

You are here: [Interviews](#) > DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

"Most People Are Rationally Ignorant"

by James Fishkin — 13.08.2012

What decisions would we make if we deliberated carefully about public policy? Alexander Görlach sat down with Stanford's James Fishkin to discuss deliberative democracy, parliamentary discontent, and the future of the two-party system.



The European: In a nutshell: What is so interesting about deliberative polling?

Fishkin: I am interested in what the public would think if it was thinking about an issue in good, controlled conditions. We have balanced briefing materials that include the pros and cons of different choices, we have a representative sample of people, we have extensive confidential questionnaires and small-group discussions. It's a scientific approach to debates about public issues. We organized two deliberative polling events in Brussels with people from all 27 EU countries, speaking 22 languages. That's probably as close as anyone has gotten to the idea of a European public sphere!

The European: One powerful argument against deliberative democracy is that discussions don't necessarily yield the best results. A small group of experts might reach more insightful conclusions than a large group of people.

Fishkin: Most people are not well informed about public policy. They are rationally ignorant: their vote is only one among millions, so why should they care? What we want to show is that these people don't lack the competence to make informed decisions. If we give them the right information, in an institutional design where they become seriously engaged in competing arguments, they will make informed and thoughtful judgments. One thing we don't seek is consensus. Consensus usually distorts judgments because of the social pressure that is involved. We want to avoid those forms of pressure, or the top-down approach of a telephone poll. It turns out that when people think about the issues, they are very thoughtful.

The European: Germany has tried to experiment with online polling and liquid democracy. As it turns out, the longer the commitment was, the less people were willing to participate. It's very challenging to follow political issues and the policy process.

Fishkin: Everything about democracy is a question of institutional design. Because we provide good preparation, very few people drop out of our deliberative polls. They find it very engaging. If you have a bad design or one that can easily be high-jacked by interest groups, you'll get skewed results. Let's look at California: for the past century, the idea of ballot initiatives and referenda has become deeply entrenched in California. It started as a progressive idea about facilitating participation from below. But the agenda for an initiative is not really determined by the people. In order to get an initiative on the ballot, you need signatures equal to 8 percent of the vote in the previous gubernatorial election. It now costs around three million dollars just to collect the signatures! So the only thing that gets on the ballot is usually special interest legislation, because special interest groups can foot the bill.

The European: The ballot isn't about the public interest anymore.

Fishkin: Right now, we have a direct democracy with an agenda set by moneyed special interests. Money buys television soundbites to manipulate public opinion. Deliberation is often lacking, and most propositions are not in the public interest. We want to bring true direct democracy back to California. What we have done now is that we have brought together eight different public interests groups – liberals and conservatives – to consider some initiatives that would address basic problems in California, and to raise enough money to put them on the ballot. Six of these proposals will now form the "Government Performance and Accountability Act" initiative, and Californians will vote on it in November as Proposition 31. In ancient Athens, there existed the "Council of Five Hundred": a machine called the "kleroterion" randomly selected 500 citizens to serve on the council, and to determine the voting agenda for the general assembly. The idea is to take a group that can deliberate and set the agenda. If the California initiative passes, it will be the first time in 2400 years that we repeat that feat.

The European: Many activists want to give everyone a voice. You, by contrast, say that we have to sample people.

Fishkin: If we sample properly, we get a representative subset of the population. A good sample is actually more representative than a mass election, where 50 percent might simply stay at home on election day and the participation might be skewed by socio-demographics.

The European: Can the deliberative polling method be institutionalized on a national scale?

Fishkin: In Texas, we have turned deliberative polling into an input for the decisions of the public utility commission about energy choices in the state. Texas was the state with the lowest amount of wind power in 1996, when the project started. When the project ended, Texas produced more wind power than any other state in the US. People were willing to pay more on their electricity bills to support wind power. In China, the same approach is being used at the local level to decide budgetary issues. In one town, since 2005, the entire budget is deliberated on a yearly basis with deliberative polling. We are finding opportunities to make deliberative polling consequential without getting rid of or changing the political system.

It's about finding new areas of input. But we are sensitive to the argument that everybody should be involved. The problem is that once you open deliberations to everyone, special interests can exert a larger influence than in a randomized sample. The Obama-administration started a project called "citizens briefing book," which asked the public online to make suggestions about the top priorities facing the new administration. And in the midst of two wars and a great recession, the most important priority expressed online was the legalization of marijuana!

The European: If this turns out to be a practicable thing for whole societies, what do we need parliaments for?

Fishkin: There are two elements of conventionally accepted democracy. One are parliaments, and the other are referenda. Referenda involve everybody voting, and parliaments involve representatives whom everyone elects. Both of those have the value of mass participation, which is a form of mass consent. However, there are trade-offs. We generally consider four fundamental democratic values: political equality, deliberation, mass-participation, and avoiding tyranny of the majority (the prevention of grave injustices or the violation of rights with majority support). But sometimes referendums can undermine those values – Napoleon and Mussolini both used referenda to push their agenda. The American founders thus designed a system of indirect and constitutional rule. They were afraid of an angry mob and wanted a senate that could deliberate. The trouble with the Senate and with most legislative bodies these days is that legislators don't feel free to deliberate for the public good because of party discipline and concerns about the next electoral cycle. Legislatures have been less deliberative than they should be, and mass democracy is less deliberative than it should be.

The European: So what is the way out?

Fishkin: I believe that democratic reform should be based on evidence. We have done about 70 projects around the world in 18 countries. We're seeing that this model of democracy – which goes back to ancient Athens – is a very viable form of democracy. Rather than jumping in and replacing everything, we say: let's gather evidence and find opportunities to improve governance. Every known political system is some combination of the four values. Our task is to weigh the alternative designs: how much direct democracy do we desire? How powerful should the legislature be? What are the opportunities for citizens to have an input?

The European: What about "big issues," like foreign policy or societal norms? Isn't that something that parliaments can address better than referenda?

Fishkin: We deal with big issues like that. In Japan, we recently did a national project on reforming the pension system. They don't have an effective system of social security numbers, because people are so concerned about their privacy. It makes it hard to track who pays, and the traditional approach was always to trust that everyone would pay into the pension system. It resulted in a big shortfall. Policy advocates argued that privatization was the best approach, and that everyone should be responsible for funding their own private pension plan. But the people didn't want anything like that. They thought that the best way to resolve the problem was to increase the consumption tax. The government recently proposed a bill that does exactly that.

The European: Do you think our idea of democracy will change in the long run?

Fishkin: A lot of very thoughtful experts say that the public is too stupid to be consulted, that it only has patience for a few soundbites and the elites should decide. That isn't very democratic. In my view, the best way to pursue long-term democratic reform is to provide a context where the deliberative democracy of the people flourishes and can give voice to key concerns. Policy choices have to be made consonant with the informed preferences of the population. That is the highest form of democracy.

The European: What role will political parties play within that system?

Fishkin: Political parties need to become more democratic themselves. If they fail the test of internal democracy, they will lose their hold on people, their legitimacy, their members. Today, many parties are self-organizing oligarchies. Unless they transform themselves, they have a dim future. We did a project in Greece with the (now former) Prime Minister Papandreou, where we used deliberative polling to select a candidate for the party's nomination for mayor of an important city. Perhaps if we had continued Deliberative Polling in Greece we could have provided a basis for the public to help resolve some aspects of the crisis. At the moment, in many European countries the party leaders have a very big role in selecting candidates. In the American system, the people supposedly select the candidates during the primaries. But primaries have become a televised spectacle, which leads to a very thin form of mass democracy. The choice seems to be between politically equal and uninformed masses, or politically unequal and more informed elites.

The latter undermines the idea of popular involvement in politics, and the former involves people only under conditions where they cannot think very much about the choices they make.

The European: But all democratic systems today incorporate some version of a two-party system or multi-party system.

Fishkin: Well, the American system was not born with the vision of political parties. In his farewell address, George Washington attacked the idea of political parties. Parties were a later innovation, but of course people were experimenting with how a republic would actually work. When more people started to articulate political issues in the public realm, parties became a mechanism for organizing that process. But I think that competition between political parties is not enough to guarantee a really compelling version of democracy. Competition between political parties is often offered now as the definition of democracy, but that's only one definition of democracy. Political parties have every incentive to do whatever they can to win an election, even if that means misleading the public. I think that representative sampling might be the way out.

The European: Let's assume that we can arrive at a representative sample. Why couldn't those people form a sort of parliament, instead of having parliamentarians elected by the general population?

Fishkin: That is possible. In ancient Greece, they asked those who were selected at random to serve for one year. You could have them serve longer, if it was institutionalized. I think the most encouraging aspect of our deliberative polls is the fact that the results produced by randomized groups are often very thoughtful.

The European: So we can say: some pillars of our political system can change, but we are still living in a democracy.

Fishkin: Let's keep in mind that our democratic process is different from what they did in ancient Athens. Back then, legislative commissions called "nomothetai" were convened as a random sample for a day. They made the final decisions on legislation after having heard the arguments for both sides from a group of advocates and a group of opponents for a particular proposal. There was no sitting legislature, but we call it a democracy nonetheless. The same way, we could say that random samples could be a different way of conducting democratic decision-making. They would be more representative than most national elections, and each of those samples would be very deliberative. I am not proposing to eliminate parliaments or to eliminate referenda. But I am proposing to supplement our recognized institutions with new processes.

The European: When it comes to unpopular decisions in a society, like decisions about war and peace, does the model of deliberation still work there?

Fishkin: A lot of hysteria is attached to war and peace. In America, we were taken into the Iraq war amidst a lot of debate. The public believed at the time that weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq, and that Saddam Hussein was connected to 9/11. Both of those claims turned out to be false. Yet there was tremendous mass hysteria about supporting the war, and politicians went along with it. In those conditions, would deliberative polling have led to different outcomes? I don't know. It depends on how long they would have deliberated, and how much fact-searching and evidence they would have been able to get. At the time, the main drive towards war didn't come from the legislature but from the White House.

The European: But what about the opposite case, when the public doesn't want to go to war, but it is necessary to do so, maybe to prevent grave human rights violations? Libya might be one good example.

Fishkin: With the pervasiveness of conventional public opinion polling and also the pervasiveness of other forms of feedback, it is very hard for politicians to resist popular choices. They are looking at their approval ratings every day. But the question you pose is a question about the nature of leadership. It's a difficult question, in a democracy as in any other form of government.

The European: How is deliberative democracy linked to secrecy? Today, we seem to have accepted the fact that our government can collect unprecedented amounts of data to aid homeland security. Will that still be the case in the future?

Fishkin: Any political system has the need for some secrecy and privacy. It might be in the national interest to keep some information secret, and there might be questions that are not suited for open, public debate. Some of these would be national security issues. But it's important to remember that not everything has to be open to deliberation. The public should be consulted about issues of collective political will, about the trade-offs they are willing to accept for the basic direction of policy. They should be consulted about the question of whether we should send a man to the moon, but they shouldn't be consulted about the choice of rocket engines. For that you need the experts and the technocrats.