Is governance for everybody?

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Abstract

The term governance has come to be used commonly in both academic discourse and in ordinary discussions about how the public sector, and other institutions, manage themselves and their relationships with the broader society. The emphasis on governance in many ways reflects public concerns about the capacity of their political systems to act effectively and decisively to solve public problems. In this short paper I take a generic stance on the nature of governance. Rather than assuming that one set of actors or another is the appropriate source of governance, I will advance a conception of governance that focuses on the basic functions that must be performed in order to govern. Further, rather than forcing a choice between one set of actors or another, this more general conception of governance focuses on the possible mixtures of actors which can govern most effectively.

There has been an explosion of scholarly literature discussing governance (Bell & Hindmoor, 2009; Pierre, 2005). Although this term has been used in a wide variety of ways, and at times takes on very different meanings, governance has become one of the most commonly used terms in the social sciences. Further, numerous political and corporate leaders talk about the need to supply governance and international organizations also discuss the need for ''good governance''. The question that arises in all this discussion of governance is whether this is indeed a generic concept that can be utilized in any political setting. Or has the term become merely a fad with little intellectual content (see Fukuyama, 2013)?

Governance must be considered through two different, but interconnected lenses. There is, as noted, a large and contentious academic literature on governance. Much of this literature debates a somewhat artificial dichotomy between the state and civil society as the source of governance. On the one hand advocates of ''governance without government'' (Rhodes, 1996) argue that the state is no longer capable of providing effective steering because of its excessively bureaucratic, rigid and ineffective nature. These scholars have argued that networks of social actors can provide more effective and responsive governance than can governments, and therefore that the state should retreat to a rather minimal role.

And advocates of ''governance without government'' also argue that not only can the use of social networks be more effective, it can also be more democratic. In this perspective, traditional representative democracy provides limited opportunities for participation for public involvement, even perhaps at the time of elections. Social networks, it is argued, provide continuous opportunities for the groups involved to influence policy choices (Sorensen & Torfing, 2007). That participation may be confined to groups involved in the networks, and therefore a number of people

potentially affected the policies. In addition, a model of governance based upon civil society may be able to provide some modicum of democratic involvement even when there is limited political democracy.

This network version of governance is usually contrasted with a model of governance based on the state and traditional political institutions. Advocates of the more institutional approach would argue that any governance through networks must be conducted through delegation from legitimate political institutions, and that the delegation can be withdrawn (Scharpf, 1997). In this perspective the institutions of the state have the formal legitimacy to govern, and also have the power to govern. They have instruments such as law, budgets and organizations that are available to create governance within the society.

My own view is that this debate over a simple dichotomy of governance is a somewhat pointless exercise. The advocates of network governance make it appear as if the involvement of social actors in governing is a new occurrence, while in reality non-governmental actors have been major actors in most governance systems for decades if not centuries. Therefore, the ''traditional'' state-centric form of governance in reality involved both sets of actors. Or more precisely included a broad range of actors including the state, market actors and civil society actors. The important question, therefore, is not which actor provides governance but rather how do actors work together to provide that governance. We therefore developed a concept of ''interactive governance'' (Torfing, Pierre, Peters, & Sorensen, 2011) that identifies a number of different ways in which state and society interact in order to provide steering.

1. The applicability of governance

At the most fundamental level governance is indeed for everyone. Despite all the contentious academic theorizing about governance, the underlying meaning of governance is the capacity to steer the economy and society, and involves identifying some effective means of deciding upon collective goals and then finding the means of reaching those goals (see Pierre & Peters, in press). In democratic societies that goal-setting will be done through an electoral process and legislative activity, but in less than democratic systems goals must still be established. One of the virtues of using governance as an approach to comparative politics is that it is applicable in a wide range of cases.

In order to develop a more encompassing conception of governance, one based on the fundamental tasks of governance, one mechanism would be to identify those functions required for governance and then to identify the different ways in which those tasks can be performed. This is essentially a functionalist approach, not dissimilar to the functionalist models of political development some decades ago (Almond & Powell, 1966). Although that style of theorizing is not popular in contemporary social science, it still has substantial power to assist in understanding complex political processes (see Lane, 1994).

I am arguing that governance requires first setting the goals for society, and then finding ways of making the many goals that the numerous actors have somewhat compatible with one another. Then some means must be developed to reach those goals, analogous to the policy formulation stage within the policy process. And then resources – money, organizations, people – must be attached to the mechanisms that have been selected, and then the mechanisms for governance must be implemented. Finally, there must be some means of evaluating the governance activities. The evaluation is important for accountability but also for the opportunity to learn, and hopefully to improve governance activities.

Although governance is indeed for everyone, not everyone will govern or be governed in the same way, and hence the identification of the major functional requirements is necessary. Further, throughout any analysis of governance decision-making is a central concern. Governing involves making countless decisions, ranging from constitutional questions about how to make subsequent decisions to more quotidian issues of implementation. Much of the study of governance to this point has lacked agency, and there is a crucial need to inject more detailed consideration of the sources of action into the analysis.

Therefore, to be an effective approach for understanding contemporary politics and glowering, we may need to add some modifiers to the term governance, just as we much to make the concept of democracy more useful (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). Concepts such as ''good governance'' and ''multi-level governance'' are used commonly in the literature, but we need to think about other ways of conceptualizing governance that can be useful for comparative purposes. And that comparison should be across policies (Freeman, 1985) as well as across political systems.

At the extreme, some scholars have argued that the concept of governance implies that the public sector is incapable of governing effectively, with the need for social actors to become major contributors to governing (see Rhodes, 1996).