

# Here's a concept: Have voters actually inform our politicians

By NEIL CARLSON & ALLISON RUDI • 22 HOURS AGO

*The Next Idea* (<http://michiganradio.org/programs/next-idea#stream/0>)

Let's face it: The unsettling truth is that too many of us aren't really sure whether democracy works anymore.

We are marinating in a bitter rhetorical sauce of claims that "Lansing is broken;" we're stewing up resentment over every stove in town. Too many of us think people are sheep, politicians are wolves, and that sheep transform into wolves the moment they hold public office.

Michiganders have become increasingly skeptical of all things political.

In July (<http://bridgemi.com/2015/07/legislature-gets-little-respect-from-state-voters-in-survey/>), a scant 20% approved of the Legislature's performance, and just 40% approved of the governor's.

Local government fares better ([http://www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/07/do\\_you\\_trust\\_your\\_government\\_m.html](http://www.mlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/07/do_you_trust_your_government_m.html)), but even its trusted status may be eroding.

Take road funding: Even when a rare coalition of both businesses and labor unions jointly campaigned for an urgent solution, our government wasn't able to field a proposal that passed voters' laugh test.

Our leaders believed they could overcome voters' skepticism about Proposal 1, but that was a misjudgment.

Now we're still feuding over potholes and waiting for a solution.

What kind of problem do we have? Is it a bad system that needs thorough structural reform? A bad people that need moral reform?

Unfortunately, even if your answer to either question is "Yes," it's unlikely that any effort to reform polity or people will succeed without strong, constructive public engagement. We won't get a working government just by demanding it.

An urgent problem is the mismatch between our increasingly complex society and our limited ways of consulting the public.

Our population has grown, our knowledge has increased, and our economy has diversified radically, but our basic political practices have hardly evolved. Our most recent innovation has been to make a competitive sport of wringing our hands.

What if our leaders actually understood the broad public's priorities deeply before proposing legislation? What if all we need to do to

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cultivate a better democracy is to implement a tried and tested method that can gradually restore trust in our government and each other?

### So what's the Next Idea?

Deliberative Polling (<http://cdd.stanford.edu/what-is-deliberative-polling/>) is a way to bring together the members of a diverse society to discuss issues and inform leaders about public opinion.

Dr. James Fishkin (<https://comm.stanford.edu/faculty-fishkin/>) of Stanford University's Center for Deliberative Democracy created this groundbreaking method of inclusive public engagement and civic education. Combining the strengths of scientific polling and deliberative forums, the innovation is simple, practical, and has been tested over 70 times. The resulting hybrid is a powerful new form of democratic participation.

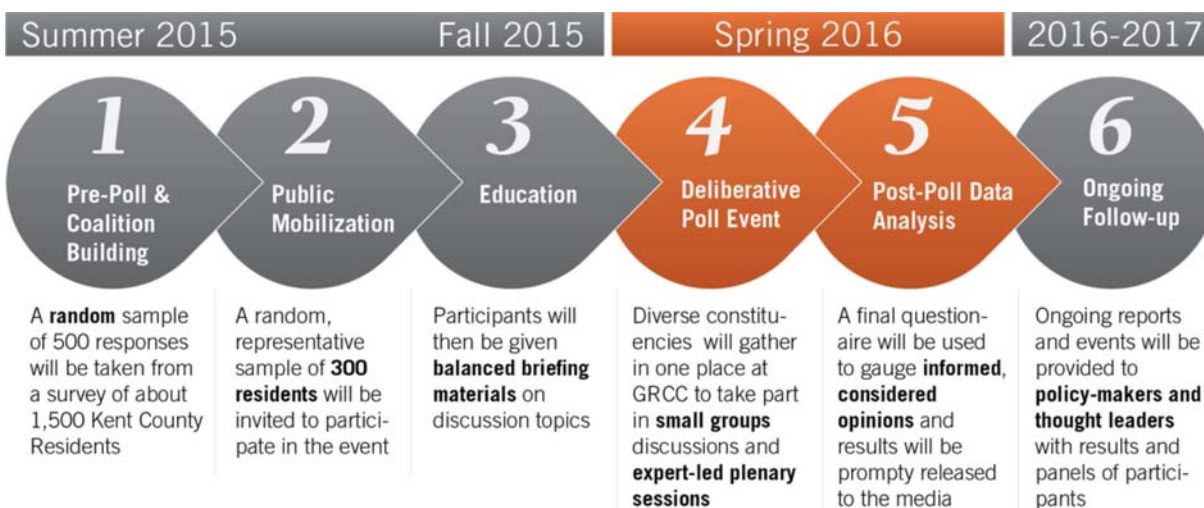
Public opinion polling can obtain an accurate picture of the public without the expense of a mass census or election. But such polls are notoriously thin and fickle; people may answer questions without much thought, and minor changes in a question's wording can have a huge impact on the results. In short, traditional polling is broad but shallow.

Deliberative forums — a refinement of town halls, focus groups, and juries — gather more informed and considered opinions, but they still tend to attract "the usual suspects." These events are not often representative — many voices are left out of the conversation because they are unable to attend, and those that do attend often push a special-issue agenda. In short, deliberative forums are deep but narrow.

Deliberative Polling is both more broadly representative and more deeply thoughtful.

Using the Deliberative Polling process, a random sample of residents are (1) surveyed; (2) recruited to a two-day event; and (3) provided with balanced briefing materials. At the main event (4), along with receiving transportation, hospitality, meals, childcare, and interpretation where needed, participants join in small group discussions and large group question-and-answer sessions with expert panels. Finally, (5) participants take a post-event survey, and (6) the show goes on the road to share the results. Resulting survey data and event transcripts are public; anyone can see whether a particular position gained or lost ground through deliberation, and why.

The results are a richer, more robust, more representative picture of public thinking.



[http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/michigan/files/styles/x\\_large/public/201509/deliberative\\_polling\\_image\\_0.png](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/michigan/files/styles/x_large/public/201509/deliberative_polling_image_0.png)

*A tentative timeline for the Kent County Deliberative Poll*

CREDIT GRAPHIC: JACK VAN ALLSBURG, CALVIN COLLEGE CENTER FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

### A Lansing precedent

Deliberative Polling is not new to Michigan.

A statewide sample ([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/spc/btp/projects/mich\\_summary.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/spc/btp/projects/mich_summary.html)) convened in Lansing in 2009 to discuss how to fund public services with declining tax revenues. The findings revealed surprising opportunity for compromise: support increased both for tax hikes on sales and income *and* for cuts in business taxes. It seems polarization may melt in the crucible of deliberation.

Why haven't we learned more from this Lansing experience?

Partly because the event stood alone with no sustained follow-up to explore the gift of the participants' effort.

What if we all pulled together to make representative public deliberation a standard best practice with robust local follow-through?

### The Kent County Deliberative Poll

We seek to bring Deliberative Polling to West Michigan as a permanent, visible feature of our regional political culture. We describe the initiative as the following:

- **The team** is a broad and growing coalition of civic and community leaders. Local institutions of higher education provide the core functions of coalition building, balanced independent research services, and event hospitality.

- **The tool** is Deliberative Polling. The Stanford team trains local small group moderators and oversees the main event. The local team will tenaciously bring the research findings and the participants themselves before the media, local community forums, and government officials.
- **The topic** is the bright future of transportation, with a focus on the implications of forthcoming plans like GR Forward (<http://grforward.org/>) to revive our rivers, lakes, and waterfronts.

We have zeroed in on the transportation topic because it has broad impact, there is ample research to sift, and we have some hard choices to make.

How much of our existing auto-centric system do we believe we should preserve?

How do we expect evolving technology to affect our investments?

How do we interleave the ever-shifting mix of pedestrians, bikes, boats, buses, cars, trucks, trains, and more?

How do we prefer to reconcile clean water and convenient mobility?

Do we want more parking lots? Or more places to go?

Yes, our infrastructure is crumbling and underfunded. But before we spend billions putting it all back just the way it was, let's have an equitable talk about our future priorities as a community. It might help us make wiser choices about what to rebuild and what to replace with something else. Residents from all walks of life need to be involved in these critical discussions, and they need the chance to learn facts and hear from each other.

If we don't engage in these conversations, we get the usual, unfortunate top-down pattern, depriving marginalized communities of a voice and depriving leaders of their wisdom. Major decisions about Michigan's future should be made with the considered advice of ordinary residents from every kind of neighborhood. Otherwise, we perpetuate the unbalanced power dynamics that have been the hallmark of political "business as usual."

Michigan's long-term future depends on making crucial decisions now. Deliberative Polling can help us decide which choices to make, and decide well.

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