



Thursday, Sep. 02, 2010

## How Can a Democracy Solve Tough Problems?

By Joe Klein

If you asked me, what's the most disappointing thing Barack Obama has done as President? I'd say, He appointed a "blue-ribbon" commission to study the federal deficit. I mean, how boring and worthy and worthless! Such commissions are an instant admission of defeat: We lack the political will to deal with (insert long-term crisis here), so we're appointing a blue-ribbon commission to study it. The process is inevitable, especially in these days of rising partisan contentiousness. A consensus won't be reached on the really tough issues. A high-minded, peripheral idea or two may emerge — frosting on a soap bubble — and then evaporate ... or worse, actually be implemented, as was the 9/11 commission's foolishly redundant suggestion of a Directorate of National Intelligence (DNI), plopped atop the CIA and military spook agencies. No doubt yet another commission will eventually be appointed to study abolishing the DNI.

But what if there were a machine, a magical contraption that could take the process of making tough decisions in a democracy, shake it up, dramatize it and make it both credible and conclusive? As it happens, the ancient Athenians had one. It was called the *kleroterion*, and it worked something like a bingo-ball selector. Each citizen — free males only, of course — had an identity token; several hundred were picked randomly every day and delegated to make major decisions for the polis. But that couldn't happen now, could it? Most of our decisions are too complicated and technical for mere civilians to make, aren't they? ([See the top 10 Obama backlash moments.](#))

Actually, the Chinese coastal district of Zeguo (pop. 120,000) has its very own *kleroterion*, which makes all its budget decisions. The technology has been updated: the *kleroterion* is a team led by Stanford professor James Fishkin. Each year, 175 people are scientifically selected to reflect the general population. They are polled once on the major decisions they'll be facing. Then they are given a briefing on those issues, prepared by experts with conflicting views. Then they meet in small groups and come up with questions for the experts — issues they want further clarified. Then they meet together in plenary session to listen to the experts' response and have a more general discussion. The process of small meetings and plenary is repeated once more. A final poll is taken, and the budget priorities of the assembly are made known and adopted by the local government. It takes three days to do this. The process has grown over five years, from a deliberation over public works (new sewage-treatment plants were favored over road-building) to the whole budget shebang. By most accounts it has succeeded brilliantly, even though the participants are not very sophisticated: 60% are farmers. The Chinese government is moving toward expanding it into other districts.

"The public is very smart if you give it a chance," says Fishkin, 62, who has been conducting experiments in what he calls "deliberative democracy" for nearly 20 years now. "If people think their voice actually matters, they'll do the hard work, really study their briefing books, ask the experts smart questions and then make tough decisions. When they hear the experts disagreeing, they're forced to think for themselves. About 70% change their minds in the process." Fishkin has done this on several continents and in many countries, including the U.S. In Texas, he ran a deliberative-democracy process for a consortium of utilities, from 1996 to 2007, which gradually transformed the state from last to first in the use of wind power. "Over that time, the percentage of people — and these were stakeholders, utility customers — willing to pay more for wind went from 54% to 84%," he says. (He

also ran a "National Issues Convention" for public television in 1996.) ([See the best viral campaign ads of 2010.](#))

Given all the noise afflicting the country, this might be a productive moment for deliberative democracy. "It works best when you have hard choices," Fishkin says. "Despite what you see and read, this is not a nation of extremists. What you see on TV, and in most polling, is an impersonation of public opinion. The actual public isn't really like that, especially when it is given something more than sound bites and distorted political messaging. If you give people real choices and real consequences, they will make real decisions." ([Comment on this story.](#))

So why doesn't Obama transform his blue-ribbon budget commission into a deliberative-democracy exercise? Let his 18 commissioners — who range from a conservative budget wonk like Congressman Paul Ryan to former Service Employees union leader Andy Stern — prepare a briefing paper for 500 Americans selected by Fishkin's team and then make themselves available for close questioning. Let them lay out the most vexing budget choices we face. Let the whole process be televised. It doesn't have to be binding. I'll bet the *kleroterion* would produce results bolder and more credible than anything Obama's commission will recommend. "People are tired of the elites telling them what to do," says Fishkin. Perhaps it's time to turn that process upside down.

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