

# Governing the Life in Common: Democracy as Public Good

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores some nuances of democratic government, using several theoretical frameworks that have developed for analyzing collective action problems. First, several of Elinor Ostrom's design principles for robust common-pool resource (CPR) institutions—described in detail in her work *Governing the Commons*—are superimposed on features of democratic government, especially in the United States. Following this foundation, the wider promise of cooperative, polycentric governing bodies is considered, along with the important roles that culture and communication play in creating and maintaining robust, successful institutions. Complementing this section is a brief discussion focused on Prisoner's Dilemmas, and how communication and expected chances of having continuing interaction affect the likelihood of cooperation. Finally, recommendations are given for how to implement and nourish the policies and factors that seem to best support democracy.

**Keywords:** collective action problems, government, democracy, citizenship, polycentricity, cooperation, common-pool resources



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The question of boundaries is in dialogue with issues of collective-choice arrangements (DP 3). If there is a major discrepancy between the group of individuals making the decisions, and a much larger group of individuals who are affected by these decisions, then there will be a social disruption that must be resolved. Ostrom's formulation of her third design principle (1990) stipulates that "Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules" (p. 90). If a critical mass of individuals feel they are being governed by systems they had no part in creating or assenting to, they will take action to improve their status and rights. If their rights to organize are respected (DP 7) are respected, they are likely to come together in social and political groups, and begin to agitate to improve their situation. Besides expressing themselves and demonstrating, these groups may further pursue legal action in an attempt to remedy what they see as their unjust treatment; through the judicial system—another institution they may have been barred from participation in—there is potential for either more robust enforcement of existing laws, or in some cases even drastic reinterpretations. The existence of relatively accessible and cheap conflict resolution mechanisms is the sixth design principle, the quality of which may vary greatly depending on the individual and their circumstances.

Ostrom's insistence on the importance of interplay between multiple levels of analysis when looking at institutional arrangements and changes (1990, pp. 50–55) is aptly demonstrated by the US Civil Rights Movements. Activists knowingly would break laws that they believed to be unjust (such as sitting-in at segregated lunch counters). While formally speaking a violation of operational rules, these symbolic acts were performed with the intention of drawing attention to the much larger injustices behind maintained, to the higher and more fundamental laws being ignored or violated. Through civil disobedience and sustained demonstration, these individuals were able to act in an informal way to intentionally violate certain operational rules while voicing their grievances; this in turn disrupted the carrying-out of collective choice rules, the stability of the status quo; finally, these actions coupled with their moral justification resulted in major actions being taken at the constitutional level—most directly the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the two Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968. While technically involving the breaking of rules, this process was non-violent and has generally been considered a great success. For our purposes, it is an excellent case study of individuals pursuing major change when the formal and traditional routes have failed them; they used a combination of DPs six and seven to redefine the boundaries of DP one, when the rules of DP three had increasingly directed their lives without their consent or input.

## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Of all the public goods that a person enjoys, good government and administration are likely the ones to be least acknowledged and appreciated. Unlike other resources, such as forests, parks, roads, clean air, and waterways, government is not generally used or enjoyed in a tangible way. However, it is essentially a "meta-good," that makes all these others realizable, and determines their outcomes. In absence of government, it is very unlikely that any of these would be created, designated, or cared for—at any rate, it is unlikely that they would remain of decent quality, or open to all. For the purposes of this paper the focus is on democratic government, and the term 'democracy' will be assumed to have connotations of effective, participatory governing processes; as Joohyung Kim (2007) notes, "Democracy has virtually obtained nonnegotiable status in the contemporary world," resulting in "... even authoritarian rulers hardly reject[ing] democracy outright" (p. 1). Democratic government can then be seen as a unique, pure public good, where many can freely benefit from the resulting services and goods without being especially involved; however, *participation* in popular government, and the corresponding decision-making power and public influence that may result, historically has had and currently has clear boundaries about who may take part, making it "exclusive," and giving it different considerations.

The relevant design principles of Elinor Ostrom that are explored: clearly defined boundaries (DP 1), collective-choice arrangements (DP 3), conflict-resolution mechanisms (DP 6), and minimal recognition of rights to organize (DP 7). As will be seen, there is a recurring tension between the first and third design principles, where those well-represented seek to maintain their influence while those under-or-un-represented strive to gain a voice in the creation and alteration of the rules and laws that oversee their lives, to expand the boundaries to include them. This tension is mediated and resolved via DP 7 and/or DP 6, where disenfranchised individuals and groups can meet and organize in the public sphere to further their interests, and eventually if needed can work through formal channels for redress.

A Prisoner's Dilemma is a simple game to study how different actors will behave in a numbered series of moves. The important points are that two players who have no communication with each other have to decide whether to cooperate or defect: the most points can be won by defecting when an opponent cooperates; fewer points are achieved with mutual cooperation; fewer points still given for mutual defection; and the least points given for cooperating when an opponent defects. Robert Axelrod held a computer tournament using a Prisoner's Dilemma simulation, and invited anyone interested to enter their program. Over two hundred rounds of play, a clear victor emerged: Tit for Tat. This remarkably simple program would cooperate on the very first move, and then would just mirror whatever its opponent did on every following move.. Its success stemmed from several factors, but on the whole it had the perfect balance of being nice, retaliating when wronged, and then forgiving going forward and leaving open the possibility of cooperation. An essential factor how likely players are to meet each other again.

## PROPOSED SOLUTION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The entirety of the American government can be seen as one big conflict-resolution mechanism. However on a local level, it is clear that we all influence how decisions are made about what happens in our communities, what constitutes justice, and how we are to live. While many dread jury duty, it can be seen as a way to be actively involved in local self-rule, participation in a non-violent way of resolving conflicts between individuals or organizations that are present in the same area where one lives. And, while it can occasionally seem like an imposition or a hassle, a peaceful resolution of vast differences through the ballot box is infinitely better than an unjust contest by force of all against all. While the costs of maintaining law enforcement, bureaucratic offices, and judicial processes are clearly not insignificant, they are certainly reasonable when compared to the inestimable human costs of lawlessness, violence, and incivility that could result in their absence.

While the Prisoner's Dilemma is a basic scenario, and Tit for Tat is a simple program, the implications of these findings are extremely significant for questions of cooperation, society, organization, and government. One of the most crucial points of the Prisoner's Dilemma is that there is absolutely no communication—and, presumably, no previous relationship—between the players. Furthermore, it has been found that if there is only a single interaction of the players, then it is actually in one's best interest to defect. Fortunately, in modern society we are constantly interacting with members of our community, fellow citizens, friends, and people who share any number of things in common with us. There are also at the moment perhaps more means and opportunities than ever for communication, both in a local context and even more radically across national and international lines—the rapid development of telecommunications and their comparatively low cost have resulted in the disintegration of old geophysical boundaries.

### Elinor Ostrom's Design Principles (Source: *Governing the Commons*, p. 90)

Table 3.1. *Design principles illustrated by long-enduring CPR institutions*

1. **Clearly defined boundaries**  
Individuals or households who have rights to withdraw resource units from the CPR must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself.
  2. **Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions**  
Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money.
  3. **Collective-choice arrangements**  
Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules.
  4. **Monitoring**  
Monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.
  5. **Graduated sanctions**  
Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or by both.
  6. **Conflict-resolution mechanisms**  
Appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low-cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials.
  7. **Minimal recognition of rights to organize**  
The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.
- For CPRs that are parts of larger systems:*
8. **Nested enterprises**  
Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises.

## METHOD(S)

The main sources for this project were *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*, by Elinor Ostrom; and *The evolution of cooperation*, by Robert Axelrod.

The methods employed in the project were comparative literature, case study review, and text reconstruction. Several works concerning collective goods, common-pool resources, and cooperation were combined in considering democratic government as a public good with unique attributes and great liberatory potential.

## CONCLUSIONS

The idealized pluralist perspective of the US holds that the more individuals who are able to express their views and participate in self-rule, the better. More ideas in circulation, a wider pool of talents and views, and a greater diversity of knowledge could all contribute to a stronger and better government. While there are certainly risks of misinformation, abuse, and alienation, there is an even greater potential for an increase in understanding, dialogue, and renewed civic engagement. Following the implications of the Prisoner's Dilemma tournament, there is a chance at this moment to have a renaissance of community involvement, a profound realization of the continuing need that people in the United States and the world round have for each other. There is an opportunity for an increase in communication and cooperation, which can further essential efforts to confront climate change, a rise in authoritarianism worldwide, and the persistent threat of nuclear proliferation (a Prisoner's Dilemma par excellence). The present moment must be met with all the knowledge that has been gathered from the past, and a deep faith in the future.

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