

Reaction Paper Patricia Chang

The problems with governance include “the failure to clarify and secure the common interest through specific policies in natural resources...and other areas.” This problem was manifested in the 1990s, regarding bison that roamed Yellowstone Park that risked infecting local cattle with brucellosis. Such stakeholders included government officials and representatives of conservation, environmental, ranching, landowner, wildlife, sporting, etc.

Ultimately, the Joint Management Plan, which was a resolution among different interests from state and federal agencies, did not represent the common interest. In contrast, Brunner notes that a plan spearheaded by the Bison Management Citizen’s Working Group in Bozeman, which did support the common interest (preventing brucellosis in cattle and maintaining free-roaming bison) was not even considered by government officials. He suggests that finding the common interest is increasingly difficult within federal, state, and local government, and nongovernmental groups. Part of this is due to the complexity of the division of authority and control in government.

Problems with governance include that of political structures resistant to change. Some of these trends include more government “gridlock” (the loss of capacity to adapt); demoscclerosis; single issue politics; a growing “disconnect” between Washington and the rest of the country; and a “fragmented and dysfunctional” structure of governance at the national level. These trends were also reflected in the bison case.

Brunner stipulates a few current trends with respect to governance. Divided interests in society have multiplied, and symbolic politics has become increasingly popular. Authorities experience greater difficulty in meeting public expectations; similarly, citizens experience greater difficulty in identifying officials and nonofficials involved in the issue and to hold them accountable.

In Brunner’s opinion, our goal with respect to governance should be to aim for the common interest, or “finding common ground on policies that advance the common interest.” The common interest has three components—procedural, substantive, and practical. There are many benefits to finding common ground through community-based initiatives. Community-based initiatives represent a broad array of interests, and more importantly, balances or integrates these separate interests for the public good. Having collaborative, community-based initiatives allows for creativity, knowledge, and leadership, and narrows the scale and focus.

These themes do resonate with me, because I believe one of the greatest hopes in holding government accountable to the people and to achieving better policy is through greater civic participation. I am an advocate of using community-based initiatives to solve collective problems, and it does seem to me that those who have their interests most at stake should be the ones in identifying a common solution and playing a significant role.

Although Brunner acknowledges some of the criticisms of community-based groups, he merely highlights these difficulties instead of giving them greater credence. For example, public political participation involves not only benefits but costs. Representation with respect to groups is a huge problem; those who have greater access to the community resources are more likely to be heard and represented.

Second, even deciding who should be included in the debate is contentious. Becoming more “democratic” and including a greater number of players in the process of deliberating policy requires trade-offs. Consensus-building, or even building a majority-consensus building may take even longer, as community members disagree on even the problem definition. A decision may be mired and be blocked even more readily. Successful models of community groups exist, yet terrible examples of unsuccessful models persist as well.

Despite the potentially greater work, collaborative solutions should still be pursued, and community-based groups encouraged.