

Deliberative democracy

Ancient Athens online

Democracy is about discussion, not just voting

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REFLECTION and representation are not an easy fit. For an individual voter, being well-informed about every twist of public policy is an irrational use of time. But leaving a self-selecting elite of wonks and careerists in charge of policy-making is unappealing. In ancient Athens, which invented both democracy and the dilemma, a machine called a kleroterion picked a random 500 people to make policy from the 50,000-odd polity. The jury excluded women and slaves and the decisions it reached were sometimes dodgy (condemning Socrates was probably a mistake). But the approach is returning in a modern guise, under the label of "deliberative democracy".

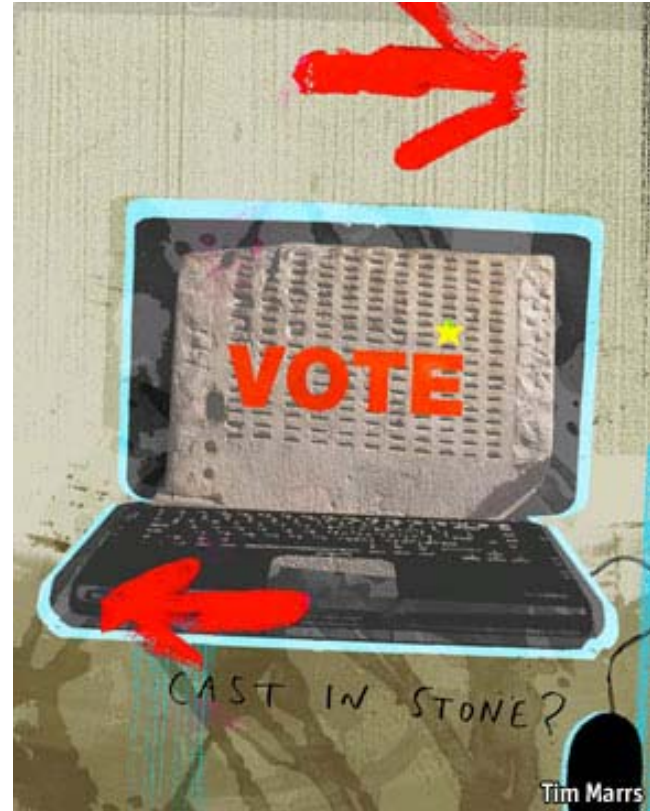
A leading practitioner is James Fishkin of Stanford University. He starts by canvassing views from a large sample of people. Then a smaller subset (normally around 300-strong) receives briefing materials from the opposing advocacy groups.

Moderators lead small group discussions which then draw up questions for experts and policymakers. If the samples are statistically representative, that should, so goes the theory, give a credible picture of what the entire population would think, were it as well-informed.

Such polls have covered aboriginal rights in Australia and traffic jams in La Plata. A Chinese jury is looking at land rights. In Fujisawa in Japan a poll on local-government planning will start in August.

Discussions and briefing often lead to a shift away from populist viewpoints. In a recent poll in Britain support for making party manifesto promises legally binding plunged from 41% to 18%. In recession-hit Michigan a discussion raised support for bigger taxes (from 27% to 45% for income tax, for example). By contrast, support for cuts in corporate taxes rocketed 27 points to 67%: the more people thought about the issue, the more they wanted a better business environment and a lower deficit. But some results are discomfiting (at least for those with this newspaper's views). A pan-European poll in October 2007 found that support for European Union membership for Turkey and Ukraine fell by a fifth as the discussion progressed.

Deliberation counts for something, with a statistically significant shift in opinion on three out of four questions, and the biggest changes coming from those whose gains in knowledge are the greatest. The internet means that the discussion no longer needs to be face-to-face, though it involves fixes to ensure



a statistically fair proportion of the unwebbed population is included. But being online can cut costs by as much as 90%. Mr Fishkin recalls that the first America-wide deliberative poll, in 1996, required airline sponsorship to fly participants to the venue in Austin, Texas.

Trademarking the methodology of a deliberative poll (as Mr Fishkin has done) may be a form of quality control. Even so the polls risk remaining an interesting gimmick, rather than a substitute for the messy business of elections, referendums and media campaigns: unless, that is, their conclusions have real bite.

But some signs suggest this is happening. In 2007 the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok), then in opposition, used deliberative polling to select its mayoral candidate for the Athenian district of Marousi (in the real election, he lost). Traditionalists looked in vain for the kleroterion, however: a personal computer drew the sample instead. In 2005 the local authorities in Zeguo, China, used the technique to apportion a 40m yuan (\$5.9m) infrastructure budget. In 2008 the approach was extended to the township's entire kitty. On May 10th the Central Party School, a hatchery for Beijing's top cadres, will start a pow-wow on the theory and practice of deliberative democracy. In a country where rulers are edgy about the masses getting too much power, the carefully channelled discussions of a deliberative poll could prove a useful safety valve.

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