Center for Global Development

Deliberative Polling as a Catalyst for Action on Climate Change

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Opinion polls on global warming haven't been much help in pressing for action to reduce climate change risk, in part because polls consistently show that many respondents are uninformed of, doubt, or outright reject climate science. Politicians take these results as reason to avoid tackling a complex problem, and public debate revolves around whether to take action rather than what action to take.

Like other public opinion surveys, those on climate change ask a representative sample of respondents about issues that many know little about and haven't thought about much. Focus groups allow for the provision of new information, reflection, and discussion, potentially opening the way for more informed opinion. But such groups are not representative and they meet only briefly — typically only about 90 minutes — so participants are unable to probe difficult issues in depth.

Deliberative Polling addresses this pair of problems — lack of knowledge and thoughtfulness on one hand and lack of representativeness on the other — in a manner that is especially well suited to ascertaining public preferences about complex issues such as climate change.

This essay explains how Deliberative Polling works and offers examples of how it has led to unexpected policy successes. It then suggests ways in which the approach could be applied nationally, beginning in the United States, to raise the quality of public debate about climate change, opening the way for independent but possibly coordinated national responses. The brief is designed for potential funders, sponsoring organizations, and partners of various types who are seeking fresh strategies for breaking the political impasse that has so far prevented effective policy responses to reduce the risk of climate runaway disruptions.[1]

A relatively new approach to ascertaining informed, thoughtful, and representative public views on complex issues, Deliberative Polling in its modern form has proven effective as a catalyst for improved policy in a wide variety of settings. The approach is more complex, time consuming, and expensive than public opinion surveys and focus groups. Done correctly, however, it can help to drive the design and implementation of effective policy action in a way that the other approaches cannot. It therefore holds great promise as a means of improving policy responses to the climate change threat.

Deliberative Polling has roots in ancient Athens, where citizens selected by drawing lots debated complex problems and decided how the community should proceed. Revived, refined, and applied in a wide variety of settings since the mid-1990s, it is designed to reveal what a scientific, random sample of people think about an issue when provided an opportunity to learn about and discuss it with others under conditions favorable to making informed decisions.

When deliberative polls have not led directly to policy change, they have often transformed the political debate through video broadcasts, reporting and analysis about the process and results, and the experience that observers — often decision-makers — have watching a deliberative poll.

How Deliberative Polling Works

The core methodology of Deliberative Polling is straightforward, although it involves more steps, greater logistical challenges, and substantially higher costs than a conventional public opinion poll. First, an advisory group that represents a broad spectrum of views about an issue oversees the creation of briefing materials to ensure balance and accuracy. These materials provide the basis for a first-round questionnaire that is administered to a large, random, representative sample of the population — typically hundreds of people — to provide a baseline measure of preferences.

Next a randomly selected subset of the initial sample, ranging from 150 to several hundred people, is recruited to gather for a day or weekend at the deliberative poll location; the remainder of the initial sample serves as a control group. All costs of participation are fully covered, and an incentive is usually offered to ensure participation is attractive and affordable to everyone in the sample.

Arriving at the venue, participants meet briefly as a single group and are then randomly divided into smaller groups of about 15 people, among whom a trained moderator guides a discussion. The moderators are responsible for ensuring that the discussion does not become polarized and that differences in ethnicity, class, gender, education, and language do not result in some people talking more than others. Participants in the small groups exchange views and decide on questions to pose to experts during plenary sessions.

The small groups give participants a sense that their ideas matter — and thus an incentive to learn about the issue and carefully consider the views of others. Moreover, in such a setting, learning about an issue is much less costly than in other settings: time has been set aside, and materials and experts are readily at hand. The common tendency to not invest in learning about issues about which one's views won't matter is thus greatly reduced.

The process alternates between small-group discussions and plenary sessions where poll participants pose questions to the expert panel. At the end, participants complete the same questionnaire they answered at the start and answer additional questions about the process.

Deliberative Polling and Policy Change

Deliberative Polling results have led to real-world changes in a surprisingly large number of instances. These changes may come about directly (e.g., the poll sponsor is a government or other entity with the power to implement policy changes, and it commits in advance to abide by the poll results). More commonly, deliberative polls change the terms of a public debate, opening the way for future changes in policy.

In Texas, a series of Deliberative Polls led to a series of investments in renewable energy, first through "Integrated Resource Plans" filed with the Public Utility Commission and then with the creation of a renewable energy portfolio standard that brought the famously oil-and-gas-friendly state's wind power generation from second-to-last in the United States to first. As in other Deliberative Polls, observers were key to subsequent policy change. Observers included elected officials, public utility commissioners, and power company executives, many of whom said in subsequent interviews that watching the deliberation was an important factor in changing their views. The Texas utility commissioner said that subsequent changes in state policy and utility company investment policies were a direct result of the deliberative polls.

Other instances in which Deliberative Polling was a catalyst for policy change include the following:

- In Zeguo, China, a city of about 250,000 inhabitants, deliberative polls helped to channel public spending from high-visibility public works to more basic environmental projects, including a sewage treatment plant. Zeguo has continued Deliberative Polling for budget and infrastructure on a nearly annual basis since 2005. The Deliberative Polling has spread to other areas of China and has been praised in the 18th Party Congress as a fruitful area for grass roots democratic experimentation.

- In Bulgaria, a national Deliberative Poll conducted with the participation of the prime minister led to the end of segregated schools for the historically shunned Roma minority and the closing of Roma-only schools.

- In Italy's Regione Lazio, the state that includes Rome, a Deliberative Poll on budgetary issues for health policy helped solve a long-standing problem of too many hospital beds and not enough walk-in clinics. Politicians said the poll results "provided cover to do the right thing."[2]

Application of Deliberative Polling to Climate Change

The advantages of Deliberative Polling in opening the way for sensible public policy on global warming will be quickly evident to readers who, like me, are preoccupied with finding a fresh way forward.

It's easy to imagine, for example, that a US national deliberative poll on climate change could attract wide media attention at each step, providing opportunities for education and a lively, relatively well-informed debate, starting with the selection of the advisory group to oversee the preparation of the briefing materials. The materials themselves, shared online and via traditional media reports, could fuel further debate and provide a valuable public resource, complementary to but more accessible and policy-oriented than recent US and international reports on climate change science. The baseline poll results will provide yet another opportunity for media exposure and reporting.

The real fun — and catalyst for change — will begin when the subset of survey participants is randomly selected to come to Washington, New York, Los Angeles, or some other media hub for two days of deliberation. As a random sample of Americans, these people will represent a wide variety of backgrounds and hold diverse views. Inevitably, some will be climate change skeptics; others will accept climate science but believe that nothing can be done or that the costs of action are too high. And of course there will be many ideas about what should be done. The goal of the deliberative poll is to discover whether these diverse opinions will coalesce around a course of action as people learn more, deliberate with each other, and think about what they think.

A subsample of the participants can be made available to the for media before the event. The entire sample can be made available after it is concluded. Local and regional media outlets will be offered a rare local angle for reporting on national climate policy, perhaps following a particular individual from her or his selection through the participation in the deliberation, in a *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*–style approach. The composition of the expert panel, and the panel members' responses to thoughtful questions from "ordinary" Americans, will provide further media interest. [3] Policymakers will be invited as observers, and organizers will commission videographers to shoot and post YouTube clips and to prepare a documentary film, similar to the film made of a pioneering pan-European deliberative poll, *Europe in One Room*.

Because the United States has the highest per capita carbon emissions of any major economy, and because the United States has both a lively media culture and citizens with widely varying views on the nature of the climate threat and the appropriate policy response, the United States is a logical choice for a national deliberative poll on climate policy. Soon after, or in a series of lagged exercises if funding is available, similar exercises should be conducted in other major economies, designed such that the poll results could be compared across countries.

What will the poll results be? There is, of course, no way to know. The uncertainty of the outcome provides much of the interest that gives the project its reality TV appeal. Funders of such a project (which could include a coalition of charitable foundations, firms, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals, perhaps abetted by crowd-sourced small contributions) would be betting that the results will be favorable to sensible climate action and that the theory of change described in this essay will subsequently prove to be effective.

Such a bet is a reasonable risk. The cost of this type of exercise — perhaps roughly $2 million to $5 million over two to three years — is modest compared to the total philanthropic funding now flowing into more conventional approaches to pressing for climate action. It is also small compared to the costs of the annual UN conferences and other international gatherings — so far unsuccessful — aimed at reaching a global climate treaty.

Moreover, the chance of getting a really bad result — that participants end the process less in favor of sensible climate policies than when they started — seems remote. Experience with previous deliberative polls shows a consistent pattern: given the opportunity to learn about a complex issue and discuss it with others, people behave how we hope they would: they shift their views in favor of policies that are more generous, have a longer time horizon, and generally align better with the recommendations of public policy experts.

[1] James Fishkin, director of the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy, has shepherded the Deliberative Polling® methodology into its modern form, working in collaboration with Robert Luskin of the University of Texas at Austin. This essay draws heavily on his work and on a Center for Global Development policy paper, *Citizen Voice in a Globalized World* (2014), by Lawrence MacDonald, Bobby Fishkin, and David Witzel. Bobby Fishkin is the cofounder and CEO of Reframe It, a firm specializing in technology-enhanced Deliberative Polling. He is the son of James Fishkin.

[2] These and other examples are described in *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*, by James Fishkin (Oxford University Press, 2009). See also http://cdd.stanford.edu for more applications.

[3] While the composition of the expert panel would inevitably be the subject of considerable debate, the event would have greater legitimacy and be more lively if the experts were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds—science, business, economics, and public policy—and held a wide variety of views. In my view, however, it would be inappropriate to include people who seek to raise doubt about mainstream climate science, just as a panel on HIV/AIDS would not include those who question whether the disease is caused by a virus or one on tobacco would not include those who reject the well-established link between smoking and heart and lung diseases. The poll participants, however, being randomly selected, would likely include people do not know or who reject the findings of climate science.