

**First Deliberative Polling® in Korea:
Issue of Korean Unification
Seoul, South Korea**

Executive Summary: Center for Deliberative Democracy of Stanford University

Jan 25, 2012

The Event

On Saturday August 11, 2011, a stratified random sample of 193 residents of Seoul and its surrounding metropolitan area gathered together in a large assembly hall of a regional training facility in the outskirts of Seoul. They were gathered to discuss various aspects of the Korean unification issue – the conditions, timing, and consequences of reunifying the two Koreas – and were prepared to tackle the issue for the rest of the weekend.

The weekend was part of the first Deliberative Polling® experiment conducted in Korea and the entire process was broadcasted as a one-hour program on KBS, the public broadcasting network in South Korea ([click here](#) to see video clips from the KBS broadcast on Dec. 4, 2011). It was part of a two-part documentary on the unification issue. Chief producer Yong-chul Kong explains the purpose of the program as follows: “The issue of unification with North Korea is not just a problem for each of us individually. It is a problem we [South Koreans] face together, as a nation. To a large extent, the future of the Korean peninsula depends on how we deal with this issue. ... But as a nation, we are far from reaching a national consensus regarding this issue, and different social collectives - the right, the left, the older generation, and the younger generation - they are all talking past one another ...”

Given the sharp divide between generations and between political parties on the issue of unification, a Deliberative Poll® faced distinctive challenges. It was employed to measure what the public would think if it were to deliberate together under transparently good conditions. To this end, a scientific random sample of the residents of Seoul (and the surrounding province) was invited to participate in a two-day deliberative event. Those who accepted were sent briefing documents that contained background on the issue and the pros and cons of different policy proposals. During the two-day event, the participants alternated between their randomly assigned small groups and the larger plenary session to discuss the issue and pose questions to competing experts. The participants were polled before and after the deliberative process to judge whether deliberating caused them to change their opinions. These results were compared to an independent control sample (N=1956) that did not participate in the deliberation.

The Results

The results in the following paragraphs will focus mostly on the post-deliberation numbers. Most of the post-deliberation percentages presented in this report have shown a statistically significant difference between T1 and T2. In some cases, however, we present post-deliberation results that are statistically indistinguishable from pre-deliberation results due to its practical importance. These questions will be recorded in the footnotes.

1. Unification: Timing and Economic Consequences

Overall, South Koreans showed overwhelming support for unification. Before deliberation, 71.6% of South Koreans thought unification were “necessary”¹. This already high number increased to an astounding 91.2% post-deliberation. Regarding the timing of unification, people were more inclined to say, “we should wait until conditions mature” (53.5%) as opposed to “unifying as soon as possible” (33.7%). People thought that unification would be hugely beneficial to North Korea (94.2%), but they also came to believe that unification would be beneficial to South Korea as well (from 48.2% before the weekend to 72.6% afterwards). Although people saw that unification might “worsen” some social problems such as the ideological divide (59.5%) and the rich-poor gap (67.8%)², there was a greater belief that South Korea would “develop into a powerful nation” if unified (85.6%).

One notable trend was that when asked about the possible economic setbacks as a consequence of unification, more people indicated a desire to “reunify when opportunity presented itself, even if this meant some setbacks in the economy” (59.6%). A lesser proportion of people said that they “opposed unification if it hurt the economy” (23.8%). In addition, 78.2% of people also thought that it is “important” for “South Korea to secure the costs of unification,” although people were split on the idea of establishing a “unification tax” (32.6% “oppose”; 38.9% “support”; and 26.4% “in the middle”).

2. North Korean Nuclear Issue and Humanitarian Aid to the North

South Koreans believed that if the North possesses nuclear weapons, it would be a “severe problem” for South Korea’s security (76.7%), and worried it might incite “Japan’s nuclear armament” (81.9%). They also preferred “complete dismantlement of

¹ This number was calculated by the collapsing the responses of 6-10 on a 0 to 10 scale, where 10 is “completely necessary”, 0 is “completely unnecessary, and 5 is “exactly in the middle”. All percentages presented in this summary are such collapsed percentages unless stated otherwise.

² The response distributions of the ideological and rich-poor gap questions were similar (i.e., statistically indistinguishable) before and after deliberation.

North Korean nuclear programs” as a resolution (65.8% support) as compared to “freezing the program at current state (27.5% support).³

In addition, after deliberation, people were less inclined to hold a conditional attitude about humanitarian aid. Support for continuing humanitarian aid *regardless* of the North Korean nuclear issue rose dramatically from 43.4% to 78.3%. People were also less likely than before to answer that “we should suspend sending rice to North Korea if any of the rice is being redirected for military purposes” (64.1% to 54.5%), but this number was still high. A related trend was found for the percentage of South Koreans believing that South Korea should possess nuclear weapons. This number declined from 53% to 34.3% after the deliberations. People also believed that rice (67.9%), fertilizers (73.0%), and medical supplies (74.6%) were helpful aid products for North Korean civilians.

3. Economic Cooperation and Policies

As for specific economic cooperation projects between the North and South, post-deliberation results showed an increased support for expanding the Gae-sung industrial complex (from 45.6% to 77.7%) and the Gum-gang-san tourism project (from 50.3% to 62.7%). This seemed to be triggered by an increased confidence about the positive effect of these programs. 66.9% of South Koreans said they thought the Gum-gang-san project was effective in bringing about unification, and 86% thought so about the Gae-sung industrial complex. The Gae-sung project additionally bolstered people’s beliefs about its positive effects on the South Korean economy (from 50.2% to 67.9%).

Process Evaluation

The participants were asked to evaluate the elements of the process on a scale from 0 to 10, ranging from 0 “generally a waste of time” to 10 “extremely valuable”. 94.8% rated “participating in the small group discussions” at 7 or above, 79.0% rated “meeting and talking to other participants outside the formal discussions” at 7 or above. 84.2% rated “the large group sessions with the candidates” at 7 or above, and 92.2% rated “the event as a whole” at 7 or above.

Partners and Project Team

[KBS](#) and [Seoul National University](#) jointly organized a special committee (lead by Prof. S.-K. Park, SNU) to carry out the project. They cooperated with the [Center for Deliberative Democracy](#) of [Stanford University](#) on all aspects of the project. The survey was carried out by the [KBS Broadcasting Culture Research Center](#), and it was in the field twice (pre-, post-deliberation) during the period of August 8 – 25, 2011. The briefing

³ The response distributions of the North Korean nuclear issue questions were similar (i.e., statistically indistinguishable) before and after deliberation.

documents were prepared by the [Institute for Peace and Unification Studies](#) of [Seoul National University](#) (lead by Prof. M.-K. Park, SNU) and every effort was made to ensure balance of the presented viewpoints.

The scientific team in charge of the project was led by Professor Kyu S. Hahn of the [Institute of Communication Research](#) of [Seoul National University](#) in collaboration with the survey research team of the [KBS Broadcasting Culture Research Center](#). Results of were analyzed by the [Center for Deliberative Democracy](#) of [Stanford University](#).

Deliberative Polling® is a registered trade mark of James S. Fishkin. Professor Robert C. Luskin has collaborated with Fishkin on nearly all the Deliberative Polling projects since their inception in 1994. For more information on Deliberative Polling® please visit <http://cdd.stanford.edu>. The process has been employed in the US, Britain, Australia, Hungary, Denmark, the European Union, Japan, Brazil, and China, among other countries.