

Deliberative Polling®

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Tool summary

Deliberative polling¹ was developed by the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University in the U.S. Deliberative polling uses public opinion research in an innovative way by providing participants, selected through random sampling, the opportunity to talk about a specific issue in detail with fellow citizens, policymakers and experts. In so doing, it attempts to provide a more accurate, scientific representation of public opinion, based on information and reflection rather than surface impressions. Deliberative polling is in sharp contrast to traditional public opinion polling like what newspapers and magazines are to television news. It is a case of substance, context, and sober second thought, versus sound bites and headlines.

What is it?

Deliberative Polling is a method of public consultation developed by James Fishkin; Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy and Chair of the Department of Communication at Stanford University. It grew out of the view that citizens are often uninformed about key public issues and that conventional polls represent opinions shaped by a superficial understanding. In the words of its practitioners, it measures what citizens *would* think if they had an adequate chance to reflect on the issue at hand. It has already been used in many cities and countries, and across the European Union.

Deliberative Polling begins with a random, representative sample of a population. The population can be a city, state, country, or as mentioned, the entire European Union, where there are 27 countries and 23 languages are spoken. Such polls have already been conducted in divided societies such as Northern Ireland (a local project about the education system among Protestants and Catholics), Bulgaria (a national project about the social policies toward the Roma), and Australia (a national project about reconciliation among indigenous and non-indigenous people).

Deliberative Polling uses scientific random sampling, which means that each person has an equal chance of being selected. In this way, the randomly selected participants represent a microcosm of the population being consulted. After selection, these participants are given a baseline questionnaire on targeted issues. Following this

¹ Deliberative Polling is a registered trade mark of James S. Fishkin. All income from the trade mark is used to support activities and research of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.

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questionnaire, carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly available. These briefing materials are reviewed by an advisory committee to ensure the materials are balanced and the information is accurate.

For the Deliberative Polling event, participants in the sample are invited to gather at a single place to discuss the targeted issues. These events are typically one to three days. The Center has also conducted online Deliberative Polls in the United States and these online deliberations are held over four to five weeks, where participants gather online once a week for about an hour each time to deliberate. These online discussions are voice-only, as opposed to text-based discussions.

During deliberations, participants engage in dialogue with competing experts and policymakers based on questions developed in their small groups with trained moderators. These trained moderators are instructed to ensure that all participants engage in deliberations equally and respect each other. During this process, participants are not asked to reach any consensus or decisions. Rather, it is an opportunity for participants to understand the issues at hand and to weigh the competing arguments on all sides of the issues being discussed. Parts of the weekend events are broadcast on television, either live or in recorded and edited form. After deliberations, the sample of participants is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had the opportunity to become more informed and engaged by the issues.

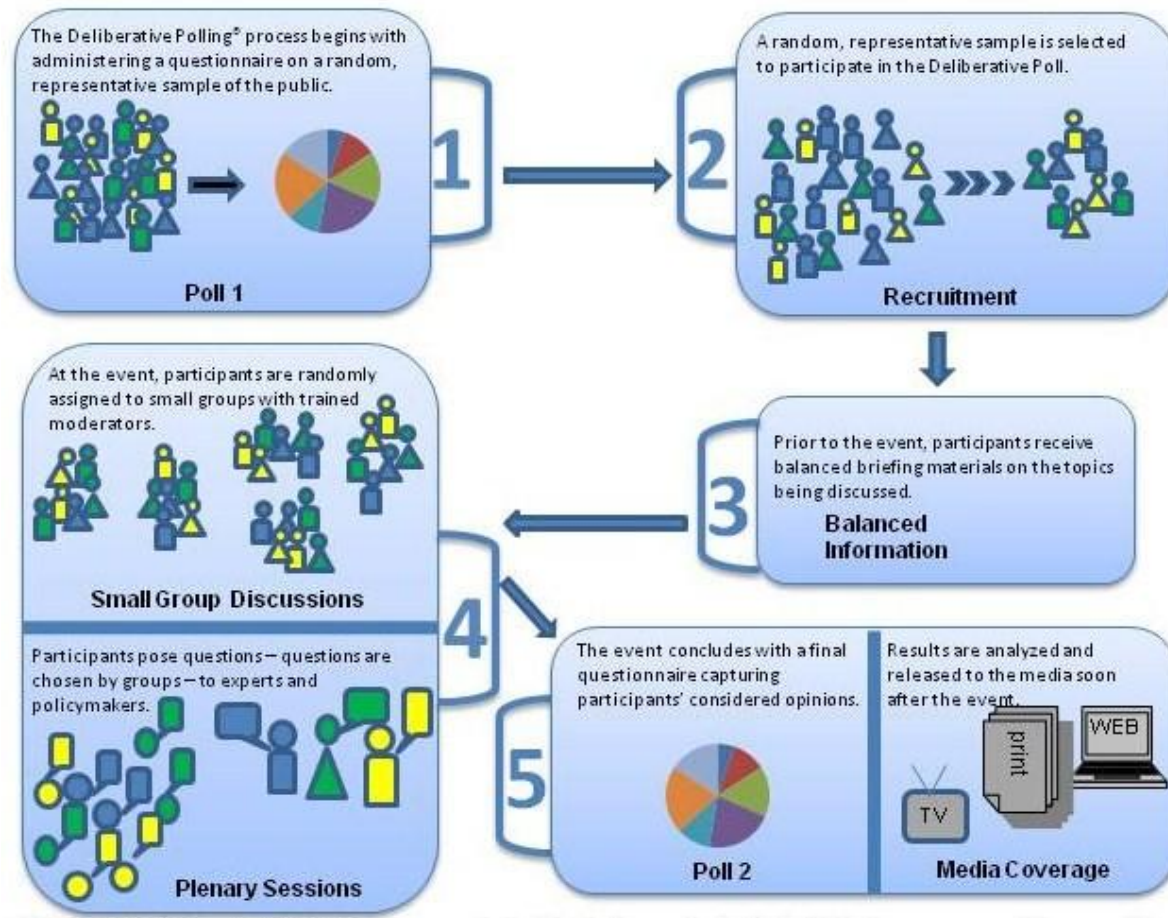
To learn more about Deliberative Polls and the Center for Deliberative Democracy (CDD), please visit: <http://cdd.stanford.edu>.

How is it done?

The step by step description of how CDD conducts a Deliberative Poll is depicted in a diagrammatic form on page 3. The time frame of preparing and conducting such a poll is dependent on the type of issue(s) and number of issues your team wishes to focus on. You can contact CDD for detailed guidelines when planning your Deliberative Poll.

Typically, the number of participants in a Deliberative Polling process range from 200 to 600. Some argue that larger the sample size, better the results are since a larger sample generates a wider cross-section of views and increases the credibility of the results as being more representative of informed public opinion. Though, the actual event may last just a few days, the entire planning and execution process typically takes a minimum of six months.

The five step process of Deliberative Polling



Source: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/>

Benefits

Some of the general benefits of Deliberative Polling are:

- substantial improvement of public understanding of an issue, as well as participation in the decision-making process
- facilitation of networks among citizens and public interest groups, as well as new links between government bodies/policy-making agencies and civil society
- better informed and more effective public policy



- bringing a microcosm of society together and providing an opportunity to meet and deliberate with people who would probably never have met in their lifetime

Specifically, the CDD has found direct policy consequences as a result of its Deliberative Polling in various geo-political contexts. After a Deliberative Poll in Bulgaria in May 2007, Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev publicly embraced the results and pledged to implement the policy recommendations toward the Roma people, and then followed up by commissioning another national Deliberative Poll on budget priorities. In China, after conducting four Deliberative Polls in the last five years, the Party Secretary of Zeguo Township publicly announced in February 2009 that he is committed to conducting an annual Deliberative Poll on the Township's budget for the next ten years.

Challenges and lessons

The Deliberative Polling process has many steps and each step requires much preparation and careful execution. For example, organizers need to ensure that briefing materials provided to participants are balanced and accurate. Therefore, the CDD advocates that an advisory committee be constituted made up of a wide range of people. If a Deliberative Poll were to be held on housing, then an advisory committee for this project would need to include housing experts, environmentalists, building contractors, policymakers, civil society organizations and citizens from the appropriate neighborhoods. It can be a challenge to obtain a balanced advisory committee, but without one, the project could be handicapped.

It is also important to remember that such a polling process is expensive, and that to achieve a wider impact on public awareness, the involvement of television is recommended, though there is an Internet version that reduces costs. While the Deliberative Polling process might help decision-makers in shaping a public policy, it is not a substitute for other tools aimed at pursuing a dialogue and improving public participation in the policy-making process.

Key Resources

Center for Deliberative Democracy:

<http://cdd.stanford.edu>

- ☞ The website of the Centre for Deliberative Democracy is perhaps the most exhaustive source of information on the concept and methodology of Deliberative Polling and includes reports and press coverage from all past Deliberative Polls.

Books authored by James S. Fishkin, Director of Center for Deliberative Democracy:

Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform. Yale University Press (1991).

- ☞ This book is about how to bring power to the people under conditions where the people can think about the power they exercise..."

The Dialogue of Justice: Towards a Self-Reflective Society. Yale University Press. (1992)

- ☞ People around the world are agitating for democracy and individual rights, but there is no consensus on a theory of liberal democracy that might guide them. What are the first principles of a just society? What political theory should shape public policy in such a society? James Fishkin offers a basis for answering these questions by proposing the ideal of a "self-reflective society" - a political culture in which citizens are able to decide their own fate through unconstrained dialogue.

The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy Yale University Press. (1995).

- ☞ In this lively book James Fishkin evaluates modern democratic practices and explains how the voice of the people has struggled to make itself heard in the past. He tells a fascinating story of changing concepts and practices of democracy, with examples that range from ancient Sparta to America's founders to the first Gallup polls to Ross Perot. He then develops the rationale for a new method--the "deliberative opinion poll"--that uses modern media and survey research to legitimately rediscover the people's voice.

When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation. Oxford University Press. (2009).

- ☞ In this book, James Fishkin combines a new theory of democracy with actual practice and shows how an idea that harks back to ancient Athens can be used to revive our modern democracies. The book outlines deliberative democracy



projects conducted by the author with various collaborators in the United States, China, Britain, Denmark, Australia, Italy, Bulgaria, Northern Ireland, and in the entire European Union.

Fishkin, James. *Nation in a Room – Turning Public Opinion in to Policy*. (2006)

<http://bostonreview.net/BR31.2/fishkin.html>

- ☞ This article provides experiences with Deliberative Polling from USA, china and Denmark starting with a critical evaluation of Gallup’s public opinion polls and it’s limitations in realizing the ideals of participatory democracy and argues how Deliberative Polling is a better solution.

Supplementary resources

Ian O’Flynn Blog: *Deliberative Polling: risky but inspiring*. (2007)

http://www.opendemocracy.net/blog/dliberation/risky_but_inspiring

- ☞ In this blog, Dr.Ian O’Flynn, lecturer in Political Theory at New Castle University attempts to answer critical questions on Deliberative Polling raised by Arthur Lupia in the context of Europe and Northern Ireland.

John Gastil’s Blog: *Deliberative Polling: Pros and Cons*. (2007)

http://www.opendemocracy.net/blog/dliberation/deliberative_polls_pros_and_cons

- ☞ John Gastil argues that Deliberative Polling can make more robust policy recommendations, if the duration for deliberation is prolonged as in the case of Citizens Juries and Assemblies thus creating more space and time for pollsters to interact and synthesize all the various perspectives

J Clive Matthews Blog: *An Attempt at Conclusion*. (2007)

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/blog/dliberation/conclusion>

- ☞ J Clive Mathews writes ...”the problem is in getting the public to accept that they would think differently about politics if they knew more about the subjects at hand. And how do you do that without insulting the public’s intelligence?”

Sanders, Lynn.M. *“Against Deliberation”*. Political Theory. Volume 25. Sage Publications. (June 1997).

http://faculty.virginia.edu/lsanders/SB617_01.pdf

- ☞ The paper investigates into the undemocratic charges leveled against deliberation foremost among them being that its proponents cannot guarantee

equality of opportunity to those who want to participate in it while also evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of deliberation proposing an alternative model for democratic politics.

“By The People”: Video excerpts of online meetings
<http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/btp/2007/excerpts/>

☞ The web link provides video excerpts of deliberative polling on the topic, “Citizenship in 21st Century America” in which 20 groups participated in four separate sessions.

Issues Deliberation Australia/America (IDA), Australia:
<http://www.ida.org.au/deliberative.php>

☞ IDA is an international, non partisan, public policy and political psychology think tank. IDA’s website is a useful resource on applied Deliberative Polling in the Australian context.

Case Studies

Energy: Between the years 1996 and 1998, the CDD and its collaborators conducted eight Deliberative Polls in Texas on the consumption of electrical energy and renewable energy, and others in the U.S. and Canada. After deliberations, across those eight Texas Polls, the percentage of participants willing to pay more on their monthly bill for wind and solar energy increased from 52 percent to 84 percent. Since then, the state of Texas has become the leading state in wind power in the United States.

Source: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/energy/>

European Union: In October 2007, the CDD and its European collaborators conducted the first European-wide Deliberative Poll with more than 360 randomly selected citizens from all 27 member states and discussions were conducted in 23 languages. A surprising result from this Deliberative Poll was that participants came to oppose enlarging the European Union.

Source: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/eu/>.

Bulgaria – Roma integration: In 2007, the Centre for Liberal Strategies and its partners, held a deliberative poll on the integration of the Roma people. A scientific sample of 255 people from across the country deliberated on three issues affecting the community – housing, crime, and education. The Bulgarian Prime Minister lauded the process and the results, which produced more open response to the needs of the Roma in all three areas.

Source: <http://www.tomorroweurope.eu/spip.php?article18>

China – town budget: In February 2008, the CDD supervised and advised the third Deliberative Poll in Zeguo Township, Wenling City, in which the entire budget of the town was the subject of the deliberations and in which the local People’s Congress observed the process in order to consider adjustments in the budget after getting the results of the Deliberative Poll. The People’s Congress did in fact adjust the budget in light of the public’s priorities expressed in the Poll. It not only increased the environmental, medical care and social security expenditures but also lowered the defense and public safety expenditures in light of the public’s input.

Source: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/china/>

