

Press Conference Athens 5/4/06

Procedures for the Selection of Mayoral and Prefectorial Candidates

John Panaretos: Thank you for giving me this opportunity to apply scientific methodology to promote practices that will assist in enriching our democracy and promoting greater citizen participation.

When the President of PASOK asked me last summer to try to incorporate deliberative polling into the upcoming mayoral and prefectorial elections, I realised that his intention was to further deepen citizen participation in public affairs. The method of Deliberative Polling (DP) has been used in many countries but never in the process of selecting candidates for elections. The whole approach of DP, with the necessary adjustments for selecting candidates, is geared to this aim.

Deliberative polling uses two practices that are more or less well known separately. The first is regular polling, whereby public opinion is recorded on specific issues based on a random sample of citizens. The second is deliberation, whereby a sub sample of citizens chosen scientifically from the first sample, are given all the facts about the issues in question and then gather in a given place to exchange views and to become better informed on specific issues in order to reach a convergence of opinion.

The rationale behind deliberative polling therefore is not to merely record the opinion of a random sample of citizens as in traditional polling. It is to empower them through deliberation and information to see all the possible perspectives of an issue and to exchange views with people who may have different perspectives. Precisely because the sample is random, these views can be considered representative of the entire population under examination.

Let me give you some more details about the process itself. Since we are talking about the upcoming local elections, I will focus my remarks on this particular application. During the first stage of the process, we will select a random sample of about 1,000 voters from Marousi, just as we would for an ordinary poll. We will record their views on a number of issues facing Marousi.

We will also put together a background document that will analyse all the aspects of every alternative proposal that is available for addressing these problems. (If, for example, we are talking about some parking policy in Marousi, we will explain the alternative approaches to solve the problem and their implications). We will invite those who wish to run as PASOK candidates in Marousi to express their views about these issues in writing.

We will then make a scientific selection of about 200-300 people from our initial sample group who will be invited to participate in the deliberation process. The background document, along with the views of the candidates on the issues will be distributed to them. They will have the opportunity to review these documents and also to ask for clarifications.

The deliberation day will be the second stage of the process and this is what differentiates our approach from an ordinary poll. It is also different from other forms of public deliberation in the sense that in this case participants do not have common characteristics (are not members of the same party, for example); on the contrary, they are a microcosm of their municipality because they were selected randomly. This allows citizens to listen to all the different views on the issues concerning their municipality, which is quite unusual.

On arrival, the participants will be asked to fill in a questionnaire on the issues and about the candidates. Then, they will be divided into small groups of about twenty people, within which they will exchange views on the problems, possible solutions, and each candidate's views. After that, all the participants will get together in a larger space, where each of the candidates will have the opportunity to present his/her views. In addition, people will be able to ask the candidates specific questions to clarify their positions.

At the end of the deliberation day, a third questionnaire will be handed out to the groups. The aim is to examine two things: First, to what extent has the informed citizen changed his/her view on municipal problems and how they can be solved? Second, how does the informed citizen evaluate the candidates' positions on each of these issues?

An important difference between this process and an ordinary poll for choosing a candidate is that regular polls - especially for local elections - examine how well-known a candidate is. Candidates with interesting points of view who are unknown to the public, either because they are not party members or do not have media exposure, do not have the opportunity to try to convince people that they are right for the job. Deliberative polling provides this opportunity.

The whole process is covered by the media. The idea is that those citizens who were not selected for this sample of 200-300 people can identify with the participants and get answers to questions that perhaps they would have liked to ask the candidates themselves. This is precisely because the participants will be a random sample of the whole population.

This is a summary of the process. The use of DP previously has confirmed that the advantage of this process is that it gives people the opportunity to participate more -- both quantitatively and qualitatively -- in determining the issues that concern their life.

I would like to add that for this project, our Institute is collaborating with the Center of Deliberative Democracy of Stanford University whose Director is Professor James Fishkin who introduced the idea of deliberative polling. The method of DP has been applied in several countries (including England, USA, Denmark, Australia, China), on a variety of issues. The innovation in our case is that for the first time we will use the method to select candidates for public office.

I would like to stress the emphasis on scientific methodology and transparency. All those involved will have access to the same, comprehensive information throughout all stages of the process. There will be a website (http://www.aueb.gr/statistical-institute/deliberative-polling/index_en.htm), a blog (<http://marousi-db.blogspot.com>) and an e-mail address (dimotikes@gmail.com) through which anyone interested can participate in the process.

Let me close with a comment. Some might think: "This may be nice, but it is rather theoretical." People often say such things about Mr. Papandreou's initiatives. I would like to share with you one experience to show you that what appears impossible at first, really is not. In 1996, when George Papandreou was Minister of Education and I was Secretary General of the Ministry, he asked me to organise a pilot evaluation of Greek universities. At the time, nobody thought this could be done. But we did it, with the help of two of our most important educational institutions, the National Technical University and the Technical College of Patras. Today, ten years later, we are still debating whether this evaluation process will be applied in our universities.

Thank you very much.