SY-06 The data: how governance and capture can be measured

The systematic measurement of human governance is an epistemological battleground. To engineer resilient self-governance architectures for a post-collapse paradigm—what this series terms the "Fall"—one must first decode how institutional frameworks have historically functioned, how they inevitably decay, and how dark-triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) exploit structural vulnerabilities. We cannot replicate what we cannot measure, yet the act of measuring governance often distorts the reality of how power operates. This report systematically dissects the premier datasets utilized by modern political science, anthropology, and institutional economics. It separates empirically robust mechanisms from the noise of subjective coding, outlining exactly what the data reveals regarding institutional scale, longevity, and capture across human history.

The Macro-State and Institutional Datasets: Measuring the Leviathan

To evaluate large-scale institutional governance, modern scholarship relies heavily on comparative indices. However, the foundational datasets measuring macro-level democracy and state capacity exhibit acute vulnerabilities when subjected to rigorous epistemological scrutiny. These datasets attempt to capture the immense complexity of the nation-state, a scale of governance that relies heavily on bureaucratic standardization and mass communication, both of which will evaporate after the Fall.

V-Dem, Polity, and Freedom House: The Subjectivity Trap

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project represents the most ambitious contemporary attempt to measure multidimensional governance, utilizing thousands of expert surveys to track dimensions like electoral competitiveness, executive constraints, and media freedom[1]. Freedom House relies on a similar expert consensus model to score civil liberties, while the Polity project (which halted data collection in 2018) historically measured autocracy and democracy based on executive recruitment and constraints[3].

Recent scholarship has heavily scrutinized the reliability of expert-coded data, exposing a critical vulnerability. Little and Meng (2024) identify a severe "pessimism bias" within V-Dem and Freedom House[1]. They argue that global narratives of democratic backsliding cause local country experts to systematically downgrade subjective indicators, such as the classification of elections as "free and fair"[1]. When researchers isolate objective metrics—such as incumbent loss rates, the size of legislatures, or the strict de jure turnover of executives—the purported global democratic decline of the past decade largely vanishes[3]. V-Dem's 2023 annual report claimed that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen was down to 1986 levels, effectively wiping out 35 years of progress[3]. Little and Meng demonstrate that this conclusion is driven almost entirely by shifting coder standards; as global attention on democratic erosion increases, coders become harsher in their evaluations, mistaking their

heightened sensitivity for actual systemic decline[1]. Defenders of V-Dem, such as Knutsen, Lindberg, and others, counter that autocratization today is executed via subtle, legalistic means—such as covertly packing courts or harassing opposition media—that objective metrics simply cannot capture, thus necessitating subjective expert judgment[4].

The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) and Quality of Government (QoG)

The WGI, developed by Daniel Kaufmann and Aart Kraay for the World Bank, aggregates hundreds of variables from dozens of sources across more than 200 countries into six dimensions of governance: Voice and Accountability, Political Stability, Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and Control of Corruption[6]. The WGI aggregates these disparate sources using an Unobserved Components Model (UCM). The UCM provides a 90 percent confidence interval—a margin of error (roughly ±1.64 standard deviations) that reveals the intense statistical noise inherent in perception-based data[6]. The creators themselves warn that if the margins of error for two countries overlap, the difference in governance is statistically insignificant and should not be used for absolute rankings[6]. Furthermore, the WGI intentionally blends de jure rules with de facto outcomes, arguing that the divergence between the law on the books and the reality on the ground is precisely where corruption resides[6].

Meanwhile, the Quality of Government (QoG) dataset, spearheaded by Jan Teorell and the QoG Institute, compiles variables explicitly focused on the impartiality of public administration[8]. The QoG argues that the true measure of a state is not how it elects its leaders, but how impartially it distributes resources and enforces laws[9]. Both the WGI and QoG datasets are highly macro-focused, relying on the existence of a massive bureaucratic apparatus. They measure the efficiency of the Leviathan, but offer little instruction on how to build localized governance when the Leviathan perishes.

The Correlates of War (COW)

The Correlates of War project attempts to quantify the ultimate breakdown of governance: organized violence. COW tracks interstate, intrastate, and extra-systemic wars, generally requiring a threshold of 1,000 battle-related deaths to classify a conflict as a war. While foundational for international relations, COW struggles to categorize the asymmetric, low-intensity cartel violence and shadow-state warfare that often characterizes regions captured by psychopathic factions. It measures the explosive failure of the state monopoly on violence, but misses the slow, entropic rot of localized warlordism.

Arrangement 1: Macro-Representative Electoral Democracy

This governance arrangement relies on periodic elections, geographically defined districts, divided government, and bureaucratic administration to manage large populations.

The Triplet: Stated, Recorded, and Inferred What the actors within this arrangement said it did was perfectly execute the "will of the people" through transparent institutional mechanisms, balancing factional interests through rational deliberation. What the record actually shows is highly entrenched incumbent advantages, massive barriers to entry for third parties, the influence of concentrated capital, and the frequent detachment of the political

class from the material realities of the electorate. What modern scholarship infers is that this system functions as an electoral oligarchy, where competing elite factions are subjected to periodic public accountability, rather than providing true direct democratic representation.

Scale Rungs	Viability	Reasoning and Evidence
Household (4–10)	Fails	Absurd over-bureaucratization for intimate kinship groups.
Hamlet/Band (30–50)	Fails	Formal balloting and representation destroy social cohesion in environments where direct, face-to-face consensus is optimal.
Village (150–500)	Marginally Works	Can function, but often creates unnecessary partisan divisions in communities small enough for direct assembly.
Parish/District (1,500–5k)	Works	Representative councils begin to show utility as face-to-face familiarity drops off.
Town/Watershed (15k–50k)	Works	Successfully mediates competing factional interests across populations where direct trust is impossible.
Region (0.5M–5M)	Works	Balances urban and rural resource allocation through regional assemblies.
Nation/Continent (50M–500M)	Works	The historical apex of this arrangement, though heavily subsidized by fossil

		fuels, rapid transport, and instantaneous communications.
Planet (8 Billion)	Fails/Untested	Insurmountable principal-agent problems; lack of a shared cultural baseline prevents democratic legitimacy.

The Capture Test A faction led by individuals with dark-triad traits takes over this arrangement by exploiting the gap between de jure institutions and de facto power, a phenomenon Little and Meng categorize as "executive aggrandizement"[1]. Machiavellian actors utilize media polarization to manufacture perpetual crises. They use the mandate of the resulting emergency to pack courts, purge independent civil servants, and alter electoral laws to guarantee incumbent survival. They never abolish elections; they merely hollow out the competitiveness of the system so that the outcome is predetermined. Historical cases include democratic breakdowns in interwar Europe and contemporary democratic erosion globally. Capture is historically resisted by an aggressively independent judiciary, highly decentralized overlapping jurisdictions that impose high friction on centralized power grabs, and a heavily armed, economically independent middle class.

Deep History, Cross-Cultural Databases, and the Ancient Past

To understand how governance scaled before industrialization, researchers rely on deep-time and ethnographic datasets. It is paramount in this analysis to rigorously avoid the naturalistic fallacy and the romance of the primitive. Pre-industrial does not mean peaceful, and small-scale does not mean egalitarian.

Seshat: The Global History Databank

Seshat is an ambitious project to systematically quantify the evolution of social complexity over the past 10,000 years[11]. Covering over 400 polities across 30 geographic sampling locations, the database measures specific "Complexity Characteristics" (CCs)[12]. These include population scale, hierarchy (military, administrative, settlement levels), and information processing (the presence of writing, texts, and monetary systems)[12].

Seshat's quantitative findings are profound. Peter Turchin and colleagues demonstrated through principal component analysis that a single component (PC1) explains approximately 77% of the variance in social complexity globally[14]. The data reveals that social complexity does not evolve in a smooth, linear fashion. Instead, polities hit "Scale Thresholds"—ceilings of demographic expansion. To breach these ceilings, a society must pass an "Information

Threshold"[14]. Without advancing data-processing capabilities (like script, standardized accounting, or legal codes), polities inevitably fracture under their own administrative weight[14]. A primary critique of Seshat, however, is methodological. Because archaeological records are fragmentary, the project relies on statistical imputation—utilizing deep neural networks like *datawig* to infer missing variables based on known characteristics[12]. Critics argue this risks projecting theoretical assumptions onto the past. Furthermore, the database heavily relies on English-language secondary sources, which introduces the risk of colonial bias in how historical governance is coded and evaluated[15].

D-PLACE and the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS)

To understand human cultural variation, anthropologists rely on the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS), established in 1969 by George P. Murdock and Douglas R. White[16]. The SCCS comprises 186 culturally distinct societies, explicitly chosen to circumvent Galton's Problem—the statistical issue where cross-cultural correlations might be driven by historical diffusion (borrowing) rather than independent cultural evolution[16]. D-PLACE (Database of Places, Language, Culture and Environment) digitizes and exponentially expands this effort, linking ecological variables (climate, biome) with cultural practices (subsistence types, kinship structures, housing)[19].

While these databases are invaluable for proving that localized environments heavily dictate governance structures, they capture a static "ethnographic present." They record how a society functioned at the moment of ethnographic contact, struggling to measure rapid institutional mutation, internal political capture, or institutional collapse over time.

Comparative Constitutions Project (CCP)

The CCP, managed by Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton, codes the de jure characteristics of 591 historical and contemporary national constitutions[21]. It meticulously tracks textual guarantees of rights, executive limits, and judicial tenure[21]. However, the CCP data repeatedly validates a harsh political reality: textual constraints are utterly meaningless without an underlying balance of physical and economic power to enforce them. A psychopathic executive will gleefully sign a constitution drafted by the CCP guaranteeing absolute liberty, knowing that words on parchment cannot stop a monopoly on physical force.

Arrangement 2: Nomocratic Chiefdoms and Early Complex Polities

This arrangement features decentralized networks of chieftains who monopolize legal advocacy and localized force, bound by an oral or minimally written customary law, rather than a centralized, bureaucratic executive state.

The Triplet: Stated, Recorded, and Inferred What the actors said it did was preserve ancestral peace, mediate disputes impartially, and protect free farmers from external tyranny. What the record shows is endemic blood feuds, a constant threat of violent reprisal, the gradual accumulation of chieftaincies by aggressive and wealthy lineages, and highly unequal wealth distribution. What modern scholarship infers is that these were highly fragile proto-states, operating essentially as protection rackets that inevitably collapsed into centralized oligarchy or monarchy when resource constraints tightened.

Scale Rungs	Viability	Reasoning and Evidence
Household (4–10)	Fails	Too small to project the force necessary to maintain legal independence.
Hamlet/Band (30–50)	Works	Kinship dynamics successfully restrain predatory behavior within the band.
Village (150–500)	Works	The natural domain of the Big Man or local chieftain; relies on intense interpersonal networking.
Parish/District (1,500–5k)	Marginally Works	Maintained through complex gift economies and marriage alliances, but highly unstable due to succession crises.
Town/Watershed (15k–50k)	Fails	Without a formalized state monopoly on violence, population density at this scale leads to catastrophic gang warfare.
Region to Planet (0.5M–8B)	Never Tried	Cannot scale without transitioning into a formalized state apparatus.

The Capture Test Capture occurs when a highly Machiavellian actor realizes that traditional constraints rely heavily on social shaming and customary boundaries, which psychopaths are biologically wired to ignore. A prime historical case is Sturlung Era Iceland (circa 1220–1262). The Icelandic Commonwealth was a decentralized network of *goðorð* (chieftaincies)[23]. Chieftains like Gizur Thorvaldsson aggressively aggregated these chieftaincies through extreme violence, political assassination, and economic extortion, destroying the balanced, decentralized nature of the system[23]. This dark-triad capture resulted in systemic exhaustion,

leading directly to the *Gamli Sáttmáli* (Old Covenant) of 1262, where the surviving Icelanders surrendered their sovereignty to the King of Norway to re-establish peace via an external monopoly on violence[23]. Resistance to this capture requires codified, unalienable distributions of force and wealth, preventing any single node from monopolizing the legal apparatus.

Arrangement 3: Constitutional Elite Oligarchy / Aristocratic Republic

A formalized, closed system where governance is restricted to an explicitly defined elite class or nobility, theoretically bound by internal checks and balances to prevent a single autocrat from rising from their ranks.

The Triplet: Stated, Recorded, and Inferred What the actors said it did was prevent the dangerous tyranny of the uneducated majority and ensure that only the most capable, historically vested families guided the state through perilous geopolitical waters. What the record shows is severe economic stagnation, aggressive rent-seeking, demographic implosion of the elite class, and a refusal to adapt to new technologies. What modern scholarship infers is that this arrangement acts as a cartelization of political power, trading long-term systemic resilience for the short-term economic and physical security of a few hundred families.

Scale Rungs	Viability	Reasoning and Evidence
Household to Hamlet (4–50)	Fails	Insufficient base population to support an economically parasitic elite class.
Village to Parish (150–5k)	Fails	Extreme spatial proximity makes intense stratification physically untenable without constant external military backing.
Town/Watershed (15k–50k)	Works	The classic domain of the aristocratic city-state.
Region (0.5M–5M)	Works	Achievable when the elite oligarchy resides in a capital city and extracts resources from a vast rural periphery.
Nation to Planet (50M–8B)	Fails	Demands transition to a bureaucratic or electoral model to manage massive, complex populations.

The Capture Test A wealthy faction captures the state by legally closing the avenues of upward mobility, ensuring no new challengers can disrupt their rent-seeking. The prime historical example is the *Serrata del Maggior Consiglio* (Closing of the Great Council) in Venice in 1297[24]. A faction of Venetian elites successfully locked the political registry (subsequently leading to the *Libro d'Oro*), monopolizing power and excluding newly wealthy merchants[27]. While this provided a few centuries of stability, statistical data tracking patrician marriages shows that by closing the system, the nobility initiated a long, fatal demographic decline. Peak patrician marriages occurred in 1552, followed by a steady rise in demographic entropy, a surge in intra-family marriages (335 recorded cases), and irreversible systemic decay[28]. The Republic never recovered its dynamism[28]. Resistance to aristocratic closure requires robust, codified integration of the lower classes into the legislative veto process.

The Micro-Polities: Commons, Communes, and Sortition

When the state recedes, governance devolves to the commons. Datasets tracking the management of shared resources and intentional communities provide the only empirical baseline for post-collapse survival.

Ostrom's CPR and Nepal Irrigation Institutions and Systems (NIIS)

Elinor Ostrom's Nobel-winning research fundamentally destroyed the "Tragedy of the Commons" myth, proving that communities can sustainably manage common-pool resources (CPR) without private property or centralized state intervention. Specifically, the Nepal Irrigation Institutions and Systems (NIIS) database, developed collaboratively by Ostrom, Wai Fung Lam, and Ganesh Shivakoti, systematically tracks over 233 farmer-managed and agency-managed irrigation systems in Nepal[29].

The NIIS data provides a lethal quantitative strike against the presumption that centralized government management and high-technology fixes are inherently superior. Agency-managed systems frequently fail due to misaligned incentives; government bureaucrats do not suffer if the crops fail, and thus lack the urgency of the farmers[32]. Astonishingly, the NIIS data proves that heavy technological interventions—such as replacing traditional mud-and-stone headworks with permanent concrete structures—actually *reduce* long-term cooperation and system performance[33]. Concrete systems lower the immediate maintenance burden, which inadvertently destroys the necessity for farmers to gather, coordinate labor, and communicate[33]. The social muscle of collective action atrophies. When a major disruption occurs, the community no longer possesses the institutional capacity or interpersonal trust to resolve it[33]. High performance requires farmers to craft their own rules (matching local biophysical constraints) and continually invest their own mutual labor[29].

The FIC Community Directory and Kanter's Commitment Mechanisms

For total communal living, the Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC) directory tracks modern communes[35]. However, the most rigorous empirical baseline remains Rosabeth Moss

Kanter's 1972 study of 91 nineteenth-century utopian communes, subsequently expanded by Richard Sosis into a dataset of 83 communes spanning 200 years (yielding a risk set of 1,556 commune years)[37].

Using longevity as the metric for success (surviving 25 years or more), Kanter and subsequent researchers found that religious communes were three times more likely to survive than secular ones[39]. Survival is almost entirely dependent on "costly signaling." Kanter identified six absolute commitment mechanisms: sacrifice (abstinence and austerity), investment (financial lock-in), renunciation (detachment from the outside world), communion (emotional group identification), mortification (submission of the ego), and transcendence (belief in the group's charismatic ideology)[38]. Secular communes that fail to demand severe upfront sacrifices invariably collapse from free-rider attrition; individuals do the minimum work acceptable while extracting maximum resources, destroying the commune's economy[39].

The OECD Deliberative Database

As modern democracies struggle with polarization, there is a surge in deliberative sortition—the random selection of citizens to form a governing assembly, mirroring ancient Athenian mechanisms. The OECD tracks 733 cases of representative deliberative processes globally[40]. Since 1979, at least 80,622 citizens have been randomly selected to participate[41]. Sample sizes generally range from 32 to 150 participants[40].

The data reveals a critical component for sortition success: financial viability. Crucially, 74% of these cases provided financial compensation to participants, and many provided childcare, to offset the heavy opportunity costs of governance work[41]. Without compensation, sortition assemblies skew heavily toward the wealthy or retired, defeating the purpose of random demographic sampling. While highly effective at generating consensus on complex, long-term issues (such as climate change or urban planning), modern citizens' assemblies are almost entirely advisory; they lack binding executive power.

Arrangement 4: Farmer-Managed Commons (e.g., Alpine Pastures, Irrigation)

The self-governance of an exhaustible, subtractable common-pool resource without private property rights or coercive state oversight.

The Triplet: Stated, Recorded, and Inferred What the actors said it did was maintain a timeless, sacred tradition ensuring equitable survival and harmony for all village families. What the record shows is strict, often brutal exclusion of outsiders, rigid rationing based on historical (and often unequal) private landholdings, and harsh penalties for rule-breakers. What modern scholarship infers is that it is a highly rational, polycentric institutional framework demanding intense, constant mutual monitoring to perfectly align individual selfish incentives with unforgiving ecological limits.

Scale Rungs	Viability	Reasoning and Evidence
Household (4–10)	Fails	Too small to maintain complex ecological

		infrastructure (canals, vast pastures).
Hamlet/Band (30–50)	Works	Highly resilient, though highly vulnerable to localized ecological wipeouts.
Village (150–500)	Works	The absolute apex scale for the commons. Mutual monitoring is perfectly legible, and social shaming carries massive weight.
Parish/District (1,500–5k)	Marginally Works	Requires nested, federated sub-groups to manage communication and enforcement.
Town to Planet (15k–8B)	Fails	Face-to-face trust evaporates; the cost of monitoring free-riders exceeds the value of the resource, guaranteeing collapse without external coercion.

The Capture Test A narcissistic elite can capture the commons by manipulating resource distribution at the physical chokepoints (e.g., the water headworks), bypassing customary rotation schedules, or altering the community ledger. Historically, Törbel, Switzerland (analyzed by Netting in 1981, maximum population 700) successfully resisted capture for centuries through a strict structural balance[43]. Törbel maintained private agricultural plots for baseline survival, but collectively managed the alpine pastures[45]. Capture was resisted through graduated sanctions and mandatory community labor, but fundamentally by transparency: rule infractions on the open alpine slopes were instantly visible to all resource users. Capture is prevented by radical legibility.

Arrangement 5: Utopian Communes

Total pooling of property, labor, and domestic life within a strict intentional community.

The Triplet: Stated, Recorded, and Inferred What the actors said it did was achieve perfect

human harmony, eradicating the sins of greed, capitalism, and artificial hierarchy. What the record shows is massive turnover rates, chronic and bitter internal disputes over labor equity, rapid financial insolvency, and frequent descents into authoritarian cult dynamics. What modern scholarship infers is that radical egalitarianism is economically viable only when subsidized by extreme ideological or religious zealotry that enforces high behavioral conformity and punishes free-riding.

Scale Rungs	Viability	Reasoning and Evidence
Household to Hamlet (4–50)	Works	Intimacy and kin-like bonds allow for communal property without severe friction.
Village (150–500)	Works Rarely	Requires intense, charismatic leadership and severe social isolation (e.g., the Hutterites).
Parish to Planet (1,500–8B)	Fails	Human information processing and ideological purity cannot be maintained at mass scale without dystopian levels of coercion.

The Capture Test A charismatic founder with dark-triad traits utilizes the rhetoric of total equality to extract financial resources, sexual access, and free labor from followers, establishing an inescapable cult of personality. A classic historical failure is Robert Owen's New Harmony in Indiana (1825–1827)[47]. Owen, a wealthy industrialist, attempted to build a secular, property-free utopia of roughly 1,000 people[48]. It collapsed completely within two years. Josiah Warren, an original participant, noted it failed because it lacked individual sovereignty, resulting in a catastrophic imbalance between workers and non-workers[48]. It lacked Kanter's costly signaling mechanisms to filter out free-riders[39]. Capture in communes is only reversed by what Kanter identifies as a "branch structure"—distributing power across multiple, semi-independent physical settlements to prevent absolute centralized tyranny by a single leader[49].

Arrangement 6: Citizens' Assemblies (Sortition)

Random demographic selection of everyday citizens to form a deliberative governing body.
The Triplet: Stated, Recorded, and Inferred What the actors said it did was eliminate toxic

political factionalism and perfectly reflect the demographic and ideological reality of the populace. What the record shows is a high dependence on the unelected bureaucratic organizers who set the agenda, moderate the debates, and select the "expert" briefers. What modern scholarship infers is that it is excellent for breaking partisan gridlock on long-term, low-urgency issues, but is highly vulnerable to agenda-capture and completely lacks the capacity for swift crisis management.

Scale Rungs	Viability	Reasoning and Evidence
Household to Hamlet (4–50)	Fails	The statistical pool is too small to yield a genuinely representative sample.
Village to District (150–5k)	Works	Creates a highly functional, randomly selected town council.
Town to Bioregion (15k–5M)	Works	A panel of 150 randomly selected citizens can effectively deliberate on behalf of millions, provided they have adequate time.
Nation/Continent (50M–500M)	Marginally Works	Can produce excellent policy, but systemic legitimacy often falters because 99.99% of citizens are excluded from the actual room.
Planet (8 Billion)	Untested	

The Capture Test A Machiavellian technocrat captures a sortition assembly not by participating in it, but by controlling the information diet of the randomly selected citizens. By strictly limiting which experts are allowed to testify, framing the policy questions narrowly, and utilizing psychological steering in facilitation, the assembly is gently guided to pre-determined conclusions. Resisting this invisible capture requires radical transparency, granting the assembly itself the independent power to subpoena information, and allowing the assembly to set its own agenda rather than answering a prompt handed down by the state.

Elite Positioning and Ideological Factionalism

Understanding how elites signal and shift their positions is critical to tracking institutional decay prior to a collapse. Modern political science relies on two massive datasets to track these shifts: the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) and the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR/CMP)[50].

CHES tracks political party positioning on economic, social (GAL/TAN), and integration dimensions using evaluations from hundreds of academics[50]. CHES added metrics in 2024 to track party support for "horizontal accountability" (executive constraints and judicial independence)[50]. Conversely, MARPOR uses human coders to categorize "quasi-sentences" in official party manifestos[51]. MARPOR operates on "saliency theory"—the idea that parties do not directly debate opponents, but instead emphasize the issues they own (e.g., a green party talks endlessly about the environment, ignoring the economy)[51].

Both methodologies have severe limits for tracking dark-triad capture. CHES is subject to expert variance and ideological projection, particularly on rapidly shifting populist issues[52]. MARPOR assumes that written manifestos accurately reflect elite intentions—a catastrophic assumption when dealing with Machiavellian actors who use written rhetoric solely as camouflage[56]. A psychopathic faction will publish a manifesto entirely dedicated to the rule of law (MARPOR), while simultaneously dismantling judicial independence in practice (which CHES attempts to catch).

The Limits of Measurement

What escapes these databases is often more critical than what they capture. Formal datasets fail to measure informal power, shadow economies, and systemic legitimacy.

1. **Legitimacy vs. Compliance:** Databases like the WGI or COW measure compliance (e.g., tax receipts collected, absence of armed civil war), but they cannot differentiate between compliance born of a genuine belief in the system and compliance born of terror, coercion, or exhaustion.
2. **Informal Power and Dark-Triad Capture:** Psychopaths and Machiavellians rarely alter the de jure organizational chart of a society. They establish shadow networks of patronage, blackmail, and economic extortion. The Comparative Constitutions Project can verify that a constitution guarantees judicial independence, but it cannot measure whether the judges' families are being quietly threatened by cartel enforcers.
3. **The Strongest Case Against:** Ethnographers and post-structuralist critics, most notably James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, present the strongest case against these datasets. Scott argues that quantitative datasets suffer inherently from state-centric myopia. By forcing highly localized, complex, and tacit governance knowledge into standardized, easily readable spreadsheets, analysts inherently strip away the ecological and cultural contexts that make those systems function. Standardized metrics inherently favor standardized, top-down governance models and falsely pathologize decentralized, informal, or customary rule structures.

Measurement Plan for the Book's Main Claims

To anchor the theoretical claims of *GOVERNING after the FALL*, the following measurement plan aligns the book's specific hypotheses with robust datasets and empirical tests.

Core Book Claim	Dataset to Utilize	Empirical Test
Size Limit: Utopian equality inevitably collapses above Dunbar's number (150) without severe coercive mechanisms.	FIC Community Directory & Kanter's (1972) 91 Communes[37].	Correlate commune population size at year 5 against the presence of hierarchical enforcement mechanisms. Expect rapid dissolution in strictly egalitarian groups >150.
Resource Capture: Technological centralization inadvertently accelerates elite capture of common-pool resources.	Ostrom / Lam Nepal Irrigation Institutions and Systems (NIIS)[29].	Regress infrastructure type (e.g., concrete vs. mud headworks) against measures of collective action and yield equity among tail-end users[31].
Ideological Camouflage: Dark-triad actors use populist rhetoric to mask elite rent-seeking and institutional dismantling.	Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) vs. Manifesto Project (MARPOR)[50].	Measure the statistical divergence between party rhetoric (MARPOR quasi-sentences) and actual policy implementation (CHES expert placement on executive constraints)[50].
Complexity Decay: Governance structures collapse if physical information processing fails to scale with population size.	Seshat: Global History Databank[12].	Track historical polities as they cross the "Information Threshold" (PC1 values ~ -0.5); observe the fracturing rate in polities lacking literacy or bureaucratic ledgers[14].

Robust Findings

Subjective expert coding in datasets like V-Dem is highly vulnerable to global pessimism biases, often exaggerating institutional decline compared to objective metrics. Social complexity globally scales along two highly predictable thresholds: raw demographic scale and information processing capability, represented by Seshat's PC1. Intentional communities absolutely require "costly signaling"—such as sacrifice and renunciation—to survive; religious communes significantly outlast secular ones by enforcing these mechanisms. Exclusively

technological improvements to common-pool resources, like concrete irrigation headworks, paradoxically destroy the social capital required to manage them. Citizens' assemblies relying on sortition require direct financial compensation to ensure equitable participation, yet remain deeply vulnerable to agenda-setting capture by bureaucrats. The closing of elite political registries, as seen in Venice in 1297, secures short-term stability but guarantees long-term demographic and institutional decay. Constitutional text has zero predictive power regarding actual executive constraints without distributed physical power to back it up. Dark-triad capture almost always preserves the formal aesthetic of an institution while aggressively centralizing de facto, informal power. Decentralized chiefdoms cannot scale beyond regional levels without collapsing into feuding warlordism. Finally, polycentric, locally crafted rules vastly outperform centralized, agency-driven management in maintaining sustainable resource yields.

Contested or Open Questions

- Can the statistical imputation of missing historical data (utilizing deep neural networks like *datawig*) accurately reflect ancient institutional reality, or does it merely project modern institutional biases onto the fragmentary past?
- At what precise demographic threshold does mutual monitoring within a shared commons fail, necessitating formalized, third-party coercion to prevent free-riding?
- Can deliberative sortition assemblies be granted binding executive power without inevitably being captured by the literate, bureaucratic class required to administer them?
- How can researchers empirically measure informal shadow governance, patron-client networks, and localized extortion that intentionally leave no paper trail?

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Implementability after the Fall

If global supply chains, the electrical grid, and macro-state structures permanently vanish, governance must immediately devolve to legible, localized scales.

Household (4 to 10): The minimum viable version is strict patriarchal, matriarchal, or elder-led resource pooling. It requires no formal records, literacy, or meeting places, relying solely on biological kinship trust and daily shared meals. The first failure to expect is authoritarian abuse by the physical head of the household, which, unchecked by an external state apparatus, can rapidly devolve into domestic tyranny.

Village (300): The minimum viable version is a Farmer-Managed Commons modeled on Ostrom's NIIS findings or the Swiss village of Törbel. It requires: (1) Basic literacy to maintain a physical ledger of land and labor rights. (2) A shared agricultural calendar to track planting and water rotation. (3) A central meeting place (a physical square or longhouse). (4) Mandatory communal labor days to maintain local infrastructure, ensuring social bonds do not atrophy. The first failure to expect is a Machiavellian family attempting to quietly capture the physical chokepoints of resources (e.g., the water headworks) or manipulating the physical ledger to disenfranchise rivals, leading to violent factionalism.

District (3,000): The minimum viable version is a Sortition Assembly paired with a federated local militia. To prevent warlordism—the exact failure mode of Sturlung Era Iceland—the district cannot rely on autonomous, heavily armed chieftains. It requires: (1) A robust, transparent lottery system (sortition) to select a governing council of 50 to 100 people annually. (2) Secure, constantly updated physical records of all households to form the lottery pool. (3) A district-wide pact requiring all constituent villages to contribute armed personnel to enforce assembly decisions impartially. The first failure to expect is agenda-capture: a highly literate, charismatic clerk or former state elite controls the flow of information to the randomly selected assembly, subtly limiting their options and effectively ruling from the shadows.

Principles

- **The Principle of Costly Signaling:** Intentional communities that demand significant upfront sacrifices and renunciation from members survive exponentially longer than those relying purely on egalitarian rhetoric.
- **The Principle of Biophysical Alignment:** Resource management rules inevitably fail unless they are crafted directly by the local actors physically constrained by that specific environment.
- **The Principle of Technological Alienation:** Imposing external, low-maintenance technology on a commons actively degrades the social capital and mutual monitoring required to sustain long-term governance.
- **The Principle of Aristocratic Stagnation:** Closing a political system to upward mobility ensures short-term factional peace but mathematically guarantees long-term systemic and demographic decay.
- **The Principle of De Facto Capture:** Actors with dark-triad traits rarely dismantle formal institutional rules; they bypass them entirely by capturing the informal networks of information, agenda-setting, and physical enforcement.
- **The Principle of Scale Limits:** Without parallel advancements in physical information processing, governance structures inherently fracture as populations expand beyond the

limits of face-to-face trust.

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