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Plan would let citizens change state government

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What would it take to straighten out state government, and in the process re-engage California's disaffected voters? Two Assembly members believe they know where the answer lies: with voters.

The two are Democrat Joe Canciamilla of Pittsburg and Republican Keith Richman of Northridge, who plan to put together a citizens' assembly made up of nonpoliticians who would solicit ideas statewide and come up with a plan to change whatever needs changing in state government.

What a concept. If there's one true thing to be said about state government, it's that insiders aren't about to make big changes because, though things aren't working well for voters, the insiders are doing fine.

The two assemblymen are drafting legislation that would create such a citizens' assembly, but they are realistic about its prospects in the Legislature, which are just about zero. If, as expected, legislators reject the idea, they intend to raise money from foundations and start a petition campaign to put an initiative on the ballot.

Canciamilla and Richman have their own ideas about what should be changed. First would be the system by which legislators gerrymander election districts and shape campaign finance laws to ensure their own re-election. They also would like to replace the present system with a Legislature elected proportionately, like the governments of Europe, to better reflect the views of voters.

But Canciamilla and Richman say they don't intend to impose their views on the process. The recommendations would be up to the citizens' assembly, and voters would make the final decision. They and others recognize that the outcome wouldn't be all that certain.

If you thought the costly campaigning against Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's initiatives in the recent special election got rough, wait until you see what the special interests would do to this approach. Nobody wants voters to decide their own fates except, possibly, the voters.

Also, although voters turn out in greater numbers in countries with proportional representation, it isn't clear that if a reform initiative got approved that California voters would start showing up at the polls. But even if they didn't, and continued leaving everything up to their representatives, at least the representatives would be voter-selected, rather than the product of a polarized and interest-beholden two-party system.

Canciamilla and Richman have worked together before on bipartisan issues, with mixed results. This time, their ideas have attracted support from distinguished academics and think tanks, including the New America Foundation, which supports efforts to reflect the political will of centrist voters. If the plan works, a proposed amendment to the state's constitution could be ready for the November 2008 ballot.

It is small wonder that some voters are cynical or apathetic about a system that seems unresponsive to their votes. Their representatives themselves seem resigned, if not casually indifferent, toward going against party bosses and doing what they believe is right.

Well, that's not right. Maybe, with a little help from a couple of assemblymen acting on their consciences, voters will do something about it.