

Closer to the people?

By [David Heim](#)

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“The government that is closest to the people governs best.” That sentiment [was expressed recently](#) by Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, and it’s long been a staple of conservative political philosophy and of candidates who want federal programs to be taken over by state and local governments. But liberals embrace it in their own way when they talk about “participatory democracy” and the need for people to be able to make decisions about the issues that directly affect them.

The question is: what does it mean for government to be “closer” to people? Are citizens really closer to their state legislators and officials? Geographically, yes. But state and local officials can also be elusive and unresponsive—perhaps even more so than national officials, since there are fewer organizations and reporters covering their actions and holding them accountable.

Most of us, if we pay attention to the news at all, are likely to know more about the debates and the lobbyists at work in Washington than we are about what’s going on in Springfield or Trenton.

This situation has been exacerbated in recent years as newspapers have cut the size of their newsrooms. A [study by the American Journalism Review](#) found that the number of reporters at U.S. statehouses dropped by a third between 2003 and 2009—from 524 to 355. In 2003, there were 14 reporters credentialed at the Georgia statehouse; now there are five. California had 40 capitol reporters; now it has 29.

In theory, the rise of personal blogs and other electronic media offers a way to fill the gap in local reporting. The problem is that most new outlets for news simply refashion reports from the traditional sources that have themselves been massively downsized.

Steve Waldman, the *Beliefnet* founder who now advises the Federal Communications Commission on the “the state of information and the vitality of democracy,” makes

this point [in a study noted here](#). For example, he found that 83 percent of news stories reported by 52 media outlets in Baltimore were recycled versions of reports generated by the *Baltimore Sun*. And the *Sun* produced 73 percent fewer stories in 2009 than it did in 1991.

The “closer to the people” theme is persuasive, but it may rely on assumptions about community and local knowledge that don’t apply to the world we actually live in.