

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF CALIFORNIA SPEAKS ON HEALTH CARE REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

Prepared for AmericaSpeaks
by Harder + Company Community Research

April 16, 2008

CALIFORNIA SPEAKS

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM POLICYMAKER INTERVIEWS

In January 2008, Harder+Company Community Research surveyed 30 individuals who played a role in California's debate over health care reform. They included legislators and staff from the California State Senate and Assembly, representatives from Governor Schwarzenegger's office, officials from state health agencies, and representatives of special interest groups involved in the health care reform debate. Respondents discussed the health care reform process and public input in general as well as their impressions of CaliforniaSpeaks. The responses are largely qualitative, as is the analysis. This summary of the results addresses the impact of CaliforniaSpeaks on the health care reform debate and presents policymakers' perceptions about the role in community involvement in the policy process.

The most common theme that emerged in the interviews is that while the public wants a change in the health care system, the complexity of the issue is a challenge both in reform and in meaningful public engagement. Policymaker suggestions for promoting public involvement included educational outreach, using the media, and holding town hall meetings like CaliforniaSpeaks. Most respondents felt that CaliforniaSpeaks was a successful mechanism for public involvement. Respondents believed that the event helped politicians to hear the opinions of average citizens and to build momentum around health care reform. Suggestions for future events were to have a more transparent agenda so that people understood what was under discussion, to hold the events earlier in the decision-making process, and to provide a mechanism for continuing the dialogue after the event ends.

GENERAL FINDINGS ON HEALTH CARE REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

Californians want health care reform

Every respondent believed that their constituents wanted to see a change in health policy. One Republican respondent said, "Everyone would like to see things more affordable and easier access." A Democratic field representative said that the overwhelming message from the public was, "Get it done!" A member of the Governor's staff mentioned that every poll shows that Democrats, Republicans, and Independents have been strongly in support of change and that Californians "believe the system is broken and needs fixing." Although everyone agreed in the need for change, the various regions and interest groups had different opinions as to what the reform should be. As one legislative respondent noted, "I meet with lots of different groups — hospitals, private insurers, constituents, and labor — so they all have different concerns." Another replied that constituents "want better access, but they're not clear on how to achieve that, and they don't want socialized medicine." In contrast, three other legislative respondents said that their constituents supported a single payer plan. There was no general consensus around a common solution although recognition of the need for reform was widespread.

By far the most common challenge to health care reform that respondents listed was the complexity of the issue. As one health official stated, “Even when you think about CaliforniaSpeaks that had eight hours dedicated to the issue — even that is arguably insufficient time to really be able to discuss the details.” A policy staff person agreed that health care reform is “such a complicated thing and there are so many moving parts that are interrelated,” that most of the public and many of the lawmakers were unclear on the tradeoffs. The other most common challenge reported was the difficulty in determining the funding for any reform efforts. Another legislative aide mentioned that the technicalities of the financing mechanisms seemed daunting to constituents.

Level of interest influenced by political party and media

The level of constituent interest in health care reform appeared to be higher among respondents from Democratic offices than Republican offices. All of the Republican respondents said that health care reform was not a main topic for their constituents compared to immigration and the state budget. For all of the Democratic legislative offices interviewed, health care reform was considered to be one of the main areas of concern for their constituents and all but one said they were contacted at least several times a week about the issue. As one field representative stated, “They call me every day and tell me. I hear a lot of complaints and dissatisfaction coming from people. At this time, many people can’t afford health care and are going bankrupt with medical expenses.” Another explained that many of his constituents “don’t have health care and wait until they have a catastrophic event to get the health care they need. They end up in emergency rooms and by then, sometimes there is not much that can be done.”

Several legislative staff members mentioned that they were more likely to hear from constituents when the topic was in the media. None of the respondents felt that constituent interest increased toward the end of 2007 around the special legislative session. Respondents explained that the special session was “behind the scenes” and that there is a “disconnect between the groups doing the talking in Sacramento — the policymakers — and the people living far away from the political center.” However, many said the level of interest had increased earlier during the year, particularly after the Governor’s State of the State address in January when he announced his commitment to health care reform and with increased media coverage on the issue. Two believed there had been increased interest during the summer when CaliforniaSpeaks was held and the first major legislative action was scheduled. One respondent declared that interest in health care reform had probably increased fivefold because of the heightened attention to it both locally and statewide.

Means of communication by constituents varied by legislative office

The methods constituents employed to communicate with their legislative offices appeared to vary considerably by office. Phone calls were common for everyone, with some respondents receiving calls about health care reform on a daily basis and others getting calls from individuals throughout the state. Four respondents mentioned constituent calling campaigns or phone banks directed by special interest groups such as AARP and cigarette companies. According to two people from different Los Angeles

legislative offices, Philip-Morris mounted a large campaign to find smokers and directly connect them to their representatives in opposition to the proposed cigarette tax. Ironically, when one respondent explained the details of the proposed legislation to one caller, the caller replied that she thought it was fine if she had to pay a couple extra dollars if that meant that everyone would get health care.

Half of the legislative respondents stated that they received office visits from people interested in health policy issues. While one respondent said that aside from special interest groups, regular constituents did not come to their office, two others explained that lobbyists rarely visited the district offices and only lobbied in Sacramento. Others also mentioned speaking to constituents at community events such as luncheons and town halls. One replied that they tried to have a representative attend any event on health care in their district. One member of the Governor's administration stressed the Governor's commitment to speaking to any group interested in health care reform and noted that staff had attended over 1300 meetings on the subject throughout the state. Most of the other respondents who did not work in a legislative office did not have direct contact with the public.

Over half of the policymakers had hosted or participated in local town hall meetings on health. As one staff member explained, "We decided to hold an informational town hall because there was so much confusion — there were five proposals at one time." Another noted that the town halls they hosted allowed the lawmaker to hear constituent stories directly. Only one respondent mentioned protests or demonstrations as a source of public opinion, but felt that they were significant because "they get attention and they get press. They are a physical and immediate presence that you can't deny or ignore."

In terms of written communication, three legislative respondents reported receiving primarily faxes while most others said they mainly received emails, both form messages and personal ones. Five respondents also mentioned receiving letters from groups and individual letters, but letters appeared to be less popular than other methods. For respondents working in legislative offices, the more personal means of communication such as office visits, meetings, or individual letters tended to have more of an impact than form messages or telephone campaigns sponsored by an organization.

Special interest groups played a significant role

The respondents noted the strong influence on special interest groups in this policy process. One field representative highlighted this opinion by stating that "special interest groups and lobbyists have a tremendous amount of authority and attention." While respondents felt that interest groups had significant influence in policy making in general, five felt their efforts were particularly intense around health care reform. As one legislative staff member described, "Organizations have been really strong — like unions, nurses, AARP, and also business groups. I haven't seen anything like this before. It's a huge amount of diversity and volume. It has been great! It's really exciting." Another respondent echoed this statement by saying that there was no single advocacy group, rather that everyone across the board from small business owners to the uninsured are concerned about health and that "there's a feeling that something could be done."

Although the majority of the respondents talked about the influence of special interest groups, two legislative staff members stressed that the interests of the general public was still of primary importance. As one explained, “public interest groups help to craft the legislation, but the motivational factor is the people.” The other stated, “Lobbying is effective, but so is the old-fashioned tallying up of phone calls and emails. We can’t ignore that. We can’t make up grassroots.” Another legislative respondent felt that public opinion should play an equal role to that of special interest groups and said, “It’s always surprising when we get a lot of constituent calls because they don’t normally get involved. Labor and the hospitals tend to represent [the public] as best they can, but it’s always good to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth.” In contrast, one representative of an advocacy organization wanted to believe that grassroots advocacy was meaningful, but was unsure if it influenced politicians’ vote as much as “campaign dollars do.”

Of the respondents representing special interest groups or advocacy organizations, two described their role as helping to motivate grassroots support through a variety of activities including holding lobby days and educational efforts for members. One advocacy group director explained that the goal of his organization was to be a “conduit” by providing information and materials to help individuals effectively advocate their positions and to ensure that information from consumers reaches legislators. One organization conducted outreach directly with the media while another had an in-house policy institute.

Other sources of influence included service providers, political leaders, and research

After special interest groups, the second most common factor respondents reported as influencing the health care reform process was that of political leadership. Seven respondents said that the Governor and legislative leadership helped to focus attention on the issue and move legislation forward.

In addition to hearing directly from citizens and special interest groups, four respondents also mentioned the importance of speaking with local health care providers and non-profit organizations to gain a better understanding of what’s happening “on the ground.” One frequently spoke with health leaders who were “leading the charge” in health care reform at the local level. Respondents who worked in the Executive branch or for state health agencies were more likely to have meetings with health care providers, hospitals, and other groups involved in the existing health care system such as insurance companies than to speak directly with the public.

While five respondents mentioned that polls have shown the public’s support for health care reform, three legislators stressed that they either did not use polls when making political decisions or that polls were of limited utility in crafting the details of a bill. One government official explained that the questions asked “can’t get into details that really contribute a lot to the policy debate. They’re useful for showing the broad framework...but polls can’t get into the debate of which tradeoffs to make.”

Three respondents looked at reports or research while another mentioned speaking with experts in the field. One legislative staff member referred to the reports produced by the Legislative Analyst's Office and the amount of information available. Two of the individuals who discussed research emphasized the importance of concise reports. One suggested highlighting the main points so the reader doesn't have "hundreds of pages to sift through" while the other believed that "policy analysts must do a good job of explaining things so that it's memorable and easy to understand... Writing like an academic grants you credibility, but it doesn't always come along with the clarity and simplicity and impact it needs." A policy analyst who was involved in developing one of the proposals consulted think tanks and strove to be "data and fact-driven."

Engage and inform the public through media, educational outreach, and town halls

Five respondents stressed the difficulty in engaging the public in the policy process in general and particularly in an issue as complicated as health care reform. The most common suggestions for increasing public involvement were to better inform the public through the media, educational materials, and town hall events.

A third of the respondents recommended involving the media for a variety of purposes from helping to create a sense of urgency around an issue to making people aware of opportunities to participate. One legislative respondent felt that media coverage helps to foster "more diverse and passionate participation by the public" while another believed that working with ethnic media outlets, particularly the Spanish media, was key. One suggested spending more time promoting public events such as CaliforniaSpeaks on community calendars and through television and the radio. In addition to more traditional media sources, one administrative staff member thought that blogs provided a forum for people to share their perspective in a timely way that newspapers could not. Two other respondents also mentioned having a website as a source for information and one specifically discussed the website developed by the Governor's office as a place for individuals to share their own experiences.

An equal number of respondents believed that the public needed more information or education about health care. Two mentioned the importance of crafting easily accessible materials and several discussed the need for accurate data. Another explained that "*intelligent* involvement must go along with *more* involvement. We need people who come to our office and understand budget realities — that decisions are not made in a vacuum. A motivated public is good, but an informed public is just as good." One representative from the Governor's office discussed the need for "an information loop going in both directions" so that policymakers could learn directly from the public.

Eight respondents, representing the legislative, executive and stakeholder respondents, thought that town hall meetings were one of the best means of getting people involved. **Three specifically mentioned the CaliforniaSpeaks forum as a model for civic engagement.** One representative of a membership organization said that the forum "came at a good time. We were all looking for ways to engage the public, and some of us had talked about trying to create an event like that in order to engage people at the local level." One health official who believed it was important to connect people to the issues

answered, “There isn’t one clear model of deliberative democracy that we can point to and say that’s the one right way. We need to try different strategies. But I do think the Foundations’ resources were very well spent on CaliforniaSpeaks.”

Another common response was the need for people to believe that their participation matters. As one legislative respondent stated, “If people believe that there's a real potential for change to occur through their involvement, they're definitely more inclined to be active participants.” Another legislative staff member recommended demystifying the participation process while three others discussed creating a sense of urgency or relevance around the issue.

Finally, two respondents recommended involving a broader range of constituents. As one legislative staff member explained, “You have to cast a wider net to get more people, not just focus it on people who you know would have an interest, but on people you don’t normally hear from. Get as many different people as possible.”

Participant diversity is the most important characteristics of a forum

When asked what factors were most likely to influence how seriously respondents took a public forum, most of the results were mixed and often depended upon the purpose of the event in question or the role of the respondent. However, two factors — the diversity of the participants and the neutrality of the convening organization — were rated as important far more often than any other characteristic. The following table summarizes the relative importance of various forum characteristics. (Please note that responses by advocacy groups were not included and three respondents who did not work directly with the public or attend meetings with the public chose not to answer.)

Importance of forum characteristics n=21 (%)

Characteristic of forum	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Not important
The diversity of who participates	8 (38%)	10 (48%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)
The neutrality of the convening organization	7 (33%)	7 (33%)	3 (14%)	4 (19%)
Contacts by forum participants after it is over	6 (29%)	7 (33%)	6 (29%)	1 (5%)
Personal attendance at a forum	6 (29%)	5 (24%)	6 (29%)	4 (19%)
Media coverage of the forum	4 (19%)	6 (29%)	3 (14%)	4 (19%)
Personal involvement in shaping the content of the forum	4 (19%)	3 (14%)	2 (10%)	6 (29%)
The size of the meeting	2 (10%)	7 (33%)	5 (24%)	4 (19%)

Almost 85% of the respondents ranked the diversity of participants as either very important or important when considering the relevance of a public forum. As the chief of

staff for one assembly person described, “I try to make an assessment of how many ‘normal’ people there are versus those already in the industry like nurses and insurance companies. The more I see a cross-section of people, who don’t have a financial stake in an issue, the more interested I am in it.” A couple other legislative staff members spoke of how diverse their particular districts were and the need to see that diversity reflected in the audience. In contrast, one respondent felt it was sometimes easier to attend a meeting with just one interest group so that their specific concerns could be the focus.

The neutrality of the convening organization was the factor with the second highest rating, with two-thirds of the respondents saying that it was important. Two respondents who did not rate it as highly explained that they would attend meetings sponsored by anyone with an interest in the subject. As the director of one special interest group clarified, “It’s actually good to have a meeting with people of similar agendas.” Other respondents expressed doubt that an unbiased meeting could be held and were concerned that “everyone has a hidden agenda.”

The majority of respondents also ranked being contacted by forum participants after a forum as an important factor. One person who worked for a legislator who often organized this type of event explained that they handed out comment cards while another person gave everyone his phone number and took it personally if nobody called.

Two factors which received mixed ratings were the respondents’ personal involvement in shaping the content of the forum and their attendance at an event. In general, both appeared to depend upon the respondent’s role within a legislative office or governmental agency. The two factors receiving the lowest rankings were the size of the meeting and media coverage. In each case, many of the respondents said it depended on the purpose of the meeting. For example with forum size, one explained that more interaction was possible with a smaller group while a larger event was impressive in demonstrating passion in an issue. For three people, media coverage wasn’t important for their work at all because they attended many meetings where they wanted to speak frankly and candidly. However, two respondents did note that for major events with the Governor or legislators in attendance, media coverage was critically important both before and after the event. The press secretary for one senator explained that media coverage was probably more important for the public than for policymakers because how media covers an event shapes public perception.

SPECIFIC FINDINGS ON CALIFORNIA SPEAKS

General impressions of California Speaks event

Most respondents familiar with the event described it in two ways: as an excellent attempt at getting input from general citizens and as inspiring to see so many people engaged and involved on such a “dry” policy topic. As one person who participated in the Los Angeles event stated, “I thought it was fantastic. I couldn’t believe the diversity, and size, and the dedication of the participants — people stayed until the end for eight hours.” Another participant said, “Generally it was a great event. In particular having the type of survey system they had. People conceive of [health care] in different ways, so the system

tried to distill people’s thoughts.” A legislative respondent was “really impressed with what they did and attempted to do.” One person who did not attend appreciated the “fair and open approach” and thought that the event was “very well done, very interesting, with a lot of good ideas.”

The most common critique, which was received from multiple locations, was in the handling of the single payer option. Four respondents, at least three of whom supported single payer legislation, felt that the event should have incorporated a discussion of the single payer option in some way from the beginning and that the exclusion of this option led single payer advocates to feel that their opinions weren’t valued. Those who participated said that they understood that CaliforniaSpeaks chose to concentrate on “viable” legislative options but felt that this focus was not clearly communicated to public participants prior to the event. A legislative staff member, who did not attend the event, said that the feedback their office received from participants was that “they were very disheartened that single payer wasn't mentioned. They felt that there was a conscious effort to avoid a discussion including single payer and felt there was a definite agenda going on.”

High level of awareness of CaliforniaSpeaks

Despite the fact that the CaliforniaSpeaks town hall events were held in August, approximately five months prior to the interviews, virtually all of the respondents recalled the event. Twelve respondents, including all of the respondents who attended, had participated in a briefing. One other legislative respondent recalled receiving an email announcing the event. At least four respondents attended the event with an elected official. Others attended as the designated health expert for their legislator. Those who did attend typically stayed for several hours. For those who did not attend the event, most said it was because they were not invited. Two said they did not attend because it was held on a Saturday, another said he didn’t like the format, and one person was out of town.

Most saw some sort of media coverage of the event. In general, respondents reported seeing local television and newspaper coverage. One said most of the television coverage was of the Governor and another learned about the results from the internet. A respondent from Humboldt reported significant positive media coverage prior to the event and mostly negative press afterward. A representative from an advocacy organization thought the event “brought media attention in the middle of the summer when there was a tendency to think about other things.”

Strong turnout of citizens and politicians

Most respondents thought the event had a diverse population represented and were pleased with the number of people involved. One participant at the San Diego event was impressed at the level of participation and felt “it was the most comprehensive outcome that I’ve seen as far as members of the community.” Two felt there were was a good cross-section of the citizenry in their locations (Humboldt and Fresno). Interestingly, one respondent from the Administration thought that single payer advocates were

overrepresented while a legislative staff member felt that single payers weren't included. Three people stated that CaliforniaSpeaks did an excellent job at trying to get a diverse population to attend, but a couple would have liked to have seen either more diversity in income level or more Latinos in attendance. No respondent mentioned randomly selecting participants. Only two provided suggestions for selecting participants. One recommended reaching out to different community organizations to get a range of participants and another thought that providing incentives and food would encourage participation.

Most of the respondents were pleased about the politicians attending, especially for a Saturday. Of the respondents familiar with the event, five said they were impressed at the high level of involvement and knew that the Governor and legislative leaders participated. One stated it was great to have so many go publicly on record in support of health care reform. Another respondent felt there was a high level of political involvement both locally and statewide, but was concerned that the politicians' presence skewed the agenda by limiting the reform options considered. Two noted that politicians were engaging with other participants during the small table discussions and one suggested creating a specific role in the day's events for the politicians in attendance.

Good organization and use of technology

Most respondents liked the format of the event and the efforts to hear directly from constituents. One legislative staff member who had attended a number of town meetings as well as meetings with smaller groups felt that the best organized event was CaliforniaSpeaks. One participant felt the format was "really good" and appreciated how AmericaSpeaks introduced the event, explained what was going to happen and had people "participate in a direct way." An administrative representative described the event as "outstanding" and considered it to be "incredibly well structured" with the organizers "nimble enough to incorporate changes." Another legislative participant said, "It showed that in these times that there are ways to process issues accurately and quickly that can be a real boon to policymakers. A tool that definitely has a place in politics today."

The most common recommendation for improvement was to have a clearer agenda explaining the purpose of the event. One participant, who considered the event good in general, noted, "I do agree with some of our constituents that felt they weren't clear on what was happening. Their involvement would have been different if they had understood that they would have been reviewing two proposals. They thought it would have been a forum wide open on health care."

Most liked the technology used to link the various locations and to tally results. One legislative staff member who attended was, "really impressed with the technology – how all the different sites were connected and how you got immediate results when they were asking questions. It was helpful to me because it's concrete evidence of what participants think at the time. Sometimes when people send us packets to our office about results, sometimes they don't get a thorough reading. So, it's helpful to be there and see the results for myself." Another legislative respondent thought the event was "cool, very innovative, and modern" and showed "that you can have input from all over logistically,

that big things are possible.” While one legislative participant thought that people enjoyed the technology, she was concerned that there was “so much focus on the technology and its sexiness, that there was a lack of understanding about the crowd.” Finally, one participant felt the system was helpful in creating the end product, but was unsure of its usefulness during the event.

CaliforniaSpeaks briefings helped to explain purpose of event

Of the respondents who had participated in a briefing, most said they were useful, particularly the local ones. Briefings appeared to be more helpful to legislative staff than to administrative staff who were helping to organize the event. One legislative respondent felt the briefings were “Tremendously helpful. To encourage people to participate in the process just in general (even if not at this event because you had to be invited), to speak out, that people really are listening to the average person. Getting that idea across was one of the biggest benefits.” Another thought that the briefings were good and appreciated the opportunity to learn about the event and understand its intent. One legislative staff member believed that the local briefing was helpful and “much more community minded” whereas the statewide briefing was “more to get elected officials to attend.” While most appreciated the level of detail in the briefings, one felt that simply explaining that “it’s a neutral organization that wants to get information about health care” was all they needed to know.

For those involved in calls related to the planning of the event, several suggested letting the people at the local level have more control over the format. One explained that the experiences of one state did not mean that the same operations would work in California. While three respondents appreciated the opportunities to discuss the event in advance, one person felt that to make the event truly unbiased and independent, the policymakers should have less involvement in shaping the agenda.

Well-written final report, but few had read it

Almost all of the respondents or their offices had received the final report, but only four people had actually read it. All of the people who had read it felt it was well-written. One used the report and the information from the briefings to speak intelligently with constituent groups and was pleasantly surprised that the results weren’t “rigged”. Similarly, another person said that the report was “a good reference to have when talking to people about what constituents think about health care.” Another legislative respondent thought it was well-written, but didn’t capture the viewpoints of the single payer advocates. One health official believed that AmericaSpeaks “did a good job of distilling all of the discussion into a readable report.”

Event demonstrated importance of health care reform and built momentum

Although many respondents said it was hard to measure the impact of CaliforniaSpeaks on the health care reform debate, the value of the event most frequently mentioned was to provide people with an opportunity to share their opinions and for politicians to hear the viewpoints of the average Californian. One respondent described the event as helpful by

“just getting a sense of how the regular constituents think about health care. That was probably the best thing about it.” Another said, “I think it’s had a positive effect... it was successful in showing lawmakers and decision-makers that people are concerned about health care and that something needs to be done.” Several also reported that the event reinforced what they had heard from other groups. As one administrative representative explained, “It came at an important time and validates what we’ve been talking about — that health care reform was important and non-partisan.” Another felt that the value to her personally was in reinforcing “what the constituents already told me. At our town hall, there were only about 200 people. Having thousands was great.” Creating momentum was another impact frequently mentioned. One stated that “CaliforniaSpeaks, in a short period, generated lots of momentum,” while another believed, “It has been good to advance the dialogue and keep it moving.”

Some respondents were unsure how the event impacted the political process because many politicians had already formed their opinions or proposals prior to the event. One legislative respondent believed that the key themes were already included in the proposed bills and thought that the recommendations were too general to further refine the legislation. He explained, “Saying ‘increased access’ is really general, so what does that mean? Everybody can say that’s what they’re for.” Similarly, one administrative official thought it was helpful to the administration but was not sure about its relevance to legislative colleagues. As the official replied, “I just don’t know how much it was on their radar. We can point to the participation of 4000 people with pride, but if no one ends up talking about it, then it doesn’t necessarily make much difference.”

While those who noted the lack of single payer involvement also felt that the event had little impact, one legislative staff member said that the event had helped to galvanize the single payer advocates in their region to force the state to think seriously about their views. In fact, the respondent said that several people felt empowered after CaliforniaSpeaks because they were able to get the forum organizers to include a discussion of a single payer plan.

Suggestions for future public engagement efforts

The three most common suggestions for future activities were to start the conversation earlier in the political process, have a mechanism for continuing the conversation after the event, and to provide politicians with information that is “easy to digest.” Four recommended beginning the discussion earlier or with no assumptions, such as presuming that insurance companies are automatically involved in health care. As one legislative staff member clarified, “I feel like we need to take a step back. I would like the conversation to be from a place where nothing is assumed or taken for granted.” Likewise, by holding the event when politicians were just beginning to form their opinions regarding health care reform, the public’s input would have been more valuable.

Others wanted to ensure that the positive involvement of the participants continued after the end of the forum and that follow up activities were conducted to ensure that the results were disseminated to policymakers. As a representative from an advocacy organization recommended, “Involve someone who can take the ball and run with it.”

One legislative staff member wanted to hold more events and provide more follow up with participants. He said he always wanted to have more of a great event and suggested inviting “the same people from the first one and get their impressions of what’s happened in the past year.” Another legislative respondent would have liked in-person debriefings and a different legislative staff member would appreciate being updated about the results for their specific districts.

Three mentioned the demands on politicians’ time and noted that politicians want concise information. One said, “For me, personally, I want easy information quickly. So instead of mailing it, email a summary. If you want to tell us what people think from our district, YouTube is so we can see what people are saying.” Another felt it was important that groups “condense the issues and be able to pick out the main issues and highlights.”

Another common suggestion was to have a very clear agenda and purpose. Many said that participants were eager to have their voice heard and did not understand that only a couple legislative options would be considered. As one Republican legislative member stated, “It seemed as if they had a predetermined outcome and the event was built around that ‘finding’.” Similarly, both legislative and administrative respondents suggested allowing the local sites to have more control of the agenda.

While most respondents appreciated having a diverse audience, respondents from Republican offices recommended targeting specific subsets of the population with future events. One thought it would be interesting to hold an event just for Republicans or Democrats so that each party could explore the differences and distinctions within their group. The respondent thought having policymakers “exposed to the intricacies of this issue would be really good for them.” Another thought policymakers would be more likely to attend an event if the participants are known to be registered and likely voters. The legislative director stated, “There’s a political reality of those who vote in every election really having a say. We’re interested in high propensity voters.”

DISCUSSION

This analysis shows the significant opportunities for public participation in the policy process and the significant barriers to CaliforniaSpeaks faced in promoting that participation. CaliforniaSpeaks was a highly successful event. It achieved the outcomes it intended to achieve. It convened a diverse group of almost 4,000 participants in eight locations across the state. It provided them with an accessible overview of the major competing health care reform options and skillfully facilitated the participants through a process that resulted in a ranking of desired elements. Elected officials attended the event in most locations and there was media coverage. The policymakers interviewed for this assessment recognized these accomplishments and noted the importance of CaliforniaSpeaks in general and similar activities in the policy process. Although there were different perspectives on some of the logistics and the use of technology, the respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of work. CaliforniaSpeaks made possible the engagement of individual Californians in a policy debate that affects every resident of the state. According to the policymakers interviewed, that engagement created a sense of

political momentum, even urgency, in Sacramento as legislators and their staffs were reminded of the need for reform.

The policymakers had several suggestions about how to improve the effectiveness of CaliforniaSpeaks. The most consistent ones addressed the timing of the event and breadth of policy options considered. While neither of these considerations created major difficulties, they raised sufficient questions for more detailed discussion. Regarding the first issue, the event organizers timed it to coincide with a key vote in a special legislative session in late August 2007. According to a majority of the respondents, there was not sufficient time to digest the results, hear from constituents about their reactions to the results or develop any new policy options based on the participants' recommendations. Statewide meetings that began earlier and continued past a single session would have had a greater opportunity to influence policy. While this would certainly have been more expensive and run the risk of losing the newsworthiness of a single event, it might have increased the chances that community voices could be heard in time to be taken into account.

In considering the criteria for effective community engagement mechanisms should be in California, the policy respondents identified the diversity of the participants and the neutrality of the convener as the most important to them. Policymakers recognize that there can be barriers to public participation due to language, culture, class and location. The mechanisms they value most are those that allow the highest level of participation by all communities. The neutrality of the convener helps to ensure that the results of the process do not favor one outcome over another because of some bias of the convening group. These are important consideration for future public engagement in California policy-making.

Concern about the range of policy options considered goes beyond the questions raised by the single payer advocates. The legislative advocates for this position were unhappy that it was not given equal time. The CaliforniaSpeaks organizers were explicit in minimizing it since there was little political support for it and not likely to be enacted. Mastering the major concepts of the most feasible options was daunting enough. But limiting the range of options, even for laudable reasons, caused some of the respondents to question how truly neutral the event was. Other respondents questioned why some of the basic assumptions of health care reform were not more fully examined. Time constraints and process considerations apply to this concern as well. The dimensions of this issue are so vast that comprehensive discussion is not really possible in a single day with a diverse group of community members. In shaping the discussion to fit the event, however, CaliforniaSpeaks sacrificed a bit of credibility for efficiency. This tradeoff had a marginal impact on how the event was perceived by policymakers, especially those who had a stake in the policy position given full consideration.

CaliforniaSpeaks received general acclaim for the event and its ability to involve the public in meaningful policy debate. Despite the success of the process, external factors limited its impact on the policy outcome. Many of the legislators interviewed said that, while they appreciated the CaliforniaSpeaks results, they had already decided what their position on health care reform was. CaliforniaSpeaks arrived a little too late to fit into

the context of local political negotiations. The respondents also noted the unusually influential role of special interest groups, professional associations and advocates in this policy debate. The high fiscal stakes ensured a high level of involvement from organized interests. While this did not affect CaliforniaSpeaks capacity to mobilize public engagement, it seems to have reduced the policymakers' capacity to absorb it. A final consideration specific to health care reform is the complexity of the options under consideration. At one time in this process, five separate bills were under discussion in Sacramento, each with its own financing mechanisms. This complexity worked to discourage public participation in favor of negotiations among the professionals. None of these factors reflect on the effectiveness of CaliforniaSpeaks in focusing the public's desire for change. It did that job well. But that sense of public urgency did not achieve its ultimate political goal.

Respondents appeared to genuinely care about the opinions of the average Californian and were interested in ways to better engage and inform the public. CaliforniaSpeaks did an excellent job at creating an opportunity for this type of communication and involving a cross-section of the public as well as elected officials in an in-depth discussion about health care reform. The diversity of the participants, which was a critically important factor in the perceived value of any forum, enabled lawmakers to hear about the priorities and concerns from people across the state. The participants' commitment to the event helped to generate momentum around health care reform for both the public and the policymakers involved. Future efforts should capitalize on the results of this event by creating public involvement early and striving to maintain the momentum created throughout the process.

APPENDIX A: METHODS

A total of 30 people responded either by phone (n=25) or email (n=5). Respondents were selected from several different groups:

- Legislative staff who had participated in a CaliforniaSpeaks briefing and/or town hall event (n=10)
- Staff from legislative offices that had been targeted for participation by AmericaSpeaks, but did not attend (n=4)
- Staff from legislative offices in the same geographic vicinity as the eight town hall meetings that neither participated nor were targeted (n=5)
- Representatives of Governor Schwarzenegger's office who were involved with the event (n=3)
- Representatives from the Health & Human Services Agency and the Department of Health Care Services (n=3)
- Stakeholders from special interest groups and membership organizations who had been identified by AmericaSpeaks (n=6)

We repeatedly attempted to have respondents from all eight regions and to include both Democratic and Republican legislators. At least three attempts (email and phone) were made to contact an office. Two individuals declined to be interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews

Although every interview covered the same overall themes, each was modified depending upon the type of respondent (legislative, governmental, advocacy). The interviewers also would follow up with additional questions depending upon the respondents' level of familiarity with any particular topic. This flexibility in the structure enabled the interviewer to address unexpected responses and to clarify or expand upon an answer. Due to the open-ended structure of the majority of the questions, the numbers of responses presented in this report include only those who specifically discussed a particular topic. For example, although only two people mentioned using websites as a source of information, that does not signify that the other respondents disagreed. The interviews began with general questions regarding communication with constituents and what types of input influenced the health policy debate. These were followed by questions about CaliforniaSpeaks including the briefings, event, report, and impact on the health care reform process. Please see the attached document for a sample interview.

Online survey

In addition to conducting phone interviews, Harder+Company also sent staff at all legislative offices that had not completed a phone interview an online survey. The online survey covered the same topics as the semi-structured interviews and was designed to be completed in 5 minutes or less. Unlike the interviews, most questions provided specific multiple choice responses, but did provide several opportunities for comments. Please see the attached documents for a sample survey.

Limitations

Despite repeated attempts to speak with individuals from every region where CaliforniaSpeaks was held, we were unable to contact anyone from San Luis Obispo. In

addition, we cannot determine if the individuals who chose to respond were more likely to be familiar with the event, have stronger positive or negative opinions about the event, or to represent a particular political view than non-respondents. However, the diversity of respondents' backgrounds; the fact that individuals from Fresno, San Diego, Riverside, Sacramento, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Humboldt responded; and that both Republicans and Democrats were involved; signals that the following results represent a broad spectrum of stakeholder opinions.