Democratic Network Governance?

Abstract

There has been much debate across political science, public administration and related disciplines concerning the suggested shift from government to network-based forms of governance involving close, blurred, often informal inter-relationships between public, private and non-governmental actors. Yet, the question of the implications of ‘network governance’ for the theory and practice of democracy in complex, fragmented and multi-layered societies is an emerging one with significant need and potential for further research. This question has been the subject of contrasting conjectures (Klijn and Skelcher 2007). Concerns have been expressed about how network governance might undermine democratic accountability. Yet, the ‘networked’ character of governance, with its capacity to draw together various forms of expertise and to mobilise actors, has also been viewed as a necessary response to the complex, cross-cutting character of contemporary policy challenges. Indeed, network governance might therefore require a re-thinking of the standard assumptions of liberal democracy (Sørensen 2015).

To explore these emerging, under-researched questions, this workshop brings together contributions from across political science, public administration, democratic theory and related fields, exploring their mutual implications. Papers are invited, with either a theoretical/conceptual or empirical focus, that explore one or more of the following key themes, across a range of geographical and policy contexts:

- How should we evaluate governance networks and their implications for democracy?
- What are the role of institutional design, governance strategies and tools and various kinds of political leadership and network management for the democratic quality and impact of governance networks?
- What are the implications for exploring these questions of alternatives to the liberal representative model of democracy, including participatory and deliberative approaches?


Outline

While there has been much recent analysis by political science and public administration scholars of ‘network governance,’ the question of the implications of network governance for the theory and practice of democracy is an emerging one with significant need and potential for further research. Increasingly, it is emphasised, following early contributions (Kickert, Klijn et al. 1997, Rhodes 1997) that governance arrangements across a variety of geographical scales and policy sectors involve networks of a range of actors from the public, private and non-governmental sectors engaging in decision-making processes that often take place outside of formal governmental institutions. This raises the question of the democratic accountability of governance networks. Yet, the ‘networked’ character of governance, with its capacity to draw together various forms of expertise and to mobilise actors, can also be viewed as a necessary response to the complex, cross-cutting character of contemporary policy challenges. Network governance might therefore require a re-thinking of the standard assumptions of liberal democracy (Sørensen 2015).

The question of the implications of network governance for democracy is linked to the wider question of the conceptual frameworks and criteria we use to evaluate governance networks. This latter question has been relatively neglected (Torfing, Peters et al. 2012), in spite of the burgeoning literatures concerned with analysing governance networks. Research that has focused on evaluating governance networks has tended to focus on evaluating their effectiveness, often measured in rather narrow, instrumentalist terms. There is a need to consider broader evaluative criteria, such as their democratic legitimacy, accountability and promotion of public innovation (Torfing, Peters et al. 2012) and their capacity to enable flexible coordination in the face of complex problems in a way that is responsive to public interests, knowledge and preferences (Greenwood 2011, Greenwood 2016).

Running parallel to debates about the turn from ‘government to governance,’ there have been significant developments in the theory and practice of democracy, including debates concerning deliberative democracy (Elstub and McLaverty 2014), scope for greater public participation beyond conventional representative models (Fung, Wright et al. 2003) and agonistic perspectives (Griggs, Norval et al. 2014). These developments have already had some significant impacts on the practice of governance, such as, for example, the emphasis the World Bank (World Bank 2014) and European Union (EU 2001) have placed on the importance of citizen engagement and participation. Insights from these theoretical and practical developments potentially offer new frameworks for evaluating network governance in terms of their democratic implications. Yet the theory and practice of network governance may also present a profound challenge to the way such democratic theories and practical initiatives conceive the nature of collective action within contemporary political systems.

The network governance literature highlights a variety of strategies and processes through which governance networks, across a range of geographical scales, seek to address complex problems in sectors such as public services, economic, social and environmental policy. These range from new public management (Hood 2005), to “collaborative working,” (Entwistle and Martin 2005) to “smart regulation” (Gunningham, Grabosky et al. 1998). Each involve selecting from a range of policy instruments and tools for steering governance networks (such as, for example, targets in the public services and sustainability assessment tools and indicators). The democratic implications of specific forms of governance, such as quasi-markets and public-private partnerships for example, has been especially neglected (Sørensen 2015). Assessing the opportunities and challenges for democratising decision-making requires close attention to these different strategies and tools.
Hence, this joint session explores the following questions:

1) What are the positive and negative implications of governance networks for democratizing public decision making in complex, fragmented and multi-layered societies?

2) How can we assess the extent to which different governance networks are themselves democratic?

3) What is the role of institutional design, governance strategies and tools and various kinds of political leadership and network management for the democratic quality and impact of governance networks?

**Relation to prior research**

This joint session is focusing on an area of study within political science, public administration and democratic theory that is relatively under-developed. It aims to bring together academics from across these different traditions of political research in order to better understand and build a more sustained analysis of the democratic possibilities of network governance.

It will build on recent research such as emerging scholarship on network governance that provides a useful set of conceptual perspectives for approaching questions of democracy (Sørensen and Torfing 2007). As shown by some surveys of the literature, contrasting conclusions have been drawn about the question of the compatibility of governance networks and democracy (Klijn and Skelcher 2007, Sørensen 2015). However, this remains an area with much scope for further development of conceptual frameworks and their application in empirical research exploring the range of different governance networks contexts.

The joint session will also aim to draw together the literatures on the following relevant themes:

- Conceptual and institutional innovations relating to network governance in the context of liberal democracy
- Strategies and tools for steering network governance in a range of policy contexts (e.g. new public management approaches; ‘new’/ ‘smart’ regulatory approaches; collaborative arrangements).
- Theoretical and empirical exploration of the potential for alternatives to the liberal representative model of democracy, including participatory and deliberative approaches.

**Likely participants**

In order to effectively respond to the challenges posed by this workshop, we will actively approach scholars who have the potential to elucidate new perspectives on the questions of democratic network governance. This will include scholars from across the general discipline of political science, including the fields of public administration, democratic theory, political economy and policy studies. The invitation would also be extended to scholars from beyond political science in related fields such as international relations, geography, planning and urban studies, development studies, or sociology. We aim to be inclusive in the constitution of the panel, including established academics alongside more junior colleagues and postgraduate students.

**Type of papers**

As explained above, there is significant need and scope for theoretical/ conceptual and empirical studies exploring the questions posed by this workshop. Hence the workshop will require a balance of papers with a theoretical and empirical focus, engaging with different aspects of network
governance and its relation to democratic theory and practice, across a range of research fields and national and international policy contexts. A key aim will be to draw together and explore the implications that the different papers have for each other in relation to the emerging questions introduced above.

References


