

The Role of Government and Citizen Participation: Part I

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We live in interesting times. The Democratic governor of New Jersey is busy eliminating jobs and otherwise reducing the size of government, to cope with a gaping budget deficit. Meanwhile, a Republican President has alluded to the need for more government since January's State of the Union Address. Isn't that backward? What ever became of Newt Gingrich and the "Contract with America"? What's going on?

Rule #1: Your vote matters. Vote wisely.

We live in an elected representative democracy. Our legislators are supposed to represent the will of the people and act accordingly. In fact, those sent to the seats of government power (as true for local and state representatives as for Federal elected officials) reflect the will of one portion of the voting population (and those who do not vote but whose beliefs coincide with those of the winning party). If you do not vote, there is the chance that your will may not be reflected by your legislators. Likewise, if your vote is in the minority, there is also the chance that elected officials will not reflect your will. Finally, if you simply vote along party or ideologic lines without following issues, then yours may be a random vote with implications far greater than you perceive—that is, legislative policies other than you desire. Unfortunately, today, too many people either do not vote, vote along straight party or ideologic lines (without assessing either the candidates or the issues) or make "less-than-informed" decisions when voting—as they are simply "too busy" to learn about candidates and issues.

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Don't blame government, because *they* are there as a result of *your* action—or inaction—and the activity (or inactivity) of the rest of the public that is eligible to vote. If you do not like the results of an election or the way things are going legislatively, get *more* involved. Change happens.

Rule #2: Government matters because of the Irreversibility Principle.

Suppose you burn a log. For all practical purposes, the results are irreversible. Suppose that you and I burn firewood—for warmth—that we harvest from the same forest. Now, suppose that it is a particularly cold winter. We are both cold. We both need firewood. I sneak out to the forest in the middle of the night to gather as much wood as I can—because I am afraid that you, given the chance, will act just as poorly as I am acting (and barring restrictions on your actions, you might) and will sneak firewood.

Now, suppose that we are both fishermen or cattle ranchers. Once again, we use a public amenity to further our individual gain—that is, we pull fish from the very large, very public ocean or we graze our cattle in a field that neither of us owns. In either case, it is just as likely that I will misbehave as a result of my disinclination to trust you, as in the case of the firewood and the forest. That is, I will pull more fish from the sea or put more of my cattle in the field than either resource can sustain—and so will you. Together, we commit the sin of overfishing or overgrazing.

In reality, in the cases just described, the actions of participants that lead to resource depletion—either wood, fish or viable pasture land—probably do not arise from a desire to do harm to other parties. Rather, private incentives—i.e., self-interest and self-preservation—result in individual actions that are harmful to the common good.

Philosophers and economists refer to that inconsistency as the *Fallacy of Composition*, and have spent hours—and pages—discussing and dissecting it. It brings together many issues, including externalities, social costs, spillover effects and more. In 1968, Garrett Hardin eloquently examined, “The Tragedy of the Commons” (*Science*, 162: 1243-1248).

A solution to the problems of individual actions interfering with the commons and public rights is government protection of the public interest through regulation and enforcement. That does not always make everybody happy; and a vocal collection of individuals and interest groups who feel unduly set upon may argue, often quite eloquently, that their rights are being trampled. Quite so. As are the rights of every individual to do as he or she chooses without regard for the rights of every other individual. As Benjamin Franklin succinctly stated, “Your freedom to swing your fist ends where my nose begins.” Perhaps, but not if the government sees it otherwise—for instance, by establishing the minimum clearance distance between noses and fists.

In many cases, regulation may be enacted to balance the rights of the individual at a point in time against the potential for irreversible harm to the collective rights of the commons—i.e., public rights—across time. Overfishing, overgrazing and overharvesting can allow an individual to usurp rights from every other individual—including future generations.

Similarly, if I am of a deviant mindset and enjoy shouting, “Fire!” in dark, crowded theaters, we all understand the need to check that individual right at the door in an effort to achieve civil society. So too, civil society requires us to consider ceding

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other individual rights. Most recently, the need for security in public spaces—for example, theaters, airliners, streets, buildings, bridges and tunnels—in order to avoid irreversible tragedies, has thrust the debate over the breadth and reach of government into the spotlight in a most unusual fashion.

The public debate is ultimately carried on by conveying our will through elected officials and their actions, then, later, by enforcing our will through the courts. Sometimes the choices we make as a collective society may be irreversible but have only minor consequences, while at other times the consequences are substantial—e.g., global warming, protection of wilderness and species.

Welfare economic theory strives to achieve *Pareto optimal* solutions, in which nobody can be made better off without making somebody else worse off. The regulatory process can be utilized to effect such solutions where the market does not. Thus, the rights of the individual are balanced against the common good—when we cannot all be perfectly satisfied, we should all be minimally dissatisfied. Of course, the rules are not dictated by economists but enacted by legislators (who call on economists to assist them in ascertaining public costs and benefits). So every vote counts.

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