

# FINAL REPORT

## A Deliberative Poll® and Follow-up Survey on The Issue of Marriage in America



Southwestern Pennsylvania Program for Deliberative Democracy  
Robert Cavalier, Co-Director (with special thanks to Joanna Dickert)

Data Analysis by Mike Bridges and Jayna Bonfini

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CMU alumnus, Frank Brunckhorst

## Executive Summary: The Issue of Marriage in America

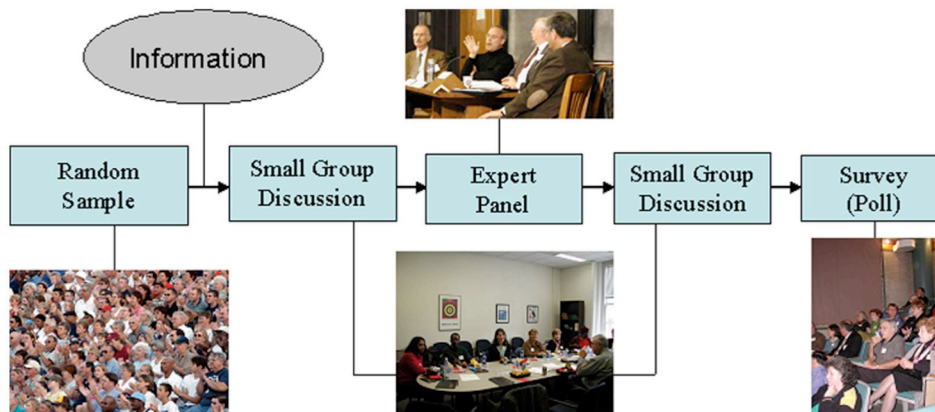
The institution of marriage rests on a foundation of several traditions. Today marriage is considered one of the most intimate private relationships anyone can have. However what many now see as a private relationship has historically been publicly regulated by laws and traditions. Some of these traditions, of course, are religious: marriage is a sacrament for some faith communities and a religious obligation for many others.

Recent debates over same-sex marriage have raised many questions about marriage and its traditions. For some, same-sex marriages threaten the institution of marriage itself, and so, these people argue, the institution of marriage must be protected. For others, debates over same-sex marriage are fundamentally about the civil rights of gays and lesbians, and these people argue that it is these rights that must be protected. This debate, in turn, has presented a challenge to the institutions--the courts and legislatures--that make up our democracy.

The democratic practice of public reasoning has played an important role in the debates surrounding same-sex marriage. Judges and legislators throughout the United States have engaged the issue. Others have opted for the 'Voice of the People' to address the question: Who should be allowed to marry?

In September 2008 a state-wide Deliberative Poll<sup>®</sup> provided an opportunity for the people of Pennsylvania to speak on the Issue of Marriage in America. In the Spring of 2009 a follow-up survey of participants was conducted to assess the longitudinal effects of the deliberative event.

Developed by James Fiskin, the basic elements of a Deliberative Poll involve the following: A scientific random sample of the population receives well designed background information on the issues. The sampled individuals then gather in small, moderated groups to discuss and deliberate the topic amongst themselves. A plenary session with experts in the field allows each group to pose questions relevant to the topic. Participants then return to their small group sessions for a brief discussion before completing a final survey.



The University of Pittsburgh's Survey Research Center mailed notices to 4000 registered voters and recruited some 400 participants, 256 of whom participated in the day-long event. The participant list was gathered from voter registration rolls of counties surrounding four host sites: Carnegie Mellon University, Community College of Philadelphia, Shippensburg University and Slippery Rock University. These sites were selected to represent both urban and rural voters from various geographic areas in the state.

Initial results show that nearly 70% of the Pennsylvania voters who participated in this deliberative poll support the legal recognition of same-sex relationships, either through marriage or civil unions.

But the situation is more complex than this headline implies. Among those who support legal recognition of same-sex relationships, participants split with approximately 35 percent supporting same-sex marriage and 35 percent supporting a version of civil union.

Interestingly, participant data also showed approximately 50% support for the PA Marriage Protection Amendment as it relates to the definition of marriage. This is due to the fact that up to 70% of those supporting civil unions were conservative in their opinion regarding a change in name. Nevertheless, since that group does support civil unions, support for the phrasing of the amendment (which precludes recognition of civil unions) would logically drop back to 35% based on the analysis of our data.\*

In the Spring 2009 follow-up survey, in which well over half (150) of our participants responded, this trend continued. Nineteen participants strengthened their positions on civil unions or moved toward positions on civil unions (from no recognition). Only one individual moved from civil union to no recognition.

As to the process itself, an overwhelming majority across all four sites felt that the experience was helpful, enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. These are not college students speaking here, but a randomly selected sample of Pennsylvania voters, with a median age of 54.



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\* Our data here also correlates to the Harris Interactive report (2008) on perspectives about the GLB community. They found that approximately 75% of American adults believe either same-sex marriage or civil unions should be available for gay and lesbian couples. Additionally, only 22% reported that same-sex couples should receive no legal recognition. The Harris report also found that among those favoring legal recognition, there was a split on the type of recognition between those in favor of marriage and those in favor of civil unions. It is important to note that the mean age in this report was 45.6, significantly lower than that of our deliberative poll (54).

## About the Participants

Participant recruitment. A total of 256 participants met and deliberated at four institutions across the state - Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), Shippensburg University (SHU), and Slippery Rock University (SRU). Participants were recruited from a sample of voters randomly selected from voter registration files in the counties surrounding the four host institutions. These host sites were selected to reflect the geographic diversity of the state and represented both urban and rural environments.

The Survey Research Program at the Center for Social and Urban Research at the University of Pittsburgh recruited participants using a telephone recruitment protocol. Those who agreed to participate were offered seventy-five dollars for their participation. Site-specific and overall recruitment rates are depicted in Table 1. Of the 3358 potential participants contacted, a total of 402 indicated they would attend the deliberative event. This represents a 12% acceptance rate. Of the 402 people who indicated they would attend, 60% were present the day of the event. Thus, the 256 people in attendance represent a 7.6% overall participation rate. The sampling error associated with this number of participants is approximately 6.3%.

Table 1. Recruitment and participation:

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>CCP</b>	<b>CMU</b>	<b>SHU</b>	<b>SRU</b>
Total Sample	3358	742	792	873	951
Number who agreed to participate (%)	402 (12%)	96 (13%)	112 (14%)	70 (8%)	124 (13%)
Number who participated (%)	256 (8%)	54 (7%)	75 (9%)	50 (6%)	77 (8%)

Background and demographics. A number of background and demographic variables were collected to characterize our sample of participants. As Table 2 reveals, the sample was largely middle-aged (mean 54.1 years), with 49% college educated or above and 72% active members of a church. Eighty-eight percent reported that religious views played an important role in their lives and 66.8% of the participants described themselves as moderate, conservative or strongly conservative on social issues.

More women (59.7%) participated than men and registered Democrats (58.7%) were in greater attendance than registered Republicans (34.9). The table also suggests that there was substantial variability in background and demographic characteristics by site. For example, the proportion of African American participants was substantially higher at the Community College of Philadelphia site (61.1%), while at the Slippery Rock University site, the percentage of participants who identified as white was 97%.

Table 2. Background and demographic characteristics:

	<b>All Sites</b>	<b>CCP</b>	<b>CMU</b>	<b>SHU</b>	<b>SRU</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	256	54	75	50	77
<b>Mean Age (yrs)</b>	54.1	49.7	55.1	52.3	57.8
<b>% Female</b>	59.7	70.4	54.0	52.3	56.2
<b>Race (% identifying)</b>					
African American	21.7	61.1	23.8	4.0	2.7
White	76.7	33.3	76.2	94.0	97.3
Asian	2.9	5.6	3.2	0.0	2.7
Native American or Alaskan	0.8	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.0
Native Hawaiian or PI	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	2.9	7.4	1.6	4.0	0.0
<b>College Educated or Above (%)</b>	49.2	50.1	46.1	50.0	50.7
<b>% Employed</b>	55.8	48.1	61.9	62.0	52.1
<b>Marital Status (%)</b>					
Single, never married	23.8	40.7	25.4	26.0	8.2
Single, previously married	10.0	20.4	9.5	6.0	5.5
Married	57.9	29.6	55.6	64.0	76.7
Partnered	0.4	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0
Widowed	7.9	9.3	9.5	2.0	9.6
<b>% Gay or bisexual</b>	2.1	5.6	3.2	0.0	0.0
<b>Parent (% yes)</b>	75.0	68.5	71.4	68.0	87.7
...of parents, % with children < 18 years	19.2	32.4	28.9	20.6	21.9
<b>Active member of church (% yes)</b>	72.9	72.2	66.7	64.0	84.9
<b>Extent of religions beliefs play a role in life (% some or great deal)</b>	87.9	83.3	85.7	84.0	95.8
<b>Political Party Identification (%)</b>					
Democratic Party	58.7	88.9	67.7	44.9	37.1
Republican Party	34.9	3.7	27.4	46.9	57.1
Libertarian Party	2.6	1.9	1.0	8.2	1.4
Green	.4	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.0
Independent	3.4	5.6	3.2	0.0	4.3
<b>Always vote (%)</b>	92.1	94.4	92.1	86.0	94.4
<b>Views on social issues</b>					
Strongly conservative	11.5	3.8	7.9	14.0	18.6
Conservative	28.5	21.2	25.4	28.0	37.1
Moderate	26.8	25.0	34.9	20.0	25.7
Liberal	27.7	42.3	22.2	32.0	18.6
Strongly liberal	5.5	7.7	9.5	6.0	0.0

Attitudes toward the gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) community. Given that the much of the current discussion regarding marriage in America focuses largely on the complex set of issues surrounding the recognition of same-sex relationships, participants were asked to indicate their views and experiences related to the gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) community. Table 3 presents the responses to these questions. As these results suggest, participants were moderately supportive of GLB issues and reasonably familiar with someone in the GLB community. For instance, most participants (70.8%) reported having a GLB acquaintance and many reported having a GLB family member or close friend. In some instances, our participants foreshadowed their complicated pattern of beliefs about same-sex marriage, with seemingly inconsistent views. For example, while close to half (45.9%) of the participants reported thinking that homosexuality is morally wrong, 75% reported believing that homosexuals should be allowed to raise children.

Table 3. Attitudes toward the GLB community:

	All Sites	CCP	CMU	SHU	SRU
<b>Gay Issues (% yes)</b>					
Have GLB relative	37.9	46.0	38.3	30.6	44.1
Have GLB close friend	39.2	60.4	32.3	42.0	30.0
Have GLB acquaintance	70.8	81.5	74.6	74.0	60.0
Know same-sex family with Children	23.8	38.9	25.4	24.0	11.1
Think sexual orientation can be changed	39.1	43.8	25.0	38.3	48.4
Think homosexuality is morally wrong	45.9	27.1	38.6	45.8	66.2
Think homosexuals should be allowed to raise children	74.9	90.7	75.9	68.9	64.5
<b>Origins of Homosexuality (%)</b>					
People are born gay	51.1	65.3	50.0	51.0	42.0
Product of upbringing	8.0	2.0	10.3	4.1	13.0
Lifestyle choice	40.9	32.7	39.7	44.9	45.0

Same-sex relationships. While the broader topic for deliberation focused on the history, meaning, and role of marriage in America, a central theme involved the current debate regarding the recognition of same-sex relationships. To better assess our participant's views of this issue, we asked them to respond to the following questions.

Which of the following BEST represents your position on the recognition of relationships among same-sex couples?

- Same sex couples should be allowed to legally marry.
- Same-sex couples should be allowed civil unions but not legal marriages.
- Same-sex couples should be given no legal recognition.

Do you strongly support, moderately support, feel neutral, moderately oppose or strongly oppose:

- An amendment to the Pennsylvania constitution that recognizes only a marriage between one man and one woman?
- An amendment to the Pennsylvania constitution that preventing the recognition of civil unions, or similar forms of marriage-like relationships?
- An amendment to the United States constitution that recognizes only a marriage between one man and one woman?

Do you believe that the State of Pennsylvania should recognize same-sex marriages that are performed in Massachusetts or California? [Note that this question was posed prior to the passage of Proposition 8. Our follow-up survey asked participants to respond to the results of Proposition 8.]

As Table 4 reports, 70.4% of the participants believed that same-sex relationships should receive some form of recognition. In contrast, only 23% believed that same-sex relationships should be given no legal recognition. However, this general pattern did not reflect the perspective at all the host sites. Indeed, the pattern of support for same-sex relationships was somewhat reversed at one site, with nearly 41% of those at the Slippery Rock site supporting no legal recognition for same-sex relationships.

Additional analyses suggested that support for *no* legal recognition of same-sex relationships was more likely among those with who believed that marriage represents a religious institution (as opposed to a civil institution), those who believed that marriage should be governed by religious beliefs and historical tradition and those who adopted more conservative positions on issues such as abortion and the death penalty.

While the majority of participants supported formal recognition of same-sex relationships, there was no clear consensus regarding the form that recognition should take. In fact, while half those who supported recognition favored legal marriage for same-sex couples, half opposed legal marriage and favored civil unions. What distinguished those who supported marriage versus civil unions? While both groups indicated strong concerns for civil rights as well as the welfare of children and society, those who supported civil unions over legal marriage were more likely to espouse stronger religious beliefs. For this later group, civil unions appeared to provide the most balanced solution with regard to the potentially conflicting concerns of religious traditions and civil rights.

In Table 5, the responses to the questions regarding amendments to the state and federal constitution also reflected the dilemma that many participants seemed to experience between certain religious traditions and concerns for civil rights. Indeed, nearly half of all participants indicated support for an amendment to the state constitution that would limit marriage to one man and one woman. Support for this amendment came from both those who opposed *any* recognition of same-sex relationships and those who favored civil unions but not legal marriages. In contrast, there was much less support for an amendment preventing recognition of civil unions (33.7% support). In essence, participants seemed to be trying to balance a number of conflicting concerns in thinking about the recognition of same-sex relationships. Many expressed important

commitments to historical tradition and strong concerns for religious perspectives. At the same time, they considered broader issues such as freedom of choice, liberty, civil rights, support for *all* families and the welfare of children.

In the end, three general positions emerged from the deliberative polling event. For most of the participants, the discussion resulted in an articulated support for same-sex relationships to receive the benefits and protection afforded by legal recognition. For some, marriage appeared to be the best option and those who supported this position tended to oppose any legislation to limit marriage. For others, broadening the constituency of legal marriage to include same-sex couples created a sense of anxiety and discomfort. Some observers noted that in their groups these feelings, characterized as caution and concern, were not expressed as anti-gay, but as uncertainty in regard to the future. These participants viewed civil unions as the best option and tended to support legislation to limit marriage to one man and one woman. There was another group of participants who both held strong religious convictions and opposed any form of recognition. These participants supported both state and federal legislation to limit marriage to one man and one woman and to prohibit the recognition of any similar legal arrangement.

Table 4. “BEST” form of recognition for same-sex relationships:

	All Sites	CCP	CMU	SHU	SRU
<b>“BEST” form of recognition of same-sex relationships (%)</b>					
Legal marriage	38.0	53.1	46.8	32.0	17.6
Civil unions, but not legal Marriage	32.4	34.7	25.8	38.0	35.1
No legal recognition	22.8	2.0	19.4	28.0	40.5
Unsure	6.8	10.2	8.1	2.0	6.8

Table 5. PA Amendment:

	All Sites	CCP	CMU	SHU	SRU
<b>PA amendment that recognizes only a marriage between one man and one woman (%)</b>					
Strongly oppose	29.6	38.0	33.9	34.0	15.8
Oppose	7.5	8.0	6.5	6.0	6.6
Neutral	10.3	18.0	12.9	6.0	6.6
Support	5.5	10.0	3.2	6.0	3.9
Strongly support	47.0	26.0	43.5	48.0	67.1
<b>PA amendment that prevents the recognition of civil unions or similar forms of marriage-like relationships (%)</b>					
Strongly oppose	40.2	53.1	40.3	36.0	27.4
Oppose	16.1	14.3	12.9	18.0	19.2
Neutral	10.0	14.3	12.9	4.0	11.0



Support	12.4	8.2	17.7	12.0	12.3
Strongly support	21.3	10.2	16.1	30.0	30.1
<b>US amendment that recognizes only a marriage between one man and one woman (%)</b>					
Strongly oppose	35.8	43.5	43.5	35.4	21.3
Oppose	8.9	17.4	6.5	10.4	5.3
Neutral	8.1	10.9	8.1	0	9.3
Support	7.7	6.5	6.5	10.4	8.0
Strongly support	39.4	21.7	35.5	43.8	56.0
<b>Should PA recognize same-sex marriages legally performed in other states (% yes)</b>	43.4	60.4	46.7	36.7	27.8

## IMIA Follow-up survey

A follow-up survey was sent to every participant in February 2009. For those who did not respond to our initial mailing, an additional round of surveys was sent in March 2009. We received 150 responses, a return rate of 54.3%. Our response rate at each site exceeded 50% as well. This rate of return along with a comparison of the participant level data enable us to continue to draw some general conclusions about the issue of marriage as a result of the deliberative poll.

As in the post-poll survey, we again asked the participants to report their answer on what “best” represents their current, personal position on the recognition of same-sex relationships. Table 6 contains the results of the follow-up survey to this question, along with a side-by-side comparison with the post-poll survey results. Table 6 also represents the response rate for the follow-up survey (percentages and actual) for each site.

Table 6. “BEST” form of recognition of same-sex relationships (%):

	<i>Post Survey</i>	<i>Follow- up</i>	<i>Post Survey</i>	<i>Follow- up</i>	<i>Post Survey</i>	<i>Follow- up</i>	<i>Post Survey</i>	<i>Follow- up</i>	<i>Post Survey</i>	<i>Follow- up</i>
	All Sites (n=256)	All Sites (n=150)	CCP (n=54)	CCP (n=29)	CMU (n=75)	CMU (n=42)	SHU (n=50)	SHU (n=28)	SRU (n=77)	SRU (n=51)
		54.3%		53.7%		56%		56%		66.2%
<b>Legal marriage</b>	38	27.1	53.1	39.3	46.8	24.3	32.0	25	17.6	22.2
<b>Civil Unions but not legal marriage</b>	32.4	41.7	34.7	39.3	25.8	56.8	38	25	35.1	42.2
<b>No legal recognition</b>	22.8	27.8	2	14.3	19.4	10.8	28	50	40.5	35.6
<b>Unsure</b>	6.8	3.5	10.2	7.1	8.1	8.1	2	0	6.8	0

From the over-all data, it appears that there was indeed some movement towards a single-peaked distribution in favor of civil unions, even after the deliberative poll. In the post-poll survey, the CCP and CMU sites had a majority of participants in support of legal marriage. The follow-up survey results for those sites indicate a movement towards support of civil unions. Most of the movement from the CCP site was from participants initially supportive of same-sex marriage while the movement from the CMU site was primarily from participants initially in favor of no legal recognition (but also contained slight movement from participants initially in favor of same-sex marriage).

Additionally, slightly over 40 percent of the SRU participants were in favor of no legal recognition and 6.8% were identified as unsure of their position. However, in the follow-up survey results, a slight majority of SRU respondents favor civil unions. It is also important to note that the rate of return for the follow-up surveys from the SRU site was

66.2%. The post-poll survey results from the SHU site indicated that participants were roughly broken into thirds among the three options. However, in the follow-up survey, 50 percent of respondents were not in favor of any legal recognition of same-sex couples. However, a closer look at *who* was responding to the follow-up survey demonstrated that a majority of the SHU follow-up respondents were not in favor of legal recognition in the post-poll survey and did not change their minds.

We also asked the participants if their position on marriage has changed since the deliberation. Of the 150 respondents to the follow-up survey, 18.8% changed their position slightly while 2.7% significantly changed their position. An analysis of the data on the participant level revealed that slight portion of respondents changed their position of no legal recognition towards recognition of civil union. Conversely, one respondent moved from an acceptable of legal recognition in some capacity to no recognition, while a few others seemed to be more in favor of same-sex marriage, a slight change from a post-poll position on civil unions. Table 7 is a snap-shot of participants' position from the follow-up survey.

Table 7. Has your position changed as a result of the deliberative poll?

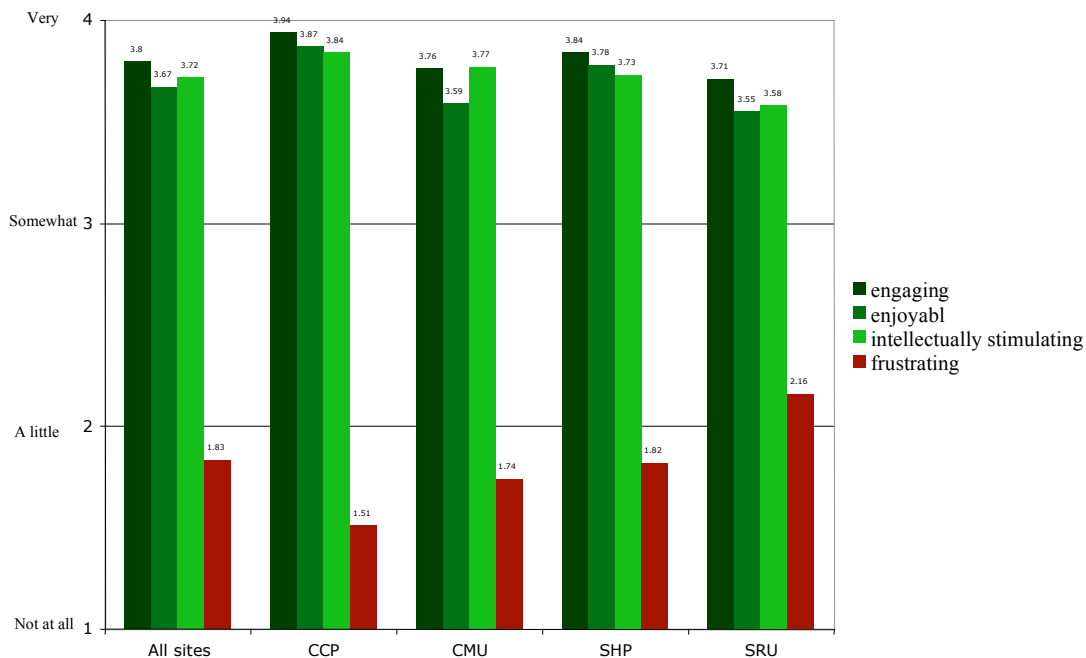
	All Sites (n=150)	CCP	CMU	SHU	SRU
<b>My position has not changed</b>	77.2	60.7	76.9	88.6	80.4
<b>My position has changed slightly</b>	18.8	35.7	17.9	11.5	17.4
<b>My position has changed significantly</b>	2.7	0	5.1	3.8	2.2
<b>Unsure</b>	1.3	3.6	0	0	0

## Participants' Experience in the Deliberative Polling Process

Overall, participants indicated a strong sense of satisfaction with their participation in the deliberative process. In particular, participants reported that they gained a broader understanding of the history of marriage and the issues concerning the current debate concerning marriage and same-sex relationships. Additionally, participants indicated that the deliberative process presented them with perspectives that they hadn't previously considered.

While a number of participants reported frustrations with perceived bias in the background information, and site responses from the post-poll survey varied considerably regarding assessments of the resource panelists, the quantitative and qualitative data regarding the event itself paints a very positive picture. Indeed, responses across all sites showed that a super majority of our participants (80-95%) felt that the deliberative process was enjoyable, engaging and intellectually stimulating.

To what extent did you find participating in the Deliberative Poll...



In the follow-up survey, we asked participants to describe any post-event discussions of the deliberative poll process and the issue of marriage in America (with family, friends, colleagues, etc.) and to classify of those discussions. The *positive* response rate for discussions about the process and the issues were 28.6 percent and 28.7 percent, respectively and the *mostly positive* response rate was 44.9 percent and 41.3 percent, respectively.

## Concluding Remarks

Unlike referenda, deliberative polls only have consulting power, they can inform but not determine policy. But they also deliver much more nuanced information on public

opinion and this can be used to influence policy discussion. Accordingly, we hope that the results of our deliberations will receive careful consideration by state legislators as they consider any amendments to their State Constitutions – or any referenda to that effect.

Copies of this Report along with copies of the Background Materials used in this deliberative poll can be found on the website for the Southwestern Pennsylvania Program for Deliberative Democracy at [caae.phil.cmu.edu/dp/](http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/dp/)