

SELF-ORGANIZED SELF-GOVERNMENT

Scott Heiferman

“ We’ll make the refreshed self-government we need
by continuing to boldly self-organize. ”

Self-government is like vegetarian chicken. Which is it, self or government? Vegetarian or chicken? Isn’t government a big bureaucratic institution that serves me like a customer? Maybe I use a national park once in a while, and the public works department picks up my garbage, and every four years I might vote, but governing isn’t something I do. It’s something an institution does, right? You can’t self-McDonald’s, you wouldn’t self-WalMart, or send a self-FedEx —so what’s self-government?

Self-government may sound oxymoronic to many Americans today, but it was a key concept for our Founders, who were desperately trying to escape the rule of a monarchical, oppressive government. As they self-organized America, the Founding Fathers used the word “association” to refer to people coming together voluntarily for a common purpose. Most often, they meant loose associations formed for political purposes, precursors of political parties that would develop

later. The right to meet with whomever they chose, and say whatever they wanted, was a fundamental building block of a free society for the Founders.

In the early 19th century, these loose associations evolved. Citizens were self-organizing into more organized associations. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. . . If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.”

Throughout the 20th century, associations, now more often known as non-profit organizations, increased in number and professional approach. The modern non-profit sector now includes associations, churches, unions, political action committees, and direct service and advocacy organizations of every size, for every cause, in every corner of the country. It would never have occurred to the Founders that professional organizations like Environmental Defense Fund or the National Rifle Association would take the place of individual citizens to advocate for legislation or services. Large non-profit organizations that came of age in the 20th century are generally organized hierarchically like centralized businesses. They became more institution-like as people were becoming more distrustful of institutions.

Now we’re seeing people self-organize in new ways through the Internet, creating new forms of decentralized associations and institutions. Just as the Founders of our country could not have predicted exactly how people would use the levers of democracy to advance the country’s interests, neither could Internet pioneers predict the incredible things people have done with their new platforms.

The Internet pioneers didn’t think of every contingency in the design; they just set a loose framework on top of which others could lay their own ideas and tools. And, as we know, millions of people have

participated in an unprecedented worldwide explosion of innovation. Human potential was unleashed, from Google to eBay to Wikipedia, to the millions of blogs with very few readers but impassioned, empowered authors.

I'm not going to pretend to be James Madison and offer ways to improve the structure and process of government. I am, however, the founder of a technology platform, Meetup (www.meetup.com), that helps people self-organize locally. Five million people have registered to meet up with neighbors around an issue, a health condition, or something important to them. Today, over 100,000 Meetups (local group meetings) happen monthly. I've come to understand that nothing will have a more positive impact on our world than the power to self-organize easily. The greatest opportunity for America to revive the spirit of self-government is through citizen self-organization.

So I'm stumped by the question of how to redesign American democracy. Citizens will feel—and will be—more powerful when they design the new system themselves. NBC couldn't make YouTube, Barry Diller couldn't make eBay, MTV couldn't make Facebook, and no traditional institution could have made Google. You can't change a culture from its original foundations. Thankfully, America was founded on self-organization. We'll make the refreshed self-government we need by continuing to boldly self-organize.

About the Author

Scott Heiferman co-founded the global group-gathering website, Meetup.com, in 2002. He also founded Fotolog.net in 2002, the leading photo weblog platform, used by over a quarter million people, and viewed by nearly 1 million people daily. In 1995 he created i-traffic, the first online ad agency, a pioneer in search-keyword media placement, and now one of the largest online media buyers, with offices in the U.S. and Europe.