

The California Government We Want: Dialogues with Californians

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Overview

- Introduction
- Key Findings
- Implications: Beyond Red & Blue

Choice-Dialogue: A new research tool

- **A series of dialogues** with representative cross-sections of the public (35-40 participants in each session)
- **Eight-hour sessions** allow intense social learning
- **Dialogue organized** around 3-4 alternative scenarios developed in advance
- **Special workbook** sets agenda, gives background on issues, lays out pros and cons grounded in research
- **Facilitation** keeps people on track and in dialogue mode
- **Before and after measures** quantify shifts in preferences, coupled with qualitative analysis

Introduction

- 6 day-long Choice-Dialogues™
 - San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Fresno, Sacramento
 - Randomly selected, representative samples

- Participants considered 4 scenarios:
 1. Stay on our present course
 2. Bring decision-making closer to home
 3. Focus on value for money
 4. Invest for the public good

Identifying the problem

- **72%** of Choice-Dialogue participants said California is on the wrong track. (*similar to PPIC poll findings 5/08*)
- Initially focused on specific programs they felt were going wrong – esp. education, health care, environment, law enforcement
- As they connected the dots, most came to see these problems as symptoms of something deeper
- At the end of the day, **77%** of Choice-Dialogue participants said the state budget process needs major changes (*vs. 65% of PPIC respondents*)

Top priorities

- Make the budget more rational & responsive to state's needs.
- Strong support across all regions, demographic groups and political perspectives for:
 - Setting goals/desired outcomes for each program and budgeting based on how well programs are achieving their objectives (Performance based budgeting)
 - Long term budgeting (3-5 year timeframe)

State/local authority

- Very low trust in state government – only **29%** say state officials can be trusted
- Somewhat greater trust in local government (**46%**) but still low overall - especially in San Diego and Los Angeles
- To make the system more effective and accountable:
 - Shift more authority to local entities **78% support**
 - BUT must balance local autonomy with statewide equity **78% support**
 - Liberals and conservatives agree that acceptable reforms must balance both values

Vote thresholds

- 2/3 threshold a necessary evil, especially at the state level. In a polarized environment neither side can be trusted to make decisions alone:
 - Lower vote threshold to raise state taxes? **65% oppose**
 - Lower vote threshold to pass state budget? **58% oppose**
 - Both liberals & conservatives oppose
- As people worked it through they became more open to lowering thresholds at the local level but only if the trust issue is addressed
 - » At end of day, 54% support lower local thresholds (vs. 34% in PPIC survey)

Taxes

- Most concluded that investing in programs that benefit Californians is more important than keeping taxes low.
 - **73% agree** – including a majority (61%) of conservatives.

- But not just any tax
 - All must pay their fair share, without an undue burden on the poor
 - Any new taxes must be earmarked for specific purposes
76% support
 - General opposition to modifying Prop 13
 - » Regional variation: LA, SF, Fresno open to modifying commercial portion only; San Diego, San Bernardino, Sacramento strongly oppose
 - » Concern that any change will reopen all of Prop 13, “beware of camel’s nose under tent”

Implications:

Beyond red and blue

Conservatives and liberals agreed more than they disagreed.
Some significant points of common ground:

- very low trust in government, especially at state level
- state government wastes a lot of money
- keep 2/3 vote threshold to raise state taxes and pass budget
- invest in programs like education and transportation even if it means higher taxes
- earmark any new taxes for specific purposes
- state should provide broad framework and oversight; give local

Beyond red and blue:

Two-way communication

Major recurring theme — strongly supported by both liberals and conservatives: change the relationship between Californians and government:

- Greater accountability and transparency = more honest and effective 2-way communication
- Better reporting — more active and creative communication with public about government activities
- Government and special interests must play by the same rules as other citizens
- Reform initiative process to make propositions clearer and easier to understand
- Treat public viewpoints and concerns seriously

Two-way communication (cont'd)

- Public is eager to be heard, eager to be involved
 - **81%** agree citizens should take a more active role in setting budget priorities and reviewing results
 - » Only **18%** say that citizens don't have time and this should be left up to experts
 - But most believe leaders aren't really serious about reaching out to the public and don't want their input
- **Public support for fundamental reform (e.g., 2/3 votes, Prop 13) will depend on steps to strengthen trust and two-way communication between government and the public.**