

Polls: Deliberative & Non-Deliberative

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In this paper I consider differences between deliberative polls and the more standard model of an attitude survey as it is practiced in contemporary public polling. The differences I will consider are those that affect the cognitive processes respondents are hypothesized to go through during the question-and-answering process. What features of a deliberative poll would lead us to expect that responses to a standard survey questionnaire administered after the deliberative process would be different from those obtained under the usual non-deliberative conditions?

First, how do respondents answer survey questions? The model we have been using (Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz, 1996) hypothesizes four tasks: understanding the meaning of the question, generating an answer, formatting the answer to fit that of the question and, finally, editing the answer. We distinguish two cases: the first, in which respondents already have formed an opinion and can recall it; and the second, in which respondents have to access what Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski (1999) call "relevant considerations." "Considerations" may involve a host of things like beliefs, information, values, prejudices, social context and other things. After evaluating the considerations, respondents construct an opinion and then format and edit it.

The modal attitude survey about public policy issues today involves a telephone sample with a true response rate of between 30 and 50%. Respondents are induced to respond to a pre-coded standardized questionnaire with as little preliminary explanation as possible. Respondents take about 15 seconds to answer a question. If surveys are conducted in person, the response rate is typically higher; there is more time for introductory material, since negotiating cooperation usually is more complicated; and the respondents typically take somewhat longer to answer the questions. In both cases, however, the survey is a conversation between two people, an interviewer and a respondent. In rare cases, the questionnaire is self-administered.

How do deliberative polls differ from this model? As the practice of deliberative polling has evolved, there are typically three major components: survey, deliberate, resurvey. First, there is a standard attitude questionnaire given to a sample of respondents, often as a self-administered questionnaire. Second, the respondents in the survey are brought together face-to-face in order to deliberate. Third, the respondents are reinterviewed with the same survey instrument that was used in the original survey. A gap of 3 to 8 weeks may occur between the two administrations of the survey questionnaire.

In the deliberative polls that have been conducted to date, the deliberation itself has had three components: (1) written informational materials provided to the respondents after they have answered the first questionnaire but before they have come together; (2) small group discussion of the issue or issues that are the topic of the poll; and (3) a meeting with "experts", who may be also politicians or candidates for office. The focus of the small group discussion has been on selected issues with the goal of formulating questions that will be posed to the experts in order to illuminate aspects of the issues that the respondents feel need further clarification. After meeting with the experts, typically in a plenary session rather than in small groups, the respondents meet again in their small groups to discuss their reactions to the experts and their answers to the group formulated questions. Finally, the respondents fill out the post-deliberation survey in their groups with no discussion of their answers with each other, at least not publicly.

From the professional survey research point of view, the distinctive feature of the deliberative poll is that it unites two methodologies that are widely used in social, political and market research—i.e., traditional surveys and focus groups. The deliberative poll brings a probability sample of the population together, divides them randomly into small groups, and then treats them essentially as focus groups, engaging the participants in discussion of selected issues in a free-form manner with no attempt during the discussion to standardize the procedures except within very general guidelines and the goal of formulating questions for the experts.

The small group experience in the deliberative poll, of course, differs from that in focus groups. Focus groups are typically used to understand more deeply people's attitudes on particular topics through the medium of non-standardized questions and discussion, but usually there is no attempt to look at attitude change as a function of participating in the focus groups. In deliberative polls, however, the purpose of the discussion is to consider new information and discuss the differing views among the participants with the expectation that new or additional information and better understanding of other people's views will enrich or possibly change the participants own views.

What model of opinion formation and change underlies the idea of a deliberative poll? People appear to form opinions rationally in light of their perceived interests and value structures. Respondents start with certain policy preferences based on their interests and values, process information about a policy (or attitude object), evaluate the information in light of their values. Their answers to opinion questions in surveys reflect that process.

The deliberative critique of ordinary public opinion surveys is based on the oft-stated view that respondents in surveys either lack significant information about the topic of the questions, and/or have neither thought much about the topic nor processed what information they have been exposed to (Fishkin, 1999?). The deliberative poll seeks to correct this situation by providing a series of experiences that expose the participants to relevant factual material, give them the opportunity to get further information from credible sources and engage in conversation with other citizens about their views. The fact that the small groups are themselves microcosms of the population contributes to the probability that each respondent will be exposed to a wide variety of views from all kinds of people with whom they do not interact every day.

It is not clear a priori which source or type of information will be more important, but it is clear from talks with participants that they feel the interaction with other respondents is the most important element in the event. Time spent with experts is the least important (though still important).

What goes on in the group discussions? They clarify normative structures and get participants to think about how one has to confront tradeoffs. Interaction with others gets people to face the limitations of their stereotypes as they hear more and richer personal stories of people who are otherwise thought of as social categories. The cognitive complexity of their views appears to increase.

Experts provide some information and, when successful, help clarify alternatives and frame the problems in different ways. They bring out points of agreement and disagreement and illuminate how much policy arguments are arguments about fact and how much they are arguments about matters of value.

How does this experience affect the response processes of respondents when they are filling out the questionnaire after the deliberative sessions? First let us consider the case in which respondents have formed an opinion before participating in the deliberative process. When respondents retrieve their opinions about a topic, they will evaluate the opinion in the light of the information and points of view they have heard during the deliberations. If their opinion had been formed over some time with types of experiences somewhat along the lines of those in the deliberative process, they may well not change their opinion but reaffirm what they have already committed themselves to. Thus, for well-formed opinions we would not expect much attitude change to be manifested in the second survey.

For topics about which there is little information or discussion, such as new topics on the public political agenda, or for people who do not have pre-formed opinions, the situation is quite different. At the time of the first interview, when confronted with a question about which they have no opinion, respondents will bring to mind whatever considerations are triggered off in their minds by the introduction to the survey, the sponsor, the wording of the question, as well as the questions that have come before. In the short time they take to answer the question, the dominant considerations will be those that are easily accessible cognitively. These will vary widely from person to person and may be heavily affected by media coverage of the topic since that is apt to be the source of any information they might have. As research has shown, this is the type of situation in which attitudes are unstable and to which the label "non-attitudes" might properly be applied.

In contrast, after the deliberative process, the extent and richness of the considerations that are readily accessible on those topics covered in the deliberations will be much greater. This should give rise to more considered opinions, if enough time is given and the answer formats do not constrain the answers in a way that forces simplification of responses. In so far as answering questions on an attitude survey involves rehearsing and consolidating opinions, one would expect that opinions formed under deliberative conditions would be quite stable.

To summarize, we would expect changes in a respondent's answers to standardized attitude questions after participation in a deliberative process when the questions are about issues that have not been widely discussed before the deliberative process or about which the public has little information either

because relatively little is actually known, as with global warming, or because it is obscure and the public has not paid much attention, as with sampling in the census. We would also expect changes from those respondents who do not have preformed opinions on the topics being asked about. When the topic is well known and much discussed, such as abortion, or respondents already have firmly rooted opinions, such as an NRA member's attitude toward gun control, we would expect little change in attitudes after the deliberative process. We might also expect little change in opinion on topics that are asked about in deliberative polls but about which there was no discussion or expert opinion in the deliberative process. Thus, there is no simple answer to the question about how much change would one expect in a deliberative poll. It depends on the topic and on the proportion of the population that already has well-formed opinions on the topics under discussion.

In closing I note an interesting challenge to the survey community. On the surface, it is surprising that we would use standardized questionnaires to measure change as a result of the deliberative process. The types of experiences that go into the deliberations should have more interesting effects on people's attitudes than we can pick up in our standard closed-ended questionnaires. We know relatively little about the ways in which the formatting requirements of the standardized opinion question force respondents to simplify complex opinions. The kind of increased richness of meaning and cognitive complexity of attitudes toward the issues which were deliberated about needs a measuring instrument that can pick up these kinds of changes. Everyone who participates in a deliberative poll comes away impressed with what goes on in the small groups and feels that there are important things happening there that we do not know how to measure. This is a long-standing criticism of survey methods and encourages some investigators to pursue more qualitative methods. Many of us have been willing to put up with the limitations of the standardized questionnaire because of its analytic benefits. At the same time, we recognize that there is much that is escaping our net. Perhaps it is time to have renewed interest in ways that attitudes can be measured so as to preserve their richness.

References

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