

Special Report: What's Next, California?

Posted on July 5, 2011 by Arlen Grossman

We all know California is in bad shape. Is there any way to fix it?

On the weekend of June 24-26, I was given the opportunity to join with 400 other Californians in a serious effort to help answer that question.

I was randomly (by scientific method) selected by McNeil-Leher Productions and a coalition of non-partisan, non-profit groups, to take part in a Deliberative Poll for the *What's Next, California?* project. The purpose was to find out what a representative cross-section of Californians would decide to be the best ways of effectively governing our state.

A typical scientific poll asks questions, without background information, to find out how voters feel about an issue. A Deliberative Poll is designed to give voters an opportunity to learn and think in-depth about issues, and discuss them with other voters. For *What's Next California*, the goal was to find out what a representative group of Californians would do to fix our state's myriad problems after being given a full weekend to delve into a selected list of issues and proposals designed by diverse academic and citizen committees.

What's Next, California? kept us busy from Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon delving into the issues of the state's (1) initiative process, (2) legislative representation, (3) local vs. state responsibilities, and (4) tax and fiscal policies. To make it all the more palatable, all our expenses were paid and we were given a \$300 stipend.

Most of the weekend was spent in discussions in our small group, consisting of a paid moderator and about fifteen others representing a diverse sample of Californians (from varied geographic areas, ages, employment status, ethnicity, political views, etc). There were also sessions attended by everyone, and moderated by PBS's Judy Woodruff, in which participants heard a wide range of expert panelists answering our questions and giving their opinions on various issues.

We completed a comprehensive survey prior to the start of the event, and a similar one at the end, to determine if our views had changed after our weekend experience.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that in my small group, despite a wide range of views, we were able to maintain a serious, but pleasant and cooperative attitude. I heard similar feedback from other groups. One memorable moment for me occurred at the beginning of our first small group get-together. One of our members insisted that immigration was the big issue in California, and he loudly insisted we would talk about it even if it wasn't on the agenda. Nobody else agreed with him, and he removed himself from our group for a while. By the end of the weekend, he was back in our group and politely discussing the designated issues.

The final poll results and analysis are not yet in, but preliminary results indicate that participants desired greater accountability, transparency, and long-term solutions from the state government. Some changes noted after deliberation included: (1) "creating a formal review process to allow an initiative's proponents to amend an

initiative following public input” rose from 59% to 76% support, and (2) “publishing the top five contributors for and against each ballot measure in the ballot pamphlet” increased from 82% to 91% support.

A common theme from the participants I talked to at the event was that most had little knowledge of how our state government worked, but learned a lot from the Deliberative Poll process, and expected to be more interested and involved when they returned home.

PBS will televise a one-hour special about the weekend, narrated by Judy Woodruff, in September. For more information on the *What's Next, California* project, which is part of a larger effort to consult the public and identify the best research on possible reforms, check out <http://www.nextca.org/>

Added bonus: If you check out the video archive, you will find a one-minute interview with me (Arlen): <http://www.nextca.org/videos/archive>.

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