

The Slow Government Movement (Opinion)

Paul W. Taylor | August 16, 2012

In contrast to the slow food movement, whose advocates say it's an idea whose time has come, slow government has no advocates because slowness has long been seen as the problem to be fixed. Advocates of government reform and innovation often tout variations of better, faster and cheaper in making their cases for change. Better can be hard to measure, cheaper can be hard to realize, but faster is always an improvement.

Even when technology is used to speed up old, tired, unreformed processes, we call it paving the cow path. Suboptimal to be sure, but still better than slow, right? If there is a copy of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* on your bookshelf, you respond as Tevye (the affable milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof*) would: "Of course, right." Seen this way, instinct is pitted against intellect in decision-making, and the difference between brilliance and incompetence is the speed at which decisions are made.

But perhaps our speed fixation is itself a rush to judgment. In a trilogy of books drawn from research on hundreds of companies — *Good to Great*, *Built to Last* and *Great by Choice* — Jim Collins has long emphasized taking the long view: "Faith in the end game helps you live through the months or years of buildup."

The buildup is too much for some people. Early in my public service career, a private-sector member of the state technology oversight board quit in frustration, writing, "We made some progress but the inertia was considerable."

Frank Partnoy thinks that well timed inertia may not be all bad. He is a law and finance professor at the University of San Diego and author of *Wait: The Art and Science of Delay*. Based on a fresh read of thousands of research studies, Partnoy argues that procrastination or what he prefers to call "managing delay" in a rapidly changing and complex world can actually help with decision-making.

A well timed pause helps make a person or organization more aware of their limitations and opportunities. Partnoy may have identified the underappreciated genius of what is often a frustrating political process, demonstrating that many decisions are better for having "being made at the last possible moment." The people at the top of their game in almost any area of life, who Partnoy calls "delay specialists," distinguish themselves as rock stars by knowing how long they can afford to "delay before committing is at the heart of many a great decision."

He argues that's true even — or especially — when there is a time crunch. The experience of trading from what worked to increase transaction speeds only to back off later illustrates the point: "It was the oddest thing. In a world that values speed so much, you could be slower, yet still be better."

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