

CASH, KIDS, JOBS, DELIBERATIVE POLL, JIM FISHKIN, TORRANCE

## Can California Slow Down and Deliberate?



Orion-Nova Productions

If you're interested in how to reform the government of California, you've probably heard something about the Deliberative Poll this weekend in the LA County community of Torrance.

What the heck is a Deliberative Poll? It's an experiment of sorts: a test of

whether Californians -- if they're forced to slow down, learn how their state works and then do some thinking -- can find ideas that improve how the state is governed. It's sponsored by eight good government groups (including the think tank that employs me, the New America Foundation, though I'm not one of the organizers).

In a regular poll, people are called on the phone, and then offer opinions based on whatever knowledge they have. In this weekend's Deliberative Poll, 300 regular Californians -- a cross-section of the state -- come to a hotel in Torrance and spend the weekend learning all they can about four big policy areas -- the legislature, state and local government relations, taxation and the initiative. Non-partisan written material also is provided, and experts are on hand to answer questions. The group is polled at the beginning and at the end to see what they conclude -- and how their minds might be changed.

Jim Fishkin, a Stanford professor who is the world's leading expert on deliberative democracy, is overseeing the event. He explains what he's up to in an essay [here](#). (More skeptical responses to the poll appear [here](#)). The process is open, and you can see the materials that polling participants are receiving [here](#).

I'm glad to see any event that forces Californians to slow down, sit down, and try to think how to put the pieces of their government together in a better way. But my own doubts about the poll involve how the information may be used.

Fishkin, in his essay, and other organizers, say the poll results may provide the basis for ballot initiatives in 2012. That strategy, in and of itself, suggests a potential flaw in the process. Ballot initiatives, however well-intentioned, build on the existing system -- and thus create greater complexity and unintended consequences. Reform initiatives are the poison, not the cure in California.

I hope instead that the process of the poll itself -- of gathering diverse people from around California -- becomes a jumping off point for a reform effort that will tackle systemic reform comprehensively, via a constitutional revision commission or convention that can consider how to fit the parts of the system together. It would be a shame if an event designed to bring people together leads to more initiatives which attempt the impossible: fixing California one silver bullet at a time.