Vincent A. Ostrom  
1919–2012

Vincent Alfred Ostrom was an internationally acclaimed scholar of democratic governance, whose work combined theory and practice and yielded important insights about the management of natural resources, cities and villages, and international institutions.

He was also a highly regarded teacher who, with Elinor Ostrom, nurtured the network of collaborative, transdisciplinary scholars, faculty colleagues, and graduate students known as the Bloomington School.

Vincent Ostrom was the Arthur F. Bentley Professor Emeritus of Political Science in the College of Arts and Sciences. He was co-director of The Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis until his retirement in 2003.

He was a pioneer of the “polycentric” approach to government—the idea that overlapping, concurrent decision making can make for the best choices in public economies. He was also among the founders of public choice theory, but soon came to disagree with some of its basic premises, leading to the creation of what has become known as the “Bloomington School of Political-Economy,” which combines public choice theory with polycentrism and a strong measure of empiricism. He helped draft Article VIII of the Alaska Constitution, which enshrined the idea that the people of Alaska would own the state’s natural resources.

Born September 25, 1919, in Nooksack, Washington, he attended Los Angeles City College and earned a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from UCLA. He worked as a high school teacher; a professor at the University of Wyoming, the University of Oregon, and UCLA; and a resource associate at Resources for the Future.

He came to Indiana University Bloomington as a professor of political science in 1965; eight years later, he and Elinor Ostrom founded the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. He received the American Political Science Association’s John Gaus Distinguished Lecturer Award, the Daniel Elazar Distinguished Scholar Award, and IU’s University Medal and the Herman B Wells Visionary Award; the latter two were presented jointly to Vincent and Elinor Ostrom in 2010.