Realizing Deliberative Democracy: 
Virtual and Face to Face Possibilities

James S. Fishkin
Departments of Communication and Political Science 
and
Centre for Deliberative Democracy 
Stanford University
Realizing Deliberative Democracy: 
Virtual and Face to Face Possibilities

James S. Fishkin

Abstract
The central, continuing problem of democratic reform has been to build institutions that realize two fundamental democratic aspirations--inclusion and thoughtfulness. On the one hand, we need institutions that somehow represent or include all the members of a polity. On the other hand, we need to consult those members under conditions where they are effectively motivated to think about the power they are being asked to exercise. All over the world, democratic reforms bring power to the people through institutions that increasingly emphasize inclusiveness. But the very conditions that allow for more inclusion seem to have undermined collective thoughtfulness. However, this trade-off is not inevitable. Rather it is due to the poverty of the institutional imagination that has guided most modern democratic reforms. This paper is aimed at expanding the democratic tool kit of mechanisms for public consultation. It is aimed at showing that it is indeed possible to combine inclusiveness and thoughtfulness--rather than force us to choose between them.

A version of this paper was presented in Hangzhou, China at the conference on “Deliberative Democracy and Chinese Practice of Participatory and Deliberative Institutions,” November 18-21, 2004

Please observe standard academic conventions for citation. For example:

Realizing Deliberative Democracy: Virtual and Face to Face Possibilities

James S. Fishkin

The Apparent Conflict

Why has it been thought that there is a conflict between the inclusiveness of institutions and the thoughtfulness with which citizens provide an input into the democratic process? Some of the main contentions can be briefly summarized as:

a) Voters may have passions or interests that can motivate dangerous factions.

b) Voters are too ill informed to deal with complex policy or political matters.

c) Voters are incapable of dealing with complex policy or political matters.

d) Voters are so disconnected from complex policy or political matters that they would prefer to have elites decide for them; they have no interest in being involved in inclusive public consultation.

e) Voters are subject to mechanisms of group psychology such as "polarization" that undermine the rationality of their choices. These mechanisms arise from group discussion, the very process that would seem most promising to raise the thoughtfulness of democratic inputs.

f) Voters have preferences that are sufficiently heterogeneous that their choices would produce "instability" (cycles violating transitivity) so that the resulting democratic decisions are subject to arbitrariness and manipulation.

Because these contentions are all well-known, I will simply take note of them now in order to frame our review of strategies that might overcome them. Our basic question is whether or not it is possible to avoid these apparent objections and at the same time, succeed in combining the two fundamental democratic aspirations of inclusion and thoughtfulness.

---

1 A version of this paper was presented in Hangzhou, China at the conference on “Deliberative Democracy and Chinese Practice of Participatory and Deliberative Institutions,” November 18-21, 2004

2 Dept of Communication and Dept of Political Science, Stanford University and Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University
Turning briefly to the first of these objections, American democracy was born in a debate over the founding in which Madison and Hamilton argued for a process of "successive filtrations" in which public views are "refined and enlarged" by "passing them through a chosen body of citizens" (to use the famous words of Federalist #10). The idea was to avoid the passions and interests of the public that might motivate "factions" adverse to the rights of others or the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. Consulting the public might be dangerous, it was thought. After all, the people had killed Socrates. The Americans had lived through Shays' rebellion. The founders wanted the cool reflections of deliberative representatives rather than the aroused passions or interests of the mass public. But to do so, they needed to create an elite "republic" that was insulated from the direct input of ordinary citizens. The Senate was selected by state legislatures; the President was selected by an Electoral College that was originally supposed to be a deliberative body (on a state by state basis). The constitution was adopted by a "convention" which was also supposed to be a representative, deliberative body. The resulting system was intended to be high on the thoughtfulness or quality of opinion (filtration or deliberation would serve the public good and protect against tyranny of the majority) but low on elements of inclusion like political equality and participation. The Founders' debate in the US suggests the question for modern democratic reform: is it possible to have a more inclusive system and avoid the problems the Founders envisaged with mass public input? Is the cool reflection of deliberation reserved only for elite representatives, or can it be conducted by the people themselves?

A second line of argument against combining inclusive and thoughtful mass consultation is raised by the whole line of democratic reform that greeted the project of the American founders, beginning with concerns expressed by the Anti Federalists and moving through populist and progressive reforms right up until our own day. The US now directly elects its Senators; many states conduct referenda and other ballot initiatives; the development of public opinion polling has led to constant informal public consultation. Yet these processes have revealed that the public has little information about the issues it is consulted about. The issue can range from whether or not Iraq had weapons of mass destruction to whether or not, at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a member of NATO. The public has shockingly little correct knowledge even
though educational levels have gone up dramatically since World War II. One widespread explanation for the mass public's low level of information is "rational ignorance." If I have one vote in millions, why should I spend a lot of time investing in more information to make an informed choice. My individual vote or opinion is extraordinarily unlikely to make any difference. Yet our aspirations for public input would seem to depend crucially on citizens being informed. The apparent conflict is that if we aspire to more inclusion, and directly consult a mass public of millions, we find that that it is subject to rational ignorance, undermining the thoughtfulness that can be attributed to the people being consulted.

A third line of argument against the possibility of simultaneously fulfilling the aspirations toward inclusion and thoughtfulness, is the idea that the public may not have the competence to deal with complex policy or political matters. To the extent this is the case, then moves toward more mass participation will bring in people who are incapable of living up to the democratic role assigned to them. A recent statement of this position can be found in Richard Posner's critique of deliberative democracy. He argues that there is no use consulting the public about substantive policy. All we should expect from democracy is a competitive struggle for the people's vote, along the lines offered previously by Joseph Schumpeter. We get a peaceful decision about the circulation of elites--elites who will take relatively similar positions in order to compete in the same electoral space. But the will of the people is more or less meaningless as the public cannot be expected to have thoughtful or well formed opinions on any substantive matters. The more we practice inclusiveness and bring the mass public into the process, the more we get away from the competent decisions of elites.

A fourth argument is a variant of the third. As advocates of "Stealth Democracy" argue, the public does not really want to be bothered by the details of public policy. An impediment to combining inclusion and thoughtfulness is that if you give the public such opportunities, they will have little or no interest in exercising it. They would rather just trust competent elites to make decisions for them.

---

A fifth argument is that even if we brought the public into democratic processes, we would not contribute to the collective thoughtfulness of the process because there are debilitating patterns of group psychology--polarization--that prevent the mass public from dealing with the substantive merits of political or policy questions. Cass Sunstein has argued that the very process that might bring some thoughtfulness to the political process--group discussion--brings pathology. He calls it "polarization" and he means a process whereby groups go to extremes. If there is an issue for which a midpoint can be defined, if the group starts out on one side of the midpoint, it will move after discussion further to that side. If it starts out on the other side, it will move further to that side. The idea is that because of an "imbalance in the argument pool" (more arguments being voiced on one side than another) and because of a "social comparison effect" (people wanting to be publicly identified with the winning viewpoint) this process will replicate itself regardless of content. Sunstein has confirmed his hypothesis with experiments with mock juries.⁶

A sixth argument is that the attempt to take democracy seriously at the level of the mass public (the product of inclusion) is likely to undermine the collective thoughtfulness of democratic results because the public is likely to have such ill thought out preferences that one could get cycles violating transitivity. This embarrassing fact is only covered up by "structure induced equilibrium" that covers up the cycles (either by limiting the alternatives to two, or allowing for agenda manipulation of the choices considered). But the normative conclusion is not affected. The voice of the people if it were consulted directly, would be arbitrary because pair wise comparisons among the alternatives could yield cycles with preferences of B over A, C over B but A over C. From this perspective it is better not to make any claims about the public will and limit the advantages of democracy to the peaceful circulation of elites.

---

Eight Forms of Public Consultation

Method of Selection:

Public Opinion
A. Raw  1A SLOPS  2A Some Polls  3A Most Polls  4A Referendum Democracy
B. Refined  1B Discussion  2B Citizens  3B Deliberative  4B “Deliberation .
Groups Juries, etc Polls Day”

The simple classification above focuses on two issues: what and who? Consider two fundamental distinctions: the first has to do with what form of public opinion is being assessed, the second has to do with whose opinion it is that is being assessed. When we ask about forms of public opinion, we are asking about the thoughtfulness of public input. When we ask who is included, we are asking about how the aspiration for inclusion is implemented.

When considering forms of public opinion, let us say that opinion is “refined” if it is the product of deliberation exposing it to a wide range of alternative views supported by sincere arguments and reasonably accurate information. Refined opinion is informed--informed about competing views and facts sincerely viewed as relevant by proponents of different positions. People are aware of the arguments and have reflected on them or thought about them. By contrast, we will say that opinion is “raw” if it is not the product of such deliberation.

The other distinction concerns whose opinion is being consulted. While the classifications I will focus on do not exhaust all the possibilities, they cover the principal practical alternatives. The people consulted can be self-selected; they can be selected by some method of sampling that attempts to be representative without probability sampling; they can be chosen by random sampling; or they can constitute virtually all voters (or
members of the group being consulted). When these two dimensions are combined, then the eight possibilities in the above chart emerge.

First, I will fill out these categories and second, I will turn to which possibilities offer the prospect of answering or avoiding the six objections.

The first category, 1A is already being implemented, especially on the internet. Norman Bradburn of the University of Chicago has coined an acronym SLOP for “self-selected listener opinion poll”. Before the internet, radio call-in shows would commonly ask for responses by telephone to some topic. The respondents to SLOPS are not selected by scientific random sampling as in public opinion polls. The respondents instead, simply select themselves. They are predominantly those who feel more intensely or feel especially motivated. Sometimes, they are organized. The SLOP, it is thought, gets “grass roots” opinion. However, in the parlance of American lobbyists, sometimes the response is something more organized and synthetic—the impression of grass roots that is really “astroturf”.

A good example of the dangers of SLOPS came with the world consultation that Time magazine organized about the “person of the century”. Time asked for votes in several categories, including greatest thinker, greatest statesman, greatest entertainer, greatest captain of industry. Strangely, one person got by far the most votes in every category, and it turned out to be the same person. Who was this person who towered above all rivals in every category? Ataturk. The people of Turkey organized to vote, by post card, on the internet, by fax and produced millions more votes, as a matter of national pride than the rest of the world could muster for any candidate, just through individual, unorganized voting.7

Media organizations routinely conduct SLOPS on the internet on a wide range of political or social matters. A SLOP involves visitors to a web site, gives people a sense of empowerment (they are registering their opinions) but it produces data that is misleading, that offers only a distorted picture of public opinion. To take just one example, SLOPS, at the time of impeachment in the US routinely showed large majorities in favor, while scientific polls showed a completely different picture. Those feeling most intensely bothered to register their views, sometimes more than once.

It is often thought that technology might facilitate the better realization of ancient forms of democracy. But SLOPS hark back to the practices of ancient Sparta, not ancient Athens. In Sparta there was a practice called the Shout, where candidates could pack the hall and the one who got the most applause was the one elected.\(^8\) Later we will turn to a different category that realizes Athenian rather than Spartan democracy.

The difficulty with category 1A is that it offers a picture of public opinion that is neither representative nor deliberative. It offers a picture of uninformed opinion that is also distorted and partial in who it includes. If it is a mirror of public opinion, it is more like a carnival fun house mirror than one that reproduces what it reflects.

An alternative to the SLOPS of category 1A is the possibility of serious deliberation, refined public opinion, produced among self-selected groups. Discussion groups fill out Category 1B. If the discussion groups offer the opportunity to weigh the main alternative arguments that fellow citizens would want raised on an issue, then they can achieve a measure of deliberation on an issue even if the participants are not a good mirror of the entire population. The Kettering Foundation supports a large network of “National Issues Forums” (NIF) in the US and in several other countries, in which thousands of self-selected participants deliberate conscientiously and sincerely with briefing materials that offer a balanced and accurate basis for discussion.\(^9\) These participants meet in churches, schools, neighborhood venues and spend hours in serious consideration of the alternatives. However, their conclusions, while filtered or deliberative are not representative of the views of the entire public.

While there are many discussion forums on the internet, it is worth pausing to note the difference between deliberative practices on the internet and those in face to face discussion. When NIF participants gather for a discussion forum, they can evaluate each others’ verbal arguments face to face; they have an extended period for arguments and concerns on one side to be answered by responses on an opposing side, they have an agenda of materials that cover the issue to make sure that they are at least aware of the main alternative arguments that have been previously voiced and they have a moderator to ensure that everyone in the forum talks, that no one dominates the discussion and that

there is an atmosphere of mutual respect that permits the respondents to listen to each other.

Can such a forum be reproduced on the internet? One difficulty is that the internet in its present form tends to be text based. The visual and verbal expression of a face to face discussion is one that is open to participants even if they are less educated or less comfortable with written materials. An NIF forum lasting a few hours gets a concentrated dose of attention and participation. Many forums on the internet involve respondents for only brief bursts of activity. Internet democracy sometimes seems as if it is suited for citizens with attention deficit disorder, zooming from one site to another rather than offering sustained dialogue. On the other hand, the internet offers the advantage that it is especially suited to asynchronous communication. People do not all have to be active at the same moment. Issues raised at one point can be responded to at a different time. In addition to the convenience asynchronous communication offers, it has the advantage that it may promote thought and reflection over a more extended period of time.

As technology improves we can imagine that non-text based, face to face discussion will become easier and easier. As broadband spreads, the interactions could approach something more like two way television than like an exchange of emails. As educational institutions attempt to adapt classes to the internet the same apparatus of discussion useful for education can be used for democracy. And as the availability of access to the internet spreads, access to the poorer and less literate strata of the population will mean that self-selected forums or discussion groups are not just from one side of the digital divide.

As discussion methods become better adapted to the internet, even for the less literate, the use of on line discussion groups serves the value of democratic deliberation. It contributes to creating more informed citizens. They do not, however, achieve the basic goal of realizing both of the values under discussion simultaneously. If the voice of the people is both representative and deliberative, then it combines major elements of inclusiveness and thoughtfulness. SLOPS are neither. Discussion groups achieve

---

9 For a good overview of these activities and the vision behind them, see David Mathews Politics for People (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
deliberation among unrepresentative groups. For that reason they serve the enlightenment of the participants, but they do not offer a voice for “we the people”.

Category 2A combines raw public opinion with methods of selection attempting to achieve some degree of representativeness—but that do not employ probability sampling. Some public opinion polls fall into this category. Those employing quota sampling, a practice still common in many democratic countries outside the U.S., justify their method as an attempt to approximate probability sampling. Some spectacular failures, such as the 1948 Dewey/Truman debacle and the 1992 British General Election have been blamed at least in part on the use of quota sampling.\footnote{For the latter, see Roger Jowell et al., “The 1992 British General Election: The Failure of the Polls”, Public Opinion Quarterly, 57, (1993), 238-63.}

A much more rudimentary form of non-probability sampling has been employed on-line. Harris Interactive, for example, employs a large self-selected panel and applies weights to the responses to attempt to reflect American public opinion as a whole, including those who are not on-line. One can sign up to participate in the Harris Poll at a company sponsored web site.\footnote{One registers at: http://vr.harrispollonline.com/register/register.asp} Any attempt to weight responses from those who first put themselves forward must be viewed as fundamentally different, and deficient, as compared to methods in which the researchers first approach the respondents.

Category 2B employs non-random methods of selection with attempts to arrive at more deliberative public opinion. There are a variety of methods of public consultation that fit this category. So-called “citizens juries” use quota samples to select small numbers of participants (typically 12 or 18) to deliberate for several days or even weeks on public issues. Consensus Conferences begin with self-selection (soliciting respondents through newspaper ads) and then use quotas to attempt to approximate representativeness. These methods often suffer from the same problem noted above. They begin with self-selection and then employ such small numbers that any claims to representativeness cannot be credibly established.\footnote{These methods often suffer from the same problem noted above. They begin with self-selection and then employ such small numbers that any claims to representativeness cannot be credibly established.}

Category 3A, combining probability samples with raw opinion is exemplified, of course, by the public opinion poll, in its most developed form. It avoids the distorted representativeness of SLOPS as well as the more modest distortions of non-random
sampling. Just as Gallup vanquished the Literary Digest by using quota sampling for the effective launch of the public opinion poll in the 1936 US Presidential election, this category, 3A, trumps the SLOPS of 1A as well as the quota sampling of 2A.\textsuperscript{13}

Public opinion polling reflecting raw public opinion offers a thin “top of the head” expression of the public voice. On complex policy or political questions, the views represented by polls are crippled by what Anthony Downs called “rational ignorance”.\textsuperscript{14} If I have only one vote in millions, why should I spend a lot of time and effort becoming informed (as we would like ideal citizens to do) when my individual vote or opinion will not make any appreciable difference? In addition, the views reported by polls on complex political or policy matters are often crippled by a second factor—the tendency to report opinions that are not only based on little thought or reflection, but that may not exist at all. Phantom opinions or “non-attitudes” are reported by polls because respondents almost never wish to admit that they do not know, even when offered elaborate opportunities for saying so. Building on the classic work of Phil Converse of the University of Michigan, George Bishop and his colleagues at the University of Cincinnati dramatized this issue with their study of attitudes towards the so-called “Public Affairs Act of 1975”. Large percentages of the public offered an opinion even though the act was fictional. The Washington Post more recently celebrated the twentieth unanniversary of the non-existent “Public Affairs Act of 1975” by asking respondents about its “repeal”. The sample was split, with half being told that President Clinton wanted to repeal the act and half being told that the “Republican Congress” wanted its repeal. While such responses were based on a minimal amount of information (or misinformation provided to the participants, since the act did not exist in the first place) the information base was really just a response to a cue about who was for the proposal and who was against it.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Another problem is that these research designs do not permit evaluation of how those agreeing to participate compare to those who do not.

\textsuperscript{13} Gallup abandoned quota sampling after the 1948 election. The advantage of probability sampling was demonstrated by the success of the Survey Research Center at Michigan in that election.


\textsuperscript{15} For a good overview of this work by George Bishop and the replication by the Washington Post under the direction of Richard Morin, see “Leaders, the Public and Democracy” Society (July 1995) Vol 35, No. 5, pg. 2.
Scientific random samples are being experimented with for internet democracy. The difficulty of course, is that a large part of the population, even in the United States, is not on line. A pioneering effort is being made by Knowledge Networks to provide computers (web tv’s) to random samples of respondents. This step effectively opens up the possibility of credible survey research on the internet. However, it does not deal with the fact that just like any other form of good polling, the opinions represented in this kind of internet polling may be “top of the head” or nearly non-existent, when the public is inattentive or lacking in knowledge or information. However, as we shall see below, we are collaborating with Knowledge Networks to conduct Deliberative Polling online.

During this period when so much of the population does not have computer access that machines have to be provided, there are some additional practical difficulties. If machines, such as web tv’s are provided, then for how long? There are two sides to this problem—attrition and sensitization. The attrition problem is just that people who may sign on have to be maintained. In any panel people drop out and the representativeness of the sample must be monitored. That is a practical problem that can be dealt with by appropriate incentives (which of course will affect the expense) and which can be monitored by comparison to the original baseline sample or other surveys. If strong enough efforts are taken to keep the response rate high and to keep the panel intact, then there is no reason in principle why such a strategy should not do as well as good conventional surveys.

The second problem, sensitization occurs with any panel. Presumably, if people are being given computers, they are expected to participate for some significant period of time. The longer they are self-conscious members of the panel, the more they are likely to diverge from the rest of the population. They will pay more attention knowing that they may be asked questions. Of course, the Deliberative Polling strategy we will discuss below faces the same problem. But Deliberative Polling does not present itself as offering a mirror of actual opinion, but rather a picture of counterfactual yet more informed opinion. On line panels may move somewhat in the direction of being more engaged and informed. There is the danger, to be monitored, that they will fall somewhere between
being a good mirror of actual opinion on the one hand, and a good picture of really more informed opinion on the other.

Deliberative Polling, which fits in our category 3B, was developed explicitly to combine random sampling with deliberation. They are meant to include everyone under conditions where the public can think. Deliberative Polling attempts to employ social science to uncover what deliberative public opinion would be on an issue by conducting a quasi experiment, and then it inserts those deliberative conclusions into the actual public dialogue, or, in some cases, the actual policy process.

Deliberative Polling begins with a concern about the defects likely to be found in ordinary public opinion—the incentives for rational ignorance applying to the mass public and the tendency for sample surveys to turn up non-attitudes or phantom opinions (as well as very much “top of the head” opinions that approach being non-attitudes) on many public questions. At best, ordinary polls offer a snapshot of public opinion as it is, even when the public has little information, attention or interest in the issue. Deliberative Polling, by contrast, is meant to offer a representation of what the public would think about an issue under good conditions. Every aspect of the process is designed to facilitate informed and balanced discussion. After taking an initial survey, participants are invited for a weekend of face to face deliberation; they are given carefully balanced and vetted briefing materials to provide an initial basis for dialogue. They are randomly assigned to small groups for discussions with trained moderators, and encouraged to ask questions arising from the small group discussions to competing experts and politicians in larger plenary sessions. The moderators attempt to establish an atmosphere where participants listen to each other and no one is permitted to dominate the discussion. At the end of the weekend, participants take the same confidential questionnaire as on first contact and the resulting judgments in the final questionnaire are usually broadcast along with edited proceedings of the discussions throughout the weekend.17 The weekend microcosm tends to be highly representative, both attitudinally and demographically, as compared to the

---

16 Knowledge Networks, is releasing participants after three years because of the sensitization problem. See Michael Lewis “The Two-Bucks a Minute Democracy” New York Times Magazine, November 5, 2000, pp. 64-67.
entire baseline survey and to census data about the population. In every case thus far, there have also been a number of large and statistically significant changes of opinion over the weekend. Considered judgments are often different from the top of the head attitudes solicited by conventional polls. Looking at the full panoply of Deliberative Polls we believe that about two thirds of the opinion items change significantly following deliberation.

But what do the results represent? Our respondents are able to overcome the incentives for rational ignorance normally applying to the mass public. Instead of one vote in millions, they have, in effect, one vote in a few hundred in the weekend sample, and one voice in fifteen or so in the small group discussions. The weekend is organized so as to make credible the claim that their voice matters. They overcome apathy, disconnection, inattention and initial lack of information. Participants from all social locations change in the deliberation. From knowing that someone is educated or not, economically advantaged or not, one cannot predict change in the deliberations. We do know, however, from knowledge items, that becoming informed on the issues predicts change on the policy attitudes. In that sense, deliberative public opinion is both informed and representative. As a result, it is also, almost inevitably, counter-factual. The public will rarely, if ever, be motivated to become as informed and engaged as our weekend microcosms.

The idea is that if a counterfactual situation is morally relevant, why not do a serious social science experiment—rather than merely engage in informal inference or arm chair empiricism— to determine what the appropriate counter-factual might actually look like? And if that counterfactual situation is both discoverable and normatively relevant, why not then let the rest of the world know about it? Just as Rawls’s original position can be thought of as having a kind of recommending force, the counterfactual representation of public opinion identified by the Deliberative Poll also recommends to the rest of the population some conclusions that they ought to take seriously. They ought to take the conclusions seriously because the process represents everyone under conditions where they could think.

The idea may seem unusual in that it melds normative theory with an empirical agenda—to use social science to create quasi experiments that will uncover deliberative public opinion. But most social science experiments are aimed at creating a counterfactual—the effect of the treatment condition. In this effort to fuse normative and empirical research agendas, the trick is to identify a treatment condition that embodies the appropriate normative relevance.

Two general questions can be raised about all research designs—questions of internal and external validity.\(^{18}\) Sample surveys are relatively high on external validity: we can be fairly confident about generalizing the results to larger populations. By contrast, most social science experiments done in laboratory settings are high in internal validity: we can be fairly confident that the apparent effects are, indeed, the result of the experimental treatments. However, experiments done with college students, for example, lack a basis for external validity if the aim is to find out something about the general population.

If a social science experiment were to have relatively high internal validity, where we could be confident that the effects resulted from the normatively desirable treatment, and if it were also to have relatively high external validity where we could be confident about its generalizability to the entire citizen population, then the combination of those two properties would permit us to generalize the consequences of the normatively desirable property to the entire citizenry. We could be confident in the picture of a counterfactual public reaching its conclusions under normatively desirable conditions. In other words, if an experiment with deliberation were high on internal validity, then we could be confident that the conclusions were the result of deliberation (and related factors such as information). And if such an experiment were high on external validity then we could be confident about generalizing it to the relevant public of, say, all eligible voters. Only with both kinds of validity would the quasi experiment called Deliberative Polling have any claim to represent the considered judgments of the people.

We have just completed three full scale Deliberative Polling projects on the internet. The first, culminating in January 2002, was parallel to a national face to face

Deliberative Poll on American foreign policy. The second, earlier this year, took place during the Presidential primary season. The third has just been completed in this presidential election. In all three cases, the method was basically the same.

A national random sample recruited by Knowledge Networks deliberates in moderated small group discussions on a weekly basis. Computers are provided to those who do not have them. Microphones are provided to all participants so that the discussions can take place using voice rather than text. Special software is employed that allows the small group participants to keep track of who is talking, who wishes to talk next. On a weekly basis, the discussions proceed for an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes with carefully balanced briefing materials; during the discussions, the participants identify key questions that they wish competing experts to answer. Our media partner, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions (including the Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer) provide the competing expert answers and distribute them to the participants in between the weekly discussions. After several weeks of these discussions, the participants take the same survey as at the beginning. Meanwhile a separate control group that does not deliberate takes the same questionnaire at the beginning and end of the process.

In the foreign policy Deliberative Poll, the results online were broadly similar as face to face. The respondents came to take more responsibility for world problems, preferring increases in foreign aid, more resources devoted to Aids in Africa and world hunger, and more multilateral cooperation on military matters. These responses were plausibly connected to large increases in information (as measured by separate information questions). In the Presidential primary deliberative poll, the respondents also showed large increases in knowledge, both about policies and about the particular candidate positions. And in contrast to the control group, the issues played a major part in their candidate preferences. In the control group, the evaluation of candidate traits dwarfed all other factors, while in the deliberative treatment group, issues became very important as well.

In the most recent online study, there were also large information gains as well as changes on some key opinion items about the war in Iraq and President Bush's tax cuts. These changes hold up in contrast to the control group. It is clear that significant numbers
of the sample changed their views and their voting intentions. This online Deliberative Poll was parallel to 17 face to face Deliberative Polls held in conjunction with PBS stations in key cities around the country. The entire event was called "PBS Deliberation Day" and piloted the concept of Deliberation Day that we will discuss below.

Eventually, Deliberative Polling on the internet promises great advantages in terms of cost and in terms of flexibility in the time required of participants. National Deliberative Polls require the logistics of national transportation, hotels and food. Two face to face Deliberative Polls have even had official airlines (American Airlines for the National Issues Convention in Austin, Texas and Ansett for Australia Deliberates). Face to face Deliberative Polls also require that respondents give up an entire weekend for the deliberations as well as for travel to them. While we have used funds to ameliorate practical difficulties (paying for child care and even in one case providing a researcher to milk a respondent’s cows during her absence), it is obvious that we lose some respondents because of the demands we place on them. Internet based Deliberative Polls offer the promise of greater convenience and continuing dialogue.

Even in the best case for realizing category 3B there is a limitation to what is accomplished. Deliberative Polling, whether on-line or face to face, involves only a scientific random sample of the population. The thoughtful and informed views created in the experiment are not widely shared because the bulk of the public is still, in all likelihood, disengaged and inattentive because it is subject to the incentives for rational ignorance that routinely apply to citizens in the large scale nation state. Deliberative Polling overcomes those incentives for a microcosm, but leaves the rest of the population largely untouched (we say largely since the rest of the population may well witness the process through the media).

The last two categories, 4A and 4B, parallel the previous ones, except that when ideally realized, they would offer the full embodiment of the kind of result represented by scientific sampling in 3A and 3B. If everyone somehow participated in mass consultations such as voting or referendum democracy, then 4A would represent the same views as those offered by public opinion polls in 3A. Of course, one problem with referendum democracy and other forms of mass consultation that attempt to involve the bulk of the mass public, is that turnout is often so defective that only a portion of the
public participates. Sometimes the participation in referendums or national elections is so low, in fact, that the distinction between mass plebescitary democracy and self-selected samples in SLOPS becomes difficult to draw. Of course, there are possible institutional remedies for low turnout. Australia has a long tradition of compulsory voting, fining non-voters, that has worked quite well to provide one of the highest turnouts in the world in national elections. However, it is well established that compulsory voting has done little or nothing to improve the level of knowledge or engagement among voters, just the level of participation.

The last possibility, 4B, is the most ambitious. Just as conventional polling (3A) models actual top of the head opinion in the mass public, which is represented by plebescitary democracy (4A) in our scheme, in the same way, Deliberative Polling 3B, models mass deliberative public opinion 4B. The latter, however, is usually counterfactual. The mass public, in other words, is usually not deliberating; it usually does not have considered judgments on most policy issues. How could this counterfactual possibility be realized? How could it be realized in either a face to face context or on line?

Bruce Ackerman and I have a proposal. We call it “Deliberation Day.” The problem for the Deliberative Poll was to motivate a microcosm of the entire population to overcome the incentives for rational ignorance and to engage in enough substantive face to face discussion to arrive at informed judgments—informed about the issues and the main competing arguments about them that other citizens would offer. But it it one thing to imagine doing this for a microcosm; quite another to imagine doing it for the entire population. Gallup’s vision was that the combination of the media and polling could turn the entire country into “one great room.” The media would send out competing views and the polls would report the public’s judgments and it would be as if the entire country were in one town meeting. This vision foundered, however, on the lack of a social context that would encourage small group deliberation. If everyone is one great room in

---

19 See Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin Deliberation Day (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2004).
20 For a summary of this original vision and an argument that it is better achieved by the Deliberative Poll see my Voice of the People, pp. 76-80 and 161-76.
the large scale nation state, the room is so big that no one is listening. A different, more decentralized strategy is required.

We propose a national holiday in which all voters would be invited to participate in local, randomly assigned discussion groups as a preparation to the voting process a week later. Candidates for the major parties would make presentations transmitted by national media and local small group discussions would identify key questions that would be directed to local party representatives in relatively small scale town meetings held simultaneously all over the country. Incentives would be paid for each citizen to participate. The cost, while massive, would make democracy far more meaningful as it would provide for an input from the public that involved most people and that also led to a large mass of citizens informed on the issues and the competing arguments. If the incentives for participation in this national holiday activity, “Deliberation Day”, worked and people actually became well informed, it would make real the counterfactual deliberative opinion represented by the quasi-experiment of the Deliberative Poll. Candidate behavior and advertising would have to adjust to the fact that voters would have become informed on the issues. The anticipation of such a deliberative public could do a great deal to transform the rest of the public dialogue.

While full scale realization of this idea is only a far off possibility, it is meant to dramatize a different way of thinking about democratic reform. The major cost of the reform is the new holiday. We propose to take an existing holiday, Presidents Day and devote it to picking our next president. We have actually piloted the idea in this 2004 Presidential Election. In 17 cities, locally televised Deliberative Polls were conducted, mostly on the same day, with statistical microcosms that represented what the local publics would think if they were all deliberating. In many cases these local deliberations produced significant knowledge gains and changes of opinion. The local/national project also dramatized the value of putting a human face on opinion change to enrich political communication as well as the prospects for creating civic engagement through discussion in local communities around the country.

There are two categories in our scheme that achieve both values—3B and 4B—Deliberative Polling and Deliberation Day. Deliberative Polling achieves inclusiveness through a form of political equality—everyone has an equal chance of being selected
through random sampling. The latter achieves inclusiveness through mass participation. Ideally, everyone does actually participate. In both cases, an important new increment of thoughtfulness is added by the deliberative process itself--briefing materials, small group discussions, questions and answers from competing experts, opportunities to reflect together on new information and competing arguments in a safe public space. Both strategies--Deliberative Polling and Deliberation Day--combine inclusiveness and greater thoughtfulness. Both are meant to be antidotes to shrinking sound bite democracy and disaffected mass participation. Both are realizations of the same pattern of deliberative practice--small group discussions alternated with plenary sessions with competing experts. The difference is whether this kind of experience is undertaken by scientific samples or by something approaching the entire mass public. The former achieves inclusiveness via scientific sampling; the latter achieves it via mass participation.

The kind of deliberative democracy embodied in both efforts offers a line of response to the objections with which we started.

First, the original objection of the American founders to direct public consultation was that it would open the door to mob rule; the people had killed Socrates in ancient Athens. The public would not engage in the cool and dispassionate reason necessary to solve public problems--a form of reason that could only be expected of representatives. However, our experience with mass deliberative institutions in the form of deliberative polls strongly supports the view that if the right social context is created, the public will consider arguments on the merits, will take account of new information and will be sensitive to the public interest. The norms of civil discourse in a carefully constructed safe public space offer little scope for the passions or interests that might fuel "tyranny of the majority" adverse to the rights of others.

Second, while it is true that voters tend to be ill informed about most public policy or political issues most of the time, it is possible to create institutions that change the incentives for rational ignorance. In preparing for serious discussions in which they will be part of a small group, people pay attention, anticipate the need for information and become more informed. All of our efforts, Deliberative Polling and the pilot for Deliberation Day, show significant knowledge gains.
Third, critics have claimed that voters are simply incapable of dealing with complex policy or political issues. However, the changes of opinion we see in Deliberative Polls show improvements in rationality in two senses. First, the people who change are the ones who become more informed. The changes are driven by information gains. Second there is a tighter connection between values, empirical premises (assumptions about causal connections) and policy attitudes after deliberation than before. The changes following deliberation are far from arbitrary. They are the product of considered judgments.

Fourth, critics claim that the public is so disconnected from the policy process that they would prefer not to be involved. They are correct that there is often substantial alienation and disconnection. But the fact that voters subjected to negative attack ads and manipulative sound bites feel this way says nothing about how they would react to meaningful opportunities to become more engaged and informed. Our experience is that voters welcome the opportunity and view it as something that transforms their connection to the political process and their sense of efficacy and likelihood of continuing political involvement. Given the right institutional design this problem can be overcome.

Fifth, Sunstein's claim of polarization is based on mock jury experiments. Our data show that the likelihood of polarization is sensitive to the exact institutional design. The mechanisms that apparently produce polarization (an imbalance in the argument pool favoring one side, a social approval effect in which people like to side with the more popular position) can be muted by designs that ensure balance and allow for anonymous final choice. Evidence from the Deliberative Poll demonstrates that while half the issues show movement away from the mean, half show movement toward the mean, adding up to no consistent pattern. Apparently, there are elements of balance in the Deliberative Poll--moderators, competing experts in the panels, balanced briefing materials that allow for a sufficiently full airing of competing arguments. In addition, the participants do not have to finally show where they come down on the issue since their views are gathered at

---

the end through confidential questionnaires. Sunstein has admitted that his "law of group polarization" has an apparent exception in the case of the Deliberative Poll.22

Lastly, there is a line of criticism that the danger in trying to consult the mass public is that, unlike elites, their preferences are sufficiently heterogeneous or variable, that the public will is essentially "meaningless" to use a word offered by William Riker.23 There will be cycles violating transitivity (e.g. endorsing choice B over A, C over B but A over C.) Because of these variegated preferences, the collective reasonableness or thoughtfulness of democratic decisions would be undermined if those decisions were brought to the mass public. However, as Duncan Black showed years ago, such cycles are impossible if the voters share an underlying dimension so that their preferences are "single peaked." In our Deliberative Polling research program, we have shown that the percentage of respondents who share the same single peaked dimension tends to increase after deliberation. And in collaboration with Christian List, we have shown that the likelihood of cycles goes down as that percentage goes up.24 While cycles are far more rare than critics who employ this argument allege, the increase in single peakedness shows that deliberative democracy has more protection against the instability of cycles than does conventional public opinion. People come to a shared "meta understanding" of the problem if they discuss it together--even if they do not agree to the solutions to those problems.

Collective thoughtfulness is indeed compatible with greater inclusion, provided we are inventive in new institutional designs. Deliberation allows for the mass public to think in the public interest, to become more informed, to discover its capacities to solve public problems, to become engaged as well as informed, to decide on the merits rather than on the basis of group psychology and to arrive at non-arbitrary expressions of collective political will. While this research program is far from concluded, the initial results of our experiments are all very promising for the prospect of bringing deliberation to mass democracy and thus include everyone under conditions where they can think.

22 Sunstein, "Law" pp. 97-98.