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## ***Saving Democracy: A Plan for Real Representation in America***

By Kevin O'Leary

The Howard Dean presidential campaign and the emergence of political blogs have altered the face of American politics. Taking the next step, Kevin O'Leary shows how the Internet can connect Americans to political power in an intelligent, deliberative fashion. *Saving Democracy* makes the case for combining the traditional town hall and the Internet to forge a new understanding of representative government that empowers citizens and bridges the enormous gap that now exists between the political elite and the average voter.

In 1787, the Anti-Federalists screamed when the Federalists proposed congressional districts of 30,000 citizens to 1 representative. In 2006, we would relish such intimacy. As the U.S. population grew from 3 million at its founding to nearly 300 million today, the size of congressional districts has exploded. In 1900, House districts were 195,000 in population; in 2000 they had more than tripled in size to an average of approximately 650,000. Congressional districts soon will inch toward 800,000. We could increase the size of the House of Representatives, which has counted 435 members since 1911. But we would have to quadruple the size of the House to make a difference and this would destroy the House as a functioning legislative body.

There is another solution to the dilemma of scale and it draws, in equal parts, on the magic of the Internet and the wisdom of the founders, in particular, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Imagine 100 individuals in every congressional district meeting two or three times a month to discuss the major issues facing the nation. Now link these face-to-face meetings together in a national network.

An on-going national town hall, this virtual citizen Assembly would allow the public to talk to itself and to deliberate about the major issues, for example, the war in Iraq, global warming, Social Security reform, or prescription drug benefits. On issues of magnitude, the public has to be consulted. A national town hall of 43,500 people (100 in 435 congressional districts) meeting face-to-face in their home districts and connected via the Internet nationally would allow this to happen.

The Assembly would empower the deliberations of ordinary citizens without surrendering the important features of our Constitution and representative system. The second stage of the reform would be the establishment of the People's House, which would have limited, but potent, legislative power. The People's House is the Assembly with a vote.

Today, polls measure public opinion on a multitude of issues. Yet, on serious questions of public policy opinion polls are a fraud. Polling techniques are wonderfully scientific, but what gets measured are unreflective, top-of-the-mind reactions. As Daniel Yankelovich has noted, we continue to lack a means for conducting serious deliberative conversations about the major issues of the day. A poll of the Assembly delegates, after they had taken time to study and debate an issue, would be worth consulting.

The Assembly reform would help us arrive at civic majorities focused on the broad public good that Madison sought as the alternative to narrow factions seeking private advantage. The Assembly would do so by linking Jefferson's vision of ward democracy to Madison's goal of a large national republic. Such a marriage of the founders and the Internet would help revitalize American democracy.

The '60s radicals railed against the system and demanded participatory democracy but they never figured out how to combine citizen activism with our representative institutions. *Saving Democracy* shows how it can be done and argues that the republican ideals of the founders demand it.

**Kevin O'Leary** is a journalist and political scientist. He is a research fellow at the Center for the Study of Democracy at UC Irvine and earned his Ph.D. at Yale University. National correspondent for *Campaigns & Elections*, he has been a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, editorial page editor for the *Pasadena Star-News*, and has written for *The American Prospect*.