

“Polling – an easy substitute for real political involvement?”

30th April 2009 17.30pm – 19.00pm Venue: Involve

Speaker

Peter Kellner – President, YouGov

Chair

Richard Wilson – Head of International, Involve

Peter Kellner

To begin, Peter Kellner stated that in answer to this question “*Is polling an easy substitute for real political involvement?*” the easy answer would be No.

Kellner explained that there is a difference between what pollsters do and what participation does; yet still there is a place for them both in society. In fact, according to Kellner there is most possibly a positive correlation between the two types of research – participation and survey.

However, as Kellner explained that although for a healthy society both are needed, there is a difference:

- Polls are snapshots of views at a given moment in time – an election poll can show who is ahead, but not who can win.
- Participation in contrast is a dynamic process concerned with interaction, encompassing more of a ‘complete film reel’.

Kellner stated that without participation or survey research society would be a poorer place.

N.B Kellner made a clarification at this point differentiating polls from survey research, explaining that a poll is a small corner of a larger body of survey research.

Kellner continued to outline some **advantages** of polling as method of measuring public opinion.

- **Problem** = Minority groups can be seen to have more people behind them than they actually do. Kellner used the example of fox hunting in a Labour MP constituency.
- **Solution** = Measuring the actual opinion poll in an MP’s constituency can give them a more accurate idea of where the needs of the public are that need to be addressed. In this case, although a minority of people were making a lot of noise about fox hunting, a constituency wide poll on ‘what their MP needed to be addressing’ came back with only a 1% desire for this to be fox hunting.
- **Problem** = Measuring how particular issues may unfold.
- **Solution** = Polling shows that we should never assume that people’s views are going to stay the same, through polling we can capture these changes. We can measure the evolution public opinion.
 - For example: Public support of Iraq War
 - Before – 60:40 (against : for)
 - Day before – 50:50 (against : for)
 - During – 2:1 (Approval)
 - 18 months after initial act of entry – 2:1 (Disapproval)

Kellner then focussed his discussion on questions of democratic legitimacy. He brought to the forefront here issues surrounding referenda and how problems can occur because of the evolution in public opinion that polling has shown appears to take place.

He explained that there are **three reasons** why he **is no longer a fan of referenda**:

1. They blur the lines of accountability
 - a. If the result comes out that has not been hoped for, who is accountable to the public? If it is the public themselves then this becomes a difficult cycle, as the only way to change this decision is to hold another referendum.
 - b. There is no one to blame.
2. They are rigid
 - a. Large important decisions are multi-faceted and therefore can't be covered in their entirety by a referendum.
 - b. Kellner posits that we need to give the politicians the power to act and then judge them on these decisions.
3. Hard to reverse
 - a. Politicians can reverse their actions easily – for example Poll Tax only lasted a year.
 - b. If the decision had come out of a referendum this would have been more difficult to facilitate.

Finally, Kellner concluded by stating that Polling works alongside participation by enhancing the dialogue between power and the people. Between the two we can amplify democracy.

However, he noted that there still needs to be a distinction between the government and the people, emphasising that we need to leave the 4/5 year gap between each general election as it is – in his eyes, too much interference here can in fact lessen democracy.

Questions from the floor followed the presentation. These included the following:

Richard Wilson, Involve

In the current climate of a very low turnout to vote, with polling is there a danger that we are increasing the exclusion of a number of different groups who do not participate in this process?

Peter Kellner –

Highlighted that there are different groups within the category of non-voters that need to be considered – criticised a piece of Mori work that only focussed on one particular group and was hence biased.

Kellner acknowledged that if politicians are using survey data to develop social policy this is very difficult when you need to focus on these excluded people – but the pollsters and the politicians are alive to it and try to address it.

Stephen Whitehead, NEF, and Richard Wilson, Involve

What is the relationship between poll data and policy making – there is a concern that as polls are such an effective way of getting attention from government perhaps they do not actually create good governance?

Peter Kellner –

Polls perhaps do have more influence than they should.

With regards to how to develop policy from polls. Politicians should be listening hard to what is actually being said by the polls. Should look at where these concerns come from and how they should build into policy.

Ministers often use simple questions in polls in order to provide comfort to them – polling shouldn't work in this way.

David Hunter, Motivation

What are tools available to counter the growing democratic engagement gap?

Peter Kellner –

The government no longer has a monopoly on technology and this has given greater means and tools for deliberation and engagement.

We need to look at the whole range of issues and draw on expertise from all sectors in order to lessen this gap to the best of our potential.

Kellner proposed that perhaps there is a case for referenda – but only when we are sure what it is being used for and not let the focus be on tactical government and parliamentary democracy. Kellner recommended a speech by Margaret Thatcher in 1975 outlining one of the only convincing views for a referendum he has heard.