What is an opinion anyway?
Finding out what people really think

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Traditional polls assume that opinions on any political or social issue can be collected simply by asking straightforward questions and recording the answers. Wrong. Many people have not carefully sifted the available information or formed a firm opinion prior to interview. Nevertheless a traditional poll counts all responses as having equal validity, however and whenever they are formed. Qualitative research, although allowing more open discussion, nevertheless exerts the same pressure on respondents to have a view. Group dynamics and the discussion guide and leader also combine to steer the group towards consensus. If only people were made to pay attention to the facts and substantive issues, as in a deliberative poll, then we would know what ‘informed’ public opinion would think. Trouble is, as the government has found, the answers obtained could be said to be critically dependent on the information the researchers choose to provide to respondents.

This paper investigates the potential for large-scale e-Delphi polling methods, simply giving large representative samples of voters simple questions on broad topic areas to consider. Via an iterative process, the job of researcher is then to observe what views people hold and give those views back to respondents to rate and comment on. The method allows people to think about the broad subject area, express a view in their own time, if they have one, and/or respond to the views of others. We can observe which thoughts are popular and which have an infectious capability. Critically, the job of the researcher is not to ask – but to listen.

Introduction

Opinion polls have become the voice of the people. They are the only way the public (by means of a representative sample of a country’s citizens) can weigh in on critical issues.

(Frankovic 2007)
This claim assumes that people have views on the important issues of the day, ready to be voiced in an opinion survey. The trouble is many people do not bother to sort out their views on political and social issues into coherent attitudes and policy preferences. Perhaps they reason that they will not be asked, seriously, to express a considered view either in a referendum or opinion survey. Unlike opinions on commercial products or services that respondents might own or consider owning, views on public affairs cost voters nothing; indeed whether these views are even held in any coherent form has no direct impact on the individual one way or the other.

In reality, an opinion research interview catches many respondents unprepared to answer carefully crafted questions. What unfolds is often an awkward question-and-answer session in which interviewers diligently read out carefully worded questions to respondents, many of whom will not have given the matter much previous thought, if any at all (see Mueller 1973; Herbst 1993).

Nevertheless, each question requires the informant to understand what is being asked, mentally retrieve any retained information and opinions on or around that subject, interpret those views against the question asked, and then (in most cases) select a pre-coded answer closest to the view they hold. Over several carefully crafted questions the effort involved is substantial (see Krosnick 2000).

Are these judgements too harsh? If so, we might expect lots of people to answer questions with a ‘don’t know’ or ‘no opinion’, and that is mostly not the case. But researchers avoid this outcome, most usually, simply by instructing interviewers not to offer these possible responses. Respondents are thus encouraged to express a view, even when they do not have one, or one that is reliably held.

In August 2009 ICM asked a representative sample of 525 people whether or not Britain should adopt the euro, using a standard-format question, without offering ‘don’t know’ to respondents, but recording that answer when given. A second matched sample of 517 people was asked the same question but, additionally, interviewers specifically offered ‘unsure’ as a possible response.

Table 1 does not show evidence of bias arising out of the omission by interviewers of the ‘don’t know’ option, as the ratio of ‘yes’ to ‘no’ is about the same on both question formats. Simply, it suggests that public opinion on the euro is less certain than might be imagined. Nevertheless, the implication that almost three in ten people make up their minds about where they currently stand on the issue of the euro during the interview is unsettling, especially if we consider other issues where the
Table 1  Attitudes to the Euro

Q: Do you think Britain should or should not adopt the euro (or are you, like other people we have spoken to, unsure)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsure not offered (standard question method)</th>
<th>Unsure offered</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes (%)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (%)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know (%)</td>
<td>2</td>
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...don’t know might not distribute in proportion to those who are presently able to express a definite view, or when we consider more complex issues involving the choice between several alternatives.

Some would argue that ‘unsure’ in the above question is similar to offering a mid-point to a scale (i.e. no opinion one way or the other). The decision often taken by opinion researchers not to offer a mid-point (neither/nor) response pushes voters to give an opinion one way or the other, and creates an illusion that public opinion can be divided between opposing views, with few people undecided.

Researchers are similarly aware that question order and wording can have an effect on the answers obtained. But these effects also imply that, for some people at least and on some issues, firm views were not held prior to the interview. If such views were firmly held then question order and question wording should have little impact. For example, around the date of the launch of the euro (1999–2001) MORI found on average that 59% were opposed to the idea that Britain should adopt the new currency. ICM asked a near identical question and found 61% opposed to the euro. Gallup polls on the other hand further advised respondents that adopting the euro meant ‘abolishing the pound’, and thus found 66% opposition and fewer people unsure. The simple addition of an obvious consequence (the disappearance of the pound) appears to raise opposition levels by 5%.

More generally, the failure of attitudinal weighting to match results obtained in online interviews to those obtained in telephone and large-scale random surveys arises because no one attitude on any specific question can be counted on to correlate strongly with another, even within related policy or issue areas. For attitudinal weighting to work we would need far more consistency between the views people hold on closely related attitudinal variables than we have been able to find (Sparrow 2006).

Poorly formed, incomplete and contradictory attitudes may be minor problems on the most obvious poll questions, such as voting intentions in an immediate general election, or on whether the prime minister is doing...
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A good or bad job. On these and other similar questions most people will have a view, or can easily make up their minds quite reliably and quickly whenever the question is asked.

More problematic for policy makers and opinion pollsters are the big issues of the day, such as those surrounding the funding of the NHS, education policy, crime and punishment, the role of government on green issues, or electoral reform. Ordinary voters, on the whole, cannot be expected to have shaped an informed opinion on these issues, or ensured that all their views within a policy area add up to a consistent view.

Are deliberative opinion polls the answer?

Deliberative democracy aims to be a compromise between direct and representative democracy, relying on deliberation (weighing up and examining the arguments for and against a choice or measure) between ordinary voters with the aim of helping governments develop sound policy. It is a seductive concept, especially to ministers wrestling with the big and complex policy issues – a task made more difficult by being confused by inconsistent polling data (Elster 1998).

What, for example, is the Minister for Health to make of the results of an opinion poll that says people want an NHS that spends less money better, with fewer administrators, but at the same time to ensure the NHS is well run, offers the latest treatments to UK citizens, regardless of cost, is accessible locally whenever the need arises and is free at the point of delivery? And what should a minister make of research which shows that voters want increased use of renewable energy and no more coal-fired or nuclear power stations, while failing to appreciate that renewable energy can only provide a small portion of our energy requirements? Deliberation by voters, examining the issues and weighing up the alternatives, at least promises a way out of the fatal contradictions often evident in a conventional opinion poll.

In deliberative research, information is given and issues explained to participants. For example, those who agreed to participate in the UK government’s deliberative event on the National Health Service received 15 pages of information prior to the event about the subject of the deliberative event. The pack explained that participants would be asked to decide ‘What ... should be done to improve community health and social care services?’ and ‘what the key priorities should be for the future’. The 15 pages contained selected facts, figures and other information aimed at informing participants (Department of Health 2006).
Perhaps wisely, the Department of Health referred to this as an ‘initiative’ and a ‘public engagement exercise’, rather than an opinion poll. The process could not be said to measure or reflect existing freely formed public opinion on these issues. Indeed one may wonder what proportion of ordinary people have bothered to sort out their views on community health and social care issues. The clear danger is that the method adds up only to a carefully orchestrated, artificial experiment producing results that are relevant only within the context of the experiment.

The selection of relevant information that is to be given to respondents, and the handling of the deliberative process itself, is a risky business for the designers if they are to avoid being accused of leading respondents to a particular conclusion. These dangers are apparent in the findings of an investigation by the Market Research Society (2008) into a deliberative exercise on nuclear power generation. It found that ‘information was inaccurately or misleadingly presented, or was unbalanced, which gave rise to a material risk of respondents being led towards a particular answer’.

If we are aiming to listen to and understand public opinion as it exists in the real world, deliberative research is not the solution.

A new approach

The origins of the Delphi method can be traced back to the 1950s and researchers at the Rand Corporation in the US. One of its first applications was to assess the direction of long-range trends, with special emphasis on science and technology. In public health and social policy, Delphi has been used to generate future scenarios in the fields of social services, health care, and the impact on public health of environmental, social, economic and urban policies (Adler & Ziglio 1996).

The architects of the method were never happy with the name Delphi. In Greek mythology a priestess at Delphi delivered messages from Apollo to those who sought advice; the messages were usually obscure or ambiguous. Uncomfortable though it may be for politicians wanting clear conclusions and recommendations, public opinion is unfortunately often obscure and ambiguous.

The method as originally designed has been used to explore ideas between a small group of experts who exchange ideas on topics that are complex and have uncertain outcomes. An important feature of the original method is that each contribution is anonymous and other participants are given time to make considered responses in an iterative process.
Our experiment has gone one stage further, applying the Delphi principles to large-scale public opinion research. We have conducted two research exercises among representative samples of all adults on our NewVista online panel. Specifically, we chose complex issues that would easily confound the bravest attempts at a quantitative poll: how should MPs be remunerated in future, and the future funding of the NHS.

The main design features of these e-Delphi opinion polls were as follows.

- A demographically representative sample of adults aged 18+. We have used samples of between 300 and 500.
- Respondents were asked to confirm their participation in a research exercise stretching over six days, containing three different stages, each one to be considered by them over a maximum of 24 hours.
- Initially, respondents were given one simple question on a broad topic area. Respondents were told that they could express a view in their own words on this subject, and we asked them to keep their comments to around 50 words initially.
- Respondents were told that it was not necessary for them to express a view at all if they did not have one. They simply had to confirm that they had engaged with the research, and all were told that they could contribute on a subsequent wave of research in response to a view expressed by others or with a new thought. Thus the research made it clear to respondents that it was acceptable not to have a view, and if they wanted to they could respond to the views of others.
- Respondents were not told how many people were participating in the research.
- The responses obtained in the first wave of research were coded up and a typical comment was then used in the second wave of research. Thus, while respondents were made aware of the comments of others, no information was given as to the number who had made the same or similar comments. Majority and minority views were thus presented equally (an important feature of the original Delphi method).
- For each typical comment, respondents were asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement on a scale of plus 5 to minus 5. They could also add a comment with a further thought on that specific comment and we also allowed respondents to make other comments. Again, it was made clear that respondents could decide for themselves whether or not to make a comment.
• The process was, on each of the two surveys, taken to a third stage. On each survey we felt it appropriate on the third wave to concentrate our investigation on ideas that were developing among participants.
• On both subjects (MPs' pay and the future funding of the NHS) we felt that after three waves of research we had sufficient information to gauge where public opinion stands and what options for the future voters are likely to consider acceptable. On other subjects it may be appropriate to have more stages, or even for the moderator to intervene more to point the discussion in a particular direction of interest, acknowledging that the purity of the design may be thus compromised.
• We interviewed members of the public but, in line with the original Delphi methods, other more specific groups could be interviewed – for example, doctors, GPs, other health care professionals, teachers.

What are the important features of this approach?

• The input of the client and the researcher is simply to decide on a topic area that we want people to give their views on; specific enough that discussion is to the point, without restricting respondents to concentrating on specific questions or giving particular answers.
• Giving respondents a full day to answer is an important element of the method, allowing for proper consideration of the issue.
• The sample themselves determine what direction the research takes within the broad subject area.
• The coding process simplifies the range of answers given to a manageable number. Respondents can react to these, free from the pressure of knowing which comments were majority views and which were minority opinions.
• We can simply observe who says what (and who says nothing at all) by cross-referencing comments and demographics, and other variables as appropriate.
• The method makes it easier for respondents not to have a view. Unlike question-and-answer surveys or focus groups, the process does not put pressure on respondents to choose between alternatives, some or all of which they may not previously have considered.
• We can look to see whether any views have an ‘infectious capability’, meaning that certain views could be mentioned by a small group or even one person but then catch on and gain the acceptance of others, who may themselves then refine or develop the thought.
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- Any respondent or small group within the overall sample can lead opinions in a particular direction by providing the most insightful ideas and comments. They may be people who are interested in public affairs generally, or for some reason have strong views on particular issues. The e-Delphi poll allows opinion leaders to emerge. Equally it accepts that researchers cannot get an opinion from someone who, in reality, doesn’t have one.
- The method can be differentiated from a blog or forum in that we ensure that the sample is representative of the population we wish to survey, and has a structure to it that is moderated at each stage.
- The only practical method that can be used for such research is the internet, and some would argue that internet polls are not reliable. However, in this case it is clear that we do not seek to provide precise percentages, but instead describe public opinion more generally and point to possible conclusions. In this case the advantages of internet-based research clearly outweigh any disadvantages.
- Open discussion in focus groups could produce some of these insights, and has done so. Indeed, it is comforting that other research methods can lead to some of these conclusions. But the e-Delphi method offers some of the recognised advantages of open qualitative work, and the scale and coverage of quantitative methods allowing hundreds of people to participate at one time in offering ideas and responding to the thoughts of others.

So how should MPs be remunerated?

The following is a brief summary of the results obtained from an e-Delphi poll on the subject of MPs’ pay.

It is clear that, to many voters, the idea that anyone should be paid over £67,000 is hard to swallow, and a list of the least deserving might well include MPs. Successive governments have therefore felt it necessary to keep increases in basic salary to a minimum, hence perhaps a more generous expenses regime that has until recently escaped the attention of ordinary voters (because details have not been published). The whole issue is now in the public domain, following publication of a long list of outrageous expense claims made by named MPs.

We explained to a representative sample of 406 people that MPs in the UK are paid a salary of £64,766 plus expenses. We asked them to say how MPs should be remunerated in future for the job they do.
In response, 49% gave answers that were specifically related to pay, 42% mentioned the specific issue of expenses and 22% expenses claimed for property, reflecting the lurid revelations in the national newspapers. Almost a quarter had no initial comment to make (especially younger people and those classed C2/DE).

Evidently, for many ordinary people the present salary seems like a colossal amount, and their own experience is of jobs for which there is a set wage, rising, if they are lucky, with inflation. The comments they are able to give may also reflect the indignation of the newspapers they read – heavy with criticism but offering few solutions.

However, a few respondents (10%) – especially those classed AB/C1 – suggest increases in basic pay but with more restrictions on expenses, and a very few suggest extra payments for attendance, number of hours worked, performance-related pay or incremental pay for length of service or for those taking on additional responsibilities, etc. It is obviously easier for people with direct experience of such incentives to suggest such measures for MPs.

Specifically on London-based accommodation, a couple of respondents suggested that MPs from outside London should be accommodated in government-owned property. A few others complained that while the tax payer presently picks up the bill for mortgage payments on a second home, on the sale of the property it is the MP who walks away with the capital gain. Neither of these specific points had previously been made in the media.

Specific comments made in the first wave of research were given back to respondents to rate and comment on further. Overall results are shown in Table 2.

For the third wave, we asked respondents to focus on what they would like to see as the main elements of a new salary scheme for MPs, assuming a new limited expenses scheme had been put in place. The aim was to steer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 Responses to wave 2 of e-Delphi: MPs pay</th>
<th>Agree a lot (%)</th>
<th>Especially</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent body to decide pay</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>65+ DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£67K is enough. Nothing more</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>C2/DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No second jobs</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>65+ DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay to reflect the status of MPs and responsibilities</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65+ DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-related pay. Underachievers sacked</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65+ DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher salary but with minimal expenses</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>AB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce numbers of MPs and increase salaries</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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respondents away from further criticism specifically of expenses related to second homes and on to more positive suggestions for the future shape of remuneration strategy.

Two-thirds of those questioned in the third wave had no specific proposals to put forward, especially those in the younger age groups and classed C2 and DE. The comments made by those who did express some thoughts on the issue suggest that, while they want rigid control of expenses, they are at least willing to entertain the idea that pay should be increased, and that there should be incentives to take on more responsibility, perhaps length of service should be taken into account, or performance or attendance should be reflected in pay scales. Of those responding, 54% mention an increase in pay but a limit to expenses (19% of all who participated in wave 3); 50% mentioned incentives to add to the basic pay (19% of all who participated).

How should the NHS be funded in future?

Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) was founded on the principle that a comprehensive, tax payer-funded health-care system should be available free to anyone who needs it. An ever increasing range of treatments and drugs, as well as rising expectations, challenge the ability of government to continue with this model. Indeed successive governments have introduced payments by some for prescription medicine, restricted the availability of some services (dentists and opticians, for example) and some more expensive drugs.

We therefore asked a representative sample of 305 people to give their views on how the NHS should be funded in future. Over three-quarters (76%) of those questioned replied that funding for the NHS should remain as now, via taxation. The demographic groups most likely to favour funding via taxation include men (82%), those aged 65+ (84%) and, perhaps surprisingly, those classed AB (84%). There is a willingness among smaller groups to look at ways in which the funds can be managed more effectively – for example, by cutting administration costs (16%) and limiting access to British citizens only (5%). Only 5% of those questioned thought that private medical insurance should be encouraged. Groups most likely to offer no suggestions were younger people and those classed DE.

Specific comments made in the first wave of research were given back to respondents to rate and comment on further. Table 3 shows continuing strong support for the basic principles behind the NHS. It is interesting to
Table 3  Responses to wave 2 of e-Delphi: National Health Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree a lot (%)</th>
<th>Especially</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The NHS should continue to be funded as now</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>65+ DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut administration costs</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>65+ DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British citizens only</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Females, 18–24, DE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who pay for private health should contribute less</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18–24 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who lead unhealthy lifestyles should pay more for health care or receive lower priority for treatments</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18–34 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage uptake of private health cover by those who can afford it, to alleviate pressure on NHS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25–34 yo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS should concentrate on providing essential treatments and lower spending on less important treatments</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce compulsory health insurance, with people able to choose different levels of cover. State to pay for poorest people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18–24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

note that a compulsory insurance scheme including a state-funded safety net for the poorest people in society gets very little support, as it could be seen as a very close alternative to a tax payer-funded service. The data also show a heavy degree of self-interest in the favoured alternatives of different demographic groups. The proportion willing to agree that the private sector should have a larger role remains small in comparison with those wanting to continue to fund the NHS as now, but the difference is not as great as was apparent after the first wave of research.

In the third wave of research we concentrated on the funding issue, and in particular on the possible role for the private sector, which seemed to gain some traction with a small number of respondents in wave 2. Only 15% agreed (4 or 5 on a 5-point ‘Agree’ scale) that people should be able to opt for private health and out of paying tax to support the NHS. Much more popular was the idea that things should continue as now; people who want private health should pay for it out of taxed income and pay for the NHS through taxation as well. This idea was supported (4 or 5 on a 5-point ‘Agree’ scale) by 38% of those asked. But 22% agreed with a comment made by one respondent that there should be some tax incentive to encourage more people to take out private medical insurance, thereby relieving pressure on the NHS. However, this level of support was offered only in circumstances where the benefits to the NHS in terms of lower demand on its service outweigh the loss of tax revenue.
The research shows clear and firm support for the principles underlying the NHS. Wholesale change in the way the NHS is funded (for example, to a compulsory insurance scheme) is unlikely to receive much support. Nevertheless the research does give politicians, struggling to fund escalating health care costs, an option that could be explored further, to encourage more people into private health cover through careful use of limited tax incentives.

**So what do respondents make of the method?**

Feedback from respondents to these surveys has been very positive, the most common responses being that the surveys looked to be both interesting, enjoyable and thought-provoking:

- ‘Enjoying this – interesting’
- ‘A very interesting topic and it is good to be able to express my views’
- ‘It looks interesting, will look forward to the next few evenings’
- ‘Interesting survey, which will give me a chance to air my views as a member of society’

The most valuable responses to any survey will come from respondents who fully engage with the process, and carefully consider their own views and those of others; clearly e-Delphi polls offer a route to success.

The enthusiasm shown by respondents produces a lot of verbatim data that has to be analysed relatively quickly so that the main threads of the discussion can be fed back to respondents within a relatively short period of time. Researchers need to consider ways in which this job can be done effectively in the time available. Some degree of automation may help, but such processes are acknowledged to be of limited value for analysing longer verbatim responses.

**What form of research is it: qualitative or quantitative?**

Researchers are accustomed to describing their work as either qualitative or quantitative, and may wrestle to fit the form of e-Delphi described here into either camp. Quantitative researchers may complain that the results are not always reproducible and rely on the interpretive abilities of those looking at the responses obtained. But duplicating any quantitative research (and therefore verifying results) demands exactly the same survey
and questionnaire design – change anything and the results obtained may well be different, leaving us to ponder the reliability of either survey to adequately describe public opinion. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, may complain that the method will produce a lot of verbatim information but lacks the depth of understanding that comes from 90 minutes of conversation with a focus group. That is also true, but such understanding is not obtained without significant risk associated with small samples, group effects and moderator influence.

The e-Delphi method does shift the responsibilities of researchers, from designing detailed questionnaires and discussion guides, and demands instead that they become honest and impartial observers and interpreters of the freely formed views of respondents. That is a challenge, but not an impossible task.

**Conclusions**

Modern representative democracy as described by Benjamin Constant (1806–10) and others acknowledges that a consequence of the size of modern states and the creation of a commercial society is the necessity to elect representatives (MPs) to deliberate policy in Parliament on behalf of the people. Citizens, who have to earn a living through employment, are relieved of any requirement for daily political involvement. It is both a political philosophy underpinning the structures of modern democracies and an acknowledgement of reality, even in 18th-century France, that ordinary people have other, more immediate and personal concerns. This reality explains why public opinion among demographically representative samples of the population on complex issues of the day is sometimes shallow, confused and disappointing for those of us trying to make sense of it.

The ‘Liberty of the Ancients’, by contrast, was participatory, giving the right to individual members of society to contribute directly to politics through debates and votes in a public assembly. It could be argued that opinion research potentially gives ordinary people the ability to influence debate. There is a crucial difference however: the ‘Ancients’ could decide for themselves whether or not to participate, and those with the best and most powerful arguments counted most and persuaded others to their point of view. A quantitative poll or a deliberative exercise, on the other hand, includes anyone willing to give up some time for an interviewer (on a subject that is mostly only briefly described) or is at least partly involved on the basis that they will be exchanging time for money. Polls and surveys
count the views of all voters as equally important (as each person gets a vote), however carefully those views are formed. These surveys probably include a small proportion of people who would wish to participate in debate, and others who don’t really care about the subject one way or the other and have other concerns.

Faced with the monumental task of describing public opinion on complex issues the fatal temptation for researchers is to construct a quite rigid framework in a questionnaire, discussion guide or deliberative exercise, based on preconceived notions and fixed information requirements. Respondents colour in the picture. This often leaves respondents frustrated, as they are limited to respond only to those things addressed in the questionnaire or guide.

The e-Delphi polling approach brings us much closer to the concept of the Liberty of the Ancients. We start by asking a representative sample to participate. They are paid – but they are paid whether or not they make a contribution. As in an ancient democracy they can volunteer a view if they want, stay silent if they want, and/or respond to the thoughts of others if they want, and are completely free to evolve or shift their views as the debate develops.

Clearly, on the big and complex issues facing government, e-Delphi shows that some elements of public opinion are undeniably enduring, such as the view that MPs are paid too much for jobs they don’t do very well, and it is clearly apparent that there is genuine affection and support for funding principles supporting the NHS despite the obvious problems of sustaining this model. We might easily guess that many people are rather better at criticising the way the government runs things than they are at suggesting positive solutions. This probably reflects much of what they read in the newspapers or see on TV.

E-Delphi polls offer a fundamentally different approach to other methods that mainly ask quite specific predetermined questions and require a response pretty much on the spot. I would argue that it is a suitable exploratory exercise for issues that would be complex to explain and have many different possible solutions. It can come up with answers/views that could not have been foreseen. It might not produce clear majorities that enable ministers to claim majority support, but indicates what policy initiatives might gain positive traction with voters.

Realistically, that is all we can expect of voters. By voting for a particular party and MP, voters delegate the responsibility for carefully crafting sensible policies to a place where such debate properly belongs: in Parliament.
References


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About the author

Nick Sparrow was Chairman of Creston Insight Group and Chairman of ICM Group 1989–2010. He has conducted opinion polls for *The Guardian* since 1980, and since that time has also conducted polls for most other UK media organisations. He was private pollster to the Conservative Party between 1995 and 2005. His previous research work on polling methodology won the MRS Silver Medal in 1995 and again in 2007.

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