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Debate by citizens leads to mature opinion
A New method to investigate "true public opinion"

In this last installment in the New Year's serial article "a revolution in common sense," we shall look at a proposal to ensure in-depth, mature debate, and how it can be a catalyst for maturation of Japanese democracy. We interviewed Professor James S. Fishkin of Stanford University, who developed a methodology for mature debate known as "deliberative polling (DP)" and Professor Yasushi Sone of Keio University, the leading expert in Japan.
(Honorifics abbreviated)

An interview with the originator

—The deliberative poll held in Yokohama is considered the first full-fledged DP in Japan.    What were your impressions as an observer?

Fishkin:    The participants were actively trying to obtain information. They were more engaged than participants in other countries.    I was quite amazed.

Sone:    It is often said that "Japanese don't like to give their opinions" or are "shy," but that is not the case.    They were all seriously considering the issues and debating them.

—How many DPs have been held overseas?

Fishkin:    They have been held in 22 languages in 27 countries, even in regions where there is religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants, and in countries like Australia where there is a conflict between indigenous people and others.

-Why hadn't they been held in Japan?

Sone:　It had not been possible to conduct them on a large scale such as in the USA, due to the cost.　But it was enabled by narrowing the sample and conducting one on a smaller scale.

-Is it an entirely new method for democracy?

Fishkin:　Actually the hint came from ancient Athens.　In Athenian democracy, 500 people were selected randomly to debate issues and make decisions.　In Greece, there was a change in government after last year's general elections.　The winners made use of the DP methodology.　A newspaper in the UK reported that "Athenian democracy had been re-introduced to Greece after a hiatus of 2400 years."

-How are the findings of DPs used in policy decision-making?

Fishkin:　The point is that policy decision-makers pay close attention to the views obtained.　Average citizens debate the issues on behalf of today's society.　The conclusions are totally different from those of common opinion polls.　When complex policy issues are considered, use of this method gives more depth to democracy.

Flow of a deliberative poll (DP)

Select participants by random sampling -＞　participants fill out questionnaire prior to debate -＞ debates in groups of several dozen people -＞ debate in a plenary session with experts -＞ questionnaire is again administered after debate -＞ changes in views after debate are analyzed.

Reflecting the results in policy - "A Catalyst for True Democracy"

—Could you give some specific success stories?

Fishkin:　Originally, Texas in the USA was one of the states lagging furthest behind in terms of introducing wind power generation.　As a result of conducting a DP and applying its findings to policy, it is now a leader in this field in the USA.

—But opinion polls are quite popular both in the USA and Japan...

Fishkin:　There are limits to opinion polls since they reflect the opinions of people lacking information.　There is an interesting story.　In 1975, there was an opinion poll to learn views about the "Public Affairs Act."　Actually, no such law existed, but various opinions were nonetheless raised about it. Respondents did not want to answer that they did not know, so they gave off-the-wall answers pretending to know about it.

—In that respect, DP has value in that answers are given after adequate information is obtained.　Is that not the case?　Is it not enough to gather knowledgeable people for a debate?

Sone:　In town meetings and other participatory democratic contexts, the participants who come together tend to be active and to have a high interest level.　But their opinions may be quite biased.　Thus, random sampling is necessary to get a truly representative group of citizens.　The logic is the same as for random sampling to select a jury.

—A new government led by the Democratic Party of Japan has been born, and its efforts to increase "visibility" of policy making, such as the so-called "sorting out" of government projects, has drawn attention.　In that sense, such in-depth debate seems to be in the spirit of the times.

Sone:　The "sorting-out of projects" has gained applause in terms of information disclosure, but it's method of reaching a conclusion in a matter

of an hour has been too hasty.   Those whose projects that were "sorted away" were dissatisfied because they not only had their budgets cut but also were not given an opportunity to express their views.   Important policies issues such as pensions and the postal system need to be debated in depth for perhaps 3 days and 2 nights so that the main points become clear.

-It looks like there will be more such in-depth debates in Japan, doesn't it?

Sone:   I think so.   In addition to DP, there are various social experiments and polls that citizens are participating in.   However, some of them are not based upon proper sampling or attempt to lead to a predefined conclusion.   That makes it pointless.

-So it is not enough just to gather an unspecified number of people and have them debate for long hours, is it?

Fishkin:   It needs to be done systematically.   That leads to success.   A good sample can be gathered employing the criteria we use.

Photo caption:   Prof. Fishkin of Standford University (left) and Prof. Sone of Keio University (right) sharing their impressions after a deliberative poll held in Japan.   In Sakae-ku, Yokohama City.