

Upside-Down Democracy

1/24/16 by Jon Schuessler

Let's take a short quiz:

1. Who is the President?
2. Who is the Governor of Missouri?
3. Who is your state representative (or senator)?



The view from Washington, D.C.

I'll wager that most of you easily answered the first question, hesitated on the second question, and had no idea about the third.

Why? Why are we so well-versed in national politics, and yet have no idea about what's going on next door? Everyone knows about our multi-trillion national debt, but if I asked you, "How much debt does your school district have," could you give an answer that came close?

The blame for our ignorance lays squarely with our reliance on network news. None of the major media companies regularly talk about local politics. Unless there's a huge scandal, or the state capitol inexplicably transforms itself into head cheese, or something equally sensational, the news networks are silent.

Conversely, the babble about the presidential race started *more than a year* before the actual election. It's been blasted over the media airwaves on a daily basis. You hear it on the radio, see it on the TV, read about it on the Internet and newspapers and magazines – there's simply no escape.

I'm not saying that the U.S. Presidency is an unimportant office. Dramatic events, such as wars, come to pass under a President's auspices. The day-to-day stuff, however, has nothing to do with the President, or Congress, or the Supreme Court.

The government that has the most influence in your life is your city council, your county council, and your state legislature. The U.S. Congress has 50 states to worry about, and over 300 million constituents. Your city council, on the other hand, has pretty much only you and your neighborhood to govern. They're focused; Congress isn't. Congress isn't going to fix a pothole, or put a pay meter on your favorite parking spot – your local government will.

There's also the issue of money. Most people see the mind-boggling trillions in Congressional budgets, and automatically assume that makes them more important than Missouri's "small" budgets of billions. They don't realize that nearly all of Congress' money goes somewhere other than Missouri. In fact, Missouri state revenues *outspend* federal funds by a factor of nearly *two to one*.

I'll say that one more time, for effect. The state of Missouri spends **TWICE** as much money for its citizens than the federal government does.

In addition, county, municipal, and school budgets, form pools of tax money completely separate from the state. Combined, these pools either *equal* or *double* the spending per capita of the federal government.

In Jefferson County for instance, the county government spends about \$400 per person. The average city in Jefferson County *separately* spends about \$1,000 per person. Festus, with a population of 11,600, actually spends about \$19.1 million per year, or \$1,600 per person.

Finally, the average school district takes in *separate* property tax levies of around \$1,000 per person. The Fox school district, for instance, taxes 67,000 residents. It spends \$133 million, of which \$59 million comes from local tax money, or about \$880 per person.

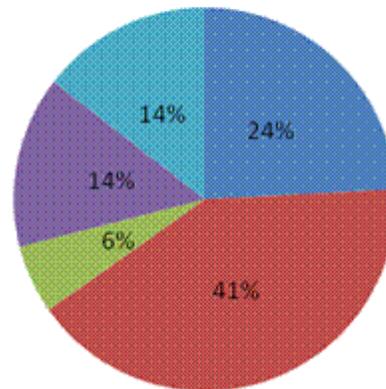
Add up all the averages - \$400 county, \$1,000 city, and \$1,000 school – and it's quite possibly double the \$1,600 federal per-person expenditure.

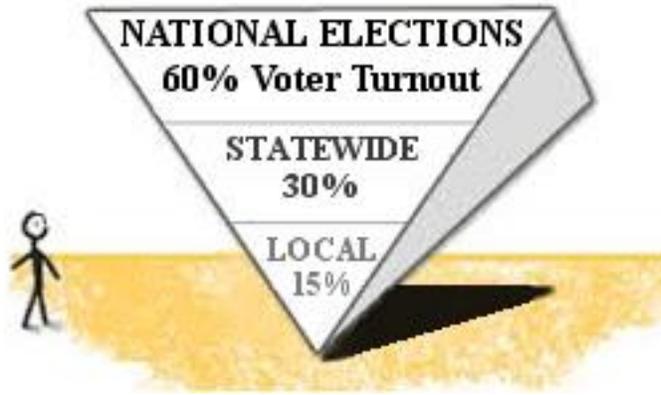
I'll say that again, with feeling. Your school, city, and county are spending **JUST AS MUCH OR MORE** *per Missouri resident* as the federal government.

So, for all of the noise about the President and Congress, it turns out that they may only contribute a *paltry 20% - 25%* to your governance. Their prestige and influence is all out of proportion to this contribution. Federal funding in education, for instance, is a *feeble 10%* on average in Missouri schools – yet many federal policies have managed to creep their way into our education system without public scrutiny.

Sources of Funds for Missouri Public Spending

■ Federal ■ State ■ County ■ City ■ School





Our obsession with Washington, D.C. isn't just misdirected, however. It's also pointless. Consider the upcoming presidential election. New York City, all by itself, has three times as many votes as *the entire population of Missouri*. So, Missouri's overall influence in national politics is very small. For the individual

Missourian, that influence drops to zero.

Nevertheless, most Missouri voters only show up to elect the President. Thanks to mass media, 60% of us are happily voting in national elections – where we have virtually no influence on the outcome – while only 30% are voting in statewide elections. A miserable 15% are turning out for the local elections, even though this is where we have the greatest influence.

No wonder people are frustrated with politics! With such an *upside-down* perception of our problems and political abilities, any effort at real change is doomed to failure. Instead of talking to *hundreds* of neighbors in our local district, we try to tackle *hundreds of millions* of voters at the national level.

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In the end, because we feel helpless, we wait for a national savior, unaware of the power that exists within our backyard.

I say enough of Obama. Stop worrying about Trump, Clinton, Bush, and all of the other self-important blatherers on TV. They get too much attention already. Turn the tables on these loudmouths and turn off the national news.

Then take control of your life and hold local governments accountable. Elect school boards that will actually do their job, rather than rubber-stamp their superintendents' decisions. Forbid city councils from giving away your taxes as “growth incentives” to billionaire CEOs. Write to state legislators and demand that they take a stand against destructive federal policies.

Our republic has been turned on its head for too long. Let's help it get back on its feet.