

Platon: Rules for Trustful Civic Organizing

March 8, 2025

Motivation

What is politics? Below is one definition:

Politics is the art of promoting leaders, institutions, and public goods in alignment with a group's values.

Here, the word "values" is critical; the art of acquiring and exercising power *without* values can be called **Machiavellianism** instead.

With this definition, we may say that we are more or less satisfied with our politics to the extent we trust that our leaders, institutions, and public goods are aligned with our own values.

This trust is at a historic low in the United States:

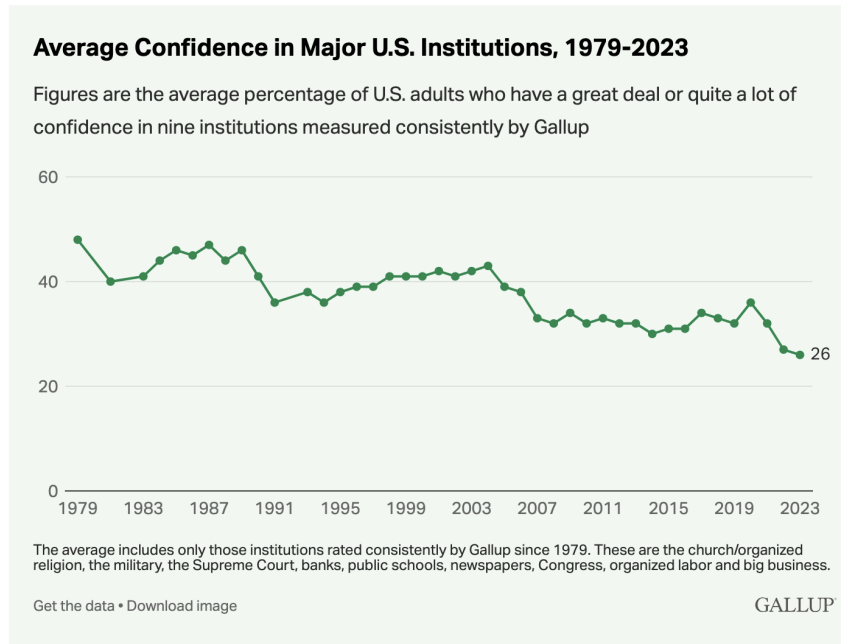


Figure 1: The Gradual Collapse of Trust

It can only go down so far, and it's very well understood what happens when that trust finally evaporates: a downward spiral of betrayal, deception, fracture, isolation, and destruction.

What follows is a proposal for systematically *building* trust. It is one answer to the common refrain: "I understand that there is a problem but I don't know what to do."

The proposal consists of a minimal set of rules, guidelines, and suggestions for getting started in the absence of any civic or political infrastructure. It is simple, free, and accessible to all. It presupposes internet access, but can be implemented on a large variety of existing (and future) internet services, with no technical skills required. It requires a minimum of two people to get started.

We are our politics. Our institutions will only be as effective as we are, as citizens and members and constituents. There is such thing as *civic muscle*, and we must exercise it – regularly, systematically, consistently, and over horizons that span much longer than election cycles – or bear the consequences of civic atrophy and decay.

Platon¹ is far from the definitive solution (assuming it could exist) but it aims to breathe trust into our suffocating public sphere.

Overview

The fundamental unit in Platon is a **Cell**. A Cell consists of **Members**, limited to around 100, who have established mutual trust in the physical, real-life world, and who are aligned on a *documented set of values*.

The fundamental work of a Cell is to propose and coordinate discrete action that can be done in support of the documented values.

A somewhat strict set of rules is suggested to limit communication in the Cell's official communication channel, in order to prevent the chaos, arbitrary censorship, and information overload that can sabotage online volunteerism, communication, and collaboration.

And finally, governance and decision-making rules give a stronger voice to Members who are *more successful at activating the group*, as measured in time (or time-equivalency).

Rules of Play

1. Start with an enumeration of values, using as few words as possible, but no fewer (The more words there are, the harder it is to agree on them). Document the essential relationship *between* values; especially, if there are priorities or hierarchies. See **Appendix 1** for a sample.
2. Form a Cell. The minimum size is 2. People within a Cell must (1) agree on the documented values from Rule 1, and (2) As a pre-requisite,

¹Name inspired by the character Platon Karataev from *War and Peace*.

already trust each other to honor the values in good faith. As new Members join, the documented values from Rule 1 may need to be adjusted or amended, but this must be done by unanimous consensus of all existing Members.

3. New Members may be added at any time, following the guidelines in Rule 2. By default, any existing Member is allowed to invite a new Member based on a personal guarantee of their trustworthiness, though this Rule (and any other, except Rules 1 and 2) can be adjusted as described in Rule 8. There must be a limit to the group size; a suggested limit is 100. Once that size limit is reached, mutual trust relationships are simply too hard to maintain.
4. Create an internet messaging group on a platform such as Signal, WhatsApp, Telegram, Reddit, GroupMe, or Discord (see **Appendix 2** for a sample WhatsApp Community screen). At the outset, it's suggested that all Members have Administrator access (with administrative privileges, for example, to remove Members), until an official Administrator policy is developed (See Rule 8).
5. There should be a single primary channel for group communication (especially on platforms such as WhatsApp Communities, Telegram, and Discord that allow a single group to have multiple communications channels). The purposes of this channel are (1) for regular proposals for civic action, and (2) for Members to report back, using a specified mechanism, on time spent in action. All other communication (discussion, announcements, document publishing and review) should happen in a different forum or channel. determined by the Cell.²

Action proposals are published in the main channel at a pre-determined interval – for instance, once or twice or week, depending on the group size and preferences. The **Proposer** is determined by a rotation, of which all Cell Members are a part by default (see **Appendix 3** for a very simple rotation schedule). The rotation can be overridden (e.g. Jerry and Yohanan swap proposal slots due to sickness or conflicts), and any Member can opt themselves out of the rotation with reasonable advance notice (say, two days). If the scheduled Proposer fails to propose, there should be some negative consequence – for instance,

²As an aside, it's strongly recommended to avoid text discussion; live audio is almost always vastly more productive.

they are sent to the end of the rotation, or deducted a fixed amount of Points (see Rule 7 for more).

Every proposal must be delivered in a **single message** using the internet platform adopted in Rule 4. This may require a link to external resources (for example, a web page or audio message with more context) if necessary.

All the Proposals should be in line with the documented values, either implicitly or explicitly. After all, this is the purpose of the whole project.

6. When a Member spends time acting on the Proposal, the Member notifies the group in the main channel, along with an approximation of the time spent. A suggestion is to use "emoji tapbacks" as a concise mechanism for indicating completion and time, as below:

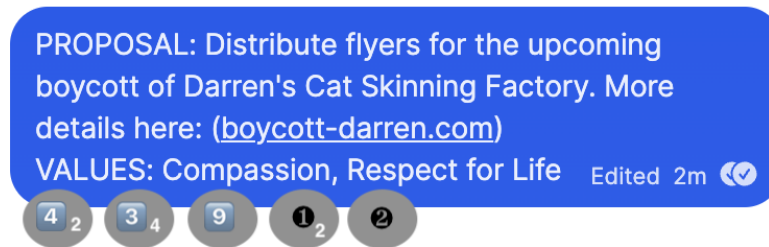


Figure 2: An Action proposal

In Figure 2, the emojis with square backgrounds represent units of 10 minutes; so the square 3 equates to 30 minutes. The white "4" subscript to the right of the 3 indicates that 4 people each reported 30 minutes of action. The numbers with black circular background represent units of one hour, following the same conventions.

Most common internet messaging apps now support this "emoji tapback" capability, and it's compatible with all current smartphones and computers across all operating systems (Android, Windows, iPhone, Mac). Messaging applications are ubiquitous, but there are certainly other ways to accomplish the same thing using different software.

In any event, there should also be a cap on the reportable time for a single action (say, four hours), to prevent individuals from excessively inflating the scoring system (see Rule 7).

A few guidelines on the scope of Actions:

- (a) Some Actions involve financial donations; Cells may want to develop a time equivalency for donations (e.g., each \$20 donation is equivalent to an hour of labor). This should also be subject to a cap, for the same purpose of limiting individual Members from excessively inflating their own Point scores (see Rule 7).
 - (b) As a general guideline, internal planning and conversation should not be valid Actions; as the Cell is oriented to outward action. On the other hand, concrete capacity-building and tool-building should be eligible for points, so long as there is a direct, uncontroversial mechanism by which such capacities and tools enable future outward action. Capacity-building and tool-building involve discrete documents, databases, physical assets, and software assets that are broadly accessible within the Cell. In this sense, tool-building is an essential component of more complex Action, not a separate category of labor.
7. As people complete proposed Actions (and some may be time-sensitive with hard deadlines), the Proposers accrue **Points** in proportion to the collective time spent completing the actions – for instance, one point for every ten minutes of action. Those who participate also receive Points for their own time, on the same scale. A Member's Point total crudely represents the effectiveness of the Member at activating the group and his/herself.

Members would, one imagines, want to collaborate on the suggestion, planning, and formulation of proposals; however all Points for a given action may only accrue to the singular Proposer, for the sake of simplicity. That said, the Proposer may donate his or her Points to other members at any time to give them credit for collaboration.

One suggested mechanism for tallying points is a freely-available collaborative spreadsheet (like Google Sheets), where each group member has exclusive permission to edit their own "tab" on the spreadsheet but totals (per Action and per Member) can be viewed by all Members.

A view of a sample spreadsheet is below; the top part is the "tab" for a single Member (Harlow); the bottom part is a "tab" that aggregates points across all Actions and Members. A live link to this sample spreadsheet is here: <https://bit.ly/platon-sample>.

A	B	C	D	E	F
Base Point Total	132			DONATIONS	
			Amount	Recipient	Note
				2 Ziggy	Survey idea
After Donations	130				

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
1		ACTIONS						TIME LOGS		
2						Sumi	Ziggy	Nico	Harlow	
3								TOTALS		
4	Action summary	Proposer	Total Points	Notes		180	550	632	269	
5	Flyers for Darren's Boycott	Sumi	350			100	0	80	170	
6	Internal survey on views on arts education	Harlow	132			30	100	2	0	
7	Car Solidarity Yard Signs	Ziggy	924			0	400	500	24	
8	Air Bud watch party	Nico	0	No points for consumption activities		0	0	0	0	
9	Compile links on top Topeka event venues	Sumi	225	Tool-building and capacity-building		50	50	50	75	
10										
11										
12										
13										
14										

Figure 3: Collaborative spreadsheet screengrabs

In Figure 3, the upper image is a "tab" for an individual Member, and the lower image is an aggregate tab to tally points across all Members.

Finally, while the spirit of Action should generally rule out consumption, the Cell might instead set a low, capped equivalency (e.g., equivalent to 5 minutes of Action) for Proposals to read, watch, or otherwise consume ideas. This is to maintain focus on Action (See also FAQ 1, below, on division of cognitive labor within the group) while still creating space for group consumption of essential sources.

- Over time, the Cell may need to make collective decisions; for example, to give itself a name, to change its rules, to remove Members, or to open a bank account and appoint a treasurer. Where these decisions can't be reached unanimously, Members should have a voice or a vote as a function of their Point totals (in the simplest case, each member gets 1 vote per Point, though other options are also possible, for example, with a square-root function to prevent power compounding)³. Associating vote or voice with time-based Points is intended to address the perennial problems of authority and decision-making in non-hierarchical volunteer civic groups.

As one example, a Cell could opt to transfer Administrator access to

³See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quadratic_voting

core software accounts every month to the top four Point holders.

FAQs

1. How will people find time?

Substitute out mass media and social media consumption time.

Anonymous social media divorced from real-world relationships is by its nature trust-destructive, and trust-neutral in the best case.

Mass media is terribly inefficient for aligned groups; the goal should be shared **values**, but distributed knowledge; rather than 100 copies of the same knowledge in each mind, the group should strive for one copy of 100 times more knowledge across the Cell, digested and disseminated through trust relationships.

2. What about collective action that requires more than one Cell?

Cell-to-Cell coordination can be done by the same mechanism; Cells can select Members to participate in one or more "super" Cells; and from there, super-Cells can send members to "mega" Cells. If a Cell size limit is 100, a super-Cell would represent a maximum of ten thousand people (100^2) and mega-Cell would represent one million (100^3), so no more than three layers of coordination would be required to activate one million Members.

One can imagine shared infrastructure for aggregating possible Proposal ideas across many Cells; though it would still be up to the scheduled Proposer within any Cell to officially make a Proposal from the many possibilities at any given time.

There's no requirement of a common or shared Point "currency" across Cells, even those that comprise a super-Cell. Each individual Cell or super-Cell should have its own Points accounting and rules; this will disincentivize large-scale collusion on Points, which ultimately are only backed by trust within the Cell.

Rule 2 requires trust as a non-negotiable part of Cell formation; therefore, when forming a super-Cell, Members should be careful to evaluate a potential "peer Cell" for trustworthiness and alignment in values.

3. What happens when a Cell reaches its maximum size?

When a Cell reaches its maximum size, members should split into two sub-Cells, perhaps coordinated via the super-Cell mechanism described in FAQ 2.

4. What about cheaters?

The small Cell size is intended to minimize cheating incentives; but the most obvious manner of deception is in inflating one's own time reporting (Rule 7). If needed, a Cell could implement some reporting process; for example, an auditable photo log (photos with timestamps recording each Action) or a "buddy system" for new Members to be supervised by trusted Members.

5. Can a person join multiple Cells?

Yes, and it could be expected that people may want to "shop around" a number Cells to determine best alignment.

6. If people earn Points by time spent, what incentives are there to save time through productivity?

As an example of this concern, it may take more collective time to send emails individually than to develop an automated email list; but according to Rule 7, more points would accrue to the more time-intensive action.

While this is perhaps a defect of the Points mechanism, the system takes for granted that members will appreciate the inherent value of productivity multipliers.

One criterion for forming super-Cells (see FAQ 2) could be to evaluate the efficiency and productivity of potential peer Cells; this would build in an incentive for individual Cells to invest in productivity.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Statement of Values

- **Honesty.** Commitment to the truth. Appreciation for the impossibility of absolute certainty; continuous effort to use words in ways that best represent one's understanding of reality. Pre-requisite to all other Values; without Honesty, words are meaningless.

- **Integrity.** Continuous effort to integrate one's values and one's actions; keeping one's word. Pre-requisite to all other Values; without Integrity, words operate in a void.
- **Courage.** Capacity to do what is right, even when it is hard.
- **Compassion.** Capacity to recognize the equal reality of the experience of others.
- **Fairness.** Capacity to follow and apply rules regardless of individual circumstances.
- **Humanity.** Moral superiority of biological human life over machines, objects, and fictional abstractions; desire to make the most supreme human experiences available to the most people and minimize downward spirals of despair.
- **Balance.** Appreciation for the cyclical and harmonic dynamics of all systems contending with finite resources. Rejection of absolute answers or solutions.
- **Generational Patience.** Intent to promote the above values for millions of generations of humans, up until the expiration of the Sun.
- **Freedom and Exploration.** Orientation to expand positive possibilities rather than contract. Selective, non-coercive use of restraint in order to organize chaos.

Appendix 2: Sample WhatsApp Community configuration

Communities

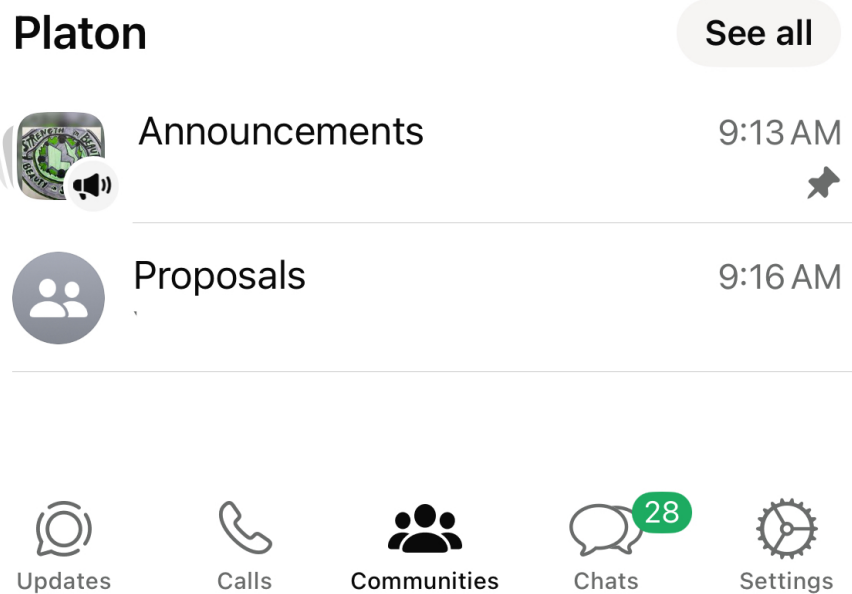


Figure 4: Whatsapp Community "landing page"

Note there are two channels here; the Proposals channel is the main channel as described in Rule 5. WhatsApp includes a default Announcements channel that cannot be deleted; this should be ignored, used sparingly, or used strictly for optional conversation in order to avoid information overload.

As it is a new community, all Members are granted Administrator access by default (see Rule 4).

Appendix 3: Sample Group Rotation Schedule

Sample proposal rotation schedule for a group with four Members and a cadence of twice per week.

Proposer	Date
Sumi	<i>[2025-03-02 Sun]</i>
Ziggy	<i>[2025-03-05 Wed]</i>
Harlow	<i>[2025-03-09 Sun]</i>
Nico	<i>[2025-03-12 Wed]</i>
Sumy	<i>[2025-03-16 Sun]</i>
Ziggy	<i>[2025-03-19 Wed]</i>
Harlow	<i>[2025-03-23 Sun]</i>
Nico	<i>[2025-03-26 Wed]</i>