Returning Deliberative Democracy to Athens: Deliberative Polling for Candidate Selection

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Candidate selection in representative democracies is usually either by party elites or by mass primaries, an American innovation lately spreading o the rest of the democratic world. The choice between the two poses a dilemma for reform. Primaries allow mass participation, but by voters who are rarely well informed and or deliberative. Elites are generally well informed and may even deliberative, but decision making confined to them violates political equality.

How then to provide for both deliberation and equality? A solution has lain in the dust of history for centuries—the deliberative microcosm chosen by lot. An ancient version was common for many political processes in Athens. A modern adaptation is embodied in Deliberative Polling.

This paper reports on the first use of Deliberative Polling for the official selection of candidates for office by a major political party anywhere in the world. In June 2006, Deliberative Polling was used to select a mayoral candidate in Marousi, one of the principal municipalities of the Athens area. PASOK, the Greek Socialist party, used a recruited a random sample hundreds of Marousi citizens to discuss the policy issues facing the city and the choice of a mayoral candidate to deal with them. At the end of the process, two rounds of secret balloting selected one of six candidates as PASOK's official candidate for the mayorship of Marousi.

This paper analyzes the changes in both policy attitude changes and candidate preferences. We consider the sample's knowledge gains, the extent to which they drove the changes in candidate preference, and the extent to which the final secret ballot voting can be generated by the questionnaire results. The paper also considers the viability of Deliberative Polling for candidate selection based on this first effort.