
THE SUM OF ALL WE ARE

Much public policy work—including what you read in this column—follows a very traditional route of identifying a problem and seeking possible solutions. But starting with a problem can give this work a negative focus—much like media stories of failure, mishap, and bad ends. Yet often, and particularly as a new year dawns, it's worth pausing and reflecting on the positive. What allows us to live and thrive in a good society? To grow and progress so much that we consider it a failure to have a few years of negative or low growth? To live in peace, at least within our borders? To enjoy almost endless possibility?

The answer I always come to is the same: each of you. I have no doubt that the underpinning of a good society begins and ends with the compassion, integrity, and hard work of each and every one of its people.

In a recent interview on the Krista Tippet on Being program, Rachel Naomi Remen, the author of *My Grandfather's Blessings*, talks about the creation story handed down by her grandfather, a student of the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah. Among its conclusions is that we are all called to be healers of the world, to find the hidden light within all things. And the story makes it clear that it's not about who rises to the top of various hierarchies, but about the difference each of us can make. ([Read the transcript from American Public Media.](#))

In my own words, we are the sum of all we are.

This beautiful spiritual story speaks volumes even when applied to the mundane world of politics and policy.

Politics is about power, and public policy is about government using power to achieve certain ends. As divided and mean as that political world can be, at day's end most politicians appeal to the public good as reason for their votes and actions. That they feel compelled to justify even their most selfish efforts tells us that conscience lurks at some level behind everything. Not just among politicians, but also among their constituents, who often vote for far more than their own interests.

To be sure, all the public policy in the world cannot substitute or compensate for what goes on in each household. At best, it can provide incentives, protect individual rights, and set boundaries on how much control others can have over us. Even education of the young—among policy's most active engagements—depends mainly on students themselves and what they learn at home. Public policy can redistribute, and it can direct, but only individuals can produce what is to be redistributed.

Most of the things we do, most of what we produce, don't even take place in a marketplace over which the government exercises much control. Most take place in that majority of time that we spend outside the formal marketplace, in our homes and our voluntary associations. And most of what is produced in the home can never be bought, borrowed, stolen, or taxed away to be redistributed.

Much policy research is inconclusive, often for a common reason. Spend a billion dollars more, and that's equivalent to about one Baskin-Robbins ice cream cone per person a year. Why would we think that one Baskin-Robbins ice cream cone would shake up the world or have a measurable impact on the grand scheme of things? So we narrow our conclusions in a lot of studies—if we're lucky—to whether the government's contribution might have led on net to people consuming one more ice cream cone. But then we punt on further implications for achieving a good society; heck, we have trouble estimating even whether people might eat less candy or cauliflower because of the ice cream subsidy.

When we do engage in the market, what underpins it as well is the basic honesty and integrity of each person involved. Trust is at the foundation of almost all contracts; we could never afford enough

police and lawyers to enforce contracts among a people who were basically dishonest.

I don't mean to discount the need to constantly work at the margin to uphold the integrity of both government and markets. Scanning across other times and places, we can see how dishonesty, corruption, and lack of compassion can bring down a nation. But this only tells us that these marginal efforts succeed best when they uphold the basic virtues that people exhibit and yearn to develop in their everyday lives.

So, at the beginning of this new year, thank you—each of you—for being who you are: the healer, the underpinning of a good society, the source of growth and peace upon which I and so many others depend. Next time we start to discuss our latest policy problems, I hope that I remember how much progress depends upon the foundation you have already built.

The Government We Deserve is a periodic column on public policy by Eugene Steuerle, an Institute fellow and the Richard B. Fisher Chair at the nonpartisan Urban Institute. Steuerle is also a former deputy assistant secretary of the Treasury. The opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its sponsors.

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