

There is a well-known quote from the famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” In a less abstract way than it figures in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, this epigram informed a recent talk that journalist and author James Fallows gave at the National Press Club on the different contributions that historians and journalists make to our understanding of public events. Historians have the benefit of sifting the past to establish the significance of events over time. Journalists seek to report what is important but often lack the context to distinguish the superficial from the essential. It is in the realm of politics, however, where one must act rather than explain or describe, that the dilemma expressed in Kierkegaard’s saying is felt most keenly.

Events, beginning with September 11, 2001, have punctured the optimism expressed in Francis Fukuyama’s article (later expanded into a book) “The End of History?” We cannot know whether we will see another form of government succeed liberal democracy, but we can easily recognize the immensity of the challenges we face in improving the system we now have. The end of the Cold War confirmed the consensus in the West that market-based polities were more economically productive and more protective of political freedom than any other alternative. But in thinking about the many reasons that this is so, an anomaly emerges based on the evident difference between the efficiency of our economic system and the effectiveness of our political system. Our needs and desires as consumers are more easily met than are our needs and desires as citizens.

There is no single reason why this should be the case, but a little reflection suggests a clue. As consumers, our ability to satisfy our needs and wants is directly related to our role as economic actors. The more our efforts are rewarded in the marketplace, the more we are able to purchase the goods and services we want or desire. But what is our role as producers of political resources? If our primary involvement in the political system is limited to the occasional act of voting, how much should we expect to be able to influence political outcomes in ways that would satisfy our needs and desires as citizens? What would it mean to be a more productive citizen?

One reason that competitive economic markets are so efficient is that economic agents are able to incorporate new information rapidly into their decision making and activity. The price system is a marvel for communicating information without centralized control. Political markets lack these rich channels for the flow of information, and the adaptive response to change on the part of political actors other than those in leadership positions is sluggish by comparison. One way, then, of improving our political system would be to

enhance the quality and availability of information that citizens can use to guide their actions as producers of political outcomes.

This is where we meet the force of Kierkegaard's contention. How can we improve upon the quality and availability of information to guide our actions if indeed we must live our lives forward but can only understand them backward? Quite clearly this is not a question I can hope to answer here. But I can suggest a direction from which we can reasonably expect some guidance. We are all familiar with Justice Brandeis's metaphor describing states in our democracy as the laboratories of invention. Experiments at the state and local levels can be rich sources of information on what practices have promise in addressing the unmet needs and desires of all of us as citizens.

We have titled this issue of the *National Civic Review* "Innovating in the New Millennium: Lessons Learned from the Local Level" in recognition of the active role that citizens, in concert with local government officials and members of the private and nonprofit sectors, play in communities across the country. Long-time readers of this journal will not be surprised to see articles assessing the state of campaign finance reform at the state and local levels. With the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, it is clear that the existing regulatory system will change, but it is not yet evident what effects the reforms that survive court challenge will have. Articles by Craig Holman and Paul Ryan examine state and local campaign finance reforms, respectively, and educe lessons for reform at the national level.

Peter Dreier assesses the response to the Los Angeles disturbances a decade later and emphasizes the impact that grassroots organizations have had in crafting efforts to make changes there. The city manager of Chico, California, takes a searching look at the public hearing process and makes suggestions for improving its efficacy as a tool for citizen involvement. And Richard Harwood has contributed a thoughtful essay on patriotism and the devotion we all need to bring to the public square as we take up our responsibilities for the common good. Taken as a whole, this issue confirms our continuing dedication at the National Civic League to seek out the promising developments at the local level that can help us reinvigorate our democracy.

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