

A Deliberative Poll on Climate Change

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Abstract: For policy decisions to be accepted, it is critically important to gain public support. But for issues with important scientific and technical details such as climate change, the public is often ill informed as to both the work of the scientific community and the details of policy options. Added to this lack of education is the lack of time that citizens have to review these details and the choices and trade-offs involved. Traditional polls designed to inform decision makers about public opinion only mirror this situation; there is no charter to improve the opinions of those polled, thereby leaving decision makers with the impression that only limited political capital for such issues exists. One way out of this dilemma is to utilize what James Fishkin of Stanford University has called a Deliberative Poll[®]. The protocols of this process, which have been honed in a university setting at Carnegie Mellon over the past 5 years, can create the conditions for a representative sample of a community to not only become well informed about an issue, but also to exercise influence beyond the particular polling event and impact actual policy decisions. In this paper, the protocol will be introduced and the results of a recent Deliberative Poll on climate change conducted at Carnegie Mellon will be described. The implications that this case study may have for larger Deliberative Polling initiatives and public policy will also be explored.

Keywords: Deliberative Polling; deliberative democracy; informed opinion; climate change

Introduction

Climate change is an environmental problem with unique characteristics such as unequal distributions of damages and benefits across the globe, intergenerational effects, and risks and uncertainties around the costs and benefits of policy interventions (Stern 2006). The assumptions behind conventional tools for policy analysis, which are typically used for decision-making, also break down under the timescales, economic impacts, and lifestyle changes that must be considered in the face of climate change (Morgan et al. 1999). Some researchers have suggested that even when actionable policy decisions for climate change have been identified, the hard work of maintaining social resolve for these policy mechanisms must continue over decades (if not longer) of rising global mean temperature (Moser and Dilling 2007). Therefore, for climate policy decisions to be accepted, it will be critically important to gain and maintain public support. But for issues with important scientific and technical details such as climate change, the public is

often ill informed as to both the work of the scientific community and the details of policy options. Added to this lack of education is the lack of time that citizens have to review these details and the choices and trade-offs involved. Traditional polls designed to inform decision makers about public opinion only mirror this situation; there is no charter to improve the opinions of those polled, thereby leaving decision makers with the impression that only limited political capital for such issues exists. One way out of this dilemma is to utilize what James Fishkin of Stanford University has called a Deliberative Poll[®]. The protocols of this process, which have been honed in a university setting at Carnegie Mellon over the past 5 years, can create the conditions for a representative sample of a community to not only become well informed about an issue, but also to exercise influence beyond the particular polling event and impact actual policy decisions. In this paper, the protocol we have used will be introduced and the results of a recent Deliberative Poll on climate change conducted at Carnegie Mellon will be described. The implications that this case study may have for larger Deliberative Polling initiatives and public policy will also be explored.

The Democratic Ideals of Political Equality and Deliberation

Democracies strive to strike a balance between the values of *political equality* and *deliberation* (Fishkin and Luskin 2005). Fishkin and Luskin define *political equality* as equal consideration of everyone's preferences, where "everyone" is in reference to some relevant population, and "equal consideration" describes a process of equal counting so that each vote has an equal chance of being decisive. *Deliberation* is described as collective and/or individual "weighing" involving discussion, reflection, or both. Fishkin and Luskin also note that, during deliberation, discussion should be: (1) *informed*, or based upon appropriate and reasonably accurate factual claims; (2) *balanced*, where arguments are paired with contrary arguments; (3) *conscientious*, which means that participants should agree to talk and listen with respect; (4) *substantive*, i.e., arguments should be considered on their merits, not upon how artfully they are delivered or who is delivering them; and (5) *comprehensive*, meaning that all points of view held by significant portions of the population receive attention.

The tradition of combining political equality and deliberation dates back to ancient Athens, where small, deliberative groups of several hundred were selected by lot to make many key decisions (Fishkin and Luskin 2005). Unfortunately with the fall of Athenian democracy, this approach to democratic decision-making was long forgotten, although American systems developed alternative democratic institutions such as primaries, recall elections, and referenda.

Nevertheless, American democratic reforms have emphasized political equality rather than deliberation (Fishkin 1991).

Conventional *versus* Deliberative Polling

Conventional polling, as envisioned by George Gallup, aspired to blend the twin ideals of political equality and deliberation. Gallup believed that the media could be leveraged to report not only on political leaders' opinions of the day, but also to report the opinions of the common person through random sampling. Through such dual reporting, Gallup saw a type of town meeting, or dialogue, occurring on a much larger scale ([Fishkin and Luskin 2005](#)). However studies have shown that most ordinary citizens think very little about politics (Luskin 1987) and deliver opinions during conventional polls that are "cognitively threadbare" (Fishkin and Luskin 2005, 287). Additionally whenever ordinary citizens do discuss political matters, they converse with others very much like themselves sharing similar views (Ulbig and Funk 1999; Mutz and Martin 2001; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). For these reasons, conventional polling does not actually capture political dialogue; at worst, conventional polling of the general populace reflects "everyday levels of inattention and disengagement... seasoned strongly by neither information nor reflection" ([Fishkin and Luskin 2005, 287](#)).

In contrast, Deliberative Polling purposefully exposes random samples to balanced information and heterogeneous discussion groups, and at the conclusion of these exercises, informed opinions are polled (Fishkin 1991). A Deliberative Poll is a specific form of democratic dialogue in which a randomly selected sample of a community is pre-surveyed on a specific issue, then given balanced background information on that issue. That sample later gathers at one site and is divided into randomly assigned small discussion groups to insure that a diversity of opinion is represented in each group. After voicing one's own and listening to the thoughts and opinions of others in a moderated roundtable setting, group members have the opportunity to pose questions to a panel of experts. A post-deliberation survey shows what the entire community might think if it had the chance to learn about an issue, discuss it with others and consult with experts.

Institutional Setting: The Role of the University in Deliberative Democracy

Universities and other institutions of higher education are especially poised to foster deliberation. Among the major activities that define the societal role of higher education, three are particularly appropriate for advancing deliberative democracy: education, community outreach, and research. In pursuit of the objectives of education and research, colleges and universities have special

capacities and resources that are difficult to find elsewhere, such as broad networks of learning communities and subject specialists. Because of these resources, many colleges and universities also conduct research and host events that benefit the community. These qualities of higher education institutions can be specially leveraged to design opportunities for deliberative democracy as Stanford University (Stanford University 2008) and Carnegie Mellon (Southwestern Pennsylvania Program for Deliberative Democracy 2008) have done. In the past, the results of Carnegie Mellon “Campus Conversations” have been used by the university to inform campus policy on a variety of issues including file-sharing, student rights policy, faculty course evaluations, and public art policy.

Case Study: “Climate Change and the Campus”

In April 2008, Carnegie Mellon hosted a Deliberative Poll that we call a “campus conversation” on climate change as a way not only to address issues at the campus level, but to beta test a background information document and survey instrument for use at the city, state and national level. In this section we describe the design and results of this Deliberative Poll and the implications they may have for larger Deliberative Polling initiatives that aim to democratize knowledge, mobilize public interest, and advance environmental policy outcomes in conjunction with public participation.

Process Design. Two samples were identified for participation in the Deliberative Poll. A random sample of participants were selected with the help of the university’s enrollment services office, and the random sample was invited directly to the event via e-mail. Random sample participants were offered \$25 (U.S. dollars) compensation. The Deliberative Poll was also advertised to the campus community with posters, a display at the main university library, and through a web site approximately three weeks before the event. The purpose of this publicity was to permit interested members of the campus community to include themselves in the Deliberative Poll. Persons who registered themselves (i.e., were not directly invited) were designated a convenience sample. Although it is recommended that Deliberative Polls be conducted over a weekend (Fishkin 1995; Fishkin and Luskin 2005), we have found that participation among members of the university community (especially undergraduate students) are maximized when the Deliberative Poll can be compressed to one evening with an optional asynchronous online discussion forum. The asynchronous discussion forum that we use is PICOLA, which stands for “Public Informed Citizen Online Assembly” (Center for the Advancement of Applied Ethics 2003).

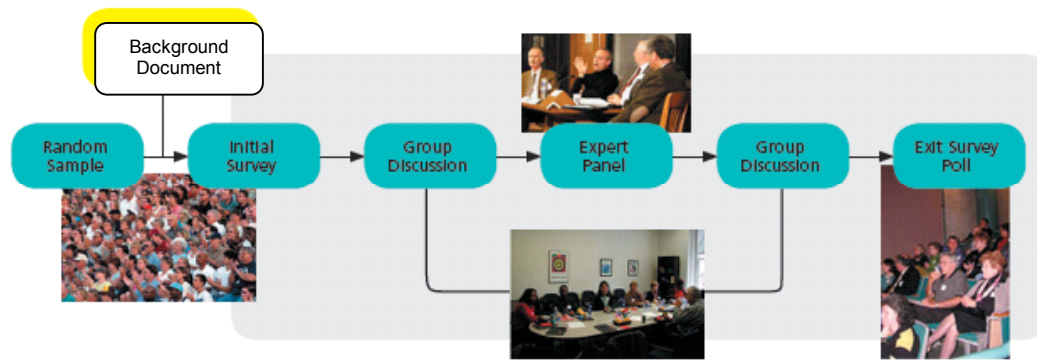


Figure 1. The Campus Conversations Deliberative Poll process.

All participants in the climate change Deliberative Poll were asked to complete a pre-survey asking for demographic information, environmental attitudes, and knowledge about the scientific consensus on climate change. All participants were also provided an electronic version of a background document prepared by faculty, staff, and researchers in multiple university departments regarding climate change and policy initiatives. Hard copies of the background document were also made available in the main university library. The background document was based upon an earlier public communications document prepared by Carnegie Mellon faculty and researchers ([Morgan and Smuts 1994](#)), which can still be accessed online (U.S. Global Change Research Information Office 2004). The three sections of the background document prepared for our most recent campus conversation entailed brief introductions to what climate change is, what scientists expect will be the impacts of climate change, and how universities can respond to climate change. The third section on climate change and the university focused on policies that the university could adopt across four areas: (1) university *practice*, or how it chooses to manage its internal operations; (2) *research*; (3) *education*, both in the classroom and through extra-curricular activities; and (4) *outreach*, or how members of the university community work to impact audiences outside of campus.

On the evening of the campus conversation, all registrants check in and are assigned to small, moderated discussion groups of no more than 12 people. Dinner and refreshments were provided throughout the evening. About 20 – 30 staff supported the evening’s events. These staff assisted with providing refreshments, check-in, moderating discussions and functioning as scribes, and collecting post-surveys. The schedule for our campus conversation was as follows:

Sign-in: 17:00 – 17:30

Welcome Remarks from City Councilman and Orientation to the Process (17:30 – 17:45)

17:55 – 19:00 Small Group Discussions

19:10 – 20:00 Plenary Session with Resource Panel

20:10 – 20:30 Small Group Discussions/Completion of post-survey

After the introductory remarks, the participants were divided into small groups and sent to different classrooms. There they were free to discuss any thoughts that they had about the topic and the background document. Moderators helped guide the discussion to consider the following questions to drive the deliberations behind the Deliberative Poll:

- Considering the many roles a university has in a community – education, research, outreach, and a consumer of energy – how should the university manage its responsibility to address climate change?
- How should a university seek to enforce the decisions it makes about addressing climate change?
- Do you believe you have a personal responsibility to help the university address climate change? Why or why not?
- Given what you know about climate change, how willing are you to take personal actions in order to address climate change?
- What strategies for addressing climate change would you be willing to actively support?

Since the Deliberative Poll at the campus level lasts for only one evening, the small groups have only one opportunity to pose a question to an assembled panel of experts or resource panel. The panelists were instructed to answer questions as educators rather than as pundits. Our resource panel was comprised of five members: an ethics professor, a civil and environmental engineering professor who specialized in sustainability studies, a visiting scholar from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, a director from an environmental education and projects research center, and a graduate student active in climate research and student-led environmental initiatives.

Questions devised for the resource panel are not to be questions of fact but rather regarding policy alternatives' outcomes and costs, tradeoffs that might be entailed, and so on. It should also be noted that in the small group deliberations, the only requirement for group consensus is around the formulation of a question worth asking the panelists during the plenary session. Since the answers to these questions should generally be debatable, and “indeed are the stuff of debate” ([Fishkin and Luskin 2005, 288](#)), the small groups are being asked, in essence, to agree upon the identification of issues over which they do not agree. Since it is possible that

more than one group might identify similar questions, groups were also asked to identify back-up questions. In our Deliberative Poll, the following types of questions were asked of the resource panel:

- If the university were to purchase more “green” energy, what would be the best choice and why?
- Does the university strategic plan include being a “green” leader?
- How can the university advocate less glamorous initiatives to be more “green”?
- Without making reference to the “scientific consensus,” what is the scientific evidence that human activities cause climate change?
- What is the cost of the life cycle of transitioning from “non-green” practices to “green” practices?
- Can there still be a “green” agenda if in 10 years, it is found that there is no climate change problem?
- How can the university bring pressure to bear on climate policy?

At the conclusion of the plenary session, the participants returned to their small groups to share any final reflecting thoughts and to complete a post-survey on knowledge about the scientific consensus on climate change, campus policy priorities as they relate to climate change, and assessments of the Deliberative Poll.

Democratization of Knowledge. Diverse forms of knowledge were considered and recognized throughout the Deliberative Poll through use of the background document, small-group deliberations, and the plenary resource panel session. The background document presented introductory scientific information to ensure that all participants would begin deliberation from a shared knowledge base. It was understood when the background document was drafted that some participants could have questions related to the scientific data presented, since in the United States, climate science is often viewed through a partisan lens.

Within the small-group deliberation sessions, moderators were trained to maintain an atmosphere of respect and civility. Moderators were also trained to encourage the opinions of quiet group members and to temper more talkative members so that deliberation did not become lopsided. Deliberation is guided by moderators in this way specifically to support discussion of diverse opinions, experiences, and diverse forms of knowledge.

Finally, the plenary resource panel session not only addresses one question from each group that could not be resolved among small group members during deliberation, but also shares

questions and answers among all participants, thereby broadening the conversation that was had at the small-group level. Thus the plenary session serves to provide additional information on policy questions from additional perspectives to all participants.

Public Interest Mobilization and Capacity. Since our Deliberative Poll was done at the campus level, participation by civil society organizations (CSOs) was not a primary concern. However a good analog at the campus level might be the participation of students affiliated with student groups. Through convenience sampling, students who would self-select to discuss climate change were free to do so. Thus Deliberative Polling can enable interested parties and organizations that are not randomly selected to participate on equal grounds in the process.

Preliminary Results: Inclusiveness of the Process. For this Deliberative Poll, we have coded results for 49 participants so far. We find the process to be relatively inclusive with the ages of participants ranging from 18 – 74. Undergraduate students were the largest share of the participants (45%), followed by graduate students (18%), staff (14%), faculty (12%), alumni (10%), and other participants (4%).¹ Males were slightly better represented than females, with 60% being male and 40% being female. The vast majority of participants were natural-born U.S. citizens (80%), but some participants were born outside of the U.S. (14% from Asia, 4% from Europe).² The vast majority of participants identified themselves as White (69%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (20%), African American (8%), and Hispanic (2%).

Preliminary Results: Interaction and Dialogue among Stakeholders. Anecdotally, participants reported that they found the process stimulating and thought-provoking. Many reported that they would like another Campus Conversation along these lines to occur again. This feedback suggests that this type of public participation, at the very least, enhances the environmental sustainability objective of awareness. At this time, it is too early to say how this Campus Conversation might facilitate the influence and impact of stakeholders, but it is our goal to share the final results of the Deliberative Poll with the Carnegie Mellon administration, and to share the process design and final results with other universities so that they might be able to use our experience to help them identify their own institutional sustainability goals.

It should be noted that there were shortcomings to our Deliberative Poll. One obvious shortcoming is that not all of the questions posed to the resource panel were debatable. This suggests that not all of the small groups were grappling with the challenges of university climate policy in the manner we anticipated. We also received feedback from some participants that they would have preferred to receive information regarding what they could do as individuals to address climate change rather than focus upon policy decisions for the university.

Conclusions

General insights provided by this case are that Deliberative Polling can be a successful tool for raising environmental awareness among a fairly diverse swath of participants. Additionally our experience has shown that universities are very effective forums for these types of events, as resource panels can easily be assembled with in-house experts (e.g. professors and other educators). An issue that merits further research, however, is how to deliberate about actions that can be taken to address climate change on institutional *versus* individual levels. As noted by many who work in the field, climate change is a huge interdisciplinary issue, and solutions to the problem must occur at multiple levels of governance and engage numerous actors. The critical feedback that we received from some participants regarding the scope of our deliberative questions indicates that we either bit off more than could be chewed in one Deliberative Poll and/or that we did not thoroughly refine our questions for deliberation. Nevertheless, we believe that Deliberative Polling is a process that could also be used by other bodies that must make policy decisions informed by the will of the people, such as local communities, cities, states, and so forth.

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¹ Percentages sum to slightly more than 100%, as two respondents were both staff members and matriculated students.

² Percentages sum to slightly less than 100%, as some respondents chose not to disclose this information.