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A California experiment in democracy

Lois Kazakoff, Chronicle Columnist

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I've heard it claimed by politicians and pundits that Californians get the government they deserve because they either don't vote or their votes lead to policies that are harmful to the long-term interests of us all. More likely, voters stay away from the polls because the issues they care about aren't on the ballot.

A unique experiment in democracy conducted last summer suggests that the true problem is access,

not lack of interest. Given a chance to deliberate on remedies for our state's dysfunctional government, ordinary Californians brought to the task the same innovative and pragmatic thinking our state is known for.

Concerned by California's faltering government, a coalition of eight nonprofit good government groups conducted an experiment in June. They invited 435 Californians of every stripe from every corner of the state, from every political persuasion to spend three days in a Torrance hotel deliberating 30 proposals for government reform. The coalition raised \$1 million to cover their travel costs.

Before they arrived by plane, train, bus and car, each had to study a 100-page backgrounder. The big concern: Would at least 300 show up for their work, allowing for a credible scientific poll? When the deliberations began, 412 Californians were at the table.

"The event restored my faith in representative democracy," said Lenny Mendonca, a board member

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of California Forward, a coalition member.

From their work, the California Forward Action Fund has crafted a ballot initiative, the Government Performance and Accountability Act, and is about to gather the 1 million signatures needed to qualify it for the ballot.

The original 30 proposals covered a gamut of concerns: term limits, reforming the initiative process and tax reform, among others. Participants were polled on their views before deliberating in small groups, and at the end, sometimes revealing a wide swing in their views. The resulting ballot initiative would require:

- Clear goals for government programs and regular updates on progress.
- Two-year budgets and three-year to five-year budget projections.
- The Legislature to show how new programs would be paid for.
- Transfer of control and financing to local government for certain programs.

Jim Fishkin, a Stanford [University](#) communications professor and democracy expert, patterned the event on the Athenian Council of 500. In ancient Greece, 500 citizens were chosen by lot to vet proposals before the electorate voted on them to ensure the people's business got before the people.

That's what needs to happen in California: The people's business needs to get on the ballot. Fishkin is promoting the idea of regularly convening a citizens advisory council, whose proposals would automatically or easily go on the state ballot. It typically costs \$3 million to qualify a measure, an almost insurmountable barrier except to special interests who would benefit from the measure at the people's expense.

This is what surprised the conveners:

- Despite the Legislature's 14 percent approval rating, the majority polled wanted to extend legislative terms, because legislators would then have more time to do the people's business.
- Most tax proposals went down to defeat - but not all.
- Proposals to allow the Legislature to reform the initiative process were uniformly rejected.
- Participants remained firm in their conviction that a good portion of government spending is wasted.

"People become informed when they have a reason to be," said Zabrae Valentine, executive director of the California Forward Action Fund.

Reforms that make government matter to people would be a good start.

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