



POLITICS -- June 29, 2011 at 12:15 PM EDT

California Voters Ask: What Happened to Our State?

BY: JUDY WOODRUFF

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A remarkable thing happened in California this past weekend. Voters who are Democrats, Republicans and everything in between came together to talk about how to get their state government back on track. Notably, there was little yelling -- mostly they listened respectfully to one another.

By now, everyone has heard about **dysfunction** in the country's most populous state. A multi-billion dollar deficit, drastic cuts to schools and universities, laid-off teachers, police and fire fighters, and the worst bond rating -- the metric governments rely on to make it cheaper to borrow money -- in the nation.



Not only are the symptoms bad, it's been all but impossible to find a cure. Republicans and Democrats in the state capital, Sacramento, are butting heads over whether and how much to cut spending or raise taxes and neither side is willing to compromise. And all this only seven months after a new governor took office, pledging to find a solution. Gov. Jerry Brown first vetoed a budget from fellow Democrats, but then this week abruptly made peace, announcing he'd given up on finding common ground with Republicans.

The assumption might be that Golden State voters are also at each other's throats, as divided as are their elected leaders. But at that remarkable gathering this past weekend in Torrance, Calif., near Los Angeles, some 400 men and women -- a carefully chosen representative sample of the state's registered voters -- convened to try to better understand the nature of the problems facing their state and to discuss how state government can address them.

They were old and young, Caucasian, Latino, African-American and Asian-American, a true cross section, coming from as far north as near the Oregon border and as far south as close to Mexico to read up on taxation and the initiative process, to meet in small groups, and to pose questions to experts and government officials.

The event, "**What's Next California?**" was sponsored by the California Forward organization and several other non-profit foundations, and was organized by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, which produces the PBS NewsHour.

Woven in was a "deliberative poll," which measures voters' attitudes before and after they are given information on a set of issues. At their first gathering, the co-chair of the event, Lenny Mendonca, told them "never before have groups come together like this ... we want the rest of the state to listen to you."

I was asked to moderate the **large plenary sessions**, where voters posed questions to

the crowd divided, where they hashed out dense topics of governance: taxation, the realignment of state and local government, and California's infamous initiative process, which allows citizens to take the lead in changing laws.



Attendees of the large plenary session at the "What's Next California" event. Photo by What's Next California.

I asked scores of attendees why they had decided to participate, and to a person, they said they love their state and want to do whatever they can to help it fix its problems. On the first evening, one man from Los Angeles told his fellow group members that he loses sleep over the state's plight: "We used to be number one. I don't know what happened."

Another man who moved to California from the southeastern U.S. said "no matter our problems, we're better off than Alabama." On the question of the ubiquitous voter initiatives that have become a complex feature of state ballots, one woman said they are "impossible to understand," and subject to manipulation by whatever group has a lot of money to spend.

Most everyone said they had been skeptical of the first couple of phone calls about the event, expecting an offer to tour vacation property. But once they realized the forum was on the level, they'd determined to attend. Seated around long rectangular tables, many expressed astonishment that each of California's 40 state senators represents close to one million people; more than the population of a few entire states, and by far the largest of its kind in the nation. One voter said his current state Assemblyman, who represents around 467,000 people, didn't return his phone calls when he was a San Francisco district supervisor, with only 25,000 constituents, so he hardly expects to have his calls returned now.

There was a spirited discussion over term limits in the state legislature: Assembly members can serve no longer than six years, which many voters realize doesn't give them time to build up expertise.

The toughest subject was taxes, and especially Proposition 13, the initiative passed in 1978 in a wave of anti-tax fever, placing strict curbs on how much local governments can raise property taxes. In the decades since, all agree the main unintended consequence is that California's cities and counties, strapped for necessary money for essential services, have had to turn to the state government for funding handouts, giving the state far more say over what happens locally. The result contributes to the dysfunction as the cost of


government services rise, and state decision making gets trapped in partisan politics.

After listening to almost two days of Californians talk about how to make their state government work better, the overriding impression was that they want their leaders to work together, to compromise when necessary, to solve problems. This sample of citizens who span the partisan spectrum repeatedly asked questions about finding common ground, especially on tough issues like spending and taxes. It's clear they don't understand why their elected representatives can't work things out.

So, where will their efforts lead? The "What's Next California?" movement, and the organizations behind it, say they will keep pushing for positive change. Keep an eye on **their website for results of the deliberative poll**. And find updates on their **Facebook page**.

And a note: This September, PBS stations in California and elsewhere will air a **report by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions** on the movement and this weekend's deliberative poll.

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Biff Jones 9 hours ago

I went and was impressed. I suspect that the whole effort was designed as cost effective way of educating a random sample of the population on the real problems that our state is facing and presenting to them potential improvements to the initiative system, governmental structure and taxation policy. The same survey was taken at the multiple time and again at the end. My opinions changed by the end.

I think that this process will be the wave of the future, rather than a simple street corner poll.

Like Reply



Joan Strasser 10 hours ago

Advocacy groups considering initiatives may well use the before/after survey information to decide whether to pursue signatures to put their initiatives on the ballot. These will be the "tangible changes." The way in which pros and cons for possible initiatives were presented in the materials passed out, and the initiatives proposed, influenced both the discussions and survey results. Due to the above, the survey results may be misleading. For example, one "con" presented for Instant Run Off Voting was "When there are three or more contenders some very strange things can happen such as the defeat of a candidate who would have won over each of the other candidates in a two person race." This is very misleading, and as a participant in What's Next California, when I was able to better explain IRV, several members in my group said they had been confused, and reconsidered their former positions. That said, everyone I talked to felt the meeting of minds an extraordinary experience. Well done, and kudos to Judy Woodruff, all organizers, moderators and panelists.

Like Reply



gag 17 hours ago

united we stand... divided we fall we're not united on anything so guess what

Like Reply



Barret Robbins Fan 20 hours ago

Nothing comes out of a whole lotta nothing. The people there might have come away with a belly full of feel goods but in the end nothing tangible will change. Sorry, but the state is doomed as are other states. I hear the service stations in Illinois no longer accept credit for gas purchases in cop cars.

Like Reply



Dave Needham 23 hours ago

I was a participant at the What's Next California event. It may be enlightening to read my perspective.


Though there were a large group of 400 participants they broke us down into 25 groups, which was where all of the debate came from. Whenever all 400 met together in plenary sessions we basically sat quietly and listened to experts of diverse opinions. So it was the small groups where we had the chance to really hash out matters.

I cannot say what happened in the other 24 groups but I will tell you that our group was diverse in opinions, ethnicity, age and where we lived in California. Each group member was as thoughtful as though we were guests at dinner. From what I learned most of us had come to the event to be sure our individual "man on the street" views were taken into account. As a conservative in California I thought I might be a unique voice. It turned out then when our group sought for solutions a conservative take was often well received. Though we had liberals and conservatives vying for affinity, what it came down to was what made the most

sense. We often started a session with rhetoric, but in time and after discussion, we usually found our way to reason. We never came to a point where everyone agreed, but though we did not vote – that wasn't the purpose – it appeared we would come to a consensus. That was something special, because I believe we came in to the meeting as polarized as most Californians are. I think what brought about consensus is that we leaned heavily on the experiences of each individual in the group. We were coming at the issues from a real world perspective; as taxpayers, as homeowners, as business owners trying to run a business and as workers trying to make a living. In our group the real world overcame the rhetoric.

The idea of learning about issues and then hashing them out related to our own life experiences was a very worthwhile process.

 **Duke McAdow and 2 more liked this** Like Reply

 **Larry Woller** 1 day ago

Coining the phrase “United We Stand, Divided We Fall”.. it applies not only to California but the nation as a whole.. too many individuals/special interests, etc looking out for themselves only and not willing to compromise, materialistic greed and intolerance on the rise, understanding and civility vanishing with ranting, playing the “blame game”, caustic uncompromising rhetoric (on all issues, not just the economy) polarizing the State and the Nation..adding fuel to the fire are the uncompromising politicians who have one eye on the 2012 Elections and the other on the voters.

Until everyone will sit down and discuss things in a civilized manner, willing to compromise a little and everyone contributing a little instead of a given percentage having to contribute more than they are capable of and suffer as a people, there will be no “United” and one day this country, the USA, will find itself on the same level as what is known as the “Third World Countries” today....

Thanks for sharing and a Happy and Safe 4th of July holiday to you, Ms. Woodruff, and everyone at PBS....

 **Duke McAdow and 2 more liked this** Like Reply

 **Nancy Pink** 1 day ago

I was also in Torrance observing much of the Deliberative Poll and did not get the impression participants wanted their legislatures to compromise, but instead wanted leaders to better serve the people of the state by making hard decisions to cut government waste and corruption while protecting schools, law enforcement and quality of life.

1 person liked this. Like Reply

Reactions

 **boardcord** 20 hours ago