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In Canada, regular folks are put to work on reforms

By Steven Hill

Despite voters rejecting Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's attempts to end-run the Legislature, that does not mean voters don't want change. California's political leaders must try to pick up the pieces of what is left of state politics. The challenges are daunting, particularly because both the governor and Legislature have lost so much credibility.

The question is: How do we move forward? One of the solutions may lie across the border in Canada. It's called a Citizens' Assembly, and it was on display last year in the province of British Columbia. The government there turned over to the people the task of basic political reform, and by doing so took the partisanship out of the process, something California badly needs.

Here's how it worked: The government randomly selected 160 average citizens to participate in the Citizens' Assembly, like selecting a jury pool. The Assembly had 80 women and 80 men from all of the province's 79 electoral districts. It was an independent, non-partisan body charged with a particular focus: to examine British Columbia's electoral system, and how their winner-take-all system was performing in determining who got elected to the Legislature.

This effort was unique. Often such task forces are dominated by the usual political insiders or good-government activists. Nowhere in the world had randomly selected citizens with no history of interest in electoral reform been so empowered to shape major proposals. Yet the work of the Assembly was unanimously endorsed by the political parties in the Legislature and community leaders.

The Assembly's tenure was divided into three phases: Learning about reform, January-March 2004; public hearings, May-June; and deliberations, September-November. They met on weekends, their expenses and a small per diem paid for by the government. They were visited by top experts from all political perspectives who gave them the benefit of their knowledge and analysis.

The Assembly delivered a final report in December 2004. 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," enthused Jack Blaney, the chair of the Citizens' Assembly.

The Assembly's proposal was submitted by the legislature directly to the voters in a referendum last May. Because the Citizens' Assembly was composed of average citizens, their recommendation had tremendous legitimacy with the public. A robust 58 percent of voters supported the measure.

The Citizens' Assembly in British Columbia focused on the electoral system, but the focus just as well could have been on other aspects of the political system. In California, a Citizens Assembly could focus on redistricting reform or campaign finance reform; or reforming our broken primary system and the electoral system.

The Citizens' Assembly solves a real dilemma: How do we enact meaningful political reform, which California so badly needs, when both the governor and the Legislature have conflicts of interest that induce them to manipulate the rules in their favor?

Citizens' Assemblies could be important vehicles for modernizing our political system because trust is placed in average citizens who have more credibility than the political class. If you truly believe in democracy, that's where trust belongs.

In the mid-1990s, a California Constitutional Revision Commission deliberated on some of these fundamental issues, but it was too timid and politically weak to enact change. The Citizens' Assembly points the direction that Schwarzenegger and Democrats in the Legislature should lead. The governor opened the debate with redistricting reform, but now is the time to inject fairness and non-partisanship into state politics. What better way than by establishing a Citizens' Assembly that empowers average citizens to decide what political reform is best for California?

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