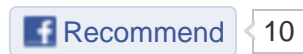


'Deliberative polling' planned for Japan's energy policies

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The central government for the first time will introduce “deliberative polling” (DP) to better reflect public opinion in compiling basic policies for nuclear power and other energies this summer.

Under this method, the government will carry out an opinion poll in July and hold discussion meetings with respondents in August, followed by another poll. The public opinions expressed will be used as reference materials in deciding basic energy policies.

DP started in the United States and Europe about 20 years ago, and has since been introduced in more than 20 countries.

In Japan, DP has been used in five cases but only on the local level, including the Kanagawa prefectural government’s research three years ago on proposals to unify several prefectures.

By the end of August, the central government plans to decide on such energy issues as the ratio of nuclear power to total electricity generation in Japan as of 2030. Currently, three options have been suggested: zero

percent, 15 percent and 20-25 percent.

Discussions on nuclear power have failed to bear fruit amid the heated conflict between proponents and opponents. So the government plans to hold "nationwide" discussions by introducing DP.

Its opinion poll, conducted in cooperation with universities and other organizations, will cover about 3,000 people throughout the country. About 300 of the respondents will be asked to attend meetings with experts or discuss energy issues in small groups.

The government will also require the respondents to learn such things as the energy situation and policies in Japan and other countries, as well as their economic influences.

Immediately before and after the discussion meetings, the participants will be required to answer questionnaires. The government will compare their answers with those from the opinion poll to grasp what changes the discussion meetings have brought. These changes will be used as reference materials in deciding the nation's energy policies.

Another reason the government will introduce DP is because its current methods for "nationwide discussions" has lost the people's trust.

The government started "town meetings" 11 years ago for "dialogue between the government and the people." However, critics say questions are staged at these meetings.

The government has also solicited "public comments" on policy proposals. But many of the comments are sent in by people organized by special-interest groups or people with extreme views.

Public opinion polls are lauded as impartial because they choose respondents at random. But some critics say that replies in these polls are based on the atmosphere of the time and do not represent the true views of the public.

According to James S. Fishkin, professor of political science at Stanford University, DP combines the advantage of conventional opinion polls, which means a random choice of respondents, with the benefits of deep deliberations at discussion meetings to ascertain true public opinion.

But the government faces a variety of challenges to make DP work effectively. It must provide data and other materials to the discussion meetings that can be accepted by both the pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear sides.

And the experts and moderators at the discussion meetings must be selected in a balanced manner.

(This article was written by Toru Nakagawa and Masahiro Tsuruoka.)

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See a related story on the AJW (<http://ajw.asahi.com/article/views/opinion/AJ201202240067>).

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