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Yes, Virginia, 'average' Californians can manage a constitutional convention

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As you ride the bus or freeway to work tomorrow, ask yourself: Can the person seated next to me, or driving past me, be trusted with the job of redesigning California's basic political and budgetary rules? Are "average Californians" ready to don the white powdered wigs to become the Founding Mothers and Fathers of a new California?

With efforts to call a constitutional convention picking up steam, a proposal for "citizen delegates" has generated considerable interest. Rather than holding elections or having state officials appoint the delegates, about 400 delegates would be randomly selected to produce a scientifically representative sample of all Californians. No political insiders or partisan apparatchiks need apply, just Golden Staters motivated by a sincere desire to help their state.

That's the theory, but could it actually work?

Even if the citizen delegates were high-minded and lacking in partisan and personal agendas, are average people capable of the kind of in-depth understanding of complex issues necessary for redesigning California's basic institutions?

In a word: Yes. There have been numerous examples in the United States and abroad showing that the citizen-as-delegate model has worked well in a range of circumstances. For example, in post-Katrina New Orleans, 4,000 citizen delegates were convened to decide how to spend scarce rebuilding dollars. After federal and state authorities grossly mismanaged the recovery, New Orleans initiated a process to engage thousands of hurricane victims – many of them scattered to 20 other cities – to propose their own recovery plan.

Participants were selected randomly to ensure they were demographically representative of pre-Katrina New Orleans. The event took place in a large convention center, and participants from all 21 cities were linked by live webcast, interactive television and keypad devices for instant polling. Small-group discussions fed into large-group sharing and decision-making. Observers submitted their comments in real time over the Internet, and public television viewers in New Orleans were able to follow along from their homes.

One of the participants expressed her amazement.

"I saw people sitting at tables together of different backgrounds, different parts of town. Not always agreeing, not just rhetoric or yelling, but having healthy conversations about what they saw as the issue."

The results of this 21st century town hall were so well crafted – and had the credibility of coming from the residents themselves, just average folks – that they were incorporated into the

redevelopment plan for the rebirth of an iconic American city.

Following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, officials in Lower Manhattan used similar "deliberative democracy" methods to break a policy deadlock by involving thousands of New Yorkers in the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site. New Yorker architectural critic Paul Goldberger commented that, "Thousands and thousands of people talking seriously about urban design is something I never thought I would see. I would be tempted to call it a turning point in the story not only of the World Trade Center, but of American planning in general."

In California and other states, citizen delegates have been used in a range of forums involving hundreds of people to advance solutions to contentious issues such as tax reform, health care, housing and regional development. The delegates usually are provided with professional staffers and facilitators, and undergo a thorough education process, hearing from a range of experts about the problems and potential solutions. By the end, the delegates themselves have become experts.

Says Steve Roselle, a deliberative democracy practitioner from San Diego-based Viewpoint Learning, "Many people enter these events with strongly held political beliefs, but usually they are far more interested in finding workable solutions than in adhering to a particular ideology."

Participants often demonstrate a ready willingness to mix and match elements from differing political approaches – market-based, public sector, conservative or liberal – as long as the resulting solution will work for themselves and their communities.

"As a result," says Roselle, "participants' conclusions often have a common-sense, practical quality."

This aspect of citizen gatherings – a focus on what works instead of ideology, partisanship or career self-interest – is exactly what California needs. There is something powerful and transformative in a process in which average citizens are asked to dialogue with different-minded people on what policies will work.

It turns out Californians are enthusiastic about such a citizen-led process. In one statewide poll, 73 percent supported a randomly selected body of "average" citizens to enact reform. The poll also showed Californians have a lot more trust in a citizen body than either a government-appointed panel or a panel of independent experts. At this point, Californians trust themselves more than they do their elected leaders or anyone else.

With California grappling with a crisis of historic proportions, it is time to draw upon the genius of what has always been the Golden State's greatest resource – Californians themselves.

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