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When the Government Shrinks, What Will Libraries Do?

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John Chratska

The 2016 elections were divisive from the start. This election will be remembered as a clash between several competing world views. It will likely mark the true beginning of the 21st century in America in the same way that the Wilson Administration was the transition between the Victorian and Edwardian Eras and the 20th Century.

At EveryLibrary, we are concerned that the policy priorities of the new Administration and Congress will not support libraries as institutions, and will create a climate where the integrity of the profession will be questioned, even as staff strive to serve their local communities, their campuses, or their students. We are also realistic that the changes to policy and funding priorities that come from a greater reliance on state and local control of government, and at the expense of federal authority, will dramatically increase the burden that local public libraries, and our colleagues in school and academic library settings, have to bear to fund future library services.

The tension between states' rights and the authority of the federal government perpetually rolls across the American political landscape. The election of Donald Trump and the continued control of Congress by a Republican majority will accelerate a shift away from Washington to state and local level funding and decision-making. We have no public opinion on whether that shift is right for America. We know library leaders have to anticipate it and address it.

Our concerns about the policy priorities of the new administration extend to many of Trump's nominations, specifically that of people like Senator Jeff Sessions to be Attorney General. Sessions is noted for his anti-immigrant sentiments and signed on to a recent letter criticizing the Library of Congress for retiring the use of the term "Illegal aliens" in favor of "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration" as a subject headings. As Attorney General, Sessions would be in a position to enforce or ignore key civil rights and voter rights laws while supporting an agenda that looks to include issues as minute as LOC subject headings as part of the culture war.

We are also concerned by the nomination of Betsy DeVos to be Secretary of Education. A scion of the

Amway fortune, she is pro-charter schools, pro-voucher programs, and is in favor of using tax money to provide "scholarships" for children to attend religious schools. We are unsure where effective school library programs and the role of school librarians fit into her view of public education, but we suspect that the current approach to federal funding that "supplements but not supplants" state and local funds will face a significant change. Likewise, announcing early in the transition that Jeff Eisenach and Mark Jamison will be the president-elect's nominees to the FCC signals that hard fought issues around net neutrality and a level playing field for internet access are going to be under threat. Mr. Eisenach and Mr. Jamison will also in a position to reimagine e-rate for schools and public libraries.

President-elect Trump has walked-back from many of his campaign promises, but we anticipate that there will still be huge federal infrastructure spending coming in the early part of 2017. Because the end result of the spending will be local construction and infrastructure jobs in hundreds of congressional districts all around the country, project priorities will be fought over in Washington on both sides of the aisle. Local library facilities and infrastructure projects like remodeling, upgrades and renovations, and construction should be included in any investment and infrastructure spending bill. We would be wise to recall that when the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2008 passed during the depths of the recession, the bill was intended to rapidly start spending federal money on local projects. The new Obama administration set up rules for infrastructure spending that were focused on "shovel ready" projects. But there was a significant lack of "shovel ready" library projects at the time, so very little money was spent in local communities on library construction and upgrades from that bill. If libraries do not attempt to be a part of any new federal infrastructure and stimulus programs to build 21st century libraries in 2017, we are missing another critical opportunity. The money will go elsewhere if libraries are not involved in this current negotiation.

Speaker Ryan and Congress

The Trump administration is not governing alone in Washington. Speaker Paul Ryan will advance a budget

framework that shrinks the federal government, reframes federal spending priorities, and reimagines the tax code. He outlines his approach to evidence-based policymaking in *A Better Way*, his agenda and “vision for a confident America.” In it, he proposes a series of significant changes to the way federal programs are authorized or reauthorized. If implemented, core programs that provide supplemental funding for state and local education programs, poverty programs, food and nutrition programs, and workforce development programs will be drastically changed or cut. Like the President-Elect, the Speaker is interested in removing regulations and rules that are “barriers to economic prosperity.” This free market, anti-regulatory approach is a key part of the Koch Brother’s agenda as well.

The rhetoric within his *A Better Way* plan is focused on finding efficiencies by eliminating waste and redundancies. He prefers models for programs that are based on “Pay for Outcomes” and includes “Social Impact Funding” as a potential new way to do public-private partnerships. For libraries, this means a greater attention to measuring, tracking, and reporting outcomes. Without data about current impacts we cannot expect our history of success to carry us very far. Speaker Ryan has advanced the creation of a new federal Commission on Evidence-Based Planning. When the rubric used to evaluate a program is “return on investment” or “most bang for the buck,” programs that impact a small population can be easily targeted and axed. We fear that core civil rights and civil liberties protections for minority populations can be weakened in this planning process.

For libraries, a Ryan Budget is full of problems. For the past several fiscal years his budgets have proposed the elimination of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the zeroing out of federal funding for libraries. If he is successful - in full or in part - this loss of federal aid will further negatively impact state libraries who are using LSTA funds to maintain agency services and personnel, and negatively impact pass-through programs that supplement local taxes or encourage innovation at the local level by libraries. If the perspective of the Speaker of the House is that libraries are not a federal issue and should not be in the budget, we should also expect other parts of federal programs that include libraries and librarians to likewise be under threat.

What can EveryLibrary Do?

Despite our concerns about what may happen in Washington, EveryLibrary needs to acknowledge that we are not setup to work on Federal issues. The lobbying and policy ecosystem for libraries in Washington D.C. belongs with the American Library Association and its divisions, the Urban Libraries Council, and other national membership organizations for libraries that wish to pick up their federal advocacy and lobby portfolios. EveryLibrary is also expressly forbidden by current IRS code and regulation from supporting or opposing any candidate for office at any level of government. When we have stepped out into federal issues, it has been to provide support to other organizations’ legislative asks. When we donate to state-level candidate-focused PACs like New Yorkers for Better Libraries or Missouri’s Show Me Libraries PAC, it legally must be limited.

As an organization, EveryLibrary has been focused from the start on local and state policy, direct voter contact and education, and funding issues for libraries. In that work, we have been successful partners with dozens of local public library communities as they campaigned for new or renewed funding at the ballot box. We have been advisors to library communities as they negotiated for funding with village, town, city, and county government. Our work has grown to support state library associations on legislative issues like bills that would hamper public library services or impede good library governance, and regulatory issues with state departments of education on school library policy after the passage of ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act. Our concerns for the future of libraries touch all levels of government, but our priorities for political action are at the local and state levels by design.

Focus on Local and State Solutions

We believe that under the new Administration and Congress, policy priorities and budgetary pressure will continue to devolve to states, counties and cities, and local municipalities. As the federal government’s role begins to diminish, states and localities will have to take up the funding and policy slack. Think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institute, and the Brookings Institute have been smoothing the way toward a free market Federalist policy framework for years. Libertarian groups like the Tea Party have

advanced and supported candidates who have an “any tax is a bad tax” philosophy of government for years. The Koch Brothers have recently included libraries on the target list of their free market Americans For Prosperity mega-PAC. This approach to shrinking government in favor of a free market will not stop at the Beltway. We have to be prepared to defend libraries’ budgets and possibly even the core argument for why libraries should exist.

Libraries as Laboratories of Democracy

States are often called “Laboratories of Democracy” by folks who want to see more authority returned to their state governments. The idea of a Laboratory should mean that states can effectively experiment with programs and policies to find solutions that are right for their local populations. But state politics have become decidedly more partisan over the last decade, with 42 state legislatures and governors’ offices controlled by the same party. When new policy “lab experiments” like state-level welfare reforms or pre-Obamacare healthcare exchanges worked, they tended to have bipartisan support and were developed in a bipartisan manner. Now, whether it is the five states controlled by democrats or the 37 controlled by republicans, single party states like Kansas and Connecticut are not generating new examples or models for legislation that are palatable across the political spectrum. Governor Brownback and Governor Malloy are running two very different economic and social agendas, and neither is transferable to each other’s local political climate. State ideas are also not going to be scalable as new federal solutions because Washington will be preoccupied over the next four years with its agenda to shrink government.

So if the states are not the best laboratory, then our villages, towns, cities, and counties need to be. Every-Library wants to remind everyone who works in a public library that you work in a unit of government. It is already a laboratory of democracy. We want to support your local laboratory of democracy at the ballot box, in negotiations with municipal funding partners, and as you innovate to solve problems in your communities. Your policies and your budget are not contingent on the Trump Administration any more than they were on the Obama or Bush ones.

We have three ideas we want to explore to preserve and protect the future of libraries, regardless of who is in office in Washington:

Using IGAs and MOUs

If federal rules and regulations are going to be rolled-back, and if states and local government are going to be given more authority to act, the library community needs to take some inspiration from its greatest historic success for our next “laboratory of democracy” experiment. Interlibrary Loan and resource sharing are radical ways to equalize taxes and create equity across town, city, county, and state borders. Interlibrary Loan is essentially a tax equalization system. Through ILL, public, school, and academic libraries have already figured out an extraordinary way to work within the tax code of their several states to promote library services. Better-off and worse-off libraries have joined together through a series of Intergovernmental Agreements and Memos of Understanding to aggregate and expend tax money across jurisdictional lines. The fact that this framework has existed since the early 1970s should not mean that we have forgotten how to do it again.

If federal resources stop flowing, how do we help secure the equity we all value for school, academic, and public library members of our consortiums and systems? If the federal government won’t lead on equity, how do we use and improve the existing network of IGAs and MOUs to advance a policy and funding formula for all our libraries? It may even be time for us to revisit existing multi-state structures for libraries like the Interstate Library Compact which “[a]uthorizes state, local, and private libraries to enter into agreements for provision of services and utilization of facilities on an interstate basis, including the creation of joint library districts.” The Compact is state-by-state in its authority, but its “eligibility is nationwide in scope.” Over half of our public libraries are independent units of government while others are departments of local government. Our school libraries and academic libraries are in systems, co-ops, and other relationships based on IGAs, MOUs, and contracts. These Interlibrary agreements facilitate cooperation and achieve equity that can be used for other outcomes as well. Agreements like these are not limited to delivery and shared catalogs by law or statute. We see a way forward to work peer-to-peer and across state lines that doesn’t need

the approval or cooperation of the folks in Washington.

Running State Ballot Initiatives

Many statewide propositions, ballot initiatives, and constitutional amendments have come to be because a number of towns, cities, or counties already had approved of the ideas through local ordinances or voter-approved measures. There was momentum and a growing consensus across the state that a change could be achieved through statewide voter action. We have seen that with the minimum wage issues, medical and recreational marijuana measures, food safety and GMO issues, and a host of school funding proposals.

When voters are asked to consider a library measure or referendum, vote at a town hall, or ratify an annual budget at the ballot box, it is the fullest expression of American democracy in action. It may be time for the library community to consider the library as a “general consensus issue” across multiple villages, towns, cities, and counties in their state and propose a state-wide funding mechanism or even a state constitutional amendment about libraries for voters to consider. Currently, only New Mexico offers voters a regular chance to vote on General Obligation Bonds to support construction, renovations, and collections for their public libraries. Only Ohio has a funding formula for libraries built into its basic law. If the national habit of setting policy and funding priorities is becoming more distributed, library communities need to understand and utilize those mechanisms of governance as well.

Finding New Revenue Sources

Library communities need to innovate within their existing local and state policy frameworks and tax codes, but we should also begin to look at new revenue sources to fund their work. We can look at two examples of new revenue sources for inspiration. One is how cities like Philadelphia and San Francisco, and local governments like Cook County in Illinois, have instituted a dedicated tax on sugar sweetened beverages that funds their public health programs. The other is how the state of Colorado allows local governments to allocate a significant portion of sales tax from medical and recreational marijuana sales to fund local priorities.

Are there new approaches to taxation that could fund libraries beyond our existing sources? Are there revenue options already available in state tax codes that a voter-approved measure, or city council or county commission could enact? Likewise, library budgets across a state could benefit from a new approach to revenue by a state legislature or statewide voter-approved proposition. If our states and our towns, cities, and counties are truly laboratories for democracy, the library community needs to start experimenting with our funding formulas.

EveryLibrary’s Next Steps

EveryLibrary exists to ensure that thousands of local libraries in diverse communities have the resources they need to help people succeed. Whether it is public libraries going to the ballot, academic librarians serving their campuses for the next generation, or school librarians trying to influence state education policy, EveryLibrary has hope for the future of America’s libraries and librarians. We believe that libraries everywhere should have funding to best serve their local communities. We know that the base of library supporters can be grown in Red states and Blue states. And we have a vision that every librarian should have the resources they need to help their communities prosper, their campuses succeed, and their students thrive.

As we look past January 20th, 2017, we are gearing up to support over a dozen public libraries on the ballot and ramping up two new pilot advocacy programs with school library partners. We have already begun the process of identifying and meeting new coalition partners from outside of libraries. Our outreach efforts to the American public about libraries and librarians is reaching thousands of people each month and we hope to have 250,000 on our action-list by the end of the year. Most importantly, we will continue to listen to the library community, our supporters and donors, and to the American electorate. If we are to be successful in our mission to build voter support for libraries it will be because we are bold about our beliefs, open to diverse voices, smart with our resources, and tactical in our approach.