

# Lessons from a Canadian experiment in democracy

BY JOHN GASTIL AND NED CROSBY  
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**W**ITH the election over, many Washingtonians are relieved to put politics behind them. Many grew weary of partisan rancor and the half-truths that littered the campaign trail like confetti. But we hope this past election can serve as an opportunity to look for a better way of conducting politics in our state.

For civic inspiration, we suggest looking north. While we Washingtonians tinkered with our primary system through the Legislature, the courts and Initiative 872, British Columbia took a novel approach to redesigning its electoral system.

In 2003, the B.C. government established a Citizens' Assembly, made up of 160 randomly selected citizens — one man and one woman from each electoral district, plus two at-large Aboriginal members. On Oct. 24, the assembly reached an important milestone

in its historic experiment by voting 146-7 to recommend replacing the current system with a "single transferable vote" model, which lets voters rank candidates within multimember districts. If the B.C. electorate approves this new model in May, the provincial government will make it law.

The assembly's plan emerged from months of deliberation and hearings (which are accessible online at [www.citizensassembly.bc.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca)). The plan deftly addresses the most contentious issues regarding B.C. elections.

The proposed system establishes four-to-seven-member districts in urban areas, and two-to-three-member districts in sparsely populated regions. This reassures rural residents, who wanted to keep their districts of manageable size.

At the same time, the system prepares a seat at the table for any third party or

independent candidate who garners enough support. Assigning seats in proportion to a candidate's share of the vote gives third parties and independents a voice.

By taking into account the concerns of citizens from across the entire province, the assembly achieved a 95-percent supermajority vote in favor of its final proposal.

The substance of the proposal merits attention, but we can learn larger lessons from the assembly process itself:

- A seemingly apathetic public can come alive when presented with a real opportunity for civic action. Though the assembly members had their expenses covered, they attended many meetings at considerable inconvenience. Attendance was nearly perfect.

- Ordinary citizens are capable of careful deliberation and sound policy judgments. Whereas we often go to the polls lack-

ing important information about the initiatives we're voting on, the assembly members became knowledgeable on the world's different voting systems, and they developed a nuanced understanding of their province.

- On controversial matters, it is sometimes easier for citizens to make bold recommendations than it is for our legislators or executives. After all, when the BC Liberals won 77 of 79 legislative seats in 2001, who would have trusted them to retool the voting system in a way that is fair to all parties?

Imagine what we could do here in Washington if we followed this exam-

ple. A cross-section of the public could examine our own electoral system. I-872 may have settled one question (for the moment), but we should consider ideas to improve our process.

Should there be instant-runoff voting, so that a vote for a third-party candidate is not "wasted"? Should there be a "citizens initiative review," allowing a microcosm of the public to review each statewide initiative and report back to us in the voters pamphlet?

We could convene an assembly to draft guidelines for our tax system. The briar patch of local, regional and state taxing authorities and policies has created a system that nobody in Washington supports. A gathering like the B.C. Citizens' Assembly could cut through the thicket and craft a fiscal framework that the larger public could support.

Those who suspect that deliberation is better suited to Canadians than Americans suffer from either self-pity or envy. Across the United States, the Jefferson Center in Minneapolis has conducted citizens' juries in which randomly selected citizens effectively tackle complex public-policy issues.

In 1993, for example, the center facilitated a national citizens' jury in Washington, D.C., which reviewed the federal budget and made recommendations to Congress. Commenting on this project in *The Washington Post*, columnist William Raspberry noted, "This citizens' jury has done what the Founding Fathers intended Congress to do.... The politicians can't do what has to be done. The people can't afford not to."

For their time, the Founding Fathers had a great trust in the American people. Let's follow our Founders' faith — and our Canadian neighbors' example — and bring together Washington citizens to deliberate on our most pressing issues. Together, we can make our own modest contribution to the modern history of democratic innovation.

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