

January 8, 2010

## James S Fishkin: The 58 ideas that could hold the key to bringing the election alive

The expenses scandal triggered an unprecedented wave of disaffection and dialogue about the UK political system. There are lots of ideas about change, but no clear way to proceed. How can a country of 60 million have a serious dialogue about how to reform its political system?

This weekend Power2010 will convene an unprecedented experiment in public consultation. A national sample of the entire UK, first polled online by YouGov, will be transported from virtual space to physical space in a London hotel. The agenda for the deliberations comes from thousands of online submissions about how best to improve the UK political system.

The result will be a "Deliberative Poll". Some 4,000 suggestions have been boiled down to 58 reform ideas. A non-partisan briefing book has been prepared with arguments for and against each reform. The 200 people who make up the sample will convene in small groups and then pose questions to competing experts in plenary sessions. At the end of the weekend, they will decide what they really think about all 58 in confidential questionnaires. The top choices at the end of the day will be submitted for a public campaign in the run-up to the election.

Most citizens do not have the time or energy to get informed about the details of public policy or politics. But with the right institutional design, the public can be effectively engaged and informed. In a Deliberative Poll, each citizen has a significant part of the sample's deliberations.

When my colleagues and I did the first Deliberative Poll in the UK in 1994, a woman came up to me to thank me. She was a spouse accompanying her husband. In "30 years of marriage" she said, her husband had "never read a newspaper" but from the moment he had been invited, he had started to read every newspaper every day. He was going to be "much more interesting to live with in retirement," she concluded. This incident showed how we created a situation where people had reason to become more informed and engaged. This weekend we will see, in microcosm, what public opinion would be like if everyone were similarly motivated to really think about the issues. Perhaps their conclusions can set an agenda for non-partisan reform that the rest of the country can sign on to.

*James S. Fishkin, Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, is the author of When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation (Oxford 2009); [www.power2010.org.uk](http://www.power2010.org.uk)*