

Yale to host innovative public opinion study

Deliberative Poll increases political participation, professors say.

BY ELIZABETH BENTON



YOO-SUN CHEONGH/YH

Cynthia Farra, director of Urban Academic Initiatives, is coordinating the Deliberative Polling event this weekend.

During an innovative public opinion experiment, a conservative 84-year-old white man once told a single African-American woman that she "did not have a family," since a family only referred to a two parent household. By the end of the experiment, he approached the same woman and said, "What are the three most important words in the English language? They are: 'I was wrong.'"

What precipitated this transformation? This man was one of hundreds participating in an experiment called a Deliberative Poll, which showed how participants' opinions could change when they were given access to information on both sides of public policy issues and given time to analyze all sides of the arguments.

A Deliberative Poll is a unique experiment in public opinion research that, unlike random sample surveys, is designed to promote democratic participation. Actual opinions are less important than the changes in participants' opinions and what affects their opinions.

FROM FRI., MAR. 1 THROUGH SUN., MAR. 3, YALE'S Institute for Social Policy Research will conduct a similar Deliberative Poll to study how public opinion changes as citizens learn more about local policy issues. Specifically, 250 people from throughout southern Connecticut will discuss potential economic cooperation between cities and suburbs.

A host of political science professors will coordinate the project. They include former Yale Professor James Fishkin, TD '70, GRD '75, Professor Cynthia Farrar, the director of Urban Academics Initiatives in the Office of New Haven and State Affairs, and Professor Donald Green, the director of the Institute for Social Policy Research. The Connecticut League of Women Voters Education Fund and the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven will sponsor the project.



COURTESY JAMES FISHKIN

James Fishkin hopes that Deliberative Polling can be a 'model.'

Fishkin first came up with the idea of the Deliberative Poll in 1988. "We do thousands of polls of the public when it isn't thinking," he said. "Why not do a couple polls of the public when it has access to information and it is thinking? I see no other good way to get an informed and representative opinion from the public."

The procedure for a Deliberative Poll is simple. Polling administrators first ask the participants questions relating to a specific public policy without providing any supplemental information about that policy. Afterwards, participants are provided with background material on the policy issues. Experts and political leaders present both sides of the issues to the subjects. The participants are then given an opportunity to engage in discussions with each other and experts in groups guided by trained moderators. At the close of the several-day event, another standard opinion poll is administered, and changes in opinion are gauged.

"This upcoming Deliberative Poll is an opportunity to watch attitude change as it happens," Green said. Eighteen successful Deliberative Polls have taken place in the United States, along with five in Great Britain and two in Australia. All have caused dramatic changes in participants' opinions. During the National Issues Convention in Austin, Tex. in 1996, 26 percent of those initially polled felt that foreign aid spending should remain the same. After the deliberative sessions the number of those polled satisfied with current foreign aid spending rose to 86 percent.

This weekend's poll, however, will be the first to tackle local issues instead of broader national issues. Participants will be discussing the proposed expansion of Tweed New Haven Airport and regional tax-base sharing.

"It's on a very interesting set of local policy issues. We hope that this Deliberative Poll may be a model for how to get an informed dialogue between the inner city, the inner suburbs, and the outer suburbs in a metropolitan area," Fishkin said.

Choosing which topics the participants will discuss and learn about during the Yale experiment was a challenging decision. The research team, along with the League of Women Voters, weighed several factors before settling on the airport expansion plans and regional tax issues.

"We wanted to try and find two questions related to regionalism that had a couple of characteristics," Farrar said. "The first is that they are on the table; something is likely to happen about them, so that they have a kind of timely quality. People aren't just talking in the abstract. Also, they are concrete issues. We're not just asking people: 'What do you think about the idea of towns cooperating?' We're asking concrete questions. Although they are concrete and timely, they are also likely to lead participants into the more general questions about regionalism."

Elise Low, president of the East Shore League of Women Voters, also stressed the importance of choosing issues that could be understood by all participants. "The whole group wanted a couple issues that wouldn't throw the participants for a loop, something that they might be able to get a handle on," Low said. "We can't assume that everybody has a college degree."

Farrar explained that this poll would have a followup aspect, which is unique. While not required, participants will be encouraged to meet with their mayors and local political officials. "When you bring people together as individuals, you give people a lot of attention," she said. "They are likely to be willing to move beyond their individual interests, but if what we are trying to accomplish is showing that these views can be sustained and can have an influence on the political process, then I think it is important to bring people back to their own identity and their town."

WHILE DELIBERATIVE POLLS HAVE RECENTLY received a lot of publicity, political science professors tend to agree that they will never replace more standard public opinion polling techniques that ask random sample policy questions without providing the respondents with supplementary information. "The issue isn't so much deliberative polling versus [conventional] polling as it is deliberative polling versus other kinds of legislative activity," Green said. "Here, you can have interested parties weighing in, but they're not trying to strike deals or put pressure on participants."

Yale Political Science Professor John Lapinski stressed that one cannot compare Deliberative Polls to standard opinion polls. Deliberative Polls "are interested in coming up with an end result, and that end result is a better-informed citizen who can participate

better in politics." These types of polls are not concerned with "just measuring something," he added. "Perhaps the purpose is a little bit different than a survey that attempts to measure just whether you support a candidate or a particular policy."

Low feels that the deliberative process provides citizens with an opportunity to become more informed about pertinent issues of public concern. "The idea [behind these polls is] democracy in action—citizens become involved, inform themselves on specific issues, and come together to share ideas across the normal barriers of town lines," she said.

Several previous Deliberative Polls were televised and attracted considerable public attention. Although this weekend's experiment will not be televised, social scientists from around the globe will attend. Plans are already under way to begin a similar project at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Faculty from Cambridge University in England will also be attending to see if a Deliberative Poll centering on local issues would be feasible in Cambridge.

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