On Politics

Hey, Washingtonians: Show Some Initiative!

By John Gastil and Ned Crosby

What's your favorite complaint about Washington politics? Perhaps the initiative process, better at producing confusion than sound policy? Or maybe the regressive game of fiscal Twister some call a “tax system”?

The standard line in Olympia is that you'd best learn to live with these problems. Neither living nor working in Olympia, we blithely propose a means of addressing both at the same time. To do so, we beg indulgence to travel briefly to Canada (with a valid passport, of course). Last year, the British Columbia government convened a Citizens’ Assembly to make recommendations on the province's electoral system. The assembly consisted of 160 randomly selected citizens, a man and woman from each district, plus two at-large aboriginal members.

In October the Citizens’ Assembly voted 146-7 in favor of replacing the system with a single-transferable vote model, which lets voters rank candidates within multimember districts. If your first choice does poorly, your vote moves to your second choice, and so on. If your first choice receives more votes than needed, a fraction of your second-choice vote is taken into account, and so forth. Sounds complicated, but Australians and others who use it never have to worry about “throwing away” votes on shoos-ins or also-rans. The assembly’s proposal was submitted as a referendum in the May 17 B.C. general election. Though it won an impressive overall 57% of the vote, the Legislature had set the bar at 60%.

Still, creating the Citizens’ Assembly was a bold step, and Canadians know when they see a good idea. After all, they popularized cursive—toward the extent that’s possible. Ontario is now considering an assembly. We should swallow some humble (apple) pie ourselves and give it a try.

Why is the Citizens’ Assembly an improvement over our initiative process? It puts deliberation at the heart of direct democracy. Even the strongest foes of initiatives must admit representatives often do a poor job of addressing issues that endanger their reelection. With the Legislature closely divided and a recent nail-biter of a gubernatorial election, neither party can afford many risks. For issues the Legislature cannot resolve, the Citizens’ Assembly offers a compromise: Let a deliberative body of citizens draft a statewide referendum.

At the same time, the assembly can make peace with those who, like Tim Eyman, dearly love the initiative process and are suspicious of any attempt to reform it. The assembly does not circumvent the initiative system; it just improves it. A broad cross section of citizens puts an initiative on the ballot without the taint of paid signature gatherers. If anything, the assembly strengthens the general public’s role.

Say we convene a Washington Citizens’ Assembly. The next thing we need is a problem—something complex but well studied, contentious but resolvable. Something lawmakers have been unable (or unwilling?) to tackle.

Our state’s revenue system is a perfect candidate. Every year in Olympia, new budgetary contortions add up to make a mess of our tax and revenue system. In 2001 the Legislature created a Tax Structure Study Committee, composed of legislators, academics and experts and chaired by William H. Gates Sr. The committee confirmed that our system is inefficient and riddled with inequities. It found that the lowest-income households lose 15.7% of their income to total excise and property taxes, whereas high-income households pay just over 4%. A Citizens’ Assembly could put a set of reforms before the public in a statewide referendum.

Good ideas draw skeptics like moths to the porch light, but we’ve got bug zappers.

True, no governor or legislature could accept something this radical—giving citizens a free pass to draft tax reforms. But limits could be placed. The assembly could, for example, be allowed to deal with only revenues and not expenditures, and its recommendations could have to be revenue neutral. Final recommendations could require a two-thirds assembly vote.

No legislature would pass a major tax-revenue lift—other than a tax cut—given the hold holbies have on them. That is why the governor should make a promise similar to that made by the B.C. government: If the assembly’s recommendations are supported by a sufficient majority of assembly members, the governor will do her best to put it on a statewide ballot.

Why would any legislature entrust even more of their lawmaking power to the people? Trust in government is falling, and initiatives are eroding the Legislature’s power. When lawmakers fail to take on major issues, the public turns to initiatives. Sponsoring a Citizens’ Assembly would demonstrate a bit of faith in the people. Showing trust engenders trust.

Of course, there’s no guarantee the general public would support an assembly referendum, however good it might be. This lends credence to amending the B.C. model slightly. The larger public is unlikely to be aware of the assembly’s deliberations. In B.C., polls conducted just days before the May election showed that the assembly referendum was passing 2-1 among those who knew about the measure; however, as many as 41 percent were undecided or unaware of it. In the end, many who voted against the referendum said they simply did not know enough about it.

And that’s despite the fact that being under-informed is not exactly “a Canadian thing.” Just a week before the 2003 general election, we [the authors] commissioned a survey of 400 likely voters in King County. A majority could not name a single measure on the ballot, even though nearly all respondents voted a few days later on two statewide measures, one King County amendment and several local measures.

To make the Citizens’ Assembly process more effective, the panel’s recommendations would need to be distributed, through pamphlets and electronic media. Even without adequate publicity, the B.C. assembly process led 57% of voters to back an unfamiliar electoral system. With even a modest publicity budget provided in its charter, an assembly would have a good chance of securing majority support.

No democratic reform goes forward with certainty. But given our state’s experience with the initiative process and the intractability of our revenue problems, the time is right for a Washington Citizens’ Assembly. L & P

—John Gastil (jgastil@uw.washington.edu) is associate professor of communications at UW and coeditor of The Deliberative Democracy Handbook (Jossey-Bass, 2005). Ned Crosby (crosney@usinternet.com) of Port Townsend is founder of the Jefferson Center, and author of Healthy Democracy: Bringing Trustworthy Information to the Voters of America (Beaver's Pond, 2002). Despite having limited experience at the sport, both authors are willing to settle any disputes regarding this proposal at the Granite Curling Club in Seattle.