

## Book Review: Democracy When the People Are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation by James S. Fishkin

Brendan Moriarty

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### Recommended Citation

Moriarty, Brendan () "Book Review: Democracy When the People Are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation by James S. Fishkin," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 97 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol97/iss1/9>

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**James S. Fishkin. *Democracy When the People Are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xii + 272 pages. Hardcover, \$26.95.**

When most people think of democracy, they envision varying overlapping concepts. We envision the mechanisms of the state, such as elections and how laws are passed. We might also think of political principles, such as equality and freedom. When professor of communications James S. Fishkin thinks of democracy, he thinks of four qualifications: political equality, participation, deliberation, and the absence of tyranny. From here, he sketches out four relevant forms of democracy which guarantee at least two of the four qualifications: competitive democracy, elite deliberation, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy. Naturally for Fishkin, the focus of this book, *Democracy When the People Are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation*, is on deliberative democracy.

Fishkin's aim, in this book and his extensive work in real life policy making, is to reform democracy. Recent efforts to reform democracy have run into a sort of Sophie's choice between political equality, deliberation, and participation. If people were able to create institutions which could realize all three, then they would realize a "full deliberative process." Going further, if there was also an agenda setting process and it was widespread, we would have a "well-ordered deliberative system." The purpose of such a system is to realize popular control of government, or what we might consider the "consent of the governed."

Setting aside the first three forms of democracy, Fishkin focuses on deliberative democracy, which guarantees political equality and deliberation. The most traditional case of deliberative democracy is that of Athenian democracy, which utilized sortition, or a drawing by lots for the holding of political offices. Fishkin lays out in great detail a more updated institution which he believes could be used to reform democracy as we know it—"deliberative polling." In

deliberative polling, you gather together a representative sample of people and have them deliberate on a set of agenda items and create recommendations which would then be propagated to voters. This could be done for presidential primaries as well as ballot initiatives or referenda. As such, deliberative polling would constitute a more democratic form of cues to low information voters than would elite endorsements.

The idea behind deliberative polling is that regular polling only offers a snapshot of what people's policy opinions are when they are unchallenged; inherent to deliberative polling is the belief that a truer representation of what people's opinions are can only be understood as the opinions that people might reach if they had first engaged in a deliberative process. Such a view has some potentially problematic, yet at times attractive, normative assumptions. Do I support building a wall because it is sound policy? Or do I just support it because I watch FOX News several hours a day? Moreover, if I were forced to argue in defense of my opinion, would I still hold it? And if I would change my mind, after being confronted by an informed interlocutor, is my initial opinion a less "true" representation of my views than my subsequent opinion? Fishkin would say yes, to the latter. Although deliberative polling seems like an attractive idea, I offer some detractions.

Much of the book's sections can be divided into two categories: details about the criteria for and features of effective deliberative democracy in the abstract, and discussions of real-life examples of deliberative democracy. From California to Japan, and Uganda to Australia, it cannot be argued that Fishkin has failed to put his money where his mouth is, so to speak. It is honestly impressive to see an academic devote so much time and energy towards the realization of a concept they first developed in the academy. What I offer in the remainder of this book review is a critique of the book, but also of deliberative polling generally.

The first issue that I have with the book is the general lack of discussion regarding social movements. I am not saying that social movements are never discussed—Fishkin talks about the Civil Rights Movement and how this was a time of “substantive national debate.” He mentions the movement, though, as an unusual period of time, seemingly as a way to dismiss any potential lessons that can be learned therein. I argue that even if we might characterize it as unusual, we can still look to this period of time because it was a spectacular demonstration of the power of social movements to transform our national thinking. Elizabeth Anderson, in her 2014 Lindley Lecture, argues that social movements are a powerful engine of moral progress because they force individuals to engage in practical deliberation about the norms which regulate society. At a minimum, social movements deserve some discussion in a book about democracy.

This gets to my second point: Fishkin fails to take seriously the necessity for power. Fishkin does mention how individuals from more privileged backgrounds might tend to dominate deliberations in deliberative polling, but this is only seen as an interpersonal issue. There is no discussion of collective power, and how this shapes our society. Where are the union halls or community centers? These are sites of deliberation among members and important for economic democracy, but there is no mention of unions. Additionally, with collective power comes collective interests. In a deliberative polling setting, can the tenants and the landlords really come to a substantive agreement? Or the wage-earner and the business owners? In this past election in California, Prop. 22, which defined app-based drivers as independent contractors, only passed after Uber, Lyft, and others spent \$200 million in support of it. Would the voters have made a different decision if deliberative polling was instituted? Maybe they would, maybe not. But political economic power is something that I believe Fishkin should discuss.

Fishkin wrote a good book, despite my detractions. It is a book suited for those interested in deliberative polling or political science, but I would not recommend it to anyone who is not an academic or policy maker.

Brendan Moriarty, M.A.  
The Graduate Center, City University of New York  
New York, New York