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The ‘Virtuous Circle’ Argument, Political Judgement, and Citizens’ Political Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Empirical scholars describe a ‘virtuous circle’ (VC) wherein effective governance, empirical legitimacy, and citizens’ obedience are mutually reinforcing. This essay offers a normative perspective on the VC by bringing it into conversation with the literature on political resistance, which focuses on how citizens improve governance by resisting governmental authority. It is argued that the VC, and the concept of ‘limited statehood’ with which it is sometimes paired, obfuscate the potential for citizens’ political resistance (PR) to improve governance. Interpreting the VC in a way that emphasizes citizens’ political judgement, and situating the VC within a broader framework that includes PR, reduces this obfuscation and clarifies the VC’s contributions to democratic theory.

KEYWORDS

virtuous circle; virtuous cycle; political judgement; resistance; social movements; democratic theory

Introduction

How can citizens¹ make governance more effective by their own lights? Over the past twenty-five years, a group of scholars has developed an answer to this question that centres on a *virtuous circle* (VC, also known as a virtuous cycle) between effective governance and empirical legitimacy. They argue that the more ‘effective’ a government or other governance actor² is – the more it ‘realizes the goals it is supposed to achieve’, or, more precisely, the more it realizes the goals that citizens think it should achieve³ – the more empirical legitimacy it has in its citizens’ eyes: that is, the more citizens will believe that it has the moral right to rule. The more empirical legitimacy the governance actor has, in turn, the more citizens will trust it and quasi-voluntarily comply with its dictates, e.g. by paying taxes and acquiescing to its other demands. Their compliance enables the governance actor to become more effective, and so the VC continues (Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018).

Most conceptual and empirical scholarship on the VC is not framed explicitly around the question of how citizens can improve governance. Rather, this scholarship clarifies the different components of the VC model, examines the conditions under which VCs arise, and elucidates the causal mechanisms and logics that keep VCs going (Levi and Sacks 2009, 2010; Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Beishem et al. 2014; McCloughlin 2015; Ciorciari and Krasner 2018; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; Winters, Dietrich, and Mahmud

2018). However, because the term implies that VCs are good – i.e. *virtuous* – and because it offers an account of what citizens must do or be for these cycles to develop and continue, the literature on the VC does quite directly address the question of how citizens can make governance more effective (by their own lights).

Scholars and policymakers have studied the VC in numerous contexts, including what some call *areas of limited statehood*. These are areas within domestic polities ‘where the state lacks the ability to implement central decisions and/or exert a monopoly over the use of force’ (Risse 2011, 4–5). In contrast to much scholarship on ‘failed’, ‘failing’, or ‘fragile’ states, scholarship on areas of limited statehood emphasizes that these areas can be smaller than states (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). Examples mentioned in the literature include Mogadishu, Somalia, parts of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and Gölitz Park in Germany in 2016 (Börzel, Risse, and Draude 2018). In areas of limited statehood, governance activities such as service provision are sometimes undertaken by non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, and international organizations (Ciorciari and Krasner 2018). Thus, it is no surprise that NGOs, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, and other entities pursuing ‘statebuilding’ and ‘good governance’ initiatives frequently invoke aspects of the VC; it provides a tantalizing account of how, simply by enabling governments to perform better in the short term, they might be able to jumpstart a mutually supportive cycle among effective governance, empirical legitimacy, and a cooperative citizenry (NORAD 2009; DFID 2010; World Bank 2011).

The present essay offers a normative perspective on the VC – especially, but not only, in areas of limited statehood – by bringing it into conversation with another set of arguments about how citizens can make governance more effective. As some scholars of the VC have studied extensively elsewhere, being compliant and obedient is not the only way in which citizens can improve governance (Levi 1997, esp. 17–19, 212–13; DeTray and Levi 1993; Ahlquist and Levi 2013). Citizens can also improve governance by being disobedient, non-cooperative, intransigent, unruly, and non-compliant for (at least somewhat) political purposes. I call these forms of non-compliance *political resistance* (PR). Examples include civil disobedience, strikes, disruptive protest movements, work slowdowns, tax resistance movements, and other more subtle forms of non-cooperation (Scott 1985; Scheuerman 2017). According to what I call the PR model, citizens make governance more effective not by complying with governmental authority, but by resisting it.

For the purposes of this article, I will assume that the VC and PR are both valid models, in the sense that both describe causal pathways for improving governance that occur, empirically, some of the time. If this assumption is correct, then two *desiderata* follow. First, citizens should be able to develop habits and capacities that enable them to participate in both models. Neither model should ask citizens to develop habits and capacities that make their participation in the other model impossible or extremely difficult, nor should one model obscure the other’s value. Second, neither model should ask citizens to develop habits and capacities that would make it difficult for them to choose or move between the two models, or participate in both simultaneously. The latter desiderata is important because the VC and PR are both means for *citizens* to improve governance. This would not be possible if citizens’ judgements about whether to use the VC or PR model (or both) were replaced by those of third parties.

I argue that the VC – as it is usually interpreted – does not achieve these desiderata because (1) it puts too much emphasis on the value of citizens’ political judgements

remaining stable, and (2) it does not acknowledge the crucial role of PR in improving governance. The concept of limited statehood also downplays the value of PR because it is a problem that only the VC, not PR, can solve. I therefore propose adopting an interpretation of the VC that emphasizes the importance of political judgement, and situating this interpretation within a broader framework that includes the PR model.

In the next two sections, I describe the VC and PR models, respectively. I then examine two interpretations of the VC model, and argue that the one that emphasizes active political judgment is superior. However, even this superior interpretation obscures the value of citizens' political resistance for improving governance. The concept of limited statehood functions similarly. These limitations can be ameliorated, to some extent, by situating the VC in a broader framework.

The VC model

In a prominent article on the VC, Levi and Sacks concisely summarize its logic with reference to conventional domestic governments:

The more effective and procedurally just the government, the greater the willingness of citizens to accept governmental authority and therefore the greater the degree of quasi-voluntary compliance, which then improves [the] government's capacity to become more effective and to evoke deference, which in turn increases quasi-voluntary compliance. (Levi and Sacks 2009)

Figure 1 (reproduced from Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018), is a visual representation of the VC that adds detail to the foregoing summary. Three aspects of the VC as just described are especially important for present purposes. First, for VCs to occur, citizens must 'cooperate' and 'comply' with governance actors; they must 'obey', 'defer', and 'acquiesce' (Levi and Sacks 2009; Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009). This compliance is necessary because it enables governance actors to expend fewer resources enforcing compliance.

Not just any compliance suffices, however. The second important point about the VC for our purposes is that citizens' compliance must be based on stable ethical judgements (i.e. judgements that stay relatively consistent over time) of the governance actor's right to rule. This is necessary because, for governance actors to feel secure in implementing low-cost systems of monitoring and sanctioning, citizens cannot wake up every morning and decide anew whether or not to comply; they must *be* compliant, in some sort of stable, ongoing way that is knowable by the relevant governance actors. The VC's focus on ethical beliefs reflects this need for stability. Citizens' beliefs about a governance actor's right to rule are built up over time and adhere to it as an entity. These beliefs are therefore likely to be less variable than judgements about a governance actor's discrete decisions or actions. As Risse and Stollenwerk (2018) put it, 'if governors who are considered legitimate do not substantially violate citizens' sense of what are acceptable and appropriate rules, regulations, or actions, then citizens will continue to comply'.

Third, citizens' beliefs in a governance actor's moral right to rule must be based largely on aspects of its performance such as service provision, rather than on other factors such as the identity of the governance actor and how it came to power. This is crucial for the VC's logic, because for the cycle to continue, citizens' belief in a governance actor's

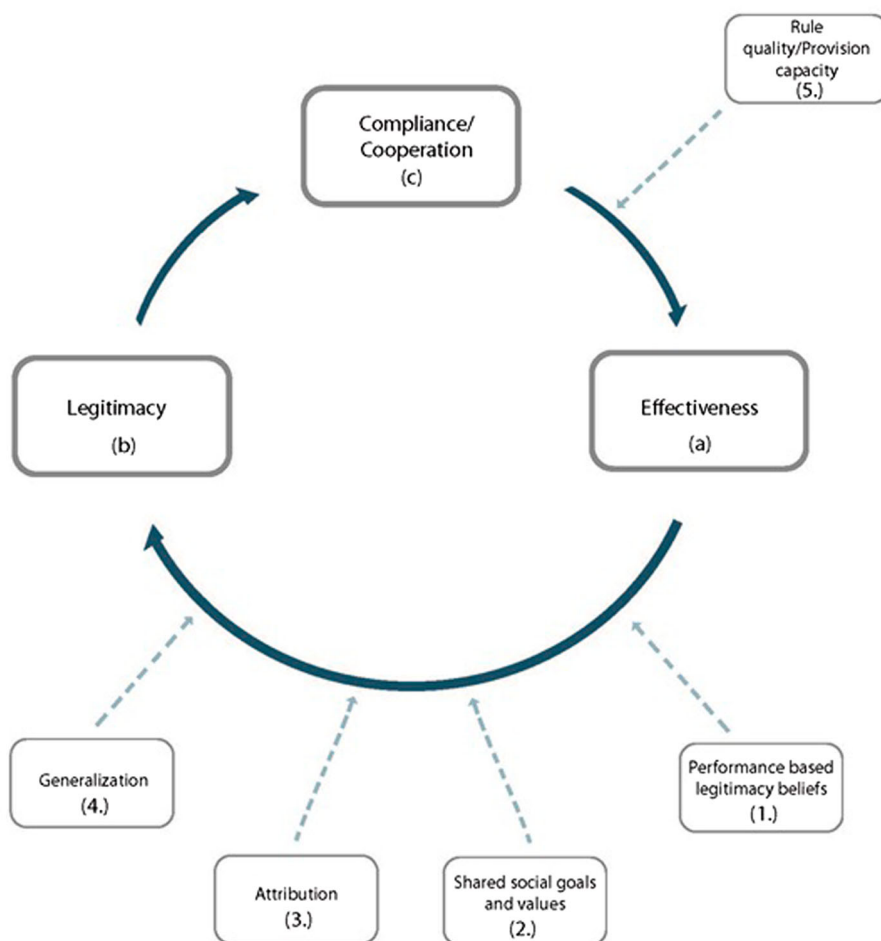


Figure 1. A schematic representation of the VC argument. Source: Schmelzle and Stollenwerk (2018).

right to rule must be somewhat responsive to its performance (although, as just noted, it cannot be too responsive). If citizens have other reasons for rejecting the governance actor, for example because it is a colonial power, then they will not believe in its moral right to rule regardless of how well it performs, and consequently will not comply more when it performs better.

Thus, for the VC model to work – for the cycle to function and governance to improve – citizens must believe certain things and act in certain ways, which in turn requires cultivating or developing particular values, habits, and capacities. Of these, two appear to stand in tension with the values, habits, and capacities that citizens need to participate in the PR model, and to move between the two models. These are, first, stable political judgement, by which I mean a tendency to have settled, stable judgements about a governance actor’s right to rule – to not question its legitimacy based on a particular objectionable policy or decision – and second, valuing compliance, by which I mean placing a high value on compliance and seeing it as an appropriate response to a politically legitimate governance actor.

The PR model

Like the VC model, the PR model is also an answer to the question ‘how can citizens make governance actors perform better by citizens’ lights?’. According to the PR model (Figure 2), citizens judge how a governance actor is performing. If all or some citizens judge that a governance actor is performing poorly, and that it can be pressured into performing better, they apply such pressure – sometimes in the form of political resistance. If the governance actor responds adequately, citizens stop applying pressure. If the governance actor responds, but inadequately, citizens keep applying pressure. (There is obviously much more to say about what motivates citizens to engage in various forms of political resistance and the effects of those efforts, but this schematic, bare-bones account suffices for present purposes.)

In the PR model, citizens’ judgements of governance actors’ political legitimacy play a smaller yet more varied role than they play in the VC model. While in the VC model, citizens comply with a governance actor because they think it is politically legitimate, in the PR model, citizens might resist (rather than revolt) because they think a governance actor is politically legitimate in some ways (I return to this point below). Citizens might also resist a governance actor that they think is politically illegitimate because they reject revolt or acquiescence for other reasons. In other words, political legitimacy does not play a predetermined role; the question for citizens on the PR model is simply whether or not resistance is called for given the government’s performance.

The PR model does not require that everyone involved in a particular episode of resistance exercise political judgement – especially strategic judgement about means and ends. Citizens sometimes resist because they are fed up and cannot take it any more, without paying much attention to the practical efficacy of their actions – although it is likely that for their actions to be efficacious, they must be part of a broader strategic movement (Kauffman 2017; Tufekci 2017; cf. Scheuerman 2017 for some doubts about the concept).

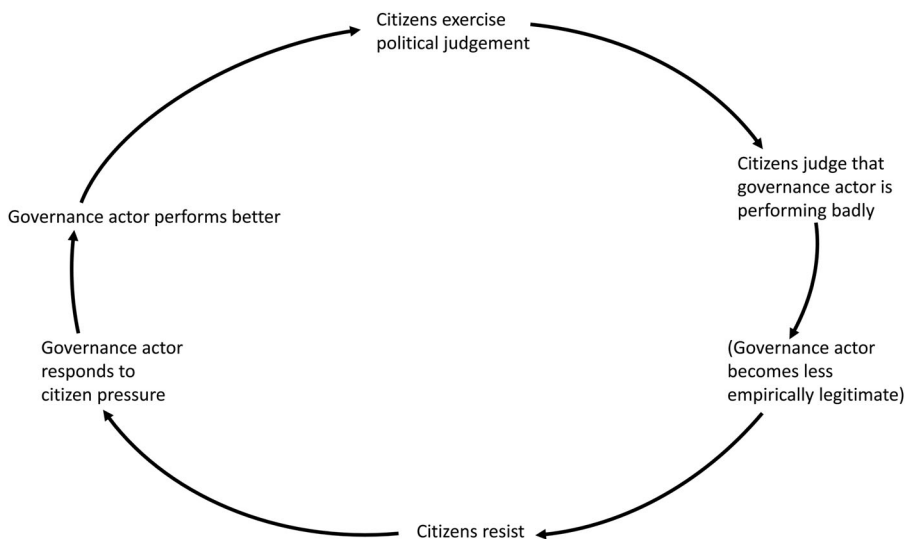


Figure 2. The PR model.

Note: Although not necessarily a cycle, the PR model is portrayed as such to facilitate comparisons with the VC model.

In the same vein, the PR model does not require that political judgement proceed in a register of calm deliberation; it can be expressed in registers of anger or outrage (Nussbaum 2013).

As a result of this process of political judgement, citizens might decide to engage in PR, a form of political agency that is active, often creative, and involves ‘withdrawing cooperation in social relations’ (Piven 2006, 23). Types of political resistance that citizens might engage in include protest marches, general strikes, election boycotts, tax resistance movements, and mass civil disobedience (Scott 1985; Laudani 2013; Scheuerman 2015; Mouffe 2005). Political resistance can also take the form of more seemingly isolated or apolitical acts, such as truancy and refusal to work, if those involved think of themselves as engaged in a collective political action (Piven and Cloward 1979; Shelby 2007). The political resistance in the PR model can be top down or bottom up, strategic or spontaneous (Scheuerman 2015; Tufekci 2017).⁴ What all forms of it – or, all forms relevant to the PR model – have in common is that they are efforts to improve governance that involve resistance to governmental authority, rather than cooperation.

It might seem at first as if the PR model is simply the VC model with citizens in the governance role and the conventional government as the audience for its legitimacy claims.⁵ This is not the case, however; no matter who occupies what role, the VC always relies on cooperation and the PR always relies on resistance. If we plug citizens into the governance role in the VC model and elected officials into the role typically occupied by citizens then citizens would govern well, and so gain empirical legitimacy in the eyes of elected officials. As a result, the elected officials would comply more with citizens’ demands, and citizens would govern better due to the elected officials’ cooperation. In contrast, in the PR model, governance improves because those who are governed (whether citizens or elected officials) decide to resist, not because they cooperate.

Not everything that citizens do to improve governance can be classified as either cooperation or resistance. Other strategies for improving governance (that might have elements of compliance or resistance but do not neatly fit either mould) include voting, running for office (or threatening to run), working to change institutional rules (e.g. campaign finance, voter registration), engaging in public rhetoric, persuasion, and deliberation about political issues, and (in a very different vein) threatening political violence or overthrowing the existing regime.⁶ In short, when it comes to improving governance, resistance is not the only alternative to cooperation – but it is a major one.

All of this brings us to a problem: the VC model seems to work best if citizens develop one set of values, habits, and capacities, while the PR model – and the task of moving between the two models – seems to work best when they develop another. In particular, while the VC emphasizes what I have called stable political judgement, the PR model – because it does not need governments to design systems to take advantage of citizens’ compliance – does not need or benefit from such a strong emphasis on stability; citizens simply respond to their government’s performance by resisting – or not. In addition to focusing on different questions, citizens’ political judgement in the PR model is more responsive to smaller-bore changes in governance actors’ policies and practices. This more active and responsive form of political judgement is also appropriate for citizens’ decisions about whether to participate in the VC model, the PR model, or both.

A second difference between the VC and PR models – in terms of citizens’ values, habits, and capacities – is that while the VC model emphasizes the value of citizens

complying with governance actors because it gives the latter leeway and resources to perform better, the PR model emphasizes the value of citizens' resistance because it pressures governance actors to perform better.

Two interpretations of the VC: Stable political judgement and active political judgement

I now want to suggest that while the account of the VC that I have described thus far is the dominant account in the literature, it is actually just one possible interpretation. The VC can also be interpreted in such a way that it relies on the kind of political judgement that the PR model, and moving between the two models, requires. Both of these interpretations of the VC – the one emphasizing more stable political judgement, and the one emphasizing more active political judgement – have limitations. When the VC is considered alone, the stable political judgement interpretation is arguably slightly better, but when the PR model and moving between the two models are factored in, the active political judgement interpretation is superior.

Consider, first, evidence that political judgement plays a role in the VC. While the substantive content of terms such as 'comply' and 'obey' (which are ubiquitous in the VC literature) clearly conveys ongoing passive acceptance of governmental authority, the grammatical form in which these terms are presented does not. In the VC literature, these terms are frequently presented in their active verb rather than adjectival form: citizens 'willingly obey', 'defer', and 'acquiesce' – they are not obedient, deferent, and acquiescent.⁷ Thus, even though the VC literature is replete with terms whose content suggests passive acquiescence, their grammatical form suggests that citizens actively choose to act in these ways. In a similar vein, Levi, Sacks, and Tyler (2009, 371) note that citizens must 'withdraw their deference and compliance' if governments fail to fulfil their obligations, and Levi and Sacks (2009, 312) write that citizens' beliefs about when to defer must be 'updated in response to changes in government behavior'. All of this is necessary because for a VC to happen, the governance actor in question must aim to govern better. Citizens must judge that the governance actor has this aim, and they must continue to update this judgement with some (but not too much) regularity. Thus, citizens must walk a very fine line; rather than merely complying with their government when it performs well and resisting when it performs badly, citizens must believe that their government has the moral right to rule but be willing to update this (settled but not too settled) belief based on new information about how the government is performing. Conceptually, this is a coherent directive. Practically, it seems difficult to pull off.⁸ This practical difficulty raises the question of in which direction citizens, and those seeking to educate or incentivize them, should err: should they err on the side of encouraging stable political judgement so that citizens are more likely to mistakenly continue to comply when they should resist, or should they err on the side of encouraging active political judgement so that citizens are more likely to mistakenly resist when they should continue to comply?

With only the VC in view, erring in the direction of stable political judgement (fig. 3) seems slightly preferable: while overemphasizing active political judgement could prevent the VC from taking off or continuing, overemphasizing stable political judgement would not have this effect (although it might have other unspecified bad effects, such as

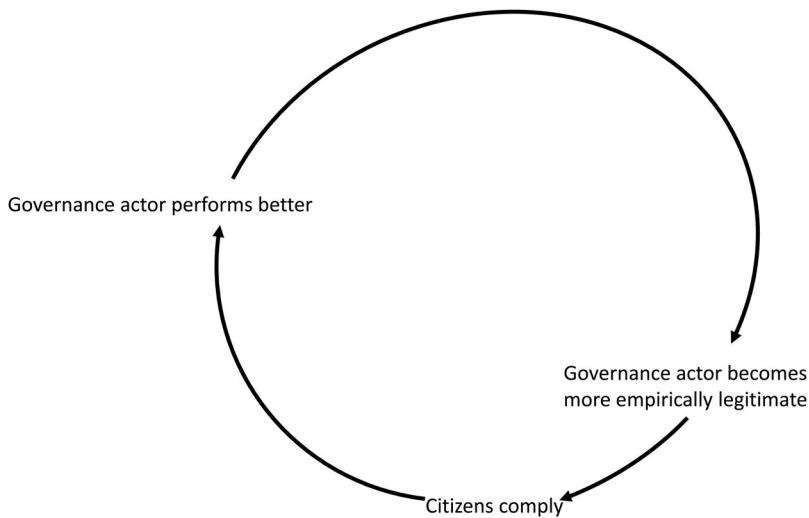


Figure 3. The VC model (stable political judgement interpretation).

empowering a government with nefarious intentions). This could be why scholars of the VC have emphasized (and perhaps overemphasized) the value of stable political judgement. However, if one considers what not only the VC model but also the PR model asks of citizens, the balance of considerations shifts and there is a slightly stronger reason, in interpreting the VC, to do so in a way that emphasizes (perhaps overly) active political judgement ([fig. 4](#)).⁹ This conclusion suggests that we should be wary of interventions that corrode or bypass citizens' active political judgement, such as those which rely on citizens' misperceptions to bootstrap a VC into action and/or bypass their political judgement *via* game-ification (Winters, Dietrich, and Mahmud [2018](#); Levi, Sacks, and Tyler [2009](#)).

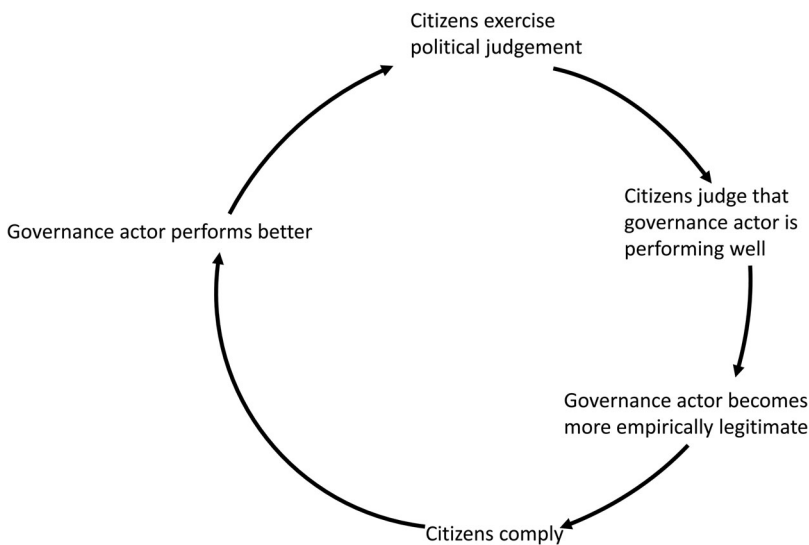


Figure 4. The VC model (active political judgement interpretation).

How the VC model obscures the PR model

While it is preferable to the stable political judgement interpretation, even the active political judgement interpretation of the VC does not acknowledge, and indeed obscures, the value of political resistance. I turn now to explaining why this is and giving some examples.

According to (both interpretations of) the VC, the governance actor is the main causal agent in making governance more effective. When citizens obey, the governance actor gets more discretion, funding, and/or room to manoeuvre – which it uses to govern more effectively. The only question that *citizens* face is whether or not to defer. If they do not defer, the VC fails. If they do defer, they contribute to improved governance by empowering a governance actor to act.

In contrast, according to the PR model it is the *citizens* who play a (if not *the*) central role in making governance more effective. Governance actors act, but their actions are directed and constrained by citizens' demands and threats. While in the VC model citizens comply with the governance actor, acceding to its demands and thereby enabling it to get on with the task of governing, in the PR model the governance actor complies with the demands of the citizens.

One might object to this notion by pointing out that citizens hold power in the VC model as well, because they can withhold their cooperation.¹⁰ It is true that citizens are not simply inert in the VC model. It is also true that they are construed as moral agents, in that their decisions to obey the government are based on moral judgements about the government's right to rule. However, there is only one way for citizens to make governance more effective in the VC model, and that is by obeying. In the PR model, citizens pressure and prod the government to act in particular ways, but in the VC model, in contrast, there is no account of how citizens' creativity or ingenuity can make governance better. Citizens provide resources and get out of the way; the only active, creative agency that improves governance belongs to governance actors.

For example, consider how Levi and Sacks describe the implications of political exclusion:

Those whose voices are not heard or opinions not cultivated in the establishment of the tax system may feel that they are paying tribute rather than taxes. The result may be the perception of what Hechter labels 'alien rule' (2009). The under-representation of a group in the legislature or the assignment of permanent minority status may reduce the group members' sense of ownership, increase their sense of injustice and partiality in the determination of policy, *and dampen their quasi-voluntary compliance*. (Levi and Sacks 2009, 318, emphasis added)

As this quotation makes clear, the political exclusion of citizens is a problem in the VC model. However, it is a problem because it reduces compliance. In contrast, in the PR model, political exclusion is a problem because it means that the citizens who are excluded are less able to pressure governance actors to govern better.

Consider next the fact that the VC is imagined as a 'circle' or a 'cycle'. These images emphasize the VC's automaticity, the way in which one step in the process leads inexorably to the next. Despite this imagery, the VC does not downplay *governance actors'* agency, because the move from citizens' compliance and cooperation to more effective governance involves the governance actor *choosing* to use its additional discretion to govern more effectively. The cycle imagery also does not downplay the agency of third

parties. To the contrary, it suggests that even a minor intervention by a third party to get a VC going can have outsized effects; just as a small flick of the wrist can set a pinwheel in motion, a small intervention to improve a governance actor's performance can jump-start a VC that then has its own inertia. However, the VC's automaticity does seem to downplay *citizens'* creative agency, especially when it comes to the move from empirical legitimacy to compliance and cooperation. According to the VC, compliance follows as an almost logical necessity from performance-based empirical legitimacy beliefs (Figure 1). This conceptualization overlooks the ways in which participants in reformist political movements, while acknowledging a conventional government's moral right to rule, nonetheless disobey and refuse to comply in certain areas in order to pressure the government to govern better by their lights (Scheuerman 2015).

The tendency of the VC to obscure the value of citizens' active political agency, especially their acts of political resistance, is particularly evident if we turn to the flip side of the VC discussed in the literature: the *vicious cycle*. Recall that according to the VC, more effective governance leads to more empirical legitimacy, which leads to more citizen cooperation, which leads to more effective governance. When this cycle reverses and moves in the opposite or 'vicious' direction, less effective governance leads to less empirical legitimacy, which leads to less citizen cooperation, which leads to less effective governance.¹¹ Describing the vicious cycle logic, Levi and Sacks write:

Low quality service provision or significant corruption *reduces citizen motivation to pay taxes* and can lead to budget shortfalls, which in turn *lead not only to lower quality services but also to a diminution in the salaries and working conditions of tax administration officials*. Low salaries can create incentives to accept bribes, and prey upon citizens rather than serve them. (Levi and Sacks 2009, emphasis added)

Thus, according to logic of the VC and vicious cycle, citizens' compliance makes governance more effective (as part of the VC) while *non-compliance makes governance less effective* (as part of the vicious cycle). What gets lost here, yet again, is the possibility that citizens' non-compliance can *improve* governance, which is the crux of the PR model.

One might object that the sort of non-compliance that worsens governance is different from the sort that improves it, but these distinctions are very difficult to draw in any general way. To give one obvious example, refusing to pay taxes can be a form of disobedience that makes governance worse (as the example cited above suggests) or it can be a form of political resistance that makes governance better (as the PR model tells us; see Piven and Cloward 1979; Shelby 2007). For example, Levi and Sacks (2009, 315) describe instances of 'tax resistance' in Nigeria and Tanzania, which they imply are examples of a vicious cycle. However, Prichard offers an example of how tax resistance can improve governance:

In Kenya in the late 1990s ... public resistance to taxation failed to prompt immediate government concessions. Instead, persistent and politically motivated tax evasion progressively undermined the fiscal position of the increasingly unpopular government. *By starving the government of revenue, this tax resistance helped to precipitate a political transition* in 2002, as the incumbent government was removed from power. In turn, the new government brought meaningful improvements in accountability, while explicitly linking improved tax collection to the expansion of popular social programs. (Prichard 2015, 3, emphasis added)

If Prichard (2015) had ended his analysis prior to 2002 – that is, if he had looked for a case in which tax resistance made governance worse, and then stopped when he found it – he

might have concluded that tax resistance in Kenya led to a vicious cycle. However, because he extended his analysis over a longer time period, he found a form of resistance that started out by making governance worse ('persistent and politically motivated tax evasion progressively undermined the fiscal position of the increasingly unpopular government') but eventually made it better ('expansion of popular social programs'). This sort of situation – a vicious cycle embedded within a process of effective political resistance – is probably not uncommon. This is why, if we want to understand how citizens can make governance more effective, it is crucial to keep both the VC and the PR models, along with the habits and capacities they demand from citizens, clearly in view.

Limited statehood as a backdrop and a concept

Before considering how this might be done, I turn now to adding an additional dimension to our picture. The subject of this special issue is the VC in areas of 'limited statehood', which – as noted above – refers to a conventional government's (in)ability 'to implement central decisions and/or exert a monopoly over the use of force'. This differs from 'effective governance', which refers to a governance actor's ability to accomplish what citizens think it should accomplish. Scholars of the VC keep these two concepts analytically distinct in order to study whether and how effective governance, including by actors other than the domestic government, is possible in areas of limited statehood (Krasner and Risse 2014; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018; Börzel, Risse, and Draude 2018).

Schmelzle and Stollenwerk (2018) characterize limited statehood as a 'circumstantial backdrop' for the VC – that is, as conceptually unrelated to it. There are many contexts in which the VC might be studied, and limited statehood is one of them. In this section, I first discuss how the VC's tendencies to downplay the value of citizens' political resistance are also apparent in contexts where limited statehood is the backdrop. I then discuss how the very concept of limited statehood itself shares these tendencies.

Limited statehood as a backdrop

In contexts of limited statehood, governance is sometimes undertaken by one or more non-state actors. In these contexts, focusing on virtuous and/or vicious cycles involving one governance actor can obscure political resistance by other governance actors. For example, Hönke and Thauer describe an episode in 2007–8 in which a company called Anvil Mining attempted to provide human rights training to security forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

National and regional heads of police stated that the involvement of companies was not welcome ... They argued that these firms had fueled conflicts in the past and supported separatist movements, and were thus untrustworthy allies in the organization of security. Hence, Anvil's programs confronted open hostility from the DRC's security elites ... Unsurprisingly, the firm's attempt to improve the provision of security services turned out to be not effective. (Hönke and Thauer 2014)

According to Hönke and Thauer (2014), who invoke the VC, this episode is a clear failure of effective governance: Anvil attempted to engage in a governance activity, but 'security elites' in the DRC did not cooperate. As a result, Anvil's performance of a governance

function was stymied. No empirical legitimacy (among the security elites) meant no success (paraphrase of Krasner and Risse 2014). If we examine this episode through the lens of the PR model, however, it looks at least potentially like an example of successful governance (although there is not enough information available to say for sure). Congolese government officials (national and regional heads of police) offered *prima facie* valid reasons against Anvil undertaking a governance function, and they succeeded in preventing it from doing so. If these officials were acting as legitimate representatives of the Congolese people then while governance by a non-state actor (Anvil) failed due to a lack of empirical legitimacy, governance by the actual Congolese government succeeded because it resisted Anvil's bad governance. Again, if we use the VC model alone as a lens, we risk missing the ways in which political resistance – in this case, resistance to governance by a non-state actor on the part of a conventional government – can make governance better.

While conceptual models of the virtuous and vicious cycles do not sufficiently acknowledge the potential for political resistance to make governance more effective, some scholarly articles centred on quantitative studies of the VC include examples and case studies wherein political resistance leads to more effective governance. For example, Levi, Sacks, and Tyler (2009, 354) present a quantitative study of one part of the VC (the relationship between citizens' belief that their government is 'effective, fair, and trustworthy' and their belief that their government 'deserves deference to its rules'). At the end of the article, the authors write:

To cross-check whether our statistical findings are consistent with what is actually happening within communities across developing and transitional countries, we now turn to cases from Africa, China, Latin America, and the United States that point to the relationship between effective government, popular beliefs, and acceptance of government authority. (Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009, 368)

They go on to describe events, policies, and trends in several regions and countries. In two of their cases (Africa and China), citizens resisted – in one case via a lawsuit, and in the other via riots and demonstrations – and governance improved as a result. However, the authors do not connect their discussion of these two empirical cases to the first, quantitative part of the paper. While their discussion of these cases is consistent with the part of the VC that they examine in the article – the tendency for legitimacy beliefs to support a belief in compliance – these cases call into question another crucial aspect of the virtuous–vicious cycle logic: the idea that citizens' disobedience makes governance less effective. The VC would obscure the potential of political resistance less if the implications of these sorts of case studies were included in schematic representations and conceptual accounts of the VC. I return to this point below.

Limited statehood as a concept

While limited statehood is typically presented as a backdrop for studies of the VC, and so as conceptually distinct from it, the VC and the concept of limited statehood are not entirely conceptually distinct. More specifically, the concept of limited statehood obscures the potential for citizens' political resistance to improve governance by conventional governments because limited statehood is, by definition, a problem that the VC model can solve but that the PR model (mostly) cannot. Far from being conceptually distinct, then,

the VC and the concept of limited statehood fit hand in glove: if the VC is a hammer, limited statehood is a nail. If one looks only at situations of limited statehood, the VC model looks far more useful than the PR model.

Limited statehood refers to a conventional government's *(in)ability* 'to implement central decisions and/or exert a monopoly over the use of force'; that is, it refers to situations in which states are *unable* to do things – not situations in which they are only *unwilling* to do them. The concept of limited statehood thus excludes situations in which a state *chooses* not to develop the ability to implement central decisions and exert a monopoly over the use of force (Table 1).

While there are myriad examples of governments choosing not to govern effectively (e.g. a government does not provide what it acknowledges are essential public services in a region in order to punish a particular social group), it might initially seem unlikely that a government would choose not to even develop the ability to implement central decisions and/or exert a monopoly over the use of force – after all, what kind of state would want limited statehood? Yet this does happen, for at least two reasons.

First, sometimes political leaders and regimes intentionally allow or foster violence and instability because it results in personal and/or political gain (Keen 2014; De Waal 2015). For example, the Ugandan government under Museveni allowed the Lord's Resistance Army to persist – even though this reduced the government's ability to exert centralized control in some regions – because this created a pretext to control and oppress the Acholi population (Branch 2011; see also the discussion of Darfur in Prunier 2008). Second, political leaders sometimes choose not to devote resources to consolidating statehood because they would rather use resources in some other way. For example, Börzel, Risse, and Draude (2018) argue that New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and Görlitzer Park in Germany in 2016 were areas of limited statehood. Yet given the wealth and power of the United States (US) and Germany, it strains credulity to claim that their governments were unable to exercise full statehood in these areas. It is much more plausible to say that they chose not to do so (although one can debate the extent to which these decisions were driven by the benefits of instability versus the desire to use resources in some other way). While the US and Germany are relatively clear-cut examples, distinguishing cases in which states *truly* lack the ability to implement central decisions and/or exert a monopoly over the use of force from cases in which they have chosen not to do so – or more precisely have chosen not to develop the ability to do so – is made more difficult by the fact that states sometimes actively disguise their unwillingness as a lack of ability. Randeria (2003) describes these as 'cunning states' that capitalize on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable to both their citizens and international institutions.

The VC is a hammer to limited statehood's nail because the VC addresses inability, not unwillingness, to govern better. Virtuous cycles function by providing governments with resources and discretion that they can use to improve governance – or further consolidate

Table 1. Limited statehood and some conceptual alternatives.

		Able	
		No	Yes
Willing	Yes	Limited statehood (a)	Consolidated statehood (c)
	No	Limited statehood (b)	Intentional disorder/non-sovereignty (d)

their statehood. (While scholars keep them conceptually distinct for analytic reasons, these two activities overlap. For example, taxes can be used to increase domestic security, which is both a governmental service and an aspect of consolidated statehood.¹²) Providing more resources and discretion to a government that is intentionally limiting its own capacities to implement decisions and/or exercise a monopoly on the use of force will not contribute to more consolidated statehood.

In contrast, the PR model – because it pressures governance actors to act in particular ways – addresses a lack of willingness but not a lack of ability. This means that limited statehood (lack of ability) is by definition a problem that the PR model cannot solve. It is true that the PR model could potentially help to ameliorate cases of limited statehood that were due to both lack of ability *and* lack of willingness (i.e. condition (b) in [Table 1](#)); however, the more that a particular case involves the paradigmatic feature of limited statehood (lack of ability), the less relevant the PR model becomes and the more relevant the VC model becomes.

To clarify, VCs are supposed to address ineffective governance; the question addressed in this special issue is whether or not they can address ineffective governance in contexts of limited statehood. However, some of the mechanisms by which the VC improves governance also promote more consolidated statehood (for a discussion of the relationship between governance and state consolidation, see [Risse and Stollenwerk 2018](#)). Because of this contingent empirical overlap between making governance more effective and consolidating statehood, VCs involving conventional governments might sometimes support consolidated statehood. In contrast, if the problem at hand is not limited statehood but rather intentional disorder and non-sovereignty, then citizens' compliance will not result in more effective governance or more consolidated statehood. A focus on contexts of limited statehood is therefore a focus on contexts that, by definition, are better addressed by the VC model than by the PR model.

Broadening the frame

I have argued that the VC model and the concept of limited statehood downplay the value of citizens' political resistance in making governance more effective. This means that in addition to endorsing the active political judgement interpretation of the VC, we should also situate it in a broader framework that brings the PR model – and its relationship to the VC model – more clearly into view.¹³ [Figure 5](#) is an attempt to represent schematically what such a broader frame might look like.

This schematic representation of the VC and PR models is of course highly simplified and abstract, and so misleading in some ways. Nonetheless, it conveys the idea that VCs, if and when they occur, might be – indeed, are likely to be – embedded in iterative processes of citizen judgement and action that include both compliance and resistance. It also conveys the importance of political judgement for both models and for moving between them, including in contexts where numerous actors – both state and non-state – are engaged in governance activities.

If we want to understand citizens' roles in making governance more effective, it is not enough to expand the frame of our analysis to include both the VC and the PR models; it is also necessary to take into account how they are connected through what we might call *layers* of empirical legitimacy. A group of citizens might believe that some aspects of their

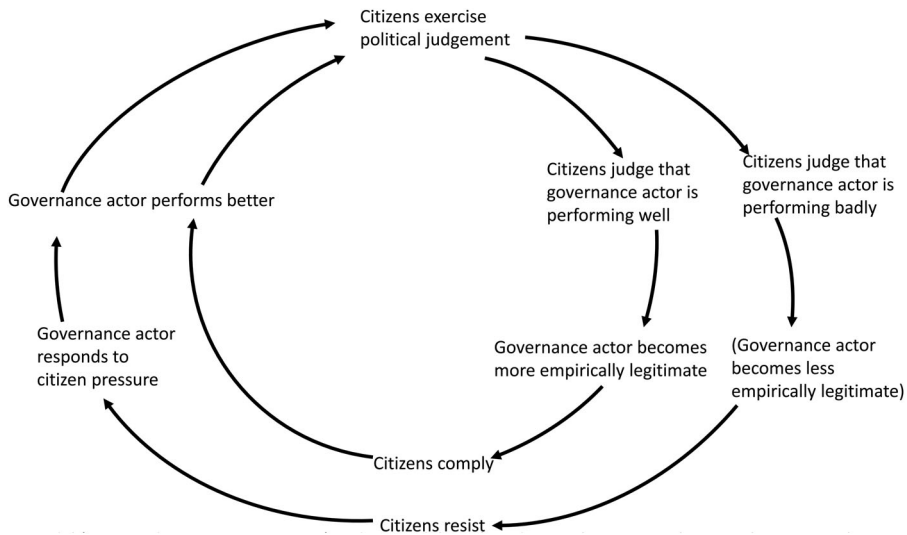


Figure 5. The VC model (active political judgement interpretation; inner circle) and the PR model (outer circle) combined.

state, such as its founding documents or ideals, have a legitimate claim to their enduring obedience, while other aspects, such as its current practices or policies, do not. In these types of situation, a state's political legitimacy in some respects can motivate political resistance to other aspects of it (Rogers 2012; Walzer 1985, 41–2; Levi and Sacks (2009) on the state's role in shaping citizens' expectations).

For example, when citizens engage in political resistance against some law or policy – e.g. slavery, Jim Crow laws, or racialized police brutality in the US context – their efforts are often fuelled by a belief in the legitimacy of *other* aspects of the state, for example its stated commitment to equality. Likewise, assertions that political resistance is legitimate and justified are frequently twinned with acknowledgement that rioting and looting are not, because the state has some legitimacy (Shelby 2007; Scheuerman 2015). Indeed, it is almost definitional of reformist political movements – in both consolidated states and areas of limited statehood – that they appeal to some aspects of the existing state or government in order to criticize and resist others (on the 'hypocrisy critique', see Pineda 2018). Empirical legitimacy beliefs do not only motivate political resistance; they give it structure and meaning.

Nor should we assume that political resistance necessarily disrupts VCs. Woodly (2018) argues that we should view social movements – which frequently engage in political resistance – not as disruptions to the normal operation of democratic political institutions, but rather as necessary for their continued functioning. Social movements remind ordinary individual citizens that we must uphold and care for our political institutions, by acting in what Woodly calls a 'citizenly' way (see also Hayward 2017). Social movements that engage in political resistance might undermine effective governance if they lead governments to expend more resources on monitoring and sanctioning than they would otherwise. However, social movements can improve governance not only by pressuring governance actors to govern better, but also by helping to educate and motivate citizens who will then comply with, support, improve, and – if necessary – challenge reasonably

just political institutions. These considerations do not contradict the logic of the VC; rather, they situate its emphasis on compliance within a broader account of how citizens improve governance.

Finally, situating the VC in this broader context helps to bring its contributions to democratic theory into clearer view. In particular, the literature on the VC can be read as a warning against romanticizing and overvaluing political resistance. It reminds us that people value the goods and services that governments and other governance actors provide,¹⁴ and that citizens' cooperation with governments (and other governance actors) is necessary for this provision to take place. By insisting that the causal link between citizens' actions and effective governance runs through not only resistance but also compliance, the VC reminds us that the task of making governance better by citizens' lights involves not just chants and refusals but also cooperation and compliance.

Conclusion

Empirical scholarship on the VC is usually viewed as addressing questions about how the world is, not how it should be. But because the VC is characterized as a 'virtuous' process that depends on citizens believing and doing certain things, it does offer a picture of how the world should be – and in particular how citizens' beliefs, judgements, and actions should interact to make governance more effective. Because the VC is invoked by international and domestic agencies engaged in statebuilding and good-governance initiatives, and because it has obvious bearing on civic education efforts, the potential impact of the VC's picture of virtuous citizenship is not merely hypothetical.

I have argued that to avoid understating the value of citizens' active political judgement and political resistance, it is important to both interpret the VC in a way that foregrounds the importance of citizens' active political judgement and situate the VC in the context of a broader framework that also acknowledges the value of political resistance. This does not mean that small-bore empirical studies of the VC need to engage with these broader questions; rather, I am suggesting a more general acknowledgement that the VC is one answer among others to the question 'how can citizens make governance more effective?', and that these other answers paint different pictures of what citizens should believe and do. This is especially crucial for scholarly inquiries that deploy the concept of limited statehood, because like the VC model, it also emphasizes the value of compliance and de-emphasizes the value of citizens' political resistance.

Notes

1. By *citizen*, I mean an individual acting in a political capacity, not someone who has the legal status of citizen.
2. Throughout I refer to 'governance actors' rather than governments to acknowledge that not all entities which engage in governance, and which participate in VCs, are conventional governments.
3. Some readers may bristle at the term *effectiveness* and this definition of it, because the question of whether or not the government does what citizens think it should do obfuscates disagreement among citizens, as well as the ways in which the political processes of decision-making influence the very views that – in a democratic system – those decisions are also supposed to reflect. I leave these significant issues to one side and use the term *effectiveness* in the

way indicated here (following Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; for a different, more substantive definition, see Sacks and Levi 2010).

4. In the PR model, acts of political resistance do not simply reflect citizens' pre-existing political judgements; they can also serve to shape and inform these judgements.
5. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.
6. This question is the subject of extensive empirical debate. Some scholars are pessimistic about its political judgement component (Achen and Bartels 2016) and/or its political resistance component (Srnicek and Williams 2015).
7. A third kind of construction that also portrays citizens as more passive is when a governance actor 'evoke[s] deference' in citizens (Levi and Sacks 2009).
8. As I write this (May 2018), most people in the US think that Donald Trump has the moral right to be president, but it is not hard to imagine a scenario (such as the firing of the attorney investigating him) in which there would be deep disagreement on this question. At that point, the question that is at issue here would arise: is it better to err on the side of stable political judgement and continue to comply, or is it better to resist (whether or not one thinks that a Trump presidency is legitimate)?
9. Some scholars have sought to resolve versions of this tension by creating a division of labour between individual citizens and institutions. For example, Pettit (1998, 311) argues that citizens should set up systems to monitor and constrain government agents and institutions (i.e. enact institutional distrust), but at the same time engage in personal trust of the actual human individuals who make up the government. Braithwaite (1998) makes a similar proposal of institutionalizing distrust and enacting personal trust. Even if these processes dissipate the tension between stable and active political judgement to some extent, they cannot dissipate it completely, because of course institutions meant to keep government in check require citizens—vigilant citizens—to function (see Waldron (2013) summarizing a much older debate about whether the design of laws and institutions or the character of individual rulers and citizens is more important).
10. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.
11. See McLoughlin (2018) for a somewhat different account of the vicious cycle that focuses on how service delivery which fails to meet particular norms of fairness – rather than less effective service delivery – can undermine state legitimacy.
12. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
13. A fuller version of this argument would look at additional strategies by which citizens can make governance more effective, such as voting and deliberation, and ask to what extent an account of citizens' habits and capacities that is consistent with the VC and PR models is also consistent with these other strategies.
14. As of 9 July 2017, the UN cited education, healthcare, and jobs as being the most important issues to survey respondents (<http://data.myworld2015.org/>).

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