visiting scholar at Stanford’s Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (http://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/), former Mongolian minister of foreign affairs and trade Gombojav Zandanshatar met Fishkin, who conveyed the benefits of deliberative polling. The meeting had such an impact on Zandanshatar that he translated Fishkin’s book on deliberative democracy, When the People Speak (https://global.oup.com/academic/product/when-the-people-speak-9780199604432?cc=us&lang=en&), into Mongolian and held a book launch in the national library of Mongolia’s capital, Ulaanbaatar.

While Zandanshatar pursued ways to introduce the process to Mongolia, Fishkin was contacted by Ulaanbaatar’s then mayor, E. Bat-Uul, who came across Fishkin’s research. E. Bat-Uul was dissatisfied with his government’s outreach to its people, Fishkin said, and inquired about bringing Fishkin’s polling method to Ulaanbaatar.

Fishkin agreed to help, but requested that a bipartisan advisory committee involving Mongolia’s two major political parties be created to assist with the effort. E. Bat-Uul, a member of the Democratic Party, agreed to serve as committee co-chair with Zandanshatar, representing the Mongolian People’s Party.

In December 2015, more than 300 residents of Ulaanbaatar deliberated for two days about 14 infrastructure projects, which would be paid for with borrowed funds. Prior to deliberations, Fishkin said the local media reported that the mayor supported a proposed metro system for the capital city, potentially influencing opinion.

But when citizens deliberated and saw the estimated cost of the metro system, that project’s popularity dropped significantly. Ultimately, the people chose installing and repairing heating and insulation in the schools of Ulaanbatar, one of the coldest cities in the world, as the top priority.

“You’d think this would be a priority, but the mayor didn’t realize how much it was a priority for the people,” Fishkin said.

When the 14 projects were re-ranked after deliberations, Fishkin said the mayor implemented an executive order that the city’s borrowing practices would address the projects in the order the people prioritized.
Reaching a nation

The success in Ulaanbaatar allowed Zandanshatar, a member of Mongolia’s parliament, to convince his colleagues of the practice’s merits. The measure was supported and passed into law on Feb. 9. Mongolia’s first national deliberative poll was held late last week.

“During my whole political career, I have been seeking to establish a just and fair constitutional democratic government in Mongolia,” Zandanshatar said. “I believe in the Mongolian people and I hope deliberative polling will give the opportunity to achieve true civic participation.”

Mongolians analyzed six issues, including the possibility of creating a second chamber of parliament and changes in presidential election procedures. Fishkin said including the Mongolian people so early in the process is “a necessary first step to thinking about whether a constitutional change on this issue is appropriate or not.”

“All over the world, governments and countries are wrestling with the issue of how do you change constitutions,” Fishkin continued. “If you take it directly to the people, you’re open to populism. If you leave it to just parliament and the elites, you’re open to suspicion that they’re not really listening to the people. This is a way to bring in the people in a thoughtful and informed way.”

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