Broadcasts of Deliberative Polls: Aspirations and Effects

JAMES S. FISHKIN AND ROBERT C. LUSKIN*

Every face-to-face Deliberative Poll (DP) to date has been the subject of a television broadcast. We consider these broadcasts a helpful adjunct to the design – a way of motivating both the random sample and the policy experts and policy makers to attend, of educating the broader public about the issues, and, perhaps, of nudging public opinion in the direction of the results. In ‘Rickety Bridges’, John Parkinson examines just one of these broadcasts, Channel 4’s on the DP on the future of Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) in 1998. Applying his coding of the contents to other DP broadcasts might or might not yield similar results, but we are happy to assume, for argument’s sake, that it would. If DP broadcasts are generally doing what he describes the NHS DP broadcast as doing, they are doing pretty well, at least as far as the distribution of coverage is concerned. It is Parkinson’s notion of what they should be doing that is mistaken. As a result, his critique is fundamentally misguided.

THE AIMS OF DP BROADCASTS

Parkinson’s critique rests on an inappropriate standard. His central claim is that Channel 4’s broadcast of the NHS DP did not replicate the participants’ experience. Of course it did not. No broadcast could ever give viewers the same experience they would have if they were actually part of the DP’s on-site, weekend-long deliberations. The broadcast in that case would have to be weekend-long, and there would actually have to be multiple broadcasts – as many as there are participants – since every participant’s experience is different. Indeed, there would remain some inaccuracy even then, since no viewer is exactly the same or would therefore have exactly the same experiences as any participant. This is not what DP broadcasts can, should or were ever intended to do.

DPs serve different functions for their participants and the viewing public. The participants, a random sample of the relevant population, are provided with information and the opportunity and incentive to absorb, discuss and think about it. They spend a weekend deliberating on-site and a much longer period between their initial recruitment and their arrival on-site deliberating more casually in anticipation. They talk about the issues with friends, family and colleagues, pay heightened attention to relevant media accounts, and in some cases even go online or to the library to do research. On-site, they discuss the issues in randomly assigned, moderator-led small groups and put questions to panels of policy experts and policy makers. The object is to harvest their more considered opinions.

* Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University; and Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin.

1 A few recent Deliberative Polls were conducted online. They have not generally been broadcast, although the results from the most recent one, about the 2004 presidential election, were included in a national television broadcast on PBS. For details, see http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/2004/onlinedp-release.pdf.

2 Parkinson questions the effect on recruitment, citing David Denver, Gordon Hands and Bill Jones’s strangely titled ‘Fishkin and the Deliberative Poll’, Political Communication, 12 (1995), 147–56, which was actually about the Granada 500, which we had nothing to do with, was not a Deliberative Poll, and involved non-random sampling.

3 Parkinson, ‘Rickety Bridges’, this issue, pp. 175–83.
The experience of watching a television broadcast is far less involving. It conveys far less information and stirs far less thought. It occasions no anticipatory learning, thinking or discussion. The people who watch, moreover, are far from a random sample. They are disproportionately well educated and interested in and knowledgeable about both politics generally and the particular issues the DP and thus the programme are about. We do not expect mere viewers to take away remotely as much as the participants do.

Thus our aspiration for DP broadcasts has never been Parkinson’s. More realistically, we have hoped merely (a) to raise viewers’ levels of interest, thought and information, recognizing that because the intervention is much weaker, they will not gain remotely what the DP participants do, and (b) to provide some simple cues that may help nudge viewers’ (and perhaps the broader public’s) opinions in the direction of the DP results, and (c) to elevate policy makers’ awareness of the results.

From this more appropriate perspective, Channel 4 did rather well. The NHS broadcast, like other DP broadcasts, focused on the policy background, the DP process and the collective results. All three are important. The policy background – the issues, facts and arguments – is what viewers need to know to think through the issues themselves. The results, above all the post-deliberation distributions of opinion and pre- to post-deliberation changes of opinion, convey a sense of what more considered opinions would be like. Policy makers, as we argue below, both should be and frequently are interested in that. Viewers – and others who read or hear about them secondhand – may take the results as a statistical cue, suggesting what they themselves might think if they knew and thought more about the issues. The process is what gives the results their ‘recommending force’.

Parkinson’s own content coding, more closely examined, supports this positive evaluation. Much of what the ‘compère’ (the television presenter Sheena MacDonald) did was to describe the issues and the pre-deliberation results. The experts and politicians, shown answering questions from the sample, were also filling in the policy background. The interviews with Social and Community Planning and Research (SCPR) present the process and results. That the small group excerpts comprise a smaller portion of the broadcast than the small group interactions do of the DP experience is neither surprising nor regrettable. The small group discussions are only part of the process, and the policy background and results also need airing. In short, the NHS DP broadcast was doing what it was supposed to do.

DP BROADCASTING FROM THE BROADCASTER’S PERSPECTIVE

Given that the object is not to replicate the participants’ experiences, there may be less tension between the goals of Deliberative Polling and the needs of broadcast organizations than Parkinson suggests. In fact, all the evidence points that way.

Parkinson’s history of the Channel 4 series is seriously misleading. Channel 4 did not decide after the NHS DP that it would be the last they would do. On the contrary, they subsequently sponsored the development stage exploration of a Europe-wide Deliberative Poll, on which they had Granada Television working with Fishkin for nearly two years. If they had thought the NHS DP unsuccessful, they would scarcely have paid for the development of a grander project of the same sort. One may similarly ask why, if the British DPs had generally made such unsatisfactory television, Channel 4 would have sponsored and broadcast one a year for five years. They cost a lot and took up a lot

4 Channel 4 had editorial control over the broadcast, while we, in collaboration with Roger Jowell and SCPR (now the National Centre for Social Research) brought the microcosm into being and conducted the research.

5 The effort eventually foundered on our inability to get access to the European Parliament building as the appropriate television site.

6 We are grateful to Channel 4, and particularly to the former commissioning editor David Lloyd, for their support.
of airtime. On Parkinson’s view, Channel 4 must be awfully slow learners. We do not doubt the authenticity of Parkinson’s quotes, but there is usually some variety of opinion within any large organization, and the views quoted clearly failed to carry the day. They may also reflect a degree of cognitive retrofitting, to square with Channel 4’s not having done any DPs in the past several years. In any case, the reason Channel 4’s interest eventually waned was simply a personnel change. A succession of new chief executives and a new commissioning editor brought new priorities.

It is also relevant that other broadcast organizations in five countries have continued to produce broadcasts based on DPs. These include the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States (twenty-eight separate broadcasts by a conservative count), Danish Broadcasting in Denmark, B-TV in Bulgaria, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) (two separate broadcasts), and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Why would they have done so if Deliberative Polling is so ‘difficult to turn into successful narrative for television’?  

POLICY EFFECTS

Parkinson’s neglect of other DPs becomes important when he moves beyond his data to argue that the NHS DP had no effect on policy and to imply that Deliberative Polling more generally does not. The particular is probably right, but the generalization wrong. The NHS DP focused on various sorts of rationing as a means of confronting difficult choices in the distribution of medical care. But even after deliberating, the participants were reluctant to confront the inevitability of some kind of rationing. They favoured giving the NHS more money but did not endorse any clear departure from current policy. Thus it is hardly surprising that in this case there was little clear policy impact.

Other DPs, however, have had major policy effects. Between 1996 and 1998 we conducted a series of eight Deliberative Polls for electric utility companies in the state of Texas on the subject of how best to meet their service areas’ electricity needs. The utilities were then regulated monopolies, supervised by the Texas Public Utilities Commission (PUC), which took a great interest in the DP project, making it clear to the companies that they would be expected to follow the results. With surprising uniformity across the eight events, the participants came to favour a turn towards greener energy, even if they had to pay more for it. The PUC and thus the utilities listened, and Texas is now a world leader in renewable energy as a direct result.  

This episode shows not only that DPs can and do have policy effects but that they can and do have them independent of television. All these events were locally televised, but the policy effect came through direct transmission of the results to interested decision makers, at both the utilities and the PUC. It is impossible to know how common this sort of direct effect will ultimately prove, but a good many non-elected decision makers we have spoken with are interested in knowing what the public would think if they thought and knew more. Since the policies the public would favour under full information constitute a plausible component of the public interest, Deliberative Polling may be useful to any decision maker charged with acting in the public interest. Even legislators, moreover, may be interested in the public’s more considered opinions on those issues (a sizeable

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7 Ten of these broadcasts were based on full-scale Deliberative Polls, and eighteen based on abbreviated local versions, many co-ordinated on the same day for ‘PBS Deliberation Day’ in October 2004.
8 Parkinson, p. 182. There is a certain inconsistency in Parkinson’s arguing on the one hand that broadcasters’ wanting to produce good television inevitably prevents broadcasts from serving the needs of Deliberative Polling and on the other hand that the Channel 4 broadcasts made bad television because they served the needs of Deliberative Polling.
majority) to which it is normally oblivious and on which they consequently have wide latitude. A good many legislators with whom we have spoken have said as much.

But what of indirect effects, through actual public opinion, to which policy makers also often respond? The effects on public opinion may be termed education and statistical cueing (corresponding to functions (a) and (b) above). Education is a matter of increasing knowledge and reflection, statistical cueing a matter of providing signposts that even the ignorant and irreflective can use. The statistical cues are the post-deliberation distribution of opinion and the difference between the pre- and post-deliberation distributions. The DP’s statistical cueing is thus of a piece with similar effects of ordinary polls – the sort of feedback V. O. Key meant to suggest with his image of an ‘echo chamber’. The difference is that the cues from Deliberative Polling are normatively superior, reflecting not just what the public thinks when it is not thinking and does not know much, but rather what it would think, if it thought and knew a good deal more.

These effects work through the media but do not absolutely require television. Newspaper coverage may serve almost as well, television and newspapers still better. And DPs have generally received considerable newspaper coverage. In this connection, too, Parkinson’s focus on the NHS DP misleads him. For example, the 1996 National Issues Convention in the United States at the beginning of the presidential election season received more than 500 newspaper articles. The DP in Australia before the referendum on making Australia a republic, the DP in Denmark before the referendum on adopting the euro, and the DP on crime in Bulgaria all received substantial print coverage both about process and results.

We do not suppose these effects to be more than small, although the magnitude will undoubtedly depend on the quantity and quality of media accounts, the nature of the issue and, perhaps nonlinearly, the force of the statistical cue (the distance between the mean post-deliberation sample opinion and the mean existing public opinion). The potential for statistical cueing is probably greatest where the issue is an election and the choices thus discrete, relatively few and well defined, and perhaps particularly great where the election is a referendum or some other non-partisan affair, like party primaries in the United States.

NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Having contended that Deliberative Polling does sometimes have policy effects, we must add that they figure to be to the good. The direct effects help implement basic democratic principles. Democracy, by definition, entails responsiveness to popular majorities – as manifested in ordinary polls as well as elections and referendums. But a majority’s authenticity also matters. From a normative perspective, policy makers should want to know what the public does think but should want to know still more what it would think if it thought and knew more. The results are an indication of collective informed consent – of the policies the public would agree to if it really considered the facts and the competing arguments that embody them.

The indirect effects may be seen as a matter of making real-world majorities more authentic. The value of ‘education’ is obvious. The facts and competing arguments in broadcast and print coverage may help individual viewers and readers approach their considered or ‘full-information’ policy positions.

The value of statistical cueing is less obvious. For any given individual, the post-deliberation mean opinion (or change from the pre-deliberation mean) may be an unreliable guide to his or her full-information position. But consider the following rough but formalizable sketch. Take a policy dimension \( X \), with greater numbers representing more pro-\( X \) attitudes. Let the \( i \)th individual’s initial attitude be \( A_i \), his or her full-information attitude be \( F_i \), and the post-deliberation mean attitude be \( M \). Without loss of generality, consider those people for whom \( F_i < A_i \).\(^{10}\) Suppose (a) that everyone adjusts \( A_i \) so as to narrow its distance from \( M \), taken as a statistical cue; (b) that the adjustment tends to be smaller, the smaller the distance between \( A_i \) and \( F_i \) (because

\(^{10}\) The story for \( A_i > F_i \) is the same, in mirror image.
disproportionately many of the people who are close to their full-information positions are relatively well informed and not there by chance); and (c) that adjustment also tends to be smaller, the further it would carry the individual away from or beyond $F_i$ (because some people are well enough informed to recognize that that would be moving in the wrong direction or overshooting the mark). Here are three possibilities for $M$: that $M < F_i < A_i$, that $F_i < M < A_i$, or that $F_i < A_i < M$.\textsuperscript{11} The preceding assumptions imply that the cue-taking adjustment will move $A_i$ towards but only rarely (and then not much) beyond $F_i$ in the first case, move $A_i$ towards and never beyond $F_i$ in the second case, and move $A_i$ further away from $F_i$ in the third case – but by less than the corresponding movements (for the same $|A_i - F_i|$) in the first case. In short, while some individuals may be led away from $F_i$, the mean $A_i$ should generally approach the mean $F_i$. There may be exceptions, whose frequency and magnitude will depend on further specifications (of the distributions of $A_i$ and $F_i$ and the parameters associated with (a), (b), and (c)), but statistical cueing should generally move people, on balance, towards their full-information preferences.

**CONCLUSION**

Deliberative Polling serves a number of valuable purposes. It is, for one thing, a quasi-experiment designed to investigate the effects of information, thought and discussion on policy and electoral preferences; political efficacy, political interest and other aspects of political engagement, including political participation; and small group mechanisms like conformity and polarization, among other things. Its value for these purposes has nothing to do with television, except in so far as the prospect of being on television helps maximize the participation rate, thus preserving the integrity of the initially random sample. It is also intended to have some policy impact – not to determine policy but to be something policy makers can take into account.

Some of Deliberative Polling’s policy impact may be indirect, through public opinion, and some of that may involve television. To be helpful, television broadcasts (and newspaper accounts) should concentrate on the policy background, the process and the results. They should not attempt to replicate the participants’ experience, as Parkinson suggests. In this light, the NHS DP broadcast Parkinson maligned was actually quite good. It departed from the participants’ experience to stress the things it should have stressed. The tension Parkinson describes between the broadcaster’s and the DP project’s desiderata is overdrawn. Other media also lend a hand. Contrary to Parkinson’s suggestion, many DPs have received prominent and considerable newspaper coverage.

The greatest possibility of policy impact, however, is almost certainly direct, with policy makers themselves noting and heeding the results, regardless of any effect on public opinion. There have in fact already been cases of sizeable direct policy impact, in the Texas utility DPs. This is a possibility wherever decision makers are interested in the public’s more considered opinions, which we find they commonly are.

It is still early days for Deliberative Polling. The project still proceeds one DP at a time. That it has already had some policy impact is a major accomplishment, especially considering that each DP has so far stood alone, unreinforced by others on the same topic and population. Greater institutionalization may be expected to enhance both direct and indirect policy effects. But even now, contrary to Parkinson, they have not always been nil and have sometimes been large.

\textsuperscript{11} We gloss over the possibility of equality relations, but taking account of them would not alter the thrust of this set-up.