
Policy Report for “Speak Up California” Reviving California Community Summit – Silicon Valley

DeAnza Community College, San Jose, CA

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Prepared by California Forward

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The “Reviving California Community Summit” at DeAnza Community College brought together a group of nearly 100 concerned citizens to assess the problems facing California’s government and discuss what can be done to reform our state’s governance system. The event was co-hosted by *California Forward* as part of “Speak Up California,” a statewide conversation project about governance reform. After a thorough discussion of the state budget process and the likely effects of Propositions 25 and 26, the summit featured a roundtable about how reforms to the governance system might help California deal with its ongoing fiscal challenges.

After the roundtable discussion, small groups at each table were posed the following questions:

- *What is your biggest concern about how state or local government works?*
- *If local governments were given more control over funding and service delivery, what do you see as the benefits & concerns?*
- *If local governments were given more control over funding and service delivery, how would you ensure that local governments are accountable? What would accountability look like?*

When asked how they would restructure the relationship between the state and local government, 94% of participants agreed that the state should maintain authority and control “in only a few areas” or “only in essential services.”

Several other major themes emerged from the discussion:

- **California’s current governance system is viewed as too cumbersome.** Many participants agreed that, for the state to compete in the global economy, state government needs to speed up and become more accessible, more responsive, and more efficient. Some participants believed this would also help address a related problem, by encouraging citizens to be more engaged.

- **We know what isn't working.** Participants agreed on several major challenges facing government: Public pensions, crumbling infrastructure, and an ongoing disparity in property tax payments (a legacy of Prop 13).
- **Local government is seen as a solution.** Participants saw many benefits to more local control, from greater accessibility and improved program outcomes to increased responsiveness to community needs.
- **Areas of concern:** The group identified several key concerns about local empowerment, including issues of:
 - **Equity** (ensuring rich and poor communities have equal access to resources)
 - **Accountability** (making sure local officials remain accessible)
 - **Economies of scale** (finding ways to ensure communities don't forego services relied on by minority populations)
 - **Statewide standards** (maintaining state oversight and regulation of the social safety net and environmental issues like pollution)

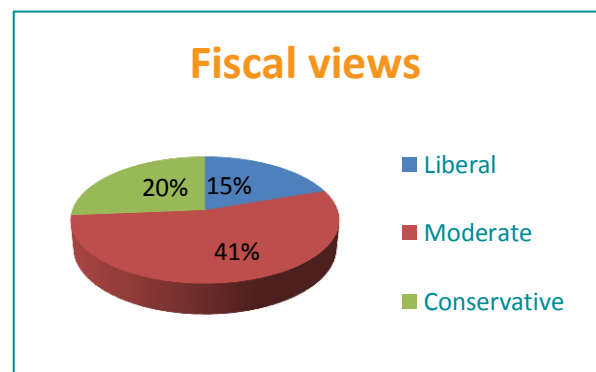
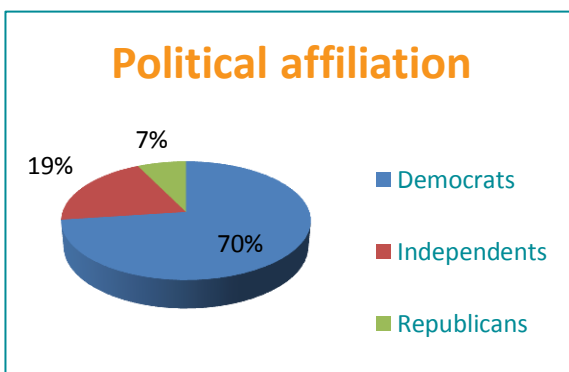
I. WHO WAS THERE?

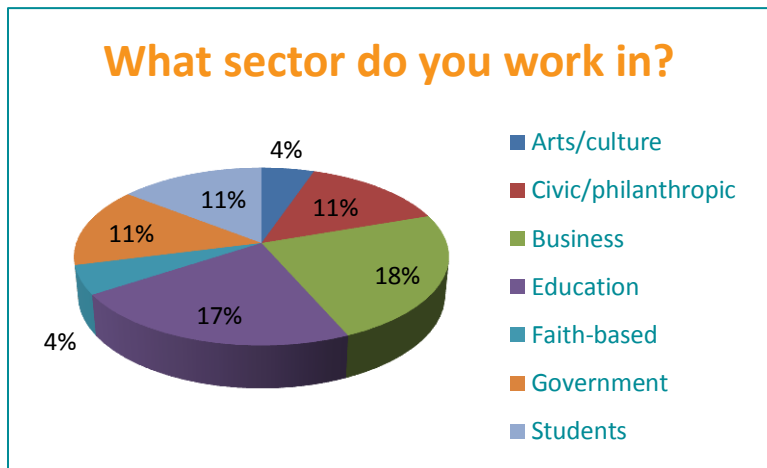
The event was open to the public, and participants ranged from Silicon Valley college students to tech industry retirees. Hosted by the American Leadership Forum - Silicon Valley, *California Forward*, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the summit also included representatives from each of its co-sponsoring organizations: De Anza College, San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Silicon Valley Leadership Group, and United Way Silicon Valley.

The speakers included:

- **Chris Block**, CEO, American Leadership Forum – Silicon Valley
- **Robert Brownstein**, policy director, Working Partnerships USA; senior fellow, American Leadership Forum
- **Ze-Kun Li**, student body president, DeAnza College
- **Joe Mathews**, journalist; Irvine Senior Fellow, the New America Foundation; co-author, *California Crackup: How Reform Broke the Golden State and How We Can Fix It*
- **Bruce McPherson**, former California Secretary of State; former member, the California Senate and State Assembly; Leadership Council member, *California Forward*
- **Maria Ochoa**, Lecturer, Mexican American studies and interdisciplinary social science, San Jose State University
- **Zabrae Valentine**, Deputy Director, *California Forward*; Executive Director, *California Forward Action Fund*

A survey taken during the event provided this breakdown of attendee demographics:





II. WHAT WAS DISCUSSED?

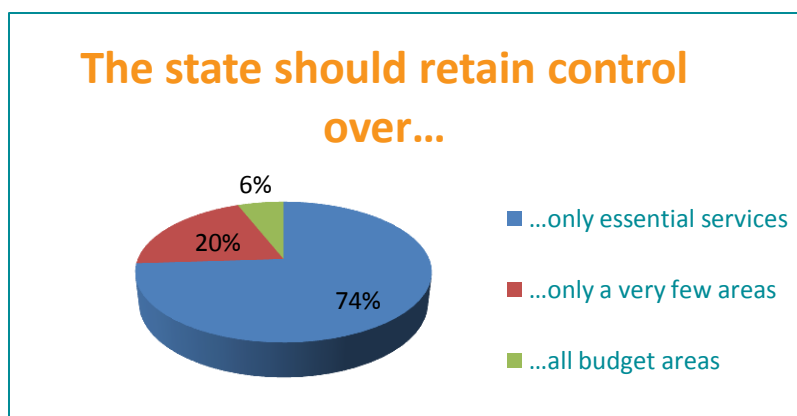
Did participants agree that empowering communities was important? Why or why not?

There was general agreement that Californians see state government as more gridlocked than ever—and increasingly unable to solve the problems facing our communities. “The line between taxes and services is not clear or efficient,” said one participant. Many cited political polarization as a major problem, saying politicians only seem to be interested in representing their party, not working together. There was a rich discussion of possible solutions, including extending term limits, and hope was expressed that redistricting would also make politicians more responsive to local voters. “Only time will tell,” another participant said.

The first half of the meeting focused on issues surrounding Propositions 25 and 26—with great desire expressed, in particular, for “accountability” in getting the budget passed on time. Many expressed fatigue with the constant debate over “big” v. “small” government. One attendee asked, “Are the only debates we can have really about taxing the rich or taking services from the poor, or is there something more that needs to be discussed?”

This was followed by a fruitful discussion about how to improve the relationship between state and local government. Though there were no explicit references to structural reform as a “third way” solution to Sacramento gridlock—an idea that has begun to emerge in discussions in the Legislature about the current budget shortfall—many participants expressed enthusiasm about the idea of restructuring.

In fact, 94% of participants agreed that the state should maintain authority and control over local affairs in “only a few areas” or “only essential services.”



As with the discussion around Prop 25, the desire for accountability and results led many to focus on the benefits of empowering communities—including services that are “more targeted” to local needs; citizens that are “more engaged” and “more invested” in local government; and local officials who are “more accessible” and “more accountable.” As one participant summed up, “Local governments would be able to run services more efficiently than the state.”

Some participants questioned the wisdom of this approach, however, pointing to an example from education, where having a neighbor on the school board doesn’t necessarily make the board more accessible. As one said, “Do local school boards really allow for more oversight or greater efficiency?”

How should we go about it?

The discussion then expanded to encompass how to put these ideas into practice. One participant asked, “Can we really create accountability at either level without significantly increasing the awareness and commitment of more citizens?”

At the end of the discussion, there was some support for the notion that state government should set priorities for essential services (health, education, and safety), while locals should have more control over “other issues.” One participant described this proposed restructuring of the state/local relationship by saying “safety net services and things like pollution regulation should stay at the state level.”

It was not clear what participants wanted local government to oversee, but public parks and libraries were two local services of which participants approved. There was also an interesting discussion about the kinds of incentives newly empowered local officials might be offered to produce desired outcomes—mostly centered on parking tickets. One participant asked, “Should money from parking tickets stay in the community to fund public safety, or should it go to the state, so local governments don’t have an incentive to write more tickets?”

What were some specific benefits and concerns expressed about empowering communities?

The meeting produced a rich conversation around the issue of empowering local government, with participants offering key insights into the potential benefits and concerns of empowering communities. Most of the meeting responses were centered on this question:

If local governments were given more control over funding and service delivery, what would be the benefits & concerns?

- **Benefits:**

- **More Targeted.** “Local governments would be able to provide services that are more targeted to the needs of the local community.”
- **More Engaged.** “Local control would encourage citizens to be more engaged in their local governments. Citizens would have more motivation and are likely to be more invested in the outcomes.”
- **More Accountable.** “Local officials are more accessible to their constituents, so there’s more accountability when control rests in the hands of local government.”
- **More Responsive.** “It would empower local government to be responsive to citizen needs.”
- **More Efficient.** “Local government might be able to run services more efficiently than the state.”

- **Concerns:**

- **Equity.** “There’s a lot of concern about equity across the state and making sure rich and poor communities both have access to resources. Too much local control of funding prevents the redistribution of wealth that can come with state control.”
- **Accountability.** “Local governments aren’t always more accessible and more accountable than state officials.” “Do local school boards really allow for more oversight or greater efficiency?”
- **Revenue.** “Until the budgeting process is fixed, local governments don’t know how much money they’ll be getting from the state in time to pass their own budgets.”
- **Special Interests.** “Local governments aren’t always safe from influence by lobbyists or special interests.”
- **Economies of Scale.** “Local government may not have the expertise to provide all services.” “Local governments may be more likely to forego services needed by only a small percentage of the local population. At the state level, the constituency needing those services is larger.” “Safety net services and things like pollution regulation should stay at the state level.”

III. CONCLUSION

After a rich discussion about how state and local government operates today, there was the beginning of a consensus in the meeting around a basic framework for structural reform. Many participants agreed that today’s state/local relationship needs to change, and some suggested that the state should maintain “standards” in areas like health, safety, and education, while local governments could be empowered to operate with more flexibility.

Near the end of the meeting, one participant posed two questions that will ultimately prove essential to a lasting solution. Moving government closer to the people, “needs to be a balancing act,” this participant said. “The money [local governments receive] should be flexible, but how do you allocate it? And how do you make it fair?”