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To Rethink Government, Start Close to Home

By ROBERT H. FRANK

GOVERNMENT gets no respect.

Some of the antipathy may stem from fancy economic theories that say free markets magically render government unnecessary. But much more of it surely results from the annoying experiences that many Americans have had in government offices.

High on many lists of miserable places to spend an afternoon is the local office of the department of motor vehicles.

For decades, people have complained of long lines and rude service at D.M.V. offices all over the country. There's a widespread impression that D.M.V. employees consider their customers' time worthless.

[One blogger](#), for example, described a visit to a rural Ohio motor vehicle office where he ignored the "take a number" sign, since he was the only customer in the room. When he approached the counter, the clerk glared at him and sternly ordered him to take a number. He dutifully complied, adding that "as soon as I sat down, she called out, 'One!' " "That's me!" he responded, and only then did she deign to scrutinize his forms.

After countless experiences like these, is it any wonder that many people believe that government is the problem and not the solution, as President Ronald Reagan contended in his first inaugural address? In the years since, increasingly harsh antigovernment rhetoric has dominated American public discourse: All taxation is theft! Starve the beast! Or, in Grover Norquist's memorable words, we should downsize government enough to "drown it in the bathtub."

Yet no society can prosper without government. Without collective action, how could we defend ourselves, or enforce property rights, or build and maintain public infrastructure, or curb pollution? And if government is unavoidable, surely it is worth asking whether we can make it better. Some societies have demonstrably more effective governments than others, after all, and some of our government institutions function much better than others.

I stumbled upon an instructive case study close to home — in Ithaca, N.Y., at the Tompkins County Department of Motor Vehicles office. The Ohio blogger could have been describing the D.M.V. I dealt with when I first moved to Ithaca in the 1970s — surly service, endless waits, mindless bureaucratic rigidity — the whole litany. But these days, the local D.M.V. is nothing like that.

For example, when I was selling my car to an out-of-town buyer last March, he said he was excited to complete the transaction except for the fact that he would need to visit his local D.M.V. I suggested that he register the car in Ithaca, where he'd be in for a pleasant surprise. We went together one morning to a harshly lit, warehouse-like building that still seemed to scream "bureaucracy." There were forms to fill out, and he found them confusing. Though he made several errors, an employee cheerfully guided him through the process. Much to his astonishment, we were out the door with his plates in 15 minutes.

Curious about what had caused this transformation, I called Aurora Valenti, the Tompkins County clerk, who's been in charge of the local D.M.V. for the last 21 years.

Things were a mess when she first took office, she told me. Employee morale was low, and customers complained bitterly and often. One big annoyance was that they had to wait in one line to have their forms processed, then start all over again in another line to pay their

fees.

She discovered that the reason for the separate line was technological: terminals used to process licenses and other forms couldn't handle transactions involving money. So she negotiated with state officials in Albany to get what was needed to allow each clerk to do both tasks. Now customers wait in only one line. That may not seem like a big deal in itself, but the intelligent use of technology — which also sometimes allows customers to complete their forms online, and not even visit the D.M.V. — has contributed to a quiet revolution.

BUT that's only part of the story.

Ms. Valenti's other major initiative was a heavy dose of sensitivity training for employees, which she delivered in person. "Most customers would rather have a root canal than visit the D.M.V.," she told them, "and that's making both you and them unhappy." Her explicit goal was to empower clerks to tell customers quickly and cheerfully that there were simply no problems they could not solve.

From what I've seen, this training worked. Morale now seems high. When I told the employee who helped us why I'd suggested that the buyer come to the Ithaca office, she blushed with pride. "We all really enjoy working here," she said. And customers with whom I've spoken say they are very happy with their experience at the office — at any rate, as happy as they can be with time spent doing government business.

The Tompkins County D.M.V. is not unique. While many people around the country may still detest their local office, friends and colleagues in New York City and other places — both inside the state and out — say they have also noted improvements.

These small victories should be celebrated, because without decent government the free enterprise system would quickly grind to a halt.

If government is inevitable, why not try to create the most effective one possible? Success requires focus and hard work, which in turn require dedicated and competent public servants. But experience shows that it's possible.

[Annual surveys by Transparency International](#), a nonprofit group based in Berlin, consistently place the same nations — New Zealand, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada and the Scandinavian countries among them — atop the list of those whose own citizens think most highly of their governments. The United States does not rank in the top 20.

Antigovernment rhetoric is surely not the only reason for our low ranking. But incessant government bashing isn't making it any easier to recruit the kind of people who make good government, and short lines at the D.M.V., possible for the rest of us.

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