The Code Is the Policy: Blockchain Governance and the Authoritarian Pursuit of Administrative Efficiency

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Abstract

Blockchain technologies are reshaping governance by embedding administrative decisions into code, reducing discretion and democratic oversight. While praised for decentralization, blockchain now advances automation and efficiency, often at ethical cost. This article examines how a second Trump administration might use such tools to institutionalize authoritarian control. Rosenbloom's tripartite framework, Frederickson's equity theory, and Ostrom's polycentric model guide analysis of smart contracts, tokenized public goods, and algorithmic rule. The concept of guerrilla governance infrastructure is introduced to explore decentralized systems as sites of resistance and accountability.

Keywords: Blockchain governance, Administrative discretion, Smart contracts, Public values, Authoritarianism, Tokenization, Guerrilla governance

Introduction

The administrative state is undergoing a quiet but consequential transformation, not through elections or edicts, but through code. Across agencies and jurisdictions, emerging technologies are rewriting how rules are made, enforced, and interpreted. While Trump's overt attacks on democratic norms have drawn scrutiny, a parallel shift unfolds with less visibility: automating compliance, privileging efficiency, and replacing discretion with rigid execution. This is not back-end modernization. It is institutional redesign.

Blockchain Primer

Blockchain is a distributed ledger in which records ("blocks") are linked chronologically and verified through consensus. Its core attributes—distributed storage, cryptographic verification, immutability, self-executing code, and tokenization—disperse control while dispersing accountability, automate enforcement, and can lock in unjust decisions.

Blockchain crystallizes this shift. At its core, it is a distributed digital ledger where records are verified through cryptographic consensus and rendered immutable. Smart contracts embed rules directly into the ledger, executing them automatically. Tokenization converts assets or rights into digital units tracked in real time. Praised for decentralization and transparency, these features can also disperse accountability, enforce rules without interpretation, and lock in unjust decisions. Figure 1 summarizes these attributes and their governance consequences. Together, these features reflect what Adams, Balfour, and Nickels (2019) term technical rationality: codified procedure over interpretive judgment.

fig-blockchain-gov.pdf

Figure 1. Blockchain attributes and their governance consequences. Each core technical feature has a corresponding effect on discretion, accountability, and procedural flexibility.

If widely adopted, blockchain governance could recast policy not as something interpreted through human judgment, but as code: automatic, unyielding, and indifferent. Rosenbloom's (1983) tripartite framework—law, politics, and management—warns against precisely this imbalance. Blockchain seals enforcement off from oversight, echoing Appleby's (1945) "cult of efficiency."[1]

Unlike e-government efforts, which digitized services but preserved human interpretation, blockchain closes those junctions: code does not interpret; it executes. A second Trump ad-

[1]While Appleby (1945) never used the exact phrase "cult of efficiency," his analysis in the chapter "The Relativity of Efficiency" is often summarized this way in later public administration literature. See, e.g., Denhardt (2011), Stillman (2010).

ministration has strengthened ties with the tech industry, particularly through the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which has proposed migrating federal spending, asset tracking, and Treasury operations onto blockchain (Kharif and Lai, 2025). The administration's January 2025 executive order "Strengthening American Leadership in Digital Financial Technology" establishes a federal regulatory framework for digital assets and creates a presidential working group to advance blockchain adoption across government (White House, 2025). This represents a fundamental shift toward embedding authoritarian efficiency into the administrative state's technical architecture.

This article examines five dimensions of the shift from human-centered, interpretive governance to code-driven, automated systems: erosion of discretion through automation; smart contracts as autonomous enforcement; tokenization of public goods; displacement of professional ethics by algorithmic logic; and guerrilla governance infrastructure, such as decentralized technologies repurposed for democratic accountability (O'Leary, 2019). The first four dimensions represent core blockchain governance functions that can follow one of two design trajectories: entrenching centralized control or enabling democratic accountability, as shown in Figure 2. Examples drawn from humanitarian aid, resource management, carbon markets, automated enforcement systems, and decentralized archiving illustrate these arguments, with particular focus on the World Food Programme's Building Blocks system, California's water rights pilot, Japan's J-Credit marketplace, and the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative's (EDGI) *Data Together* project. Blockchain is not neutral; it encodes values, whether entrenching control or enabling accountability.

fig-four-core-dimensions.pdf

Figure 2. Four blockchain governance dimensions. Each dimension can follow one of two design trajectories: toward centralized control or toward democratic accountability.

I. The Erosion of Human Discretion in Public Service

Discretion has long anchored the ethical and democratic foundations of public administration. Lipsky's (1980) "street-level bureaucrat" captures how frontline officials interpret mandates, mediate conflicts, and respond to lived complexity. For Friedrich (1940), discretion reflects internalized responsibility and professional norms; Finer (1941) argued for strict rule-following and external oversight. Blockchain governance fulfills Finer's logic to the extreme, not by improving oversight but by replacing it with code. Algorithms replace interpretation; execution supplants deliberation. As Simon notes, administrative decision making is bounded; when information and capacity are limited, organizations substitute rules and routines for judgment (Simon, 1947/1997, 1955).

Discretion has shifted from the field to the codebase. Like all algorithmic tools, blockchain reflects the biases and blind spots of its designers. Just as self-driving cars have failed to detect dark-skinned pedestrians in low light (Buolamwini & Gebru 2018; Benjamin, 2019), blockchain risks encoding discriminatory effects behind a façade of neutrality. Algorithmic governance reframes social problems as data, reduces policy to executable commands, and replaces interpretation with automation. Where enforcement once relied on human judgment to balance law with compassion, blockchain systems trigger penalties the moment a threshold is breached. As Pors and Schou (2021) show, digital interfaces do not just constrain discretion; they reshape how frontline workers understand moral responsibility, replacing reflective judgment with procedural compliance.

In the Netherlands, automated fraud detection flagged thousands of families for child benefit fraud, leading to wrongful terminations that human caseworkers might have questioned (Amnesty International 2021). In the U.S., Eubanks (2018) documents how automated eligibility systems build a "digital poorhouse" that profiles, polices, and punishes the poor. The pattern is the same: technical fixes narrow discretion and push harms onto those least able to contest code. In traditional systems, a caseworker might extend benefits when illness delays paperwork; blockchain automation would terminate assistance the moment the deadline passes. This mechanized approach echoes Trump-era efforts to recast public servants—the people themselves—as obstacles to control.

Blockchain's technical dimension—automation through code—reshapes the procedural by narrowing enforcement to rule execution and eliminating contextual reasoning. Distributive consequences follow: marginalized groups bear the brunt of automated exclusion. As discretion erodes, so does administrative capacity for equity, responsiveness, and moral reasoning. Algorithmic rule culminates in a Weberian "iron cage," where rationalized systems strip administration of the values that made it public (Weber, 1958). Viewed through Starke, Mackey, and Heckler's (2018) account of administrative racism, procedures presented as neutral routinely reproduce hierarchy. Coupled with Balfour et al.'s (2019) analysis of administrative evil, technical rationality becomes a delivery system for inequity: once discretion is stripped away, harm is routinized and harder to contest. Automating those routines risks hard-coding them into ledgers and smart contracts. This is durable infrastructure rather than revisable policy.

II. Smart Contracts as Autonomous Enforcement Mechanisms

Smart contracts, or self-executing agreements embedded in blockchain networks, reconfigure enforcement in public administration. Traditional regulation relies on interpretation, discretion, and negotiated compliance; smart contracts automate these processes. Once triggered, they impose penalties, reallocate resources, or deny access based on preprogrammed conditions, with no human intervention. Governance shifts from interpretation to execution, privileging predictability over deliberation. This reflects a technoauthoritarian impulse: the belief that good governance means strict rule-following, not contextual reasoning.

The risks are acute in environmental governance, where Internet of Things (IoT)-linked contracts assess violations and impose penalties in real time. They cannot interpret ambiguous data, weigh extenuating circumstances, or navigate competing goals. Adaptive enforcement gives way to mechanical rule; governance becomes a reaction to inputs (Xia et al., 2022; Furones & Monzón, 2023). Policy becomes code.

Blockchain-based automation also advances deregulation by replacing judgment and expertise with code. It lets political actors project an illusion of regulatory rigor while hollowing out institutions that interpret law in lived contexts. The World Food Programme's Building

Blocks system illustrates the shift. Since 2017 it has delivered aid via a private, permissioned blockchain whereby biometric authentication triggers transfers instantly. Overheads fall, but discretionary space collapses: aid workers cannot pause enforcement, adjust distributions, or advocate for exceptions (WFP, 2023).[2] Humanitarian governance grounded in care becomes algorithmic compliance: efficient, scalable, emotionally indifferent. Technical automation narrows procedural flexibility and amplifies distributive risks for those least able to adapt.

III. Tokenization and the Commodification of Public Goods

Tokenization converts public goods into digital assets—financial instruments that can be tracked, traded, or allocated automatically on a blockchain.[3] Commons governance has rarely matched Tocqueville's ideal of full civic participation; most has been technocratic, with limited and uneven engagement (Tocqueville, 2000 [1835/1840]). Yet, Ostrom (1990) documented islands of genuine co-governance through institutional diversity and collective rulemaking. Tokenization moves allocation upstream into code, prioritizing liquidity and efficiency over equity, accessibility, and stewardship. Under a second Trump administration, this logic could recast public goods as commodities managed by protocol rather than public deliberation. As Stone (2012) argues, collapsing plural public values into a single exchange metric trades equity for efficiency.

Tokenization shifts governance from rules-in-use to rules-in-code. While it can strengthen boundaries and monitoring, it weakens collective-choice arrangements and hardens graduated sanctions into automatic penalties. Polycentric, locally informed judgment gets compressed into oracle data and parameter settings—a commons optimized for transaction and auditability, but thinner on deliberation, reciprocity, and equity.

[2]WFP reports efficiency gains from *Building Blocks* deployment, but UN guidance warns that biometric–ledger coupling centralizes control and reduces frontline discretion. Design recommendations include explicit override/appeal pathways. See: Joint Inspection Unit (2020); Cheesman (2025); RAND (2024).

[3]Readers may be familiar with Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) through sensationalized examples like digital artwork of cartoon apes selling for millions. While those applications drew media attention, tokenization extends far beyond digital art to potentially include water rights, carbon credits, and other public resources.

Water and carbon markets illustrate this transformation. In California, the Blockchain Working Group has proposed converting groundwater rights into non-fungible tokens (NFTs), enabling real-time transactions via IoT-linked flow meters that automatically debit digital accounts upon extraction (California GovOps, 2020). In Japan, the Ministry of the Environment (2024) is piloting a tokenized J-Credit system using blockchain infrastructure to turn carbon offsets into tradable digital assets. Both cases promise streamlined transactions but flatten governance into technical exchange, replacing collaborative stakeholder negotiations with automated allocation based on usage data and predefined rules.

While these tools can support transparency through open transaction records and oversight mechanisms, market logics wrapped in neutrality tend to lock inequities in place. As Frederickson (1997) warned and recent work confirms (Sweeting & Haupt, 2023; Humphrey et al., 2023), tokenization represents depoliticization that channels resources toward those already holding greater market power. Efficiency gains deepen inequities.

IV. Displacement of Professional Ethics through Algorithmic Governance

This same displacement of equity under the banner of efficiency carries into the domain of professional ethics. Historically, public administration anchored democratic legitimacy in professional norms: discretion, contextual judgment, and moral reasoning (Friedrich, 1940; Lipsky, 1980; Frederickson, 1997; Cooper, 2012). Administrators served not only as enforcers but as interpreters, mediating statutes through lived realities (Stivers, 2000; Luton, 2009; Catlaw & Sandberg, 2018; Gooch & Wofford, 2017; Pors & Schou, 2020). Algorithmic systems sever that link: they execute but do not judge; they cannot weigh competing values, anticipate novel cases, or justify trade-offs. The result is not neutrality or superior efficiency so much as a different administrative order—lean on discretion, thin on equity and care.

Neutrality itself is not value-free; it is a governing choice with a racialized and exclusionary history. As Portillo, Humphrey, and Bearfield (2022) show, appeals to neutrality often mask how rules allocate advantage. Algorithmic systems encode values without capacity to interrogate them, eliminating variance and judgment while enforcing precision, not justice. Transparency is often offered as the fix, yet posting code online offers thin comfort. Many deployments run on closed systems with critical functions hidden. A code file reveals little about who is counted, what triggers action, or how errors are corrected. Accountability requires venues to argue and change course, not just observe. Opacity appears in three forms: technical (systems most people cannot read), procedural (unclear who writes or can alter rules), and distributive (unclear who gains and who pays). These features make systems hard to audit, easy to abuse, and difficult to contest (Piotrowski & Rosenbloom, 2002). Table **??** summarizes these forms of opacity across various blockchain-based governance cases.

Transparency is often offered as the fix. Yet posting code online offers thin comfort. Access is not control: many "public" deployments run on closed systems, with critical functions hidden. Seeing is not understanding: a code file does not reveal who is counted, what triggers action, or how errors are corrected. Accountability requires venues to argue and change course, not just observe. In practice, opacity appears in three forms: technical (systems most people cannot read), procedural (unclear who writes or can alter rules), and distributive (unclear who gains and who pays). These features make systems hard to audit, easy to abuse, and difficult to contest (Piotrowski & Rosenbloom, 2002; Scott, 1998; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016). Table **??** examines these opacity patterns across three blockchain governance examples that illustrate automated enforcement and resource allocation.

Table 1. Opacity in blockchain-based governance examples (technical, procedural, distributive). Cells show dominant patterns; not exhaustive.

Example	**Technical opacity (legibility)**	**Procedural opacity (who decides / overrides)**	**Distributive opacity (who gains / who pays)**
WFP "Building Blocks"	Private/permissioned stack with biometric integration; much activity off-chain—reading code is not seeing operations.	Rules and entitlements set centrally; point-of-service execution automated; exceptions pushed upstream.	Errors and edge cases fall on recipients; fewer frontline adjustments.
California groundwater pilots	Telemetry and proposed tokenized rights; meters/oracles create opaque data pipelines for users.	Caps/shares encoded ex ante by GSAs; limited discretionary carve-outs during drought.	Liquidity advantages larger users; small growers and domestic wells become price-takers.
Japan tokenized J-Credit	Blockchain registry and tokenization; verification logic embedded in protocol.	Transfers settle automatically; discretion relocated to registry and protocol design.	Lower transaction costs may widen access, but verification burdens favor incumbents.

Note: Cells show dominant patterns; not exhaustive.

The examples presented here show how technical, procedural, and distributive opacity combine to narrow judgment, complicate accountability, and risk entrenching inequities.

The problem is not only technical but ethical and institutional: automation should preserve discretion, build appeals in by default, and keep public values visible.

V. Guerrilla Governance Infrastructure: Decentralized Resistance

Blockchain can be repurposed to build what could be described as guerrilla governance infrastructure (GGI): distributed systems that operate outside formal hierarchies while embedding public values like equity, transparency, and stewardship. Drawing from O'Leary's (2019) typology of covert resistance, GGI reclaims decentralization as institutional resilience. These systems feature: (1) value-anchored code where smart contracts encode equity principles insulated from central override; (2) polycentric node governance distributing control across NGOs, local governments, and community actors (Ostrom, 1990); and (3) cryptographic auditability making censorship technically and politically costly. Figure **??** illustrates GGI as contested terrain between co-optation risks (validator capture, technical literacy barriers, hostile regulation) and resistance potential (value-anchored code, polycentric governance, cryptographic auditability).

fig-ggi-framework.pdf

Figure 3. Guerrilla governance infrastructure framework. GGI represents contested terrain between co-optation risks and resistance potential, requiring careful design to preserve democratic values.

The Environmental Data & Governance Initiative's (EDGI) *Data Together* project offers a clear example (2021). In response to data removals under the Trump administration, EDGI built a decentralized network to mirror and preserve federal environmental databases. Unlike FOIA-based transparency, which relies on institutional goodwill, this architecture embeds accountability into the infrastructure itself. As a contrasting example of resistance-oriented design, the opacity profile of Data Together differs markedly from the automated enforcement examples above, as summarized in Table **??**.

Table 2. Opacity in EDGI *Data Together* decentralized archiving.

Technical opacity (legibility)	**Procedural opacity** (who decides/overrides)	**Distributive opacity** (who gains/who pays)
Distributed mirroring and versioning—stack not obvious to lay users.	Polycentric stewardship across NGOs/universities; control dispersed but infrastructural.	Preserves access; capacity gaps (hosting, literacy) can reproduce inequalities. (EDGI, 2021)

This example revives Ostrom's (1990) polycentric model, not through public hearings or interagency councils, but through self-organizing systems that encode democratic values in technical form. In doing so, it turns decentralization into a site of resistance, enabling communities to maintain oversight, continuity, and participatory control even under hostile conditions. Here, decentralization is used not to automate enforcement but to preserve public access and oversight, showing how blockchain's architecture can be designed to uphold, rather than erode, democratic values.

Yet GGI is no panacea. Validator capture can reproduce asymmetries; technical literacy requirements may exclude vulnerable communities, undermining Frederickson's (1997) equity mandate; environmental costs of blockchain consensus raise sustainability concerns;[4] and hostile regimes may regulate or co-opt these systems. GGI offers tactical leverage, not systemic insulation. Its promise lies in reasserting values within systems designed to erase

[4]Energy-intensive "proof-of-work" consensus mechanisms require massive computational resources. Some newer protocols use less energy-intensive methods, but environmental concerns remain relevant.

them, reminding us that technical architectures of resistance must preserve procedural inclusivity and guard against distributive inequities to remain genuinely democratic.

Conclusion

Blockchain governance redistributes authority, discretion, and public values through design choices that can either erase space for human judgment or reopen it through transparency and oversight. The second Trump administration's embrace of blockchain—through, for example, DOGE's Treasury proposals and the January 2025 executive order establishing federal digital asset frameworks—revives Appleby's (1945) "cult of efficiency," reimagined through code (White House, 2025; Kharif and Lai, 2025). These initiatives institutionalize authoritarian impulses within administrative infrastructure: statutory mandates become algorithms, enforcement becomes execution, and Rosenbloom's (1983) tripod collapses as managerialism ascends.

Yet blockchain's architecture remains contested. With explicit safeguards—appeal mechanisms, auditability, participatory rulemaking—blockchain can support democratic accountability rather than undermining it. Guerrilla governance infrastructures can reproduce asymmetries through validator capture, but they can also embed democratic values in code, creating tactical leverage for resistance.

Yet blockchain's architecture remains contested. Discretion and judgment can invite inconsistency and bias, but a fixation on efficiency flattens complex public problems into mechanical solutions. With explicit safeguards—appeal mechanisms, auditability, participatory rulemaking, polycentric governance—blockchain can support transparency, accountability, and collaboration. As Figure 3 demonstrates, guerrilla governance infrastructures occupy contested terrain: they can reproduce familiar asymmetries through validator capture and exclusion, but they can also embed democratic values in code, creating tactical leverage for resistance even under hostile conditions.

The question is not whether blockchain will shape governance, but whose values it will encode. Ignoring design-stage choices means inheriting systems tilted against discretion, justice, and democratic accountability. Weber (1958) warned that once institutions are rationalized and stripped of value deliberation, escape becomes nearly impossible. The time to intervene is in the code itself. The examples examined here—from WFP's humanitarian aid systems to California's water management pilots, Japan's carbon credit marketplace, and EDGI's resistance archiving—show how design reverberates across technical, procedural, and distributive dimensions, determining whether blockchain becomes an engine of control or a scaffold for accountability.

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