

Brunner argues that the problem with governance, rooted in the constitutive formula and proliferation of special interest groups, is its failure to create integrative policies and structures to advance the common interest. As a result of overlapping jurisdictions and different mandates and interests, existing systems exacerbate cleavages and competition between different groups. Governance problems with the current system have been defined in different but overlapping ways: ‘gridlock,’ or policy paralysis; ‘demosclerosis,’ or the government’s loss of the ability to adapt; ‘single-issue politics’ that has led to the politicization of decision-making; ‘disconnect,’ in which policymakers consult only with core constituencies; and as ‘pathologies of the public sector,’ defined as ‘parochialism,’ special interest influence, and bureaucratic layering. . Decision-making and conflict resolution is typically divisive, time-consuming, expensive, and often ineffective.

As to current trends with respect to governance, Brunner argues that the constitutive formula and special-interest politics are creating an “increasingly fragmented and dysfunctional structure of government at the national level.” Yet at the same time the successes of informal mechanisms such as community based initiatives, and their processes of innovation, diffusion, and adaptation, are increasingly recognized as having the potential to complement and perhaps substitute for some of the more cumbersome and poorly-functioning formal governance institutions.

Brunner states that the appropriate goal of governance in a democracy is advancing the common interest, and that the “continuing task of governance—in a community that respects equal rights for all—is finding common ground in policies that advance the common interest.” Within the existing contest of dysfunctional and bureaucratized government structures, Brunner argues that we need informal institutions that work within and alongside established forms of governance to advance the common interest. Since this “common interest can only be clarified through the community decision processes,” new structures such as community based initiatives might be the missing governance institution to realize this goal. Their ability to access local knowledge, flexibility, and interdependence creates better policy, and the participatory processes of such “multiple-interest groups” create a shared commitment to the outcome and greater accountability and legitimacy.

By facilitating stakeholders coming together to formulate policy solutions, the participatory processes that are part of community-based initiatives allow stakeholders to strike a balance among competing claims. Participatory processes that facilitate different stakeholders coming together helps in advancing the common interest, as those processes allow different groups to strike a balance among competing claims and base their policy solutions on common goals.

The discussion of how the actions of (often well-intentioned) special interest groups can produce policy paralysis or distorted outcomes was interesting. Often, the voice of affected people is not heard in decision-making processes, and the statements of well-funded and organized special interest groups are often assumed to be a reasonable proxy for the voice of affected people. Ideally, we would want comprehensive institutional reform that prevents special-interest groups from hijacking political processes, while at the same time promotes the participation of different stakeholders. Given the complexity and cost of full-scale institutional reform, informal mechanisms like community based initiatives appear to be one low-cost and effective means to improve outcomes.