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Leadership and Careful Analysis Are Required to Address California's Problems

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Californians may soon confront a ballot measure that would establish a constitutional convention. The advocates of this measure believe that state government in California has become so dysfunctional that it is necessary for the public to directly devise a solution to the problems the state faces.

There's no arguing that California faces multiple crises. The state budget is in terrible shape and is likely to remain so for years to come. The legislature is dominated

by partisan divide. There's little logic to the division of service-delivery and revenue-raising responsibilities between state and local government.

And yet, the push to establish a constitutional convention raises several key questions: Does this approach have a high likelihood of success? Can the state wait for as long as it would take for this approach to yield results? What are the risks of this approach?

The likely success or failure of a constitutional convention is difficult to predict. The answer will depend in part on what the citizens selected to participate in the convention think the problem is. Is it runaway spending? Insufficient revenue? Legislative term limits? The lack of a rainy-day reserve? Proposition 13?

What is the likelihood that 400 randomly selected citizens will reach consensus over the key causes of the state's problems and be able to devise sensible solutions the voters will embrace? I admit to a certain degree of skepticism.

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I believe the solution in part requires leadership around the need to make choices and pay for the services we want. Whether this leadership would emerge from a randomly selected group remains to be seen.

But the solution also requires careful study of the current governance structure in California to understand the problems that structure creates and whether we can learn from approaches in other states or countries.

Equally important is the issue of risks associated with the convention—chiefly of two sorts: First, the participants in the convention might fail to reach consensus, which would mean that the time spent getting the voters to approve the convention as well as the time for the convention itself to deliberate might yield nothing in the way of solutions.

Second, and perhaps more concerning, the convention might end up preoccupied by marginal concerns that offer little to address the challenges the state faces.

While many argue that the legislature is the cause of the state's current problems, it doesn't necessarily follow that a group of well-meaning citizens selected at random will be able to come up with the solutions.