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Consulting the People--Thoughtfully

How can the people of an entire state be consulted about complex issues--thoughtfully? Here in California we live with the well intentioned legacy of the Progressives--initiative, referendum and recall. Born of a desire to consult the people directly and to take money out of politics, the Progressive legacy, in the television era has brought us sound bite campaigns with focus group tested messages. It has helped replace the original American republican vision, deliberations by representatives as hoped for by the Founders, with advertising and persuasion--sometimes with ads that would not be allowed even for consumer products. It has, in effect, replaced the values of Madison with those of Madison Avenue.

Many scholars point to another vision of democracy, which has inspired many reforms. That vision, participatory democracy, has been made particularly famous by the *participatory budgeting* in Porto Alegre, Brazil. For years now, a portion of the city budget has been turned over to meetings by the people, who discuss local priorities and actually make key decisions. From the standpoint of social justice, there have, no doubt, been considerable accomplishments for this noble experiment--roads paved, services provided in areas that had been grossly underserved. But critics have pointed out that those who turn up are not representative, they are a small proportion of the population and they are often mobilized to support a particular agenda. From the standpoint of participatory democracy this is only to be expected. And the citizens of Porto Alegre have found a form of participatory democracy that is more substantive than our special elections. A California referendum is more like *audience democracy* than real participation since the real battles play out on the airwaves and the internet.

Recently, Porto Alegre experimented with yet another form of democracy. It is not mass participatory democracy, it is not audience democracy and it is not the elite deliberation of our representatives. Rather it is a form of democracy that goes back to Ancient Athens--*deliberative democracy*. A representative microcosm of the people, chosen by random sampling deliberate in depth about key problems. The results of the first *Deliberative Poll* in Latin America were just announced. They will be the basis for legislative proposals by the state government of Rio Grande do Sul in September. Detailed results can be found at <http://cdd.stanford.edu/Brazil>. A scientific sample of 226 participants gathered for an entire weekend in Porto Alegre. They compared extremely well in both attitudes and demographics with the larger sample of 1426 of the entire state who did not participate. The results compare favorably with those from other projects around the world described in *When the People Speak*.

The issue was career reform in the state civil service, an issue with tremendous budgetary implications. At the moment there is great reliance on time in service as a main basis for pay and promotion for government workers. But after deliberation the public wanted pay and promotion to be based more on measures of competence and productivity. With almost half of the state workers "inactive" (retired or the descendants of the retired collecting pensions) budgetary pressures demanded a hard look at how to make the government more efficient and responsive. The public endorsed a whole series of measures by margins of more than 70%. In a later blog I will report on how the government's actual proposal in September fits with the public's views. But for the moment here in California it is worth taking note of this new (and very old) way to consult the public--the deliberating microcosm as a tool to put an entire state in one room where it can spend a weekend confronting hard choices. Those conclusions can then be brought to the more conventional democratic processes in the legislature. When they come there, they are brought as the people's proposals and not just those of politicians. Hopefully they will be treated as such.