



## EDITORIAL: 'Deliberative polling' is a good 1st step

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The government solicited public opinion on nuclear energy policy over the weekend, the first time it has tried out "deliberative polling."

We commend the government for experimenting with this new form of policymaking by involving a cross section of the public.

Participants were able to consult reference materials and listen to different opinions while discussing energy policy.

This format has obvious advantages over conventional opinion polls in which participants are asked questions only once, or public hearings that go no further than getting selected individuals to express their views.

A man in his 40s, who participated in the two-day forum held in Tokyo, said of his experience: "When you attend something like this, you can't plead ignorance of the subject or say you want to leave the decision to the government. You really feel that you and your fellow participants are calling the game, and that the politicians, bureaucrats and power companies are nothing more than players."

Before it went ahead with the polling, the government conducted a telephone survey of eligible voters at random. Of 7,000 or so people who responded, 286 expressed their desire to participate.

How did their opinions change through the deliberative process, and what made the people change their minds? A committee made up of university researchers and others will release their findings in mid-August.

What is important to watch is how an undertaking of this nature will influence the government's policy decisions. It is certainly not easy to devise a method that satisfies most people, but the government will simply have to try out what works best. That is the only way it can hope to overcome deep-seated public distrust in politics.

Another point to pay attention to is whether the deliberative process should be changed or improved.

The two-day polling faithfully followed the method developed by Stanford University. For instance, the moderators maintained a strictly passive role, refraining from answering questions asked by the participants.

As a result, discussions in small groups sometimes ground to a halt over unanswered questions, or developed around premises that were flawed or inaccurate.

We believe the government was right not to offer preconceived notions to the participants.

However, gauging the trend of public opinion should not be the only purpose of having a popular discussion forum of this nature.

It is just as important to create a system that makes people feel they are part of the nation's policymaking process.

We, therefore, propose that, instead of just sticking to the Stanford method, the government should explore ways to deepen the discussion process by providing greater support to the participants.

For instance, why not encourage experts and participants to engage in two-way question-and-answer sessions? Or disclose to the public the reference materials and questionnaires distributed among the participants, so that any community can organize deliberative polling of its own?

We hope deliberative polling will evolve further into an effective means for keeping the public involved in policymaking.

--The Asahi Shimbun, Aug. 7