

VIEWPOINTS

MAKING GOVERNMENT WORK

Good ideas exist to get Arizona back on track

All state's leaders need to do is pay attention to them

With Arizona's 100th anniversary on the horizon, big-thinking organizations and people devoted time this past year trying to figure out how to fix, improve and reform government.

Recommendations emanating from The Arizona We Want, the O'Connor House Project, Town Hall and others all speak to common-sense ways to get a better state government. They offered good ideas, including eliminating term limits, changing the primary system, effecting pay raises for elected officials, fixing Clean Elections, streamlining the executive branch, improving the budget process and dozens more.

Each was intended to make government more reflective of today's needs and give all its branches the tools they need to grapple with complicated state issues and our economic crisis.

The problem with improving government is not coming up with ideas about what to do. We have plenty of good ideas. It's coming up with the means to implement them.

Most of these ideas require a state constitutional change and, therefore, a vote of the people. The lessons of the past election may prove useful as we consider how to move forward.

Good government ideas typically do not have a natural constituency to support them. Surveys show that nearly everyone thinks our government should be better and more responsive than it is today, but very few people are willing to write big checks to support a campaign to implement such reforms, making it difficult to get the message out to voters.

A key lesson of the November election, when reform ideas to improve the initiative process, create a lieutenant governor and allow state trust land to be used to save our military bases were defeated, is that without a rigorous and typically ex-

pensive campaign to educate voters about why they should support an idea, voters will default to "no" when it comes to issues on the ballot.

We have some of the most liberal initiative and referendum laws in the nation.

The net result is that we've become lab rats for experimental reforms of every stripe, financed largely by deep-pocketed, out-of-state special interests.

So, a second lesson from the successful November ballot measures: There has to be something in it for somebody.

The Healthcare Freedom Act had huge support from the medical community and others who oppose President Barack Obama's health-care plan; the card-check proposal had vigorous anti-union support; medical marijuana was part of a larger national campaign. These successful campaigns were all primarily funded by out-of-state, special-interest money.

Similarly, in previous years, we have seen Arizona's ballot process largely co-opted by well-financed campaigns designed to avoid the Legislature altogether and change the laws by direct democracy. This is how we got measures that actually make government more difficult to deal with and less responsive, including the Voter Protection Act, Clean Elections, the supermajority requirement to raise taxes, term limits and the Independent Redistricting Commission.

But it is our "republican" form of government that has taken the most direct hit. The initiative process has evolved into a much more powerful beast than a vote of the Legislature. Arizona's initiative laws, originally envisioned as the citizen's only route to direct democracy, have instead become a special-interest tool and should be overhauled.

Similarly, the referendum provisions that allow the Legislature to send ideas directly to the ballot should be scrubbed and updated to rein in special-interest influences.

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