



The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy

Professor James S. Fishkin

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Ours is an era of stunted public discourse, this text argues, where instant polls, 900 numbers, orchestrated petitions and talk-show campaigning appear to have overwhelmed participatory democracy. What has become of the freely reasoned public debate and informed "consent of the governed" that, as cherished principle, we hold will produce better leaders and better public decisions? Where or what is the voice of the people today? In this work, James Fishkin evaluates modern democratic practices and explains how the voice of the people has struggled to make itself heard in the past. He tells a story of changing concepts and practices of democracy, with examples that range from ancient Sparta to America's founders to the first Gallup polls to Ross Perot. He then develops the rationale for a new method the "deliberative opinion poll" that uses modern media and survey research to legitimately rediscover the people's voice. Fishkin's proposal for televised deliberative opinion polls has already been realized twice by the British television network Channel 4, and he discusses its implementation in the book. In January 1996, his deliberative poll will be seen in action in a "National Issues Convention" to be broadcast by PBS on the eve of the American presidential primary season. During this broadcast, a national random sample of citizens will interact with presidential contenders in order to reflect and vote on the issues and candidates. Fishkin discusses the pros and cons of this event, giving behind-the-scene details about preparations for it.

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