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## Getting over post-election blues

Brian Martin

*University of Wollongong*, [bmartin@uow.edu.au](mailto:bmartin@uow.edu.au)

Lyn Carson

*University of Sydney*

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## Getting over post-election blues

Brian Martin, University of Wollongong  
Lyn Carson, University of Sydney

For many, it was a one-two punch: the October 2004 re-election of the Howard government in Australia followed a month later by the re-election of George W. Bush. Many expressed disappointment and demoralisation. US liberal magazine *The Nation* conveyed this feeling on the cover of its post-election issue with a picture of a cloudy night sky and the words 'four more years'. Meanwhile, commentators have written endless post-mortems and recommendations for 'next time'.

Mourning election results is understandable. But does voting make any real difference? Australian supporters of refugee rights were appalled by Howard government policies, but Labor didn't promise any big changes. After all, it was Labor that introduced detention centres. Many voters were alienated by the Iraq war and wanted to punish the Bush administration for its lies and violation of international law. But Democrat John Kerry promised only to be more effective in waging the war.

Disappointment with progressive parties didn't start with refugees and Iraq. In the early 1980s, Australian opponents of uranium mining hoped a Labor government would implement the party platform against mining. After Labor was elected in 1983, however, party power brokers changed the policy to continue with existing mines despite opposition from Labor's membership. Lyndon Johnson was elected US president in 1964 after a scare campaign about how conservative Republican Barry Goldwater might handle Vietnam but the victor proceeded to dramatically escalate the war. As Ralph Miliband (1969) once argued, progressive parties in office regularly act as a brake on pressures for radical action.

A focus on elections is disempowering because it encourages people to put their trust in leaders rather than taking action themselves. Might it be more productive to look at alternatives to electoral politics? Here's how grassroots action, participatory initiatives and new structures for participation might make a difference.

### GRASSROOTS ACTION

No matter who's in power, activists have plenty to do. Environmentalists, feminists and many others can rarely rely on governments to press their causes and win their struggles. Australian environmental activists have changed public opinion on whaling and forestry and often have done so without the support of a major party. In the United States, there is a remarkable level of activism in many communities that is seldom reported in the media and rarely taken up by the major parties. (For a similar view on the place of local activism in Britain, see Pattie et al. 2004.) And popular campaigning against the Iraq war in the face of government hostilities has arguably reduced the likelihood of further pre-emptive attacks (Kolb & Swords 2003).

Remember that most social movements—feminist, environmental, peace, Aboriginal, gay and lesbian, disability and others—did not develop out of political parties. Although links with party activists mattered in some cases, these movements have been successful because they have changed

popular consciousness and cut across party lines. One key exception is the labour movement, which inspired the Australian Labor Party and built longstanding ties to the Democratic Party in the United States. Nowadays, however, these parties are increasingly unreliable supporters of organised labour.

Often it's better for activists to campaign without a party allegiance because they are more capable of independent action and less likely to be seen as the enemy if the other party is in power. Some of the best activism goes on quietly behind the scenes, mobilising people, changing attitudes and gradually winning support. Much anti-smoking activism has been of this sort, quietly influencing the public and governments and saving many thousands of lives.

## **INITIATIVES FOR PARTICIPATION**

Citizen participation in decision-making can—and should—be much broader and deeper than electoral politics. Examples show us what's possible. Democratic forums, for instance, have been called deliberative, inclusive processes (DIPs) because they create decision-making space that brings together a cross-section of a community (usually via random selection) to deliberate on options with the assistance of a neutral moderator. One-off forums include citizens' juries, consensus conferences and 21st century town meetings. A citizens' jury involves around 12-25 people, planning cells attract 400 people in simultaneous gatherings and a 21st century town meeting can involve several thousand.

Locally, we've already seen illustrative experiments in deeper participation. Australia's first consensus conference was convened by the Australian Museum in 1999 on the subject of genetically modified organisms in the food chain. It involved three days of deliberation following expert presentations and interrogation. And the southern hemisphere's first 21st century town meeting was convened by the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure of Western Australia in 2003 to consider how Perth could become the world's most liveable city by 2030. Over 1,000 people gathered in a passenger terminal in Fremantle to work in small groups linked electronically to a 'theme team' that projected decisions via large-screens back to the entire group. Recommendations from the meeting were accepted by the Minister and the Cabinet (Carson & Hartz-Karp 2005).

Other organisations can follow these leads. Corporations are able to integrate DIPs into their organisational structures and involve workers directly in decisions that affect them. One participatory method, the World Café, has been used routinely by one US corporation for collective decision-making that maximises staff input and cross-fertilisation of ideas (Brown 2005). At the same time, non-government organisations like Oxfam Australia convene youth parliaments (which include online deliberative forums) to investigate how to directly involve members in policy development. Southern Cross University in Lismore recently experimented with policy juries—randomly selecting academics and bringing them together for a day's deliberations—to assist in developing the University's research plan.

## **NEW STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION**

Although party politics may disappoint, inclusive government may offer a way forward. A high level of citizen participation can be sustained if there are suitable structures to encourage it. Some governments are taking participatory alternatives to electoral democracy seriously. For instance, British Columbia's recently convened Citizens' Assembly has attracted real interest among electoral

reformers. Through a deliberative forum, 160 randomly chosen citizens recommended that the province shift to a new electoral system (single-transferable vote within multi-member districts). The Citizens' Assembly's preferred model will go to the people of British Columbia in May 2005 as the subject of a plebiscite.

Scandinavian countries offer alternative ways of building citizen participation. Sweden has a Minister for Democracy, and Denmark has institutionalised DIPs within the parliamentary structure. The Danish Board of Technology holds consensus conferences to allow citizens to deliberate upon matters of contention, especially those involving value judgments. Citizens' recommendations are fed directly into the Danish Parliament to assist with parliamentary decision-making (Joss 1998). And neighbourhood-based deliberation in Porto Alegre, a municipality in Brazil, shows us how participatory budget processes are capable of drawing many people from lower socio-economic groups into the policy-making arena (Fung & Wright 2003).

Apart from actual experiments, there are many proposals for participatory alternatives to take up and develop further. Some propose forms of federation inspired by the Swiss canton system (Kendall & Louw 1987) and others argue for 'demarchy'—a decentralised network of decision-making groups chosen by random selection (Burnheim 1985).

Getting down about election results is only a symptom of the real problem: the opportunities for democratic participation are too limited. Rather than getting depressed, we should remember that election 'successes' often fail to measure up, that grassroots action is needed whatever government is in power and we have a vital role to play beyond the ballot box. There's plenty to do!

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*Lyn Carson is in Government and International Relations, University of Sydney. Brian Martin is in the School of Social Sciences, Media and Communication, University of Wollongong. They are authors of the book Random Selection in Politics.*

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