

Remembering Vincent Ostrom: unhorsing a dominant paradigm

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Abstract This essay is a memorial piece about Vincent Ostrom (September 25, 1919–June 29, 2012). I start by reviewing his academic history and then turn to Professor Ostrom’s major intellectual legacy—his effort to overturn the dominant paradigm in public administration and political science on metropolitan government reform. The three most important contributions of his work are discussed, including the introduction of public goods theory into the study of public administration and his work on quasimarkets and the Tiebout model. Three controversies or conundrums raised by his work are then discussed. Finally, the essay considers whether Professor Ostrom was ultimately successful in his effort to overthrow the traditional approach to the production and delivery of public goods at the city government level.

Keywords Commissioned scholarly obituary on Vincent Ostrom

Vincent Ostrom (September 25, 1919–June 29, 2012) will be remembered as one of the early mainstays of the Public Choice Society, having served as its President from 1967 to 1969. This publicly acknowledged role as a leader in the development of the public choice approach was merited. Indeed, he was throughout his career a major advocate of and contributor to public choice theory in the disciplines of political science and public administration. Along the way, he made critical contributions to the study of urban government, the provision of public services, and federalism. For those studying these and related topics within these disciplines, Vincent Ostrom was the very public face of public choice theory. It is through his extensive body of work, rather than directly through economics, that political science and public administration students were and still very much are introduced to public goods theory and alternatives to the traditional approach to reforming the delivery and production of public services at the city government level.

Born in Washington, Professor Ostrom’s scholarly career began deeply rooted on the west coast with a BA (1942), MA (1945), and PhD (1950) from UCLA. This was followed

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by faculty positions at the University of Wyoming (1945–1948) and the University of Oregon (1949–1958) before returning to UCLA from 1958 to 1964. His early academic interests were focused heavily on the quintessential western issue of water—how a scarce commodity with considerable public goods characteristics is politically distributed among many potential consumers. This work is best reflected in his 1953 monograph, *Water Supply*, later reprinted in book form as *Water and Politics: A Study of Water Policies and Administration in the Development of Los Angeles* (Ostrom 1972a). That western experience provided the experiential foundation for Professor Ostrom’s more important body of theoretical work on the design of public service institutions. This is reflected in perhaps his most important journal article published while at UCLA, “The Organization of Government in Metropolitan Areas: A Theoretical Inquiry,” written with Charles M. Tiebout and Robert Warren, which appeared in the *American Political Science Review* in 1961. The central importance of this paper will be discussed more below.

Still, Professor Ostrom will be forever associated with Indiana University, and his work there will be the main focus of this essay. Arriving there in 1964, he was a Professor of Political Science until 1990, and then the Arthur F. Bentley Emeritus Professor of Political Science until his death. In 1973, he co-founded the Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis with his life and intellectual partner Elinor Ostrom, with the workshop being renamed in their honor in 2003. It was at Indiana that Professor Ostrom’s major impact on the field was fulfilled through both important empirical and theoretical work and the training of two generations of young scholars who have made their mark in public choice theory and in any number of other subfields in public administration, political science, and several other disciplines whose students benefited from the open door the Workshop provided for interdisciplinary scholarship.

1 An advocate of paradigm change

The author of 15 books and monographs, 61 journal articles, and many more chapters in edited books and proceedings, Vincent Ostrom’s scholarly interests were incredibly varied but centrally focused on the design of public institutions of service provision and production. No short review of his work can do justice to the breadth of his contributions. But his most durable and significant contributions with respect to public choice concern his persistent, tireless, and powerful efforts to redirect how the disciplines of political science and public administration understand the nature of public service provision and production. These efforts were expressed through his work on urban government in particular, and public service delivery institutions more generally.

To understand the importance of this work, it is first necessary to remember how these disciplines approached the topic of service delivery before Vincent Ostrom made his mark (Ostrom 1972; Lowery 1999). In brief, in reaction to the Jacksonian tradition of amateur administration and participatory democracy, the traditional reform approach held that public service delivery should be organized in consolidated urban-county governments (Wood 1961) with centralized and professional bureaucracies (Gulick 1937) that were largely removed from direct political influence (Goodnow 1900). There were, of course, controversies and nuances in this extant work even prior to Ostrom’s (Simon 1947; Waldo 1948; Appleby 1949). But as Knott and Miller (1987: 38) summarized the approach:

What kind of structure would facilitate prompt delivery of the mail, or neutral enforcement of the law, or efficient cleaning of the street? The reformers pictured a government agency that would be nearly the opposite of the Jacksonian standard;

where Jacksonian bureaucracy had been comprised of amateurs, they would hire professional experts; where the Jacksonian bureaucracy had been informal and political, they would impose administration by formal, written rules; where the Jacksonian bureaucracy had been decentralized to geographic wards, they would require centralized hierarchy.

The dominance of the traditional reform approach was such that it constituted a well-defended paradigm that guided both scholarly work on service delivery and, perhaps even more consequentially, the training of several generations of public employees through its influence on students receiving masters' degrees in public administration.

The power of this paradigm is evident in the how the field first reacted to Professor Ostrom's work. For more than a decade, public administration and political science reacted with complete indifference. This is most clearly evident in how scholars responded to his 1961 *American Political Science Review (APSR)* paper with Tiebout and Warren, "The Organization of Government in Metropolitan Areas: Theoretical Inquiry." This is a dense paper that foreshadows in early form nearly all of Vincent Ostrom's important scholarly contributions, running from public goods theory to a discussion of a wide variety of quasimarkets, including the Tiebout model of fragmented governments and government contracting. Yet, while widely cited after 1970, the paper was referred to only three times in the decade after it was published—twice in 1965 and once in 1970—despite having been published in the premier scholarly journal of the discipline of political science. In retrospect, I do not think that this inattention was at its core due to any real hostility to Professor Ostrom's ideas. Rather, they were simply so strange from the perspective of the prevailing paradigm that few had any idea what to make of them. Even when political science and public administration were compelled to address Professor Ostrom's ideas after 1970, the reaction often verged on the apocalyptic, as was evident in his confrontational exchange (Ostrom 1977), again in the pages of the *APSR*, with Robert Golembiewski (1977; also see Baker 1976; Wade 1979) later in the decade. As we will see, the disciplines of public administration and political science have now incorporated as part of their approach to service delivery many of the ideas of Professor Ostrom, his colleagues, and students. But that influence was slow in coming and not especially promising in the beginning.

More to the point, this reaction could not have been unexpected given that Professor Ostrom self-consciously sought to confront, challenge, and ultimately replace the corpus of ideas and concrete institutional design implications of traditional reform theory. This is especially evident in his most influential book, *The Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration*, published in 1973. In the first chapter and explicitly using the language of Thomas Kuhn (1962), Professor Ostrom boldly called for a paradigm shift in public administration, to one diametrically opposed to nearly all of the central tenants of the traditional reform approach. By casting issues of public service delivery as a Manichean struggle between two incompatible approaches—the traditional reform approach and the public choice approach—in this and latter works (Ostrom 1975; Ostrom and Ostrom 1971; Ostrom 1972), Professor Ostrom both demanded scholarly attention to his ideas and at the same time subverted faith in a long-standing and powerful existing paradigm.

2 Three important contributions of Vincent Ostrom

What were those ideas and why were they so threatening to traditional scholarship and training in public administration and political science? Again, while Professor Ostrom's

scholarship was wide-ranging, the essential elements of his fundamental challenge to traditional reform theory inhered in three nested ideas.

The first, the introduction of public goods theory to public administration and political science, is one that will not be easily recognized or appreciated by readers of *Public Choice* because they already swim in a sea of economic analysis, but is perhaps the most fundamental to his contributions. Pigou's (1922) essential idea of market failure and the nature of goods and services that might make exchanged-based provision problematic were reviewed in "Public Goods and Public Choices," a book chapter he wrote with Elinor Ostrom in 1977. While much of this pedagogical work was not new, this was the first time that many political science and public administration students were exposed to public goods theory. And public goods theory runs throughout his work more generally. This is perhaps most evident in his (Ostrom 1999: 71) explicit statement that, "Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren proposed that the theory of public goods be applied to be used to conceptualize the task of governance." But Professor Ostrom (1972b) also added to public goods theory by subsuming it under the concept of polycentricity or decentralized systems of decisions by rational, nondependent actors, thereby providing a broader theoretical conception of choice encompassing public goods theory, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison's approach to constitutional decision making, judicial decision making and much more.

And tellingly, his use of public goods theory had two major impacts on how these fields understood public service delivery. First, the dominant traditional reform approach focused exclusively on how public goods and service should be produced. It simply had no theory about the prior decision to provide goods or services through public institutions (Ostrom 1999). Public goods theory and economics more generally provided that theory and have since been fully incorporated into training in public administration. And many of us continue routinely to use the Ostroms' clear and concise chapter as a first introduction to these ideas when discussing the basic decision of governments to provide goods and services. Second and instrumentally more importantly to Professor Ostrom's efforts to induce a paradigm shift in our understanding of public service delivery, he employed public goods theory and his conception of polycentricity as powerful theoretical levers to unpack and undermine the assumptions underlying the traditional reform theory. While often overlooked, lacking this lever, his latter contributions would not have been possible.

The second and more readily observed challenge to the traditional reform theory was Professor Ostrom's analysis of quasimarkets as an alternative—more often than not a preferred alternative—to the direct production of government goods and services. As noted earlier, his 1961 APSA paper with Tiebout and Warren discussed a full menu of quasimarkets that might be employed instead of traditional bureaucratic production. And the range of quasimarket alternatives constitutes the substantive core of *The Institutional Crisis in Public Administration*. This, of course, is the most recognizable public choice element of his work. Prior to public choice theory, public goods theory followed Pigou's (1922) conclusion that, once market failure had been acknowledged, direct government production or regulation should follow. But building on Stigler's (1965) and many others' observation that just because markets can fail does not imply that governments will succeed, the public choice enterprise has in large part devoted itself to theoretical and empirical analysis of sources of nonmarket failure. Indeed, running throughout Professor Ostrom's work from *The Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration* to one of his last books, *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies* (1997) is a full-throated endorsement of the public choice nonmarket failure thesis (also see Ostrom 1984).

Yet, even when nonmarkets fail, and especially so in the time before real reductions in the scale and scope of government were viewed as a viable political alternative, some other

solution was required beyond simply not responding to market failure. Quasimarkets—the Tiebout model of government fragmentation, government contracting with the private sector and other governments, vouchers, and other innovative mechanisms of public service delivery—provided the needed alternative. And all rest on Professor Ostrom’s observation that while Pigouvian market failure might call for government *provision* of goods and services, it does not imply that the government *production* of goods and services is needed. This persistent call to separate the decisions to provide and produce public goods and services in the face of market failure and the public choice menu of reasons why nonmarkets might fail is what ultimately so deeply challenged the traditional reform approach in political science and public administration. It is quasimarkets in all their forms that are designed as replacements for the centralized, professionalized, and consolidated bureaucracies of the traditional reform approach. And Professor Ostrom’s tireless championing of quasimarkets has had a profound impact on governments. Today, half of all local government goods and services are produced through quasimarkets in one form or another. While many public choice scholars have played a role in laying the theoretical and empirical foundations for this rapid and widespread transformation of the public sector in what has been a relatively short time period, Professor Ostrom can certainly claim to be among the most consequential proponents of quasimarkets.

The third nested intellectual contribution of Professor Ostrom’s career concerns one particular type of quasimarket: the Tiebout model. While the essential idea of employing fragmented governments as a quasimarket to better match consumer preferences with local government goods and services will always be associated first with Charles Tiebout (1956), Vincent Ostrom surely filled the role of St. Paul in developing, testing, and proselytizing the Tiebout model. But his work on the Tiebout model and its implications for institutional design also deeply informed his more original work on the design of intergovernmental institutions and federalism, especially so his 1971 book, *The Political Theory of the Compound Republic*. Thus, Professor Ostrom contributed significantly to extending and generalizing the theoretical implications of Tiebout’s original observations.

Still, if there is one notion that will be associated with Professor Ostrom, it will be fragmenting local government. In the many empirical studies conducted under the auspices of the Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis and in at least two textbooks—*Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered* (Bish and Ostrom 1974) and *Local Government in the United States* (Ostrom et al. 1988)—the virtues and economies of small, fragmented, and amateur-based co-production of local goods and services were touted by Professor Ostrom as a preferred alternative to what he labeled Gargantua, the centralized bureaucracies of consolidated metropolitan governments. Largely based on the attention to this alternative by Professor Ostrom and his colleagues, the politics of the fragmented model have been elaborated on in important ways over the last three decades, especially so by Mark Schneider’s (1989) analysis in *The Competitive City: The Political Economy of Suburbia* of the role of city officials as entrepreneurs seeking a stronger tax base. And while debates over the merits of fragmentation have become a staple in research on urban politics and government, the results in the real world have been telling. While there was a steady move over several decades toward consolidating metropolitan governments prior to Professor Ostrom’s work in the 1970s, such efforts ground to a near halt thereafter. In no small measure, Professor Ostrom provided the opponents of consolidated governments the intellectual firepower to achieve this.

3 Problems and conundrums

As noted earlier, Professor Ostrom's ideas largely were ignored in the 1960s. And even after they could no longer be ignored in the 1970s, reactions to them initially generated near hysterical comments by many of those rooted in the prevailing traditional reform paradigm (Golembiewski 1977; Baker 1976; Furniss 1978; Wade 1979). Many of these entailed a rejection of economic modes of analysis in their entirety, especially in terms of substituting the concept of consumer for that of citizen, and have little telling impact on how Professor Ostrom's theoretical contributions have been incorporated into political science and public administration scholarship. Still, Professor Ostrom's work generated a number of theoretical and empirical controversies that remain with us and which he did not fully address. These remain a continuing task for those wishing to pursue his enthusiasm for quasimarkets in general and the Tiebout model in particular.

Perhaps the most important of these concern the distributive consequences of governmental fragmentation. Simply put, the Tiebout model is both based on a number of strong assumptions and is largely inattentive to distributive outcomes. For 30 years, a number of scholars have indicted local governmental fragmentation as fostering inequality owing to mismatching tax bases and the need for goods and services (Hill 1974; Downs 1994; Weiher 1991). Elinor and Vincent Ostrom's answer to these problems was always a simple assertion that higher levels of government or intergovernmental agreements could always address such distributive issues. But two essential elements of the larger public choice enterprise have been the ideas that public officials are not statesman but self-interested politicians and that institutions matter by providing veto points the might well shape political agendas. Thus, in addressing what seems a well-founded empirical criticism about the secondary consequences of reliance on quasimarkets going beyond the efficient delivery of public goods and services, the Ostrom's often seemed to assume in response a non-public choice world in which such issues could be whisked away. In his rejoinder to critics pointing out some of the undesirable consequences of fragmentation, Professor Ostrom's lack of a plausible *public choice* characterization of how real politicians working in real institutions that give agenda control to some rather than others—while fully evident in his nonmarket failure critique of Gargantua—has provided substantial grounds with which to reject fragmentation beyond simply rejecting an economics-flavored analysis.

Second, Professor Ostrom's analysis of the virtues of quasimarkets more generally has, in what is perhaps the greatest compliment that can be given to any scholar's work, generated hundreds if not thousands of empirical analyses of the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of vouchers, contracting-out, and the Tiebout model. I will not cite these here because such empirical tests are a staple of this journal and many others in economics, political science, and public administration. The cumulative results, however, are best summarized as confused, mixed, and complex, and the comparative consequences of quasimarkets thus remain controversial. In parallel to the public choice claim that just because markets fail does not imply that nonmarket production will be successful, these very heterogeneous empirical results suggest that just because nonmarkets can fail does not imply that quasimarkets can succeed. This means that our enthusiasm for quasimarkets must be tempered by a recognition that quasimarkets also can fail (Lowery 1998). In some cases, the sources of quasimarket failure—such as poorly informed consumers or monopoly production because only a single firm bids for a contract—are the same as those that might lead to market or nonmarket failure. In others, failure might arise from differences in the preferences of production and provision consumers that are uniquely associated with the separation of these two sets of actors when relying on quasimarkets. In short, in his enthusiasm for quasimarkets as

an alternative to the institutions of traditional reform theory, Professor Ostrom rarely acknowledged that they too can fail in ways that should influence our choice of public service delivery institutions. I will have more to say about this in the conclusion when I consider the success Professor Ostrom enjoyed in inducing a paradigm shift in scholarship on service delivery.

Third and perhaps as a consequence of his success in promoting public choice approaches to government production of goods and services relying on quasimarkets, a secondary literature has developed that might be labeled “public choice lite.” A good example of this is Osborne and Gaebler’s widely influential 1992 book, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. With all of the depth of an airport management book, these works tout in glowing language the institutions of quasimarkets as surefire solutions for all that ails us with little or no connection to the serious theory that underlies them. And these books are not unimportant given that many of the government officials making real decisions on how government goods and services are produced are exposed to only this sort of work. As a result, quasimarkets are often applied in a cookie-cutter manner where the necessary conditions to make quasimarkets effective simply are unspecified. I do not know what Professor Ostrom thought about such works, and he is certainly not responsible for them. But I would like to think that they would have appalled him given that his intellectual work on quasimarkets was always deeply grounded on a solid understanding and appreciation of both political and public goods theory.

4 Remembering Vincent Ostrom

I have only two final thoughts, and the first is personal. I completed my work on an MPA degree in the spring of 1974. This was a very traditional program in which I had little exposure to public goods theory, the virtues of consolidated and centralized bureaucracies were never questioned, and Vincent Ostrom was never mentioned. That fall, I entered a PhD program where in the first class—an Introduction to Public Administration—the instructor held up Professor Ostrom’s *The Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration* and said that this book would overturn everything we know about the field. Thereafter, I enrolled in plenty of economics courses and directed my research attention to quasimarkets. It remains a big part of my research agenda. But it would be fair to say that more often than not my empirical work has led me to very different conclusions than those suggested by Professor Ostrom. I frequently am a critic of his work, finding, for example, that local governmental fragmentation does not always better match the preferences of citizens to services as he would have expected (Lyons et al. 1992). Still, his work has profoundly and enduringly shaped my research agenda and those of many others, irrespective of how our empirical and theoretical work supports or rejects hypotheses that he initially framed. While I only met Professor Ostrom a few times, he has had perhaps more influence on my work than any other scholar. And I am certainly not alone in bearing this intellectual debt.

And the reason is quite simple. He profoundly reshaped how political science and public administration think about public service delivery. But was he successful in engendering the paradigm shift that he aspired to? In part, yes. Traditional reform theory as a dominant paradigm was thoroughly unhorsed by Professor Ostrom. The simple certainties in centralized, consolidated, professional bureaucracies of my MPA education are gone, in large part due to Professor Ostrom. And public goods theory now constitutes a core subject in public administration programs. Further, his ideas have had significant real-world impacts by providing the intellectual underpinnings for the proliferation of quasimarkets and the slowing

of efforts to consolidate metropolitan governments. But public choice theory and its quasi-market institutions remain controversial in public administration and political science due to the distributional consequences of quasimarkets, the very mixed empirical findings on their efficiency, effectiveness, and equity, and the possibility of quasimarket failure. Thus, the public choice approach embodied in Vincent Ostrom's work has not replaced traditional reform theory as the next dominant paradigm. At best, we now have a bi- or even multi-polar intellectual world in which the two approaches (and perhaps others)—what Elinor Ostrom termed the two reform traditions—are pitted constantly against each other in both scholarly debates and classroom discussions. What remains for the next generation to do is to develop a more encompassing level of theory that allows us to specify the conditions under which different types of public service institutions will be most effective, efficient, and equitable. Public goods theory, so long as it incorporates elements of quasimarket failure, along with its more traditional attention to market and nonmarket failure, would seem well placed to provide this higher level of theorizing that would subsume traditional reform theory and Professor Ostrom's approach in a new synthesis.¹

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¹For those wishing to assess Professor Ostrom's work more directly, many of his most important papers, along with those of colleagues and students working in the Workshop for Political Theory and Policy Analysis have been collected in an excellent three-volume set edited by Michael D. McGinnis (1999a, 1999b, 1999c).

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