

Personalized Government: A Governmental System Based on Behavior Analysis

Los Horcones

Abstract

Evolution of the Personalized System of Government (PSG) is described. PSG was preceded by experimental comparisons of other governmental systems including a planner-manager government modeled after Walden Two (Skinner, 1948) and direct democracy. When evaluated in terms of the percentage of members participating in governmental decisions, PSG was shown to be superior. Important characteristics of PSG include (a) any member serving as a manager, (b) coordinators teaching others their organizational skills, (c) all members participating decisively in governmental decision-making, (d) encouragement of face-to-face control, (e) public discussion of all important governmental matters, (f) decision-making by consensus, (g) emphasis on long-range problem solving, and (h) a behaviorally engineered government. Some apparent advantages of PSG are that it encourages all members to participate in governing, it increases productivity while improving interpersonal relations, and it promotes the values upon which Los Horcones is based — equality, cooperation, nonviolence, economic self-sufficiency, and ecological balance.

Societies of the 20th century are fortunate to have access to a very powerful behavioral technology derived from the experimental analysis of behavior (Burgess & Bushell, 1969; Cantania, 1979; Cooper, Heron & Heward, 1987; Ferster, Culbertson, & Perrot, 1975; Holland & Skinner, 1961; Malott & Whaley, 1971; Miller, 1980; Skinner, 1953, 1969, 1972, 1978; Ulrich, Stachnick, & Mabry, 1966, 1970, 1974). Behavior-analytic procedures have been used to solve a great variety of important personal and social problems (e.g., see *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 1968-1988). The demonstrated effectiveness of this behavioral technology makes one wonder why it has not been applied to the design of an entire society. The pertinent question arises, Why not use the principles of behavior to construct a society in which problems are prevented by design instead of always trying

to solve problems after they are created by a defectively arranged society?

In 1973 we founded the Los Horcones community as an experimental culture. Like B.F. Skinner's fictitious society, Walden Two (Skinner, 1948), Los Horcones uses the principles of behavior and an experimental approach to cultural analysis, design, and change. This *modus operandi* is a defining feature of Walden Two societies (Horcones, 1976b, 1982).

A basic question that any society should confront is how to govern for the benefit of all its members. This paper describes the evolution of the Los Horcones government from our original planner-manager system, based on Skinner's suggestions in his novel *Walden Two*, to our current experimental system of government, the end result of a behavioral analysis of different forms of government.

By describing the evolution of Los Horcones' political system we want to point out that the science of behavior analysis can be applied to the study of government, particularly to the field of comparative analysis of political systems (Andrain, 1983; Bertsch, Clark, & Wood, 1986). This application is not only possible but necessary because many of our contemporary personal, social, and environmental problems result from current system of government (Julian, 1980). The intent of this article is thus two-fold: (a) to prompt behavior analysis to focus some of their research efforts on the analysis of governmental contingencies and (b) to present to political scientists a behavior analytic perspective toward the study of politically relevant behavior.

Evolution of the Design of Los Horcones' Government

As we started the Los Horcones community, we found ourselves confronting a number of questions concerning the system of government most suitable to a behaviorally designed community. What type of government is needed to promote cooperative and egalitarian behavior? How

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do we encourage pacifism and sharing? What type of government would allow our citizens to participate in all governmental functions? What type of government is needed to emphasize prevention rather than mere remediation? How do we insure that our government remains committed to our experimental approach to cultural design?

First, we searched for experimental literature on the study of governments. Unfortunately, most of the political literature that we were able to find was based on speculations and theories from political philosophers rather than on experimental analyses of different political systems (Reimer, 1983).

Because we did not find experimental data on the effectiveness of various forms of government, we had to conduct the experiments ourselves. By empirically assessing the effects of different forms of government on the governors, the governed, and on the community as a whole, we should be able to determine the type of government which would be best suited to our needs. Our evaluative comparisons were based on *cooperation* (participation in the political decision-making), *equality* (equal access to political power), *non-violence* (peaceful problem solving) and *sharing* (political education) — not as abstract values but as specific behaviors.

Planner-Manager Government

Initially, we tried a planner-manager system of government similar to that described in *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948). We appointed two planners to make all the major decisions for the community. The planners appointed a manager for each major area of responsibility within the community (e.g., agriculture, construction, finances, work, and human behavior). The managers elected one new planner every 18 months to replace one of the existing planners. As the planners had three-year terms, we always had one planner with at least 18 months of experience.

Although the planners had final authority to make decisions for the community, they always consulted each member of the community before making any important decisions. None of the planners or managers considered that they had all the information necessary to make the best decision for the entire community. Over a period of four years, our decision-making became a progressively more cooperative effort, with the planners eventually no longer having complete authority.

Direct Democracy

In 1977, we agreed to change our form of government in recognition of the fact that the planner-manager system was not accurately describing the type of government implemented in the community at that moment. We decided to make it explicitly democratic and chose the form of direct democracy (as opposed to a representative democracy). In a

direct democracy all members can participate directly in the decision-making process (Sills, 1968).

As with the planner-manager system, we had managers for each of the major work areas within the community. However, the managers were elected directly by the members of the community instead of being appointed by planners. We simply eliminated the position of planner. Major decisions were made during weekly meetings of the entire membership with a 51% majority required to pass any motion.

The direct democratic form of government seems to be based on at least three assumptions. First, it is assumed that a majority of any group would make better decisions than would one or few members of that group. Second, it is assumed that it would be nearly impossible for all members to agree on a decision. Finally, it is assumed that participants in a democratic form of government would be more likely to help implement and follow decisions made by the majority.

Our experience with democratic government suggests, however, that the majority does not necessarily make the best decisions, that it is possible to reach consensus, and that democratic decision-making does not necessarily result in more members participating in ways that help implement the decisions made.

There were several major problems that eventually made us abandon the democratic form of government. First, we found that negative, competitive statements occurred frequently. Members in the minority on a vote said things like "They have made a poor decision" or "I'm sure that solution will fail." If indeed the decision of the majority turned out to be unsuccessful, we heard members in the minority say "They decided that, not me" or "That's why I was against it" or "I told them that would happen." However, when the decision of the majority turned out to be correct, the minority did not show their approval. Winning or losing the vote seemed to become more important than making a correct decision.

A second problem with the democratic form of government was that it encouraged adversarial behaviors. Groups formed in opposition to one another, each promoting its own proposals. We heard competitive comments like "We'll win; there are more people to vote in favor of our proposal than theirs." We also heard discriminatory statements like "He always votes in favor of another person's proposals, so don't help him" and "They are making a mistake. We are right. They are not as interested in the community as we are."

These adversarial behaviors led eventually to a third problem: A deterioration in the decision-making process and in the group support for the decisions made. Members began to vote to favor some proposals just because certain people presented them, not because the proposals were superior in an objective sense. Members began to say things like "If he says so, then it must be correct." This outcome

amounted to having only a few members who were actually making the decisions for the group; it was hardly a democracy.

A fourth problem made our democratic form of government intolerable! We found that dissenting members were not likely to expand much effort to implement and maintain the decision of the majority. Indeed, they were more interested in letting the decision fail if it would. We heard comments like "I didn't agree to that solution, so don't expect me to work very hard on the project." Sometimes the success of a proposal depended critically on the support of one or more people who had voted against it. Our democratic government had become impotent and dominated by a few. It became very difficult to make any important changes.

After using the democratic system of government for a year, we realized that it was not appropriate for a community in search of equality, cooperation, peaceful problem solving, and participation by all members in the governmental process. We suspected that the problems we encountered were similar to those experienced by virtually all societies that are ruled by the majority.

For a brief period of time, we tried a variety of other forms of government that might be classified as totalitarian, gerontocratic, and technocratic. However, they all had the

same important shortcoming we experienced with the democratic system described above — only a few people made most of the decisions. We were still in search of a system of government that would allow every member to participate decisively in the decision-making process.

Personalized System of Government

Since 1982, we have been using principles derived from the experimental analysis of behavior to shape a new form of government that supports our values (cooperation, sharing, non-violence, and equality) and that promotes participation by all members of the community.

We named it *Personalized System of Government (PSG)* because it shows the same concern for the individual members of our community as the Personalized System of Instruction shows for individual students (Keller 1968; Keller & Sherman, 1982). We will describe below what we consider to be the more important characteristics of this form of government.

Unlike the planner-manager system of government where a few members made all the decisions or the democratic system in which the majority ruled the minority, PSG promotes the participation of all members in governmental decision (see Figure 1).

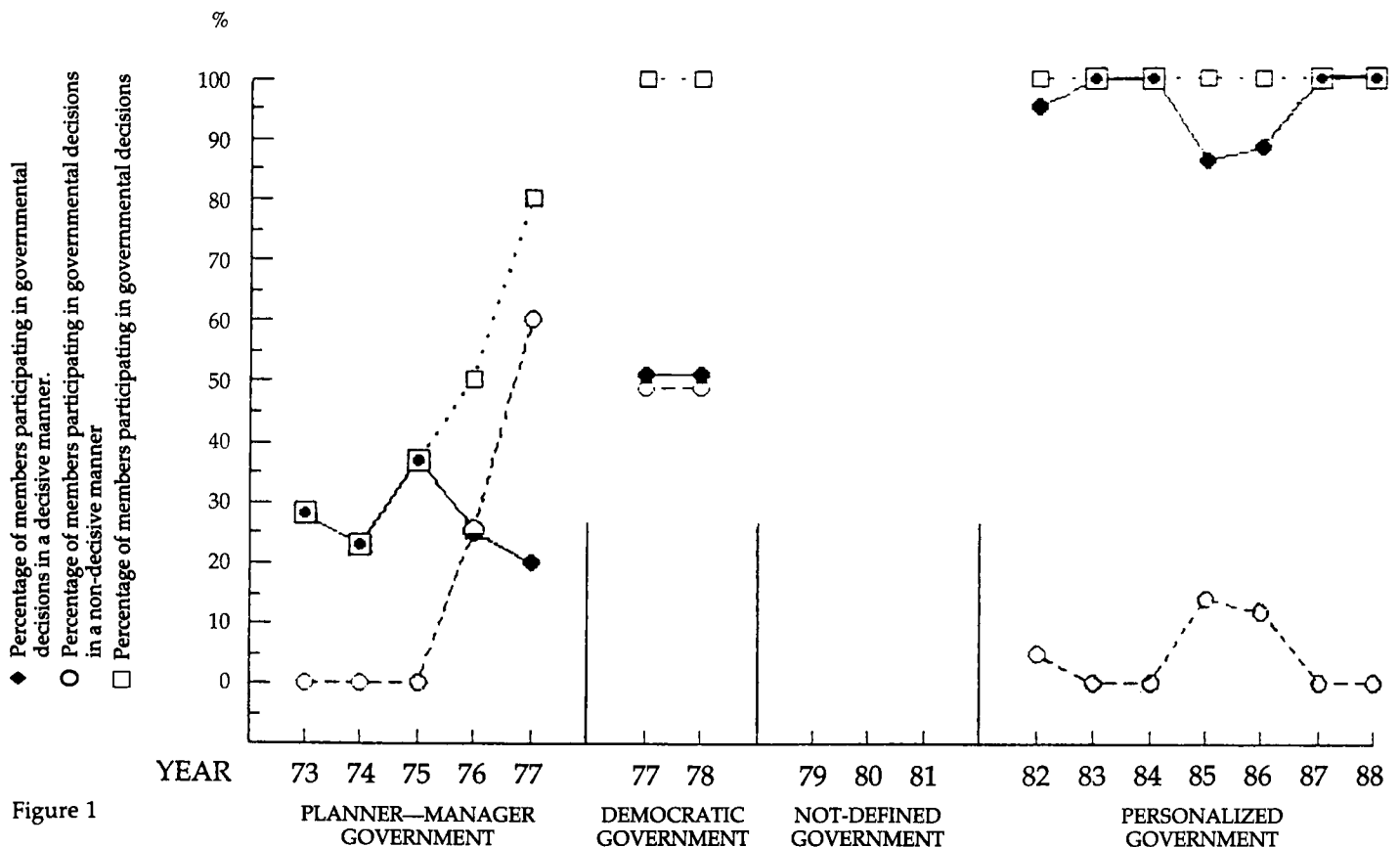


Figure 1

Any member can serve as a manager. We have divided the operation of the community into a number of areas; presently there are 61 areas of organization (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Comunidad Los Horcones
Areas of Organization in 1987

1. General Work	32. Walhdos Newsletter
2. Daily Work	33. Walden Two
3. Health	Intl. Association
4. Adult Behavior	34. Academic Education
5. Behavioral Research	35. Preschool Education
6. Child Behavior	36. Special Education
7. Communal Child Care	37. Teaching Society Model
8. Economy	38. Summer Courses
19. Coop	39. Carpentry
10. Construction	40. Automotive Mechanics
11. Maintenance	41. Agricultural Mechanics
12. Clothing	42. Electricity / Writing
13. Sewing	43. Computers
14. Vegetable Garden	44. Video / T.V.
15. Fruit Orchards	45. Photography
16. Forage	46. Food Buying
17. Strawberries / Herbs	47. Menu's Planning
18. Ornamental Plants	48. Cheese Making
19. Cattle	49. Bakery
20. Horses / Donkey	50. Food Processing
21. Rabbits	51. Granola Making
22. Beekiping	52. Yogourt Making
23. Fish Farming	53. Indoor Cleaning
24. Poultry	54. Outdoor Cleaning
25. Pets	55. Recreation
26. Ducks / Pigeons	56. Sports
27. Transportation	57. Water System
28. Tractor D5	58. General Library
29. Exterior Relations	59. Behaviorology Library
30. Diffussion	60. Music Instruments / Records
31. Correspondence	61. Toys

Each of these areas has one or several managers. However, unlike the planner-manager system, members are allowed to appoint themselves as managers instead of electing two planners who appoint the managers. Furthermore, the majority of areas have more than one manager, and some have as many as four.

In addition, the number of organizational areas within the community grew from 12 under the planner-manager system, and 24 under the democratic system, to 61 under the PSG. Virtually all adult members hold managerial positions now. Incidentally, we now call out managers *coordinators* to

emphasize the cooperative nature of their relationship with other members rather than their managerial function.

Coordinators teach others their organizational skills. We require coordinators to teach other members of the community any special skills needed to coordinate or work within their area. Coordinators teach their skills (a) through manuals in which their own functions are described, (b) through formal seminars for the entire membership, (c) through on-the-job training for apprentices, and (d) in some areas through videotaped material (e.g., techniques for managing children's behavior). Along with making it possible for more members to become coordinators, this training insures that the community never becomes too dependent upon any one individual. If a coordinator leaves the community or decides to work in other areas, we always have other members who are trained to take his or her place. Also, this arrangement prevents any member from using his or her special expertise to coerce the rest of the group (Horcones, 1981c).

At Los Horcones, coordinating an area not only means managing and supervising but also teaching others about one's own area of expertise. To us, sharing implies not only sharing objects but sharing knowledge and skills.

All members participate in governmental decision-making. Unlike the minority dictated planner-manager system or majority-dictated democratic system, the PSG enables every member (even the newcomer) to participate in governmental decisions without causing problems for the whole community. *Decisive participation* means that a member can stop the group from enacting a decision if he/she is in disagreement; the decision-making process continues until total agreement is achieved (see Figure 1).

Participation in the decision making is included in the community's behavior code as a pro-communitarian behavior. To promote such behavior, the community arranges the necessary conditions — for example, giving courses on the appropriate ways of participating in the decision making process, presenting proposals or alternatives in objective ways, allowing newer members to present their alternatives and differing decisions to more experienced members until one acquires expertise (Horcones, 1986). One might think this procedure could unfairly exclude people from participating in decisions. However, in our five years of using PSG we have had no apparent problems in this regard. Each person quickly becomes expert in at least one area and no one can be expert in all. Only those members who have potentially valuable contributions to a particular decision that is to be made participate in making that decision.

Face-to-face control is encouraged. PSG encourages face-to-face control between the coordinators and the members who work within their areas. A full 100% of the coordinators work in their own areas, so they are affected by the consequences of their own organizational behavior. Thus the behavior of both the coordinators and the members comes under the control of the same consequences. The coordinators

are available at all times to talk with members who wish to discuss matters related to their areas, thereby obviating reliance on inefficient bureaucratic practices. In fact we may find that the ultimate, most effective size for our community will be limited by this feature.

Governmental matters are discussed in public. All the government's decision-making is conducted in public to make it easy for all members to participate. Coordinators make oral and written reports of the decisions they make and of their results. Any member can follow the progress in my area simply by listening to or reading the coordinators' reports. In addition, all meetings are announced in advance and held at times when all members can attend.

Decision are made by consensus. Vital decisions are made by all members, while ordinary decisions are made by coordinators within their areas. Generally the coordinator of an area brings important problems to the attention of members as early as possible so that any one who wishes to may participate in formulating a solution. The coordinators present the background information and all members are encouraged to participate in formulating a solution. None of our members attends meetings simply to watch others make decisions for them.

We use a type of consensus decision making that insures that each individual has a decisive role (see Figure 1). We call it a *communitarian-behavioral system of decision making* (Horcones, 1986). Any individual can stop the group from proceeding on a particular course of action if he or she considers the decision to be wrong, thus forcing the group to rework the solution to better address the concerns of all members. This practice seems to produce superior solutions and certainly more general support for the decisions made.

Some authors have reported problems with consensus decision making, most notably those resulting from the ability of one member to stop the implementation of a decision. At Los Horcones we do not have this problem, possibly due to the training in cooperative decision-making given to all newcomers (Horcones, 1985), our attempts to base our decisions on objective information (data) rather than on subjective opinion, our agreement to defer to members with more experience in a particular area when in doubt, and/or our ability to have all members serve in positions of responsibility somewhere within the community (Horcones, 1981b). Further, our entire community is designed to teach and maintain cooperative behavior. A fully cooperative environment will arrange conditions that foster the implementation of consensus decision-making.

Thus the members of Los Horcones object to particular solutions only when there appears to be a real opportunity to improve upon them. Additionally, cooperative forms of decision making may be more easily achieved in a setting where property is shared: Benefits are not obtained as individuals, but only as individuals within a group.

Long-range problem solving is emphasized. We try to detect and solve problems before they become so grave that their solution would necessitate a considerable amount of time and effort. We continually try to consider the long-term consequences of the actions we take or do not take. Unlike many elected officials with limited terms of office, our coordinators have no incentive to produce short-term benefits and disguise long-term costs.

The government is behaviorally engineered. Our government, like the rest of our community is designed according to principles derived from the experimental analysis of behavior. The appropriate behavior of the coordinators, the expected behavior of the members attending a decision-making meeting, and other governmental behaviors are all specified in our behavior codes. We observe and record performance at meetings, performance of coordinators, and interactions between coordinators and the members they supervise to determine how well we are living up to the specifications of our code.

Finally, we arrange the conditions to facilitate the potency of natural consequences as the ones that maintain governmental behavior. We prefer natural consequences to contrived ones because once a behavior is brought under the control of natural consequences, no further intervention is required to maintain it (Horcones, 1983). We avoid the use of any type of aversive control in favor of modeling, positive reinforcement, and shaping.

As we build our PSG and as we continue to improve upon it, we gather data on its effectiveness and allow the data to guide us in the selection of new and more effective governmental practices. In this manner, our governmental system is genuinely experimental.

Advantages of the Personalized System of Government

There are several advantages to be derived from PSG. First, PSG encourages all members to participate in the operation of the government. Submissive and dependent behaviors undergo extinction and get replaced by more responsible participation (Horcones, 1976a, 1981c).

Second, PSG seems to increase our productivity while improving our interpersonal relations. Some political scientists would say that we increased "our political awareness". Our involvement in government is not due to "having political awareness" but to the reinforcement contingencies that have been arranged in such a way that the participatory behavior, and not dependent behavior, has been reinforced (Horcones, 1981a).

Third, PSG promotes the values on which our community is based. It supports *equality*: Los Horcones is a more egalitarian society under the personalized government than it ever was under the planner-manager or democratic gov-

ernments. We have no political elite. Our government also promotes *cooperation* among members and discourages competition. All members can participate in localizing and specifying problems, and also in proposing a solution to be implemented. It's a form of government that emphasizes *sharing* by requiring community members to share governmental skills by giving political education to newcomers. PSG provides the conditions necessary to offer pacifist *non-violent solutions* to problems. Finally, our government sustains our attempt to become *economically self-sufficient* and to maintain the *ecological balance* of our environment.

Such is the current state of PSG at Los Horcones. Because we take an experimental approach to its design, we expect that it will change as new data are obtained. While the details of our governmental procedures may be unimportant, we believe that at least some of the features we have outlined in this paper are critical to the enduring success of any noncoercive government. We are now in the process of evaluating various components and plan to publish our findings as they become available.

We also believe that the features we have outlined may turn out to be critical to the creation of societies that will promote cooperation, sharing, equality, pacifism, and participation by all citizens in the governmental processes. We suspect that any cooperative group could benefit from experimentally adapting some or all of these characteristics for their own governments.

In conclusion, we hope that behavior analysts will accept the challenge to conduct research on this emerging area: behavior analysis of systems of government. The experimental investigation of political behavior may identify more effective forms of government, thereby making significant contribution to the achievement of a government that is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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