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THE BOSTON GLOBE

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Citizen
Congress

DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL candidate John Edwards unveiled a "One Democracy" initiative last week to enlarge the role of ordinary Americans in politics. The "Citizen Congress" is the most original part of this policy. If elected, he would convene millions of Americans in town halls throughout the country every other year to deliberate and advise public leaders on difficult issues such as healthcare, poverty, and foreign affairs.

The idea that government should talk directly to citizens about political issues, and that citizens should talk to each other, has the potential to reinvigorate American democracy. Citizen participation through influential assemblies such as Citizen Congresses would address three critical failings of the political system.

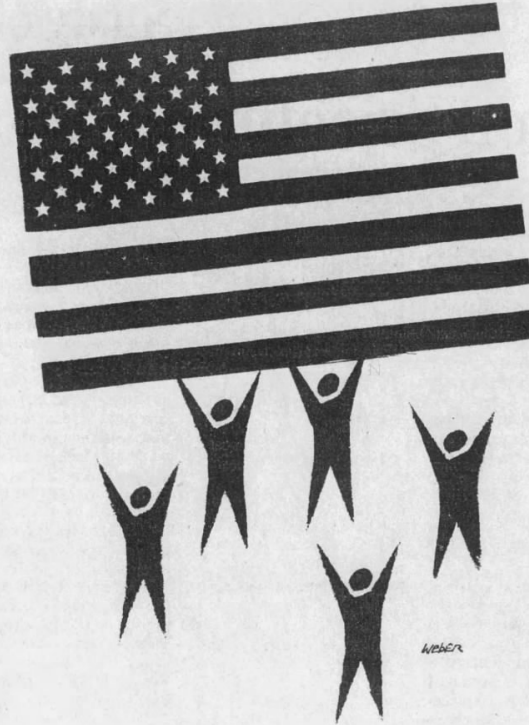
First, people often have conflicting values, contradictory preferences, and misinformed views. Many want both low taxes and good schools, healthcare, and smooth roads. Well-organized deliberations can provide citizens with accurate, balanced information and help people reach what Daniel Yankelovich called sound "public judgment." Through deliberation, citizens with conflicting priorities and views can come to appreciate the reasons and arguments of the other side.

In a prelude to the current healthcare debate, for example, the state of Oregon expanded its public health insurance program to cover many more low-income families several years ago. With limited funds, however, Oregonians faced important trade-offs: should kidney replacement, end-of-life therapy, or preventative care take priority?

Instead of settling the matter by legislative wrangling or some back-room deal between patient advocates and health industry lobbyists, hundreds of Oregonians met in an extended series of community meetings.

Values such as maintaining quality of life and preventing diseases emerged as priorities. In part because the citizens' recommendations guided the subsequent healthcare plan, it enjoyed a level of public support that eluded Senator Hillary Clinton in the 1990s and other would-be healthcare reformers since.

Second, the political system produces many laws and policies that favor a few special interests at the expense of the majority of Americans: manufacturers over consumers; those in the education business over students and parents; medical providers and insurers over patients and their families; and politicians over voters. With the rules governing elections, voters have an interest in creating competitive elections to motivate candidates to represent them



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well. Sitting politicians have a strong interest in creating rules such as electoral district boundaries that get them reelected. In part because politicians, not voters, make the rules of democracy, congressional incumbents who seek reelection win 98 percent of the time.

When the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario sought to reform their electoral systems recently, they created Citizens' Assemblies to develop new voting rules rather than having politicians decide. The British Columbia Assembly had 160 members and 103 people participated in the Ontario Assembly. In both cases, members were randomly selected, like juries in the United States. Each assembly met for several months. Their final recommen-

dations were not merely advisory; they went straight to voters in popular referendums.

Third, Americans increasingly distrust their political system and find it illegitimate. In a March 2007 poll by The Pew Charitable Trusts, only 34 percent of Americans said that they believe government "cares about what people like me think," down from 47 percent in 1987.

According to a July 2007 CBS News/NYT Poll, the percentage of Americans who think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time" has declined to 24 percent in 2007 from

around 75 percent in the early 1960s. In 1969, only 29 percent of Americans agreed that "the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves" rather than "for the benefit of all." By 2004, that figure had risen to 56 percent.

If they become prominent and credible, Citizen congresses and assemblies have the potential to help connect Americans to their government and increase trust in public institutions. If Americans see each other deliberating sensibly about critical issues and public leaders heed what they say, it will be palpable evidence that government really does care about what ordinary people think.

Political leaders in Canada, Britain, Brazil, and many other countries have already recognized the potential of public participation and instituted important new ways for citizens to influence government. Rather than being the world leader in democracy, America is lagging behind in its democratic imagination and ingenuity. Edwards's proposal marks an important, if modest, step to catch up. Perhaps it will empower ordinary Americans in the political process and, eventually, make America an example of democracy that is truly worth following.

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