

# Are Americans losing their interest in self-governance?

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by [Randy Bright](#)

I have been thinking about what freedom means a lot lately. It is more than obvious to me that Americans have lost its meaning, primarily because the Progressives have intentionally wanted us to lose sight of our Constitution and our Bill of Rights. These documents are, after all, rather pesky things that get in the way of a growing government determined to impose their will on our people.

This is what Skousen wrote in his book *The 5000 Year Leap*: “The centralization of political power always destroys liberty by removing the decision-making function from the people on the local level and transferring it to the officers of the central government.”

But here is also what he wrote just after that: “This process gradually benumbs the spirit of “voluntarism” among the people, and they lose the will to solve their own problems. They also cease to be involved in community affairs. They seek the anonymity of oblivion in the seething crowds of the city and often degenerate into faceless automatons who have neither a voice nor a vote.”

I cannot help but think about form-based codes (one among many infractions of our freedoms) when I read this passage, simply because these codes demonstrate the centralization of power by dictating how a project can or can't be designed.

It might surprise you that the Founders believed in strong local government, but the strong local government we are seeing in our cities today is unlike what the Founders believed it to be. In comparison between the Anglo-Saxons and the New England colonies, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “These wards, called townships in New England, are the vital principle of their governments, and have proved themselves the wisest invention every devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation.”

Does this mean that Jefferson believed in the type of local government we have today? Not at all. Skousen contrasted true self-government with what we have today when he wrote, “How different from the Anglo-Saxon tribal meetings, where the people were considered sovereign and every man took pride in participating.”

Skousen also quotes historian Richard Frothingham who contrasted the Anglo-Saxon form of government with that of England:

“In ancient England, local self-government is found in connection with the political and territorial divisions of tythings, hundreds, burghs, counties, and shires, in which the body of inhabitants had a voice in managing their own affairs. Hence it was the germinal idea of the Anglo-Saxon polity.”

“In the course of events, the Crown deprived the body of the people of this power of local rule, and vested it in a small number of persons in each locality, who were called municipal councils, were clothed with the power of filling vacancies in their number, and were thus self-perpetuating bodies. In this way, the ancient freedom of the municipalities was undermined, and the power of the ruling classes was installed in its place. Such was the nature of the local self-government in England, not merely during the period of the planting of her American colonies (1607 to 1732), but for a century later...It was a noble form robbed of its life-giving spirit.”

In respect to our zoning codes, and in particular to the generation of form-based codes, how does Frothingham’s description compare with our situation?

First of all, local self-governing bodies are getting larger, that is to say that they envelope and take over the functions of smaller bodies of government. Suburb cities are coming under the influence of their central city, cities are coming under the influence of counties, and counties are coming under the influence of regions; all of which are greatly influenced by the will of the federal government. And with each layer of government, the real power flows to and from the top,

Second, form-based codes are enacted without any serious interaction with the populations they serve. Often the public is invited to participate in the formation of new and better codes, only to be met with facilitators whose charge is to make certain that the outcome of public meetings is as a central power wants it to be. Then the new code is touted to be the result of the public’s input, when in reality the code was written and ready to adopt long before the public was ever involved.

The result? Just as Skousen said, people lose interest in self-government because they know that even the majority won’t stop bureaucrats from imposing and enforcing what they believe should be done. Not only does it kill the spirit of the people, but it is destined to impoverish us as well.

This article was adapted from an article originally written in May of 2014.



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