

Democracy requires action

VIEWS

Adam C. Uzialko

For months news anchors have been pushing presidential politics on their audiences. I get it. Presidential politics is fun; it's the big time, and the stakes are always high. But the wall-to-wall coverage of the two-party heavyweights betrays the real essence of democracy.

Associated Press Washington Bureau Chief Byron Price first used the famous phrase "all politics is local" in 1932, and there is a sort of obvious truth to that statement. Why is it, then, that so few voters turn out for, or even show an interest in, municipal elections?

"People generally have a very limited participation in local government, and it has shrunk as local [news] coverage has declined," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "The matters [municipalities] deal with are significant, but to ask voters to judge ... it's rare that they have enough information to really make an informed decision."

According to Weingart, engaging with politics at the national or state level is easier because a set of values or a general philosophy about government can help inform citizens about what policies they might prefer the government to pursue.

However, at the local level, Weingart said, the role of government is "management, rather than policy." It is undeniably difficult to be passionate about the maintenance of infrastructure or the installation of a traffic light.

"Implicitly, we think we have delegated those responsibilities to those people [we have elected or who have been appointed,]" Weingart said.

Local government is a dense and complex world, often characterized by dull meetings and legal jargon. For the layman, local government is confusing and maybe even a bit annoying, but the municipality is where the foundation for the entirety of our national society is built. The municipality is the central nervous system of how our community relates to itself.

Local schools and infrastructure depend on municipal government, and in many cases, utilities as well. Local government is responsible for determining what land gets developed and how, and often secures open space as it sees fit.

Municipal government has the ability to define the character of a town and, in a democracy, is supposed to exercise that power on behalf of the residents. But how can that be the case when the vast majority of citizens are not even aware of what their local governments do?

It's tough, I know. Who wants to go sit in a stuffy town hall for two or three hours after working all day? Watching just about anything on Netflix sounds better than listening to a debate about a water tower, right?

But if you ignore the little things, the big stuff gets by you. If you don't understand the process, how can you expect to reasonably engage in it? If you don't know your officials, how can you possibly know what to expect from them? New ideas and social relations can be implemented on the local level. For example, municipalities have the power to support and strengthen alternative institutions, such as consumer cooperatives. That sort of governance can be leveraged to fundamentally change the ways our communities operate for the better, but it takes a robust and informed public to shake local governments out of the usual ways of doing things.

Many of us wonder why, at the higher levels, big money has such undue influence and the lobbyists on K-Street seem to have more pull when it comes to lawmaking than the average American citizen.

The truth is that even the active American electorate has been detached from the process of governance for a long time; the voters have been alienated from politics at the local, county, state and federal levels, insulating themselves within the notion that voting once a year constitutes participatory democracy. It certainly does not.

Real, healthy democracy involves debate and contention, transparency and accountability. Voting based on name recognition and party affiliation, or not voting at all, proves, unequivocally, that a meaningful connection to government has been lost. Political efficacy has become a thing of the past for most people.

If that is so, how can we hope to control our governments? How can we reignite the passion for democracy? If you ask Weingart, it starts during childhood.

"Most people who vote are already involved or do so out of a sense of civic duty," he said. "We can boost that by increasing civics education from a young age."



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Much of my personal knowledge about political philosophy and the American government came from my college education and my own research beyond that, an opportunity not afforded to many Americans. By boosting civics in the early days of public schooling, students can be exposed to the world of politics and the many philosophies of how to organize a society. That generation can carry new, bold ideas into the political arena of tomorrow, particularly at the local level.

It is not your civic duty to simply roll down to your nearest polling station once or twice a year, tick a few boxes and chalk it up to a triumph of civil society.

It is your civic duty to educate yourself, challenge your own beliefs and to vote your convictions. It is your civic duty to question your government and demand better of it, from local to federal, and not merely to assume elected officials always know best.

Whatever your political inclinations, an informed vote is the true triumph of democracy

. Meaningful and intelligent contention can lead to a better day for us all and it begins at the municipal level. If all politics are indeed local, then it is in the American city where we will rebuild and revitalize our democracy.

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