



Viewpoint: A Graduate Student at the Deliberative Poll

06/30/11 by Kati Koster

A historic event took place in Southern California last weekend, an experiment in deliberative democracy. From June 24-26, more than 400 registered California voters descended onto Marriott South Bay Hotel in Torrance for the first ever statewide Deliberative Poll in California.

The Deliberative Poll, created by Professor James Fishkin of [Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy](#), took a representative sample of Californians and convened them for a weekend of small group discussions and large group plenary sessions moderated by PBS's Judy Woodruff, with expert panelists to engage in deliberation on topics of California government reform. Participants explored four topics: initiative reform, legislative representation, restructuring state and local control issues, and taxation. The participants were eager to express their opinions, and worked diligently to find possible solutions to the aforementioned complex issues.

As an observer at What's Next California, I witnessed the group dynamics of the small group discussions and the interactions among the participants and experts in the large group plenary sessions.

This event had a large digital component: Twitter updates among the observers, participants, and experts fed through the weekend at hashtag: [#NextCA](#); live streaming video of the [news conference](#) Friday featuring David Davenport, James Fishkin, and Lenny Mendonca; PBS videotaped the event for their documentary program "[By the People](#);" and the digital team uploaded video interviews, tweets, Facebook updates, blogs, and articles in real time. What's Next California was definitely the most technologically-driven event I've witnessed.

The participants were prepared to engage in real conversations about political reform, but also expressed the frustration, confusion, and exhaustion of California's general voting public.

In the first plenary discussion, a group asked a simple question: how can ballot initiatives, their title and summary, be written clearly and concisely, so that the general public thoroughly understands what voting for and what voting against the initiative represents? As one participant stated, "I want to understand what no means, and what yes means."

Another participant during this same discussion opined that there is logic behind the confusing language of initiatives. "Initiatives are sold to the public just like Coca-Cola, in a way in which you will buy it."

The participants, though frustrated and sometimes cynical of government, attended the event with hopes of creating change to improve California's governance. As one participant declared, "We need public servants to represent the common good."

Topics and ideas that the participants routinely addressed were: accountability, lack of communication, duplicate efforts by different agencies providing the same service, the power of lobbyists/special interests, transparency in costs as well as the organizations/people/party affiliations of the writers of the initiatives, equity of services geographically if services are restructured from state to local control, and caution that whatever agent of change used to solve such large complex issues, doesn't create even larger unintended consequences than the status quo.

During plenary sessions, panelists answered questions from the participants, as well as weighed in on the issues. Said panelist [Senator Michael Rubio](#): "How do we show our constituents we are providing them their money's worth? Government's bottom line is how large are the benefits of the investment. We need to have performance measurements in place, in order to be accountable to our constituents."

Senator Rubio challenged the participants to hold their elected officials accountable. "It starts with us, with asking the right questions. Accountability starts with us," he said.

This event, historic in nature, and large in scale, brought together more than 400 ordinary citizens to find solutions to extraordinary problems. As Lenny Mendonca stated during the kickoff press conference, "People should get an opportunity to have their voices heard."

The participants this weekend not only found their collective voice, but demanded to be heard. Results of the Deliberative Poll will be tabulated and released publicly; this ensures momentum towards California political reform, as well as ensuring that the voices of California's people are heard.

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Comments

