

Britain Experiments with the Deliberative Poll

By James S. Fishkin

A new form of opinion polling was born on national television in Britain on May 8, 1994. The world's first "deliberative opinion poll," broadcast by Channel 4, produced by Granada Television, and co-sponsored by *The Independent*, is unlike any poll or survey ever conducted.¹ Ordinary polls offer a snapshot of what the public is thinking, regardless of whether the public is engaged or paying much attention. A deliberative poll attempts to model what the public *would* think, if it had a better opportunity to consider the questions.

The idea is simple. Take a national random sample of the electorate and transport it from all over the country to one place. Immerse the sample in the issues, with carefully balanced briefing materials, intensive discussions in small groups, and questions to competing experts and politicians. At the end of several days working through the issues, face to face, poll the participants in detail. The resulting survey is a representation of the considered judgments of the public—the views the entire country would come to if it had the same opportunity to behave more like ideal citizens immersed in the issues for an extended period.

The deliberative poll is not meant as a replacement for surveys. Its aspirations are neither descriptive nor predictive. Rather, they are prescriptive. The deliberative poll has a recommending force: these are the conclusions the people would reach if they were better informed and had the same opportunities for intensive face-to-face discussions as the members of the sample did.

A sample of 869 citizens was randomly chosen from the electoral register by Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), an independent research institute based in London. This sample is highly representative of the entire country in age, class, geographical representation, gender,

education and other important dimensions. After sample selection, we conducted a baseline survey which provides an excellent picture of the public's attitudes on the issue in question: "Rising Crime: What Can We Do About It?" But this baseline survey was not the deliberative poll. It was only the beginning of the process.

The actual test of the idea occurred in Manchester, England, April 15-17 at the Granada Television Studio. Each of the 869 participants was invited to the Manchester event after completing the baseline survey. The 302 who accepted and completed the weekend in Manchester were, in every important respect, indistinguishable from the 869 who took the baseline survey. In terms of class, education, race, gender, geography, the weekend microcosm was as fully representative of the entire country as the baseline survey.

Answering the Critics

Some critics had contended that neither women nor parents with young children would participate. However, both surveys had 50% men, 50% women. Additionally, parents with children were not under-represented: for both the baseline and weekend samples those with one child under 18 were identical (17%). In the baseline sample 21% reported having two or more children under 18, where the deliberative figure was 22%. Another concern was that either the old or the young would be seriously under-represented. Once again, the 302 are virtually indistinguishable from the 869 in terms of age. Perhaps the most persistent concern was that we would get a disproportionate share of those who were politically informed. We assessed this both with specific knowledge questions and with information on newspaper readership. On both counts, we got a matched microcosm to come to Manchester.

The last criticism to be addressed here was that participants in the poll would be precisely the people who were more interested in the specific issue—the people who were more worried about crime.² However, in both the national and weekend surveys only 21% reported that crime was a big worry. Those responding crime was not a worry at all—28% of the baseline survey versus 27% of the weekend group.

On other substantive questions about crime, the weekend sample turned out to be consistent with the national mood. Both groups thought an effective means to reducing crime would be stiffer sentences (77%). "Reducing unemployment" as an effective measure achieved 81% response nationally versus 82% in Manchester.

As a starting point, the weekend sample was an almost perfect representation of the nation gathered together in a single place. The challenge for the experiment was whether they would change over the course of the weekend. Of course, it is probable that they had already begun changing from the moment they received our invitation. Knowing that they would be on national television, they probably began discussing the topic with family and friends, read newspapers and listened to the media with more care, and probably read the briefing materials we sent them to prepare for the event. In all these ways their views became unrepresentative of public opinion in the conventional sense. But those views also became representative in a new and different sense. They became representative of the views the entire country would come to if it were populated by ideal citizens, by people who took the same opportunity as the members of our sample did, to engage and debate the issues over an extended period. In short, their new, considered judgments represented what the public would think about an issue, if it actually had the opportunity to do so.

The Outcome

As we theorized, there were a number of significant changes in the 302 comparing the "after" with the "before" (baseline) survey. First, the respondents showed an increased sense of the limitations of prison as a tool for fighting crime. Support for "sending more offenders to prison" as an "effective way of preventing crime" went down 19 points from 57 to 38%. Support for the notion that "the courts should send fewer people to prison" went up 15 points from 30 to 45%. Support for "stiffer sentences generally" as an effective way of fighting crime went down 13 points from 77 to 64%.

A second major change was an increased willingness to support alternatives to prison, particularly for juvenile offenders. For example, the percentage strongly *against* sending a first time burglar, aged 16, to an ordinary prison went up from 33 to 49%. The percentage agreeing that such a juvenile should receive a strict warning but otherwise be left to the parents to sort out went up from 49 to 63%. For "criminals who are not a big threat to society," the percentage favoring compulsory training and counseling went up from 49 to 63%. There was also a drop in the focus on punishing rather than reforming criminals. For the question: "If the government had to choose, it should concentrate more on punishing criminals or it should concentrate more on trying to reform criminals" the percentage choosing punishment went down from 55 to 45%.

Perhaps even more dramatic, respondents showed an increased sensitivity to the procedural rights of defendants. For example, the percentage strongly *disagreeing* that the police should sometimes be able to "bend the rules" in order to get a conviction went up from 36 to 46%. The percentage believing it is "worse to convict an innocent person" than "to let a guilty person go free" rose from 60 to 70%. On the question, "If a suspect remains silent under police questioning this should count against them in court" the percentage agreeing went down 16 points, from 57 to 41%. The percentage agreeing that "suspects should have the right to remain silent under police questioning" went up from 36 to 49%.

Despite this increased sensitivity to the procedural rights of defendants, the respondents remained tough on crime. The percentage agreeing that "the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence for some crimes" remained unchanged at 68% and the percentage agreeing that "prison life should be made tougher and more unpleasant" also remained unchanged at 71%. The respondents showed a movement towards family values as a strategy for dealing with crime. In terms of dealing with the root causes of crime, there was an increase of 11 points (from 66 to 77%) in agreement that "a very effective way to help prevent crime" is to "teach children the difference between right and wrong." There was a similar change in support, from 54 to 65%, in the notion that "parents spending more time with their children" is a "very effective way

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to help prevent crime."

It is worth noting that these results are all net change. Many more respondents changed than indicated by these figures because on many questions change in one direction was canceled out by change in the other. For example, on "the courts should treat suspects as innocent until proved guilty" there was virtually no net change, but only about half (46%) gave the same answer both times.

Who Changed?

There was change in all groups, but the most dramatic was in the more educated. In response to the claim that stiffer sentences are not effective, the most educated increased agreement by 16% where the less educated only increased by 5%. Favorable opinions to send only hardened criminals to prison rose by 20% for the more educated and again only rose 5% for the less educated.

The fact that it was the educated who

were more apt to change says something about the process. We strived to create a deliberative process where the respondents were expected to weigh competing arguments. The more educated seem to have been more prepared to do that, although there was change across all socio-economic categories. The fact that the more educated changed most suggests we were not "brain-washing" the participants. If this were the case the less educated would probably have been more easily influenced. Instead, the process was one of deliberation.

Some critics have argued that interaction in small groups must mean that the more educated and articulate will unduly influence the process. First, it should be noted that we collected the responses through confidential questionnaires, so participants would not feel social pressure in giving their private, considered judgments. Second, the moderators were trained to involve each person in the discussion, and to make sure that no individuals dominated.³ Third, it should be remembered what we are trying to accomplish. If, somehow, the entire society were magically transformed so that everyone would be as engaged by the issues as the participants in our sample, then there would also be opinion leadership and cases where more informed and articulate people would be more influential. The moderators and the deliberative atmosphere kept such influence within limits, but it could not, and need not, be eliminated entirely.

Why Deliberative Polls?

The deliberative poll responds to the two main problems which afflict the poll-driven, sound-bite version of televised democracy that has spread around the world. Those two problems are the "rational ignorance" of ordinary citizens and the tendency of polls to report "non-attitudes" or pseudo-opinions. If I have one vote in millions, why should I spend a lot of time and effort sorting through complex public policy alternatives? My individual vote, my individual opinion, won't make any significant difference. In that sense, as the economist Anthony Downs argued years ago, it is "rational" for individual citizens to avoid investing a lot of effort in becoming

less ignorant.⁴ However, if I am part of a sample of a few hundred in a nationally televised deliberative poll, I have a real incentive to invest a lot of time and effort attempting to understand the issues. I have the opportunity to make those opinions count when they will make a difference in a highly visible event. Of course, just by broadcasting and publishing the results, we will not impart wisdom to the entire mass public. But we will at least inform citizens around the country of the conclusions they would collectively arrive at if they were seriously engaged by the issues.

It is now widely accepted that many of the “opinions” reported by polls and surveys are “non-attitudes” or pseudo-opinions.⁵ Respondents are asked questions about which they have no knowledge, and no settled opinion. Therefore, instead of making informed judgments, they simply choose one of the alternatives offered. In effect, they make up an opinion on the spot. The random volatility of these opinions over time is one of the clues to the lack of thought that has gone into them. Yet these pseudo-opinions are reported solemnly by the media as if they were firm and settled. As the media disseminate those views, they take on an additional life of their own. As the late V.O. Key argued, television and polling together operate as a kind of echo chamber.⁶ Poll results are broadcast, citizens have vague impressions of the results and bounce them back in future polls. Very little thinking is going on in this process. The aspiration of the deliberative poll is to insert a real voice of the people, its considered judgments, into the echo chamber of-

fered by the media.

Imagine what would happen if the deliberative poll were inserted into the beginning of the American presidential selection process. The two defining features of the deliberative poll, that it is representative and deliberative, would offer a dramatically different start to the process, a new version of the “invisible primary,” the period before the first official events when momentum for both issues and candidacies is born.

Rather than small, self-selected electorates in unrepresentative states we would have a national-random sample. Rather than sound-bite campaigning or the ritual of endlessly repeated stump speeches, we would get a deliberative and in-depth examination of the candidates and the issues at the moment when it could make a difference—the beginning.

The British have already announced that they will make the deliberative poll the centerpiece of one network’s television coverage of their next General Election.⁷ With luck, the process they have pioneered may be used to bring deliberative democracy to our next venture in presidential selection. The hope is that we can use the two technologies, polling and television, that have, thus far, combined to give us a superficial form of mass democracy. Through survey research, we can select the sample and formulate and tabulate the questions. Through television, we can attract the citizens and the candidates and disseminate the results. The result may be a new

method for bringing power to the people, but under conditions where the people can think about the power they are to exercise.

Endnotes:

¹ For a detailed discussion of the deliberative opinion poll see my *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

² See for example, comments of Robert Worcester on the deliberative poll on the NBC Nightly News, May 7, 1994.

³ For an excellent summary of the approach of the National Issues Forums in facilitating small group discussion of issues, see the recent book by David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

⁵ See Philip E. Converse, “Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue,” in Edward R. Tufté, ed., *The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1970). See also Russell Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁶ V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 2.

⁷ “Channel 4 to Introduce Radical Polling Method,” *Broadcast* (May 6, 1994), p. 3.

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