

Municipalism: The Resurgence of Cities

Giving Power Back to the People Through Participatory Municipal Governance



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SOLVING THE CLIMATE PUZZLE SERIES

This report is part of a series that offer innovative and diverse ideas for tackling different aspects of the climate crisis. Perspectives shared in the Solving the Climate Puzzle Series are those of the author(s) of each report and do not necessarily reflect the views of Horizon Advisors.



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When Cities Ruled the World

The principle of the city as the fundamental unit of government is, of course, not new. In the 6th Century BC, Athenian democracy gave rise to a new form of rule (*kratia*) by the people (*dēmos*), localized to the city-state or *polis*. In Medieval Europe, the free imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire were self-ruling autonomous entities that tolerated little outside interference in their affairs.

With the rise of the Nation-State as a unifying force, cities were subordinated to the superior national structure both in terms of power balance and perceived importance. The political hierarchy between state and city is largely maintained today; here in Canada, it is reflected in the provinces' authority over cities' very charters, their founding constitutional documents. This in turn shapes the popular conception of the corresponding roles of city and state leading to higher voter turnout for "superior" instances of government.

The popular conception of the role of the city as being of less democratic consequence than that of the state is being challenged by the swelling demographics of city populations. At the same time, citizens are increasingly unconvinced that national or provincial level governments are able to effectively address pressing issues, particularly relating to the climate crisis. It is this paradigm shift in governance, from macro to micro, that is the subject of this paper.

Resurgence

As the level of government closest to local issues and populations, municipalities are where the bulk of interactions between citizens and government happens. From garbage collection to road maintenance, from bike paths to parks, so much of our daily lives are affected by decisions made at the municipal level. Unlike parliaments and provincial legislatures, city councils are centrally located in familiar buildings where we go to renew permits and pay fines. City Councillors feel more approachable to us than MP's – we rub shoulders with them at local events, and we see them on the news, speaking about transit, housing, commercial development and other local issues.

It's only natural that as confidence in national and provincial governments' ability to effectively bring about the changes needed to confront the climate crisis wanes, populations are increasingly turning to their local governments to find solutions.

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A revolutionary people must either assert their control over institutions that are basic to their public lives — which Bakunin correctly perceived to be their municipal councils — or else they will have no choice but to withdraw into their private lives, as is already happening on an epidemic scale today.¹

— Murray Bookchin—

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An Old Idea is New Again

When citizens take to the streets asking governments to address issues of pressing public concern such as climate change, they are manifesting a demand for action on a level that is well beyond individual intervention. But when they show up to a municipal meeting and voice dissent for a pipeline project, a parking lot or highway expansion, or to propose a community garden, tree-planting project or water-reduction measures, citizens are able to effect change in a much more direct and often more meaningful and effective way.

The principle of subsidiarity states that issues should be dealt with at the level closest to the source of a given issue, not escalated to increasingly remote spheres where issues risk being lost to convoluted bureaucratic processes. The origin of the term lies with the 19th Century Catholic Church, defining the Church's argument upholding individual and collective forms of agency in opposition to a legislative approach to assistance based on a State-managed centralization and bureaucratization².

As a non-confessional, local and collectivist approach, municipalism - loosely defined as direct citizen governance at the municipal level - is the most natural modern expression of the principle of subsidiarity.

Rising out of the graveyard of neo-liberalism and the creaky old-left, municipalism appears fresh and filled with as yet-undefined possibilities. Social-political thinkers and writers looking for solutions to the problems of voter disengagement and the apparent failure of national and state governments to change course on climate crisis in the timeline required for planetary survival, are increasingly turning to municipalism's potential for catalytic change.



That power of collective citizen engagement is surprisingly untapped as of yet, although some recent municipal experiments have started to crop up. For example, the London borough of Barking-and-Dagenham, inspired by the Participatory Cities movement literally opened up shop fronts where citizens can drop in to discuss ideas and projects for their community, leading to a positive renewal for a once down-and-out neighbourhood³.

Here at home, citizen engagement at the local level has led to some tentative steps towards implementing innovative initiatives such as Vancouver's creation of the citizen advisory committee Talk Vancouver, Toronto's strategy of Community Development Officers and the launch of a program for participatory citizen-initiated projects in the Montreal borough of Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie.

¹ Murray Bookchin, What is Communalism? The democratic dimension of Anarchism (September 18, 1994)

https://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/dn/vol3/bookchin_communalism.htm

² "By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending" Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004)

³ George Monbiot, The Guardian: Could this local experiment be the start of a National transformation? (January 24, 2019)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/24/neighbourhood-project-barking-dagenham>

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Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

– Jane Jacobs –

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The way forward

As mistrust and cynicism grow in the era of social media and “fake news”, citizen participation in the democratic process has atrophied. Voter turnout for municipal elections hovered just over the 40% mark in Toronto (41% in 2018) Montreal (42% in 2017) and Ottawa (42,6%) while in Mississauga (27% in 2018) under one-third of eligible voters showed up to cast their ballot.

If cities are to reach their potential as transformational democratic models, that will have to change. Citizens need to get informed, get involved, and get out to vote. Some of the impediments that cities will need to overcome are an irregular candidate recruitment process, lack of public participation in municipal instances, and the complexity of the electoral system.

With no clearly defined job requirements or prerequisites, candidates are a real mixed bag. Recruitment is a difficult process as the risks involved with political candidacy are high. How many people, after all, are willing to give up a steady paycheck for a job that is in voters’ hands for renewal every four years? Not to mention the constant public scrutiny a political position implies (better scrub that Facebook wall clean before applying!). Putting in place a candidates guidebook that sets out the expectations and responsibilities of elected city officials would be a great first step in removing some of the fog of doubt and misinformation, and encouraging more people to put their names forward as candidates.

Although council meetings are generally held monthly and are open to the public, attendance tends to be low, and dominated by citizens with individual complaints. Municipalities should work to actively increase citizen participation at public meetings, by opening up agendas to questions of community interest, allowing space for citizens to bring forward issues of common concern and to engage more directly in their resolution.

Participatory budgets are one mechanism for direct citizen engagement that municipalities have been successfully experimenting with, enabling residents to go beyond simply providing feedback, engaging people directly in decisions involving budgets. Using all the available communication tools to engage citizens and to encourage participation in processes is a must, although nothing beats a group meeting *IRL*. And while it may seem simplistic, offering some basic enticements such as coffee and juice for kids makes parents and families feel welcome too.

Our political system isn’t terribly complex, but understanding of the processes should not be taken for granted. For many people, “government” is a blanket term that covers municipal, provincial and federal elected officials. When a citizen reaches out to their City Councillor with a question on health care, they don’t want to hear “That’s not a city issue” – they want an answer. Working together between levels of government to address citizens’ broader questions rather than playing ping-pong would remove the burden from the citizen of scurrying around trying to find who’s responsible. The flip side of that coin is educating the general population on which level of government is responsible for what, and how the electoral process works – things we don’t always learn in school (or are able to remember at the opportune time).

There are some good tools for citizen engagement that exist already⁴. Municipalities should have the mandate to put into action some of the recommendations made here and in the many available tools and publications. It is to cities’ advantage to encourage citizen participation, and it is to our collective advantage to increase our cities’ collective agency in the face of increasingly complex social and environmental challenges.

⁴ Norman Gludovatz, Getting the Majority to Vote: Practical solutions to re-engage citizens in local elections, Columbia Institute Centre for Civic Governance (April, 2014) <https://www.civicgovernance.ca/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Get-Engaged-for-web.pdf>