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## Shifts in responsibility show How power resides in cities

**Localism** addresses head on many of the grievances exploited by **populism**

Bruce Katz



The chaotic presidency of Donald Trump spawns daily commentary about the health of democracy and the stability of US institutions. Less well recognised in this heated environment is the maturing of a trend that has been under way for decades: the **rise of cities** and metropolitan communities — and their networks of public, private and **civic leaders** — as the world’s pre-eminent problem solvers.

Power is shifting globally. With national governments challenged, **cities in the US and beyond have assumed increased responsibility** for addressing many of our biggest policy challenges. **Cities are able to act** because their power rests not in government alone, but in market and **civic strengths** that emanate from the concentration of valuable economic, physical and social

assets. Leaders in cities **routinely work collaboratively across sectors** rather than using traditional command-and-control mechanisms.

The emerging framework of **multi-sectoral governance** and networked problem solving is what might be called “**new localism**”. Where **populism on the right and left exploits the grievances of those left behind by economic and social change, this localism is a means to address them head on.**

Ironically, Mr Trump’s push for the “**deconstruction of the administrative state**” is accelerating the rise of the modern city-state.

In the US, signs of new localism abound. Pittsburgh, for instance, is catalyzing innovative and inclusive growth by inventing and deploying new industries and technologies. Indianapolis is using formal governance structures and private and civic funds to grow a world-class life sciences economy. Los Angeles is investing hundreds of billions of dollars of local resources in state of the art infrastructure. Louisville is creating a cradle-to-career system that aims to help disadvantaged youths become middle class by middle age. And Philadelphia is using nature-based solutions and green infrastructure to manage storm water run-off.

The most intriguing question in the US and elsewhere is how far new localism can go. There are limits, of course, to city-led problem solving; the current debates in the US over healthcare funding and immigration policies remind us of the central roles that national governments play. But two areas are worth watching.

In the aftermath of Mr Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris agreement on climate change, hundreds of American cities made a commitment to meet the agreement’s goals through local and collective action. We can expect similar collective commitments in other areas, including children, housing, transport and refugees.

Instruments and institutions will be created to convert market power into tangible fiscal and financial resources. Copenhagen’s revival of its waterfront offers one approach: transfer government-owned land and buildings to a publicly owned, privately driven corporation. And then use smart asset management and strategic zoning to spur the regeneration of older industrial areas and the financing of a citywide transit system, without raising taxes.

New localism is a reminder that power in countries as powerful as the US — or Britain, Germany and China — has never been as simple as the daily reports from national capitals would suggest. **Decisions are routinely made by sub-national leaders** and ordinary citizens that build communities, drive economies, educate children, spur innovation, and change lives. The **hidden reality of distributed power** upends conventional wisdom about who solves problems and drives change in an age with too much partisan conflict and not enough common purpose. New localism is representative of the democratic ideals and principles that founded the American republic and sustains it in good and bad times. It is a governing practice and philosophy that puts place over partisanship and problem solving over

**polarization.** It may just offer the best hope we have for renewing citizens' faith in the political system.

*The writer is the co-author, with Jeremy Nowak, of 'The New Localism', to be published later this year*