Reaction Paper Jenny Suckale

1.) Brunner lists numerous problems of governance that I will divide into two categories: the first comprises general difficulties that inherent to his definition of governance and largely independent of the specific social and political situation. The problems in the second group are directly related to the modern society, specifically in the USA.
According to Brunner "clarifying and securing the common interest through policy decisions is the legitimate function and the criterion of governance in a democracy". This foundation of governance on common interest obviously implies numerous difficulties associated with the definition of common interest. Though it is obvious that "not all interests are equally valid or appropriate in clarifying the common interest", the selection and weighting process is complicated. Additionally, it has to be taken into account that every individual in a society has multiple interests depending on personal preferences, professional specialization, environment and other factors. This micro-conflict is reflected on all levels of public decision making and leads to numerous conflicting interests of the involved agencies. Also, Brunner points out that "all human judgements are simplified and based on limited perspectives and information".

In most modern democracies such as the USA, the separation of powers is manifest in the constitution. This concept of conflicting powers introduces an important element of competition and rivalry into all political process. It is relied upon that the competing forces will reach an agreement which is acceptable to all sides. However, Brunner points out that the means how to resolve this inherent conflict is not institutionalized. Therefore, the situation might occur, where the different sides block each other rather than coming to a consensus that would resolve the problem.

2.) Concerning the current trends, Brunner most importantly points to the challenges of modernization. He claims that "modernization proliferates interest groups and multiplies the number and complexity of issues over which they come into conflict." According to his analysis, the impact of modern advances in communication and information technology is two-fold: On the one hand side, the autonomy of isolated local communities has been eroded. The necessary reform processes that followed this development have created "a hapless confusion of institutional pupuses, authoritative controls, and government boundaries". On the other hand, the modern technologies have "multiplied the foci of attention" within the society. By this expression he means an increasing "division among interests that compete in a more complex society". This obviously creates new challenges for governance. If the emerging interests created by continuing modernization and other social changes are not accounted for, the government will loose its credibility in resolving conflicts and thus its historical legitimacy and public support.

In the USA, the public support for and trust in the government has decreased over the last decade. In 1992 the notion "gridlock" was introduced to describe the phenomenon that the government is unable on major national issues. In a changing society that undermines old policy solutions and generates new policy problems, the bureaucracy has to change as well. However, apart from the continuous growth of agencies and institutions, few fundamental adjustments have been possible. The term "demosclerosis", defined as the postwar governments' progressive loss of the ability to adapt, captures this problem quite well.

The proliferation of organized interest groups in the civic sector caused an increasingly fragmented and dysfunctional structure of governance at the national level. The augmenting diversity of agencies involved in governance has "multiplied the number of contacts and complicated the mutual understanding necessary for cooperation".

3) The primary goal is obviously that governance functions in the sense that it is able to resolve conflicts. Given that the bureaucratical system is unlikely to reform itself, Brunner promotes collaboration as an alternative to the existing institutionalized procedures. He lists several examples in which the commitment of community-based communities advanced the common interest.
He models the general pattern of these initiatives by subdividing it into three processes: innovation, diffusion and adaptation.

4) Brunner convincingly lists many positive features of community-based approaches. However, my impression is that the potential of participatory approaches is particularly high in the field of natural resource policy and not necessarily transferable to other areas. The example of the bison in Yellowstone National Park is special in the sense that it is (1) obvious to the people locally affected by it, (2) characterized by limited uncertainty (necessary information about involved actors etc. is available), and (3) isolated such that it can not be expected to trigger major political changes in other regions. Therefore, I think that under certain circumstances, community-based initiatives can be very influential. However, I doubt that this is generally so. But more importantly I think that the crisis of governance that is apparent in many modern democracies runs

deeper and has to be tackled in a more fundamental way. If trust in government institution declines continuously, the foundation of the state is challenged. This is reason for great concern. Reliance on collaborative groups does not resolve this problem, but rather finds a way around it. It might help to find short-term solutions to a selected set of issues, but does not address the more fundamental challenge of reforming democratic institutions.