

# **A Citizens Constitutional Convention for California: How to Avoid Partisanship and Special Interest Influence**

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## **Introduction**

“Every man, and every body of men on earth, possesses the right of self-government...I am not among those who fear the people.” --Thomas Jefferson

“This representative assembly should be in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them.” -- John Adams

“The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.” - Alexis de Tocqueville

“I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.” --Thomas Jefferson

The United States of America was founded on a unique vision of self-government that became an inspiration to the world. The founders and the framers believed, as Thomas Jefferson said, “Every man, and every body of men on earth, possesses the right of self-government.” Over a half century later, President Abraham Lincoln renewed the spirit of 1776 when he declared that America was a place “of the people, by the people and for the people.”

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, California democracy has become a faint echo of the founders’ original vision. The Golden State still has a strong civil society, and the democratic spirit reaches deep into the state’s roots. But the institutions of government and elections have been gathering cobwebs for some time, undermined by special interests, raw partisanship, and citizen disengagement. Those failures in turn have hurt the ability of California’s government to enact forward-looking policy. In order to once again become a living expression of the founders’ inspiration, California is badly in need of democratic renewal.

New methods of deliberative democracy and citizen consultation, currently being used across the nation, have great potential to renew and recharge this democratic ideal for the 21st century. Especially if deployed as part of a constitutional convention focused on redesigning government, a randomly selected body of average Californians can lay the basis for a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the Spirit of 1776. While the techniques of deliberative democracy are quite modern, the

concept itself is based on an old, old idea reminiscent of a New England town meeting: if average people are brought together and given an opportunity to become informed, and to mull the pros and cons of specific policy proposals, they will come up with practical solutions based on what is best for the general welfare.

Some have wondered if average people are capable of the kind of in-depth understanding of complex issues that will be necessary for redesigning California. But the truth is, average Californians are the only ones who *can* lead our state out of the quagmire of special interests and partisanship that currently is paralyzing it. That's because average Californians bring a special quality that too many incumbents and the political class in general do not have: a pragmatic desire to solve the state's problems, regardless of ideology, partisanship or career self-interest.

Says Steve Roselle, a deliberative democracy practitioner from Viewpoint Learning in California, "Many people enter the deliberative democracy process 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 result is a solution that will work for themselves and their communities. "Their guiding question," says Roselle, "is not 'Does this fit into my political framework?' but 'Will this work?' As a result, participants' conclusions on specific issues have a commonsense, practical quality."

This aspect of citizen gatherings – the focus on what works, not ideology – has been found particularly useful in otherwise deadlocked situations. It turns out there is something powerful and transformative in a process where average citizens are asked to dialogue with differently minded people on what policies will work. These "democratic agoras" have been used with impressive results on a range of issues in a range of places in the United States, as well as in other countries. In post-Katrina New Orleans, 4000 people, including the diaspora spread across twenty one cities, were convened simultaneously to give input into how to spend scarce rebuilding dollars. Following the tragedy of the September 11 attacks, officials in Lower Manhattan used various deliberative democracy methods to break a policy deadlock by involving thousands of New Yorkers in the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site. In California and other states, citizen consultation has been applied in a range of meetings and forums involving hundreds of people to advance solutions to significant and contentious issues such as tax reform, health care, housing, regional development and education.

After studying the evidence exhibited in dozens of deliberative democracy events that have occurred in the United States and abroad in recent years, the conclusion of this report is that a constitutional convention of randomly selected citizens, gathered together under the Spirit of 1776, can be entrusted to make good public policy decisions. As the case studies presented later in this report illustrate, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that not only can citizens make good decisions on complex questions, but such gatherings are critical to reestablishing faith in government. Unlike delegates chosen either by election or by appointment, delegates chosen by random selection are not beholden to special interests, party leaders or incumbents. They are not mired in career self-interest, and retain a degree of legitimacy and credibility with their fellow citizens that the political class and their designees no longer enjoy.

In previous uses of these deliberative democracy methods, not only were citizens able to make sound decisions but, perhaps more importantly, their feeling of power over their destiny helped

restore their faith in government. This is particularly important in the Golden State. Californians have lost faith in their leaders and their government. Approval numbers for the Legislature and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger are at rock bottom lows. Voter turnout often is abysmally low, as voters demonstrate by their absence their lack of faith in the electoral process. Indeed, one statewide poll found that Californians have more faith in average people like themselves to design a reform process than they have in either elected leaders or even independent experts. At this point, Californians trust themselves better than any other body to get California out of its current governance and budgetary strait jackets. The Spirit of 1776 and Lincoln's faith reside deeply within the California body politic, looking for a vehicle through which it can express itself.

### **Practitioners of Deliberative Democracy**

The deliberative democracy field includes a wide range of practitioners, consultants and theoreticians, all approaching the field from the perspective of their own backgrounds and areas of expertise, though with many qualities in common. Professor Jim Fishkin, the originator of deliberative polling, is a political scientist at Stanford University where he has founded the Center for Deliberative Democracy (<http://cdd.stanford.edu>). Carolyn Lukensmeyer, founder of AmericaSpeaks ([www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org)), has a background in organizational development and public administration. The National Issues Forums ([www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org)), with the encouragement of the Kettering Foundation, has refined and enriched the discussion group methodology. Public Agenda ([www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)) and Viewpoint Learning ([www.viewpointlearning.com](http://www.viewpointlearning.com)) bring to the field a background in public opinion research, dialogue, and governance. Many other organizations, including Common Sense California ([www.commonsenseca.org](http://www.commonsenseca.org)), Study Circles, the Public Conversations Project, the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, and scores of local centers and initiatives are responding to the growing demand for public dialogue and deliberation.

All deliberative democracy practitioners share certain core convictions: They believe that a more robust and active public engagement is indispensable to our democracy. They recognize the limitations of the existing methods for public engagement and representative government, and see the need to provide the public with opportunities and techniques to engage in a more active and complex process of deliberation than currently prevails.

Deliberate democracy is a new and powerful tool in the toolbox of democracy. The objective of larger scale engagement is not only to create dialogue between leaders and the public, but to provide opportunities for the public to take greater control of the dialogue process, thereby creating social capital, community, "buzz," and ownership. Finding better ways to do this is essential to overcoming the constraints imposed by special interest advocacy and a legislature too often wracked by partisanship and incumbent self-interest. It is also essential to restoring the public space in American life. The public holds the key to ending most stalemates. If leaders turn to the public to break through the gridlock of special interests and destructive partisanship, citizens will almost always find common ground based on a nonpartisan type of pragmatism, even on the most challenging issues. We need new public engagement methods to discover and create that common ground.

### **Gauging Public Support for Citizens Conventions and Deliberative Democracy**

A statewide poll conducted in California in November 2006 by the Survey and Policy Research Institute at San Jose State University showed not only strong support (73%) for a randomly selected deliberative body to enact reform, but also that Californians have a lot more trust in such

a “citizen body” compared to either a government-appointed panel or even a panel of independent experts. Seven in 10 respondents said they would be more likely to support a recommendation to change the election system if it came from average voters rather than from a committee of government and political leaders, with strong support among all racial, partisan and ideological groups, including independents (73.2%). That figure compared with only 10.2% who said they would be more likely to support a proposal from government and political leaders.

About two-thirds of voters (64.7%) said they believe average voters who participated in such a study could make intelligent decisions about how elections should be organized, with that opinion particularly high among Latinos (75.3%), Asians (68.9%) and blacks (80.6%). And more than half the voters said they would want to participate in a voters’ study of the election system if they were paid and meetings were convenient. Three-fourths of the respondents said they would like to see the governor and the legislature create a citizens assembly in California, and more than two-thirds said if the governor and legislature failed to create one, they would vote for an initiative to create such a randomly selected citizens’ body.

So the public appears to recognize that average people have the capacity to propose important and innovate policy, and is ready to embrace efforts to bring that into being.

### **Case Studies: Deliberative Democracy in Action**

The power of these methods can best be illustrated by looking at examples of specific places where they have been used. That allows the best appreciation of the innovative mix of citizen involvement, random selection, new technologies and policy formation that occurs in these forums. Below are a few selections from dozens of deliberative democracy events that have been used in the United States, Canada and elsewhere in recent years.

**British Columbia, Canada: Citizens Assembly.** Especially intriguing has been the use in various Canadian provinces of “citizens assemblies” that have randomly-selected hundreds of participants and turned over to them the task of basic political reform as a way of taking the partisanship and incumbent self-interest out of the reform process. The citizens assemblies deliberated for months on proposals for political reform that were placed directly on the ballot for their fellow citizens to decide.

The best studied of these involved the citizens assembly in the province of British Columbia. The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly was an independent, non-partisan body, created by the legislature in 2004 composed of 160 randomly selected British Columbians. Their ranks included 79 women and 79 men, with two seats added to ensure representation of native Canadians. British Columbia is a very diverse province, with 30 percent of its 4.5 million residents identified as racial/ethnic minorities, and delegates spanned the demographic spectrum in rough similarity with census data. The process began with tens of thousands of written invitations sent out to random citizens all across the province. Through several stages of positive responses and further lottery selection, the members of the assembly were narrowed down to 160 from every legislative district. The citizens assembly model created what has been called a “mini-public” which, while not absolutely perfect, was a more representative sample of people than is present in most elected legislatures. “This really is power to the people,” stated Jack Blaney, former president of Simon Fraser University who chaired the citizens assembly. “Never before in modern history has a democratic government given to unelected, ‘ordinary’ citizens the

power to review an important public policy, then seek from all citizens approval of any proposed changes to that policy.”

The delegates met on weekends and were paid for their involvement during an 11-month tenure that was divided into three phases: Learning about reform, January-March 2004; public hearings, May-June; and final deliberations, September-November. Central to the citizens’ assembly model was the “learning phase.” Delegates underwent a rigorous six-week internal education process, learning about the topic from a diverse panels of experts who gave them the benefit of their knowledge and analysis, as well as from custom-tailored educational materials and a staff of educators selected and trained to present a range of perspectives in a way that avoided biasing the process. Their particular focus was to examine the province’s electoral system -- that is, how votes for candidates and political parties determine who gets elected to the legislature. By the end of this learning phase these assorted delegates -- bus drivers, home makers, blue collar managers and school teachers -- were able to debate election reform at an expert level.

In the “public hearing phase,” the citizens assembly held 50 hearings all over British Columbia that was attended by thousands of people. 370 members of the public were invited to make presentations at these hearings, and the assembly also accepted written submissions from nearly two thousand people. At the conclusion of the public hearing and written submissions phase, the delegates met to review and discuss what they had heard from their fellow British Columbians. Then the delegates took a summer “reading break,” with homework that included more specific resources as well as the thousands of written submissions from the public.

In the final “deliberation phase,” the delegates underwent an exhaustive six weeks of facilitated consensus-driven discussions and structured decision-making. Members talked in small groups and large groups, debated, weighed options, heard concerns and voted step-by-step through each of the key decisions required to find a common answer. Over the eleven-month course, only one delegate withdrew and attendance was close to perfect. In the end the citizen assembly ended with over 90% of its delegates voting in favor of a final recommendation. As the evaluations and academic reviews of the process have shown, these solid majorities were not the result of charismatic manipulation, authoritative coercion, or exhausted frustration, but instead resulted from a clean and thorough process. The final decisions represented 160 random people, representative of the whole province, who approached full agreement on an open ended question regarding an issue as complex as election reform. This was achieved by a thorough understanding of the options and respectful discussion with the stated goal of seeking the best solution that would be in accord with the commonly recognized values of the people.

The citizens assembly delivered a final report in December 2004, proposing that British Columbia should reform its longtime winner-take-all electoral system and begin using a proportional representation electoral system that allows voters to rank their candidates. Their research led them to believe that under a proportional voting system, “Election results will be fairer, voters will have more choice, and candidates will work harder to earn their support,” as the final report of the assembly concluded.

As required by the law establishing the citizens assembly, the proposal was automatically submitted directly to the voters in a May 2005 referendum, receiving 58% of the vote (however, it needed 60% for passage). The process itself was widely seen as a great success for how it brought a representative body of citizens together to study a complex issue and propose to their fellow citizens a credible and innovative solution. Said President Blaney, “With an impressive

commitment to learning so many new concepts and skills, and with a grace and respect for one another in their discussions that was truly remarkable, the Assembly members demonstrated a quality of citizenship that inspired us all.” Gordon Gibson, a former Canadian legislator and widely considered the architect of British Columbia’s citizens assembly process, said, “We built a new type of airplane, and to tell you the truth I didn’t know if it would fly or not. But I can tell you that it flew beautifully. For someone with a faith in democracy, this was like seeing the face of God.”

**New Orleans: uniting the diaspora.** One of the best examples of the techniques of deliberative democracy and citizen consultation in the United States occurred in New Orleans, December 2006 and January 2007. After federal and state authorities badly mismanaged the recovery from Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, the City Council and the New Orleans City Planning Commission initiated the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) to prioritize rebuilding projects. To facilitate this process, they brought in AmericaSpeaks, a nonprofit practitioner that used its signature methods to engage thousands of hurricane victims to propose their own recovery plan.

AmericaSpeaks specializes in what it calls its 21st Century Town Meeting. They convened a “Community Congress” of 4000 current and former New Orleans residents, many of them dispersed to 20 other cities. Participants were selected randomly to ensure they were demographically representative of the city as a whole, a virtual mirror of New Orleans. Critically, participants reflected pre-Katrina New Orleans: 64% were African American and 25% had annual household income below \$20,000. The event took place in a large convention center, and participants from all 21 cities were linked by laptop computers, interactive television and key pads that allowed for instant polling. These Community Congresses were at the heart of the Unified Plan process, with key decision-makers listening as citizens weighed in on housing, flood protection, public services, neighborhood safety, infrastructure, rebuilding priorities and more.

The methods used included networked laptops and individualized keypad polling to support facilitated, small-group discussions at diverse tables. These discussions fed into large-group sharing and decision-making. Interactive television connected participants in New Orleans with those in Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta. Participants in 16 other cities viewed the program through a live webcast and submitted their views in real-time over the internet. Public television viewers in New Orleans were able to follow the programming from their homes. At day’s end, the citizens’ collective priorities were provided in writing to every participant. The Community Congresses resulted in a comprehensive strategy and redevelopment plan for the rebirth of an iconic American city.

Vera Triplett, one of the Congress participants, expressed her amazement at the productive interaction of different groups. “More than anything,” she says, “I think the thing I was most impressed with about [the Community Congress]...when I went and I walked around, I saw people sitting at tables together of different socioeconomic backgrounds, different parts of town, having healthy discussions. Not necessarily always agreeing, but actually having conversations. Not just rhetoric, not yelling and screaming, but really just having healthy conversations about what they saw as the issue here.”

According to various reports, the Unified New Orleans Plan process and its unprecedented levels of citizen engagement yielded powerful results in three ways. First, it established the credibility needed for real action. Average citizens and a full range of officials responsible for rebuilding

New Orleans participated in the Unified Plan process, emerging as “co-owners” of a concrete action plan. The combination of high levels of citizen endorsement and decision-maker ownership meant the plan would have the needed credibility and authority to move forward. Second, it built a constituency committed to the work. The process built a citizenry energized both to stay involved and hold officials accountable for outcomes. And finally, it helped restore a sense of hope, connection and extended community for the people of New Orleans, especially those in the diaspora.

Abigail Williamson, a researcher from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government who studied the UNOP process, says “After months of political rancor, citizens came together, discussed, and ultimately expressed support for a plan for recovery. [The Community Congress] enhanced the credibility of UNOP in their eyes by gathering a representative mix of citizen voices and enabling conversation across differences...[It] engendered ‘buy-in’ from both the public and their community leaders.”

The results were so well crafted that they were incorporated into Mayor Ray Nagin’s plan to unify New Orleans, and finally in June 2007, the New Orleans City Council and Louisiana Recovery Authority approved the Unified New Orleans Plan.

### **Listening to the City: Redeveloping Lower Manhattan after the September 11 attacks.**

Citizen consultation was crucial in the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan following the September 11 terrorist attacks. Soon after the attacks, differences over the future of the World Trade Center site began to divide business leaders, residents and family members of victims. Civic leaders and members of the general public feared that business and political interests would prevail unless a broad public consensus emerged and shaped the redevelopment effort. To address this need, the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York asked AmericaSpeaks to develop a public process that would transcend these differences and provide decision-makers with areas of agreement about the redevelopment of the site.

Five thousand New Yorkers were included in stages of consultation and deliberation. The first “Listening to the City” meeting was designed to shape an overall vision for the rebuilding process and involved over 600 people -- primarily community leaders, issue advocates and planning professionals. In the second meeting, 4500 members of the general public who closely reflected the demographic diversity of the region attended to provide input on site plans. Finally, a two-week online dialogue reached another 800 New York City residents who reviewed the site options in small cyber-groups. As a result of this process, it was decided that none of the six different proposed rebuilding plans were sufficiently imaginative or visionary, so elected officials and the governor decided to go back to the drawing board. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation launched an Innovative Design Study that incorporated principles shaped by the “Listening to the City” meetings, such as preserving the footprints of the Twin Towers for memorial-related space, restoring a powerful, tall symbol in Lower Manhattan’s skyline, and reestablishing the street grid and improving connectivity within Lower Manhattan.

The design ultimately selected in February 2003 for rebuilding the World Trade Center site fit with those elements articulated by the public through the Listening to the City dialogues. This exercise demonstrated that it is possible for thousands of citizens to come together, deliberate about difficult and emotional issues, and reach consensus within a charged and complex decision-making process. About this process, *New Yorker* magazine’s architectural critic, Paul Goldberger commented, “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. ... Thousands and thousands of people talking seriously about urban design is something I never thought I would see.”

**New Jersey: Addressing Property Tax Reform.** Many New Jerseyans have long been dissatisfied with the structure of their tax system which relies very heavily on local property taxes and is viewed as unfair. Many citizens, business leaders, and current and former public officials shared a frustration with the inability of government to resolve this longstanding issue. A New Jersey-based grassroots organization called Coalition for the Public Good asked Public Agenda (led by Daniel Yankelovich), a practitioner of deliberative democracy methods, to facilitate a different kind of forum in which residents from across the state could engage complex questions of tax reform and demonstrate that reasonable solutions to the gridlock were possible.

A major two-day event called a “Citizen’s Tax Assembly” was organized and held in the capitol building in Trenton. The New Jersey Citizens’ Tax Assembly brought together close to a hundred diverse “delegates” from every county in the state to engage one another in a dialogue on possible approaches to tax reform. The participants were selected randomly, with consideration given to gender and geographic balance. The coalition then held an additional statewide follow-up assembly, in which the same delegates reassembled to continue refining their recommendations and to tackle the issues in more detail. The group then organized four regional tax forums, each with its own set of delegates, in order to expand the number of citizens involved in the process of deliberation. Eventually they submitted their recommendations for tax reform to the Legislature, garnering much media attention in the process.

The overall effect created a vibrant network of people engaged in this issue who made it visible, met with legislators, and served as catalysts. According to Bill Schluter, former Republican State Assemblyman and one of the founders of this effort, “We have succeeded in making this the No. 1 issue in the state and bringing a lot of attention to it. It’s on the front page of all the papers and everyone is aware of it.” Following the attention brought to the issue by this effort, Governor Jon Corzine said that if lawmakers had not acted by January 1, 2007, he would call for a citizen’s constitutional convention to resolve it.

Besides raising the visibility of tax reform, the results of this endeavor showed that, given an opportunity to work through the issues, people of diverse backgrounds could find a surprising amount of common ground on an issue as contentious as taxes. The participants were willing to support changes that required sacrifice, including program cuts and tax increases, but only if they could be assured that their tax money was being well spent and for the purposes intended. As one participant stated, “It’s not about taxes – it’s about trust.”

Jon Shure, director of New Jersey Policy Perspectives, a non-partisan policy research organization, explained that the effort succeeded because it was designed to “take people from around the state to come and sit in judgment in a way that...showed that the public can, in fact, have an adult conversation about taxes, deal with the trade-offs and complexities. It was really designed to show the policymakers and the media in New Jersey that a convention was not such a far-fetched idea, because in fact, people could handle such an event.”

**Northeast Ohio: regional economic development.** Northeast Ohio has suffered in recent years from deindustrialization and the need to modernize its economic plan to compete in the global economy. In 2005, an alliance of business, community and religious groups known as the Fund for Our Economic Future convened a multi-step process called “Voices & Choices” seeking to identify Northeast Ohio’s greatest regional challenges and to propose possible solutions for

addressing those challenges. Working with deliberative democracy practitioners, first they convened more than 1,000 area leaders from business, government, non-profits, faith-based organizations and education to participate in Leadership Workshops. Using the various techniques and technologies of deliberative democracy, during each workshop participants identified the region's greatest assets and most important challenges. A total of 11 workshops were held, each lasting about four and half hours. The leadership workshops were followed by various regional town meetings which convened about 750 people from 15 counties to participate in roundtable discussions about what they wanted Northeast Ohio to be known for in the future, and identified aspects of history, culture, and attitude that had both helped and inhibited their region's ability to compete in the global economy.

After discussing the most pressing challenges facing the region, participants then had the opportunity to rate the importance of key themes using keypad polling devices. Once the two most important challenges had been identified through the polling, participants brainstormed possible solutions for the top two challenges. Unequal public school funding and lack of employment opportunities with livable wages and benefits were identified as the two most important priorities. Both in turn were linked to the need to create a skilled 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce with strong linkages to business needs. Health care access, lack of a regional public transportation system, lack of affordable and integrated housing, inadequate parental involvement, and inability of schools to teach students "life skills" were also among themes that participants ranked among the ten most important priorities for the region.

The results of these dialogues were so successful that the program was expanded and ultimately engaged more than 20,000 people from across the 15-county region over the next year. The "Voices & Choices" process was one of the largest public deliberations ever convened in the United States. It integrated multiple models of public engagement, including town meetings, online dialogue, live webcasting, interviews, leadership forums, and decentralized community conversations. By engaging thousands of people, Voices & Choices created a public constituency to drive economic change. The scale of public participation reportedly had a dramatic impact on the political environment of the region as the notion of regional cooperation started to take root across Northeast Ohio. The process was carefully monitored by the media, with the Akron Beacon Journal editorializing that "In creating a process of public engagement that draws on the broad community, the [Fund for Our Economic Future] has set an impressive example for all of us, encouraging fresh approaches to reinventing Northeast Ohio."

**Texas: renewable energy.** In Texas, where they were trying to assess how to deal with escalating energy prices, political scientist Jim Fishkin from Stanford University was brought in by the regional power authority to use his signature deliberative polling process to ask customers about their support for renewable energy and other energy needs. The deliberative polls combined telephone surveys of a thousand customers with town meetings of randomly selected customers. At the town meetings, the customers learned more about energy choices and discussed them with each other and with panels of experts, including from the Public Utilities Commission. At the end of the process, the customers drafted their conclusions, giving a ringing endorsement to wind power at a time when it was not as popular in Texas as it is today (Texas now is the largest producer of wind power in the United States). The customer-participants sent a strong message that they wanted more energy efficiency programs and renewable energy incorporated as a part of the overall mix. And they were willing to back that view up by paying more for their energy needs.

“Customers absolutely loved the process,” said Professor Fishkin. “They grasped the issues and came up to speed quickly. They went from ‘top of the head’ opinions to a much more sophisticated discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the options. These people really became engaged in thinking about electricity issues.”

And the state regulators listened. They responded by changing their energy policy to incorporate more renewable energy and efficiency.

**San Diego: A Vision for the Future of Air Travel.** San Diego County is growing and the San Diego International Airport’s single runway will be hard pressed to meet the needs of this high-tech city in the future. Developable land is scarce, and this “NIMBY” issue has been gridlocked for many years as most residents do not want to see an airport near their neighborhood, or the current one expanded. Despite fighting among the business community, homeowners associations, the military, and environmentalists, the law requires the San Diego County Airport Authority to put a solution on the ballot for voters to decide.

Wanting to bring more people from around the region into the conversation, the Airport Authority asked Viewpoint Learning to design and conduct an online dialogue. Almost 800 people signed up through the San Diego Union Tribune’s Web site to participate in a two-week online experience using Small Group Dialogue software created by WebLab. Thousands more read daily postings of each of the small groups as they worked their way through the same set of scenarios and tradeoffs. The results of the online dialogues demonstrated support for moving forward with some decisions unpopular with special interests. There was surprising agreement on the nature of those steps and the future directions that made sense. This represented a real change in position from where the participants had begun. For the first time, the voice of the unorganized public was represented at the table which previously had featured only special interest advocacy. On an issue where NIMBY attitudes traditionally had reigned, average people were able to contribute to finding a viable solution to gridlock.

### **Conclusion**

Critics of deliberative democracy approaches of turning over important policy proposals to groups of randomly selected citizen bodies have questioned if such a body would have sufficient expertise, even with an involved pre-education process. As one skeptic has stated it, “How could a roomful of dummies be expected to do something smart?” But the dozens of examples from across the United States as well as abroad shows that, with the right kind of institutional support, randomly selected panels of average citizens are able to grasp and deliberate on complex issues. Moreover, they bring a commonsense pragmatism to the task at hand, and check their partisanship and narrow self-interest at the door. That allows a new and innovative synthesis of ideas and solutions to come to the fore. The methods and techniques of deliberative democracy tap into the genius of “we the people” in a way that has never before been possible. As California grapples 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.