

The Vital Importance of Small Politics

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Since the early days of the American Revolution, one of the tensions that has defined American politics is that between the states and the central government in Washington. Over the 240 years of America's existence, power has shifted between these two levels, dependent upon both the contingencies of the times and the political philosophy guiding the governing party at the time. In recent years, political power has been flowing disproportionately inwards, to the federal government, with little political authority being reserved for the states. There are very few areas in which the federal government is not currently involved. In a speech to the Take Back America Conference on June 14, 2006 Barack Obama proclaimed the end of what he termed the "smallness" of politics. In a letter to Gideon Granger in 1800, Thomas Jefferson argued the importance of small politics, asserting that the federal system established in the American Constitution and its distribution of power serves as a crucial safeguard against tyranny.

Jefferson's letter is written on the eve of the election of 1800—often referred to as the Revolution of 1800—giving Jefferson's assessment of the chances of the Democratic Party, as well as outlining what he believed to be the central issue at stake in the election. This election was a major one, in which the Federalist Party, which had been in power since its formation, was defeated by Jefferson's Democratic Party. These results represented an earthshattering achievement, as it was the first peaceful transition of power from one party to its philosophical opposite after the results of a bitterly contested popular election. Jefferson had vigorously opposed the policies of the Federalist Administration under John Adams, as well as many of the actions taken by George Washington, particularly those advised by Alexander Hamilton. He saw in these policies efforts to increase the authority of the central government at the expense of the

states, which Jefferson believed placed the liberty of the people at risk. In opposition to the Federalist Party of Hamilton and Adams, Jefferson and Madison formed the Democratic Party, whose platform focused on limiting the national government and allocating most responsibilities and powers to state and local governments.

Jefferson believed that a Democratic victory in 1800 would be more significant than simply his party gaining control of the government and his own ascendance to the presidency. He argued that his victory would mean the preservation of the liberty of the American people. Writing to Gideon Granger, Jefferson argued that those who he expected to support his party in the upcoming election were those who were “attached to the preservation of the Federal constitution according to it’s [*sic.*] obvious principles & those on which it was known to be received...” Jefferson believed that his Federalist opponents represented a danger to a strict interpretation of the Constitution and to the principles upon which America was founded. Jefferson further outlined those whom he believes forms the core of support for the Democratic Party, writing that he expects support from those:

attached equally to the preservation to the states of those rights unquestionably remaining with them, friends to the freedom of religion, freedom of the press, trial by jury & to economical government, opposed to standing armies, paper systems, war, & all connections other than of commerce with any foreign nation, in short, a majority firm in all those principles which we have espoused and the federalists have opposed uniformly...

These principles formed the core of Jefferson’s political philosophy, and he deliberately contrasted them with those of the Federalists. By doing so he furthered his argument that the Federalists represented more than just the opposition party, but rather a threat to American liberty itself.

Jefferson expanded this argument, emphasizing the aspect of the Federalist program he found most concerning, and writing that a certain portion of American citizens “support

principles which go directly to a change of the federal constitution, to sink the state governments, consolidate them into one, and to monarchize that.” This desire to increase the power of the central government beyond its appointed limits, to the point of the consolidation of the state governments unto complete subservience to the national, was the greatest danger Jefferson saw as resulting from Federalist policy.

The single biggest danger Jefferson saw arising from such a consolidation was that of the corruption of the government that he argued would necessarily result if such a program were implemented. Because “our country is too large to have all it’s [*sic.*] affairs directed by a single government[,] public servants at such a distance, & from under the eye of their constituents, will, from the circumstance of distance, be unable to administer & overlook all the details necessary for the good government of the citizens...” A central government’s inability to govern the vast expanse of America would lead to inefficiency, as those in the government would not be able to maintain close relations with their constituents. This in turn would lead to the development of a distinct political class separate from those they governed, which would lead to laws less suited to the interests of the people themselves. Further, Jefferson argued that “the same circumstances by rendering detection impossible to their constituents, will invite the public agents to corruption, plunder & waste...” Jefferson went to far as to assert that were the states to be consolidated into a single general government “it would become the most corrupt government on the face of the earth.” This corruption would lead to the abrogation of the people’s rights, as those in government would surely place their own private interests above the interests of those they governed. The government would then cease to serve the people. It would serve only itself.

The strongest cure Jefferson saw for government corruption was the maintenance of the independent rights of the states to order their internal affairs free from interference from an

overbearing central government. He wrote that “the true theory of our constitution is surely the wisest & best, that the states are independent as to every thing within themselves, & united as to every thing respecting foreign nations...” This clear and firm division of responsibility would ensure that those in the government would be constantly under the observation of the governed, which would provide a powerful safeguard against corruption. Further, it would make government more economical, as “our general government may be reduced to a very simple organization, & a very unexpensive [*sic.*] one: a few plain duties to be performed by a few servants.” Economy in government would also lend itself to a greater protection of the people’s liberties, as the less economic power the government would have the less political power it would have as well.

In addition to protecting the liberty of the people, a limited central government also provides a better administration for that which does fall under the government’s responsibility. In Jefferson’s conception, the majority of responsibility for internal affairs would fall to the states to manage on their own. Because of this arrangement of powers, the areas of government that would be the most active, and have the most influence on the people, would also be the areas of government that was closest too, and most resembled, those same people. As a result, the state and local governments would be better informed as to the particular circumstances of their people, leading to actions that would best suits their constituents. This political localism—this smallness of politics—allows for far greater flexibility, innovation, and experimentation on the part of policy-makers than any binding national directive.

Jefferson’s understanding of the role of state governments in relation to that of the national government is fundamentally one of balance and restraint. Both the state and national governments have particular enumerated spheres of responsibility that are proper to them, and

when either level of government moves beyond that sphere, corruption and abrogation of the people's rights will ensue. The tension between these two spheres, and in particular the tendency of the national government to become overbearing, is a significant conflict that Jefferson identified in American politics. Struggles between the state and national government are regular features of American history, with the balance of power generally being maintained. Certainly times can be pointed to in which the national government dominated, but these periods, viewed within the historical context, become much more understandable. The single most significant example of this is the Civil War, in which the executive branch in particular under Abraham Lincoln took on immense power to the detriment of state authority. While this would seem like a blatant upsetting of the political balance Jefferson so valued, when the circumstances surrounding this assumption of power are considered, it becomes clear that Lincoln took prudent action to preserve the union against a rebellion, which had it been successful would have done much more lasting damage to Jefferson's ideal republic, founded on the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. In spite of exceptional examples, the general trend from the framing and ratification of the Constitution for the maintenance of balance between state and national government can be identified. The importance of small politics, so ardently championed by Jefferson, was in general maintained.

This trend was broken in the late 19th century for two primary reasons. The first was industrialization, which, though occurring throughout the 1800's, rapidly increased as the century drew to a close. This drew a large part of the American population—which at the time was largely rural—into rapidly expanding cities. The shift in political power that resulted from this population shift led to a significant increase in the electoral power of urban areas, which became much more important political focal points. This demographic shift is directly tied into a political

shift, which arrived in the form of the Progressive movement. Originally made up of academics influenced by German Idealism and then expanding into the political arena, Progressivism promised to improve the working conditions of urban industrial laborers through the implementation of modern scientific techniques of political management. It was in these techniques that the greatest challenge to the balance between state and national government arose. Progressives supported direct democracy on all levels, but in particular on the federal level. The primary argument advanced for this position was that only through direct democracy could the will of the people be represented, and any sort of delegation of power would limit the expression of the popular will. This led to the philosophical conclusion that any limitation of the power of the national government to act on the people as a whole represented an unjust restriction on the popular will, seriously challenging Jefferson's arguments in favor of balance.

The danger progressive political thought poses to Jefferson's ideal of balanced spheres of power can be seen in the approach Theodore Roosevelt took towards his powers as president. Roosevelt believed that as president—elected by the nation as a whole—it was his duty to represent the whole of the people. As such, he asserted that he was “a steward of the people bound actively and affirmatively to do all he could for the people, and not to content himself with the negative merit of keeping his talent undamaged in a napkin.” Under this stewardship theory of the presidency, Roosevelt believed that it was his responsibility to act whenever and wherever any other level of government was perceived to be incompetent. He argued that “[he] acted for the common welfare, [he] acted for the common well-being of all our people, whenever and in whatever manner was necessary...” He counted only positive prohibitions found either in the Constitution or in acts of the legislature as limitations to the executive power. Where these did not exist, Roosevelt argued, the president was competent to act. This power is not limited by

state boundaries and sees no need for the balance of power prized so highly by Jefferson. Rather, under this doctrine the national government, and the executive branch in particular, is viewed as the force that ought to take primacy in protecting the rights of the people. The limitations on governmental action found in the Constitution are only restrictions on what the executive might do for the people, and as such ought to be construed in as limited a fashion as possible.

In this understanding of the power and role of the national government as represented through the executive, the dangers feared by Jefferson can be seen made manifest. Though the states have not been formally consolidated into one government, the effect remains the same, as the national government represented in the office of the president asserts that it is on the national level that political action ought to be taken. This is the beginning of the destruction of small politics. As Roosevelt himself asserted, it is the president alone, acting through the executive branch, that can protect the interests and well-being of the American people. The states, when mentioned, are at best considered simple administrative zones and at worst inconvenient limitations on the power of the national government.

It is out of this tradition of political thought that Barack Obama emerges, proclaiming the end of small politics. He argues that “it’s the timidity—the smallness—of our politics that’s holding us back. The idea that some problems are just too big to handle...” This assertion that there are no problems too big for the government to tackle, nothing that should remain outside its reach, runs directly contrary to the vision Jefferson paints of the ideals of his Democratic Party in his letter to Gideon Granger. Obama goes on, criticizing what he calls “the Ownership Society in Washington...” This “Ownership Society” consists of those who “don’t believe government has a role in solving national problems because it thinks government is the problem.” Given this definition, it would appear one must consider Jefferson to be a member of the “Ownership

Society,” considering his fear of too great a concentration of power within the hands of a few men. It is through the thinking that, beginning in the progressive era, slowly spread to become mainstream in modern American politics that the most significant damage to Jefferson’s ideal of balance is found. Progressive theory focuses on the national stage, with the states becoming minor political players for the very reason that Jefferson prized their relative prominence respective to the national government. The states are barriers to national action, slowing its progress, and checking the will of the people. Progressive theorists reject this, as they reject any notion that government ought to have oversight from the people. Their ideal is a government administered by apolitical experts that know better than the common man. As a result, any restriction ought to be eliminated to make way for a more active national government.

The tension between the states and the national government is one that has been central to American politics since the ratification of the Constitution, and in some cases before even that. Jefferson did not view this tension in a negative light, but rather saw it as a means to protect the rights of the people and ensure the government did not become corrupt. Though as a result of progressive thinking the balance between the states and the national government that Jefferson praised has been severely damaged, that does not make Jefferson’s warnings irrelevant. Rather, it makes them all the more pertinent as one of the institutions Jefferson considered a crucial safeguard against tyranny has been steadily eroded. In his letter to Gideon Granger, Jefferson repeatedly emphasizes the vital importance of small politics as a safeguard of liberty, and a protection for the people against the machinations of dishonest politicians.

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