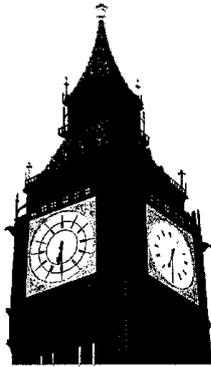


The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Is research always going to be more democratic than elections?

“Elections produce government with majorities that bear no relation to public support, allow them to claim a mandate that they don’t have and let them carry on for five whole years no matter how much the whole country may oppose them”. These were the words of Nick Moon, Managing Director, GfK NOP Social Research, proposing the motion ‘Research is always going to be more democratic than elections’ at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 9 May 2011. The debate was sponsored by The Market Research Society and chaired by Austin Mitchell, MP for Greater Grimsby and President of the Debating Group.

Nick Moon began by considering what we mean when we talk about being more or less democratic. The etymology is from two Greek words – ‘demos’ meaning people and ‘kratos’, power. The most common definition of the term is ‘government by the people’, most famously modified by Abraham Lincoln as ‘Government of the people, by the people, for the people’. Nick Moon pointed out that for practical reasons this definition has had to be modified and we describe as democratic a political system in which power is vested in the people but is exercised for them through elected representatives. Effectively what almost all democratic countries now follow is the trustee model of representation, propounded by Edmund Burke, whereby we elect representatives but they are expected to use their own judgement rather than act as mere mouthpieces for us.

We have come a long way from the original concept of democracy, in its origins in Athens and other Greek city states in the 4th and 5th centuries BC whereby every citizen (though not slaves or women!) came to the Assembly and cast their votes on each piece of business.

Sheer size of the population makes this model impossible today, which is why we have the trustee model, but there are very serious arguments over just how democratic this model actually is. We have just rejected an alternative voting system that, although it was not in any way proportional representation, may well have been a stepping stone to it. For the next few elections we shall still be using a system that allowed Mrs Thatcher to win 63% of the seats with 42% of the votes and Tony Blair to win 64% of the seats with 43% of the votes.

Nick Moon maintained that our voting system can only simplistically be said to give power to the people and the current coalition makes matters worse. How many Liberal Democratic voters cast their votes with the intention of bringing about a Conservative government with policies diametrically opposed to the Lib. Dem. manifesto?

Nick Moon went on to examine the issue of manifestos. He argued that people do not read manifestos and say, ‘yes, I agree with everything in there, so I’ll vote for that party’. If they base their decision on the manifesto at all, they are far more likely to say, ‘I agree with more than I disagree with, so I’ll vote for that party’. People vote for a party because they want it to form the next government – most probably because they think it will be best at running the economy and making the voters better off. They may be quite happy

to let the government do whatever else it wants so long as it achieves the main objective, or it may be that they will grudgingly accept these things as a necessary evil – a price to be paid for the main objective. Either way, power does not lie with the people, it lies with the government. It is not just elections that are the problem – it is the time between them. If a government does something that turns the entire population against them there is nothing that can be done about it – even less so if the bill for fixed parliaments succeeds.

Nick Moon argued that research can do better on every measure. The actual votes show how the parliamentary majority distorts the popular vote, but opinion and especially exit polls can do more than this. Polls can ask people how they just voted and how they would have voted under AV, or STV or any other system and thus allow them to give a more nuanced view of what kind of government they want. Had we had AV at the last election, Nick Moon believed, we would have ended up with a rather different coalition. It may not have done a better job, but it would have better reflected the wishes of the public.

Secondly, because polls can be carried out at any time, they can show conclusively when a government has lost the support of those who elected it. Even if nothing can be done about it, this can still provide a valuable brake on an unpopular government. A government that is convinced it is right will be confident that eventually the public will come round by the time of the next election – mid-term unpopularity has not traditionally proved a bar to victory in the following general election – but if polls consistently show heavy opposition to a particular policy then even a confident government may feel the need to consider change. This may actually lead to worse government, but it would be more in tune with the power of the people.

With an election we really only have a choice of two possible governments and yet decision-making should be far more subtle than that. Nick Moon questioned whether people would accept a situation where they had to choose one channel when they bought a new television set and could only watch programmes on that channel. Research allows people to make those much more nuanced judgements – to say they like five main policies of a party but dislike four others.

It is a measure of how much we have accepted the trustee model of government that there is no real protest over the fact that that on one of the issues that the British population feels most strongly, the government has always done the exact opposite. Support for the restoration of capital punishment has fluctuated over the years, but there have always been more people favouring it than opposing it and sometimes huge majorities supporting it. Nick Moon suspected that most of the audience would not want hanging restored and are therefore quite happy to accept a situation that is certainly not democratic. On the other hand, US polls have always shown public support for increased gun control and yet legislation to that effect always fails.

The logical extension of this argument would lead to an expansion of the Swiss model of referenda on all key issues. This would undoubtedly be far more democratic, in the original sense of the word, though it wouldn't necessarily be very practical. But even if we do not go as far as having monthly referenda, research can in some ways fulfil one of their most important roles by stopping governments claiming a mandate that they simply do not have. The 1980 and 1984 US elections provide a very good example of this. The Reagan spin doctors attempted to persuade the nation of their highly partisan and subjective view of why the voters picked Reagan over the Democratic challengers and hence of the mandate that followed their victory. That they failed in this attempt can be attributed, at least in part, to the solid evidence that the exit polls in 1980 and 1984 provided the press with empirical objective data to help characterise why voters voted as they did, showing that there was little support for some of the more ideological elements of the Republican platform.

One of the arguments put forward for the trustee model, and indeed for parliament's continued refusal to bring back hanging, is that many of the things government has to do involve extremely complex issues and public opinion merely reflects an uninformed view based on a failure, or inability, to think through all the aspects of the issues. However, research can take a representative sample of the population, spend a day or more talking through the issues with them and – most importantly – allowing them to call in expert witnesses of their choice, before asking them to vote at the end of it, and thus get a measure of informed rather than uninformed opinion. This is deliberative polling. When this is done about hanging or the importance of prison, it provides an interesting insight into how the population is at heart more liberal than its gut instinct suggests.

Nick Moon pointed out that research in the form of exit polling has played a vital role in new democracies such as in Eastern Europe, Latin American and elsewhere. In the final round of the Ukrainian Presidential election of 2004, the state-run Central Election Commission declared Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich the winner over Viktor Yushenko, but both the two exit polls showed Yushenko to be the winner. What followed was the Orange Revolution, with Yushenko's supporters taking to the streets in peaceful protests, and the election eventually being re-run with Yushenko now officially the winner. It wasn't just the exit polls that caused the Orange Revolution – the external observers all reported evidence of fraud – but they played a significant role in ensuring that the will of the people ultimately prevailed. In Ukraine in 2004 the research – the exit polls – was undoubtedly more democratic than the election. In 2010 Nick Moon conducted exit polls in Ukraine for their next Presidential election, where the final run-off was between a 'reformed' Yanukovich and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. The result was, as originally in 2004, a clear win for Yanukovich. Although Tymoshenko made a half-hearted attempt to call her supporters onto the streets, it fizzled out because this time there was no fewer than six exit polls, all of which showed Yanukovich to be the winner.

Research can thus stop an election being undemocratically stolen and can equally defend a democratic election against undemocratic attack.

Nick Moon concluded by quoting Nathan Maccoby of Stanford University who said that election polling was a process of using a well-conducted survey to predict the results of a poorly conducted one.

True elections

Opposing the motion, **Vernon Bogdanor CBE, Research Professor, Institute of Contemporary History, King's College, London**, acknowledged his tremendous respect for market research. Nonetheless he distinguished two types of election: elections we hear from opinion polls and the true elections. There are three reasons why market research cannot be a substitute for true elections:

- We have politics because we disagree on technical matters and values e.g. the role of the state; the need for an egalitarian society. Market research can clarify the choices but it cannot make them for us. Marx believed that in a Communist society these choices would not exist, but nobody now takes that view. We have to recognise differences in values which are solved by voting.
- Elections provide people with a chance to participate. That is what democracy is about. A referendum widens debate and may lead to a more considered judgement. People might think they waste their time answering market research questions. Democracy is not just about answering a question. The effect of true elections on voters is they can deliberate, discuss and debate.
- Democracy involves leadership as well as followership i.e. people who want to try to convert people to their conception of democracy. It is perfectly fine for a leader to pursue a course of action that a majority of people may initially oppose but try to win people round as they go.

Elections are more than photographs at a point in time. Market research can clarify, but it is not a substitute for democratic government.

Social issues

Seconding the motion, **Penny Young, Chief Executive, NatCen**, reminded the audience that just four days ago, demographic elections delivered the clear will of the people: a bloody nose for the Lib Dems; a warm embrace for the SNP; and a harsh rejection of AV. An effective democracy must empower ordinary people and give a voice to the widest range of citizens. And once the people have spoken, politicians must listen. The decisive nature of last Thursday's results obscures a fundamental truth, which is that the British public has lost faith in politicians. The vitriolic tone of the AV debate will have done nothing to restore their faith. Turnout was just 41% in the AV referendum. 6 in every 10 people stayed at home. The referendum was hailed as some kind of success, simply because it was not a complete meltdown. In Scotland there was only a 50% turnout for an election that may prove to seed the end of the Union.

And now the people have spoken will politicians take heed? All elections see politicians listening intently. The following months prove they have short memories. What better example than the Lib Dems' unfortunate photo opportunity promising no increase in tuition fees.

Penny Young's main argument was built, not by trashing elections, but trying to persuade the audience of the power of research to give real voice and influence to the British public.

She presented three examples:

- When we think of government, we tend to think primarily of government, of those who tax and spend. But, increasingly, much that is really important in our lives is determined by corporate institutions: the banks, the privatised utilities and a multitude of service and product providers. *Which?* the great consumer campaigner has over a million members. And it regularly researches their views and experiences. How are you being treated by your energy company? Are you satisfied with your bank? Has it tried to sell you payment protection insurance? How did Ryan Air treat your disabled mother on her flight? What happened when you complained to your solicitor? All over Britain *Which?* members and their friends and families use these research data to inform their important purchasing decisions, cutting right through the marketing spin. And when buying power alone does not bring errant companies to heel, *Which?* uses the research evidence to lobby on behalf of the wider public, to make markets work for consumers. Recently, for example, it launched a super complaint on excessive credit and debit card surcharges, such as those imposed by the low cost airlines. *Which?*, in Penny Young's view, is a brilliant example of the power of research to counter market failure, weak government and regulatory inertia. It truly demonstrates the democratising power of research.

- Secondly, Penny Young presented the example of the NHS. In the last election, the Conservative said 'no more top down reorganisation of the NHS'. "And look what happened". But the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) has a fantastic trend of British Social Attitudes data going back over a quarter of a century showing that public satisfaction with the NHS actually doubled under the Labour government because waiting times had fallen. When NatCen published its latest findings in December they became a core part of the national conversation. John Humphreys quizzed David Cameron hard, "why are you making these changes when people have never been more satisfied?" Penny Young believes that this was the start of the potential unravelling that we are seeing today.

- Thirdly, Penny Young referred to Britain's great Birth Cohort and other longitudinal studies that have given an amazing voice to the less privileged in society, simply by examining what happens to people throughout their life course. Analyses of these data give voice to the disenfranchised. Professor John Hill's analysis for the National Equality Panel, a forerunner to Nick Clegg's recent social mobility strategy demonstrated that children of less well-off parents were more likely to fall behind even before they reached school. And following them further, his analysis showed particular problems with low income White British and Black Caribbean boys. He also highlighted the multiplying disadvantage among Gypsy and Traveller children. Based on the research he concluded "Economic advantage and disadvantage reinforce themselves across the life cycle, and often onto the next generation". This research truly gives a voice to the disenfranchised.

Penny Young concluded "Like most people, I'm passionate about the importance of education, social mobility and social justice. I care about political issues, but I've never been active within a political party. And it is because I believe that it is research, rather than elections, that gives the loudest, most enduring voice to the widest range of people".

Decision-making

Seconding the opposition **Nick Yarker, a Saatchi ad man and Conservative Councillor on Westminster City Council**, quoted Abraham Lincoln's address at Gettysburg, 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people' as the best functioning of democracy. It is the responsibility of every citizen to participate and choose a leader and you can't do that without elections. Nick Yarker stressed that he was in doubt as to the value of research in helping people understand and test policy. Research helps but elections require us to inform ourselves and then decide. They imply an act of making a decision, of coming off the fence. Research can certainly shed light, but a research group does not have to make a decision. They are not substitutes for elections. Research is a valuable tool that helps deliver government for the people but answering a survey question differs entirely from casting a vote.

Elections are not perfect; they are open to vagaries, but research is also imperfect. Just as the recent referendum on whether or not to adopt AV saw arguments on the pros and cons of various voting systems, a world in which research was the dominant means of demographic expression would no doubt see similar debates over survey methods, sample selection and sample size. A referendum on whether research should be

employed to make decisions would result in arguments about sampling error and possible distortions due to events. The commercial world knows about ‘health warnings’ attached to research findings. The complexity about how people are feeling would be difficult to measure. In an election people do not need to be articulate.

Nick Yarker stressed the importance of the role of research at Westminster City Council and criticised any council that failed to prioritise this role. However, while research can inform, it cannot decide. Voters expect their representatives to take decisions on their behalf. They are held to account at elections. Any politician who tries to deliver government for the people by constantly asking the people what they should be doing will not remain in office for long.

Nick Yarker was present at a polling station for the AV referendum. He noted different voters e.g. pensioners, new immigrants, who each came with individual decisions. Every vote was equal and clear. He concluded “Go in to a polling station to find out if elections or research are more democratic”.

Discussion from the floor

Contributors from the floor made the following points:

For the motion:

- A fundamental aspect of research is objectivity. The AV vote resulted in a lot of comments which were not objective. There is an obligation that research must be objective. Research is more demographic than elections which are partisan.
- The person whom you vote for makes the decision, just as the client makes the decision.
- There is bias in favour of the status quo e.g. AV referendum. People don’t really know what they are voting for.
- The contributor was concerned about the role of tactical voting and marginal seats in elections.
- It is ludicrous to replace elections with a ‘super-survey’, but market research could get a sense of what the country wants and that is democratic.
- Good research will involve greater and equal participation.

Against the motion

- The contributor from Google believed absolutely in the power of market research and panels. Google had its own database of intentions. Nonetheless he believed that ultimately the ballot box is the direct connection to the electorate.
- Democracy fundamentally embraces the concept of leadership. It is an interplay between those who articulate policy and those who follow it. In the interplay of leadership and public opinion, market research has a role but not the major role.
- The contributor used the analogy of a television dancing contest where people did not necessarily vote for the best dancer. A survey would have given a different result. He suggested this was realism not democracy.
- Not everybody is suitable for a sample. They are sometimes the wrong age or sex. A sample survey is undemocratic rather than democratic.
- The contributor stated that only when he was unemployed did he have time to answer a survey. Nonetheless, in employment he has time to vote. A time factor is against the motion.
- Research is not meant to replace democracy but to inform democracy – to inform but not to *be* the national debate.
- The contributor compared elections, research and referenda – three incomparable things: in an election votes go to the MP who makes decisions; research decisions are made by the client; a referendum is the only truly democratic system.
- People have not got the time to fill out questionnaires. If you look at voter turnout, although it is not high, there is more engagement in voting than filling out forms.
- Democracy is governing, not just representing. Market research can’t replace decision-making.

- Elections encourage people to be involved. If we believe elections are not as good as research, we will damage democracy.
- The ballot box is private. Nobody can trace what your response is.

Neither for nor against

- One of the things about democracy is freedom of choice. In market research we are good at stopping people and they do not really have a choice. Democracy is the ability to have a choice and freedom to make that choice.
- At the end of this debate will we take a vote or take a sample?
- There is hypocrisy in the fact that David Cameron believes in first past the post, but his leadership election was based on AV.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition **Vernon Bogdanor** pointed out that the polls about AV would have shown opinion to be roughly even. When it was time for the decision people said no.

The result of the referendum about Europe in 1975 was similar. Two-to-one voted to stay in. Six months before people were evenly divided. Voting in an election is not the same as an opinion poll. Opinion can be changed by a balanced argument. Democracy is not just a passive process of answering questions. Market research is an aid to democracy, but we don't want researchers to make the decisions. "We want the experts on tap, not on top".

Summing up for the motion, **Nick Moon** commented that the speakers had described how elections ought to be, not how they are. People do not always inform themselves about issues. Elections don't work properly and research gives a better way into what people want.

Of course it can only be good research. Nick Moon acknowledged that 'turnout' in most polls is far lower than in elections and a lot of research is not well conducted and contains a number of biases. But good research still exists in the form of the surveys cited by Penny Young. Surveys like the Birth Cohort are great flagship surveys. We can get a 70% response rate for good surveys – it's a long time since we had that turnout for an election. The BBC Exit Polls get an 85% response rate. It is this good research that offers the opportunity to get closer to the real meaning of democracy than our current electoral system does. Nick Moon did not believe that people informed themselves in the AV referendum. They were more in favour of the status quo.

Every year AAPOR – the American Association for Public Opinion Research – has a competition for the slogan for its conference t-shirt. In 2001 – after the election of Florida and hanging chads – the winning slogan was "Polling – now more accurate than the election itself".

Nick Moon concluded with a quote from Phillip Meyer's 1990 AAPOR Presidential address:

"Let me tell you about a shockingly inadequate polling methodology that is currently being used to decide some of the most important public policy issues of our day. This method involves self-selected respondents, a response rate that is less than 50%, and it uses simple binary response categories to represent complex aggregations of political attitudes. Moreover the respondent burden is so heavy that the self-selected respondent actually has to leave his or her home and pay significant costs in time and travel to participate. I refer, of course, to our election system".

The result

The motion was defeated.

Next debate

The next debate will take place on **Monday 24th October 2011** sponsored by the Professional Publishers Association. For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, on 020 8202 5854, e-mail: doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com.

