

## Californians brainstorm state's political issues

Lenny Mendonca, David Davenport

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It's hardly news that Californians are frustrated with politics as usual. The budget is billions of dollars out of balance and invariably comes together late, with duct tape and deferral of the real problems. Sixty percent of Californians say the state is headed in the wrong direction.

But a large part of the problem is the disillusionment and lack of engagement by Californians themselves, who have a major stake but not much of a voice. Occasionally they rise up with ballot initiatives, but even those are largely dominated by special interests. How can ordinary Californians be engaged and heard on the state's big problems?

Next month, 300 randomly selected Californians will have an opportunity to do just that - to deliberate and speak out on key issues of fiscal and political reform that could help move the state forward. Using principles of Athenian democracy, and tools of leading-edge technology, these ordinary Californians will spend the weekend of June 24-26 in Torrance (Los Angeles County) engaging in the first-ever California statewide deliberative poll. Both the process and the outcome promise to be significant.

A deliberative poll brings together a representative random sample of the state for a weekend of study, presentations and small-group discussions of key issues - in this case taxation, local control, the initiative process and legislative representation. They will consider a range of reforms and approaches to these questions of governance and fiscal policy that could form the basis for breaking the logjam in Sacramento and moving the state forward. It gives voice to the commonsense ideas of everyday Californians.

James Fishkin of Stanford University, creator of the deliberative poll and one of the leaders of the "What's Next California" weekend, has carried out such projects on important and difficult topics all over the world. Consistently, policymakers are surprised by the sophisticated trade-offs and recommendations that result from citizen deliberation, and the people who participate and observe increase their levels of civic engagement long term.

This unique civic experiment will be filmed and edited into a documentary to be aired by PBS, so that every Californian has the opportunity to see not just what but also how their fellow citizens think as they work through tough issues with their peers. The results of the poll will show what proposals the public would support, and which ones it would not, if it had good information and really engaged the issues. In that way, the poll will provide a route to responsible advocacy, a path for possible reform proposals and ballot [propositions](#) in the future.

Prior reform efforts have either been based in Sacramento itself, or brought together distinguished panels that created interesting studies that by and large ended up on a shelf. This time, 300 Californians should spark a serious debate throughout California and enable a broad-based look at improving governance in our large and complex state.

Stay tuned, California. The people are about to speak!

Lenny Mendonca is a director of McKinsey & Co. David Davenport is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. Together they represent the bipartisan leadership of What's Next California. A multi-partisan group of organizers has come together to launch this project, including: California Forward, the New America Foundation, the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, the Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University, the Public Policy Institute of California, the Nicolas Berggruen Institute, the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University, and California Common Cause. See [www.nextca.org](http://www.nextca.org).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/05/27/INTQ1JL14K.DTL>

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