

# Deliberative Polls: An Introduction

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## *A vicious cycle: rational ignorance and public opinion polls*

People are often uninformed about major public policy issues, for good reason. Since one person's actions alone cannot make a difference, individuals do not invest the effort to sort out rival political claims or unfamiliar policy trade-offs. Social scientists call this *rational ignorance*.

Alternatively, many individuals join or take cues from groups that pursue shared interests. However, even the largest and most influential groups have a narrow range of vision, one that is either economic and material (e.g., labor unions, business organizations), ideological and expressive (NARAL, NRA), or social and solidary (NAACP, VFW). The major political parties are shifting coalitions of these groups.

When self-interested groups enter the political arena, the interests of larger numbers of citizens, who are affected, but not engaged, are at risk. When the unengaged, for lack of awareness and involvement, are shortchanged by political outcomes, social scientists call it a *collective action failure*.

Standard public opinion polls, which are thought to weight the views of activists and the unengaged objectively, instead contribute to collective action failures. Standard polling techniques provoke interest groups and partisans to a standard response. They fundraise, create and invest in salient but superficial political messaging. Forgoing debate and consensus-building, the competing sides vie to permeate the mass media with their own messaging, paid and otherwise. The messaging frames the issues and personalities to take advantage of preconceptions and to exploit rational ignorance.

The goal of the zero-sum messaging game is political leverage via standard polls. The result is too often a political standoff. Collective action failures have persisted for decades in health care, education, energy, social security and other policy areas, despite the oft-stated willingness of a majority of Americans to support balanced change.

## *Breaking the cycle: Deliberative Polls*

In a Deliberative Poll a random, representative sample is first polled on the targeted issues. After this baseline poll, members of the sample gather for discussion. Carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly available. The participants engage in dialogue and develop questions in small group discussions with trained

moderators, then assemble in larger groups to pose the questions to competing experts and political leaders. After one or more rounds of these deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had an opportunity to become more informed.

Unlike standard polls that overlook rational ignorance and the political messaging that manipulates it, a Deliberative Poll provides an information shortcut, or heuristic device, that is not easily gamed. A Deliberative Poll's results are a guide to successful and responsible advocacy and debate. Those results can be used to moot manipulative political messaging and to restore the incentive for opposing advocates to engage in meaningful debate, the first step in consensus-building.

### *Important Deliberative Polls So Far*

Over thirty-five Deliberative Polls have been conducted around the world in face-to-face gatherings and, more recently and more economically, online with voice technology. Each experiment gathered a representative sample and produced dramatic, statistically significant changes in participants' views.

- Deliberative Polls conducted in China (2005) and Texas (1996) were the basis for decisions on, respectively, public infrastructure for a new township and, major investments in renewable energy by electrical utility firms.
- Online and face-to-face Deliberative Polls on America's role in the world, undertaken in 2003, yielded similar pictures of deliberative public opinion regarding U.S. foreign policy. Participants' support for American global responsibilities increased. Highlights were televised nationally on PBS.
- A televised event on national reconciliation with aboriginals in Australia (2001) witnessed a doubling in the percentage of participants recognizing reconciliation as an important national issue. Highlights were televised nationally.
- Televised Deliberative Poll events in Denmark (2000) and Australia (1999) played a major role in shaping the public debate before national referenda on, respectively, the adoption of the Euro and, a constitutional referendum on the monarchy.

More details are in the table on the next page.

## Selected Deliberative Polls, 1996-2005

<b>Deliberative Poll Topic</b>	<b>Co-Sponsor &amp; Other Details</b>	<b>Significant Developments</b>
Chinese township infrastructure spending	Zeguo Town; 2005; N=256	Support increased significantly for three sewage plants and a comprehensive environmental plan and decreased significantly for prestige projects. The selected projects are being built.
America's role in the world	MacNeill/Lehrer; 2003; DPs in 17 cities (televised); N=283 (online)	First online poll, using voice conferencing. Participants increased support for U.S. global responsibilities. Face-to-face and online poll results were shown to be similar.
Australian reconciliation with aboriginals	Issues Deliberation Australia; 2001; televised; N=344	Participants who considered reconciliation an important national issue doubled to 60%.
Danish adoption of the Euro	University of Southern Denmark; 2000; televised; N=364	The Danish prime minister and opposition leader answered participants' questions; undecided participants dropped by 10%. The issues were reframed in terms of effects on welfare state.
Australian constitutional referendum	Issues Deliberation Australia; 1999; televised; N=347	Participants in favor of replacing monarchy with republic increased by 20%; those believing they had sufficient information to decide their vote dropped by 20%.
Texas renewable energy regulation	Public Utility Commission; 1996; eight regional polls; N=175 to 250.	Eight utilities made investments to generate 1,000 MW in renewable energy.

For more information on Deliberative Polls, contact Bill Corbett of Citizen Sovereignty at [WilliamCorbett@cox.net](mailto:WilliamCorbett@cox.net) or 703-927-0531.

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