



Day 1: Organizers and Participants Set the Scene

06/24/11 by Agustin Gurza

At a time when California state government is in gridlock and voters feel alienated from the political process, nearly 400 average citizens have come together this weekend to chart a new future for their state in what is being heralded as a historic exercise in participatory democracy.

The three-day public opinion summit, known as a Deliberative Poll, was kicked off Friday with a press conference at the Marriott Hotel in Torrance, site of the event called "What's Next California?" Poll participants will meet here to discuss key issues with the aim of setting the agenda for reforming California government to make it more efficient and responsive to the people.

"We are excited to be able to bring together a group of California citizens to debate and come to conclusions on some of the most important issues facing the state," said Lenny Mendonca, a California Forward Leadership Council member. "Although it's an expensive and difficult and time-consuming undertaking, we think it's a worthy investment."

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The Deliberative Poll, the first of its kind in the state, addresses what the organizers called the "inadequacies of conventional polling" conducted in a sound-bite climate of "an audience democracy played out on television" and other media. The new process also responds to the public's sense of powerlessness in the political system where politicians cater to special interests, consistently fail to agree on budgets, run annual deficits and manipulate the initiative process for their own ends.

"Californians consistently tell us that they're very frustrated by their government in Sacramento (because) they're not addressing the real issues and real problems," said David Davenport, a California Forward Leadership Council member and research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. "We will leave here this weekend knowing what a random sample believes should be done in California."

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The poll participants were scientifically selected by a random sample of California voters. They will meet in small groups Saturday and Sunday to discuss and debate positions on major topics, such as tax policy, initiative reform and legislative reform. Their discussions will be guided by a 100-page "briefing document" described as "accurate, vetted exhaustively for balance, pros and cons, across the political spectrum." In the end, the groups will decide which of 30 possible reforms they will support.

"The result will chart "a route to responsible advocacy," said James Fishkin, Director of the [Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University](#), which is leading the poll. "It is not misleading advocacy," he added, "but advocacy based on good information."

Some critics have questioned the impact of the elaborate poll process, claiming that 300 strangers are no more likely to agree on issues than their elected representatives. However, organizers say the process can not only lead to informed reform recommendations but also encourages a more engaged and energized citizenry.

Fishkin, who has conducted 16 Deliberative Polls in several countries since 1994, says it has produced proven results. He said the grass-roots process of political deliberation has not been used since the early days of democracy in ancient Greece.

"What is different in the history of the world, unless you go back to ancient Athens, is this notion of the whole agenda of initiatives being formed by the deliberations of a microcosm of all the people," said Fishkin, who is also chair of the Department of Communications at Stanford. "So I think this is unusual."

Organizers at the press conference also addressed the belief, in some cynical quarters, that the public is either too apathetic or just "not smart enough" to address crucial issues directly. Fishkin said the experience in countries such as Great Britain, Bulgaria, Hungary, Thailand and Northern Ireland prove precisely the opposite.

"In fact, the public is just inattentive and there are a lot of people trying to confuse the public," said the researcher. "But if you provide good conditions for the public, they are collectively very smart. They make a lot of sense, and it's that common sense that we will try to harness."

The right conditions include: Being randomly assigned to small groups, having experts in attendance who answer questions but don't give speeches, and knowing their opinions will matter.

"People everywhere respond to the idea that they have a voice," concluded Fishkin, "and that somebody's going to listen to what they have to say."

The Deliberative Poll, which runs through Sunday, is being sponsored by a coalition of non-partisan reform organizations, academics and journalists. They include [California Forward](#), the [New America Foundation](#), the [Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University](#), the [Public Policy Institute of California](#), the [Nicholas Berggruen Institute](#), the [Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University](#), and [California Common Cause](#).

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