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California: A Season of Reform?

DAVID DAVENPORT | AUGUST 26, 2011 | 9:21 AM



Until the California economy (and tax revenues) begins to recover, a window of opportunity remains open for fiscal and governance reforms in the state. Slow, quietly, such reforms have begun, first with the enactment of redistricting reform and then the open primary. This week the California Assembly has before it SB 14, which calls for performance-based budgeting, and SB 15, which requires a multi-year budget.

This summer, several California organizations joined together to set the stage for additional reforms by convening the first statewide California Deliberative Poll. We brought together a scientific random sample of 412 Californians to spend a weekend deliberating over additional reforms that might help get the state moving again. The results of these deliberations were announced this week: www.nextca.org.

Even though 70% of those participating questioned whether the California legislature was able to “get important things done,” after deliberation most felt that increasing the length of terms and even growing the size of the legislature would strengthen the legislative process. But they want the legislature to be held accountable to identify funding for new programs or tax cuts, establish a rainy day fund, and do performance-based budgeting.

In its 100th anniversary year, the initiative process gets strong support, but California voters find these ballot measures confusing. They would like a citizen review board to clarify initiatives and want initiatives to identify sources of any needed funding. And voters clearly want devolution of both decision-making and money from Sacramento to local governments.

California Forward (on whose board I serve), Think Long (on whose board Hoover fellows Condoleezza Rice and George Shultz serve) and other groups plan to use these Deliberative Poll results to press for legislative changes and likely one or more ballot initiatives in November, 2012. It is possible that those who say California is ungovernable will be pleasantly surprised by several important reforms during this open window.

