

The Citizen Engagement Round Table: Deliberative Polling

April 17, 1996

In Attendance: L. Bergeron de Villiers, R. Doering, M. Fortier, M. Hynna, H. Lacombe, R. Lafleur, J. Stagg, K. Stanley, G. Stewart, N. Wildgoose: James Fishkin (speaker); Bill Blaikie, Hugh Winsor (special guests); C. McQuillan, M. O'Neil, T. Plumptre, J. Walker (IOG).

The roundtable met to discuss the utility of deliberative polling as a tool to enhance citizen engagement in public policy development. Following a short introduction to the subject by Maureen O'Neil, Dr. James Fishkin, Chair of the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin and the architect of deliberative polling, was introduced to the participants. Dr. Fishkin's presentation outlined the theoretical background and methodological processes which constitute deliberative polling; to illuminate the discussion, he employed several visual and anecdotal cues from previously executed deliberative polls. Dr. Fishkin's presentation was followed by questions and considerable discussion from the group, which included special guests from the media (Hugh Winsor of the Globe and Mail) and politics (Bill Blaikie, House Leader of the Federal NDP).

INTRODUCTION: Maureen O'Neil

Maureen O'Neil welcomed the group to the 1996 Institute On Governance Citizen Engagement Roundtable Series. Following a short description of the role and function of the Institute On Governance, she provided a brief overview of issues surrounding citizen engagement.

People want to have more say in how policies and programs are designed by government. Coincidentally, resources (human and financial) available to government are severely constrained and governments must decide what are the essential tasks facing them. Asking citizens to participate in making these choices would help to resolve both problems.

The question for public executives is now not *whether* to engage citizens in public policy debate, but *how to do so* in a way which is cost effective, responsive, timely and which balances public expectations against public good. Deliberative polling is an approach to consider in such a role.

PRESENTATION: James Fishkin

*Citizen Engagement: Deliberative Polling
Institute On Governance*

Deliberative polling is a new form of public opinion research which hinges on an idea that is not so new - that for democracy to thrive and prosper, citizens must be closely engaged in the processes of public policy development. What makes it new and interesting is that it utilizes television as its central communications tool. What also makes this process work is that it can address issues at the local, state (Provincial) or Federal level.

Democratic institutions were created to involve citizens in their own governance. However, for a number of reasons, citizen disengagement from the political process has become a fixture of the modern political landscape, both during and between electoral contests. This disengagement has grown to a point where it challenges the democratic order as it has been known.

Traditional polling attempts to act as a partial substitute for democratic input (between election campaigns), but it fails to meet the criteria necessary for citizens to execute their assigned democratic role. There are two reasons for this: First, traditional polling only generates surface level, "top of mind" responses from respondents, which often reflect underlying biases, some of which are based on misinformation. Second, the polling process is uni-directional and quantitative, so there is no shared learning stemming from dialogue, and responses are often pigeonholed into artificially created categories.

Townhall meetings have recently emerged as a solution to this problem, and some observers have equated these with deliberative polls. A deliberative poll is not the same as a town meeting, however. Deliberative polls utilize a random sample to bring participants together, ensuring that disengaged citizens become part of the process. Town hall meetings tend to have the most engaged citizens involved, bringing together a "selected sample" of interest groups who already possess hardened opinions.

There are two additional defects which plague modes of citizen engagement in our current political context. The first problem can be referred to as "rational ignorance": an individual, observing that they have only one vote in millions, will resign themselves to political disengagement. This perceived inability to make a difference during an electoral process causes an individual to disengage from the political system as a whole (and all of the issues which inform governance).

The second of these is what has been referred to as "non-attitudes". When individuals are presented with questions in a standard poll, they will offer opinions which vary significantly on the same subject, and worse, will offer opinions on issues of which they have inadequate knowledge, simply because they are asked to offer an opinion. In this context, there is no linkage between an individual's knowledge and opinions. A reinforcement of underlying biases, often based on misconceptions of fact, is the result.

Deliberative polling has been used as an experiment up to this point - to see what the public would do if it were more fully informed. The underlying idea is to utilize the best characteristics of polling and

television and harness them to enhance democratic engagement.

DELIBERATIVE POLLING IN PRACTICE - CRIME IN THE U.K.

This deliberative polling idea began to germinate into a tangible project following a paper written by Dr. Fishkin for the Atlantic Monthly in 1988. The article outlined the tensions between the above discussed problems and the democratic role which constitution builders set out for citizens. However, it was not until Channel 4 in England (ITV) took hold of the idea in 1993 that it arrived at its next stage, a deliberative poll on a specific issue of public policy. The topic chosen was crime, a divisive issue laden with emotion and strongly held views.

For the initial deliberative poll, incentives were created to ensure disengaged citizens participated. The keys to acquiring participants, not surprisingly, were in convincing them that a) their opinions mattered in the process, and b) that they would be on T.V. What was surprising was the ability of the participants to be constructive and thoughtful on the most emotional of issues, crime and capital punishment. The most notable value of the initial exercise was the diversity of the individuals involved. At the beginning of the weekend, individuals from diverse groups in society knew each other only as stereotypes; by the end of the four days, their counterparts in the group were real. In fact, there happened to be criminals in the random sample, which took the entire discussion to a realm unexpected but undeniably interesting.

There were many lessons learned from the first deliberative poll. The organizers learned how important it is that issues be framed in terms easily understood by average citizens. The staff at Channel 4 insisted that the citizens frame the issues in their own terms, leaving the experts to act as listeners and respondents to questions, and forcing the politicians to respond on those terms. In the end, this process played a key role in making the initial deliberative poll "a poll with a human face".

As with many observers since that time, the British partners (as well as critics) doubted whether the samples would be truly random. Because of this scepticism, the organizers ensured that this criteria was met by dint of applying a rigorous standard to the polling process.

The second most valuable part of the initial experiment turned out to be the press, who in most cases changed from being sceptics to advocates of the process. The small group structure of discussion and the provision of complete media access to the event were important in fostering positive media relations and in providing good story material.

The initial project taught the organizers several lessons about the timing and agenda of a deliberative poll. Most importantly, the organizers learned that this process could be used in a non-election context, and on a single issue or a group of issues at a national level.

Following the three completed deliberative polls, the private sector is now beginning to take hold of this

idea and consider its use. A power company in the U.S., which has been mandated to hold citizen forums on the approval of a power generation site, has decided to utilize a deliberative poll to address the issue.

DISCUSSION

A Successful Deliberative Poll

The group was interested in the criteria used to measure the success of a deliberative poll.

There are essentially four criteria for a successful deliberative poll:

1. Ensuring that a random sample of the population is convened.
2. That the participants have learned more than they knew when they arrived.
3. That a wide audience of viewers watches the event on television.
4. That opinions are better informed.

This is measured by the following three criteria:

- a) Do the opinions make sense (can they articulate why they feel the way they do)?
- b) Are the opinions coherent?
- c) Is it good television, because if it is not, then the broader communicative role which the process plays is compromised.

The Deliberative Polling Method

I Potential for Manipulation by Vested Interests

The participants queried Dr. Fishkin as to whether groups with vested interests might use this type of process for manipulative purposes. How do organizers ensure that the process is not captured by manipulative interests? How do they ensure that participants or media do not perceive manipulation?

The best way to address this potential problem is by transparency. When the National Issues Convention took place, there were 350 reporters invited, all of whom were given free access to all parts of the process. This served both as an internal "check" mechanism and as a symbolic gesture of openness.

The other way in which the problem was addressed was to employ a bi-partisan advisory council which played a "checking" role right from the start: from building the pre-event reading materials to assuring that none of the politicians had any "special treatment" in the question periods. The role of this council is explained to all participants and partners before and during the event to assure that all involved are

aware of this mechanism. Depending on the country and the issue, more than two opinions can be incorporated into this council and into the choice documentation, if necessary.

If these criteria are not met, then manipulation of the process is certainly a danger. In future, others who use the name "deliberative polling" when consulting the public will have to meet the above criteria.

On a related point, one participant asked whether there was a contradiction between the "open" character of deliberative polling and the fact that a limited representative sample is used and limited opinions are set forth in the documentation.

First, if people are brought to the process at random, stakeholders will be represented within the sample itself, in equal proportion to their standing in the general population. Second, if committees made up of stakeholders on all sides of the issues at hand are charged with creating the choice documents and approving the material presented by the other interest groups and experts, then you retain the openness without compromising substance. As an additional note, in terms of gender, deliberative polling exercises have reached a degree of equality and "openness" not obtained in the best of democratic institutions, because women and men attend the event, in numbers equal to their proportion of the population, and all are provided with equal voice in discussion.

II. Event Context and Group Dynamics

The group expressed interest in the dynamics of delegate selection and group deliberation. In particular, Dr. Fishkin was asked whether the delegate selection process, the small group composition of deliberation, or the combined "collegiality" effect of these factors might skew results.

As long as the small group is representative of the broader random sample, the selection process does not influence the result. In all previous deliberative polls, organizers have gone to great lengths to ensure that random samples are obtained. To ensure that all have equal ability to participate, small honorariums have been paid to delegates in previous deliberative polls.

Small group discussion is an integral part of deliberative polling. By enabling everyone to speak, small group discussions actually enhance learning by individuals and the group, meeting the democratic objectives of "community" deliberation. The level of individual satisfaction has been very high at every deliberative poll thus far. At the National Issues Convention in Austin, all participants felt that they not only had their voices heard, but that there was a high level of fairness in ensuring that all voices were heard.

Long Term Impact of The Deliberative Polling Experience

Several individuals asked questions regarding the longer term impact of a deliberative polling exercise on the participants. In particular, they wanted to know if opinion changes would remain after citizens

returned to their communities, whether these citizens became more politically active in their communities, and whether a crystallization of political values along ideological lines took place.

Dr. Fishkin noted that there had been a small shift back toward old values when participants were surveyed several months after participation. But, more importantly, he noted that a higher level of political empowerment and engagement has been noticed among participants. This higher level of political courage among participants is evidenced by the emergence of community-level deliberative polling simulations, many of which were created by National Issues Convention participants. The long term result for participants is a higher degree of interest and activity in learning about issues (and acting upon that learning).

As for a greater crystallization of issues along ideological lines, participants certainly become more consistent. Not only does the broad direction of perspective change, but people begin to see issues in relation to each other. Causal factors, results and implications for other issues are understood in a more comprehensive way. However, the general public does not think in terms of ideological conventions as policy elites do. Dr. Fishkin noted that delegates will change opinions without considering how this might impact their political or ideological standing.

Suitable Policy Issues for a Deliberative Poll

Throughout the evening, the group discussed the types of issues which would be most/least germane to a deliberative poll, the levels of governance most appropriate to a deliberative poll, and the stage in policy development at which an approach might be most successful (for both citizens and policymakers).

Any issue of collective political will is germane to deliberative polling. Issues which bring forth strong emotions or have clear lines of divergence have in fact been among the most successful thus far. Dr. Fishkin made reference to the success of deliberative polls on crime and on European integration in the U.K. as examples of emotionally charged issues where participants were able to engage in thoughtful dialogue (and where many opinions changed).

The types of issues which are less suitable are those of a highly technical nature. Dr. Fishkin stated that there are also some issues which are so skewed by misinformation (and are based in a fairly high degree of technicality) that a deliberative poll would have difficulty driving the debate forward. One roundtable participant expressed reservations about the level of expertise which average citizens could obtain in three days on complex issues, and thus saw deliberative polling as a process applicable to a smaller range of issues.

Ideally, an emerging policy category issue on which political parties have not developed a comprehensive direction works best for a deliberative poll, in that there is likely to be a greater willingness among political actors to engage in the process. It could serve to advance the debate and crystallize the choices at hand before the politicians and interest groups "spin" it in a way that might not

serve the public interest.

In terms of effect on participants, a deliberative poll can be executed on multiple or single issues at a national, regional, or local level. Preceding an election campaign, the execution of riding-level deliberative polls might be an excellent way to engage citizens and to assist politicians in defining an agenda.

Implications of Deliberative Polling for Policymakers and Politicians

Roundtable participants were interested in how such a process would be of benefit to them and to politicians (Cabinet Ministers in particular). The group placed deliberative polling in the context of their work, identifying how and in what ways it could be best utilized.

The central objective of deliberative polling is to bring forth national (or issue-based) public dialogue. Thus, for policymakers, it is an information presentation and dialogue building tool, and its chief role is in recommending policy direction. Deliberative poll results have been highly coherent, and clear directions have been observed. This can be of obvious value in creating good public policy.

Deliberative polling has not been established as a predictive tool, although it might have some use in that role. Similarly, it is also not a direct "communications strategy" tool, although its results might assist in shaping a communications strategy.

Deliberative polling enables the public to reframe issues, which may cause politicians to reframe solutions (as well as assessments of the problem). It also serves as a mechanism for politicians to get closer to the issues of greatest public concern. In sum, government has to actually want to consult the public if it is going to execute a deliberative poll. In practical terms, then, a deliberative poll is best conducted when an issue is beginning to come to the fore or is in the early stage of public debate/discussion.

Deliberative Polling in Comparative Perspective

The group talked extensively about the merits of deliberative polling in relation to other citizen engagement processes, touching upon issues of interest group input, the scope of impact, cost, and assessments of its potential success in the Canadian context. Several important insights emerged.

Townhall meetings, Royal Commissions, and task forces suffer from similar problems: though these mechanisms are very good at engaging those who are already involved in political affairs (particularly special interest groups), these traditional consultative methods employ a *self-selected* sample, not a *randomly* selected sample. The disengaged citizen is left out. The point of deliberative polling is to go

outside that self-selected circle and touch the disengaged citizen, the average voter who can (and does) impact the democratic process but whose voice is rarely heard. One of the participants confirmed that during a recent consultation process executed by their department special interest groups were well represented, but average citizens were not.

Traditional polling and townhall meetings, the two methods used most often by political parties and media, suffer from the problems outlined during the introductory remarks, those being the expression of "top of mind" responses and "non-attitudes". But one of the participants argued that these processes contribute to another problem plaguing our democratic system. They enable individuals to address complex issues with simple solutions, leading the public at large to believe that there are simple solutions to society's problems. According to that participant, deliberative polling appears to heighten public understanding of the complexity of many issues, so at least a deeper level of dialogue between politicians and citizens can take place.

The group largely agreed that the contextual (and monetary) constraints of involving the media and political parties (as is done in deliberative polling) mean that the models of citizen input currently practiced will continue to be used. As one participant said, these methods get people (politicians and media) through the short run, which is in many ways what matters most to them. However, deliberative polling, which speaks to the longer run, was viewed as a method that should be pursued on the right issue, on a national scale, with the proper media partnerships and funding.

Shifting Deliberative Polling from Experiment to Standard Practice

After surveying the potential value of deliberative polling, the group queried Dr. Fishkin on how deliberative polling might move past its experimental phase into the mainstream of citizen participation.

The best way to move this process forward is to institutionalize it around specific events or times of year, regularizing it in the minds of the media (particularly television) and

hopefully the public. Most importantly, a television outlet must take proprietary hold of it, because television provides the deliberative poll with the communications scope it needs. Innovation and experimentation would continue to be part of the mandate, however, because the model demands updating and improvement. For example, in future, it may be possible to execute a deliberative poll at least partially through interactive media, which may bring more citizens directly into the process and reduce costs.

Concerns were also raised during the discussion regarding the potential for deliberative polling to become a "novelty". As one participant said, if that novelty were to wear off, television media would not broadcast the event and the broad impact of the deliberative poll would be lost. Dr. Fishkin agreed that there is potential for a "novelty" factor to become attached to the process, but if it can become

institutionalized and regularized, as it is beginning to be in the U.K., deliberative polling can avoid this pitfall.