

Arthur T. Denzau

My research is gradually coming to focus on a question that I heard Nobel laureate Douglass North pose nine years ago: "Why have almost all societies in human history failed to grow economically in per capita terms for more than a generation?" Much of my current work, along with my students here at CGU deals pretty directly with this question: we ask what it is that governments do to hinder or destroy economic growth. These policies result from the attempts to achieve and maintain political power, and forcefully show the importance of institutions in channeling competition into wealth-creating or wealth-redistributing paths. Little is yet known as to how to transform a society on a redistribution path into one on the creation path.

In most of my work, I have tried to explain governmental decision making in democratic settings. From the beginning, my work has shown that the details of the political constitution matter. This prepared me for becoming a colleague of Douglass North in 1983, and learning his New Institutionalist approach to economics and history. I was already part of what became the New Institutionalism in Political Science, writing four articles in top journals in that field. I now wish to study features of democratic polities in terms of their effects on economic activity, and their emergence within the polity. My most recent article is co-authored with North, and explains the emergence of ideologies and institutions as shared mental models that enable easier communication and coordination of joint activities. We are working with a team of experimental economists to test some of our ideas.

I began my education at Caltech, expecting to be a scientist or engineer. I soon transferred to Arizona State University, and began working 56 hours a week as an electronic technician and then engineer at Motorola, helping to make integrated circuits. My interests in the semiconductor industry and computers dates from this five year experience. After graduating in mathematics in 1969, I attended the Arizona State Law School for the fall semester, leaving although ranking first in my class. I switched from working nights to working day shift, and started taking economics at night. This caused me to go to Washington University and get my Ph.D. in 1973, with a dissertation that added a majority rule governmental sector to the standard economic model.

My first job after graduate school was at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (VPI), where I was associated with the Center for the Study of Public Choice until 1975. I returned to my doctoral institution in 1981, where I was jointly appointed in Murray Weidenbaum's Center for the Study of American Business. I have also taught at my alma mater, Arizona State University, and at Tulane University.