

OPEN FORUM  
The way forward for political reform  
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AS GOV. Arnold Schwarzenegger renews his call for an independent redistricting commission, a new opinion poll finds that California voters overwhelmingly support improvements in the election process, but there's a catch -- it depends on who is proposing them.

A statewide survey commissioned by the nonpartisan New America Foundation found that 70 percent of voters are more likely to support recommendations made by a panel of average citizens than they are to support the ideas of a government committee or even a panel of independent experts. Only 10 percent said they have more confidence in a government committee.

With such distrust for politicians, the survey also found strong support for a citizen-based reform model that was demonstrated recently in Canada. In that case, lawmakers convened a "citizens' assembly" made up of 160 randomly selected average voters. The group spent nearly a year studying the election process and made proposals for improvements that were placed directly on the ballot.

In the New America survey, three-fourths of the respondents said they would like to see the governor and the Legislature create a similar citizens assembly in California. More than two-thirds also said they would vote for an initiative to create the citizens' panel if it were on the ballot.

The survey, conducted by the Survey and Policy Research Institute at San Jose State University, polled active voters statewide over a three-day period ending Nov. 30. It affirmed general approval of the governor and Legislature in Sacramento, but it still found overwhelming demand for better elections and better candidates that cut across all racial, partisan and ideological lines. Seventy percent of respondents said they "often feel [they] are voting for the lesser of two evils." More than 3 out of 4 voters said the system favors Democratic and Republican candidates and is unfair to independents or minor party candidates. Nearly 60 percent said the system needs improvement and that government would perform better if a wider variety of candidates were elected. More than half the voters say California needs another major political party.

What comes through in the poll is the great faith that Californians have in "We the People" -- that is, themselves -- and much less faith in "Them the Politicians." That bold self-confidence is particularly

striking in light of the many political earthquakes in California in recent years, including the recall of a governor. Yet is anyone in Sacramento listening?

In recent years, a number of promising reforms have been proposed for making the California political system more representative and responsive -- from independent redistricting to term limits and "top two" primaries to public financing of campaigns -- but all have faced the same obstacle: entrenched interests, including elected lawmakers, who benefit from the status quo. Oftentimes the reform itself has been viewed as an extension of the partisan war.

In 2005, the redistricting proposal in Proposition 77 was seen as an attempt by the national Republican Party to force through a GOP-tilted gerrymander and gain an unfair advantage. This year, Proposition 89, the public-financing proposal, was viewed by some as an attempt by certain labor unions to tilt the playing field in their favor.

So while Californians keep voting down reform, what this poll shows is that it is not because Californians don't believe reform is necessary. It is because they want it to be done in a fair and nonpartisan way. What is overwhelmingly clear is that the biggest problem for political reform is not the message, it is the messenger. People don't trust politicians to design their own election system. Yet the poll findings suggest a highly popular method for improving California's election process and creating more public confidence. While some propose using voter initiatives, what the New America Foundation survey reveals is that the best solution is using a citizens' assembly where average voters would be empowered to propose political reforms to California voters, such as an independent redistricting commission, open primaries, campaign-finance reform or alternative electoral methods such as instant-runoff voting.

Two California legislators introduced a constitutional amendment, ACA28, into this year's legislative session, to establish a California Citizens' Assembly. The authors were termed out and thus have left the Legislature, so this bipartisan legislation is no longer pending and is ripe for new sponsorship.

A citizens' assembly is an important vehicle for modernizing our political system because trust is placed in a deliberative process involving average citizens who have more credibility than the political class. For nearly two years, both Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Democratic Speaker of the Assembly Fabian Nunez have agreed on the need for reform but have not been able to agree on the details. Well, here's the solution, one that California voters overwhelming support: Turn the details over to a California Citizens' Assembly, and let average citizens decide what political reform is best for California.

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