

Florence 'Winkie' Evans: What's next, Californi

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"Do you have any hope for California?" my husband asked. I was calling him before heading home to Visalia from LAX after having just finished participating in the first-ever in California Deliberative Poll.

"Yes, I do," I replied confidently, "because of what I have just experienced."

A few weeks ago, I re-ceived a phone call at dinner time telling me I had been "scientifically selected" to participate in "What's Next California?," a Deliberative Poll to be held in Torrance and sponsored by the MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour. I was skeptical until I heard that name, which I respect.

"How did you happen to call me?" I asked.

"You were scientifically selected to participate," the lady repeated, explaining further that they were seeking to fill certain demographics from the state and they needed a few more people in my demographic.

I was still cautious, but she continued and said that they would pay all my transportation, my lodging, my meals and give me \$300 for my time.

The purpose of the weekend was to gather 300 Californians from around the state to discuss the condition of California and what might be done to help it. MacNeil-Lehrer would set up cameras and tape the proceedings. Judy Woodruff, a PBS journalist, was the moderator of the plenary sessions and would take the tapes and make a documentary of the event to be shown on PBS in September. It sounded interesting to me, so I agreed to attend.

A pre-event survey was administered by phone, before we left our homes, the same one that we had via paper and pen Friday afternoon before we started, and the same one we had Sunday afternoon, plus a few more questions to evaluate the experience, before we left.

A 100-page booklet was mailed out for us to read before we arrived. The focus of our deliberation was four parts of government:

^a The Initiative Process

^a Legislative Structure

^a Government: State and Local

^a Taxation

Each section in the booklet was followed by a list of proposals for addressing that part, with pros and cons for each proposal. It was simply written and easy to understand, along with graphs, charts, a glossary, a list of the Academic Advisory Group and of the Project Advisory Committee.

We were put in small groups with a moderator, who was to keep us on track. Our job was to look at each proposal, its pros and cons, and see if we understood what was written. We were not to come up with a group consensus, but rather choose, as a group, one or two questions that would be asked a panel of "experts" at the plenary sessions to follow. The moderator would write down questions she heard as we discussed, and we voted on each suggested question (voting for each question we liked, even if we had already voted on another one), with majority ruling.

The "experts" were from state government — assemblymen or senators, professors, an L.A. city councilman, members of "think tanks," e.g., California Forward, California Common Cause and others.

They wanted 300 participants, so they invited 400 just in case some could not come. All 400 showed up, so they had to scramble for more rooms and more food. It was well-run, and we were well-taken care of. I saw Jim Fishkin, developer of the Deliberative Poll, from Stanford, and offered that the reason the 400 came was indicative of the frustration most Californians felt. He, also being a Californian, agreed.

There were 19 people in my group. It was an amazing experience. We were a bunch of strangers, from different backgrounds, economic levels, political persuasions, ages, ethnicities and professions, and we were all respectful of each other, listening to one another, expressing different thoughts, observations, considerations, concerns. Everyone spoke up at least a few times, and I thought that was the norm for all 25 groups.

On the last day, while eating our box lunch and preparing for the final survey, the young man seated next to me (we had to sit in the same place each time, for the sake of the cameras and the study), told us that he had talked with some people in other groups who were not having the same civilized experience we were. Their groups had a few who dominated the conversation or argued and it was not a good scene.

Our moderator then told us that, in fact, Fishkin's son, who had been an observer in our room (typing away on his laptop, as we deliberated), told his father, "You've got to come look at Group 4; they're doing it just like you said!" That explained why the "headman" had come in during our discussion of taxation. Some people who had been relatively quiet during the first three discussions spoke up quite a bit during this last part.

We had been told that there would be observers, coming in and out, that we were to interact with them, and to ignore the cameras

as best we could. It wasn't hard because the cameras, set up on tripods, were small and unobtrusive. Also, the conversation and exchange of ideas in our group engaged us and held our attention.

It was eye-opening and encouraging to me to see that we could discuss the workings of government from our varied perspectives and do so civilly. It also illustrated that average, everyday people had legitimate contributions to make in regard to our state, and that they would do so if given information and opportunity.

The results of our work will be on the website www.nextca.org, and the documentary will be on television in the fall.

^a Florence "Winkie" Evans is a retired teacher and takes an interest in local community affairs.

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