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## Government **BY** the people



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**Fewer than one in four Americans expect Washington to "do what is right" most of the time, according to a July 2007 CBS poll. A Pew Research Center...**

By [John Gastil](#)

Fewer than one in four Americans expect Washington to “do what is right” most of the time, according to a July 2007 CBS poll. A Pew Research Center survey in March found that only one in three Americans believe the federal government “cares about what people like me think.” Those are grim statistics for a nation once heralded as the global icon of democracy.

The presidential candidates have yet to tap successfully into this wellspring of alienation, but this past Saturday in Keene, N.H., Democratic candidate John Edwards launched the One Democracy Initiative to do just that.

Among the items featured on the Edwards reformgasbord are full public financing and free airtime for congressional candidates, new restrictions on lobbyists, and items seasoned for the Democratic palate, such as paper trails for electronic voting machines.

The proposal with top billing in the One Democracy Initiative merits special attention. Edwards pledges to create a “Citizen Congress” that would bring together 1 million citizens in a network of local town halls and online forums. The idea is to draw citizens back into the business of governing by giving us a special responsibility for deliberating on federal policy priorities.

At the present time, our elected officials record our sentiments through polls, talk radio, blogs, ad hoc public forums and the blunt instrument of elections. The public voice Washington hears is already thrice filtered, by special-interest campaigns, media frames and politicians themselves.

Edwards proposes an alternative means of public expression in American politics. I say American politics because other nations have already undertaken reforms like the Citizen Congress. While Edwards was delivering his speech in New Hampshire, the European Union was holding a “Deliberative Poll,” in which hundreds of randomly selected citizens speaking 21 different languages discussed their region’s future. Federal governments from Denmark to Australia to Brazil have experimented successfully with a variety of new designs for public deliberation, as have many communities in the U.S. and Canada.

The immediate inspiration for Edwards appears to be the “21st Century Town Meeting” developed by the civic organization AmericaSpeaks. Edwards refers to this when he cites the “citizen-centered projects” that have “given ordinary people a voice in designs for the World Trade Center memorial, the redevelopment of New Orleans, [and] health-care reform in California.”

If it follows this model, the Citizen Congress will invite Americans to participate in policy-oriented public meetings. Using modern communication technology to synchronize geographically dispersed venues, the congress will let people seated in

small discussion groups merge their voices into a large national forum that gradually moves — over the course of a long day — from recording public concerns to setting broad policy priorities.

Even this much is speculation, however. Edwards' proposal is currently a 150-word sketch on a campaign Web site. At this stage, I find myself in the same position as a fan who discovered and adored a garage band before it went mainstream. Having studied deliberative reforms for 15 years, I hope that Edwards' proposal remains true to its roots. The Citizen Congress can satisfy this hard-core fan only if its final form is transparent, representative, deliberative, directive and influential.

Transparency requires that the congress' procedures be open to scrutiny. After all, this reform is about restoring public trust.

To ensure the congress is representative, it should mix open-invitation events with smaller ones that use random samples to validate the work of larger bodies.

To deliberate in depth, the congress must have ample information and time. The most successful citizen deliberation involves weeklong (or longer) meetings, rather than exclusively holding one-day wonders.

Each session, the congress must also develop a clear policy directive, lest its advice be misunderstood, misrepresented or ignored.

In the end, the congress must have influence. Edwards proposes creating an advisory body, but if Washington does not heed its advice, people will continue to tell pollsters that politicians do not “care about what people like me think.”

We should scrutinize the details of the One Democracy Initiative and ask other presidential candidates whether they, too, support its most important reforms. In particular, by looking closely at the Citizen Congress, we might help to shape this nascent institution into a deliberative body that helps Washington earn at least a measure of our trust.

*John Gastil is an associate professor in the University of Washington Department of Communication and co-editor of “The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century.”*

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