

Professor James Fishkin – written evidence (FGU0016)

House of Lords Constitution Committee Inquiry into the Future governance of the UK

1. I would like to commend to you the use of deliberative democratic methods in the consideration of the future governance of the United Kingdom. By deliberative democratic methods, I mean a) the use of random samples to deliberate on potential political reforms and b) scaling the same kinds of deliberation engaged in by random samples to larger numbers in the population in order to help achieve a more thoughtful and informed mass public.
2. In particular, I want to direct your attention to the method we have fostered over the years, which we actually began in the UK with Channel Four in 1994 (after I spent a year visiting at Cambridge.) That method, which I call Deliberative Polling® has been employed more than 110 times in 30 countries to help make important decisions and to contribute the representative and thoughtful voice of the people to the public debate.
3. The process presumes that democracy has to make some connection to the public will, especially for important decisions. But ordinary polls often reflect no more than an impression of sound bites and headlines. Many people get their information from social media and, in their “filter bubbles”, never come to terms with the reasoning of those they disagree with. What would they think if they could consider the issue in depth? The process is called Deliberative Polling® because it employs a stratified random sample answering a survey on first contact and then again at the end of a deliberative process. The changes of opinion are often substantial when people really discuss issues in moderated small group discussions and plenary sessions where they get their questions answered by competing experts representing different points of view. The process does not strive for consensus because the push for consensus can distort opinion (as in a jury verdict). Instead, the final considered judgments are collected in confidential questionnaires. If there is a consensus it will be apparent in the data.
4. Unlike citizens assemblies, which usually meet periodically for about a year, the Deliberative Poll, with proper preparations, can generate its conclusions in a weekend.
5. Some particular points to note:
 1. These projects can occur face to face or online. The online projects are much less expensive since they obviate the need for transportation, meals and hotels. One of the recent projects in the US, “America in One Room” brought more than 500 deliberators, a demonstrably representative sample of American voters, to a single place for four days of intense, face to face discussion on the major issues facing the US. It produced dramatic changes of opinion featured widely in the press. See
“This experiment has some great news for our democracy”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/opinion/america-one-room-experiment.html>

and, more generally:

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2019/america-in-one-room/>

Those dramatic changes de-polarized the differences between Republicans and Democrats on the most contested issues and showed the contours of representative and thoughtful opinion when people thought about the merits of the case for and against each of 47 policy proposals.

2. The process has been used on issues of constitutional change, most notably in Mongolia, where it is now required by law before the Parliament can consider a constitutional amendment:

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2017/mongolias-first-national-deliberative-poll-on-constitutional-amendments/>

And in Iceland where it was employed by Parliament to advise on a new round of constitutional reform in 2019:

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/dp-locations/europe/iceland/>

3. The process was used in Japan for important national decisions, both on the pension system and on the choice of energy solutions following the Fukushima disaster:

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2012/deliberative-polling-on-energy-and-environmental-policy-options-in-japan/>

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2011/deliberative-polling-on-the-pension-system-in-japan/>

4. In Texas, the process was used on energy choices in eight projects that led Texas from being last among the fifty states in wind power in 1996 to becoming first by 2007. <https://cdd.stanford.edu/1998/deliberative-polling-texas-electric-utilities/>

5. In Bulgaria a national Deliberative Poll on policies toward the Roma helped lay the groundwork for the desegregation of the then Roma-only schools

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2007/deliberative-polling-on-policies-toward-the-roma-in-bulgaria/>

6. In South Korea, the government officially convened a national Deliberative Poll to make the final decision about whether or not to finish construction of two nuclear reactors (Shin Gori 5 and 6)

<https://cdd.stanford.edu/2017/proposed-deliberation-in-south-korea-on-closing-two-nuclear-reactors/>

7. Some of the more recent Deliberative Polls (Chile, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Canada all on the CDD web site) have used an automated platform that facilitates each small group moderating its own discussion. Small groups of ten deliberate simultaneously adding up to samples of more than 400. This platform has been

used, not only for online Deliberative Polls but also for scaling the same kind of deliberation in schools, among civic groups and amongst the mass public. Experiments are in process now with samples of several thousand. In theory it could be used for very large numbers of deliberators. See <https://cdd.stanford.edu/online-deliberation-platform/>

6. Work on scaling deliberations with this platform is ongoing in several countries. At some point in your deliberations you might consider employing this kind of technology to cost-effectively engage large numbers of citizens in deliberation.
7. If any of this work is of interest to the committee, we stand ready to contribute further to the dialogue in the UK or answer any questions. Please let us know if there is some way we can be helpful.

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