

The Opinion Shop

breaking thoughts from the members of the San Francisco Chronicle Editorial Board

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A people's tool for democratic reform



Californians' efforts to right our listing ship of state have produced a flurry of reform efforts and attracted a bevy of reformers. Jim Fishkin, a Stanford communications professor and democracy expert, says California can make use of a tool for democratic reform developed by the ancient Greeks. He cites as evidence the outcome of the first statewide deliberative poll – a modern version of the Athenian Council of 500 – conducted last June.

Many complain that too much democracy is what has brought California to its dysfunctional state and point to the state's unique (and extremely popular) initiative process. Initiatives put on the ballot by the people have produced: ballot-box budgeting that deprives Sacramento of flexibility to respond to the state's changing needs and conditions; the "three-strikes" law that ran up prison spending; and term limits, which leave the state governed by inexperienced legislators easily led by special interests.

Yet Fishkin says the remedy is more democracy, specifically a regular meeting (say yearly) of a group selected by scientific polling to represent every region, demographic, political ideology and class in the state to deliberate and set the state's agenda. The group would spend a weekend deliberating on the state's problems and then agree on a set of people's initiatives that would go before voters for approval or rejection.

Initiatives, because they cost about \$3 million to gather the signatures to qualify for the ballot, largely are bankrolled by the special interests who will benefit from them at the expense of the state and the people. It's difficult to get publicly beneficial measures on the ballot (notable exceptions, Fishkin said, are redistricting and the top 2 primary). In the end, initiatives are ideas sold to the voters by powerful interest through advertising, not laws crafted by the people themselves – the antithesis of what the Progressives who made the initiative process law intended.

"I'm talking about a reform that would make California a laboratory of democratic innovation for the people to grapple with their problems," he said. "They would do this on a regular basis, where the results could go directly on the ballot or with a lower threshold than \$3 million."

The deliberative polling group, convened by a coalition of eight nonprofit organizations, brought together 412 Californians in June to deliberate over 30 proposals. Six proposals are embodied in an initiative heading for the ballot, Fishkin said.

Need more convincing that more democracy is the remedy? The organizers of the Deliberative Poll will present the conclusions drawn from the June polling on Tuesday, Jan. 3, along with excerpts from the PBS documentary on the project. Look [here](#) for details.

To read Fishkin's report, look at his [Stanford website](#).

To learn more about the ballot initiative that the people supported at the end of the Deliberative Poll, click [here](#).

