Yes, Ordinary Citizens Can Decide Complex Issues

Representative panels of the populace have helped choose energy policy in Texas, constitutional amendments in Mongolia, and other issues in 28 countries.

Democracy is under threat around the world, afflicted by polarized politics, tribalism in support of partisanship and propaganda spread on social media. Most citizens converse only with the like-minded, so they almost never hear the other side. Our collective decisions are rarely based on evidence and often lead to deadlock.

It’s no wonder that approval ratings for nearly all democratic institutions are abysmally low, not only in the U.S. but in most democratic countries. The apparent dilemma is that if policy makers try to listen to the people, they get the angry voices of populism. If they do not, they are distrusted and seem out of touch.

What would it take to reimagine democracy so that the will of the people is meaningful and consequential? Is it utopian to think about a new and better form of democracy? I don’t think so.

For several decades now, I’ve been working with other social scientists and political leaders on an experiment in democratic governance called deliberative polling. It’s hardly a solution to all of our woes, but it’s a starting point, I’d argue, for real reform.

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The idea is straightforward enough. We aim to give citizens a chance to think through difficult issues under conditions that encourage informed deliberation. To achieve this, we use pollsters to gather a random sample of people, a microcosm of society, but we don’t just ask them to react to sound bites and headlines, as is done in conventional polling.

We start instead with an agenda put together by an advisory committee representing...
different points of view on an issue. They create briefing materials that strive for a balanced, accessible account of the debate. The people in our sample review these materials, question the competing experts and then deliberate about the best course of action. They offer their views in confidential questionnaires. Once they’ve decided, we compare these considered judgments to the views they had before going through this process.

But this isn’t just some academic exercise or thought experiment. Over the past three decades, I have worked with various collaborators to conduct deliberative polls more than 100 times in 28 countries, and in many cases, the results have had real-world consequences.

My research group was first hired in Texas in 1996 to help energy companies meet their legal requirement to consult the public about how to provide electricity. At the end of the deliberations, the percentage of our representative sample willing to pay a bit more on monthly utility bills for the support of renewable energy rose from 52% to 84%, with a similar increase in support for conservation. The public utility commission and then the state legislature relied on these results in making a series of decisions that moved Texas from last to first in wind power among the 50 states.

Last year Mongolia adopted a law requiring deliberative polling to screen potential constitutional amendments. Soon after the law was passed, we helped to convene a national sample of 700 citizens who, over the course of a long weekend, considered 18 proposals for constitutional reform. Ultimately, they only endorsed a package of anticorruption measures aimed at protecting the independence of the civil service and the courts. The parliament will take up these measures in October.

In South Korea, the new government of President Moon Jae-in recently faced the difficult choice of whether to resume or abandon the construction of two partially built nuclear reactors. To the surprise of many observers, the government left the final decision to a national deliberative poll. After several days of discussion, the sample of nearly 500 South Koreans decided to support resuming construction by a margin of 59.5% to 40.5%. The government is now implementing their decision.

These cases show that when a random sample of ordinary citizens deliberate in moderated small groups, they actually listen to each other and make decisions based on the substance of policy choices.

Some political scientists say that democracy is just an edifying myth, that the people are simply not competent enough for self-government. But it depends on our institutions. Under the right conditions, ordinary people are perfectly capable of making complicated policy choices.

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