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Far From Washington, Americans Are Finding Solutions

National politics may be paralyzed by partisanship, but local governments and institutions are coming together with ordinary citizens to get things done.

By Gerald F. Seib

As debate about police behavior raged over the summer in the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, the nation's elected leaders in Washington seemed unable to agree on any response, except perhaps to amplify the shouting.

In Kansas City, Mo., however, Mayor Quinton Lucas took the simplest of steps to build public confidence in police accountability: He moved to make it easier for a citizen to file a complaint about police behavior, in part by removing a strange legal requirement that any complaint had to be notarized. "Washington did not become a place for positive results in law-enforcement reform," says Mr. Lucas, who is a Democrat.

Similarly, while the national debate over abortion rights has escalated in response to Donald Trump's Supreme Court appointments, Kathleen Wilson, the founder of a program in Fredericksburg, Va., that provides homes for pregnant women seeking an alternative to abortion, raised enough money to finish buying a house for expectant mothers. She had enough funds left over to help young mothers unable to make rent payments amid the coronavirus economic slump. "I don't think of this ministry as being political," she says of her organization, Mary's Shelter. "We try not to be."

And while national politicians lapsed into finger-pointing over shortages of masks and surgical gowns during the pandemic, two businesswomen in Morganton, N.C., organized a network of small textile companies in the area to begin producing half a million masks and surgical gowns for the region's doctors, hospitals, businesses and citizens. "In the early days it was like Rosie the Riveter," says Sara Chester, one of the businesswomen. "Everybody wanted to do their part."

One notable local success has been to lower the volume and temperature of public discourse.

There are potentially big lessons in such small steps. At a time of deepening national divisions and political tribalism, many Americans have decided to rely less on Washington to deal with problems and have turned for answers to local institutions, state governments, business leaders, their own communities and one another.

It's no secret that Washington isn't working particularly well these days. That may change under the Biden administration. The new Congress will be almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, and there is at least a chance that the close division of power will have a moderating effect on both parties and empower centrists who hold the balance of power.

But we are just as likely to see more paralysis and gridlock in Washington and more of the rage that has recently dominated national political discourse. In that case, the need to find solutions to the nation's problems may well find expression elsewhere.

"One of my deepest hopes is that in the midst of all this noise and chaos and lack of trust people will say, 'Yes, I'm going to vote on who's going to Washington, but I'm going to make my neighborhood, the five blocks around where I live, my community, the best possible place to live,'" says Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican.

The idea of looking downstream for action and answers has long been a basic tenet of conservatives, who tend to distrust centralized power. But Robert Putnam, the former dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a self-described "good liberal Democrat," says that localism is increasingly em-

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National Divisions, Local Solutions

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braced by those on the left as well.

"Probably 30 years ago decentralization was kind of a right-wing view," says Mr. Putnam, who, along with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, is the author of a new book, "The Upswing," which explores how the nation's social and communal fabric has frayed over the decades and how it might be restored. In the 1960s, segregationists battled the federal government by invoking "states' rights" to fend off efforts to integrate schools and other institutions, while liberals embraced centralized power as a way to force reform.

Now, says Mr. Putnam, "There's been a change in that view on the left. Increasing numbers of people on the left also think that decentralization would be a good idea." In the last few years, a growing number of young liberals have switched their focus from national to local politics, seeing work in their own communities as a better way to expand the stockpile of affordable housing, raise wages for low-income people and address racial tensions.

> **'State governments are working much better than the federal government is. The reason is basically they just have to deal with practical problems.'**
>
> YUVAL LEVIN
> Editor, National Affairs

There are many issues, obviously, that can be handled only at the national level. Only Washington can muster the kind of national response needed to confront a rising China, for example, or to effectively distribute millions of coronavirus vaccines.

But Washington itself might benefit if people weren't turning to it to solve more problems than it can handle in its current fractured state. If the capital's leaders were to focus on those things that the national government is best suited to tackle, they might do those things better. It could be the start of a virtuous cycle.

Some of the poison of the national political debate during the Trump years has seeped down into the grassroots, making it harder to find comity there as well. Debates have raged within states and cities, even within families, over whether to wear masks to fight the pandemic and whether to restrict or close businesses and houses of worship. Local election officials are being threatened by fellow citizens over the presidential vote count. As more issues have become nationalized, they have been sucked into the vortex of bitter and unproductive national debate.

"I don't even know what it means to encourage people to act locally," says the conservative writer Rod Dreher, who lives in Louisiana. "I talk to people on the left and right, and they all are obsessed with national politics. I fear we are losing what it takes to make these local connections."

Yet a look around the country shows achievements at the grassroots on matters that seem beyond resolution in Washington—starting with lowering the volume and temperature in public discourse.

In Duluth, Minn., a city of about 85,000 on Lake Superior, community leaders were so alarmed about the tenor of public discourse that in 2003 they decided to launch a program called "Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project," which established ground rules for those taking part in debates about local issues—a system that community leaders credit with working through difficult debates over municipal belt-tightening and a new ordinance on paid sick leave.

Since then, requests from other communities seeking to replicate the program have poured in, and Duluth leaders have shared their experience with more than 100 communities from coast to coast. "We have been especially busy in the last few years," says Rob Karwath, former executive editor of the Duluth News Tribune and now a consultant to the Speak Your Peace project.

One community that picked up the program was the town of Sisters, Ore., which found itself several years ago falling into angry divisions as it grappled with a split between old-time residents and newer arrivals over how to handle growth. So in 2016 it adopted the Speak Your Peace format to lower the temperature.

And this year, it has found that the program has helped deal with an entirely new 2020 issue: relations between the community and law enforcement. Sisters had no desire to slip into the kind of tensions between police and community that have rocked Portland up the road. One step it took to avoid that fate was to host this month an online forum in which citizens could talk directly with local police officers.

"It was awesome," says Amy Burgstahler, a co-founder of the Citizens4Community organization that hosted the meeting. "People were, like, 'Wow, I'm feeling more at ease' ... It was never our goal to send a specific message. Our goal was to let people talk."

Sometimes the steps that have helped lower tensions between citizens and police are taken at an even more granular level. Sen. Rubio points to the example of a Miami police officer who was hit over the head with a skateboard swung by a Black teenager during a heated summer protest. The incident could have become another episode in the monthslong narrative of tension between police and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Instead, the police officer, Raymon Washington, agreed to meet with the 17-year-old who struck him, and the two started a friendship that has evolved into visits with the teenager's family and attendance at his high-school football games. "That police officer is now that young man's mentor," says Mr. Rubio. "That police officer and what he's doing is 50 times more impactful than any law that you could pass."

Decentralization "can lower the temperature of our politics," says Yuval Levin, a former aide to President George W. Bush and now editor of the conservative journal National Affairs. He adds: "State governments are working much better than the federal government is. The reason is basically they just have to deal with practical problems. At the national level, our politics has gotten used to organizing itself around big, broad debates, and those are hard to resolve." Among other things, state governments, unlike the federal government, have to balance their budgets every year, which forces compromises.

There is a fine American tradition of policy innovation at the state and local level. The spread of universal high-school education was fueled by local community activism early in the 20th century, a movement extended in recent years to include free community-college education spearheaded by leaders such as Chicago's former Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Tennessee's former Republican Gov. Bill Haslam.

The Pew Charitable Trusts has begun issuing a series of case studies called "States of Innovation," which highlight examples of state governments successfully tackling practical problems. These include the state of Colorado combining with a county hit by mine layoffs to provide improved broadband service, bringing in both jobs and better prospects for economic development; Indiana's expansion of treatment for opioid abuse to ensure that treatment is no more than an hour's drive away for anyone in the state; and laws passed in more than a dozen states to deal with a shortage of dentists in rural areas by authorizing dental therapists to provide more services.

Certainly states and governors have had less luck finding consensus on steps to deal with the coronavirus, as Democratic governors have been attacked by those who think they have gone too far in shutting down businesses and houses of worship and Republicans have been excoriated by those who think they have done too little.

Yet even within that maelstrom, some have found practical solutions. Mr. Levin points to his home state of Maryland, where Republican Gov. Larry Hogan arrived at an approach to reopening schools that pushed the decision to lower levels of government. He allowed counties to decide for themselves, while also declaring that private schools could make their own decisions regardless of what their home county decided—an approach that has allowed experiments in different approaches.

Another issue where local action is sometimes proving easier than national efforts is climate change. While leaders in Washington continue to fight over the seriousness of the problem (President Trump plays down the threat) and how big a response to muster (Sen. Bernie Sanders advocates an economy-altering, multi-trillion-dollar Green New Deal), businesses and local governments are stepping into the breach with modest steps of their own.

In July, a worker at Diamond Brand Gear in Asheville, N.C., stands with boxes of surgical gowns produced for the state's Emergency Stockpile.

JEA, the city-owned utility of Jacksonville, Fla., announced this summer an agreement to shut down a coal-fired electric generating unit in nearby Georgia and to purchase power produced elsewhere by Florida Power & Light Co. The company presented the decision as a hard-headed business move that will save more than $200 million by switching to natural gas—but also one that will reduce carbon emissions by 1.3 million tons a year by 2024 and open the door for a future move to solar energy.

Similarly, the city of Cincinnati announced late last year that, in a push for more renewable energy, it plans to construct the largest municipal solar array in the country. The new solar farm, about 40 miles east of the city's downtown, will span the equivalent of 750 football fields and contain more than 310,000 solar panels. "Cities need to take action, and that's exactly what Cincinnati is doing," said Mayor John Cranley, a Democrat.

Urgent community needs have also driven businesses to take more direct action, as with the response to the coronavirus in western North Carolina, a region long driven by textile and furniture manufacturers. The seed was planted more than a decade ago when Molly Hemstreet formed her own employee-owned textile company, Opportunity Threads, with one sewing machine and two employees in Morganton, a town of about 17,000. It now has expanded to more than 60 employees and a 30,000-square-foot building.

But the region's textile and furniture plants were being hammered by foreign competition, and large firms were taking manufacturing overseas. So Ms. Hemstreet and Ms. Chester formed The Industrial Commons, a cooperative that supports small, locally owned textile and furniture manufacturers by helping them to solve similar problems and work together.

When a local doctor called early in the coronavirus pandemic to say that medical providers were worried about being prepared when the pandemic reached their region, a network was in place to respond by producing face masks and other protective gear. No one company had to turn all its productive capacity over to personal protective equipment; instead, all produced some. Masks and surgical gowns went to the local hospital, to the local school district and eventually out across the state under a government contract. "It gave people an incredible sense of purpose," says Ms. Hemstreet.

> **State-level initiatives have been successful at bringing broadband service to laid-off workers, treating opioid abuse and expanding access to dental care.**

Mayor Lucas in Kansas City, who is awaiting final police commission approval for his plan to reform the complaint process, says that the ability to make a direct impact is what led him back home and into local government in the first place. He grew up in Kansas City, then went east to get a law degree at Cornell. "My friends thought I would practice in New York or Washington," he says.

But an internship in Washington altered his view of that path. "You started to see how much friction there was in every piece of legislation, and you saw that it would paralyze the nation." Back in Kansas City, he says, "I saw people trying to do things."

Above: Mayor Quinton Lucas listens to demonstrators in Kansas City, Mo., May 31. Right: Bella Jimenez and her children at a home provided by Mary's Shelter in Fredericksburg, Va., June 10.

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