



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

Benoît Rigaud, Professional Researcher
École nationale d'administration publique
benoit.rigaud@enap.ca

Public governance is an interdisciplinary field of study centring on relationships of power between government authorities, civil society and the market, in a context of transformations in the ability of political communities to legitimately govern themselves and act effectively. These relationships can vary in nature, embodying relationships of authority (i.e., authority exerted by the State but also by the market through the enforcement of contractual arrangements) as well as relationships of influence and persuasion, coercion and manipulation (Lukes, 2005). As such, the term not only describes changes in the nature and role of the State since the 1980s and 1990s, it also reflects the need to conceptualize a set of broad, interrelated yet difficult-to-define social and political evolutions (Rayner, 2009; Bevir, 2007; Harguindéguy, 2007). Indeed, the popularity of “governance” owes in large part to how it stands in contradistinction with a related term such as “government,” reflecting the attempts by scholars and practitioners to grapple with these transformations.

Traditionally, in English, “government” refers not only to a set of institutions (for example, as the “governing community,” “governors,” etc.) but also to the manner or outcome of governing (“good government”) and even the activity or process of governing (covered more specifically under the heading of “steering”). For its part, “governance” has meanings that overlap with those of “government” but is not, however, construed to be a synonym with the latter. Indeed, according to Rhodes, “governance signifies a change in the meaning of government, referring to a *new* process of governing; or a *changed* condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed” (1996; pp. 652-653).

In the context of public sector reforms launched in the 1980s and continuing to the present time, governance thus reflects attempts to replace hierarchic, rule-bound institutions with interactive processes. But more significantly perhaps, conceptualizations of governance suggest, according to Bevir (2007), that “patterns of rule are not formal institutions based on fixed laws or norms. Rather, patterns of rule are changing practices arising from interactive processes”. The interest and value of governance studies can no doubt be traced to this shift in focus – to the dynamics of the relationships between those who govern and those who are governed – for it is entirely of a piece with the growing complexity of post-industrial societies witnessed over the last few decades (Kooiman, 2003). Among the many factors that account for these changing relationships, it is important to note evolutions in the structures of society – in particular, individualization and the atomization of the groups constituting civil society – and the transformations of politico-administrative structures that accompany the rescaling of public action in favour of substate and suprabstate tiers.

PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

Confronted with a set of changes that challenge the capacity of nations to shape the evolution of societies following the “neoliberal turn” of the 1980s (Jobert, 1994), administrations have focused on solutions to facilitate their transactions with citizens, adopting practices typical of commercial relations or quite simply privatizing sectors of the public economy. As a result, relationships between the state and citizens have taken an essentially managerialist tangent, with an emphasis on the increased efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. However, these managerialist reforms have had the negative effect of fuelling public cynicism toward government institutions and their capacity to orient change (Rosanvallon, 2006). The grounds for implementing such reforms have often rested on the notion that in order to adapt to the effects of globalization, there is no alternative but to cut public services and to scale back the regulatory activities of governments (Hassenteufel, 2008). According to this line of argument, there is only one model of effective governance – i.e., one that embraces exclusively economic considerations when defining choices that have major implications for the distribution of power and resources in society. The result is, on the one hand, to considerably reduce the latitude for political action and interaction, and, on the other hand, to foster the technocratization of public affairs, in a manner that is often impervious to principles of open and transparent decision making (Callon, Lascombes and Barthes, 2001; Schiffino and Jacob, 2011). In this context, initiatives to improve public service performance may conflict with efforts to strengthen the legitimacy of public action (Rosanvallon, 2008; Gattinger, 2009). Recent writings on “administrative democracy” and the “steering state” (*État stratège*) (Chevallier, 2011; Coté, Lévesque and Morneau, 2009) point the way forward in governance studies for developing a research focus concerned with the role of public administrations as drivers of institutional arrangements seeking to achieve synergy between both types of initiatives.

For governance scholarship, the main methodological challenge consists in defining an object of study that, on the one hand, is broad enough to offer key insights into major changes between public authorities, civil society and the market, but that, on the other hand, is sufficiently delimited to account for the policymaking specializations of policy cycles and policy subsystems (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003; Beck, 2003; Sabatier, 2007; Rigaud and Côté, 2011). Governance studies can, by narrowing their scope to a territory, a principle or a particular sector of intervention, become studies on urban governance, democratic governance and educational governance, to take but these examples. In this context, it would behoove governance analysts to step up their empirical research and, above all, to envisage the possibility of an interdisciplinary development of knowledge originating in the social sciences (Offerlé and Rouso, 2008) and the so-called “hard sciences.” Just as convergence and transfer between economists and political scientists have served to bring out the political dimensions of managerialist reforms (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), there is reason to think that more sustained interaction between researchers hailing from different scientific backgrounds could lay the groundwork for the future integration of various types of knowledge in debates bearing on desirable models of public governance (Beck, 2003).

Bibliography

- Beck, U. (2003). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, New Delhi, Sage, [from the original German publication (1986) of Risikogesellschaft].
- Bergeron, G. (1977). *La gouverne politique*, Paris and Québec, Mouton and Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Bevir, M. (ed.) (2007). “Editor’s Introduction: What is Governance?,” in M. Bevir (ed.), *Public Governance*, London, Sage, vol. 1, pp. xxi-xliii.

PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

- Callon, M., P. Lascoumes and Y. Barthe (2001). *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, coll. "Inside Technology".
- Chevallier, J. (2011). "De l'administration démocratique à la démocratie administrative," *Revue française d'administration publique*, vol. 137-138, no. 1, pp. 217-227.
- Côté, L., B. Lévesque and G. Morneau (eds.) (2009). *État stratège et participation citoyenne*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Dolowitz, D. P. and D. Marsh (2000). "Learning from Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy-Making," *Governance*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 5-24.
- Gattinger, M. (2009). "Contribution to Governance Scholarship: Definitions, Debates, and Omissions," in C. Andrew, R. Hubbard and J. Roy (eds.), *Gilles Paquet: Homo Hereticus*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa, pp. 210-223.
- Harguindeguy, J.-B. (2007). "Government," in M. Bevir (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Governance*, vol. 1, London, Sage, pp. 385-389.
- Hassenteufel, P. (2008). *Sociologie de l'action publique*, Paris, Armand Colin.
- Howlett, M. and M. Ramesh (2003). *Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems*, Don Mills, Oxford University Press.
- Jobert, B. (ed.) (1994). *Le tournant néo-libéral en Europe*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Kooiman, J. (2003). *Governing as Governance*, London, Sage.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A Radical View*, Basingstoke (UK), Palgrave Macmillan.
- Offerlé, M. and H. Rouso (eds.) (2008). *La fabrique interdisciplinaire : histoire et science politique*, Rennes (France), Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Rayner, J. (2009). "Understanding Policy Change as a Historical Problem," *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 83-96.
- Rhodes, R. A. W. (1996). "The New Governance: Governing without Government," *Political Studies*, vol. 44, pp. 652-667.
- Rigaud, B. and L. Côté (2011). "Comparer l'État québécois : pertinence et faisabilité," *Politique et sociétés*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 19-41.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2006). *La contre-démocratie : la politique à l'âge de la défiance*, Paris, Seuil.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2008). *La légitimité démocratique : impartialité, réflexivité et proximité*, Paris, Seuil.
- Sabatier, P. A. (2007). *Theories of the Policy Process*, Boulder (CO), Westview Press.
- Schiffino, N. and S. Jacob (2011). "Risk, Democracy, and Schizophrenia: The Changing Roles of Citizens in Risk Policy-Making. Putting GMO Policy to the Test," *Journal of Risk Research*, vol. 14, no. 8, pp. 983-993.

REPRODUCTION	Reproduction in whole or part of the definitions contained in the <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> is authorized, provided the source is acknowledged.
HOW TO CITE	Rigaud, B. (2012). "Public Governance," in L. Côté and J.-F. Savard (eds.), <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> , [online], www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
INFORMATION	For further information, please visit www.dictionnaire.enap.ca
LEGAL DEPOSIT	Library and Archives Canada, 2012 ISBN 978-2-923008-70-7 (Online)