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Congressional irrelevance

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 FAIR GAME
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As Democrats and Republicans jeopardize national security by jockeying toward the next election cycle, Congress has made itself irrelevant to the needs of the American people.

A “corrupt duopoly” is how New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman labeled our paralyzed two-party system at the Aspen Ideas Festival: “Our nation,” said Friedman, “is facing the biggest decline in national values since the rise of the Greatest Generation.” Despite enormous geopolitical challenges, national policymakers spurn collective action. “We are in a slow, gradual decline,” concluded Friedman. “And the worst thing? People are getting used to it.”

Congress seems to think that America is “too big to fail,” but our national system is broken. “Our policymakers don’t go off to work each morning with the ambition of bettering the lives of the American people,” Harvard President Emeritus Derek Bok said at Ideas Fest. “They go off to better the lives of their contributors.”

What do we do with an irrelevant group of policymakers stagnated in political trench warfare? “You make other arrangements,” suggested a friend who practices an alternative lifestyle of barter and local food production. “You avert congressional irrelevance by building a new model with a local focus that provides the most basic of our needs: survival.”

When we can no longer trust our national institutions, it falls to our local communities to provide essentials like energy, food, health, education and investment. If a community can safeguard these functions, it will have met a level of security that centralized, unsustainable systems can no longer guarantee.

Energy is fairly easy. The Community Energy Collective (CEC), based in El Jebel, offers photovoltaic solar panels in large arrays. I subscribed last month, and the CEC is now providing 95 percent of my home electricity needs. Solar hot water panels on my roof heat our domestic water and save propane. Harness both, and you can declare energy independence while shrinking your carbon footprint to almost nothing.

Food is grown year-round in our valley. Papaya, figs and passion fruit thrive at Jerome Osentowski’s Colorado Permaculture Institute. My son is working there as an intern and he brings home delectable organic greens. By ramping up local agriculture with large-scale community farms, we can protect ourselves from the insecurities of the industrial food chain. Jerome’s many interns are brilliant and motivated, and eager to show what they can do with the land. We need to give them the opportunity to grow food and establish farming careers locally.

If food regulators try to thwart the locovore movement, we can do what the town of Sedgwick, Maine, has done by passing a food sovereignty law. Citing the Declaration of Independence and the Maine Constitution, the ordinance states that “Sedgwick citizens possess the right to produce, process, sell, purchase, and consume local foods of their choosing.” We, too, have the power to harness our valley’s agricultural heritage with a youthful labor force eager for careers in agronomy.

Most health issues revolve around living well, eating right and exercising. The Roaring Fork Valley is already a leader in communitywide health practices. Autonomy in the fields of health and fitness could lead to forming health co-ops with local physicians and clinics. Rather than struggle with rapacious insurance premiums, health co-ops could establish more affordable, long-term local health care alternatives.

Education starts at home. Parenting our children should include preparing them for a changing world by creating healthy, new economies and sustainable patterns of life. Local education of the kind offered at the Aspen

Center for Environmental Studies and the Permaculture Institute could become the underpinnings for meaningful social change.

Bernie Madoff and the Great Recession radically undermined investment security. Rather than hand over your nest egg to megabanks and international investment firms, keep it local. Invest in local farms for a share of produce. Buy into local solar electricity for clean, renewable energy. Help create local career opportunities for our children. Develop a barter system that swaps local goods and services. Invest in your community and it will pay dividends in energy, food, health and education.

Impersonal, automated networks could care less about you and your community. Congress is dysfunctional and corrupt. Consider anchoring your future to a place where people know you and care. Nurture community by expanding relationships with your neighbors. Look to local solutions, and exercise the ultimate in democratic principles.

Paul Andersen's column appears on Mondays.

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