

**The Deliberative Poll**

by

Kasper Møller Hansen

Discussion paper presented at the conference  
**Elites and Democracy**  
in Copenhagen 6-8 December 1999.

Kasper Møller Hansen  
University Of Southern Denmark  
Department of Political Science and Public Management  
Main Campus: Odense University  
Campusvej 55  
5230 Odense M  
Denmark

E-mail: "pol4@samnet.sdu.dk"

## **The Deliberative Poll**

### **Introduction**

The myth about Athens' form of democracy seems again to play an important role in new concepts of democracy and again it may be used as a spring board for assessment of regimes, institutions and methods. In this discussion paper I will focus on one method: the so called Deliberative Poll developed by James Fishkin (Fishkin 1988, 1991, 1995, 1997). Inspired by Fishkin's work and other related methods (Price & Neijens 1998), I have been involved in three Deliberative Polls in Norway and conducted one in Denmark. In this discussion paper I will first compare my experience from the four Deliberative Polls with two of Fishkin's Deliberative Polls. In the second part I will set up 13 points of interest in relation to Deliberative Polls and its future use.

### **Part 1**

#### **The Deliberative Poll**

The basic ideal of a Deliberative Poll is simple: *Bring a representative group of people together and let them deliberate with each other, politicians and expert and measure their opinions before and after this process.* In the context of democratic theories the method of Deliberative Polling combines two normative ideal types of democracy. On one hand it tries to fulfill the criterion of representativeness, which is part of the liberal concept of democracy. On the other hand it tries to fulfill the criterion of deliberation, which is part of the republican concept of democracy. The liberal and republican view on democracy are ideal types of democracy (Held 1996) and have been labelled differently with some differences, but in this case it is enough to think of these two concepts as two normative ideal types of democracy. The Deliberative Poll combines the Athens' form of face-to-face democracy with the ideal of representative governance. The Deliberative Polls give an insight of how the voice of the people would have looked like if the people were given the chance to participate in a similar process and in this way a Deliberative Poll prescribes the public opinion and not like other polling methods which tries to describe or predict public opinion. The point is that the participants mirror the public on opinion and social characteristics when they enter the process of the Deliberative Poll and from that on they start to become

unrepresentative of mass opinion and instead represent an engaged and informed public opinion (Fishkin 1997:162-173), which from the republican view on democracy is seen as an ideal.

### 1.1 Experiences from six different Deliberative Polls

Table 1, on the next page, compares six different Deliberative Polls on some relevant points. I will give some comments on the table, even though it mostly speaks for itself.

**Table 1 - Comparison of six Deliberative Polls**

	Manchester (England)	Austin, Texas (USA)	Nordland Fylke (Norway)	Fyns Amt (Denmark)	Stord Kommune (Norway)	Konsberg Kommune (Norway)
Time of holding	15-17 April 1994	19-21 January 1996	27-29 Marts 1998	7 Marts 1999	24-25 April 1999	28-29 August 1999
Populations	A country	A country	A county	A county	A municipality	A municipality
Questioned initially	869 out of 1174 chosen	914 out of 1278 chosen	1200	1000	905	1200
Method for initially questions	Face-to-face interview	Face-to-face interview	Telephone interview	Telephone interview	Telephone interview	Telephone interview
Participants in poll	301	460	83	75	41	48
Duration of poll	Friday to Sunday with a stay overnight	Friday to Sunday with a stay overnight	Saturday to Sunday with a stay overnight	A Sunday	Saturday to Sunday without a stay overnight	Saturday to Sunday without a stay overnight
Reward	-Expenses covered -50£ in honorarium -Tour of TV- studio, which produces poplar shows -Chance for being on TV	-Expenses covered -300\$ in honorarium -Video invitation by famous talk show- host -Chance for being on TV	- Expenses covered	-Expenses covered	-Expenses covered	-Expenses covered
Representativeness	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Deliberation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Change of opinion	Yes, in one direction	Yes, in one direction	Yes, but not in one direction	Yes, in one direction	Yes, but not in one direction	Yes, but not in one direction
Subject	Crime	Economic politic, Family politic and USA's position in the World	Environment and development	Placement of hospitals within the county	Environment and development	City- development
Other remarks	-Strong media- coverage	-Strong media- coverage	Questions asked 3 times: By phone, when they show up and when they leave the poll	Questions asked 3 times: By phone, when they show up and when they leave the poll	Questions asked 3 times: By phone, when they show up and when they leave the poll	Questions asked 3 times: By phone, when they show up and when they leave the poll
Source:	Luskin m.fl.1995, Fishkin 1997	Fishkin 1997	Offerdal & Aars 1998, forthcoming	Hansen 1999	Data made variable by Jacob Aars & Audun Offerdal, University in Bergen	Data made variable by Jacob Aars & Audun Offerdal, University in Bergen

The population at the polls in England and USA to mirror an entire country which is a challenging task to fulfill, but in both

cases the poll makes the criteria of representativeness, which surely is the most difficult task of the Deliberative Poll.

The dropout in British and American polls from the initially asked questions to the participants show up at the polls are very low compared to the four other polls. The reason for this may be due to the fact that the initial interview was face-to-face, which allows a better chance for persuading the interviewee. Further the participants were payed and they had a chance for being on TV and in one case a tour of the TV-studio was given. All this gives many incentives to participate and this may indeed be important for people who usually not participate in politics. The people, which are already involved or interested in politics, will probably participate in the poll even without these incentives. These incentives may therefore be seen as a way to create representativeness so that the participants mirror the population.

Table 1 also shows that opinion change as a result of being part of a Deliberative Poll. This may be due to a number of factors initiated by the first round of questions. Participants may be influenced by the information-material mailed to participants before the polls. They may read newspapers and engage in discussion with friends ec. At the poll they discuss the subject with others, politicians and experts which put the matter in perspective and new ideas may surface. The massive change of opinion at the polls has been criticised for a result of the Hawthorn effect. The Hawthorn effect in this context should be interpreted as the participants change opinion due to the fact that they are part of an experiment. Fishkin (1997) argues that this is beside the point because what makes a Deliberative Poll artificial actually makes the decision making process better. If the primary purpose of the Deliberative Poll was to describe the public opinion, the critics have a point, but as Fishkin (1997) argues the poll tries to prescribe the public opinion if they had a chance to participate in a similar process. In the next part I will discuss some important aspects of the Deliberative Poll, some of which will be related to the normative discussion of what democracy is all about.

## **Part 2**

### **Point of interest in relation to Deliberative Polls and its future use**

In this part I will not go into a more thorough discussion of what democracy is all about. Instead I will focus the discussion on more practical points in relation to the Deliberative Poll and only in some cases relate these practical points of interest to the normative discussion about democracy. The points are indeed overlapping, related and even depending on each other, but anyway I will keep them separated due to analytic reasons and for the purpose of discussion.

#### **2.1 Information**

By participating in the Deliberative Poll participants get in-depth information about a subject. This information may lead to a more qualified answer. On the other hand it is crucial that the information that is given is balanced. This may be a hard task if TV-stations, counties or municipalities are the main sponsors. Commercial TV-stations, as other media, may have an interest in intensifying and simplifying the different views in the debate and may therefore also have an interest in the information given to the participants. If the poll is sponsored by a local government, it can be a hard task not to be dominated by the majority in the local council or other strong interests. On the other hand everyone faces these dominating factors every day. So somehow this conflict among different interests may be seen as part of the game, but anyway still an object of concern.

#### **2.2 Participation**

The Deliberative Poll involves people and makes people participate in the decision making process. From a very strong liberal point of view people cannot and should not participate in democracy and democracy is seen only as a method where people elect their leaders. From a republican view people should participate because democracy is more than just participating in elections. Participation has an intrinsic value which enhances and creates the common citizenship. When conducting Deliberative Polls, as table 1 clarifies, it may be a difficult task to make people participate. If our contemporary democracy is to be based on representative democracy in which participation is seen as

voluntary it may be worth discussing if participators should be paid to participate. On the other hand this may be the only way to create representativeness. This again brings us back to the classic discussion about elite democracy and what kind of specific qualifications the rulers should have, if any, to rule (Dahl 1989).

### **2.3 Mutual understanding**

When people discusses a certain subject there is a chance that it creates a mutual understanding and even a consensus on the matter between the participants. On the other hand it may bring up potential conflicts which could have been avoided if people where not brought together. These potential conflicts may be looked at positively and as a tricker for new development in the society and as a natural part of politics. You may even say that without conflicts and different opinions their would be no need for politics or politicians, who somehow feed on mutual disagreement.

### **2.4 Responsibility**

It may be argued that when participants are involved in the decision making process, they will be more responsible for the implementation of the politics even if the politic are against their own view. This may be due to an understanding of arguments behind the politic and that the poll may have enforced some common values among participants, which lead to a feeling of being part of the community (Fearson 1998). After the participants have spent much time and effort they may also expect that their advice is taken into account (Bohman 1996). Deliberative Polls are in this way more binding than other traditional polling methods.

### **2.5 Education**

Education is another point which may be emphasized. The republican view on democracy sees education as part of democracy and by taking part in the decision making process the people will be educated. The Deliberative Polls give the participants a chance to take direct part in the decision making process, which provides them with information, but also gives the participants the chance for making an argumentation in front of others. These effects have all educational benefits.

## **2.6 Empowerment**

Deliberative Polls give participants a chance to be heard and listened to. This in relation with the educational benefits, mentioned above, may empower people to participate in their own everyday life and take an active part in their own community when they return from the poll. Participants may even want to be active in politics after a close encounter with the politicians. On the other hand it may also intimidate people from politics.

## **2.7 The price**

Even though it may be argued that the Deliberative Poll from a normative point of view is the best method of obtaining the voice of the people with all the normative effects mentioned above the price is a practical concern. The American poll outlined in table 1 may have a rough estimated price around 5-600.000 \$ and the Danish poll used on the local level have an estimated price around 50.000 \$. Taking this into account, it will never be an easy decision to undertake a Deliberative Poll. Even on the local level Deliberative Poll is an expensive method compared to other methods. On the other hand democracy has never been a cheap task to fulfil. If the Deliberative Poll is to be cost-effective and seen as a method, which local as well as national governments can use as a tool for their planning, there needs to be worked out careful instructions so governments can undertake Deliberative Polls without much help from the outside. Even if these initiatives are taken, a Deliberative Poll will never be a tool like the almost everyday consumer and citizen surveys initiated by different level of government. The method is just too expensive for governments as well as for the participants regarding time.

## **2.8 The subject for a Deliberative Poll**

Can every matter be the subject for a Deliberative Poll? The subject needs a certain amount of built-in complexity, otherwise, it can be hard to have a discussion at all. Subject suitable for Deliberative Polls may be characterised as what has been known as wicked problems. These problems are characterised by no definitive solutions and where definitions of the problems may be seen challenging in it self (Harmon & Mayer 1986:9-12). Further polls with subjects which media often focus their attention on due to their intrinsic conflict and subjects with larger public appeal

will have a better chance successfully fulfilling the criterion of representativeness, just because it is more interesting for people to participate.

## **2.9 Non-relationship between the participants and the citizens**

Traditional polling methods such as telephone surveys and mail questionnaires have their legitimacy in that they rely on a representative sample of the people. Deliberative Poll relies on a representative sample of the people and deliberation within the sample. To compare this representativeness with e.g. the representativeness of local or national politicians would be wrong. The participants have no institutionalised relationship with the citizens as elected politicians have. Therefore, the demands for fully representativeness of all citizens in Deliberative Polls are much stronger.

## **2.10 Argumentation by common interest**

Deliberation is often emphasized due to that it is difficult in a group of people to use argumentation based on self-interest. Egoism will therefore have a hard time during a deliberation due to that it would not be commonly accepted to use this form of argumentation. From a liberal point of view the argument for the common good will be used strategically for promoting self-interest (Gargarella 1998). Further argumentation will have a tendency to be based on objective facts and commonly accepted principles rather than feelings and traditions. In a debate about the size of hospitals an argument implying that small hospitals are more cosy and the personnel is nicer, will have difficulty to be turned into a persuasive argument, because it is a subjective concern and it is difficult to compare and quantify. This however does not imply that an argument of this kind is more illegitimizing than other argument.

## **2.11 Consistency**

Deliberation emphasizes the norm of consistent argumentation. A participant cannot openly contradict himself. On the other hand the norm of consistent argumentation will weaken the people's tendencies for changing their opinion due to better information or the force of the better argument (Elster 1998).

### **2.12 Conformity and Group think**

When a group is gathered and discussing a given matter new ideas may occur which may never have surfaced. On the other hand groups tend to develop a conformity or uniformity within the group. Some participants may suppress an argumentation against a general consensus in the group which can reinforce a mutual mistake. This tendency is labelled conformity and group think which focus on and question, that groups may work their way towards a consensus. From a republican view on democracy these tendencies may be looked at positively, because the participants adjust their view in relations and respect to the generally accepted norm in the group. From a liberal view on democracy these tendencies show that the participants may not be given the chance to taking an individual stand and are clearly a break with the concept of autonomy individuals (Elster 1998)

### **2.13 Manipulation**

When people meet, they influence each other, that may be in everyday situations or at the Deliberative Poll. Some people are better gifted and educated to speak for themselves and will have an advantage in the deliberation. Demagogues in their use of rhetoric may be able to manipulate some participants. If these manipulatory and paternalistic tendencies are not met, the Deliberative Poll undermines its democracy foundation. Therefore it is crucial that within the design of Deliberative Polls to teach moderators and chairpersons to prevent some people from dominating the debates.

## **Part 3**

### **Conclusion**

In this discussion paper I have summarized some points of six different Deliberative Polls and briefly discussed some of the differences. The four polls conducted in Scandinavian have a problem with participation and due to that, problems with the representative ideal of the Deliberative Poll. The deliberative ideal seems to have been fulfilled in all polls.

In the second part I have outlined 13 points of concern in relation to the poll, which all have to concern us in the future use of the Deliberative Poll. These points are: Information, Participation, Mutual understanding, Responsibility, Education,

Empowerment, The price, The subject for a Deliberative Poll, Non-relationship between the participants and the citizens, Argumentation by common interest, Consistency, Conformity and Group think and Manipulation. These points are all related and overlapping, but each of them may be seen as a starting point for discussion about the Deliberative Poll and its future.

### **Selected literature**

- Bohman, J. & Rehg, W. (eds.) (1997) *Deliberative Democracy - essays on reason and politics*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Bohman, J. (1996) *Public Deliberation - Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Dahl, R. A. (1989) *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Elster, J. ed. (1998) *Deliberative democracy*. Cambridge University Press, NY.
- Eriksen, E. O. & Weigård, J. (1999) *Kommunikativ handling og deliberativt demokrati - Jürgen Habermas' teori om politikk og samfunn*. Fakkboklaget, Bergen.
- Fearon, J. D. *Deliberation as Discussion* i Elster, Jon (ed) *Deliberative democracy*. Cambridge University Press, NY. pp 44-69.
- Fishkin, J. S. (1988) *The Case for a national caucus - taking democracy seriously*. The Atlantic, August pp. 16-8.
- Fishkin, J. S. (1995) *The Voice of the People - public opinion and democracy*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- Fishkin, J. S. (1997) *The Voice of the People - public opinion and democracy - 2. editions*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- Gargarella, R. (1998) *Full Representation, Deliberation and Impartiality* in Elster, Jon (ed) *Deliberative democracy*. Cambridge University Press, NY. pp 260-281.
- Hansen, K. M. (1999) *Danmarks første folkehøring - afrapportering fra en folkehøring om det fynske sygehusvæsen*. Fyns Amt, Odense.
- Harmon, M. M. & Mayer, R. T. (1986) *Organization theory for public administration*. Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois.
- Held, D. (1996) *Models of democracy - 2. editions*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Luskin, R. C. & Fishkin, J. S. (unpublished, 1997) *Considered Opinions: Deliberative polling in the UK*.
- Offerdal, A. & Aars, J. (1998) *Deltakelse og deliberasjon: Rapport fra en deliberativ høring i Nordland fylke, Norge* in Kommunal Ekonomi och Politik. vol. 2, nr. 3. september 1998 pp 27-41.
- Price, V. & Neijens, P. (1998) *Deliberative Polls - Toward Improved Measures of Informed Public-Opinion* in International Journal of Public Opinion Research, Vol 10, Iss 2, pp 145-176.
- Aars, J. & Offerdal, A. (forthcoming, 2000) *Having people deliberate - Representativeness and deliberative politics* in Nirmala Rao (ed.) *Representation and community in western democratises*.