

Location: Statewide - Bay Area, Central Valley, Inland Empire, and Southern California.

Issue: Viewpoint Learning's "Bridge California's Disconnect" (citizens/state and local government)

Methodology: Viewpoint Learning – Choice Dialogues

Link to more: <http://www.viewpointlearning.com/publications/reports.shtml>

In the spring of 2004, Viewpoint Learning, along with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation developed a statewide research project to provide local and state governments with the values of average Californians regarding key issues like fiscal and policy challenges (health care, infrastructure, K-12 education, and transportation). The method used to conduct this research was Viewpoint Learning's Choice Dialogues. The 15 Choice Dialogues carried out across California consisted of 30-40 randomly selected citizens from all sorts of diverse ethnic, socio-economic and political backgrounds. All together more than 500 Californians participated in the 8-hour long Choice Dialogues. The Choice Dialogues explored what average Californians expect from their local and state government for themselves, and what tradeoffs they were willing to support in order to achieve their expectations. The Choice Dialogues were followed up by Stakeholder Dialogues uniting elected leaders with participants of the Choice Dialogues. This led to a Proxy Dialogue, which is an innovative media format that allows greater access to more citizens. The Choice Dialogues centered around two choices for California's future policy decisions that emphasize the market and individual choice, and those that emphasize fairness and community wellbeing.

As a result of many corporate scandals and problems of civil society organizations, there was a high amount of mistrust shown by Californians during the Choice Dialogues. The research for these Choice Dialogues found several ways to reduce citizen mistrust for the government and improve the relationship between citizens, state and local government, as well as develop necessary public support for important fiscal and policy issues, such as infrastructure, K-12 education, and health care. The following methods of research were useful in reducing citizen mistrust of government and improving their relationship with one another: focus sharply on accountability and tangible outcomes to rebuild confidence, set high but achievable standards and goals, then develop and publish metrics that report success or failure in meeting them. During these dialogues researchers figured that participants who focused on a single policy issue were likely to work through tradeoffs more effectively and ultimately achieve publicly supported outcomes. Californians who engage policy issues in this fashion are an important factor for bridging the disconnect and rebuilding trust in California.

Nine of the Choice Dialogues focused general policy issues, such as health care, K-12 education and transportation, while the other six dialogues focused on infrastructural issues, such as water and K-12 school facilities. As the Choice Dialogues continued, the

deeper values of citizen participants became more apparent on core policy issues. In the beginning of the Choice Dialogues many participants upheld strong political beliefs, but were willing to put them aside in order to find solutions for California's policy issues. Instead participants focused more on the importance of common sense, efficiency, personal and community responsibility, and value for money and fairness, rather than their own political ideology.

Throughout all 15 Choice Dialogues it became apparent how dramatic the mistrust of the average citizen was towards the government. This was shown through participants' requests for greater accountability and transparency and increasing support for public/private sector partnerships as a means of establishing checks and balances. The large disconnect between citizens and leaders (on both parts) has also led to a lack of citizen engagement. Citizens believe politicians possessed complete control over budgeting and decision-making, while leaders felt that citizens "want it all" but were unwilling to deal with the trade-offs (i.e. universal health coverage will lead to citizens paying more taxes). Citizens view leaders as negotiating solely with special interests and partisanship groups, while leaders find citizens ignorant of policy issues, possessing very little knowledge of policy making. Until the issues of rebuilding citizen trust for government and uniting citizens and leaders together are addressed, there seems very little chance for any substantial improvement in policy issues, such as health care and K-12 education.

As a result of the Choice Dialogues, leaders have realized helpful tips to engage citizens more effectively, as well as increase citizens' trust in government.