

American Society Was Built for Populism, Not Elitism

Technocrats and elites insist that centralized control is best. Nature and history prove them wrong.

By Karl Zinsmeister

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New York Jets fans cheer against the New England Patriots at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., Sept. 19, 2024. Photo: Sarah Stier/Getty Images

Political, economic and cultural power have become concentrated in recent decades. Public-health officials, activists, tech executives and others press everyday Americans to let “experts” and “authorities” control decisions that affect all of society. Technology allows unprecedented monitoring and steering of civilians’ actions.

Throughout U.S. history there have been periodic backlashes against potentates attempting to hoard influence. In 1968 presidential candidate George Wallace said Americans were fed up with “pseudointellectuals lording over them . . . telling them they have not got sense enough to know what is best for their children.” This won Wallace nearly 10 million votes and shocked grandees of the Boston-Washington corridor who thought they had foreclosed arguments over who should run America.

Ronald Reagan recognized that Americans were chafing against intellectual authoritarianism. His administration collected mounds of evidence that bureaucratic central planning was having disastrous results. He pumped the brakes on impositions from Washington and discredited its manipulations of economy and culture.

Reaganism proved most effective as an economic force. Its cultural victories were rarer and didn’t last. A monolith of liberal activists, judges, educators, entertainers and media continued to overshadow our public square. The range of “acceptable” worldviews narrowed dramatically from 1988 to 2024.

During those years, America’s budding socialists shifted their efforts from economic Marxism to cultural Marxism. Their new causes ranged from racial grievances and environmental alarmism to hatred for America and the West.

The left’s new social mandates weren’t only an abstract threat to liberty. They wreaked practical damage on American society. With culture as with economics, consolidated decision-making produces inferior results. Big, centralized regimes are generally surpassed by freer, more local efforts.

Data scientists will tell you that even a process as routine as emptying a football stadium of 80,000 fans in a few minutes is an intractable computational problem—if you try to solve it from a master position. You could cover the stadium with hardware and programmers directing fans, and you’d never be able to empty the stands as quickly as fans manage on their own. There are simply too many variables.

Yet leave each slob to himself, and he'll be opening the door to his Chevy before the scoreboard lights are cool. He may not realize that he's "exhibiting large-scale adaptive intelligence in the absence of central direction," as behavioral mathematician Art De Vany puts it, but he is. Even New York Jets fans can do it.

Stanford biologist Deborah Gordon spent years studying a large ant colony in Arizona's desert. Her goal was to discover how these thousands of creatures coordinate their work so that essential tasks get done. No one ant or group of ants has any idea of the complexity of the entire colony. So who's running the show?

The answer is nobody. Each colony "operates without any central or hierarchical control," Ms. Gordon reports. "No insect issues commands to another." These complex societies are built on countless simple decisions made by individual ants responding to local needs. These micro-decisions meld together to yield a highly efficient macro-result. This pattern of complex problems being solved by small actors working without direction is, Ms. Gordon states, "ubiquitous throughout nature."

Emptying stadiums and running ant colonies are simple compared with questions of how our economy should be structured or which schools our children should attend. How can smart people imagine that an imperial class ensconced in Washington can decide such matters better than people on the ground?

Many of the Brahmins who push for top-down management of society recognize the clumsiness of their approach. They proceed anyway. Why? Because they prefer the security of control to freedom. Grass-roots decision-making may work better, but it cedes power to unsocialized mavericks who resist orchestration and tasteful outcomes. That's the nightmare of every officious princeling.

Americans are skeptical of nostrums that promote intellectual castes and monopolize authority. We raised to new heights the concepts of autonomy, local independence and self-determination. During the Battle of King's Mountain in 1780, American Col. Isaac Shelby instructed his men, "When we encounter the enemy, don't wait for the word of command. Let each one of you be your own officer." Europeans visiting our new nation were consistently struck by the unordered bloom of independent businesses and associations.

The first quarter of the 21st century has brought political winds and technical tools that allowed a class indoctrinated in universities to grab unprecedented power. But millions of Americans eventually recoiled against manipulation from above. As we approach the 250th anniversary of our independence, there's renewed resistance to centralized control and constrictions of opinion and action.

To recover sovereignty among everyday citizens, we should crimp the institutions of master command. Then hand off a slew of federal prerogatives to private institutions, local governments, families and individuals. Do this over and over, in as many sectors as possible. Leaders should offer Americans choices rather than edicts.

If our current populist rebellion can move the U.S. away from smug superintendence, we will enjoy a new burst of flourishing and freedom. Because American society was brilliantly constructed to thrive without rulers.

Mr. Zinsmeister is author of "Backbone: Why American Populism Should Be Welcomed, Not Feared." He served as the White House's chief domestic policy adviser, 2006-09.