



# The European debate on governance networks: Towards a new and viable paradigm?<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper aims to take stock of the European debate on governance networks in order to assess whether or not it has succeeded to develop a new a viable paradigm based on clear concepts, sound theories and methods and an expansive research agenda. The political and institutional conditions for the emergence of the Europe governance debate are analyzed and the notions of ‘governance’ and ‘governance networks’ are critically examined and defined. A brief assessment of the empirical significance of governance networks at different levels of governing is followed by a presentation and comparison of the main theories of governance networks that tend to draw on different strands of institutional theory. Finally, the large and expanding research agenda of the new ‘second generation’ of governance network research is revisited before concluding that, despite of the need for further methodological development, the European debate on governance networks provides a new and important paradigm for understanding the emerging forms of multilateral action and pluricentric governance.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to take stock of the European debate on public governance by focussing on how governance is produced in and by different kinds of networks. The ambition is to assess whether the academic debate on public governance by networks is developing into a new political science paradigm based on clear concepts, sound theories and methods, and an expansive research agenda. Before proceeding, it should be noted that, despite ongoing economic and political integration processes, Europe is a divided social and political territory with striking differences between North and South as well as between East and West. Indeed, the uneven impact of the global fiscal crisis, and the different political and public responses it has engendered, has further contributed to the deepening of the existing divisions in Europe. Therefore, any talk about a special ‘European’ debate on governance should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, when comparing Europe with North and South America and with South-East Asia and the African continent, there is much more that unites than divides the European countries in terms of political cultures and institutional legacies. Hence, the presence of relatively strong welfare states, well-consolidated democracies and long

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traditions for involvement of civil society actors in public governance provides favourable conditions for interactive governance through networks, which is also a form of governance that has been advocated and advanced by the European Union (The European Commission, 2001). Moreover, in the field of academia, conferences convened by the European Consortium of Political Research and the European Group of Public Administration together with a growing number of European journals have spurred European-wide debates on new trends in governance that go beyond the traditional ways of governing through the formal institutions of government. While we should be careful not to exaggerate the influence of this scholarship, it is safe to say that the academic studies tend to reinforce the introduction of more collaborative forms of governance by European governments. In sum, it is warranted to speak about a distinctive European debate on governance that brings together academics and policy makers.

The European governance debate emerged in the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The new focus on ‘governance’ – a new term which is difficult to translate across European languages – was triggered by the problematisation of traditional forms of government. The idea that society and the economy were – and indeed should be – governed solely through a ‘chain of government’ connecting voters, parliaments, ministers and public bureaucracy was criticised of being too formalistic, narrow-minded, exclusive, conservative, inflexible, uncoordinated, undemocratic and, more importantly, out of step with reality. Through a simple inversion of these criticisms, the term ‘governance’ was associated with a formal as well as informal interaction between public and private actors, competent and knowledge-based decision making, creative problem solving and innovative policy solutions, flexible and well-coordinated policy implementation, the realisation of democratic ideals about inclusion, empowerment and ownership, and a more realistic account of the actual forms of governing society and the economy. As such, many people seem to have made a Faustian bargain, where they only see the positive aspects of the deal and ignore the darker and more problematic aspects of governance (Peter & Pierre, 2004: 76).

The discovery and embrace of governance is not only founded on a critique of the *modus operandi* of traditional forms of government. Governance is also conceived as a response to a more fundamental problematisation of the role of the State. Hence, as Jessop (2002) succinctly puts it, we are witnessing a three-fold development that involves ‘the denationalisation of statehood’, ‘the de-statification of politics’, and ‘the internationalisation of policy making’. Processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation are weakening the link between state and nation. Old and new state powers are displaced upwards to international and transnational organisations; downwards to local governments, public service institutions and user boards; and outwards to emerging cross-border regions and global city networks. Consequently, state power is exercised at a variety of different and tangled scales. At the same time, the State is gradually losing its monopoly on public policy making as an increasing number of private stakeholders such as interest organisations, NGOs, citizen groups, consultancy firms and business firms become involved in the formulation and implementation of public policy. Last but not least, the national space for making and amending public policy is transgressed as policies are increasingly being uploaded to and downloaded from international policy arenas through complex processes of policy learning and policy diffusion.

The problematisation of traditional forms of government and State has given rise to the widespread, but frequently contested, assertion that we are witnessing ‘a shift from government to governance’. Numerous books and journal articles begin by making this claim that clearly has a strong signalling value as it urges us to look for processes of public governance rather than for the role of the formal institutions of government. However, the implicit dangers of the assertion of a shift from government to governance is that it creates a far too simplistic image of a unified past and future and that it invokes the idea of a zero-sum game, according to which governance is necessarily expanding at the expense of government. Moreover, it also tends to obfuscate the role of government and state by nurturing the belief that these are being ‘hollowed out’. In order to avoid these unfortunate problems and mistakes we should rather see governance as a ‘new perspective on an emerging reality’ (Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sørensen, 2012).

Today, it is commonly accepted that public governing is not congruent with the formal institutions of government. In some areas and at some levels there is still considerable room for *unilateral action* on the part of the State and particular government agencies, and most public services and transfer payments are still handled by large-scale public

<sup>1</sup> Jan Kooiman’s edited volume *Modern Governance* (1993), Rod Rhodes’ book *Understanding Governance* (1997), Jon Pierre’s edited volume *Debating Governance* (2000) and the EU Commission’s whitepaper on *European Governance* (2001) were important landmarks in the rise of the governance debate. Beate Kohler-Koch and Fabrice Larat’s edited volume *European Multi-level Governance* (2009) provides an overview of the EU-related governance debate in different parts of Europe.

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