

“Slow Democracy”

The focus of Clark and Teachout's book is on moving decision-making powers to the local level

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Global Research, August 07, 2012

warisacrime.org 7 August 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Susan Clark and Woden Teachout's new book, "Slow Democracy," offers the civil equivalent to slow food. The goal of both is not slowness for its own sake, but quality, health, sustainability, and the pursuit of happiness.

We all know that the federal government ignores us most of the time, state governments nod in our direction once in a blue moon, and local governments listen to us quite often. So, there is an argument to be made for moving decision-making powers to the local level and engaging there.

The focus of Clark and Teachout's book is on how to engage with local democracy, and toward what ends. Adversarial campaigning may not work. What gets you on television at a Congressional "town hall" could just alienate your neighbors at a real town hall. A deeper understanding of democracy than just the desire for Washington, D.C., to follow majority opinion once in a while involves the realization that we are all better off if all of our viewpoints are considered. We all know that in small discussions the result can be greater than the sum of its parts. The same is true in local politics. New ideas can arise through exchange and disagreement; a synthesis that considers the needs of more than one group can be better for all, longer-lasting, and strengthened by the depth of its public support.

Seeking to engage with others and involve those who disagree with us looks like a disastrous approach to those who work on political advocacy at the national level (except Democrats, to whom it looks like a brilliant innovation guaranteed to work on the very next attempt). Treating national officials like friends will usually get you sold down the river. When we were occupying Washington, D.C., last fall and holding consensus-based eternal dialogues in the shadow of the Capitol, we were excellent and improving at the skill of deciding which building we would shut down tomorrow or who was going to help make dinner. But saying just a few words out loud, no matter how politely, in a "public" hearing on Capitol Hill would only serve to get us thrown in jail, and often did.

Worse, however, than trying to take slow democracy national may be trying to take national politics local. A town hall in a small town in Vermont can be ruined by following the proper conduct to get yourself on Fox News or CNN. Shouting and name calling don't usually advance discussions outside of politics. Why should they be helpful within it? "Slow Democracy" looks at numerous examples from around the country and outside of it in which local governments are finding ways to more deeply involve residents in deliberations and even decision making. The results are not just decisions that carry broader support, but also in many respects better decisions.

Why can this be done locally and not on a larger scale? The right wing fears big government and the left big corporations, the two of which have merged. Both fears are very well placed. Centralization and privatization both disempower us. Representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives strive today to “represent” about 700,000 people each. If a so-called representative met with his or her constituents, 100 at a time, that would be 7,000 meetings. If they crammed in three meetings per day, it would still take almost 7 years just to get through those meetings once, with no holidays, and no time to go to Washington and do anything. For senators from many states it’s many times worse. Add to that the problem that our elected officials are bought and paid for by their campaign funders and largely subservient to one of two political parties, and you’ve got a recipe for “democracy” instead of democracy.

The buyers of our governments find it easier and less expensive to buy state and federal officials. When the feds preempt state laws, the number of governments that need to be bought drops from 51 to 1. When states preempt local laws, a similar effect is achieved. Were we to force more power down to the local level through creative and aggressive local legislating, there would be a risk of seeing financial interests try to take us on there. But they would have a harder time of it. People don’t always believe that black is white, even if their television says so, when the black is right in front of them. Sound bytes aren’t as powerful when they go up against in-depth discussion.

But do we want power to go local? Ideally wouldn’t we have good federal laws? Isn’t this a next-best-thing proposed in desperation? I’m not so sure. Most of what the federal government does should not be done at all, at any level. A majority of federal discretionary spending goes into the crime of war. We don’t need that locally or at any level; we need it eliminated. Federal bailouts for banks, and regressive tax policies, and corporate trade agreements, and welfare for oil and coal companies are all worth ending, not mending. Sure, the federal government has pushed some states in a better direction on some issues, but usually while holding other states back. Some states want to deprive their people of healthcare, and the feds won’t let them. Other states want to provide their people with better healthcare less expensively through a nonprofit system, and the feds won’t let them, or at least have made it extremely difficult.

Civil rights is the unavoidable example of the feds stepping in for the better, but it’s an example both marred by the federal government’s historical responsibility for the problem and misleading as a guide for all politics at all times. Indeed, the notion that without federal power the states would become racist police states may be steering us in just the wrong direction. Let’s not forget that our federal government spends a majority of our tax dollars waging war on non-white countries. Some model!

Which ultimately did more for LGBT rights in the United States, the example of a civil unions law in Vermont, or a U.S. President belatedly expressing his support for rights he failed to enact? Which would do more for healthcare, the example of a universal nonprofit system in Vermont or a continued bitter feud over a corporate bailout healthcare bill widely denounced as socialism? Which would advance the worst-off state in any policy area most quickly, the example set by other states able to innovate, or waiting for Godot to govern from our Corporate Capital? It’s at least a question worth considering.

Maybe in the end the left and right can meet. Call it a corporate bailout or call it socialism, federal policy — on healthcare, the military, trade, energy — is worthy of the highest form of denunciation. Use your favorite terminology, but the relevant and accurate description may

simply be TOO BIG.

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