Arizona Citizens’ Initiative Review

Morrison Institute for Public Policy last fall conducted Arizona’s first Citizens’ Initiative Review, a direct-democracy, citizen-participant project to help voters better understand complex ballot issues. The CIR exercise was held Sept. 18-21, 2014 at the Phoenix Convention Center in downtown Phoenix.

For the first time in more than three decades there was no voter initiative on the 2014 statewide ballot, so Arizona’s first CIR project focused on the Phoenix city government pension reform proposition. The issue of government pensions has garnered statewide and national interest, with the Phoenix measure’s outcome of Proposition 487 closely watched.

“This CIR project, which was in the works for two years, aligns perfectly with one of our renewed emphases – governance,” said Morrison Institute director Thom Reilly. “CIR gives voters a new tool to easily understand the pros and cons of a complex issue because fellow voters – not slick campaigns – share their thorough knowledge of the subject in everyday language.”

A Morrison Institute poll conducted just before the 2012 election identified a dire need for increased voter awareness concerning ballot measures. Nearly three-quarters of Arizona voters polled said they found ballot measures too complicated and confusing to fully comprehend. As a result, 60 percent use their limited knowledge to struggle through the propositions, while more than 20 percent don’t vote one way or the other. Some respondents (5.5 percent) said they just vote “no” on ballot propositions they feel they do not have enough information about to understand.

The CIR exercise is somewhat similar to a deliberation process by a jury. A representative sample of Phoenix’s demographics – including political party, ethnicity, age, gender and other factors - gathered to examine the complex ballot issue over three-and-a-half days. Fact sheets, neutral but expert presentations and panel discussions with various points of view were included in the exercise. Facilitators helped move the process forward but did not influence individual or group discussions or positions.
At the end of the process, the 20-member citizens’ panel came up with its key findings – both pro and con – regarding the initiative to offer to the public, using everyday but clear and concise language. The goal was to provide their fellow voters with unbiased and understandable factual information as an alternative to well-funded and often misleading campaigns associated with many ballot initiatives. CIR findings were posted on the Morrison Institute website and disseminated by news media.

Arizona’s CIR was modeled after the pilot program in Oregon, with Morrison Institute staff members observing that state’s CIR exercises in 2012 and 2014, both of which were facilitated by Healthy Democracy. The Oregon CIR project was awarded both the International Association for Public Participation’s Award for North American Project of the Year and Project of the Year internationally in 2013.

Healthy Democracy, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, helped secure funding for Arizona CIR related expenses and offered its knowledge, expertise and facilitating experience, but Arizona’s CIR project decidedly was “Arizona” in scope, mission and practice. For example, unlike in Oregon, Morrison Institute opted to list just the pros and cons of the initiative and not take a vote by panelists on whether to recommend its passage or defeat. The rationale was to keep the focus on the initiative key points and not the CIR panel vote, allowing voters to make up their own mind about the ballot measure.

An independent evaluation was conducted on Arizona’s CIR, as has been done in Oregon, to ensure the integrity and transparency of the exercise, which was open to the public and news media for observation. There also was an in-house evaluation that the impact CIR had on panelists. Both evaluations will be used in improving Arizona’s CIR for the 2016 election, when there likely will be several key statewide ballots.

Arizona’s CIR Project was aided by input from its nonpartisan advisory board, including:

- Thomas Collins, Executive Director, Arizona Clean Elections Commission
- Rivko Knox, League of Women Voters of Arizona
- Bill Montgomery, Maricopa County Attorney
- Alberto Olivas, Maricopa County Community Colleges District Center for Civic Participation
- Jane Prescott-Smith, Managing Director, National Institute for Civil Discourse
- Karen Schroeder, ASU Adjunct Professor, School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning
- Daniel Schugurensky, ASU Professor, Schools of Public Affairs and Social Transformation

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