

## Interested in What Californians Really Think about Initiative Reform? Remember “What’s Next CA?”



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With their developing super-majority, Assembly Democrats have turned their attention (once [again](#)) to something they’re calling “initiative reform” and more than a few people—on both sides of the aisle—are worried. The San Diego U-T [opined](#), “The Democrats who team with unions to control Sacramento have no credibility on this issue. Direct democracy is the only strong check on their power. Any attempt to “reform” the process is highly likely to be an attempt to weaken it – or subvert it.” Consumer Watchdog President Jamie Court complained to [the SacBee](#) that one of the proposed ideas was “pandering to interest groups that want to use the ballot measure process as a way of legislating.”

Hmmm...if only there was some way to know what informed Californians thought about the legislature tinkering with their voice in statewide policy-making...

They say in politics a day is like a year, so perhaps those in Sacto should be forgiven for not remembering that one of California’s largest non-electoral public deliberations on initiative reform (among other issues) took place over three days back in June 2011. Privately sponsored by organizations like California Forward, the Hewlett Foundation, AAA of Southern California, and [others](#), “[What’s Next California?](#)” (full disclosure: I was on the project’s bipartisan [Advisory Committee](#)) brought together a statistically representative group of over 400 Californians to both learn about and discuss issues ranging from initiative to fiscal reform.

The process used to facilitate the event was the “[Deliberative Poll](#)”. Created by Stanford’s Dr. James Fishkin, the methodology includes a series of small and large group discussions where participants learn about an issue from experts – including their fellow Californians. What should be of particular interest to Assembly Democrats is that the process measures how opinions and informational awareness change from the beginning of the event to the end. Invariably with growing knowledge about issues comes changes in opinions, but the initial survey findings are also important for legislators. This is the “raw stuff”, before we’ve had a chance to think through an issue.

PBS taped the proceedings, producing an hour-long documentary of the event. Here’s what the public discussions on initiative reform [looked like](#). Some of the Deliberative Poll’s results should hearten Senator Steinberg and his colleagues as they push reform ideas, but he might tread lightly with others:

Indirect Initiative: Allowing the Legislature to amend an initiative after it has passed subject to the agreement of the initiative's proponents.

- Beginning of "What's Next California?": 43% Support vs. 44% Against
- By the end of deliberations: 37% Support vs. 51% Against

(Note: While the publicized Steinberg proposal would involve the Legislature prior to ballot placement, on this and other questions, attendees were very skeptical of Legislative engagement in the initiative-writing process.)

Allowing initiative's supporters to withdraw it after it qualifies for the ballot.

- Beginning of "What's Next California?": 88% Support vs. 5% Against
- By the end of deliberations: 84% Support vs. 9% Against

But a couple of the most popular initiative reforms to this "California in One Room", do not appear on any slate of the current proposals:

Create a public review process of an initiative after it has been filed with the AG to "clarify the proponents' intent". This might look something similar to the Citizens' Initiative Review currently employed by the State of Oregon, which I [reviewed here](#). This proposal saw the largest positive jump from pre- to post-deliberation:

- Beginning of "What's Next California?": 60% Support vs. 21% Against
- By the end of deliberations: 76% Support vs. 16% Against

Along with the above proposal, allowing proponents to withdraw an initiative after qualification, the highest rated initiative reform (both pre- and post-) was, like the measure above, related to improved public information about an initiative: "Requiring all ballot measures that require new expenditures to indicate how they will be paid for":

- Beginning of "What's Next California?": 87% Support vs. 6% Against
- By the end of deliberations: 91% Support vs. 4% Against

"What's Next California?" was a \$1MM+ project, engaging hundreds of "everyday Californians", and a broad range of the state's leading policy experts to discover – to paraphrase Dr. Fishkin – "what Californians think about reform, after they've had a chance to think." The results show some support for current Democratic proposals, caution for others, but also places where they could push further...if they care what "the people" think.