



## CITIZENS ASSEMBLY: AN EFFECTIVE VEHICLE FOR POLITICAL REFORM

### THE PROBLEM

A number of promising reforms have been proposed for making the California political system more representative and responsive—from independent redistricting, term limits, and open primaries to more modern electoral systems and public financing of campaigns—but all face the same obstacle: entrenched interests, including elected lawmakers, who benefit from the status quo.

One means of removing partisanship and incumbent protectionism from the political reform process is known as a Citizens Assembly, which convenes a body of average citizens empowered to formally propose electoral reforms that politicians have too strong a conflict of interest to propose themselves. Already successfully employed in British Columbia, California's legislature is now considering a Citizen Assembly measure of its own.

### THE BRITISH COLUMBIA MODEL

The Citizens Assembly in British Columbia was established by the legislature, with a mandate to focus on electoral reform. The assembly's 160 members were chosen by a random selection process, just like a jury pool. First there was a draw of 100 men and 100 women from all of the province's 79 electoral districts, asking how many would agree to serve. Eventually one man and one woman were selected from each of the 79 districts, and two more members were added to ensure representation of native Canadians, a total of 160 members.

**Three phases.** The Assembly's tenure was divided into three phases: first, learning

about reform from noted experts, January-March 2004; second, over 50 public hearings, May-June; and third, final deliberations, Sept-Nov. They met on weekends, their expenses and a per diem of about \$1000 per month paid by the government. They were addressed by top experts from all political perspectives who gave them the benefit of their knowledge and analysis.

Nearly 11 months later in December 2004 the Assembly delivered its final report. It voted 146-7 to toss out its longtime winner-take-all, single-seat district electoral system and replace it with a proportional representation system. "This really is power to the people," stated Jack Blaney, the chair of the Citizens Assembly.

By previous agreement, the Assembly's proposal *automatically* was submitted by the Legislature directly to the voters in a referendum in May 2005. Because the Citizens Assembly was composed of average citizens, their recommendation had tremendous legitimacy with the public. A strong 58 percent of voters supported the measure, though 60 percent was needed for passage. But this unleashed such reform momentum that the legislature has placed the proposal back on the ballot, this time with funding devoted to a public education campaign.

The Citizens Assembly in British Columbia focused specifically on the electoral system, but the focus just as well could have been on other aspects of the political system, such as on

redistricting reform, campaign finance reform, the primary system, term limits, or electoral systems such as instant runoff voting (as well as proportional voting).

*Most importantly, the Citizens Assembly fostered a deliberative process of reform that removed partisanship, special interests and incumbent protectionism from the mix, and made average people the center of the process.*

## **THE CALIFORNIA PROPOSAL**

A bill has been introduced into California's state legislature, ACA 28, calling for a Citizens Assembly. Under the provisions of this legislation, the Secretary of State would coordinate with a team of academic experts to ensure a representative sample of Californians drawn from voter rolls. 100 Californians would be randomly selected from each of the 80 state Assembly legislative districts, asking who is willing to serve. Eventually one man and one woman would be selected from each of the 80 districts. In addition, up to 10 more members would be added from the randomly selected pool to ensure that the Citizens Assembly represents the diversity of California.

Unlike a constitutional convention that has a broad mandate, the California Citizens Assembly would be limited to proposing electoral reforms only, such as an independent redistricting commission, campaign finance or term limits reform, reform of the electoral system, or open primaries. The California Citizens Assembly would start by identifying the important democratic goals to achieve, such as a more representative legislature, a less polarized representative body, more competitive choices for voters, and a reduction in special interest influence.

After months of study, learning about reform from noted experts, and a series of

public hearings all around the state, the Citizens Assembly would then translate these goals into one or more ballot measures proposing specific political reforms.

Once the Citizens Assembly adopts a ballot measure or measures, those would be submitted to the state legislature for further review and potential revision. But any legislative changes would need to be approved by the Citizens Assembly, a step that would maintain the independence of their work. Ultimately voters would have the final say by deciding whether to vote yes or no on the proposed reforms, following a statewide campaign that would give everyone a chance to be heard.

## **SOLVING THE DILEMMA OF REFORM**

The Citizens Assembly solves a real dilemma: How do we enact meaningful political reform when political parties and their leaders have conflicts of interest that induce them to favor the status quo or, even worse, to manipulate the rules in their favor? While some propose using voter initiatives to go around special interests that often dominate government, the best solution is using a Citizens Assembly to reform the electoral process in a way that increases the chances we will elect political leaders who are more representative and provide better governance.

Citizens Assemblies could be important vehicles for modernizing our political system because *trust is placed in a deliberative process involving average citizens who have more credibility than the political class.*