

USA TODAY

POLITICAL LIBERTY AND NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNMENT

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

California's Jarvis-Gann initiative to limit property taxes, whatever its ultimate effects, is an almost convulsive commentary on the deepening political deprivation and alienation in the United States. Behind the alienation—evidenced, ironically, by tax revolt at the polls rather than “voter apathy” as in the past—there is a roiling wave of public opinion that government is out of control, that ordinary citizens are powerless.

People with moderate to low incomes who are not only dissatisfied, but want to *do* something, often reactionary, either find no way or are steered to positions and roles without power. They are denied what, in the past, was called “political liberty.” The problem impels us toward working out a modern definition of political liberty and then exploring the salient contemporary social action linked to that definition, the movement for neighborhood government.

Anchoring power

Civil rights such as due process and equal protection are invaluable, but they are not political liberty. The thing being defined here is a *political* right—the right to take part *in* government. It translates into institutionalized roles—embedded in the state's political-economic structures (mainly governments)—that are defined in terms of behavior, for people to act in their *public* capacity, as citizens. Beyond individual meaning, the importance of political liberty, sometimes called freedom or “public space,” stems from its function in a compound Federal republic.

Our Federal structure is centered on *balancing* powers, rather than their separation. The idea is that, in a hierarchy of governments, each jurisdiction offsets the powers of the government above it, so that citizens can act through cities and counties to somewhat balance the powers of the states, and act through the states to restrain Federal power. The linchpin at the bottom of the entire structure is *direct* self-government, anchoring power to each individual citizen. One variation of the theory is that, to ground the republic, to prevent the destructive use of its massive power, the state must provide public space for each and every person to join directly in government decision-making.

Seeing public space as an organic function of a

Federal republic casts government not as service giver, administrative bureaucracy, or economic regulator, but as political rule. The theory and structure of the state are connected with the political freedoms of its citizens, in contrast to goals of efficiency and economy. The argument is that public space is a preventive measure and antidote to political tyranny (including the bureaucratic variety) and to endless cycles of insurgency and repression.

For Jefferson and modern observers too, American independence created new political freedom, but failed to provide public space for its expression in action by the general citizenry, except for occasional elections. The Constitution granted all power to the citizens, but withheld opportunities for *acting* as citizens. Government discussing and deciding, the hallmark of political liberty, was closed to all but representatives.

Jefferson believed this lack of public space was a defect in the structure of the newly established state and would continue to threaten national well-being. He was convinced that, without public space to enable political liberty, “we shall go on in the endless circle of oppression, rebellion, reformation; and repression, reformation, again; and so on forever.” He also believed, however, that the presence of *directly* democratic government within a polycentric system would ensure that “every man in the state will let his heart be torn out of his body sooner than let his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or Bonaparte.”

Given the social upheavals of recent history, Jefferson presumably would not be surprised to find that American culture still narrowly defines the political rights of citizenship as jury service (a duty now), voting, and *ad hoc* protest.

After his retirement from public life, Jefferson advocated subdividing the counties into “little republics” patterned on New England town governments. Since that time, a number of popular assemblies have emerged worldwide. Hannah Arendt describes them as “the spontaneous organs of the people, not only outside of all revolutionary parties but entirely unexpected by them and their leaders.” The New England town governments, although pre-revolutionary, were also founded (and most continue) as popular assemblies.

In France, this phenomenon of direct democracy was tied to local political infrastructure inadequate to elect representatives for the National Assembly. In Russia, when the directly democratic *soviets* defied the Bolshevik party, threatening their partisan power monopoly, they were crushed; and Hannah Arendt reminds us that “the name ‘Soviet Union’ has been a lie ever since.”

The popular assemblies are undermined by partisan parties on the right and left. Both are quick to see the potential alteration of the state structure, one that would dilute through decentralized government their control over the means of state-sanctioned violence (police and military). These conflicts mark tension between partisan parties that work to consolidate and centralize power in the nation-state and spontaneous nonpartisan movement at the grassroots towards “the first beginnings of a true republic.”

Party labels have no place for the indigenous groups, and they are persistent critics of all representative assemblies where party affiliation is the password. Deep divisions between partisan and nonpartisan interests also arise from the former’s assumption, as an elite minority, of the exclusive right to define national problems and then, as governors, to assert, compel, and fix policy choices; while the goal of the latter is to have the largest possible number of citizens share in governance directly, without partisan interference.

Contemporary political realities

The need for political liberty in the form of public space has grown, rather than diminished, over the course of our national history. While the present neighborhood movement is haltingly generating public space, the bankruptcy of the country’s two-party-based system of representation simultaneously is feeding a vale of political alienation.

Not long after the Revolution, a Representative in Congress had about 25,000 constituents. Today, the number is 500,000. Even with recent reform, candidates for contested House seats typically spend \$100,000 or more in primary campaigns. It is public knowledge that the money and “good will” that attracts it come from a relative handful of sources, many of which are corporations despite the law. Nonetheless, it is tenable to take a charitable view of contemporary politics, to accept that most officeholders are *not* bought and sold, that the *quid pro quo* for contributions or influence is *not* a favorable vote on a bill. The behavior of American politicians can be explained more generously.

Conjure an image of well-fixed contributors buying the right to stand in a small circle surrounding the politician, *creating a definition of reality*. The process is not complicated. For influence or contributions, the politician grants access to life-space. The officeholder’s prized time, energy, and opportunities for involvement are shared with a narrow, self-selected group with special interests and,

through their face-to-face communication of subjective realities, the official’s *objective* world is constructed—what the representative comes to call the “real” world.

It is easy to see how elected officials are recruited to serve profit-making interests that hold “irresponsible power” and how the representative system is transformed from a means of expressing the democratic will to a method for subverting it. With mind-boggling national problems of unemployment and inflation, an urban fiscal crunch, organized crime, institutional racism, and a self-directed covert intelligence community, all impacted from age and neglect, the Democrats and Republicans are fighting to maintain the political-economic status quo and their own immunity from the voters. Reputable studies are now confirming the common-sense belief that voting and government policy are only distantly related.

Millions of people intuitively understand that going to the polls is not a remedy for this sweeping powerlessness, with initiatives that limit taxes a possible partial exception. As one suburbanite put it, “it just makes a voter so apathetic—it doesn’t matter which politician is in, it’s the same thing.” The prolonged political deprivation feeds national malaise, material obsession, and so-called voter apathy, as well as the more-up-to-the-minute problem of tax-limitation initiatives.

The last decade’s proposals to decentralize government, sponsored from both the top down and the bottom up, range from little more than redrawing boundary lines of utility districts to increasing public space by forming genuine neighborhood governments. Many people who favor organizing new small-scale public jurisdictions see them as the lower tier in two-tier metropolitan federations. Their vision is to transform the existing urban government structure of special utility districts, cities, counties, and regional authorities into regional federations of neighborhood governments. Given modern urban demographics (a single metropolitan area is now comparable to the country as a whole at its founding), we might expect the form of regional political rule to be a congress of several hundred neighborhood representatives. Most regional authorities at present are run by a handful of self-appointed city and county officials whose actions are unchecked by the voters. With their neighborhood and regional boundaries to overlay the critical sites for economic spillovers, two-tier metropolitan federations are the most promising plan yet for changing the form of urban government.

Many types of organizations were included in the “decentralization experiments” of recent decades, from block clubs and neighborhood associations through community development corporations to decentralized school boards and little city halls. Still, nothing in all of this activity suggests that

neighborhood government is going to come about through shared or devolved power. Citizen participation is another facet of the competition for scarce resources, the power arena. It strains credibility to think that neighborhoods are going to *inherit* power, to believe that cities and the Federal government are going to see their interest in creating a new level of government. Shared power and devolved power are nothing more than *administrative* decentralization, a limited franchise for a limited function under the control of a larger public organization.

Our recent history tells a story of citizen participation that was co-opting, rather than empowering. Most of the time, participation was camouflage for social control. We have the War on Poverty as an example of successful collaboration between Federal and local officials to avoid transferring power to neighborhoods. It is a problem because, if neighborhood governments are to serve as public space, they have to make their own decisions on acquiring and allocating resources and have to have independent taxing and spending powers. Consider Patrick Moynihan's argument in 1973 that, if taxing power was withheld from New York City's then-proposed districts, "decentralization will only accentuate the present irresponsibility of municipal government."

Future prospects

Historian L.S. Stavrianos argues that we are in transition to another dark age, a long-extended decline in the monopoly of power held by large, centralized nation-states. With the urban fiscal crisis of the 1970's, there is even the parallel to ancient Rome's

burgeoning military and bureaucratic establishments that outran the relatively static productive capacity of the state. Our present downward slide is marked by political deprivation and alienation that result in part from massive scale, the breakdown of representation, and the lack of public space for direct citizen action in government decision-making.

We can reasonably expect that, in coming decades, there will be more frequent and extreme attempts by the citizenry at counter-control—efforts to reduce the punishing experience of being politically deprived—through tax resistance and other even less acceptable forms of insurgency.

An effective remedy must acknowledge that, while a compound republic requires public space in a directly democratic form, experience consistently shows the futility of top-down schemes for citizen participation by way of established institutions. Neither voting, lawmaking, or power devolved via bureaucracy is likely to result in permanent neighborhood government that affords authentic public space. The key ingredient missing in every past instance is vesting of formal police and fiscal powers.

Grassroots movements will be the vehicle if political liberty—public space to share directly in governance—is to expand and institutionalize in the U.S. While the prospect may seem dim at best, public space may yet expand dramatically with more extensive deprivation and alienation—the incentives for citizen action—and more research, testing, and refinement of models for direct self-government. These are converging forces.

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