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Sort the Candidates Through Deliberation

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The candidates who announce almost daily for president are competing for the top ten positions in national polls to qualify for televised debates. There may be one debate with the top ten in national polls and a second tier debate with candidates who have at least one percent. The "invisible primary" has now turned into the "visibility primary." Donald Trump and Mike Huckabee will likely rate in the top ten. Governors Kasich, Jindal and Perry as well as Senator Graham, probably will not. These polls mostly represent name recognition of candidates the public knows little about. Yet, those left off the top list will face big disadvantages. The public's vague impressions of sound bites and headlines will be winnowing our initial path of presidential selection.

Imagine a different way of launching the campaign. Suppose a scientific sample of the entire electorate was gathered to engage the candidates in-depth on the issues for several days. It would put the country in one room under conditions where it could think. Candidates answering questions from this sample would need to address the concerns of more than the activist slivers who now dominate the primaries.

Suppose such a microcosm, large enough to be demonstrably representative in attitudes and demographics, evaluated both the candidates and their positions. If the process had significant television time, it would draw the attention of the country before Iowa and New Hampshire. Instead of just name recognition, it would evaluate based on substance, instead of representing just activists who turn out to meetings, it would represent everyone. Over several days, the process could engage more candidates and go in-depth on the issues. Candidate preferences could be broken out by party as well as for the country as a whole. There would be plenty of prizes for the candidates to take home. And with so many candidates competing for visibility, the main impediment to this sort of exercise, getting the candidates to come, would not apply this year.

A utopian fantasy? In 1996, PBS convened just such a gathering, called the National Issues Convention at the University of Texas, Austin. A good microcosm of the country, some 466 voters based on sampling by NORC at the University of Chicago gathered in Texas for a long weekend to question candidates about the issues with five hours of national broadcast hosted by Jim Lehrer. It succeeded in the scenario just mentioned with one crucial exception. It did not evaluate the candidates, just the issues. Instead of conventional polling it offered deliberative polling -- a good sample offering its conclusions both before and after a long weekend of deliberation. The results provided a detailed picture of what the people really wanted on reflection -- on

foreign policy, on the economy and on social issues. It also provided a good picture of the economic anxieties that surprised Robert Dole a month later in the New Hampshire primary. He was the one major candidate who skipped the convention.

Since then, there have been Deliberative Polls in 22 countries around the world on many issues (see Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford (<http://cdd.stanford.edu/>)). The process shows what the people would think if it were really thinking and could become more informed. In our polarized environment, such a deliberative and representative prelude to the campaign's official contests could start the campaign representing all of us. Iowa and New Hampshire hardly represent the country. Most of the electorate does not live in swing states, so those voters will only be peripherally involved even in the general election. Yet scientific sampling can draw on the whole country. Every voter in effect has an equal¹ chance. If the sample is surveyed both before and after it has really engaged the candidates, we could learn more about the candidates and about ourselves -- about the electorate's real concerns.

The presidential debates were first held in 1960 between Kennedy-Nixon with a gap of 16 years before the Carter-Ford debates in 1976. Sometimes ancient history is not completely irrelevant. Given the state of our campaign dialogue, might the system work much better if the visibility primary were made more deliberative?