

# What does the 'common good' actually mean? Research finds common ground across the political divide

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Some topics are hard to define. They are nebulous; their meanings are

elusive. Topics relating to morality fit this description. So do those that are subjective, meaning different things to different people in different contexts.

In a [recently published paper](#), we targeted the nebulous concept of the "common good."

Like moral issues that elicit strong arguments for and against, conceptualizations of the common good can vary according to the different needs of individuals and the different values they hold. One factor that [divides people](#) is [political orientation](#). Those on the far left hold very different opinions on moral and [social issues](#) than those on the far right.

How can we expect people across the [political spectrum](#) to agree on a moral topic when they have such different perspectives?

If we set aside the specific moral issues and focus instead on the broader aspects of the common good as a concept, we may well find foundational principles—ideas that are shared between people, ideas that are perhaps even universal.

## **Folk theory**

To find such underlying commonalities, we used a social psychological [folk theory](#) approach. Folk theories are non-academic or lay beliefs that comprise individuals' informal and subjective understandings of their world.

The concept of the common good bleeds into cultural perceptions and worldviews. The currency of such ideas influences how we think and what we talk about with other people. By asking people to write about or define elusive concepts, social psychologists can search for frequently

expressed words and phrases and derive a shared cultural understanding from the collection of individual texts.

We asked 14,303 people who participated in a larger study for the [Australian Leadership Index](#) to provide a definition of the common good, also sometimes called the greater good or the public good.

The sample was nationally representative, meaning it reflected the demographics of the Australian population at the time the data was collected. We then used a linguistic analysis tool, called the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program, to analyze the responses.

The program has a new function called the [Meaning Extraction Method](#), which processes large bodies of text to identify prevalent themes or concepts by analyzing words that frequently occur in close proximity.

Using this method, we explored Australians' definitions of the common good. From the word clusters derived from this analysis, we identified nine main themes:

- outcomes that are in the best interest of the majority
- decisions and actions that benefit the majority
- that which is in the best interest of the general public
- that which serves the general national population rather than individual interests
- that which serves the majority rather than minority interests
- that which serves group rather than individual interests
- that which serves citizens' interests
- concern for and doing the right thing for all people
- moral principles required to achieve the common good

Interestingly, these broad themes did not differ for the most part between right-leaning and left-leaning participants, meaning they were

shared by liberals and conservatives alike. There is indeed common ground in people's understanding of the common good.

## **A working definition**

These nine themes thus reflect a deeper conceptual structure. They can be distilled into three core aspects of the common good. These relate to outcomes, principles and stakeholders.

The first describes the 'objectives' and 'outcomes' associated with the common good—for example, the decisions and actions that are seen to be in the best interests of most people.

The second refers to the 'principles' associated with the common good and the 'processes' and 'practices' through which the common good is realized.

The final aspect relates to the 'stakeholders' who make up the community or communities that are entitled to the common good and its benefits.

From this we arrived at a working definition of the common good:

"The common good refers to achieving the best possible outcome for the largest number of people, which is underpinned by decision-making that is ethically and morally sound and varies by the context in which the decisions are made."

In the definition above, you will detect the nine components, as well as the three broader themes.

While we identified a shared understanding of the common good, it is important to acknowledge that people may share the 'big picture' of the

common good, but differ when it comes to the social and moral issues they prioritize and the practical ways in which they think the common good should be achieved.

For instance, [recent research](#) suggests that people care deeply about fairness, but society is divided by how they view fairness concerns.

On one side, you have the social order perspective, which focuses on processes or 'how' justice is achieved. On the other side, the social justice worldview is concerned with outcomes and 'what' justice looks like as a result. Both sides share a disdain for inequality, but don't often see eye to eye about naming or fixing societal inequality.

If the two sides were willing to start by finding their common ground, using our working definition to probe for areas of convergence first, then moving on to discuss areas of divergence with an openness to learn from each other's strengths might become possible. Intractable conflicts could be broken down and systematically addressed. Of course, this requires a willingness from both sides to lower their defenses and listen.

Community leaders will encounter challenges when they unite to advance the common good. Leaders from different industries bring different backgrounds, education and priorities to the table. In order to integrate their efforts, it becomes essential to set aside contextual (and often biased or partisan) understandings of the common good to focus on the 'big picture.'

**More information:** Melissa A. Wheeler et al, A search for commonalities in defining the common good: Using folk theories to unlock shared conceptions, *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12713](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12713)

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