

## James Fishkin - What can deliberative polling do for democracy

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Deliberative polling offers a thick conception of democracy, argues James Fishkin. It serves the values of political equality and deliberation, by representing potentially all citizens and by spreading an ethos of participation in politics.

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### An interview to Pavlos Hatzopoulos for *Re-public*

**Pavlos Hatzopoulos:** Do you consider deliberative polling as an antidote to the crisis of representative democracy?

**James Fishkin:** The crisis of representative democracy is that the public is not well-informed, there is a perception all around the world that elites make decisions in their own interest, or without taking adequately into account the concerns, values, and perspectives of the public. The mechanisms by which the public expresses its views are often unrepresentative and people do not have enough motivation to look into the complexities of issues because after all they have to provide for their lives and their families. All these are problems that reflect the disconnection between the mass public and the elites.

What deliberative polling does, based upon an ancient Athenian idea, is to take a random sample of citizens to create a microcosm of the public who can deliberate together and become more informed and then express their views on behalf of the rest of the citizenry. Ordinary polls represent what the public is thinking when it is not paying too much attention. Deliberative polls represent what the public would think if they become seriously engaged and informed and express what they really think about after due reflection. So, deliberative polling can provide a useful input to both policy and politics.

**P.H.:** Can deliberative polling help in increasing the participation of citizens in politics in general?

**J.F.:** Deliberative polling serves two main values: political equality and deliberation. That is, it actually represents everybody: everybody has an equal chance of being drawn in the random sample. People who participate in a deliberative poll tend to participate further in politics after that. Of course only a few hundred people are involved in a given experiment. If deliberative polling became common in the way that microcosms chosen by lot were common in ancient Athens, then you would spread the ethos of participation. In ancient Athens every citizen knew that he would be called upon to serve in one capacity or another.

So, deliberative polling serves participation in the sense that it brings in ordinary citizens under conditions where they can really think about the issues that are important to them and get their questions answered. One of the main goals of participatory democratic theory is political equality: deliberative polling definitely serves that. A second goal of participatory democratic theory is to get as many people participating as possible: deliberative polling does less well in that, but it does further that goal also.

**P.H.:** You have done a series of [1] [deliberative polls in China](#). This may sound paradoxical since representative democracy is not in place there.

**J.F.:** It certainly surprised us. We initially thought that deliberative democracy is a very advanced form of democracy and so the Chinese context seemed, at first glance, less promising. But, at the local level, government officials have a great deal of autonomy in China and they are looking for ways to consult the public. They were already applying forms of deliberative democracy, but they were not happy with these forms. There were named 'earnest democracy discussion meetings'. What we helped them to do was what is now called in China 'scientific earnest democracy discussion meetings'. In the earliest version, there was no guarantee that participants were representative of the whole population, the most high-status people were dominating the discussion, and there was no decision process.

One of the surprising things was that two authoritarian legacies of the Chinese system made deliberative polling easier. Almost every participant who was asked to come actually came to the meeting. Secondly, once they guaranteed us that the process was going to be completely balanced and we were going to have advocates of all the different projects that were being considered, they also promised that they would implement the results. They were as good as their word: they implemented the results although they were very surprised by them. That is, they expected that everybody would want the infrastructure projects most promising for economic development, mostly the building of many more roads and highways. Instead, what the people wanted was sewage treatment plants, they wanted clean water, they wanted a comprehensive environmental plan, and they wanted people's recreation instead of a fancy town square. These were thought to be much more important, and they are now being built.

The deliberative experiment involved adaptation because decisions in China need to fulfill three criteria: they are supposed to be scientific, democratic, and legal. Chinese officials agreed that deliberative polling was scientific, it was also deemed democratic since it involved a random sample of the people, but in terms of being legal we were asked to present our case to the People's Congress. The local party leader submitted it to the Congress and it was approved. We are beginning to replicate this project in various parts of China.

**P.H.:** Critics of deliberative polling have argued that it stands on a 'thin' conception of democracy. That is, it gives the possibility choosing from a set of choices, but it does not question why this particular set should form our horizon of thinking in the first place. How would you respond to that?

**J.F.:** I disagree: deliberative polling offers a thicker conception of democracy. What we have now is soundbyte democracy, based upon the public's vague impressions about soundbytes and news headlines and the science of impression management (advertising and photo opportunities). Deliberative democracy is about people facing the real trade-offs that affect public policy, that affect their lives and grappling with deliberation. The root of it is weighing: weighing the values about this course of action against that course of action, realizing that almost every choice has good aspects and bad aspects, and doing these not on the basis of manipulated misinformation but real information. Deliberative polling is related to actual decisions: decisions on candidate selection, [2] [as in Maroussi](#), decisions on policy options, as in China or in Texas. Participants in these cases talked openly about the issues put on the table.

Very often, though, deliberative polling raises new issues. When we did the nationally televised deliberative poll about the adoption of the euro in Denmark, the public spontaneously and consistently raised an issue that the political debate had not been previously addressing. This was how joining the euro zone would effect the welfare state and, in particular, the pension system. Given the kinds of taxes Danish citizens pay, the effect on the pension system turned out to be the primary issue. The public often reframes the issues or raises new ones. In the 1996 US pre-primary deliberative poll in Austin, Texas, the public was focused on jobs and the economy, while the candidates were totally unprepared for that. Later in the primary season, these became the overwhelming issues that decided the election.

I would say that deliberative polling allows for issues to come out from the people, but in a thoughtful, responsible, and representative way. What generally happens now is that issues usually come up from just intense constituencies who are self-selected. So, I think deliberative polling is thick rather than thin and bottom up rather than top down.

Further links

[3] [The center for deliberative democracy](#)

[4] [The nation in a room](#)

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[1] deliberative polls in China: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/china/index.html>

[2] as in Maroussi: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/06/07/opinion/edpapa.php>

[3] The center for deliberative democracy: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/>

[4] The nation in a room: <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.2/fishkin.html>

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