

Deliberative Polls

MARTA REGALIA

University of Bologna, Italy

Deliberation is a process involving a public discussion on a conflict of opinions, which, through an argumentative process, takes into consideration different points of views on a common problem. A deliberative process entails a “talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving” through a variety of communications tools: “Arguing, talking, demonstrating, expressing and persuading” (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 5). Scholars maintain, in fact, that the term originates from the Latin word *libra* (literally, a pair of scales), thus referring to the action of thoughtfully weighing options, of pondering the pros and cons of a decision to be taken, of evaluating alternative arguments.

Democratic deliberation and political equality

The ideal-typical conception of democracy, in which each and every citizen takes an active and roughly equal part in the management of the *res publica*, would entail a robust deliberative process (Mansbridge et al., 2012). However, in modern nation-states, with the growing extension of territories and populations, it has become an ideal hard to reach, even harder than direct democracy understood as involving the intensive use of referenda or, nowadays, of e-democracy instruments.

Moreover, since individuals do not have the same skills, resources, and knowledge, democratic deliberation has begun to be considered an apparently contrary value to political equality, understood as equal consideration of everyone’s preferences. Thus, as the franchise, along with the emphasis on political equality, has been enlarged, it “has had the unintended consequence of diminishing deliberation. [...] Giving the mass public, which is not generally very deliberative, more say has meant decreasing the level of deliberation behind political decision-making. As political equality has gone up, deliberation has gone down” (Fishkin & Luskin 2005, pp. 284–285). As a result, with the intention of strengthening equality among citizens, the discursive benefits of the (democratic) ideal of a sound deliberation were replaced by the (egalitarian) ideals of vote and representation (Fishkin, 1991).

Opinion polls and deliberative polls

Opinion polls are surveys of public opinion observed through the gathering of information in a particular, random sample of individuals. Opinion polls are usually

The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication, First Edition. Edited by Gianpietro Mazzoleni.

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc235

designed to represent the opinions of a population by conducting a series of interviews with the aim of generalizing from the sample to the entire population within confidence intervals. However, although democratic theory assumes that public opinion is well grounded, empirical research has made it abundantly clear that most ordinary citizens know and think extraordinarily little about politics. Thus, the opinions captured by conventional polls reveal answers to issues the respondent has barely ever thought about before and about which he/she possesses very little information. The opinions uncovered by the surveys are, therefore, not informed by any consideration of alternative arguments or points of view. They rather reveal uninformed, incompetent, and mostly ignorant rough opinions (Converse, 1964).

This conception of opinion poll is highly incompatible with the model of deliberation, which entails some knowledge of the issues at stake and the aptitude to ponder conflicting views and assessments. Trying to reconcile polling and deliberation, in two classic books, Fishkin (1991; 1995) proposed “a poll with a human face” (McCombs & Reynolds, 1999) exposing random samples of population to balanced information and opposing arguments. Randomly selected people are encouraged to challenge their embedded opinions by discussing with heterogeneous interlocutors having divergent points of view. Thus, by talking with other people, participants are forced to think deeply about the matter, to weigh the pros and cons and, consequently, to learn, substantively, which are the arguments and the interests at stake and, methodologically, how to reflect on their and others’ opinions. This method attempts to provide a more accurate, scientific representation of public opinion based on information and careful consideration rather than on “top of the head” opinions. Through this process, called “deliberative polling,” Fishkin believes it becomes possible to solve the aforementioned trade-off between deliberation and political equality. Actually, thanks to the implementation of random sampling procedures, political equality is guaranteed by the fact that “every citizen has an equal chance of being chosen to participate, and, on average, over infinitely repeated sampling from the same population, the sample would resemble the population exactly” (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005, p. 287).

Deliberative poll: How it works

According to the model developed by Fishkin, a deliberative poll begins by drawing a random sample of the population and by interviewing it.

The second step, that can last several weeks, consists in providing a starting point for discussion by sending to those who have agreed to participate a set of carefully balanced briefing materials. Those materials, containing the main arguments relating to the issue at stake and providing purely factual information, are supervised by the stakeholders to assure accuracy and balance. Often, during this phase, participants begin to pay more attention to relevant media news, to discuss the issues with their group of peers, or even to look for information independently. This process, while relevant, risks being a source of bias since people tend to turn to sources of information and to talk with people who are socially homogeneous with themselves.

In the third phase, participants are brought together to attend a two to four-day forum in which they participate in small group discussions about public issues. During the time they spend together, they conduct mainly two kinds of activities; they discuss the issue in randomly assigned small groups and they ask questions arising from the groups to experts and policy-makers in plenary sessions. Plenary sessions and small group discussions are typically broadcast. In this phase, it is important, on the one hand, that experts and policy-makers represent a balanced set of perspectives, and, on the other, that small groups work appropriately. To this end, trained moderators are introduced with the task of maintaining a healthy atmosphere of mutual respect and ensuring that all the opinions for and against are expressed. On-site discussion tends to be more balanced than the previous phase thanks to the heterogeneity of the random groups and to the moderators. At the end of the deliberative process, the participants are asked to answer the same questions that were put to them before being invited to participate. The resulting change in opinion represents the conclusions the public would reach, if the people had the opportunity to become more informed in and involved by the issues.

Usually, high-quality deliberative polls use quantitative pre/post tests to assess the impact of public deliberation on participants' attitudes and opinions. To this end, researchers arrange a control group which is not invited to the second and third phase of the process and which is needed to provide evidence that the changes of opinion in the "treatment" group stem from the deliberative process rather than from other sources of influence affecting both the treatment and the control group. Thus, a deliberative poll is both a form of public consultation (providing policymakers with information about collective and informed opinions) and a social scientific quasi-experiment.

Communication modes in deliberative polls

Deliberation requires interpersonal communication. The classic approach to deliberation stresses Habermas's (1989) "rational-critical debate," which entails controversial argument and argumentative contestation. Yet, in recent years, several scholars have advocated that deliberation also includes wider forms of communication such as storytelling, rhetoric, and a conversation model of speech which leads to an open-mind, civic, constructive, and respectful form of communication. While deliberation is context-dependent (conversations about values are different from conversations about actions), the essential goals of deliberation—such as the acquisition of better knowledge to get to an unbiased evaluation—require both "consensual" and "conflictual" discussion. A recent contribution by Bächtiger and Gerber (2014) analyzes group discussions during Europolis, a pan-European deliberative poll, to "explore towards which pole concrete citizen deliberations drift. First, a consensual variant of discussion is geared towards common understanding and identifying common ground. Its main feature is the search and identification of converging arguments and reasons that other discourse participants can accept. [...] Second, a contestatory variant of discussion is geared towards the clarifications of differences. It has debate-style features, even though it does not

conform to a classic debate format” (pp. 118–119). The authors find that small group discussions are largely instances of consensual conversations with just little doses of contestation. However, the authors underline also that after only a little controversy “the discussion became much more focused, in-depth and creative” (p. 130). A healthy dose of contestation is thus necessary in order to achieve a scrupulous evaluation of the proposals and the participants’ arguments.

Deliberative poll and its critics

Deliberation in general and deliberative polls in particular have been criticized in many respects. First of all, the representativeness of the sample is criticized due to the fact that the people who accept to participate represent a self-selected subsample. Even though the same is true for opinion polls, Fishkin answers that “demographically and attitudinally, the statistically significant differences are remarkably few and typically modest. The participants are generally a bit older, better educated, and more interested and knowledgeable about the topic than the nonparticipants, but not by much” (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005, p. 290). However, another selection bias could be at work. Even if the role of the experts and the policy-makers might mitigate this problem, we can never be certain that a valid position has not been overlooked.

Some people also challenge the very ontological premises, believing deliberation is impossible since the conditions for good deliberation are too demanding and the mass public is incapable of deliberation, being too ignorant, confused, and contradictory to be worth consulting (Posner, 2004). Fishkin and his colleagues used evidence from deliberative polls’ results to show that participants learn quite a lot about the topics under discussion during the deliberative process. Even more important, the changes in opinions are information-driven since the preference changes emerge from better knowledge of the issue under discussion (Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002).

A third objection considers deliberation worthless. The public can use cognitive shortcuts to approximate its real preferences, thus making deliberation a waste of time and resources since people are already at or near their “real,” informed preferences. Fishkin and Luskin’s results falsify this claim, showing evidence that participation in such forums facilitates political learning and opinion change. A part of this change could be caused by random factors due to underdeveloped previous attitudes, but the size and the significance of the change and its correlation with information reveal some net change as well (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999), indicating that informed opinion differs from the more “top of the head” responses captured by opinion surveys.

Finally, others believe that deliberation is damaging since it can alter citizens’ preferences for the worse, giving advantages to specific groups and their preferences (mainly the most privileged members of the society), enlarging majorities and polarizing opinions to an extreme level (Sunstein, 2003). According to Luskin’s results, however, there is no evidence of a tendency for the people with certain sociodemographic characteristics to change opinion more often, to a greater or lesser degree, or more in one direction than in others. This means that the process is accessible to all social strata, that deliberation does not result either in a polarization of opinions or in a homogenization of

preferences within groups, and that, on whole, it improves the quality of democracy through better decision-making (Luskin et al., 2002).

SEE ALSO: Argumentation, Political; Consensus; Deliberation; Democracy; Interpersonal Communication; Public Opinion Polls; Selective Exposure

References

- Bächtiger, A., & Gerber, M. (2014). "Gentlemanly conversation" or vigorous contestation? An exploratory analysis of communication modes in a transnational deliberative poll (Europolis). In K. Grönlund, A. Bächtiger, & M. Setälä (Eds.), *Deliberative minipublics* (pp. 115–134). Colchester, UK: ECPR Press.
- Converse, P. E. (1964). The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In D. E. Apter (Eds.), *Ideology and discontent* (pp. 206–261). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Fishkin, J. S. (1991). *Democracy and deliberation: New directions for democratic reform*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fishkin, J. S. (1995). *The voice of the people: Public opinion and democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fishkin, J. S., & Luskin, R. C. (1999). Bringing deliberation to the democratic dialogue. In M. McCombs & A. Reynolds (Eds.), *The poll with a human face: The National Issues Convention experiment in political communication* (pp. 3–38). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fishkin, J. S., & Luskin, R. C. (2005). Experimenting with a democratic ideal: Deliberative polling and public opinion. *Acta Politica*, 40(3), 284–298.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Luskin, R. C., Fishkin, J. S., & Jowell, R. (2002). Considered opinions: Deliberative polling in Britain. *British Journal of Political Science*, 32(3), 455–487.
- Mansbridge, J. J. et al. (2012). A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In J. R. Parkinson & J. J. Mansbridge (Eds.), *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale* (pp. 1–26). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- McCombs, M., & Reynolds, A. (1999). *The poll with a human face: The National Issues Convention experiment in political communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Posner, R. (2004). *Law, pragmatism and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2003). The law group of polarization. In R. C. Luskin & J. S. Fishkin (Eds.), *Debating deliberative democracy* (pp. 80–101). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Further reading

- Fishkin, J. S. (2009). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy and public consultation*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Fishkin, J. S. (2010). Response to critics of *When the people speak*: The deliberative deficit and what to do about it. *The Good Society*, 19(1), 68–76.
- Ryfe, D. M. (2002). The practice of deliberative democracy: A study of 16 deliberative organizations. *Political Communication*, 19(3), 359–377.

Marta Regalia holds a PhD from the Italian Institute of Human Sciences (SUM). During the PhD, she was appointed a Visiting Student Researcher by Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. She recently edited, with Gianfranco Pasquino and Marco Valbruzzi, a volume on Italian political science, *Quarant'anni di scienza politica in Italia* (Il Mulino, 2013).