



# **LISTENING TO CALIFORNIANS: BRIDGING THE DISCONNECT**

## **Executive Summary**

**A Report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation  
and  
The James Irvine Foundation**

**January 2005**

*Submitted by Viewpoint Learning, Inc.*

*Principal authors:  
Steven Rosell, Heidi Gantwerk, and Isabella Furth*

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## **Acknowledgements**

We wish to extend thanks to the following people whose contribution was essential to the success of this project:

- Frances Michener and Maria Senour who led the facilitation teams, and Doris Bersing, Jesus Nieto and Monica Schweidler who worked with them, for their expert facilitation of the dialogues and insightful comments on the results.
- Monica Schweidler who coordinated the administrative planning of the dialogues and Sarah Duey, Reagan Espino, Nicole Loebach and Jennifer Dalida for providing unflagging support in the office and on the road.
- Barbara Lee, Viewpoint Learning's Director of Research, along with Mark Baldassare and the staff of the Public Policy Institute of California, Ceil Scandone and Wallace Walrod for their contributions to the research and in particular for providing data used in the workbooks.
- Nick Bollman and Seth Miller at the California Center for Regional Leadership for their insight and assistance.
- Viewpoint Learning Co-Founder and Chairman Daniel Yankelovich, for guidance at all stages of this work.

Contact us:

Viewpoint Learning Inc.  
2236 Avenida de La Playa  
La Jolla, CA 92037

Phone: (858) 551-2317  
Fax: (858) 551-0375

Email: [info@viewpointlearning.com](mailto:info@viewpointlearning.com)

[www.viewpointlearning.com](http://www.viewpointlearning.com)

## Executive Summary

# Listening to Californians: Bridging the Disconnect

In the spring of 2004, Viewpoint Learning, with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, undertook a statewide research project designed to provide state and local leaders with deeper insight into the views, values and underlying assumptions of average Californians on some of the key issues and choices facing the state. The purpose was to find practical ways to build the public support needed to effectively address important fiscal and policy challenges, and to improve the relationship between citizens and state and local government.

To gain insight into citizen thinking, we conducted a series of intense, 8-hour dialogues with average Californians across the state. These *ChoiceDialogues*<sup>™</sup> focused on the kind of California participants want to see for themselves and their children: the kinds of services they expect from state and local governments and the choices, tradeoffs and costs they are prepared to support to achieve those ends. ChoiceDialogues provide insight that polls and focus groups cannot. This innovative methodology is described in more detail in Appendix A of the report.

As a starting point, participants explored two distinct scenarios for the future of the state. In developing those scenarios, we paid particular heed to the ideological split that divides those who give priority to a market-based approach from those who give precedence to community wellbeing. We wanted to learn whether and to what extent this split divides the California public. To make the discussion as concrete as possible, the scenarios were illustrated by showing how they would impact specific policy issues. Some dialogues considered issues from general policy areas (health care, K-12 education and transportation) and some focused more closely on infrastructure (water, K-12 school facilities, and transportation). These issues were not the primary focus of the project but provided a concrete way to bring to the surface the underlying values and viewpoints of Californians and to explore larger questions of governance.

The results of the ChoiceDialogues were deepened and extended through a set of *Stakeholder Dialogues* that brought elected leaders together with some of the citizens from the ChoiceDialogues creating a different kind of conversation; and through an experiment in *Proxy Dialogue*, an innovative media format designed to scale up civic engagement to a larger audience.

This Executive Summary reports the key findings of the project and summarizes what we have learned about alleviating the climate of mistrust and building the public support that will be needed to address critical issues confronting the state. The research suggests a number of constructive actions that leaders can take to that end.

## Seven Major Findings

- 1. Two competing conceptions of fairness dominate public thinking about policy issues. However, these operate beneath the surface as unstated assumptions,**

**often confusing the issue and creating the appearance of greater division than actually exists.**

Two distinct definitions of equity came into play during the dialogues, each reflecting different underlying assumptions. One view saw equity as giving more to those who have less. The other view defined equity as everyone receiving the same level of service or support regardless of his or her situation. Some of the most passionate arguments we saw during the dialogues resulted from misunderstandings between participants who held these different unstated definitions of equity: different hidden assumptions led participants to talk past each other, fostered greater misunderstanding and stirred up especially strong emotions. In the area of health care, for example, heated arguments over who should be covered (in particular immigrants) actually turned out to be about whether those in greatest need should receive more.

At the same time, significant areas of common ground lay beneath these misunderstandings (although they were often obscured by them). We found that even when divergent assumptions about equity came into play most strongly, building on common ground led to agreement to act. (For health care, that common ground included support for universal coverage and for greater personal responsibility.) On the other hand, trying to take advantage of the different conceptions of fairness with “wedge issues” led to polarization and gridlock.

**2. Framing issues in terms of physical infrastructure increases support for market-based approaches.**

The dialogues consistently revealed that Californians are more likely to support market-based solutions when the issue is framed in terms of dealing with physical objects like roads and bridges – infrastructure where people assume the private sector has an advantage. In the dialogues that focused on infrastructure, participants were much more open to a strong role for the private sector and market-based mechanisms. But when participants engaged the identical issue in the context of dialogues focusing on broader policy questions, they were much less inclined to embrace market-based solutions. Instead, in that broader policy frame, they gave more emphasis to social values, stressing the importance of making sure that all Californians have access to the services they need. For example, support for the idea of making greater use of privately owned and user financed options such as toll roads and toll lanes remained unchanged during the general policy dialogues, but when this proposal was presented in identical terms during the infrastructure dialogues, support rose significantly over the course of the day. What had changed was the context or frame of the conversation, and that seemed to make all the difference.

**3. For most Californians pragmatism wins out over ideology.**

While many participants entered the dialogues with strongly held political beliefs, they were far more interested in finding workable solutions than in adhering to a particular ideology. They demonstrated a ready willingness to mix and match elements from differing political approaches – market-based, public sector, “conservative” or “liberal” – as long as the result was a solution that would work for themselves and their communities. Their guiding question as the day evolved was not “Does this fit into my political

framework?” but “Will this work?” As a result, participants’ conclusions on specific issues had a common-sense, practical cast, gravitating toward solutions that meshed with their key values: efficiency, personal and community responsibility, value for money, and fairness.

For example, on K-12 education, when asked whether increasing parental choice (and using related market mechanisms such as vouchers) or investing more in neighborhood schools would provide the best way forward; participants consistently reframed those alternatives into a set of priorities or a sequence of steps to be followed: 1) do everything possible to improve neighborhood schools; 2) to the degree that isn’t successful, allow parents to move their children within the public system; 3) (agreed to by many, but not most) to the degree the first two steps don’t work, allow parents to move their children outside the public system using vouchers. As they worked through each of the issues, participants were surprised by the amount of common ground they were able to find. They repeatedly contrasted their common-sense approach with what they perceived to be the overly partisan stance of political leaders that often hampered efforts to find or implement solutions. In other words, the ideological divisions that preoccupy so many among political elites seem much less important to most Californians.

**4. Californians are insufficiently engaged in policy issues of great importance to them, and so have not given much thought to the tough tradeoffs that each of them requires. This creates and reinforces a striking disconnect between citizens and government.**

On most issues we found citizens engaged in a significant amount of wishful thinking at the beginning of each dialogue – for example, about the real cost of changes in transit systems, or about how much could actually be saved by reducing “waste, fraud and abuse” in government. This also reflected the degree to which Californians don’t feel they have a voice in shaping public policy, and therefore have no incentive to get engaged and to confront tough choices.

One of the most consistent and striking findings of these dialogues was the extent of the disconnect between citizens and elected leaders. Where leaders too often see a public that wants everything but doesn’t want to pay for it, the public sees tax dollars disappearing into a black box of budgeting and mysterious decision-making. Where leaders too often see an uninformed public with little to contribute to policy-making, the public sees a decision-making process completely taken over by special interests and partisan battling. Where leaders too often see an apathetic public that has little interest in being engaged, the public sees governments doing little of value to address the challenges that matter most to them.

At the same time, in both the ChoiceDialogues and stakeholder dialogues, we saw repeatedly that Californians really do want to be more deeply engaged in the issues that affect their lives. Once dialogue participants saw that their voices were being heard and taken seriously, mistrust and wishful thinking quickly turned into a constructive, problem-solving approach to the issues, and the conversation became more realistic. Californians are not prepared, however, to take the initiative to bridge this disconnect, and

conventional political involvement is out of the comfort zone of most people. Other approaches are needed.

**5. An all-pervasive climate of mistrust exists throughout the state that distorts all issues, creates gridlock, and causes citizens to restrict government freedom of action**

In every one of the 15 dialogues, and on every issue examined, profound mistrust of government and elected officials emerged as a central underlying issue shaping all other responses. This mistrust was both more intense and more persistent than expected, outstripping the levels that have been measured by polls and focus groups. In the course of the day, that level even increased somewhat as participants found their worst suspicions confirmed by others' experiences, and sharing those experiences served to reinforce their anger and frustration with government. Most participants channeled their mistrust into two clearly articulated themes: (1) a universal demand for greater accountability and transparency, and (2) increasing support for public/private sector partnerships as a means of establishing checks and balances.

While ChoiceDialogue participants frequently gained a much clearer sense of the root causes of problems over the course of the daylong dialogues, the combination of mistrust and the disconnect led them to back away from solutions that involved giving government greater discretion or latitude. In every dialogue, on every issue examined, participants cited examples of what they saw as waste, inefficiency and abuse that justified their lack of confidence in government. As they worked through the issues, participants found that their desire for solutions could not overcome their sense that giving government any additional scope for action without the most rigorous accountability would only open the door to greater abuses. As a result, they concluded that current limitations on government (including Proposition 13, spending limits, voter mandates and supermajorities) must be strongly maintained, believing that these restrictions represent citizens' best protection against a system that cannot be trusted to act in their best interest.

In other words, mistrust and the disconnect are far more than background noise. Instead, they combine to affect every issue considered in these dialogues. Until and unless these deeper issues can be addressed – bridging the disconnect and rebuilding trust – it will be difficult, if not impossible, to make far-reaching, sustainable reforms that go beyond a patchwork of temporary fixes.

**6. Californians have a clear and strongly held conviction that greater openness and accountability are needed. This demand reflects the high levels of mistrust, but openness and accountability alone will not be enough to reduce that mistrust.**

A fundamental and recurring theme throughout all of the dialogues was the need for greater accountability and transparency. This demand was the flip side of participants' deep mistrust of government and elected officials. In particular, participants emphasized the importance of:

- Knowing more about how their tax dollars are being spent, and to have that information provided in a format that is both easily accessible and understandable (“not gobbledy-gook”).
- A much tighter connection between the taxes they pay and how they are spent, being able to follow the money more easily and hold those responsible to account, and to see real consequences for those who do not live up to their responsibilities.
- A stronger audit and accountability system that is run or verified by third parties and provides more access for citizens.
- Greater local control, in part to make it easier to “follow the money” and strengthen accountability.

In all of the specific issue areas examined, participants indicated a willingness to pay more for specific outcomes, but only if they can be satisfied the money they already pay is being well spent, and that any additional money will be used to achieve those outcomes.

While strengthening transparency and accountability is a necessary part of learning to live with mistrust, more will be needed to actually reduce that mistrust.

## **7. Citizens’ mistrust is not completely impenetrable: it is a crust that covers a deep desire to find constructive solutions to the problems facing the state**

Despite the level of mistrust and concern about the direction in which California is headed, we also saw hopeful signs that it will be possible to bridge the disconnect and rebuild trust. In particular:

- The common ground identified as a result of dialogue was much greater than participants expected.
- Participants consistently expressed a willingness to make sacrifices to obtain specific outcomes if accountability is increased. This included not only a willingness to pay more, but also to change their own behavior, for example using less water, becoming more involved with local schools, carpooling and more.
- Dialogue participants clearly and repeatedly expressed a desire to be more engaged and to have a voice in the future of California. Before they experienced the dialogue, the notion of being “more involved” too often conjured images of endless hearings, debate and sniping. The existence of alternative dialogue-based formats was an exciting possibility for participants.
- Mistrust and cynicism can be overcome and replaced by a constructive, problem-solving attitude – once participants conclude that the conversation is serious and that their viewpoints are being heard.
- Engagement is a two-way street - if leaders want the public to listen, they must listen in turn. Improving the listening mechanism of government, and reducing some of its distortions, may be the highest leverage way to begin to bridge the disconnect and rebuild trust.

## **What Leaders Can Do: Breaking Through the Crust of Mistrust**

The pervasive climate of mistrust found during these dialogues is not unique to California, though it appears to be especially strong here. In the wake of a spate of corporate scandals, problems of civil society organizations ranging from the Catholic Church to the Red Cross, and growing political polarization and partisanship, the nation has been thrown into a period of mistrust. This is the third such wave of mistrust we have seen in the last century. The first coincided with the Great Depression, and the second with the cultural revolution of the 60's and 70's. Each earlier wave lasted about a decade; we don't know how long this third wave of mistrust will last.

The national climate of mistrust makes it even more difficult for California to dissipate mistrust at the state level. But California has led the way in many areas; perhaps it can lead here too. Despite a great deal of energy and excitement generated recently by the unprecedented recall of a sitting governor, Californians are no more trusting of their governments than they were before Governor Schwarzenegger took up residence in Sacramento. But at the same time we now have a new governor who has built up immense political capital that can be dedicated to improving the relationship between leaders and citizens.

The research findings reported here suggest a number of steps that leaders can take to break through the crust of mistrust, improve the relationship between citizens and state and local government and build the public support needed to address important fiscal and policy challenges. The key point is that everyday norms and ethics of self-interested behavior that may have been acceptable in the past no longer work in a climate of mistrust. In such a climate, where those in authority are less likely to be given the benefit of the doubt, leaders need to demonstrate higher standards, what might be called "stewardship ethics." Stewardship ethics means a commitment to leave your organization, community or state better off than you found it, being clear on how your actions contribute to that end, and engaging the public in setting expectations and understanding results in that context. The following steps can help leaders move in this direction:

- **Focus sharply on accountability and tangible outcomes to rebuild confidence**

Californians are not prepared to move in a single leap to questions like changing supermajority requirements or revising Proposition 13. But they are open to a more gradual approach that focuses on specific outcomes they want to see and then takes steps to achieve those outcomes in ways that are more open and accountable. By taking these more limited steps now, elected officials can rebuild the trust needed to make bigger changes later.

For example, statewide school accountability standards put in place over the last few years, combined with annual public report cards on each school's success in meeting them, have gained widespread public attention and support. Steps such as these have begun to rebuild confidence that the state's schools are doing their best to educate children, and we saw this view reflected in the dialogues. In the field of infrastructure, similar efforts are underway in several counties across the state to develop an annual report card on how the county is performing in eight crucial infrastructure areas.

- **Set high but achievable standards and goals, then develop and publish metrics that report success or failure in meeting them**

As illustrated in the examples of the school and infrastructure report cards, there is no better way to build credibility than by developing and publishing metrics that monitor how well leaders are doing in meeting specific objectives and standards. Keys to success include focusing on a specific policy area and on objectives the public wants to see achieved; and then setting standards and goals that are high but do not create unrealistic expectations, and reporting regularly to the public on both success and failure in achieving those standards. Setting explicit objectives and standards gives leaders a measure of control over the all-important matter of voter expectations.

Even when objectives are intangible (e.g., quality of health care) it is possible not only to reduce these to more tangible indicators (e.g., waiting times), but also — and usually more relevantly — to measure the perceptions of experts and consumers on how well intangible benefits are delivered, and use these to create useful metrics.

- **Improve government's ability and mechanisms to listen to ordinary Californians**

The improved listening mechanisms required can only partly be provided by polls and focus groups (which can be misleading on issues where people have not made up their minds). Nor can interest groups (which by definition do not represent unorganized Californians) meet this need, nor can traditional town hall meetings do so. Alternative listening mechanisms, such as those used in this project (based on forms of dialogue that encourage two-way learning and thoughtful interchange of views rather than debate), show great promise and need to be further developed and tested.

- **Take the initiative**

The unorganized public today generally does not have the resources, time, institutional capacity or access to those in authority needed to change the conversation with leaders. As a practical matter leaders need to take the first step. For example, establishing citizen tested and approved objectives and milestones and then using progress reports as occasions for public discussion, can stimulate constructive public engagement.

- **Close the loop between citizens and government: move from one-way “spin” to two-way dialogue**

Too often communication from government to citizens is conceived as a one-way, top-down effort designed to educate or persuade (“spin”) citizens to agree with a position already decided. While citizens have a lot to learn from leaders, leaders also have a great deal to learn from citizens. To be sustainable in a democracy today, any major policy decision (especially on gridlock issues) needs to meet at least two tests: it needs to be technically feasible and it needs to reflect the underlying values of the citizenry. Only citizens (not experts, not special interests) can give leaders the input on values they need to craft sustainable reforms.

- **Scale up the conversation**

As a practical matter, 35 million Californians cannot participate in face-to-face dialogues with elected leaders but, as discussed in the report, there are other ways in which this conversation can be scaled up:

1. through the political process and the special role that political and civic leaders can play
2. through new ways of using the media

## **Conclusion: A Missing Step in the Governance Process**

The specific issues examined in this project provided a concrete way to bring Californians’ underlying values and viewpoints to the surface and to explore larger questions of governance. At the same time there was not enough time to fully work through the particulars of any one issue (nor was this the purpose of this project). Each of the issues examined (and many others) could usefully be the subject of a separate ChoiceDialogue.

In our experience, participants in dialogues focused on a single policy area are able to work through the tradeoffs more fully; dialogues of this sort can provide essential input to defining measurable goals and achievable outcomes that the public will support. Engaging Californians on specific policy issues in this way will be an important part of rebuilding trust and bridging the disconnect.

Traditional notions of governance and decision-making tend to be relatively simple – issues arise, key interests advocate different responses and a decision is made. This may work well enough when the issues and the possible responses are reasonably well understood, and where those involved share similar assumptions, language, background and culture. But in California today, mistrust runs rampant and people with very different beliefs, problem-definitions, values and traditions must find common ground. The state’s ability to deal with a whole range of issues – from schools, transportation and health care to immigration, welfare and the criminal justice system – now depends on addressing deeper issues: mistrust and the disconnect. To do this an additional step is needed. That is where dialogue comes in.

In today’s world, we need to make room for real dialogue with the public at the front end of many of our most important decision-making processes, and to do so in a more explicit and systematic way.