

Can Deliberative Poll Solve California's Girlfriend Problems?



By Joe Mathews

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If you look for a path to fixing California's governance crisis in traditional public opinion polls, you'll look in vain. California voters are frustrated but don't understand the basics of state finance and governance enough to identify a way to reform. In this way, the California electorate is like the worst girlfriend (or boyfriend) you've ever had: she is angry about just about everything, but can't give you any clear instruction about what you can do to make her happy.

What if California voters learned how the governance system really worked, through some sort of educational process? Would they be able to point to a coherent way forward?

That, in over-simplified fashion, is the goal of a deliberative poll being conducted this weekend in the LA County city of Torrance. Some 300 Californians, **chosen at random from around the state**, will come together to learn about four big policy areas, ask questions, and, once informed, offer their views.

You may have heard about this poll (**full details are here**). Virtually every good government group in California has put its name on the event (full disclosure: including the New America Foundation, the think tank that employs me, though I'm not one of the organizers). And critics have already **begun raising questions** about the value of the poll, and the political affiliations and previous stances of the various sponsoring organizations.

In both the praise and criticism, the deliberative poll is depicted as exotic. This tells us more about California than it does about this poll.

The concept of deliberation is foreign to our political culture. Too foreign. We often put together major legislation and budgets behind closed doors, in last-minute sessions. Our ballot initiative system runs at reckless speed, giving initiative sponsors just 150 days to collect hundreds of thousands of signatures. (The Swiss, who value deliberation, give sponsors 18 months so they can build support, spark debate and still have plenty of time to gather signatures). Our voters have chosen to establish complicated formulas to govern spending and taxation - effectively blocking political debate over questions like school funding and property values.

The best thing about the deliberative poll is that its very existence challenges this culture. Just getting Californians to sit down and seriously think about different pieces of the state - taxation, the initiative, representation, the state-local government relations - is useful as a counterweight. And attention to the poll might even get Californians thinking about the value of deliberation - a radical thought in the Golden State.

Of course, the poll is designed to tease out support for a variety of specific policy ideas for fixing California. That's fine as far as it goes, but the specific poll results are not nearly as important as what is learned from watching Californians try to figure out the issues. For me at least, the key question of this exercise is how people think and talk about the state's problems - and what information, phrases, and questions move them away from angry girlfriend territory and towards a view of California's problems that resembles reality.

I have my doubts about whether people can get there. California's political discourse is so full of false narratives that correcting misimpressions (only 9 percent of Californians know that education is the number-one spending item and the income tax the number one revenue source in the state budget) seems like a task that might take more than a weekend. But we won't know until someone tries.

Maybe, if this poll produces interesting data and new knowledge, the California electorate and governmental reform can start dating again.