

Deliberative Polling inventor paves way to informed public

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Political theorist Jim Fishkin left the University of Texas-Austin in favor of the Farm after he headed a project at CASBS in 2001-02 that led to a permanent offer.

Jim Fishkin insists that ordinary citizens care a lot more about thorny political issues than their leaders think.

"Collectively, the public is very smart if you persuade them that their voice matters and you give them an opportunity to engage in the process in a safe and public space," the political theorist said recently while sitting in Stanford's year-old Center for Deliberative Democracy in the Department of Communication.

Fishkin, the Janet M. Peck Chair in International Communication, is the inventor of Deliberative Polling, commonly described as "polling with a human face." The professor argues that the mechanism, which he has trademarked, gives a more accurate picture of what the public would think if it were more engaged and informed.

"The basic problem is pervasive," he said. "How do you consult the public under conditions where they can be effectively motivated to think about the issues? We're all suffering from unrepresentative, self-selected samples intensely speaking for the rest of us. Just look at the pseudo town meetings that candidates hold; the self-selected voting on websites. Real polling, done well, represents everybody but under conditions where people hardly think beyond a sound bite."

Since 1988, when Fishkin dreamed up the framework for such a process during a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS), more than 22 Deliberative Polls

have been held in England, Australia, Denmark, Bulgaria and the United States. Fishkin argues that the mechanism is particularly suitable for topics about which the public may have little knowledge, or complex policy issues involving alternative solutions.

"Knowledge makes a difference," Fishkin said. "Hearing the alternative arguments makes a difference. The public is very smart if you give them a chance. Nobody is smart enough to know what to do if they don't know what they're talking about."

On Saturday, Oct. 16, Fishkin will have a chance to prove his point during a nationwide event dubbed "Deliberation Day." About 1,800 people will gather in 17 cities across the country to discuss national and economic security—two key issues in this year's presidential campaign. After a baseline poll is taken, the nationally representative groups will meet with political experts, read balanced briefing materials and deliberate among themselves. At the end of the day, the groups will be polled to gauge how their views have changed.

The Public Broadcasting Service will showcase the event in a televised special called "Time to Choose," produced by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, to be aired before the Nov. 2 presidential election. Deliberation Day is part of a broader PBS effort called "By the People: America in the World," which is funded in part by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Dan Werner, president of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, has supported Fishkin's projects since 1996, when the energetic professor convinced PBS, the University of Texas and the University of Chicago to hold a "National Issues Convention." That event brought 459 randomly selected participants to Austin, Texas, to discuss the economy, the state of the family and America's role in the post-Cold War world. After deliberating for three days, participants agreed, for example, that the United States should spend more on foreign aid and that divorce should be harder to obtain.

According to Werner, Deliberative Polling offers an important perspective on the core values of democracy. "We never talk to strangers about politics," he said. "At these events, everybody from the richest to the poorest comes away from it jazzed." The effort has helped start a much-needed conversation among citizens, he said. "It's a process, not a thing. All you can do is move the problem a little bit."

Not everyone is convinced. Political science Professor Samuel Popkin, a leading elections expert at the University of California-San Diego, supports the idea of deliberation but questions Fishkin's take on the process. "I'm very skeptical of the value of the Ackerman-Fishkin random sample of deliberative democracy," he said, referring to Yale University Professor Bruce Ackerman, Fishkin's longtime colleague. "The idea of learning something when people deliberate is good. But it's troubling to me that you're doing it so neutrally that it doesn't matter who the deliberator is. Are Jim and Bruce the self-appointed lords of the neutral? I can imagine a lot of people having a lot of other ideas." Robert Bork, the conservative judge, and Ackerman, have both been Yale law professors, he noted. "Are they the same neutral? There is no such thing as a neutral agenda. One person's deliberation is another person's manipulation." Popkin is a CASBS fellow this year.

In addition to hosting Popkin, CASBS played a role in bringing Fishkin to Stanford from the University of Texas-Austin, where he and his wife, English Professor Shelley Fisher Fishkin, taught for 18 years. In 2001-02, Jim Fishkin headed a project at CASBS on deliberative public opinion that involved weekly discussions with Department of Communication Chair Shanto Iyengar, Stanford political science Professor Paul Sniderman and Robert Luskin, a colleague from Texas. "Unbeknownst to me, Shanto was the head of a search committee for a chair [at Stanford], and he saw that there was a fit," Fishkin said. "It was all serendipitous."

In fact, Iyengar said, it was tough to convince faculty members to back Fishkin because his doctorates are in philosophy and political science, not in communication. "But our department is interdisciplinary and he added to that mix—he straddles the social sciences and philosophy," Iyengar said. "Because his credentials were so strong, we were able to win the department over."

While Fishkin was being considered, the English Department was involved in a search for a 19th-century American literature scholar. Fishkin's wife, an expert on Mark Twain, was mentioned as a candidate. "They ended up offering her a position and she's very happy here," he said. "It was sort of a match made in heaven."

In addition to the fact that Stanford was the birthplace of Deliberative Polling, Fishkin was drawn by the university's location in Silicon Valley. Since mid-September, Stanford has hosted weekly "virtual" meetings of hundreds of people along the same lines as the Oct. 16 Deliberation Day gatherings. Knowledge Networks, a Menlo Park research firm that worked with the university last year to hold the first-ever online Deliberative Poll, recruited the participants, 20 percent of whom were given computers to ensure the poll was not skewed by a digital divide. The online poll results will be announced at the same time as the PBS broadcast. Both Fishkin and Iyengar say the Internet offers Deliberative Polling the greatest chance for long-term success because it is cheap and flexible.

Fishkin never expected that his ivory tower research would touch the gritty world of politics. "I think, by dumb luck, I've blundered upon an intersection of political theory, political science and a contribution to the public dialogue," he said. The professor credits his wife's early career for giving him glimpses into life beyond academia. From 1971 to 1984, Shelley Fisher Fishkin administered the Poynter Journalism and Chubb fellowships at Yale, programs that bring prominent journalists and politicians to campus for close-up meetings with students. "I got a sense from that about how the media works," Fishkin said. "Politicians couldn't just answer with a sound bite because they were there for several days, so the dialogue became more revealing."

Following Fishkin's *eureka* moment about deliberative democracy at CASBS in 1988, he published a related article in *The Atlantic* and forgot about it. A couple years later, Fishkin shared his idea with a friend who told him it could work on television. In 1991, Richard Richter, an executive at WETA, a Washington, D.C., public broadcasting station, told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "For us, Jim's proposal was an answer to our prayers. PBS was beginning to talk about a series of new programs to give our coverage of the campaign more depth, and Jim walked in off the street. Frankly, I was surprised. You seldom get wonderful ideas

that way-and seldom from ivory tower academics."

For the next year, Fishkin worked with WETA to set up a National Issues Convention in January 1992. However, the Gulf War intervened and the project ran into financial problems and was canceled, he said. In frustration, Fishkin went to England and successfully organized polls with the television network Channel Four on hot-button issues such as crime, Britain and the European Union, and the monarchy. With a working prototype in place, Fishkin was able to convince his U.S. backers to support the 1996 National Issues Convention. Since then, the formula has been widely adopted for a range of local and national issues at home and abroad. (For details, go to <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/summary/>.)

According to Fishkin, criticism of Deliberative Polling has come largely from groups such as the Roper Center that are heavily invested in conventional public opinion polls. The January/February 2004 issue of *Legal Affairs* features an article by Fishkin and Ackerman that proposes replacing Presidents' Day with a new national holiday called Deliberation Day-also the title of their new book. The magazine includes pieces by two critics-Richard Posner, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit, and Arthur Lupia, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan-who argue against the process.

Iyengar concedes that Deliberative Polling is a controversial subject among political scientists. "The problem with deliberative democracy is that it's very difficult to implement," he said. "It's counter-factual-that means it can never actually happen. But that doesn't mean it's not worth studying."

Iyengar is convinced the Internet will help move deliberative democracy closer to reality. One day, perhaps as soon as three or four years from now, home computers will be as commonplace as telephones, he said.

Fishkin plans to be ready. "We want to position this for the period when we can have a cost-efficient alternative to Gallup that is deliberative and thoughtful," he said. "I think this is important in terms of how to improve democratic practice."

