



Capital Notes

A glimpse of the policies, people, and politics of California state government

Poll: Longer Legislative Terms, Stronger Initiative System

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If a unique gathering of Californians for a weekend full of talks about government proved anything, it may be that the best chance for consensus lies in the what's most absent in politics: substantive dialogue.

On the last weekend in June, 412 citizens from around the state [gathered in Torrance to discuss what's wrong with California's system of governance and how it might be fixed](#). This morning, the backers of the event released their findings at a news conference in Sacramento.

Tops on the list: longer legislative terms, an initiative process that allows for amendments by citizens but not by politicians, and a focus on performance measures for state government.

The event and subsequent report are the work of a group called [What's Next California](#), comprised of everyone from activists to academics. While few may

expect the work to be quickly embraced by either the state's warring political factions or gloomy and distrustful voters, it nonetheless helps provide a window into what can happen when people think, talk, and search for consensus.

The results were gathered through what's called [a deliberative polling process](#), where participants are asked opinions before participating in the event, then tasked to engage in several deep discussions with other citizens, then re-asked their opinions on the same topics.

Most notable, it seems, the participants decided that though they don't like legislators, they think legislative terms are too short. By the end of the weekend event, 80% of participants supported lengthening Assembly terms from two years to four years and Senate terms from four years to six years. In contrast, only 33% of the participants supported that idea when polled at home before the conference.

Why the shift in opinion? The report's authors argue the following:

An explanation can be found in two other questions. Before deliberation, 68% agreed that

'increasing state legislators' terms will let them spend less time fundraising and campaigning and more time legislating.' After deliberation, agreement with this proposition climbed 14 points to 82%. The contrasting argument against increased terms, that "increasing state legislator's terms will make them less responsive to their districts" dropped 23 points, from 41% agreeing initially to only 18% agreeing after deliberation. The participants clearly thought that legislators needed to spend less time campaigning and more time legislating if they were to represent their districts effectively.

Increasing state legislators' terms will let them spend less time fundraising and campaigning and more time legislating. (#15b)

	Before	After
Agree strongly	31%	29%
Agree somewhat	27%	29%
Neither agree nor disagree	19%	14%
Disagree somewhat	13%	18%
Disagree strongly	9%	10%

NextCA.org

from the start of the weekend conference to its end, from 32% support to 50% support. That's still, though, an uphill battle to ever get that change made through a political ballot measure campaign. The event's participants also seemed to warm up by the conclusion of the poll to the [much talked about "split roll" proposal](#) -- modifying Prop 13 to allow for more frequent property tax assessments of commercial property, while leaving residential property tax restrictions in place.

But for all of the willingness to give the unpopular Legislature more tools, the conference of citizen deliberators rejected ideas to let politicians tinker with the initiative process. Support for allowing legislators, even on a supermajority vote, to amend an approved initiative actually dropped over the weekend by six points to just 18% of the group. Even if the initiative's proponents agreed to the change, only 37% said they would support legislative amendments.

"It wasn't because they didn't think the initiative should be revised," said **James Fishkin** of [Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy](#) at today's news conference. "They believe this is the people's process."

Along those lines, what the group did support was allowing an initiative's backers to amend the proposal after its introduction, with 76% liking that idea after the weekend event. Support also rose after deliberation for allowing an initiative proponent to withdraw a measure after it qualifies for the ballot, from 50% to 57% of the group. And 91% of the conference attendees supported a proposal to publish an initiative's top five pro-and-con money spenders in the statewide ballot pamphlet.

Fishkin says the opinions about changes to the initiative process may be the most important data of all, given how many groups -- including backers of the deliberative poll -- are mulling initiative reforms that would give the Legislature some kind of new role.

"This is a real warning flag for any such effort," said Fishkin of the poor poll results for those kinds of proposals.

Full results from [the Next California deliberative poll](#) can be found on the group's website.

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