

The Promise of Deliberative Democracy

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Photo by Tore Johannesen

Offshore windmills at Middelgrunden, just outside Copenhagen, Denmark.

Getting to 350 parts per million CO₂ in the atmosphere will require massive investments in clean-energy infrastructure—investments that can too often be foiled by a combination of special interests and political sclerosis. Take the recent approval of the Cape Wind project by the U.S. Department of the Interior. In some ways, this was great news for clean-energy advocates: the project's 130 turbines will produce, on average, 170 megawatts of electricity, almost 75 percent of the average electricity demand for Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.¹ But, because of local opposition by well-organized opponents, the approval process was lengthy, costly, and grueling—and all for a project that will produce only 0.04 percent of the total (forecasted) U.S. electricity demand in 2010.^{2,3} Over the next few decades, the world will need thousands of large-scale, low-carbon electricity projects—wind, solar, and nuclear power will certainly be in the mix. But if each faces Cape Wind–like opposition, getting to 350 is unlikely.

How can the decision-making process about such projects be streamlined so that public policy reflects the view of a well-informed majority, provides opportunities for legitimate critiques, but does not permit the opposition to retard the process indefinitely? One answer is found in a set of innovative policy-making tools founded on the principle of deliberative democracy, defined as “decision making by discussion among free and equal citizens.”⁴ Such approaches, which have been developed and led by the Center for Deliberative Democracy (cdd.stanford.edu), America Speaks (www.americaspeaks.org), and the Consensus Building Institute (cbuilding.org), among others, are gaining popularity by promising a new foothold for effective citizen participation in the drive for a clean-energy future.

Deliberative democracy stems from the belief that democratic leadership should involve educating

constituents about issues at hand, and that citizens may significantly alter their opinions when faced with information about these issues. Advocates of the approach state that democracy should shift away from fixed notions toward a learning process in which people develop defensible positions.⁵ While the approaches of the Center for Deliberative Democracy, America Speaks, and the Consensus Building Institute do differ, all of these deliberative methodologies involve unbiased sharing of information and public-policy alternatives with a representative set of citizens; a moderated process of deliberation among the selected citizens; and the collection and dissemination of data resulting from this process. For example, in the deliberative polling approach used by the Center for Deliberative Democracy, a random selection of citizens is first polled on a particular issue. Then, members of the poll are invited to gather at a single place to discuss the issue. Participants receive balanced briefing materials to review before the gathering, and at the gathering they engage in dialogue with competing experts and political leaders based on questions they develop in small group discussions. After deliberations, the sample is asked the original poll questions, and the resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions that the public would reach if everyone were given the opportunity to become more informed on pressing issues.⁶

If policymakers look at deliberative polls rather than traditional polls, they will be able to utilize results that originate from an informed group of citizens. As with traditional polls, deliberative polls choose people at random to represent U.S. demographics of age, education, gender, and so on. But traditional polls stop there, asking the random sample some brief, simple questions, typically online or over the phone. However, participants of deliberative polls have the opportunity to access expert information and then talk with one another before voting on policy recommendations.

The power of this approach is illustrated by the results of a global deliberative process organized by World Wide Views on Global Warming (www.wvviews.org), a citizen's deliberation organization based in Denmark.⁷ On September 26, 2009, approximately 4,000 people gathered in 38 countries to consider what should happen at the UN climate change negotiations in Copenhagen (338 Americans met in five major cities). The results derived from this day of deliberation were dramatic and significantly different from results of traditional polls. Overall, citizens showed strong concern about global warming and support for climate-change legislation, contrary to the outcomes of many standard climate-change polls. Based on the polling results from these gatherings, 90 percent of global citizens believe that it is urgent for the UN negotiations to produce a new climate change agreement; 88 percent of global citizens (82 percent of U.S. citizens) favor holding global warming to within 2 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels; and 74 percent of global citizens (69 percent of U.S. citizens) favor increasing fossil-fuel prices in developed countries. However, a typical news poll that was conducted two days before 350.org's International Day of Climate Action on October 24, 2009, found that Americans had an overall declining concern about global warming.⁷

How can deliberative democracy help to create solutions for the climate-change policy process, to accelerate the kinds of policies and public investments that are so crucial to getting the world on a path to 350? Take again the example of wind in the United States. In the mid-1990s, the Texas Public Utilities Commission (PUC) launched an "integrated resource plan" to develop long-term strategies for energy production, particularly electricity.⁸ Upon learning about the deliberative polling approach of James Fishkin (then at the University of Texas at Austin), the PUC set up deliberative sessions for several hundred customers in the vicinity of every major utility provider in the state. The results were a surprise: it turned out that participants ranked reliability and stability of electricity supply as more important characteristics than price. In addition, they were open to supporting renewable energy, even if the costs slightly exceeded fossil-fuel sources. Observers considered this a breakthrough: based on these public deliberations, the PUC went on to champion an aggressive renewable portfolio standard, and the state has subsequently experienced little of the opposition to wind-tower siting that has slowed

development in other states.⁸ By 2009, Texas had 9,500 megawatts of installed wind capacity, as much as the next six states (ranked by wind capacity) in the windy lower and upper Midwest (Iowa, Minnesota, Colorado, North Dakota, Kansas, and New Mexico).⁹

Deliberative democracy has proven effective in a wide range of countries and settings. In the Chinese township of Zeguo, a series of deliberative polls has helped the Local People's Congress (LPC) to become a more effective decision-making body.¹⁰ In February 2008, 175 citizens were randomly selected to scrutinize the town's budget—and 60 deputies from the LPC observed the process. After the deliberations, support decreased for budgeting for national defense projects, while support rose for infrastructure (e.g., rural road construction) and environmental protection. Subsequently, the LPC increased support for environmental projects by 9 percent.¹⁰ In decades to come, China must be at the forefront of the world's investments in clean-energy infrastructure. The experience of Zeguo, if scaled up and fully supported by Chinese leaders, can help to play an important role.

Deliberative democracy offers one solution for determining citizen opinions, including those on pressing issues related to climate change and clean energy. If democracy is truly about representing popular opinion, policymakers should seek out deliberative polls in their decision-making process.

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