

A Revolution in Common Sense

On a chilly Saturday morning under cloudy skies about to start raining any moment, about 150 citizens gathered at a public gathering facility in Sakae Ward, Yokohama. They were of all ages and genders, and total strangers to each other.

Their goal was neither a flea market nor a lecture on culture. They broke into groups of several dozen for a debate on "the Doshu system and education."

"If Russian is taught in Hokkaido, and Korean in Kyushu, it will be useful for local trade."

"If the class curricula vary by region, children who move to a new town due to their parents' career change will be disadvantaged. I am also concerned about discrepancies in educational levels between regions."

The somewhat off-beat event was a "Deliberative Poll (in-depth discussion)" held by Kanagawa Prefecture last December. It also was a challenge against recent trends in politics and government, seemingly dominated by opinion polls.

Photo caption: A deliberative poll in which participants are debating about the Doshu system, etc. Dec. 5th 2009 in Sakae Ward, Yokohama City (Photo by Kazunori KASAHARA)

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Nowadays, cabinets and political parties are judged with the measuring stick of approval ratings in opinion polls. Individual policy decisions are also swayed by poll figures.

However, opinion polls conducted primarily by phone demand answers without allowing time to think. So they can hardly be said to reflect true public opinion.

The in-depth debate held in Yokohama City was conducted according to the deliberative poll (DP) scheme developed by Professor James S. Fishkin of Stanford University in the USA. First, an opinion poll of randomly selected citizens was conducted, after which the citizens were given a chance to talk among themselves and sort out the issues. They also listened to the views of a number of experts. On that basis, the same opinion poll was conducted again.

The answers were found to have changed from prior to the debate. The more the debate is allowed to mature, the more "full-bodied" the public opinion becomes. That is why it is called a "mature debate."

Formulation of "full-bodied" public opinion

◇Conventional◇

Phone surveys are reflected in public administration

◇The new common sense of DP◇

Extract true public opinion matured with debate

This was true of that day's questionnaire. Prior to debate, 37.1% were in favor of the present prefectural system while 31.2% supported introduction of the Doshu system, but after the debate, these numbers changed to 33.1% and 41.7%, respectively. This distinction is what makes deliberate polls different from conventional opinion polls. The figures after deliberation are closer to true public opinion.

Deliberative polls have a long history in the West, with some being held for several days in a row. This was the first full-fledged in-depth debate using the DP methodology in Japan.

The Japanese citizens, often thought to be “not very good at debate,” expressed their opinions, listened to others’ views and solidified their positions.



On the 30th of this month, Fujisawa City will be hosting “A One Day Debate on the Future of Fujisawa” with the assistance of the Keio University DP Study Group (Chairperson: Professor Yasushi Sone).

Furthermore, though using a different methodology, junior chambers of commerce nationwide will be holding multi-hour debate sessions of randomly selected citizens, called “Citizens’ Debates.” Such in-depth debates by citizens are becoming a popular trend.

Once such approaches become well established, it will be possible to tell where public opinion really stands. Politics and government will no longer be swayed by the ups and downs of inaccurate opinion poll figures. Citizens will also acquire the basic democratic skill of voicing their views.

A woman (35) who participated in the Yokohama deliberative poll said: “It was meaningful to be able to exchange views with various people. I hope the opinions raised this time will be reflected in politics. The government has changed, so we had also better change.” (Related article on p. 2)

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