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## LABORATORIES

## To Reunite America, Liberate Cities to Govern Themselves

Even setting the dysfunction of our national government, the fact is that no top-down, one-size-fits-all set of policies can address the very different conditions that prevail among communities.

RICHARD FLORIDA, JOEL KOTKIN 04.11.17 1:00 AM ET



*Time* magazine's 2016 Person of the Year was elected president, as the magazine's headline writer waggishly put it, of the "divided states of America."

Donald Trump did not, of course, cause America's long-standing divisions of class, culture, education, income, race, and politics, which have been baked into our geography

and demography for a long time. But he has certainly brought them into stark relief. As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt remarked, “We have to recognize that we’re in a crisis, and that the left-right divide is probably unbridgeable. ... Polarization is here to stay for many decades, and it’s probably going to get worse, and so the question is: How do we adapt our democracy for life under intense polarization?”

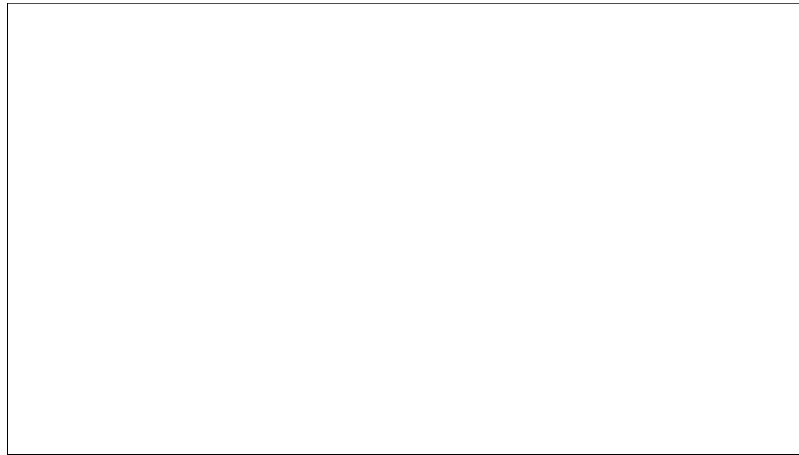
The answer lies not in enforcing uniformity from left or right but in embracing and empowering our diversity of communities. The best way to do that is by shifting power away from our increasingly dysfunctional federal government and down to the local level, where partisan differences are more muted and less visible, and where programs and policies can actually get things done.

This is hardly the first time the United States have been so divided. Yet with the exception of the Civil War, America has always been able to surmount its differences and change as needed over time. Often the most powerful and lasting innovations—from both the left and right—have percolated up to the national level from the grassroots politics of state and local governments, the places Justice Louis Brandeis famously called “the laboratories of democracy.”

Far from promoting unity, centralizing power at the national level drives us further apart. This is something that the Founders recognized at the very outset of the American experiment when they designed a federalized system, and it is very much in tune with our current national mood. Almost half (49 percent) of Americans view the federal government as “an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens,” according to a 2015 Gallup poll. And nearly two-thirds (64 percent) believe that “more progress” is made on critical issues at the local rather than the federal level, according to a separate 2015 Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor poll.

The issue isn’t just the dysfunction of our national government, but how we can best and most efficiently address our economic needs and challenges. The United States is a geographically varied place. No top-down, one-size-fits-all set of policies can address the very different conditions that prevail among communities. Back when he was governor, Bill Clinton understood that “pragmatic responses” by local governments to key social and economic issues were critical in “a country as complex and diverse as ours.”

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Until recently, local empowerment was mostly a theme of the right, for example when Yuval Levin characterized President Obama's use of executive orders as intrusions on local rights. Now some progressives, horrified about the orders that might come down from a Donald Trump administration, are also seeing the light. Progressives have not always been hostile to local control, as anyone who's studied the grassroots radical movements of the 1960s well knows. But now a growing chorus of them, including Benjamin Barber and Bruce Katz, are on board with the idea. Indeed, strange times make for strange bedfellows, and we have come to a pass where conservatives and progressives can work together to reinvigorate our federalist state.

The United Kingdom, long a highly-centralized country, has been making moves in this direction—even before the Brexit vote showed widespread opposition to meddling from an even more distant government in Brussels. In 2015, a blue-ribbon panel of British business leaders, policymakers, economists, and urbanists outlined four key steps to empower cities, including shifting decision-making authority from the national government to cities and metropolitan areas; giving cities greater tax and fiscal authority; placing city leaders on national representative bodies and giving them a permanent seat on the national cabinet; and creating new mechanisms to coordinate major investments in infrastructure, talent, and economic development across metro areas. We would be wise to follow their cue.

It is time for American mayors and community leaders—from small towns, suburbs and midsized 'burgs to great metropolitan capitals like New York City, LA, and Chicago to press for a similar devolution of power. Such a strategy recognizes both the advantages

that come from local innovation and problem solving and the substantial variations in local capabilities and needs. This need for devolution and local empowerment does not just apply to the federal government; it applies to the relationship between the states and municipalities as well. A greater recognition of local differences may be particularly helpful for suburbs, which often have little voice in regional decision-making compared to either big city mayors or the rural and small town interests that dominate many statehouses.

In the America that emerged after the Second World War, unity of purpose was the watchword. In the more geographically-varied world of today, it makes sense to allow for a greater variation of policy approaches. Rather than pursuing a single vision of “national greatness,” it’s time for us to embrace and empower the country’s wondrous local diversity of cities, suburbs and communities of all kinds.

*Vive le difference!*

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