



Day 2 Overview & Highlights

06/26/11 by Agustin Gurza

After a long day of small group discussions on specific ways to improve state government in California, all 400 participants in the Deliberative Poll gathered Saturday night for a panel discussion on how the state's increasingly diverse population can work together toward that reform.

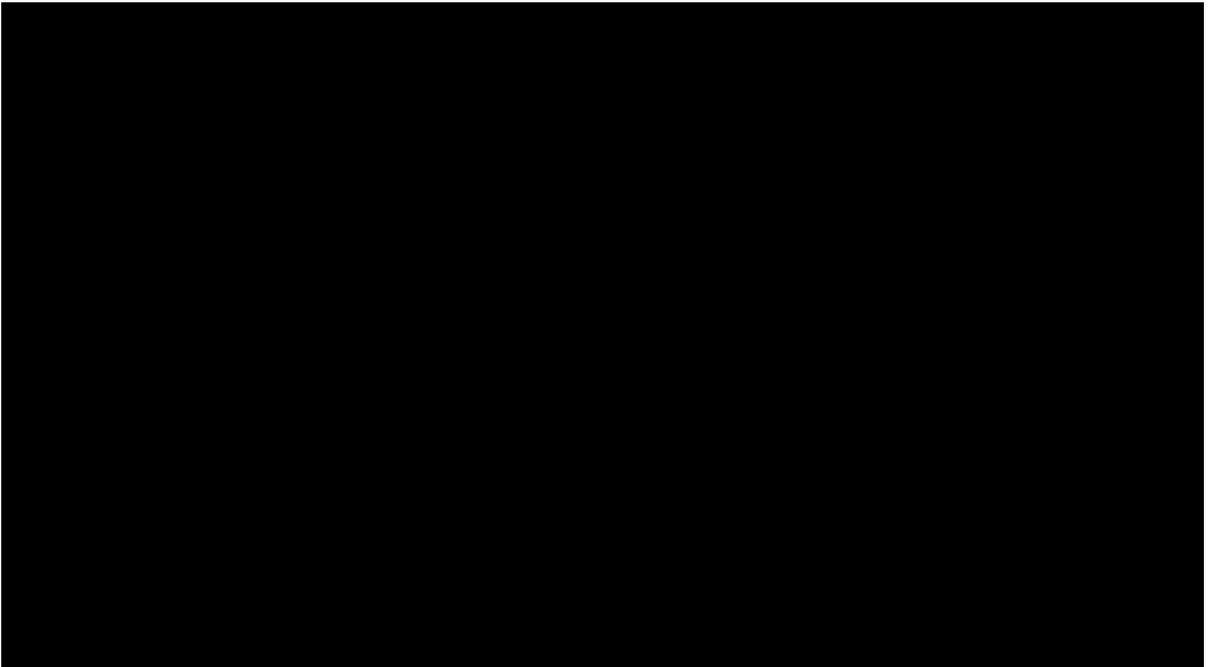
The evening panel, "How Do We Engage the Many Faces of California," initially sparked differences of opinion, and even some audible grumbling, among audience members. But panelists worked to navigate the topic by discussing how it can help enhance the state's future.

The night's most controversial remarks came from panelist Daniel Olivas, an author and attorney, who noted that immigrants tend to be scapegoated when economies falter. His remarks drew some heckling.

Panelist Ethan Rarick from UC Berkeley said diversity can become a dividing line when times get tough. In more homogenous societies, he explained, the public is more likely to willingly fund public services such as education and healthcare, because the benefits go to people who share group characteristics. In more diverse communities, the general public is more reluctant to spend on those services.

"That makes governing California a more complex chore," he said. "It makes it harder."

In the end, Olivas struck a conciliatory note by urging the audience to continue communicating to help bring the state out of its current crisis. "When times are bad, I don't think we stop talking," he said to strong applause. "That's the time when we do start talking to each other. We can talk about things and reach common ground."



Plenty of common ground was found during the day's group discussions. Despite the occasional ideological rant or recitation of talking points, most groups engaged in thoughtful and nuanced analysis of the issues they were charged to address – the initiative process, legislative representation, and restructuring of state and local government.

There were no pat answers to the problems. During one discussion about the virtue of increasing local representation, for example, one participant cautioned that politics was all about reconciling competing interests, at every level.

"Like it or not, we are all special interests," said Long Beach attorney Gene Erbstoesser. "If you're a property owner, you're a special interest. If you're a teacher, you're a special interest. We all have our interests and we want them to go to the front of the cue. And if they don't go to the front of the cue, we get upset."

As the day wore on, a spirit of camaraderie and good will developed among some groups, which evolved into real working teams. That positive spirit spilled over on Twitter, the social media site which was abuzz with posts about the event. One example from @chakra51a: "Real citizens engaging in real dialogue about how to improve CA. Exciting 2 see strangers become inspired friends."

In one group, a serious political discussion got so productive that participants could not decide on a single question to submit to the plenary session at mid-day.

"Submit BOTH questions," suggested one man in a mock rebellious tone. "We're going to be on the cutting edge."

"Wait!" interjected another man in an instant satire of Sacramento gridlock. "Let's argue about which one we're going to submit."

In the end, each group selected a question that best represented their discussion. Representatives then read the questions aloud during a mid-day plenary session in the main ballroom, hosted by PBS "NewsHour" anchor Judy Woodruff. The session featured a panel of six experts who tackled the issues ranging from confusing ballot initiatives to the large size of California voting districts, by far the largest in the country.

Many people felt government was too big to be effective and they believed they would be better served if more decisions were handled at the local level. Indeed, a streak of distrust ran through many of the sessions. Not just distrust of politicians and their motivations, but distrust of the actual machinery of government itself.

In one session, for example, participants expressed suspicion of how authorities deliberately distort the wording of initiatives, leading one man to assert that "the Secretary of State had manipulated" the gay marriage measure. There was even the occasional Libertarian outburst with calls to dismantle the whole thing and throw all politicians out.

Steve Swan, an unemployed auto mechanic from Bloomington in San Bernardino County, originally hoped the conference would be an open-ended, brain-storming session on how to create a pure, direct democracy in California. The structured format didn't allow for that approach, he said during a cigarette break, but he wasn't disappointed.

"Disappointed? Of course not," said Swan, 47, who sports a thick beard and a cowboy hat. "I still got to speak my mind. My life's been enriched."

Agustin Gurza is a reporter for California Forward.