

The Televised Deliberative  
Poll: The British Experiment

by James Fishkin

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Columbia Institute for Tele-Information  
Graduate School of Business  
Columbia University  
809 Uris Hall  
New York, NY 10027  
(212)854-4222

James Fishkin  
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### The Televised Deliberative Poll: The British Experiment\*

A new form of opinion polling was born on national television in Britain on May 8, 1994. The world's first "deliberative opinion poll", broadcast by Channel 4, produced by Granada Television, and co-sponsored by The Independent newspaper, is unlike any poll ever conducted.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary polls offer a snapshot of what the public is thinking, even though the public may not be thinking very much or paying much attention. A deliberative poll, by contrast, models what the public would think, if it had a better opportunity to think about the questions at issue.

The idea is simple. Take a national random sample of the electorate and transport it from all over the country to a single place. Immerse the sample in the issues, with carefully balanced briefing materials, with intensive discussions in small groups, and with questions to competing experts and politicians. At the end of several days working through the issues, face to face, poll the participants in detail. The resulting survey expresses the considered judgments of the public--the views the entire country would come to if it had the same experience of behaving more like ideal citizens immersed in the issues for an extended period.

The deliberative poll has a recommending force: these are the conclusions the people would come to, if they were better informed on the issues and had the same opportunities for intensive face to face discussions as the members of the sample. It is a microcosm of the country making recommendations to itself under conditions where it can think through the issues and where its views can be heard. If such a poll were broadcast before an election or a referendum, it could have a major effect on the outcome.

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\* Paper presented at the Washington Annenberg Center, June 3, 1994.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the deliberative opinion poll see my Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

The first national test of the idea occurred in Manchester, England, April 15-17 at the Granada Television Studio. The sample was selected by SCPR, the independent research institute based in London, from 40 randomly chosen polling districts in 40 randomly chosen constituencies from around the country. First, a baseline survey was conducted of 869 citizens, randomly chosen from the electoral register. This survey had a high response rate--74%. It gives an excellent picture of the public's attitudes on the issue in question "Rising Crime: What Can We Do About It?" It is highly representative of the entire country in age, class, geographical representation, gender, education and every other important dimension. But this baseline survey was not the deliberative poll. It was only the beginning of the process.

Voters were invited to the Manchester event only after they completed the baseline survey. The three hundred who came to Manchester for the weekend were, in every important respect, indistinguishable from the 869 who took the baseline survey. In terms of class, education, race, gender, geography, the weekend microcosm was fully as representative of the entire country as the baseline survey. Even more dramatic was the fact that in their attitudes about crime, and in their political positions more generally, the weekend microcosm was just as representative of the country as the baseline survey.

One of the persistent claims of critics was that participants in the poll would be precisely the people who were more interested in the issue, specifically, the people who were more concerned with crime.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the weekend sample turned out to be an almost perfect microcosm. For example, note this comparison of the total baseline survey and the weekend sample:

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, comments of Robert Worcester on the deliberative poll on the NBC Nightly News, May 7, 1994.

	Total survey	Weekend sample
Crime: No worry	28%	27%
A big worry	21%	21%
A bit of a worry	34%	35%
An occasional doubt	17%	18%

Furthermore, on every important question of substance about what should be done about crime, the weekend sample turned out to be a near perfect microcosm. For example, to take just two of the key questions on ways of reducing crime, "reducing unemployment" and "stiffer sentences generally":

	Very effective	Effective	Neither effective nor ineffective	Not very Effective	Not at all Effective	
Reduce						
Unemployment	43	38	8	7	3	Total
	44	38	11	4	3	Weekend
Stiffer sentences						
generally	51	26	14	6	3	Total
	50	27	15	5	2	Weekend

As a starting point on the issue of crime, the weekend sample was an almost perfect representation of the nation gathered together in a single place. The challenge for the experiment was whether they would change over the course of the weekend. Of course, it is probable that they had already begun changing from the moment they received our invitation. Knowing that they would be on national television, they probably began discussing the topic with family and friends, they probably began to read newspapers and listen to the media with more care, they probably read the briefing materials we sent them to prepare for the event. In all these ways their views became unrepresentative of public opinion in the conventional sense. But those views also became representative in a new and different sense. They became representative of the views the entire country would come to if it were populated by ideal citizens, by people who took up the same opportunity as the members of our sample did, to engage the issues and debate them over an extended period. In short their new, considered judgments represented what the public would think, if it actually had a better opportunity to think about it.

But would their considered judgments be any different from their initial responses? Is it realistic to believe that the mass public can actually be made to think about the issues? As you can see from the appendix, the citizens who came to Manchester changed their views considerably. They remained tough on crime (they continued to insist, as they did at the start, that prison should be "tougher and more unpleasant" and that "the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence" for some crimes) but they offered, by the end, a much more complex appreciation of the problem. Realizing the limits of prison as a tool for dealing with crime, they focused on rehabilitation and on different treatments for first-time juvenile offenders. They also concentrated on family values as a method for dealing with the root causes of crime. Most dramatically, they increased their sensitivity to the procedural rights of defendants. The "right to silence" showed a strong increase in support and opposition to the police "cutting corners" to get a conviction also increased

significantly. In short they demonstrated a new appreciation for the complexity of the issues, the value conflicts they pose and the limitations of any one solution. Our participants became far more sophisticated consumers of the competing policy prescriptions. They became, at least on this one issue, more thoughtful and engaged citizens.

Who changed? There was change in all groups, but a dramatic finding is that the more educated changed the most. For example (changes from the baseline poll in parentheses):

	A levels +	Other qualifications	No qualifications
Stiffer sentences not effective	27 (+16)	13 (+5)	8 (+5)
Only hardened criminals to prison	62 (+20)	51 (+16)	56(+5)
Leave young burglar to parents	64(+23)	52(+15)	66(+1)

The fact that it was the more educated who tended to change more says something about the process. We strived to create a deliberative process where the respondents were expected to weigh competing arguments. The more educated seem to have been more prepared to do that, although there was change across all socio-economic categories. The fact that the more educated changed more shows that we were not "brainwashing" the participants. We subjected them to balanced, competing arguments so that they could make up their own minds. The less educated would probably have been more easily influenced if the process were one of indoctrination. Instead, it was one of deliberation.

Some critics have argued that interaction in small groups must mean that the more educated and articulate will unduly influence the process. First, it should be noted that we collected the responses through confidential questionnaires, so participants would not feel any social pressure in giving their private, considered judgments. Second, the moderators

were trained to involve everyone in the discussion, and to make sure that no individuals dominated the discussion. Here we drew on the experience of the National Issues Forums, a network of small group discussions around the world supported by the Kettering Foundation in the U.S. that, in a completely non-partisan way, attempts to facilitate citizen discussion of public policy issues. The Kettering Foundation helped train the moderators provided by The Independent and it offered invaluable advice on the briefing materials (on the basis of focus groups conducted with by SCPR with British citizens). Third, it should be remembered what we are trying to accomplish. If, somehow, the entire society were magically transformed so that everyone were as engaged by the issues as the participants in our sample, then there would also be opinion leadership, there would also be cases where more informed and articulate people would be more influential. The moderators and the deliberative atmosphere kept such influence within limits, but it cannot, and need not, be eliminated entirely.

Of course, we are unlikely to get the entire society seriously engaged by the issues. I mention the hypothetical just as a point of comparison. But the deliberative poll offers a practical method for doing the experiment with a national random sample and broadcasting the results for the entire country on national television.

The deliberative poll responds to the two main problems which afflict the poll-driven, sound-bitten version of televised democracy that has spread around the world. Those two problems are the "rational ignorance" of ordinary citizens and the tendency of polls to report "non-attitudes" or pseudo-opinions. If I have one vote in millions, why should I spend a lot of time and effort sorting through complex public policy alternatives? My individual vote, my individual opinion, won't make any significant difference. In that sense, as the economist Anthony Downs argued years ago, it is "rational" for individual citizens to avoid investing a lot of effort in becoming less ignorant. However, if I am part of a sample of a few hundred in a nationally televised deliberative poll, I have a real incentive to invest a lot of time and effort attempting to understand the issues. I have the

opportunity to make those opinions count when they will make a difference in a highly visible national event. Of course, just by broadcasting and publishing the results, we will not impart wisdom to the entire mass public. But we will at least inform citizens around the country of the conclusions they would collectively arrive at if they were seriously engaged by the issues. By broadcasting the results we can change the agenda of public discussion and, if the timing is right, we can affect the substance of campaigns and elections.

A great deal of social science has established that many of the "opinions" reported by polls and surveys are "non-attitudes" or pseudo-opinions. Respondents are asked questions about which they have no knowledge, and no settled opinion. To avoid appearing foolish, they choose one of the alternatives offered. In effect, they make up an opinion on the spot. The random volatility of these opinions over time is one of the clues to the lack of thought that has gone into them. Yet these pseudo-opinions are reported solemnly by the media as if they were firm and settled. As the media disseminates those views, they take on an additional life of their own. As the late American political scientist V.O. Key argued, television and polling together operate as a kind of echo chamber. Poll results are broadcast, citizens have vague impressions of the results and bounce them back in additional polls. Very little thinking is going on anywhere in this process. The aspiration of the deliberative poll is to insert a real voice of the people, its considered judgments, into the echo chamber offered by the media.

Imagine what would happen if the deliberative poll were inserted into the beginning of the American presidential selection process. The two defining features of the deliberative poll, that it is representative and deliberative, would offer a dramatically different start to the process, a dramatically different version of the "invisible primary", the period before the first official events when momentum for both issues and candidacies is born.



Rather than small, selected electorates in unrepresentative states we would have a national random sample. Rather than sound-bite campaigning or the ritual of endlessly repeated stump speeches, we would get a deliberative and in-depth examination of the candidates and the issues at the moment when it could make a difference--the beginning.

I am now at work with MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and all ten of the nation's presidential libraries, five Republican and five Democratic, for plans for a "National Issues Convention" to be held in Austin, Texas in January, 1996. The idea is not to replace the primary process as we know it but to provide a deliberative prelude where the people can come to grips with the issues facing the country during the period when momentum is born. This deliberative poll would simply be a supplement to the many conventional polls that will undoubtedly be held during the period. But the early conventional polls do not do much more than measure name recognition of candidates even though they provide the basis for fund-raising in our increasingly front-loaded primary system. With California, New York and other major states moving up in the queue, it should be obvious that the opportunity for the people to have a representative and deliberative input will only come at the very beginning.

The British have already announced that they will make the deliberative poll the centerpiece of the television coverage of their next General Election.<sup>3</sup> With luck, the process they have pioneered may be used to bring deliberative democracy to our next venture in presidential selection. The hope is that we can use the two technologies, polling and television, that have, thus far, combined to give us a superficial form of mass democracy. Through survey research, we can select the sample and formulate and tabulate the questions. Through television, we can attract the citizens and the candidates and disseminate the results. The result may be a new method for bringing power to the people, but under conditions where the people can think about the power they are to exercise.

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<sup>3</sup> "Channel 4 to Introduce Radical Polling Method" Broadcast, May 6, 1994, p. 3.

Appendix: Key Results: Before and After

Key changes in the After survey (compared to the baseline survey for the 300):

I. The respondents show an increased sense of the limitations of prison as a tool for fighting crime:

"Send more offenders to prison" is an effective way of preventing crime, Down 19 from 57 to 38%.

"The courts should send fewer people to prison" % agreeing up 14 from 30 to 44.

"Stiffer sentences generally" is an effective way of fighting crime. Down 13 from 77 to 64%.

II. The respondents show an increased willingness to employ alternatives to prison, first for juveniles and second, for offenders more generally.

First time burglar, aged 16, the percentage strongly against sending him to an ordinary prison went up from 33% to 49%.

The percentage agreeing to a strict warning but leaving the juvenile to the parents to sort out went up from 49 to 63%.

For criminals who are not a big threat to society, the percentage favoring compulsory training and counseling, up from 66 to 75% .

"If the government had to choose, it should concentrate more on punishing criminals or it should concentrate more on trying to reform criminals" the percentage which chose punishing rather than reforming went down from 55 to 45%.

III. The responses show an increased sensitivity to procedural rights of defendants.

The percentage strongly disagreeing that the police should sometimes be able to "bend the rules" to get a conviction went up from 36 to 46%.

The percentage believing it is "worse to convict an innocent person" than "to let a guilty person go free" rose from 60 to 70%.

On the right to silence, the percentage agreeing that "suspects should have the right to remain silent under police questioning" went up from 36 to 49%.

"If a suspect remains silent under police questioning this should count against them in court" the percentage agreeing went down 16 from 57 to 41%.

"A confession made during police questioning should not on its own be enough to convict someone" percentage agreeing rose 11% from 67 to 78%.

IV. Despite the increased sensitivity to procedural rights, the respondents remain very tough on crime. They have not been turned into "liberals":

They remain impatient with the impediments to getting a conviction:

"The rules in court should be less on the side of the accused" showed an increase in support from 42% in the before survey to 52% in the after survey.

"The death penalty is the most appropriate sentence" for some crimes, percentage agreeing unchanged at 68%.

"Prison life should be made tougher and more unpleasant" % agreeing unchanged at 71%.

"Prison life is too soft" percentage agreeing virtually unchanged at 73% (76% previously).

V. Family values: The respondents also show movement toward traditional values:

"Teach children the difference between right and wrong" as a very effective way to help prevent crime: In the before survey, this option had support from 66%, in the after survey, it had support from 77%, an increase of 11% .

"Parents spending more time with their children" as a very effective way to help prevent crime. In the before survey, this option had support from 54%, in the after survey, it had support from 65%, an increase of 10%.

"Less violence and crime on television" as an effective way of preventing crime, in the before survey this option had the support of 66%, in the after survey, it had the support of 74%, an increase of 7%.

VI. Respondents show increased knowledge on issue of crime:

"Britain has a larger prison population than any other country in Western Europe" % correct (true) rose from 50 to 82%.

"Britain has more people serving life sentences than the rest of the European Community put together" percentage answering correct (true) rose from 20 to 59%.

"Possible to be tried by a jury in a local magistrate's court" percentage answering correct (false) rose from 58 to 70%.

VII. Respondents show increased consistency:

There is some evidence, which we intend to analyze in greater detail, that respondents became more consistent. For example, before the weekend, 54% of those who agreed that "the rules in court should be less on the side of the accused" also agreed that "if a suspect remains silent under police questioning this should count against them in court." After the weekend, this figure rose to 73%.

VII Note that all the changes above are net change. Many more respondents changed than indicated by these figures because on many questions change in one direction was cancelled out by change in the other. For example, on "the courts should treat suspects as innocent until proved guilty" there was virtually no net change, but only half (46%) gave the same answer both times.

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## The Deliberative Poll: Some Summary Results

### Representativeness

SCPR, an independent research institute in London selected a national random sample from 40 randomly chosen polling districts in 40 randomly chosen constituencies in Great Britain. 869 responded to a baseline survey with a response rate of 74%. 300 participated in the Manchester experiment, April 15-17. On every demographic and attitudinal dimension, the 300 are indistinguishable from the 869.

For example on the issue of whether crime is a worry, note this comparison of the total baseline survey and the weekend sample:

		Total survey	Weekend sample
Crime:	No worry	28%	27%
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### Results: Before and After

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VIII. Note that all the changes above are net change. Many more respondents changed than indicated by these figures because on many questions change in one direction was cancelled out by change in the other. For example, on "the courts should treat suspects as innocent until proved guilty" there was virtually no net change, but only half (46%) gave the same answer both times.