

# Virtual Public Consultation: Prospects for Internet Deliberative Democracy

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## 1 Introduction

Innovations in the technology of communication easily affect the possibility and feasibility of different methods of public consultation. To consult the public, we must somehow communicate with it, or allow it to communicate with itself. How this is done can affect both who is consulted and the kinds of opinions that are solicited.

Let us posit two fundamental democratic values for public consultation. The history of democratic practice and reform is a history enmeshed in visions that more greatly emphasize one or another of these values. I will term these two values ‘deliberation’, on the one hand and ‘political equality’ on the other. For our purposes here, we can simplify with some working definitions. By *deliberation* I mean the thoughtful weighing of policy or political alternatives on their merits, in a context that facilitates access to good information. By *political equality* I mean the attributes of a decision process whereby the preferences of each member are counted as having the same weight. When some portion of the population is consulted about the views of the rest, political equality implies representativeness. Deliberation is

about the development of preferences, and political equality is about how those preferences weigh in the decision process.<sup>1</sup>

This conflict has a long history. For example, in the debate over the founding of the United States, the Federalists emphasized deliberation (representatives were to ‘refine and enlarge the public views’) while the Antifederalists were, among the disparate values they emphasized, more interested in political equality. The Antifederalists embraced a ‘mirror’ notion of representation in which representatives should be exact replicas of the people as they are. They were concerned about the elite character of the Federalists’ proposed deliberative institutions, institutions that might be dominated by the rich and educated. In opposing the Constitution they asked: Where will there be a farmer or blacksmith in the senate if it is going to be so small and selective? Ideally, as in their advocacy of a referendum in Rhode Island, decisions should be taken to the people themselves so that all their votes could be counted. And if decisions could not be taken by the people directly, they should be taken by people who were exactly like the entire people in microcosm. The Federalists opposed this notion (see Hamilton in *Federalist*, no. 35). Indeed their notion of refining public opinion involved refining the views of the public through deliberation as well as refining via the choice of representatives, selecting only the most competent, most virtuous and most qualified.

We can capsulize the debate by saying that the Federalists wanted *reflective* public opinion (refined by representatives) while the Antifederalists wanted *reflected* public opinion (provided by a mirror). The aspiration to somehow get both has played a key role in efforts to improve public consultation, both formal and informal. As we will see below, it is possible that the Internet may make such an aspiration more feasible than it has been previously.

## 2 Empowering the Public

In the two centuries since the debate over the American founding, the general direction of democratic reform has been to emphasize political equality over deliberation. We have brought power to the people through increasingly direct forms of consultation, without worrying too much about whether or not we have given the people much incentive to think about the power they are asked to exercise. We choose senators directly rather than

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<sup>1</sup> For some more detailed reflections on the definition of these two values, see Fishkin (1991), chapter four. Of course these are not the only values that are implicated by efforts for democratic reform. The book discusses two others as well, participation and non-tyranny (avoiding tyranny of the majority).

through state legislatures, we have mass primaries for candidate selection, we have referenda in many states, and we constantly assess the pulse of the public via the public opinion poll. Yet, all these efforts serving political equality have given greater emphasis to mass opinion that is seldom deliberative. The mass public is typically uninformed and disengaged.<sup>2</sup> As Anthony Downs hypothesized, it can plausibly be considered ‘rationally ignorant’. Each person having but a single vote can see that his or her vote (or opinion) will not make much difference to any public decisions, so it may not be worth a lot of time and effort to make oneself more informed (Downs 1957).<sup>3</sup>

Consider the moment of triumph for the public opinion poll. When George Gallup reflected on his successful use of the poll in the United States presidential election of 1936, he argued that it provided the basis for a serious democratic reform—one that would bring the democracy of the New England town meeting to the large-scale nation state. The poll is obviously an embodiment of political equality in that it offers a statistical microcosm of the entire electorate, and one in which each person’s preferences count equally. More surprisingly, Gallup also thought its use would contribute to deliberation. Newspapers and radio would send out the views of competing policy makers. The public would talk over the issues and send back its considered judgments via the poll. It would be ‘as if the nation is literally in one great room’ (Gallup 1939). The difficulty is that the room was so big, no one was listening with the care that Gallup imagined for the town meeting.<sup>4</sup> Downsian arguments about the rationality of investing in political knowledge may come into play when small-scale political notions are applied to the large-scale nation state. The poll may help achieve political equality, but for uninformed and disengaged preferences. Later we will turn to different institutional designs, to achieve the ‘whole country in one room’ in a different way.

Note that Gallup’s aspiration was to achieve political equality combined with the public’s considered judgments or its more deliberative preferences. In effect, he hoped to combine reflective and reflected preferences. However, he achieved political equality in the representation of mostly uninformed and disengaged opinions. That achievement was greatly facilitated over time with some technical advances. Interviews were initially conducted face-to-face with quota samples. With the development of the tele-

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see Carpini and Keeter (1996).

<sup>3</sup> For some thoughtful reflections on this argument, see Hardin (2003).

<sup>4</sup> The town meeting is not always what Gallup imagined. See Frank Bryan for the argument that participation and attention to the issues in the town meeting are inversely related to the size of the town (Bryan 2004).

phone and the invention of random digit dialing, it became practical to conduct polling without face-to-face interviewing, greatly lowering the costs for ever more continuously checking what Gallup called ‘the pulse of democracy’ (Gallup and Rae 1940).

### 3 Experimenting with Deliberation

As we look to other methods for combining political equality with deliberation, a key question will be whether or not the Internet will serve, as did the telephone before it, to lower the cost and increase the frequency of efforts to combine these two key values. Deliberative Polling® was developed explicitly to do so, to combine political equality with deliberation.<sup>5</sup> It is meant to include everyone (via random sampling) 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 nonattitudes or phantom opinions (as well as ‘top of the head’ opinions that approach being nonattitudes) 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.

Consider the face-to-face version. 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 in which 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

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<sup>5</sup> Deliberative Polling® is a trademark of James S. Fishkin. Any fees from the trademark are used to support research at the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy (<http://cdd.stanford.edu>, last accessed November 1, 2008).

discussions throughout the weekend.<sup>6</sup> The weekend microcosm tends to be highly representative, both attitudinally and demographically, both of the entire baseline survey and of 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 top of the head attitudes solicited by conventional polls. Looking at the full panoply of Deliberative Polls (which have been held on many different kinds of issues), we believe that perhaps 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 in order 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, counterfactual. The public will rarely, if ever, be motivated to become as informed and engaged as our weekend microcosms.

If a counterfactual situation is morally relevant, why not do a serious social science experiment—rather than merely engage in informal inference or armchair empiricism—to determine what the appropriate counterfactual might 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 more carefully.

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

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see Fishkin (1997). For more detailed analysis, see Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell (2002).

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.<sup>7</sup> Sample surveys are relatively high on external validity. When they are done well, 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 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.

#### **4 Online Deliberation**

We have completed several 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 took place during the presidential primary season in early 2004. The third was completed during the 2004 presidential election, while the last, as noted below, used a more cost effective methodology.

In the first three projects, a national random sample recruited by Knowledge Networks deliberated each week in moderated small group discussions. Computers were provided to those who did not have them. Microphones were provided to all participants so that the discussions could take

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<sup>7</sup> See Campbell and Stanley (1963).

place using voice rather than text. Special software was employed that allows the small group participants to keep track of who is talking and who wishes to talk next. The discussions proceeded for an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes each week with carefully balanced briefing materials. During discussions, the participants identified key questions that they wished competing experts to answer. Our media partner, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions (including the Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer) provided the competing expert answers and distributed them to the participants in between the weekly discussions. After several weeks of these discussions, the participants took the same survey as at the beginning. Meanwhile, a separate control group that did not deliberate took the same questionnaire at the beginning and end of the process.

In the foreign policy Deliberative Poll, the results online were broadly similar to the face-to-face results. 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 particular candidate positions. In contrast to the control group, the issues played a major part in respondents' candidate preferences. In the control group, the evaluation of candidate traits dwarfed all other factors, while in the deliberative treatment group, policy issues became very important as well.

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.

As access to the Internet approaches the near universality of the telephone, and the digital divide (eventually) disappears, the Internet may well succeed in lowering the costs of deliberative public consultation with scien-

tific samples just as the telephone lowered the cost of conventional polling. However, for the foreseeable future, the digital divide poses a serious problem, one that substantially raises the cost, and hence challenges the feasibility, of Deliberative Polling online.

The fourth Internet-based project, a collaboration with Polimetrix and with MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, points to an interim solution. Polimetrix uses a matching methodology to reverse engineer a national random sample from a one million plus national panel that is already online. Instead of starting with random digit dialing and having to live with low response rates, it constructs a sample in reverse from a large panel that has been constructed without any clue to what they might be asked about. On a host of demographic criteria, the process of sample construction attempts to mirror what a random sample taken from either census data or from voter lists, would look like.<sup>8</sup>

Sample selection in this process occurs in two stages. First, a true random sample is selected from the U.S. population, called the 'target sample'. For this study, the target sample was from the American Community Study, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. In the second stage, the closest matching respondent in the Polimetrix panel to each member of the target sample was found. 'Closeness' was measured by the respondent's demographic characteristics, including age, race, gender, education, marital status, and income.

Of course, perfectly realized random sampling would be preferable, but because of all the people who are difficult to reach and who refuse to participate when they are reached, perfectly realized random sampling is not a practical alternative. In the meantime, to the extent that such samples can plausibly represent the entire electorate, and not just those on the advantaged half of the digital divide, then the matching strategy offers a more cost effective alternative than starting with random digit dialing.

In any case, the key aims of the projects we are launching with Polimetrix depend more on internal validity than random selection. With a pre and post control group that is carefully matched to the participant sample, we can assess the effects of deliberation on opinion change without worrying about whether the changes are coming from the media and the wider world or from the treatment in the experiment. The degree of representativeness provided by sample matching provides more than adequate external validity.

To the extent that matching technology does approximate a good random sample of the entire electorate and to the extent that the treatment (de-

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed description with results, see <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/btp/2005/onlinebtp/index.html> (last accessed August 30, 2008).



liberation) produces the changes, there is a case to be made that the result combines external and internal validity. It is a public consultation that combines political equality (it is a representation of what political equality would produce, reverse engineered), and it embodies, by the end, the public's considered judgments. In that sense, it puts the whole country in one (virtual) room, under conditions where it can think for an extended period—a period of weeks so far, but perhaps eventually months.

Thus far, it is clear that the online version of Deliberative Polling is a more modest treatment than the one we produce face-to-face. Instead of the intensity of a deliberative weekend that totally immerses participants, hourly discussions take place in home environments. In between the sessions, the participants are subject to all their normal habits, news sources and conversation partners. These factors probably dampen the effects. However, online DPs have the potential to be extended longer. The face-to-face DP is limited to the duration of a long weekend. But online, the process could, in theory and with sufficient incentives, extend for months rather than just weeks. Perhaps the resulting treatment, if sufficiently extended, may eventually surpass the face-to-face process. One can only answer this question through further empirical work.

## 5 Strategies of Public Consultation

Deliberative Polling, like conventional polling, occurs at the intersection of social science and public consultation. But there are many efforts to consult the public that do not take such care either with political equality or with deliberation. Some practices are not representative and some do not solicit anything like informed and considered judgments. To fix thought, consider just these four simple possibilities:

	<b>Unrepresentative</b>	<b>Representative</b>
<b>Nondeliberative</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Deliberative</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

A great deal of public consultation now takes place on the Internet but most of it is in category 1. It is neither deliberative nor representative. The easiest way to consult the public, one might think, is just to ask them. But self-selected, top of the head consultations do not provide a microcosm of the public, and do not represent considered judgments.

Category 1 is exemplified by what Norman Bradburn of the University of Chicago has called the SLOP. We see it daily on media websites, such as CNN's which solicits a 'quick vote' from self selected samples on an ever changing array of topics. In the days of radio, the term SLOP referred to

'self-selected listener opinion poll'. Radio call-in shows would commonly ask for responses by telephone to some topic. Now the SLOPs have spread throughout the Internet. Media organizations like to solicit active involvement from the owners of eyeballs, and SLOPs accomplish this effectively. To be clear, SLOP respondents are not selected by scientific random sampling as in public opinion polls. The respondents instead select themselves. They are predominantly those who feel more intensely or are especially motivated. Sometimes, they are organized. The SLOP, it is thought, gets 'grassroots' opinion. However, in the parlance of American lobbyists, sometimes the response is something more organized and synthetic—the impression of grassroots 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, and 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 (Morris et al. 1997). More recently, SLOPs showed that Alan Keyes was a leading presidential candidate, because he had an organized and intense following that was willing to mobilize to vote over and over online. Without scientific sampling, but while still representing a tiny fraction of the population, SLOPs are open to capture.

Category 2 is of course represented by the conventional public opinion poll. Now with Internet technology, it is moving online. Some efforts employing mere post hoc weighting from self-selected samples have only suspect claims to representativeness. But other efforts, such as those of Knowledge Networks and Polimetrix, attack the problem of representativeness in more credible ways. In the Knowledge Networks case, the strategy is to begin with random sampling. In the Polimetrix case, the strategy is to reverse engineer the panel that would have resulted from good random sampling. In both cases, there is room for continuing empirical investigation as to how successful these efforts may be.<sup>9</sup>

But as we noted in our earlier discussion of Deliberative Polling, conventional polling, whether undertaken online, on the phone, or face-to-face, may achieve representativeness when done well, but will do nothing, despite Gallup's initial aspirations, for deliberation. Polls will tend to reflect

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<sup>9</sup> In the Knowledge Networks case, see Chang and Krosnick (2003).

the public's top of the head impressions of sound bites and headlines. The views represented by polls are crippled, as we noted, by 'rational ignorance'.

A second difficulty is that 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 'nonattitudes' 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 nonexistent '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.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to have serious deliberation on the Internet but without representativeness. Self-selected forums can exchange information and come to grips with trade-offs. There is, however, a serious empirical question about the extent to which such efforts will be distorted by unrepresentativeness. When I do not hear opposing views or just commune with those with whom I already agree, I am less able to deliberate. I may engage in what Cass Sunstein (2001) calls 'enclave deliberation'—the reasoning together of the like minded. Sometimes enclave deliberation produces more extreme views (as in movements either to the far right or far left) and sometimes it lays the basis for important and constructive social movements that define a new center (consider the civil rights movement and the environmental movement). But whenever only the likeminded discuss a topic, the opportunity to weigh, and really take seriously, counterarguments and discrepant information has been limited. Ultimately, representativeness and deliberation can facilitate each other—if only we achieve the appropriate institutional designs.

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<sup>10</sup> For a good overview of this work by George Bishop and the replication by the Washington Post under the direction of Richard Morin, see Bishop (2004).

The Deliberative Poll, filling out category 4, is one attempt to do this. Madison began with representatives refining and enlarging the public views. But to leave deliberation in the hands of representatives alone has been viewed as elitist and undemocratic. In a host of ways, we have brought power to the people, while we have, at the same time, ignored the conditions that might facilitate the public thinking about the power we would have them exercise. The Deliberative Poll is not the only such effort.<sup>11</sup> But we believe that by attempting to combine social science with public consultation, it offers prospects for realizing these two values on an ever improving basis—both to achieve representativeness and to fine tune the process of deliberation. If the online version manages to achieve cost effectiveness for national consultations, then it may finally result in Gallup's aspiration to put the whole country in one (virtual) room—but under conditions that aspire to adapt the town meeting to a national scale. Cost effectiveness is not just a matter of practicality. It is also necessary if episodic experiments are also to become a continuing part of democratic practice.

We have only begun to assess the implications of virtual democracy, and some of them, such as the proliferation of SLOPs and the communing of the like minded, may not be constructive. But if we think of democratic practice as a problem of institutional design, then new technologies allow us to experiment with improvements. Perhaps, eventually, we will be able to periodically take the 'pulse of democracy' in a more deliberative manner.

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<sup>11</sup> See Gastil and Levine (2005) for an overview of many efforts to realize deliberative democracy.

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