

The End of California Progressivism



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Tue, September 6th, 2011

As he struggled during an [interview](#) on KPCC to defend his fellow Democrats' recent assaults on California's initiative process, Assemblyman Mike Gatto (D - Burbank, Glendale, Silver lake) blurted out that the conversation with Republican Assemblyman Don Wagner (R - Irvine) was becoming a "strange segment with a Republican sounding like a Democrat, and a Democratic representative sounding like a Republican." The insinuation was that the state's Republicans have generally dismissed the public's involvement at the ballot box, while Democrats have upheld the virtues of initiative and referendum.

Gatto's appraisal is disingenuous, of course: California *Democrats* have been remarkably consistent over the last several years in their endeavors to curb participation in the initiative and referendum system. Several of their current constraining efforts are warmed over ideas from Democrats past. I wrote recently on [these pages](#) about Democratic Senator Ellen Corbett's attempt to restrict signature gathering to hourly employees or volunteers - SB 168. This was the Democrats' [fourth bite](#) at this apple, with Corbett's earlier attempt in 2010 (SB 34) falling to Governor Schwarzenegger's pen, then-Senator Debra Bowen's (now Secretary of State) SB 1047 failing to make it out of committee in 2006, and then-Assemblyman Mark Leno's AB 2946 falling to veto that same year.

The cavalcade of Democratic efforts to either constrain or modify the initiative and referendum process ranges from how signatures should be collected, to when the public [should be allowed](#) to vote on them. I'm [not the first](#) to wonder whether the Party, which stands to win the hallowed two-thirds majority in the Legislature after redistricting, is now attempting to squelch any other possible

sources of opposition. But I am chastened with the knowledge that they're not the majority, yea super-majority, for nothing.

Still, I wonder whether the Democrats have - as the kids say - "jumped the shark" on this issue.

In the most in-depth, multi-partisan, statewide survey of its kind, the "What's Next California?" event brought together a statistically representative group of over 400 Californians during three days in late June to both learn about and express their opinions on a number of reform proposals - including the initiative process (full disclosure: I served on the project's Advisory Committee). Provided with the same pro/con arguments propounded in the Capitol, the just-released results should provide Democrats some reasons to reconsider their current course.

The unique Deliberative Poll process used in "What's Next California?" surveyed attendees before and after their weekend's worth of learning and discussions on a variety of reform ideas. Drilling down into the results by party affiliation yields some interesting findings. Participants were asked, "Do you support allowing the Legislature to amend an initiative that has already been passed, subject to a two-thirds vote?" While 61% of all participants deemed this "Undesirable" at the start of the process, fully 73% of the total felt this way *after* learning more about the issue. At the party affiliation level this included a pre/post jump from 68% to 79% for Republicans, 53% to 67% for Democrats, and 65% to 78% for Independents.

Of the four discussed measures that would have given the Legislature some influence over the initiative process not a single one received more than a 45% "Desirable" result prior to the weekend's discussions, and none earned higher than 37% afterwards. Republicans and Independents did show the highest levels of distrust of Legislative involvement, but Democrats followed them closely.

This is why, when this same representative group of Californians was asked to

describe their feelings towards most of the state's governing institutions, only "Your city/town and county's government" ranked more favorably than the initiative/referendum process. And, importantly, pre/post deliberation support for the initiative system (those saying they were "extremely satisfied" with it) increased by a larger percentage (16 percentage points) than any other state governing body surveyed, with, again, Independents and Republicans leading the way. To compare, participants' positive views of the State Legislature grew a meager two percentage points - from 10% to 12%.

Californians do see room for improvement in the initiative/referendum process, though. Some of the most popular reform measures across all the issues discussed (including taxation, representation, state/local relationship) involved providing voters more information about a proposal's financial implications and "creating a formal review process to allow an initiative's proponents to amend an initiative following public input." These could be proposals on which Democrats and Republicans in Sacramento might agree.

At a couple points in the aforementioned KPCC interview, Assemblyman Gatto argued that the Party's reform proposals were attempts to bring the process "closer to the people." If the "What's Next California?" results are to be believed, the Democrats have some work to do in making this case. In the meantime, it appears that the Republicans are rediscovering their Progressive roots, and the 100th anniversary of the initiative/referendum in California might be the perfect time to do it.

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