



THE VIEW

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GRASSROOTS, TEA PARTIES, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

BY

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In the ebb and flow of politics we have come upon one of those periods in which we may assess the nation's political health by examining the grassroots. Perhaps it was the events of last week's "Tea Parties" coming as they did in the midst of the municipal campaign season in Mississippi that have spurred thoughts of the exercise of political voice at the lowest level where the people are. Remember, it was the late U.S. House Speaker Tip O'Neal who said "all politics is local".

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution may be the most powerful piece of language on which to base government in the world today. It is only one sentence long, but contains virtually all of the wording necessary to keep us as the free people whom we claim we are. Even at that, we debate, often vigorously, the meaning contained in the First Amendment. It forbids the government from establishing a religion or from prohibiting the free exercise of religion by its citizens. The First Amendment also prohibits the government from interfering with our freedom to say what we wish, to put our thoughts in print, to gather with those who think like us or to petition the government when we believe we have been wronged. Virtually all of the freedoms addressed here are best and most readily practiced at the grassroots.

Very few of us will ever journey to Washington with the intent to walk the halls of Congress in hopes of changing the course of government. Most of us will not head for the Capitol in Jackson in an effort to impact in a tangible way the laws passed by the State Legislature. It is at the local level of our federal system where we can all state our case and know that we can be heard. I was reminded of this several times during the course of the past week. On Wednesday as I headed for Jackson for a meeting my radio dial was on the small town radio

station to which I had been listening the night before. Just as I reached the highway the live broadcast of that small town's Tea Party event hit the airwaves. The Mayor was the master of ceremonies and the fact that there was a decent and fairly vocal crowd in the background was obvious. This fortuitous bit of radio listening afforded me the opportunity to think again about the value of participation at the grassroots. Here a small town mayor most likely in an electoral contest to hold on to office was leading his fellow citizens as they voiced their concerns about the actions of government much of which they disagreed with.

Nearly 280 years ago in his famous book, *Democracy in America*, the French political sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville recognized the importance of such local grassroots participation as being vital to the success of the whole of American government. Tocqueville referred to local government as "that fertile germ of free institutions. The strength of free peoples resides in local community." He went on to say that "Local governments put liberty within the people's reach."

Indeed as we watched our fellow citizens at the grassroots take full advantage of their First Amendment guarantees of their rights to assemble, to speak out, to cause statements to be placed into print and, yes even to pray, it was easy to pause and be thankful for the Constitution that guaranteed it all. This is even truer since many of the statements made verbally and held aloft on signs were quite controversial.

In the same way, local political campaigns are proving to be quite gratifying. Citizens volunteer themselves as candidates because local government may be the most important level of government of all. The electoral process takes on added seriousness because in many cases everyone knows each other, and expectations for a better life at the local level runs so high. English political philosopher James Bryce hence referred to small towns as the "tiny fountainheads of democracy," and wrote that "The best guarantee of the success of democracy is the practice of local self-government."

One needs only to examine the lives of two current leaders prominent on the national political scene to see the pivotal role played by grassroots involvement of local citizens. Barack Obama left lucrative opportunities in the legal world to return to Chicago's Southside and become a community organizer. Through speeches in front of assembled groups of citizens, printed materials, and petition drives, Obama helped the cause of inner-city Chicago citizens and honed the political skills that helped him capture the White House at the same time. In the same way, it is clear that recent Republican Vice-Presidential nominee Sarah Palin became the political success that she is largely because of her participation in the politics of Wasilla, Alaska. Palin, who is now Governor of Alaska, was a member of the Wasilla City Council for four years, the Mayor of Wasilla for six years and Governor of



Alaska for only two years when she was chosen by Republican nominee to be his running mate. The successes of President Obama and Governor Palin were no doubt learned in that greatest of classrooms of democracy - local government. As such, local government serves as the base on which our democracy rests and that's because it is available to everyone.

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