

Reflections on Carver and Government

Matt Carpenter, December 2022

In this article, I summarize some of John Carver's writings on municipal government, add political science concepts, and identify key questions and opportunities. Carver's two articles are "*Elected Boards: Meeting Their Special Governance Challenge.*" Board Leadership, No 15, Sept.-Oct. 1994; and "*A City Council Creates Ends Policies.*" Board Leadership, No 33, Sept.-Oct. 1997. Both these articles are available to download in this forum.

Summary

John Carver wrote that well-functioning government was essential for shaping the future of society. We might expect government to be exemplars of good governance. Too often, however, mediocre and dysfunctional government leaves the future adrift, sets a poor example for other groups, and undermines faith in democracy. Although municipal councils and local agencies have much in common with other boards, they seem *more* prone to micromanagement, elevating trivia, short-term thinking, simplistic solutions, poor transparency and accountability, and empty rituals. Carver declares that local government bodies are "*...best used as examples of what board leadership should not look like.*" Nevertheless, Carver sees hope in servant leaders, voter education, and Policy Governance principles that could help improve government performance.

Although Carver is clear that he sees local government bodies as similar to other boards, he does note several key differences that make governing more challenging in the public sector:

1. **Higher Stakes & Government Power:** As Carver notes, "*Elected bodies exist in order to exercise massive power that belongs to the electorate* (emphasis added)." The stakes are higher because governments have regulatory "*law-making authority*" and "*police power*" to enforce those decisions on the rest of us. The scope of government encompasses everyone within its borders. Although Carver does not directly discuss the authority to (involuntarily) tax residents and set spending priorities, this is clearly an important part of this power.

It is precisely because government has the power to shape the future that the stakes are higher in the public sector. Political scientists sometimes describe politics as a means of holding a society together by channeling **competing interests** into workable compromises. Political debates can be seen as competition between different visions of the future. Government often cannot avoid creating winners and losers when officials decide *What we do, For Whom* and *At What Cost*.

Carver notes that governments must wrestle with "*intractable problems*" with no real solution, such as inequality, climate change, and historical injustices. Government cannot choose its market like a business or a non-profit. Aside from being unsolvable, such issues are often polarizing. Sometimes there isn't even agreement on whether there *is* a problem, or government's role.

Government deliberations attract "*massive tides of public opinion*" that can increase pressure, and fragment group thinking. Although public transparency can help curb abuses of power, this

same visibility can turn public meetings into “performances” and “posturing” rather than thoughtful deliberation. And the sheer cacophony can hide more than it reveals.

The reality of democratic government gets messy; self-interested agendas and ambition abound, factions form and dissolve, loyalties overlap, opportunities are seized. Principles vie with immediate benefits. Taxation creates arguments over how to fairly share public funds. The collective can infringe on individual liberty. Interests seek influence without accountability. There is little hesitation to manipulate governance itself to gain an advantage.

While leaders tirelessly try to broker compromise, every narrow interest has an advocate. Officials are often left to courageously argue alone for the best collective solution. But this produces many imperfect decisions. It brings to mind two old sayings: don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the possible, and a *good* government decision is one that leaves everyone equally unhappy.

2. **The Iron Grip of the Past:** Many governments are hampered by tradition or obsolete rules that actively impede good governance. Interests that have managed to learn a labyrinthine system can entrench themselves, making reforms difficult. Carver specifically notes the tradition of micromanagement-by-committee as a counter-productive relic, vulnerable to abuse, that pre-dates modern management thinking.
3. **Voters as Owners:** Carver’s main focus is on the dynamics between voters and elected officials that can lead to short-term thinking and individual vs collective solutions. Carver notes that elected officials are hired and fired directly by voters, and what voters typically demand is reactionary, immediate, and self-interested results, not a collective benefit or long-term strategy. As Carver writes:

“As elected officials, they are vulnerable to the whims, short memories, and expectations of the rest of us – the electorate. To cover that vulnerability, elected officials frequently adopt a number of behaviors that curiously we both demand of them and excoriate them for (pontification, simplistic solutions, and demagoguery).”

“Each of us operates more as a consumer of government than as a joint owner, even though it is the latter role that offers long-term improvement.”

“Citizens write their legislators to influence a specific choice rather than to chide them towards better governance.”

“Hence, development of group action, the cultivation of group responsibility, and the crucial establishment of a healthy wholeness in the governing body are difficult.”

“Statespersonship by individual elected officials is a rare and precious quality.”

Carver ends with a call to transform government, to become an exemplar of good governance, and provide future-oriented leadership. He outlines a vision of elected officials too busy proactively shaping the future of their communities via policy to bother with the minutia of operations. While government does have its unique challenges, Policy Governance principles can be applied;

“...when we get down to the essentials, it is the city council’s job on behalf of a city population, to see to it that municipal government achieves what it should and avoids what is unacceptable – the same as any other governing board.”

He also feels that voters must be part of the solution. Officials must work to educate voters about the benefits of good governance and the importance of collective success. He states that the long-term solution is education and “...a general public that must be more sophisticated about what to expect from our elected forums...” and that city councils “... must bring their constituencies along with them on their governance journey”, including every pressure group. He acknowledges the heavy cost of such an engagement effort but points out that it is still less expensive than the costs of mediocre government.

Thoughts, Questions and Opportunities

Most voters, officials, and staff are well-intentioned, aspire to stewardship, and want to help make a difference in their communities. That so many people run for office, choose public service, and expose themselves to the frustrations of their fellow citizens – sometimes as unpaid volunteers – is worthy of thanks and praise.

Democracy evolves and Policy Governance can be seen as part of a history of reforms aimed at perfecting the democratic experiment. The number of governments who have already successfully adopted Policy Governance illustrates its promise in the public sector. But proponents of Policy Governance would do well to remember that democracy is about self-determination, not optimized technocratic decisions. There is a value in owning a decision, regardless of whether it is any good. As insiders, it is tempting to imagine that we know best, and we should take care to remain humble and present Policy Governance as a tool to aid democracy, not a replacement for it.

Some key questions I’ve had while writing these reflections:

1. How can we elevate the needs of Owners over those of narrow interests? Could this help focus government or reduce conflict?
2. Competing interests will never go away. Can differing vision of the future be channeled into development of Ends or Exec Limitations policies? How can we keep ourselves from resorting back to micromanagement?
3. How can Policy Governance remain viable when faced with the pressures listed above, especially as generations of leaders come and go?
4. What can we learn from Policy Governance successes and failures in the public sector?
5. Can local municipalities bootstrap themselves up, or would it be better to ask state and provincial government to impose good governance rules from the top down?
6. How do officials and staff work together in a team using Policy Governance?
7. How can we sell an unfamiliar concept like Policy Governance to elected leaders, staff, and the electorate? How can we articulate the benefits?
8. What are best practices in implementing Policy Governance? In maintaining it long term?