



The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy

By James S. Fishkin

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Ours is an era of stunted public discourse, 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 lively book 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 fascinating 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 important event, giving behind-the-scenes details about preparations for it.

Here then is a compelling story of citizen deliberation from ancient Athens to the present, setting the context for future deliberative polls and related efforts to reinvigorate our public dialogue.

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The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy By James S. Fishkin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2442300 in Books
- Published on: 1997-08-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x .73" w x 6.11" l, .88 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 256 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

James S. Fishkin holds the Darrell K. Royal Regents Chair in Government, Law, and Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is also chair of the Department of Government. The most recent of his many books include *Democracy and Deliberation* and *The Dialogue of Justice*, both published by Yale University Press.

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