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Cover art: Seung Lee, Bamboo #3 (30”x 30” Mixed media 2015)
It seems to me that the problem of achieving a good society is not to move outside of government but rather to broaden our conception of what government means. If we adopt the idea that covenants are the foundation for a self-governing society, then institutional arrangements for governance exist in many forms at many levels. By covenants, I mean the willingness of individuals to come to basic agreement about how they will achieve future tasks, to keep these agreements, and to monitor one another so that temptations to break agreements do not threaten the viability of the agreements. Hobbes did indeed argue that covenants without swords are but words on paper. The need for “swords” has been interpreted in modern times as the need for an external enforcer who is somehow motivated to be an unbiased enforcer. What our recent research has demonstrated rather clearly is that within smaller communities, individuals are willing to monitor and sanction one another to ensure that their covenants are sustained. Many of these agreements have survived wars, pestilence, floods, and major political upheavals.

One of the distorted views stemming from a presumption that “the” government should fix community problems is viewing citizens living in their own communities as helpless and incapable. A second distorted view is that only one government exists in the United States, the one located in Washington, D.C. Such views have not always prevailed. Their recent acceptance may be a source of contemporary problems rather than a solution to them.

Widespread participation in school boards, local councils, and town meetings has been a
foundational element of the American heritage. In his view of American governance during the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that local institutions are the essential foundations of a democratic society: “Town meetings are to liberty what elementary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it.” It is at such meetings that people learn the science and art of association.

Many factors are involved in increasing or decreasing the capacities of citizens to find productive and meaningful civic lives. But among the causes of the decline are the views of governance and of the production of public services that has come to dominance. This view can be visualized as a one-way relationship among the key participants in local governance. The presumption is that public services are produced entirely by a government agency, rather than being coproduced by those whose skills and conditions are being changed and by those who are the teachers, social workers, or government employees more generally. There are several problems with this conception. Citizens are viewed either as voters or as clients. Both of these are relatively passive roles. Focusing on voting as the primary way a democracy is governed limits citizens to selecting from among candidates and leaves them little else to do. Democracy can be viewed as a process—a way of life—in which citizens take responsibility for as much as possible of what happens around them. Instead, democracy is reduced to elections and electioneering. At the other end of the process, citizens are viewed as clients who receive what others provide for them. Their fate is totally in the hands of others, rather than being something over which they have some control.

Those of us who teach should understand that it is not a one-way process. Teachers do not produce education by themselves. It is teachers, students, students’ families, and students’ peers that coproduce education.

If one presumes that teachers produce education, police officers produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and social workers are essential to the development of better public services. But ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of these services means that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account in the way that policymakers think about these problems. The term “client” is used more and more frequently to refer to those who
should be viewed as essential coproducers of their own education, safety, health, and communities. A client is the name for a passive role. Being a coproducer makes one an active partner. The way that production and consumption are organized in communities affects the incentives or disincentives among users to participate.

Citizens are viewed either as voters or as clients.

actively as coproducers of services. Unless public officials and the suppliers of services take account of the aspirations and preferences of the people they serve, they are apt to find reticent citizens who consider themselves victims of exploitation, rather than active participants in collaborative efforts to realize joint outcomes. Coproduction has a strong potential relationship to efficiency as well as local self-governance.

The relationships among the major participants in local governance are far more complex. Each group undertakes the activities but not in a top-down relationship. In a productive community, these two-way relationships enable participants to work more effectively because they are not just the recipients of commands from above. In a less effective community, participants operate strategically and play one another off against the others.

Institutions of self-governance depend upon the development of a science and the art of association to make the formal institutions of government serve the interests that citizens share with one another in human communities. Formal units of government are those nonvoluntary associations that are more permanently established by law to administer the affairs associated with identifiable territory. Their operation in a democratic society depends upon their being nested in rich configurations of voluntary activities. Voluntary associations, often labeled as “private,” serve crucial public purposes.

In many communities, institutions that might be considered private are effectively governing and managing local common-pool resources and providing sustainable infrastructures. The equation of public government and government with central structures leads to a lack of recognition of the substantial role of individual citizens in public life. The process of governance refers to a much larger universe of discourse both inside and outside of formal governmental units than to what proceeds within the walls of a particular unit. Populations that reach into the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of people cannot be governed from City Hall—let alone the White House. They must govern themselves.

Elinor Ostrom (1933-2012) was Distinguished Professor and Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science at Indiana University. She also founded, with Vincent Ostrom, Indiana University’s Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. In 2009, Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her work on the governance of common-pool resources.

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