



**PhD  
Programme  
in Sociology**

## **RÉSUMÉ OF THESES**

**Vépy-Schlemmer Éva Rita**

**THE IMPACT OF DELIBERATION**

**EXPERIENCES OF THE DELIBERATIVE POLLING IN KAPOSVÁR**

PhD dissertation

**Supervisor:**

**Dr. Lengyel György DSc**

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**Institute of Sociology and Social Policy**

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## 1. **Applied methods**

This dissertation covers a field of empirical sociology that has not been discussed widely so far. Deliberative opinion polling does not have considerable traditions in Hungary, only a handful of such polls were done in the last decade. Thus, it is my sincere hope that my dissertation will be useful and a source of inspiration for the analysts relying on public opinion polls frequently. The relevant theoretical framework is also discussed in detail in this paper. A historical and interdisciplinary overview of deliberation is also provided as an ideal version of the concept and implementation of democracy. The research methodology and the analysis of data requires an interdisciplinary approach and, in order to grasp and present the diverse and complex nature of the topic, various considerations need to be discussed in the context of political sciences, political philosophy, psychology, social psychology, and communication theory. Both qualitative and quantitative aspects were paid due attention in the course of analysing the impacts of deliberation through the use of a unique and novel technique of analysing the quality of the discourse. The available data allows comparison from multiple aspects, and the results are supported by the intragroup changes in time, the comparison of different groups to each other, and the use of control groups. My analysis also includes qualitative aspects, group dynamics parameters are used through a novel application of the discourse quality index, and the quality of deliberative discourse is also examined in the context of two particular groups.

Deliberative opinion polling is a participation-based technique developed by James S. Fishkin (1995). The method implements the concept of deliberative democracy, which is focused on debate. Deliberative meetings are attended by free and equal citizens in order to develop their own positions regarding public affairs following a long and thorough discussion. The method is a decision-making support technique that reflects on the shortfalls of the system

of representative democracy, i.e. it complements democracy itself. It aims to educate and inform citizens to make them better, to create community, and to strengthen social involvement in public policy decision-making. As intended by Fishkin, this method shows how people would think if they were given the opportunity to take into account reliable information and to consider certain issues more thoroughly. Already dozens of deliberative opinion polls have been organized in various countries, and each poll showed significant changes to the information level and attitude of the participant as a result of deliberation.

This analysis covers the immediate and long term impacts of deliberative opinion polling based on a research carried out in Kaposvár during 2008 and 2009. It includes the analysis of which changes in opinion, information level, and attitude prove to be short or long term changes, as well as the analysis of the social characteristics of persons who demonstrated short term or long term changes, respectively. The analysed data cover changes to opinions and information levels that took place right after the deliberative event, as well as changes that were measured one year after the event. An attempt is also made to measure the quality of the deliberative discourse by using an index developed for this particular purpose (DQI, Steiner, 2012) through the analysis and comparison of group discussion, so that the essence and operation of deliberation could be understood better.

The first Hungarian deliberative opinion polling was organized by Corvinus University of Budapest in the small region of Kaposvár. As a member of the research team headed by Mr Lengyel György, I was involved in the methodology experiment that covered the fields of employment and job creation and raised both content and methodology related challenges. We sought to examine how the new participation-based technique would operate in the context of discussing a topic that is relevant to a local community and what kind of changes may be achieved regarding the level of information and motivation of the participants concerning public affairs. The method is efficient apparently as the level of knowledge of the participants has

increased – though not in every topic –, their attitude has changed regarding certain matters, the participants have become more trustful, tolerant, and solidary with other people, meaning that the community have become more resourceful socially. But how long do the impacts of deliberation last? Does the opinion and values of the participants they demonstrated after the deliberative weekend remain unchanged on the long term, e.g. after one year? Do structural changes occur to the opinion related transformations in the mind of the participants? In order to be able to answer these questions, the following-up of the deliberative process needs to be accompanied by an analysis of the impact of the various components of the method on the level of knowledge and attitude of the participants. This paper provides a short examination of how and to what extent does the deliberative mechanism affect the changes in opinion and knowledge level on the short and long term.

The deliberative opinion poll conducted in Kaposvár included general questions as well as questions aimed at policy related matters, personal attitude, and knowledge measurement. The research questions discussed in this paper concern primarily, on the one hand, changes to the level of knowledge, and, on the other hand, changes to the personal attitudes toward employment policy. What are the consequences if people collect information and discuss the issues thoroughly? Which persons demonstrate the most significant increase in their level of knowledge? Which persons experience the most significant changes to their views? Is there a relationship between the two factors? Does increased knowledge have an impact on the changes of opinions? In the context of two priority groups, the quality of the deliberative discourse is examined, as well as the composition of the groups, the course of the debate, while this paper also explains the dimensions of the discourse quality index (DQI) used. Subsequently, the two groups are compared to each other, the data pertaining to the changes in knowledge and opinion of the participants are conferred, and it is considered whether or not the quality of the discourse (mezzo level variable) has an influence on the increase in knowledge and the change of opinion.

While it is entirely possible that no significant or robust difference is revealed, but this qualitative (in part quantitative) analysis chapter seems to be rather promising. The groups of participants showing the most significant increase in knowledge and change in opinion are examined and characterized according to status, purpose, and attitude. It is an assumption that the nature and permanency of the impact of deliberation depends on the social status of the participants, as well as the initial purpose and attitude they brought with themselves to the deliberative weekend. It is expected that significant differences will be revealed regarding the impact of deliberation according to the characteristics of the status of the participants as well.

I rely on the following sources of the analysis. First, a secondary analysis is conducted regarding the data of a survey carried out among members of a representative sample of the adult population of the Kaposvár small region in 2008 (T1, N=1514) as well as the data of the questionnaires filled out by the participants at the deliberative weekend (T3, N=108). Audio-visual recordings and group moderator reports of the deliberative weekend are also used, as well as documents pertaining to the media coverage of the event. The data recorded when (repeatedly) interviewing participants of the event during 2009 and members of control group, the members of which did not attend the event (T4, N=186) – the control group was a sub-sample of the original representative sample and its members were persons who indicated their intent to participate in the event but could not attend it eventually for some reason.

Through the statistical and secondary analysis of the data of the Kaposvár DP, I attempt to demonstrate the lastingness of the change in knowledge and opinion as measured through the questionnaires used during the Kaposvár DP, so that the distortions caused by other external factors are filtered through the use of a control group. In addition to the two-variable analysis, it is also justified to use multi-variable statistical analysis, considering that numerous relationships may turn out to be insignificant, or the opposite, by controlling other variables.

With a view to measuring the change in knowledge, the questionnaires included nine (inf1-inf9) questions offering multiple answers, but only one answer was correct. In order to measure the change in attitudes, a 5 to 7 to 10 step attitude scale was used in the deliberative opinion poll in Kaposvár; the questions related to the level of agreement with, support for, or objection against certain attitude objects relating to the processes of employment, unemployment, and job creation. The change in opinion is measured by the shift shown by the responses given before and after the deliberation. In this research, the change in knowledge and attitude is treated as a dependent variable, and the changes in the attitude of the participants in the deliberative process, as measured along their socio-demographic characteristics, are followed-up.

With regard to ordinal variable, it is advisable to use non-parameterized trial to measure the changes in opinions, because it does not assume that the data follow a normal distribution and it handles the low number of items better. Cross-table analysis is used with regard to nominal measurement level variables, and the significance of the differences is tested using a chi-squared test. With regard to the background and type of the opinion changes, a regression model is used to examine which persons have changed their opinions. Relationships are measured using a chi-squared test, and the groups are analysed using socio-demographic variables. In the course of explaining the change in opinion, we aim to provide an explanation for the extent and direction of individual opinion changes. The change in knowledge level and the change in the average group opinion are used as explanatory variables, while the aggregated dependent variable consists of policy related matters. In the course of comparing the changes in the experimental group and the control group, the impact of the interference – i.e. of deliberation – is to be researched. The group involved in the deliberation process is handled as the experimental group, while the group consisting of the same number of persons but not involved in the deliberation process is handled as the control group.



The process and outcomes of deliberation need to be analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods, since the analysis of survey data – accompanied by qualitative analysis techniques – allows for a more thorough understanding of the underlying contents. Considering that the opinion of the participants of the Kaposvár research project was most heavily influenced by the small group discussions, group dynamics, mechanisms, and the quality of the discourse needs to be analysed as well, as this quality analysis and the quantification of quality can supplement and add more detail to the results of quantitative analyses.

## 2. Results

Usability of the deliberative social model has been criticized extensively, and the debate concerning deliberation needs to be supported by empirical testing. The deliberative method does offer numerous advantages, but it also raises several problems. A review of available studies concerning the empirical results of deliberation suggests that the number of quantitative and valid analyses is relative low and there are numerous issues yet to be settled. It is still unknown, for example, how deliberation actually works. Many has found that opinions frequently change as a result of deliberation, but *most empirical analyses fail to explain the pattern of opinion changes and to justify the lack of any such change* (Barbaras 2004: 688).

The DP protocol suggests the use of retrospective follow-up research to determine if the opinion changes are only passing or remain permanent. The simultaneous use of a control group makes it possible to estimate the impact of deliberation and of other factors – such as public speech or a crisis – separately. Similarly to the follow-up research among the participants of the Kaposvár DP, a survey carried out in Denmark suggests that the subjects returned to their original views but demonstrated a permanent increase in their level of knowledge (Hansen-Andersen 2004: 271-276). The Kaposvár research shows significant and permanent changes in

terms of knowledge level, with two important exceptions. First, the level of knowledge has increased only with regard to text-based items, since the numeric responses did not show any short term improvement. Qualitative and quantitative information may have different impact on the knowledge of the participants (Fishkin et al. 2009). Second, the control group has also demonstrated an increase in knowledge on the long term.

While the impact of the DP can be measured best through text-based knowledge, the control group – members of which were selected from the local population – demonstrated increased knowledge regarding quantitative information. It seems possible that this was one of the impacts of the crises: numeric data on unemployment became public knowledge. However, participants of the DP showed improvement in this respect as well. The difference may be related to the deliberative debates and the age composition of the sample. Due to the self-selection of the DP sample, older age groups were overrepresented among the participants.

As for the level of information, significant and permanent increase can be measured in the level of knowledge. However, this level is not significantly different from the one measured in the control group. Nevertheless, the type of the change is different: participants of the DP had more qualitative information and members of the control group had more quantitative information regarding unemployment.

As for the changes in attitude, two of the five items has not shown any change, and every third item showed only long term changes. Two of the twenty items demonstrated long term effects that were due to the DP. There were two items that were sensitive ideologically: more extensive re-distribution at EU level, and the opening of markets for competition.

According to the results of the follow-up research in Kaposvár, the deliberative opinion polling has a minor but permanent impact on the views and opinions of the participants. On the short term, the knowledge level of the participants increased after the event significantly and their opinions changed regarding several matters – for example, the participants became more

tolerant regarding unemployment and their opinions became more balanced. They evaluated the event enthusiastically and felt that they would participate in public debates in the future more gladly. After one year, most of the measured impacts disappeared on the long term: the level of knowledge of and most of the opinion changes demonstrated by the participants was not different from those of the control group, and their opinion of the event became less enthusiastic (but it was still positive in most respects).

### **3. Summary of conclusions**

Our results suggest that deliberative opinion polling is not suitable for changing views and opinions on the long term. This may not be good news for those wishing to experiment with the various forms of participative democracy, but it may contribute to the development of decision-making techniques. The method can successfully increase the level of information of citizens, even if it does so only temporarily, and may also increase the willingness of common citizens to get involved in public affairs. This may be useful before making important decisions as the method could help balance the two major problems of voting-based procedures and other decision-making techniques, i.e. ignorance and disinterestedness. Better informed and motivated citizens are more willing to participate in similar events. There is another aspect that seems worthy of further research: DP is not about arguments and acquiring knowledge only. In our research, the emotional dynamics of the event had mostly positive side-effects: the level of tolerance and trust increased, even if only temporarily, and more evidence would be needed to determine if this is a common or typical situation. It seems that arguments and the collection of information helps in the development of balanced opinions. However, it further research is needed to determine how the emotional dynamics of the event may influence most of the passions and the participants on the short and long term.

The purpose of DPs is change and usually it does make a change. However, we have only limited knowledge regarding the operation of opinion changes, including group effects and the role of other factors beyond the deliberative process. In light of the results, I believe that the “negative result” is the most interesting one, i.e. that DP is apparently not the most efficient means of causing permanent opinion changes. While this may be a disappointment, our observations most certainly contribute to the better understanding of deliberative processes and to the removal of illusions that may surround this methodology.

With regard to the above considerations one may ask if deliberative opinion polling could or should be regarded as a means of inducing lasting changes in views and opinions. In light of the results I believe that the method should be regarded primarily as a means of gaining information on opinions and views held by members of the public, and only secondarily as a method of inducing lasting changes in public opinions. In the latter scenario, researchers may need to meet additional requirements, such as determining the correct or desirable public opinion, that goes beyond the tasks and functions of researchers.

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