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"Comment: A Step Forward on a Vital Issue"

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David Ryfe

This essay raises an important issue for the practice of and research on deliberation. Anyone who circulates among deliberative practitioners knows that, ideologically, they tend to have a liberal progressive bent. This is not true of the many mayors, city managers, planning commissioners and the like who initiate deliberative events in their communities. For these people, exasperation and frustration are often greater motivators than ideology. But it is true of the larger number of consultants and experts who orbit these policymakers. For instance, I once attended a conference put on for these professionals. At a plenary meeting of the conference, participants were asked to identify their party preferences in an impromptu survey. Fully 95% of those in attendance professed a preference for the liberal progressive parties in their home countries.

Does this kind of ideological uniformity matter? Does it, for instance, shape the kinds of events these people organize, the sorts of issues on which they invite communities to deliberate, or their framing of these issues?

Gastil and his colleagues address precisely this issue, and they do so in a creative way. They have cobbled together a dataset of opinion changes on particular items recorded by James Fishkin in his analysis of the many deliberative polls he has organized over the last decade or so. As the authors admit, the dataset is not perfect. It is relatively small and does not include the raw data from these polls. Also, while it can alert us to systematic shifts in opinion change across many issues, and, if such shifts exist, link them to the process of deliberative polling, it cannot tell us what, specifically, in that process (experts used, issue frames, facilitators, etc.) caused the shifts.

One might also quibble with how the authors code liberalism vs. conservatism. It seems to me, for instance, that more might be done to distinguish liberalism as a political philosophy and liberalism as a political platform pursued by the Democratic Party in the United States and by similar parties elsewhere. Also, because deliberative polls have been conducted in different nations, it seems important to distinguish liberalism and conservatism as they are understood in different parts of the world. Does liberalism, for example, mean the same thing in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and the other places in which deliberative polls have been conducted?

As the reader will discover, Gastil and his colleagues find a general tendency toward small "I" liberal values, understood as a philosophical preference for the common good over individual interests, for cosmopolitanism over nationalism. However, they find little support for the notion that deliberative polls lead participants toward large "L" liberal views of the kind that might be supported by the Democratic Party. Whether one comes away with the sense that this makes deliberative polls sufficiently neutral depends, I would think, on how one feels about small "I" liberal values.

Given the limitations of their data, one might well ask why Gastil and his co-authors do not wait to publish until they have more data and are on a surer methodological footing. One reason might be that they are looking for assistance from their community of scholars/practitioners, saying, in effect, "we are putting this out there not despite, but because of, its limitations, so that you will tell us what you think and help us to make it better..."

This is, in fact, how I interpret the essay's intentions. I am less impressed by its findings than I am by the authors' willingness to tackle the issue, and their ingenuity in fashioning a path to do so. In other words,

I take the study to be a provocation. It invites us to grapple with an issue that has been ignored for too long, and though it is limited, it provides enough direction to motivate more sustained, and more methodologically rigorous, research.