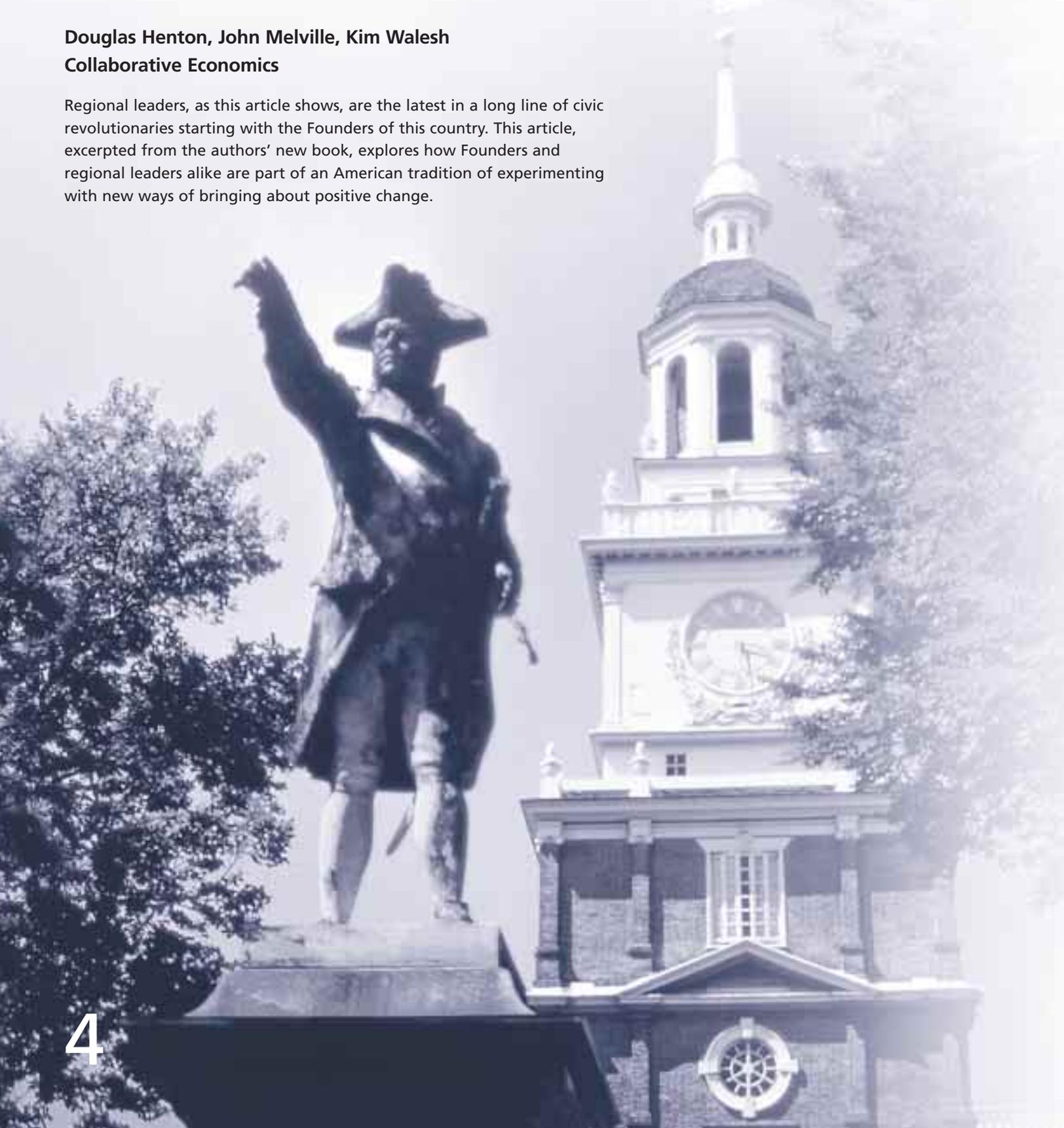


# Civic Revolutionaries

**IGNITING THE PASSION FOR CHANGE IN AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES**

**Douglas Henton, John Melville, Kim Welsh**  
**Collaborative Economics**

Regional leaders, as this article shows, are the latest in a long line of civic revolutionaries starting with the Founders of this country. This article, excerpted from the authors' new book, explores how Founders and regional leaders alike are part of an American tradition of experimenting with new ways of bringing about positive change.



## Introduction

Our country's founding generation grappled with a fundamental question: how to balance and reconcile competing values in the birth of the first modern democracy. Individual and community, freedom and responsibility — the Founders worked through these and other tensions of their time and laid down the nation's guiding philosophy in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The task of every succeeding generation has been to revisit these values under changing conditions, within the framework of the nation's guiding philosophy, and to try to reconcile them so that America can move forward. This is the continuing American Experiment.

The American Experiment is our most important tradition and the key to our enduring success as a nation. This tradition has endured because succeeding generations have stepped forward and made their contribution, as we must. We can never rest, because the world keeps changing. But it is in our power to see that the American Experiment progresses rather than regresses on our watch. It is our responsibility to be stewards of the American Experiment. As was true for generations before us, our duty is to answer the call to stewardship in our time.

Today civic revolutionaries across the nation are answering the call to stewardship, igniting the passion for change in America's communities. They are revolutionaries in the sense that they are willing to experiment with new approaches to complex community problems. Although their methods differ and the pace of change varies from place to place, the essential motivation of civic revolutionaries is

the same: a long-term commitment to fundamental change that improves the well-being of people and their communities.

Following in the footsteps of generations before, people of great ability and imagination are today stepping forward as leaders in a grassroots movement to transform how our nation solves its most pressing problems. In communities across America, leaders from business, government, education, and community are struggling to move forward on critical economic and social issues — how to succeed in a volatile economy, how to prepare people for a new world of work, how to safeguard environmental assets, how to create a sense of community in a pluralistic society.

Although important work is taking place on critical issues nationally, we believe that the most interesting and powerful civic innovation is happening from the bottom up — in communities and regions across America. Although most of these civic revolutionaries are not household names and probably never will be, their determination to change their communities makes them part of a great American tradition of experimentation and fundamental optimism about the future.

### The New Civic Revolutionaries: Regional Stewards

We believe that a grassroots civic movement is currently under way in this country at the regional level. Civic revolutionaries, acting as regional stewards, are experimenting with new ways of addressing critical, complex issues that cut across multiple





political jurisdictions and constituencies — transportation, housing, economic competitiveness, social equity, disaster preparedness. This is a pragmatic approach to problem solving born of necessity from multiple forces, including devolution of federal and state programs, global competition, decentralization from central cities, fiscal limitations, increased diversity and demands for participation.

This new reality poses difficult challenges for civic leadership and for the institutions of government and processes of governance. The need for regional approaches and cohesiveness stands in sharp contrast to governmental fragmentation and parochial governance. The result is the emergence of networks of regional stewards who influence regional direction through ad hoc approaches, rather than new, formal government structures. These leaders work pragmatically across traditional boundaries of geography and sector to deliver results.

The work of civic revolutionaries acting as regional stewards has only just begun. We are in a transitional phase, working to develop new patterns of collaboration and partnership, experimenting with new ways of doing business.

## Igniting the Passion for Change

We believe that there are three major roles that civic revolutionaries play to ignite the passion for change and navigate the process of experimentation in their communities. Civic revolutionaries *discover*, then they *decide*, and then they *drive* change.

### *Discover: Building a Compelling Case for Change*

Civic revolutionaries build a convincing case for change in their communities — accumulating information, ideas, and allies in the process. They diagnose the challenges facing their communities, the tensions between competing values that must be addressed in new ways. They creatively describe, reframe, measure, and connect issues and root causes. They try to understand what is working, what is not working, and what might work. They seek out the experiences of other communities, to expand the view of what's possible and to find other civic revolutionaries who might be able to help them frame problems or develop solutions. At the same time, they seek out and discover allies in their communities, individuals that can help make the case and become part of the coalition for change. All of this preparation helps them discover or rediscover problems, possibilities, and people and in the process builds the case for experimentation.

The Founders themselves went through a period of discovery by being active at the local and state level before moving onto the national stage, finding allies in other parts of the country, connecting with one another in *committees of correspondence*, and drawing liberally from the literature and experience of other countries when they seemed to fit the aspirations and needs of the fledgling republic. Through these efforts, they built the case for change. They went through a particularly intensive search as they recognized the limits of the Articles of Confederation and created the Constitution. The Articles created a national government that had neither the resources nor the authority to govern the new nation of three million people spread along the eastern seaboard, and an alternative had to be found.

Like the Founders, today's civic revolutionaries broaden their horizons through the discovery process, but they also stay focused on the applications of what they have learned with the allies they have found. Making the case is not an academic exercise, but one that marshals information, resources, and people to take action.

### ***Decide: Making Critical Choices in Experimentation***

Civic revolutionaries use what they learn from the discovery process to make decisions. They make choices from among the many actions they could take to tackle their challenges. Though they may consult with those in other communities and tap into national sources of research and ideas to consider options for action, they sort through different ideas and decide on how best to apply what they have learned. They decide about focus, scope, and priority in designing experiments in community change — immediate actions connected to an overall vision (or story) of change that will provide opportunities for continuous feedback and adaptation.

The Founders themselves engaged in focused decision-making sessions to agree to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, after much experience with experimentation at the state level and the Articles of Confederation, individual Founders came together to sort through specific ideas and create an overall framework for action, essentially agreeing on a set of operating principles for governing the republic. Just as important, they introduced a system of renewal that would allow future generations to make adaptations.

Like the Founders, today's civic revolutionaries do not find answers to all the problems but set out a new approach based on guiding principles that can be put into practice immediately, with tangible and visible results. Above all, they do not shrink from the responsibility and risk of making decisions and moving forward with much-needed experimentation.

### ***Drive: Mobilizing Allies for Change***

Civic revolutionaries are relentless in their drive for change. Although they are thoughtful and reflective in preparation and in decision making about what to do, they neither succumb to “paralysis by analysis” nor engage in an endless search for the perfect solution. They embody the spirit of experimentation — they reflect, decide, act, then reflect on initial results, make more decisions, pursue new actions, and start the process again. They drive a realistic, opportunistic, and adaptable experimentation process.

Even with their preparation and decisiveness, the Founders were ultimately drivers of change. After agreeing to the Constitution, they engaged in a campaign to put it into practice, working to ensure that each state would vote to ratify the document.

Although we recognize and celebrate their contribution in our time, the Founders faced an uphill battle in their time. Supporters of the Constitution would not have won a Gallup poll.

Key to the effort to drive adoption of the Constitution was a series of essays (essentially op-ed pieces) in a New York newspaper, the *Independent Journal*. We now know these essays collectively as *The Federalist Papers*. They made the case to a wary American people that a new structure of governance was necessary and that the Articles of Confederation were inadequate to the demands of the day. They articulated how the new Constitution addressed the problems that the country faced and how it addressed the major concerns of opponents and the numerous competing interest groups in our already diverse nation. The essays were reprinted in other newspapers and circulated as pamphlets and were arguably one of the key drivers for adoption of the Constitution by the states. Only with these efforts did the Constitution transform from a thoughtful synthesis of governing principles into the blueprint for action to launch a new nation.

Once the ratification process was completed, the Founders participated in the implementation of the new governing model. They quickly added the first ten amendments, collectively known as the Bill of Rights, and over the next few years through experimentation, fine-tuned the content and application of the document through legislative changes and judicial review. The Constitution was never about getting it perfect the first time around. Even in their time, the Founders tinkered with their creation to make it a practical, workable blueprint for action.

Following in the footsteps of the Founders and later the civic revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we must recognize the time has come for this generation of Americans to take its place as stewards of the American Experiment.

Douglas Henton, John Melville, and Kim Walesh are principals in Collaborative Economics, a firm that forges linkage between local governments, businesses, and nonprofits to promote successful communities. This article is excerpted from the introduction of their new book published by Jossey Bass, *Civic Revolutionaries: Igniting the Passion for Change in America's Communities* (2004) and is printed here with their permission. For more information, visit [www.coecon.com](http://www.coecon.com).