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## 'Political downsizing' is latest weapon for voters

By Rick Hampson, USA TODAY

HAMBURG, N.Y. — Joe Killian rose at a taxpayers' forum one night to bemoan the chronically high cost of government in western New York. "Nothing's worked," said the burly, 59-year-old water utility worker. "We're the Cubs. This team don't win."

It's winning now. Discouraged by unemployment and depopulation and frustrated by politicians' inability to solve either, voters aren't just throwing the rascals out of office — they're throwing out the offices.

In what this region calls "political downsizing," communities are voting by referendum to reduce the number of seats on town councils. The movement's theory, as voiced by its founder, a gadfly named [Kevin Gaughan](#): The best (and maybe only) way to cut government is to start with your own representatives.

So far the downsizing movement is confined mostly to western New York, but it's part of a national wave of frustration over big government that was illustrated this year by raucous town-hall-style meetings over health care and the rise of the Tea Party movement. Unlike those movements, downsizing is a proven hit at the ballot box.

This year, all four towns that considered citizen-initiated referendums to trim their boards from five members to three have voted to do so. They range from Orchard Park, the affluent suburb where the NFL's [Buffalo Bills](#) play, to the rural, close-knit town of Alden. In several other communities, councils have voluntarily elected to downsize.

This month, Niagara County voters decided overwhelmingly to reduce the county legislature from 19 members to 15.

There's even talk of dissolving whole villages (which are parts of towns but levy additional taxes and have their own elected boards). Last month, with visions of a 40% tax cut in their heads, the villagers of Limestone voted 3-to-1 to dissolve. The next council downsizing referendum is Tuesday in this community of 56,000, where one candidate in the Nov. 4 election endorsed downsizing, even though it would eliminate the seat he was seeking. He won.

"This is our chance to send a message," Killian says. "Now we have a stick" — a quick up-or-down vote on whether to take a bite out of government that spares service providers such as police and teachers. Nothing personal, he adds: "The guys on the council are friends of mine. I'm sorry it has to start at this end. But it has to start somewhere."

### 'Something's out of control'

It started with Gaughan, 55, a lawyer whom the *Buffalo News* calls "the region's downsizing guru." In the past few years he has gone from town to town, attending 263 meetings at last count, to argue that fewer elected officials means more room in government for citizen volunteers and participatory democracy.

Downsizing is not unique to New York. Holyoke, Mass., for example, has lost a third of its population over the past 75 years but kept a 15-seat council. This month voters elected to consider changing the city charter and possibly reduce the size of the council.

And the anger that fuels the downsizing movement doesn't stop at New York's border. Given the recession and conflict over what to do about it, "politically there's a higher stress level out there now," says Mike McGrath of the National Civic League, a non-partisan group that promotes good government.

"Everybody is becoming aware that local governments are spending well beyond their means," says Nick Dranias, who studies the issue at the conservative [Goldwater Institute](#) in Phoenix. "There's a sense that something's out of control."

Can downsizing go national? [Grover Norquist](#), a leading anti-tax crusader, is skeptical. "It's a lashing out by people who feel they've tried everything," he says. "But if five guys won't stare down the unions or not replace some retirees, why will three? ... New Hampshire has more legislators than California, but it has lower taxes."

The rise of downsizing is something of a surprise, because polls show that Americans have a higher opinion of local government than of state or federal government. For all their complaints about government and taxes, they also overwhelmingly re-elect their own representatives.

Yet in many cases, downsizing would reduce representation below the minimum of five elected council members recommended by the National Civic League's model charter.

Downsizing's popularity also is surprising in light of how little it would save taxpayers. A study by the University at Buffalo Regional Institute concluded that if every municipality in Erie County (which includes Hamburg) cut two legislators, the savings would be "negligible" — less than \$4 per person a year in most cases.

The success of the movement in western New York has more to do with psychology than political science, says Kathryn Foster, co-author of the study.

Although it won't do much to lower taxes, she says, "voters faced with a (downsizing) referendum say, 'This is the choice I have now. This is what I can do.'"

### Winning and losing



On Election Day, Gaughan stands outside a polling place in a large suburban church, asking Hamburg voters to come back in two weeks to vote for the council downsizing referendum. When he introduces himself — "Hello, I'm Kevin Gaughan" — he's wasting his time.

Voter after voter nods or says "I know," as if it were obvious.

They've seen him on TV, read about him in the paper — the unsuccessful candidate for Congress and mayor of Buffalo, the prominent advocate of the failed cause of regional government. Now, suddenly, he's a winner. In a region known for losing jobs, people and [Super Bowls](#), that makes him a sensation.

Even downsizing's opponents and skeptics, such as Michael Haselswerdt, a political science professor at [Canisius College](#) in Buffalo, describe Gaughan as charming.

He greets people with an exaggerated politeness, kissing women on the cheek and vigorously shaking hands with men, often with a courtly bow of the head.

He is effusive in his love of western New York ("we tamed the mighty Niagara and lit the world"); besotted with ideas, which he says are the keys to politics; and giddy with success. "I am the luckiest fellow alive," he says again and again.

He traces the origins of downsizing to two personal epiphanies. The first was that "the town hall meeting is dead."

"You have to sign up to speak, and until then you have to sit there, be quiet and not make any sudden moves," he says. Council members sit on a raised platform, looking down at the sparse audience. If council members achieve too little, he says, they do too much, like "decide where to hold the Halloween parade, when to have the garden walk, how much gravel to buy. ... People don't feel represented. They feel managed."

He says he realized regionalism had failed because it missed "the essential first step" of local electoral downsizing. "We all knew there was too much government, but no one ever made the connection between that and the number of political officials."

Then, epiphany No. 2. Gaughan says that one night he was in bed reading

He read something so exciting that he says he stood up: a law passed in 1932, and then forgotten, that allows citizens to petition for referendums on the size of town councils.

Most such boards in western New York consist of a full-time supervisor and three to six part-time members who make an average of about \$16,000 a year, plus pension and health benefits.

Gaughan assembled a team of student researchers to visit Erie County's 25 towns, 16 villages and three cities to study elected officials' compensation. They concluded that if each town cut two council members, an overall total of \$4.5 million a year would be saved. Then Gaughan asked each municipality to voluntarily downsize. All but one refused.

In West Seneca, the downsizers got 4,600 signatures, roughly a tenth of the population, to force a referendum that produced their first victory. (Gaughan still has an opposition "Gaughan Be Gone" yard sign in the trunk of his battered 10-year-old Mercury.) Then came big majorities in Evans and Orchard Park.

#### **'This is a movement'**

"It now is official," wrote [Buffalo News](#) columnist Donn Esmonde, "This is a movement, ... The mini-revolution seems unstoppable."

Two weeks before the Hamburg downsizing referendum, Gaughan sits in Sharon Raymond's living room surrounded like [Socrates](#) by 20 workers, including veterans of other campaigns and local neophytes.

They go over the effort — website, literature drops, newspaper ads, yard signs, poll watchers. The veterans recount triumphs over officials in other towns who refused to schedule referendum votes on the same days as general elections and then tried to suppress turnout by limiting polling places and hours.

Some talk about why they enlisted in the struggle. Deborah Frank, a single mother and small-business owner, says the recession has made it simple: "I'm pulling in my belt. So should the town." Their leader, however, is worried. "This will be close," Gaughan predicts.

Hamburg, where Gaughan grew up, is the largest town to vote on downsizing. Opponents say that while it might make sense elsewhere, it's not for a town with a \$40 million budget that would go from 11,000 people per council member to 18,000. Foster, the Buffalo professor, warns of a "dangerous ... concentration of power" on such a council: "If you hate it with five, you won't like it with three."

The case against downsizing has come into sharper focus. Critics, ranging from office holders to academics to fellow activists, accuse Gaughan of using specious arguments to lure a desperate electorate into an experiment that won't solve the region's real problems.

Lenny Roberto, head of Primary Challenge, a group that supports leaner government and lower taxes in the state, calls downsizing "a distraction" from the fight against centralization of power in Albany.

Many voters "want to hold someone accountable," says Tom Quatroche, a retiring Hamburg council member. "They're trying to say they're unhappy, and they're going to start at the top. It's easy, because they don't see (downsizing) affecting them day to day."

Voters favor downsizing over other changes, such as merging municipal services, "because that's hard work," says Keith Dash, an Evans Town Council member. "People want the quick fix. 'Let's just trim it.'"

Some voters who want lower taxes want to stand pat. Marsha Schawel says the full Hamburg board has saved millions over the past few years by consolidating water and sewer districts and reorganizing town departments.

Many are skeptical of Gaughan's claim that citizen volunteers will step forward to do the committee work now handled by elected officials. Dan Meyer, editor of the [Hamburg Sun](#) and a downsizing sympathizer, notes that less than a third of citizens even bother to vote in local elections. He adds: "People are so busy. If we downsize, there's going to have to be a gut check."

Whatever their merits, such objections miss something about downsizing and about Kevin Gaughan, which are as much about raising spirits as saving money.

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At the forum where taxpayer Joe Killian decried his losing "team," Gaughan described western New York's losses — almost 300,000 residents since 1970, more than

56,000 jobs since 1990 — and said: "We must innovate and experiment. We can save some money, and if we do, we'll feel good about ourselves. That's what this is all about." Win a few, build some momentum, show change is possible. It will revitalize democracy, he tells them, "and be a hell of a lot of fun."

Already, Gaughan is looking beyond Hamburg. There will be campaigns in the spring to downsize the councils of two large Erie County suburbs, Amherst and Cheektowaga, and to systematically dissolve its villages — "the holy grail," Gaughan says.

When the living room meeting is over, Gaughan gets everyone to huddle in the middle of the room and says, "Hands in!" On his count of three, they shout as one, "WESTERN NEW YORK TODAY! USA TOMORROW!"

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