



What is a Deliberative Poll®?

The outcome of a scientific approach

The method of Deliberative Polling® is developed in the United States during the 1990s by **Professor James Fishkin** of Stanford University, in collaboration with **Professor Robert Luskin** of the University of Texas at Austin, and tested for the first time in the United Kingdom in 1994. The « Center for Deliberative Polling® » of the Texas University first hosted their work which is currently attached to the « **Center for Deliberative Democracy** » of the **Stanford University**.

The motivation of developing Deliberative Polling® was to **correct the imperfections of conventional polls**, since the answers people give to the questions are mostly not well considered answers and they are not based on well informed opinions. More generally, their approach consisted in overcoming what social science call "rational ignorance", that is to say the common unwillingness to get information about an issue because of the required individual investment.

With the words of Professor Fishkin: *"A Deliberative Poll® is designed to show what the public would think about the issues, if it thought more earnestly and had more information about them."*

Combining representativity and « enlightened opinions »

The **design** of a Deliberative Poll® is as follows. Before the deliberation a public opinion poll is conducted with a random and representative sample on key public policy issues. During the deliberative event the participants discuss the issues and the various policy proposals - which had been provided to them weeks before the deliberation in proper briefing materials - in moderated small groups and in plenary sessions with experts and politicians. The event is covered by the media. After the deliberation the same poll is conducted again, therefore the change in opinions and in the knowledge on the issues can be highlighted.

Each time of the previous DPs there was a statistically significant and impressive **change in opinions**, furthermore the **knowledge** on the certain issues has greatly increased among the participants. The DP give the possibility to participants to formulate "enlightened opinions" and has a positive effect on their posterior political interest and political participation as well. It gives the opportunity to call prejudices into question.

Deliberative Polling® provides the opportunity to deliberate issues from a wider and more diverse perspective than citizens mostly do since they are usually surrounded by people they share similar values with. Through the deliberation they can consider different values and viewpoints. The objective of Deliberative Polling® is to encourage citizens to be more interested in politics, think and learn more about public matters. Deliberative Polling® can answer the question whether the citizens' policy preferences would change if they knew more about certain issues.

Hence the Deliberative Poll is an effective tool of bringing **participatory democracy** into effect, as it serves a direct feedback and a potential guide for public decision making. The result is an image of a considered public opinion, therefore it can provide considered **recommendations for policy makers**. It shows how the society would think about policy issues if their political attitude would not be directed mostly by cognitive heuristics, but they would have the chance to be well informed and better engaged with politics. Contrarily to conventional polls, DP does not focus on immediate individual opinions but provides a perspective.

Examples of previous Deliberative Polls®

This method has been usefully implemented in more than 25 different countries.

- British Deliberative Polling® Poll on Crime (1994, UK)
- Deliberative Polling® on UK and Europe (1995, UK)
- British Deliberative Polling® on the General Election (1995)
- The National Issues Convention (1996, Austin, Texas)
- Australian Deliberative Polling® on the referendum on Independency (1999)
- Deliberative Polling® on the Euro (2000)
- Australian Deliberative Polling® on Aboriginal Reconciliation (2001)
- New Haven Deliberative Polling® on Regional Economic Cooperation (2002)

China, Italy, Northern Ireland also hosted Deliberative Polls®.

TV channels usually contribute to the process by broadcasting deliberation and reports at the national or regional levels.

Tomorrow's Europe will be the first ever Deliberative Poll® experiment on such a large scale. *The transnational level, thanks to specialists, is considered as an optimal dimension.*

"Each experiment conducted thus far has gathered a highly representative sample together at a single place. Each time, there were dramatic, statistically significant changes in views. The result is a poll with a human face."

James S. FISHKIN, « Deliberative Polling : Toward a Better-Informed Democracy », Stanford University



► The Roots of Deliberative Polling

The deliberative poll is a distinctive form of public consultation. It combines two key values: political equality and deliberation. By political equality, we mean the equal consideration of everyone's preferences. The root of the word deliberation means "weighing". So by deliberation, we mean a process of discussion in which people weigh competing arguments on their merits. The quality of deliberation depends on the degree to which four criteria are met:

1. Completeness: the extent to which arguments offered on one side of an issue are answered by arguments from another side that are then answered in turn
2. Information: the extent to which the information that people employ is reasonably accurate
3. Conscientiousness: the extent to which people participate so as to decide the issue on its merits
4. Diversity: the extent to which those who deliberate represent the diversity of viewpoints in the relevant populations

A deliberative poll attempts to satisfy each of these criteria to a reasonably high degree. Balance is the hallmark of the briefing materials, the panels of experts, and the training of moderators. Every effort is made to provide the participants with accurate information, which is usually reviewed by an advisory group (...). Organizers also create an atmosphere of mutual respect so that participants will be interested in deciding the issue on its merits. Random sampling, when effective, produces a diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds. When it works well, the Deliberative Polling® process requires citizens to take their real differences into account, sidestep the distorting power of special interests, and mitigates polarization among the participants.

James FISHKIN and Cynthia FARRAR, Deliberative polling: from experiment to community resource, in John GASTIL and Peter LEVINE (ed.), The deliberative Democracy Handbook, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2005, p. 71

Resources and references

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<http://cdd.stanford.edu/>
- Elliot, J. (2005) *Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual.* (King Baudouin Foundation, Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment)
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