



A Moderator's Perspective from the Deliberative Poll

06/28/11 by Ashley Trim

I'm reflecting on my weekend spent moderating one of the small group discussions of the "What's Next California?" Deliberative Poll. I wasn't quite sure what to expect as I sat down with a sample of 18 Californians who had traveled from San Diego County, Humboldt County, and many points between. Would conversation flow? Would participants be afraid to disagree? Would they be intentionally hostile and provocative?

It was soon obvious I had nothing to worry about. Within five minutes, the group had taken over the conversation, and was engaged in a thoughtful, energetic discussion. By the second session almost everyone was talking frequently, and the group took the initiative to encourage those who were hesitant. Moderating the Deliberative Poll process is different than other types of moderation in that we were not trying to get our group to come to a consensus. Rather, the purpose was to encourage them to listen to different viewpoints and consider their own opinions in light of better information. As a moderator I just got to listen (and help us stay a little bit on task).

The conversation was not completely free of frustrations, and there were times disagreements began to be heated, but the participants were willing to clarify miscommunications and to offer respect for dissenting opinions. We hear much about polarization in California, and it was refreshing to see this type of collaboration. Even when the majority were united on a point, they would intentionally seek out the response of someone who disagreed – often without any intervention from the moderator. Every single one of the participants in my group expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to share in the discussion. Perhaps most encouragingly, after the last session, one of the group members passed around a sheet of paper to collect email addresses "so we can keep this discussion going!"

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