



# INTERVIEW/ James Fishkin: Deliberative Polling should be used in key policy issues like energy

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By MASAHIRO TSURUOKA

It was 24 years ago during the presidential primary campaign of 1988 that Stanford University professor James Fishkin felt doubts about the way American democracy operated.

His doubts came from the fact that superficial campaigns in small and unrepresentative states, such as Iowa and New Hampshire could determine the momentum in the presidential race. The process was not very representative of the country and it was not very thoughtful or substantive.

Against this background, Fishkin originated the concept of Deliberative Polling (DP). According to the political scientist, Deliberative Polling works like this: A random sample of citizens is taken to create a microcosm of the public who can deliberate together and become more informed and then express their views on behalf of the rest of the public. Ordinary polls represent what the public thinks when it is not paying sufficient attention. Deliberative Polling represents what the public would think if they become seriously engaged and informed and express what they really think about after due reflection.

Fishkin, who recently authored another book on the subject "When the People Speak," has visited more than 20 nations including China and European countries over the years to conduct Deliberative Polling. He recently visited Japan and gave an interview to The Asahi Shimbun.

Excerpts of the interview follow:

Question: What is the primary purpose of Deliberative Polling?

Fishkin: DP is a scientific effort and a research program, designed to show what the public would think, if it were thinking about an issue, under good conditions.

Most of the time, in most countries around the world, the public is not very attentive and not very well-informed. Social scientists have an explanation for this. They call it "rational ignorance." If I have one vote in millions, why should I pay a lot of attention to complicated policy issues? My individual vote or my individual opinion will not have much effect.

Also, there are many attempts to influence public opinion, mislead public opinion, shape public opinion, through campaign strategies and public relations efforts. The public, even if it does pay attention, may be led astray.

My simple question is, "What would the public think, under good conditions for thinking about it? Is it possible to provide those good conditions, in a transparent way? Is it possible, scientifically, to establish that a sample is representative of the entire public, and then is it possible to see what the sample would conclude and, therefore, what the entire public would conclude, if they had a similar opportunity?"

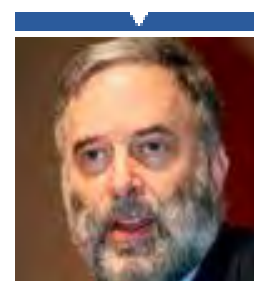
It turns out, in every country in which we've done this around the world, that the people are very smart. It's just, normally, they're not paying much attention. Or, if they're paying attention, they're mobilized for one side of an issue, without an effective opportunity to think about the other side.

But, when they're really engaged in the competing sides of difficult policy choices, they can come to serious conclusions for good reasons.

The results of DP can influence public policy, depending on the context, can affect the public dialogue, can engage people's interest in politics. It is, first of all, a scientific, transparent, credible process, but it's one that we hope will add to the toolkit for democracy and public policy-making.

Let me add that, for years, political theorists around the world have been talking about deliberative democracy but, in theory, in a very general way, and it has often been dismissed as something impractical, something purely theoretical. In my view, and in my method, it is a practical method that can easily be instituted in many different public policy contexts, and we then gather the data to show that it is credible, that it has legitimacy because it is representative, because the people become more informed--we have information questions--because we are able to show the reasons why people come to the conclusions that they do. And, in fact, most of the opinions do change significantly, so that we show that it makes a difference whether people deliberate or not, whether they think or not,

James Fishkin (The Asahi)



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about the issues.

In different countries, we find different contexts in which it can be inserted, sometimes at the local level, sometimes at the national level, sometimes throughout the entire European Union, (which, as you know, is 27 countries), or in many different kinds of political systems. In Japan, in Brazil, in the United States, even in China, we have had success with DP.

Q: How can DP, or deliberative democracy, compensate for the shortfalls of representative democracy?

A: First of all, when the people are engaged to deliberate in a representative and thoughtful way, they're only interested in solving the problem; they're not interested in running for re-election. Representatives are interested in running for re-election, so representatives will always calculate political advantage and, indeed, in parliaments with party discipline, they have to do what the party decides, even if they personally disagree with it.

There is not very much room for elected representatives to deliberate on the issues, but there is room for the people to deliberate on the issues.

Without DP or something like it, you have the views of the people in their impressions of sound bites and headlines, but that's when the people are not thinking very much about the issue, and you have the views of representatives, where they're constrained by party discipline, so they're not really allowed to think very much about the issue.

It's very hard to see who is really thinking about the issue, except advocates of one special interest or another. But, they have special interests in the outcome, and so the idea of DP is to bring to the public dialogue what all of the people would think, if they could really think about the arguments on either side of an issue and come to a thoughtful conclusion.

Surely that would enrich the policy-making process. It can change the agenda of the process. It can change the importance of an issue. It can show things that are otherwise left out or neglected by the conventional political process.

Q: According to your book "When the People Speak," you mention that you came up with this idea of DP when you had some doubts about how the presidential primary election was run in the United States.

A: The primaries and caucuses are not representative, and they're not deliberative. Iowa and New Hampshire go first, as you saw. They're very unlike the rest of the United States.

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The Iowa caucuses have a very small turnout. You saw 150,000 people. You saw the result just change, when, instead of (Mitt) Romney winning by eight votes or nine votes, there was a mistake of 22 votes in one place, so he lost by, whatever it is, 20 or 30. But it's all ridiculous, it's such a tiny number of voters, who are unrepresentative, and it's a process--it's not a thoughtful process; it's a process of organization and mobilization.

New Hampshire is bigger in turnout, but also unrepresentative. And then after Iowa and New Hampshire it becomes a television sound-bite campaign.

I had the very simple idea, why not start with something that is representative and is deliberative for the whole country, and have that first? Then, you would have a really good start to the process, and the winner would achieve the momentum and probably go on and win.

We actually tried this, in 1996, in something called "the national issues convention," that we did with the public television broadcaster PBS, and we had the presidential candidates there. And it worked really well. The only thing, the PBS project decided not to include the candidate evaluations, so we only had the issues.

Q: Are you thinking of conducting DP for this year's election?

A: We are in discussions about a possible project, not about voting intention but about the budget crisis, the jobs. The fundamental issue that has paralyzed the United States has been the debt and the jobs, the trade-off between debt and jobs, and what to do about the federal budget.

We have almost had a government shutdown. We've had the issues about the extension of the debt ceiling. And this issue will be facing the country again, after the election, no matter who wins. That's the first thing.

Each party is willing to discuss its view of only half the problem. One party wants to cut the budget, to cut the debt, but will not consider any new taxes. The other party wants to stimulate jobs but it doesn't want to cut any entitlements. And there's a long-term entitlement problem, from Social Security, Medicare, and then there's a short-term issue about jobs.

Each party has only half of the problem and half of the solution. More than a third of the voters are independents, not connected to either party, and the public is very confused about the issue.

Q: After the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, our nuclear policy has become an important agenda item in Japan. What would be your opinion about conducting such a DP?



A: First, let me describe what we did in Texas.

Texas had eight regulated electricity companies, for different parts of the state. In every one of the eight service territories, we did DP about the area's future energy choices. Should they have their electricity from coal, from natural gas, from renewable energy like wind power, or should they cut the demand through conservation, so they would have less need? Or should they transmit the energy in from someplace else, like from Mexico?

You will find, in the book, a discussion of the Texas projects and the policy impact of them. When we started, Texas was last among the 50 states in the amount of wind power in 1996. If you averaged the eight DPs, the percentage of the population who were willing to pay a little bit more on their monthly electricity bill in order to subsidize wind power went from about 50 percent to 84 percent.

The Public Utility Commission used these results to justify allowing the companies to charge a little bit more. As a result of these decisions, Texas went to being first among the 50 states, in 2007.

There were also greatly increased expenditures for conservation, or demand-side management, justified by a similar change in public opinion, from 40 percent being willing to pay more to subsidize conservation, to 75 percent being willing to pay more, averaged over the eight projects.

Over time, these investments in wind power and conservation have turned out to be very good investments for the state.

Now, the way that we organized the electricity DPs in Texas provides a model for what I would recommend in the Japanese case. We got an advisory group that represented all the relevant stakeholders; the environmental groups, the consumer groups, the advocates of alternative energy, the representatives of the large electricity customers, the relevant government agencies. It was an advisory group that was very large, that included everybody who might comment or object to the results, after they came out.

This advisory group had to approve the balance and the accuracy of rather extensive briefing materials about each of the policy options and the arguments for and against each of the options for how to provide electricity in the service territory in the future.

The members of the advisory group did not have to agree on what should be done; they only had to agree that the materials were balanced and that all the information in the materials was accurate.

Q: Some people say that DP is not a fair representation, strictly because

the participants are limited to those who have the time and who are interested in those topics, and they only represent a part of the population, randomly selected. What do you think about that?

A: We work very hard to get the people selected in the sample to come. That's why we usually pay an honorarium as a gesture of appreciation. We pay for the trip, the hotel and the food.

Most importantly, we convince people that their voice matters. People who have no interest in the issue, they're the ones who are most important for us to get because they're the ones who make the sample representative. We work very hard.

In the National Issues Convention that I described, in the United States, there was a woman who couldn't come, who was on a farm in Vermont, because no one would milk her cow. We sent somebody out to milk her cow, so that she could come for the weekend, and she did! And that's the kind of effort. We have to provide child care, we have to do all the things that are necessary.

Q: When the DP is hosted by a governmental body, they are sometimes criticized for trying to appeal or raise their authority by demonstrating that they have listened to public opinion. What do you think about that kind of criticism?

A: When a DP is hosted by a government authority, they have to assure us, beforehand, that there is no predetermined conclusion, that they are open to listening to the conclusions of the people.

The real test of government officials is whether they do listen to the people, and do implement what the people really want, at the end. And, if they do, they deserve some credit, I think.

Q: Let me ask you about the DP that you conducted last year in collaboration with Keio University. It was immediately after the March 11 earthquake and, despite the fact that there was such a disaster, you had 10 people from the Tohoku region, including Fukushima, which enabled you to have a representative sample of the public, of the Japanese people. What is your opinion about that?

A: Obviously, the disaster in the middle of the recruitment was a serious problem, but I do think it was a pretty good sample.

I was there. I listened intently to the discussions. I looked at the results. It was fascinating to hear the dialogue across the generations, the older people and the younger people, and their very different concerns.

I thought that the results made a lot of sense.

This is another case where policy experts had very strong views about how the so-called "funded system" or what, in the United States, would have been called a "privatized system" of pensions, was an appropriate solution. But, the public did not want the risk of such a solution. There was a gap between the experts and the people.

But, the public realized that there is a big problem, but they were very interested in the particular problem of the failure of collective action, the problem that--because of the Japanese concern with privacy--it's very difficult to know whether people are really paying into the pension system in the way that they're supposed to.

There's a fairness issue that's very fundamental in the Japanese system. The indication, to me, that the people were really, seriously, deliberating is that there was a strong movement, I think 19 points or something, in the direction of increasing the consumption tax in order to keep the "pay-as-you-go system" solvent.

Well, that's a big sacrifice! Anytime people are willing to support a big sacrifice like a tax increase, that gets my attention because they're weighing very difficult choices.

I thought it was a very genuine deliberation, and I'm interested that the government is considering an increase in the consumption tax in order to finance social security because that is exactly the kind of result that the people were endorsing in the DP.

Q: How do you think DP would influence Japanese politics?

A: I think that the Japanese political system, like most of the competitive party systems in the developed countries, is in a bit of a deadlock, and you've had six prime ministers over the last five years or so?

I think that the party system and the economic issues have paralyzed this country, they've paralyzed my country, they've paralyzed most of the countries in the European Union. This is a problem around the world.

I think that, under these conditions, it's very difficult to have serious, substantive policy discussions, and it's very difficult to make the hard choices to solve the problems of the people.

The DP can lead to a substantive public voice on the issues and can be inserted at strategic moments, like a commission or a committee on the nuclear issue, the power issue, for example, or for solving other big issues about the educational system or the pension system or whatever the issues

are, and can actually help resolve public policy, by giving everybody, as that Italian official told me, "cover to do the right thing." And, it can improve the public dialogue about the issues too.

I think it could be very helpful for the state, because the public is very suspicious of politicians all over the world. But, the public trusts the public. If the public has a voice, under the right conditions, people see, "Those are people just like me! They're telling what they really think! They're not doing this to try to manipulate opinion, they're not doing it for advantage, they have to live with the same problems I have to live with!"

It's a very useful way to engage a microcosm of the people in thinking about what should be done.

I think that, in each country, we can experiment in a different way, but in Japan, from the five DPs that we have done, I think it could be very constructive. I hope that the various people in Japan who are interested will pursue it, and we'll do everything we can to help them.

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