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Moderator: Caby Verzosa, the World Bank

James Fishkin: I'm interested in what I call deliberative polling, which is different from conventional public opinion polling. I'm interested in it because I'm interested in a better form of democracy. I said better in a sense that most of the time the public is usually not well informed on complex policy issues. Social scientists have a name for that: "Rational Ignorance". If I got one vote in millions why should I pay a lot of attention. All of us are trying to do our jobs or survive. Secondly, many of the opinions reported in polls don't exist. They are phantom opinions. That is, people don't like to say they don't know, that they almost randomly choose a response. Thirdly, even if people do have an opinion, usually it's an impression of sound bites and headlines or an impression of something they heard from somebody else they talked to, but usually people only talk to people like themselves. So they never really get a chance, or have an occasion, or have reason to consider competing arguments.

So I ask myself the question, what would public opinion be like if people really had a good chance to consider the issues and why don't we do that as a social science experiment, but then make it available to policy makers, broadcast the results, make it available to the press in a transparent and visible way and see then if we can create an occasion or opportunity for people to implement the results, or as some policy makers have told me, create cover to do the right thing.

Caby Verzosa: These are very interesting ideas, can you tell us a little about this methodology deliberative polling?

James: It begins with an ordinary poll, as good a scientific sample we can get. So right there we distinguish it from just open meetings, participatory budgeting as it has been done in some places or any self-selected group. So we get a scientific sample, we give them a survey of the conventional sort, and then we invite them to come to an event, sometimes one day, two days, three days. Local, regional, national, it depends on the context. We have carefully balanced transparent briefing materials about the issue. In writing, sometimes if people are less literate, we have a video version of it that we show on arrival. In China, we did one project where 12 percent of the participants were illiterate, but it didn't matter, they learned and changed just like everybody else through the discussions.

Caby: And these discussions were facilitated by an expert?

James: No, we randomly assigned participants to small groups and then we have moderators who are trained not to show their own point of view, but to make sure that everybody talks and no one dominates the discussion. In China, we trained local school teachers to do this. We did it very cheaply in a school building on the weekends, so it wasn't expensive. But in the small groups, they discuss the issues, and they clarify key questions that they ask of competing panels of experts or policymakers.

The questions are brought from the small groups to the plenary session and once they learn that the experts disagree and offer different answers, then that empowers them to think for themselves. We alternate the small group discussions in the plenary sessions for one day or two days or more and then at the end of the process, they take the same questionnaire that they did at the very beginning and we see the changes of opinion, which are always very large. We also have information questions so we can show that the people became more informed, and we actually can show that the people who became more informed changed their opinions.