

Viewpoints: Californians want to change initiative process

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When state Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg told the Sacramento Press Club recently that he thinks the state's initiative process needs to be changed, people took note.

A good place for the senator and his colleagues to start would be, well, with the voters themselves.

The California initiative process was designed 101 years ago to put greater lawmaking power in the hands of the people. History tells us that the voter initiative was adopted because the people of California in the early 20th century didn't always trust their elected officials – and certainly wanted to act on their own behalf if elected officials did not.

Californians in the early 21st century haven't changed much. How do we know?

We asked them. At California Forward, we've been talking with people for the last three years. Californians are frustrated with their government and believe it can and must do better. In fact, voters are so eager for change and they seem ready to take ownership to make sure it happens.

About 10 months ago, more than 400 "regular" Californians from around the state gathered for a weekend in Torrance to discuss major issues facing California. It was the first-ever California Deliberative Poll, sponsored by reformers, academics and foundations. A random sample of Californians sat down, discussed and analyzed some important matters. It was a remarkable experience in honest-to-goodness democracy.

James Fishkin, who has conducted deliberative polls all over the world through Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy, spearheaded the California Deliberative Poll titled, "What's Next CA." (For more information, go to www.nextca.org.) His conclusion of how these Californians view government?

"They believe it is the people's process."

People like the initiative process, but find it confusing and in need of improvement. But while Sen. Steinberg understandably thinks of ways the Legislature could help with the process, the public had a much different take.

Seventy-six percent of them wanted to create a formal review process to allow an initiative's proponents to amend an initiative after public input. In other words, if the language isn't clear, let's give the proponents time to make it so. Clarity is important for an informed electorate.

Eighty-five percent favored requiring all ballot measures that require new expenditures to indicate how we will pay for them. That's common sense. People want to make sure that if the state is going to make a commitment, everyone knows how that promise will be paid for.

Ninety-one percent said they want to know who is paying for each ballot measure and agree it is a good idea to publish the top five contributors for and against each measure in the ballot pamphlet.

There also was strong consensus that the Legislature should keep its distance from the initiative process. A strong majority of Californians do not believe lawmakers should be able to put a competing measure on the ballot with a majority vote or to remove a measure from the ballot by enacting it into law. Once the people have spoken, more than half said they did not want state elected officials to be able to amend an initiative.

Interestingly, after a weekend of discussion with other voters and experts, more Californians walked away satisfied with the initiative process than those who walked into the event.

It also is important to note that while 70 percent of Californians don't think the Legislature is getting important things done, they wish lawmakers could. And when asked to fix the Legislature, they had some interesting remedies in mind.

Eighty percent were in favor of lengthening Assembly terms from two to four years and the Senate terms from four to six. That would mean fewer elections, less fundraising and, presumably, giving elected officials more time to get some work done.

Seventy-one percent thought that expanding the Assembly from 80 to 120 members was a good idea because it would mean fewer people being represented by Assembly members, which could, in turn, mean better service for the constituents from the elected officials.

Californians are willing to improve the initiative process, and improve the legislative process. But voters don't want to give lawmakers more control of the voters' process.

At California Forward, we have been working hard to help fix our state. We started by listening to Californians so we could make sure that "reforms" are predicated on the public interest. Their expectations are reasonable:

- They want government to get the job done.
- They want transparency and accountability.
- And in a state growing in complexity every day, they want decisions made closer to where they live – so they can keep a better eye on those making the decisions on their behalf.

Sen. Steinberg is understandably frustrated. Governing this state is hard work. The people legislators serve are frustrated, too.

But they see a way out. Their answer is to give lawmakers the tools to do their job. And for the voters to keep their own tools just in case.

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