

# A Unique Democratic Experiment

The Civic Engagement Project  
for Children and Families

By Scott London

When California voters approved Proposition 10 in November 1998, it was hailed as a landmark public health initiative. The ballot measure set a new precedent for anti-tobacco policies by adding a 50-cents-per-pack tax to cigarettes while, at the same time, reaffirming Californians' support for pregnant women and children under five by channeling all revenues from the surtax to early childhood development programs.

But Proposition 10 was also groundbreaking as a political experiment. The measure reversed what has become something of an axiom of the democratic process — that elections come at the end, not the beginning, of public policy debates. The argument, as it's usually presented, is that it's only after vigorous discussion and debate that citizens are sufficiently "primed" to cast an informed vote, one that genuinely reflects the public voice.

Proposition 10 turned that logic on its head. It began with a vote and evolved into a sustained public dialogue about the ends and means of early childhood development. It was also a democratic initiative, in the true sense of the word. Rarely has a ballot measure offered greater opportunities for community input and engagement in the actual decision-making process.

Some of the credit for the ongoing public

dialogue about Proposition 10 issues belongs to a small group of civic-minded scholars and foundation executives in the Bay Area. For them, Proposition 10 was a perfect opportunity to support a different kind of policymaking, the sort that takes its cues from dialogue and decision-making at the community level.

While public deliberation was once the hallmark of American democracy — exemplified by the New England town meeting — it has become increasingly rare in today's political culture. This is reflected in a number of worrisome trends, from declining confidence in government to the increasingly shrill tone of our national discourse. The question for these philanthropists was whether community dialogue and deliberation is still viable and effective as a form of political decision-

making.

The Civic Engagement Project for Families and Children was launched in November 1999 to put that question to the test. With funding from five California foundations — the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the James Irvine Foundation, the Packard Foundation, and the Peninsula Community Foundation — the project aims to: 1) create opportunities for heightened community involvement; 2) stimulate participation among those not typically involved in community issues; 3) bring

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a diversity of people and perspective to bear on the needs of young children and their families; and 4) build and strengthen civic infrastructure in the community that can support long-term engagement in public issues.

Proposition 10 was a perfect fit for the project, the planners felt, because even though it was a statewide ballot measure, the implementation is being handled on a community-by-community basis through independent county commissions. The task of the commissions is to devise strategic plans for how the tax revenues will be used. While community input in this process is mandated by the state guidelines, the commissions are free to solicit that input however they choose.

What is the best way to canvass the public's views? The answer seems to depend as much on political philosophy as it does on technical expertise. From the project planners' perspective, however, it was clear that opinion surveys, focus groups, and public hearings could only go so far in mapping Californians' views on early childhood development.

What was needed instead were in-depth community conversations that brought a diversity of perspectives to bear on the issue, that defined the most pressing questions, that strengthened community awareness, and that laid out a range of practical alternatives.

To that end, they organized a project made up of three overlapping phases. In the first — now all but completed — the project staff worked with eight participating counties to garner public input through surveys and public hearings. The findings were then consolidated to determine potential gaps in public awareness and possible areas for community dialogue. The goal in stage one was to generate initial feedback from a diverse array of perspectives — those of service providers, parents, grandparents, and other members of the community — to complement the assessments of experts.

The second stage — now underway — is aimed at exploring shared values and common ground. In practical terms, it involves organizing community forums, framing questions for public discussion, and seeking common ground as a basis for strategic implementation of Proposition 10. This phase is central to the success of the Civic Engagement Project as it serves the dual purpose of informing the Proposition 10 planning and policy process while at the same time laying the foundation for long-term engagement.

The goal of stage three is to sustain the momentum for engagement by building and strengthening civic infrastructure. During this phase, the project staff will work with participating counties to create ongoing opportunities for dialogue, feedback, networking and other activities. Community members and policymakers will work together to find creative solutions on issues involving young children and their families.

While it's still too early to assess the outcomes of the project, initial reports and interviews have been favorable. A first-year study recently completed by two evaluators at University of California Davis found that the project has heightened the inclusivity of the planning process by engaging the views of those not normally included in community affairs, such as immigrants and low-income families. More significantly, it has deepened the county commissions' understanding and appreciation of the value of citizen participation. This is seen as crucial as the project moves into its second stage — that of convening, framing, and facilitating community dialogues.

According to Sarah Rock, an attorney and county commissioner from Yolo County, public deliberation has a crucial role to play in the process of devising sound strategic plans. Deliberation helps the community to work through thorny issues and

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set basic priorities, she says. Unlike public hearings, deliberative forums also allow policymakers and members of the community alike to explore and refine their views through the process of give-and-take. “Those of us in the community know what we need. If we can decide among ourselves what we want to spend our money on, we are invested and we step up to the responsibility.”

Rock feels that deliberation also has a role to play in shaping policy decisions. “It can be extremely valuable even at our level, among officeholders,” she says. The challenge is to keep the dialogue open, reflective, and respectful of dissenting views. Many policymakers have little or no experience with that kind of dialogue.

For Charles Lacy, a Kettering Foundation associate and one of the architects of the Civic Engagement Project, the aim is to affect a change,

however small, in the relationship between citizen and policymaker. A successful outcome, he says, would be one in which “the first impulse of the Proposition 10 Commissioners is to engage and deliberate with the public — not because the law requires it, but because they think it makes for better decisions at the community level.”

Originally planned as a two-year initiative, the project team is now exploring whether to extend it an additional year. Civil investing takes time, they readily acknowledge. Building and sustaining public engagement requires an enduring faith in the capacities of ordinary citizens, a long-term commitment, and, above all, patience.

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