How a Resurrection Really Feels: Untangling and Revitalising Decentred, Decoupled and Disjointed Governance in a Welsh Context

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This paper explores the conception of governance narratives as they relate to academic and political discourse on the subject. It aims to explore the following question: how do elite perceptions of governance processes fit with governance as it is practiced? Do these perceptions complement or contradict processes in practice? The paper develops a new theoretical framework for understanding multi-level governance and examines structural, relational and policy factors that form multi-level governance processes, mapping these to corresponding notions of policy inputs, outputs and throughputs. It then presents a new, decentred framework for understanding and assessing governance, before applying this framework to the case study of the National Assembly for Wales.

The research draws upon a survey of all 2016 National Assembly for Wales candidates and a content analysis of NAW debates and discussions on the topic of governance from 2011-2017. It uses these sources to draw a mixed-methods assessment of how governance is perceived by political elites, and whether these perceptions fit with narratives on governance derived from actual discussions in the Welsh Assembly. It finds that elites feel that political decision-making *should* focus on processes that emphasise output, policy-orientated conceptions of governance. NAW debates, however, show a markedly different picture of how governance is utilised in practice. There, the focus is clearly on governance as a structural, throughput issue, with little focus on governance as policy output or input focussed. These findings illustrate a clear governance mismatch between what elites feel governance *should* be and how it plays out in practice.

'Governance', of course, is a difficult term to define. I think it means organisations are accountable to the citizen, service users and the wider communities they serve, and they take well-informed decisions in a transparent manner and lead people to achieve their objectives. In other words, they do the right things in the right way for the right people, and they uphold the value set for the Welsh public sector.
Vaughan Gething, Plenary Debate, 17 June 2015, 17:39.

Governance is a contested concept within both the broader politics literature and specific sub-disciplines of political studies, and various subsets of governance, such as multi-level governance (MLG), have attempted to reconcile the horizontal and vertical pulls of modern governance arrangements. Within the MLG subset, different conceptualisations and typologies of MLG both complement and compete with each other (for example, see Bache and Flinders, 2004; Stephenson, 2013). In addition, it is unclear where this academic debate can be placed in regard to practical discussions of new modes of governance, legitimacy, accountability, transparency and openness. This points to a need to examine governance as not just a process, but also a social construct that evolves over time and use. Looking at governance – and multi-level governance – from this decentred perspective (Bevir, 2002; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; Bevir, 2013) allows for a greater understanding of the underlying perceptions that both shape and are shaped by governance processes. This paper will focus on analytical ways that the debate around multi-level governance can be decentred and present a nuanced conception of multi-level governance that will then be used to examine conceptions of governance as they shape political processes in Wales.

The paper aims to answer several questions: how do elite perceptions of governance processes fit with the realities of governance? Do these perceptions complement or contradict processes in practice?

The paper brings together various types of analysis to contextualise governance in terms of both academic research and political and policy usage. First, the paper develops a new framework for understanding governance, which takes into account structural, relational and policy factors that shape governance processes. The paper will then apply this understanding and analytical framework to the case of Wales, using a candidate survey to examine elite conceptions of governance in terms of policy decision-making. This will be combined with a content analysis of National Assembly for Wales plenary debates on issues and discussions directly related to governance.

The paper is highly relevant to understanding academic and practical applications of multi-level governance. First, it provides insight on new areas into which the concept is moving and how it can be theorised, thus highlighting where innovative approaches to conceptualisation may be found and how academic work on MLG can be linked to practical applications of the concept. The Welsh case then illustrates the usefulness of this conception in understanding how governance works (or fails) in practice.

Governance as a Concept – Decentring, disjoining and decoupling MLG

Multi-level governance as a concept wades into an already crowded pool of related but distinct concepts of governance (such as network governance) over multiple levels (such as federalism or multi-level government). Originally, MLG aimed to provide an alternative and somewhat middle-ground theory to European integration that avoided both the state-centric

nature of intergovernmentalism and the federalism (or federalism light) espoused by supranationalism and neofunctionalism (Marks, 1993). The initial ideas underpinning this new conception of governance evolved into a more nuanced picture of two distinct types of multi-level governance. Type I MLG systems resemble federal-type structures, with non-intersecting, general purpose jurisdictions, clear spheres of authority and well-defined levels. In contrast, Type II MLG, a somewhat 'newer' governance form, is distinguished by overlapping, policy-focussed jurisdictions operating at shifting numbers of levels that are more flexible and inevitably messier than traditional federal-type multi-level structures (Hooghe and Marks, 2003).

While MLG was initially used as a way of analysing EU-level processes, it has since broadened out to include regional (e.g. Bache and Andreou, 2011) and state-level analyses both within and outside the EU (e.g. Horak and Young, 2012) as well as bottom-up examinations of the roles of local governments (Grisel and van de Waart, 2011). This includes expansion into functional uses, where the concept was applied in new policy areas or country studies (Stephenson, 2013, p. 822) and even development of the concept as a way of identifying a normative 'good' form of governance (European Commission, 2001; Committee of the Regions, 2009). This creates the danger of conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1970) or the creation of a 'container concept' that tries to be everything to everyone (Van Geertsom, 2011, p. 169).

The broadening and deepening of the concept over time has in turn led to new attempts to categorise different modes of governance (see, for example, Grisel and van de Waart, 2011; Howlett, Rayner and Tollefson, 2009; Curry, 2015; March and Olsen, 1996; Offe, 2006; Scharpf, 1991; Treib et al., 2007; Weaver and Rockman, 1993). These all offer their own strengths and weaknesses, trying to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and elegance, general applicability and specific nuance. These refinements of the concept also raise new issues regarding MLG and its practical effects, including questions of scope (can MLG be applied outside of Europe, or to international relations?), academic rigour (is MLG a theory or just an organising framework?) and legitimacy and accountability (who is ultimately responsible when multiple elected and unelected actors at different levels are involved in crafting and delivering a policy?).

Towards a Refined Conception of MLG

This paper has shown that multi-level governance, almost 25 years on, remains a vital concept that has both breadth in the literature it produces, and depth in the literature it engages with. The paper gives quantitative evidence that MLG has expanded beyond its traditional EU confines to be used in both new national and policy contexts. Most notably, it has gained significant traction in non-European contexts and with non-European academics, and has a robust literature developing mainly in the field of environmental science and policy. While these new national and policy applications continue to thrive, less work has been seen in further developing what MLG actually means as a concept. The greater focus on specific policy areas, such as environmental policy, shows that MLG is growing on policy terms, while connections to concepts such as networks and institutions illustrate that

structural and relational factors are also being taken into account. However, sources that can be seen as conceptual in nature (rather than based on specific policies or cases) were more limited and mainly date back to Hooghe and Marks' and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Bache and Flinders' initial work on the concept. While new case studies do increase the robustness and application of MLG, it remains important to consider the interplay between the structural, relational and policy considerations at play.

The changing way in which MLG is applied and used makes it ideal for decentring its study and examining the constituent parts that create the governance narratives underplaying this multi-levelness. A review of the literature reveals certain factors that go into shaping MLG, which can be broken roughly into structural, relational and policy factors. These in turn roughly coincide with the idea of policy throughputs, inputs and outputs, respectively (Scharpf, 1997, 1999; Schmidt, 2013). Complex institutional structures (throughputs) can lead to fragmentary policy-making. Relationally (inputs), hierarchy may make coordination difficult as actors compete for power. Finally, different actors may have competing, conflicting or shifting policy (output) interests and goals (Taşan-Kok and Vranken, 2011, pp. 16-17). These structural, relational and policy processes map onto Hooghe and Marks' typology of MLG, but provide a more granular way of analysing the factors influencing MLG.

Type of Governance Process	Manifestation	Effect
Structural	Defines institutional effects on the policy process (throughputs)	Increases/decreases structural complexity of governance processes
Relational	Defines number and configuration of actors involved in the policy process (inputs)	Increases/decreases number of actors involved in governance processes
Policy	Defines outcomes and specific results from the policy process (outputs)	Increases/decreases net beneficiaries from policy outcomes of governance processes

The three categories of processes can be mutually reinforcing, contradictory or separate. Institutional structures and actor relations will have an impact on what policy options are open. The realities of policy-making and specific policy areas will, in turn, affect how actors work together and use institutional structures to develop policy. If these three factors are mutually reinforcing, structures that are supportive of MLG-type processes will develop. This will give actors more room to manoeuvre in shaping policy outcomes in a multi-level manner, actors may utilise structures in a way that supports multi-level solutions, and/or policies may lend themselves to solutions that make use of structures and relations in a multi-level way. If these processes are not mutually reinforcing, they can result in governance mismatch, which can take two forms. When these processes operate in contradictory fashion, disjointed governance can result, where actors, institutions and policies operate at cross purposes (Curry, 2015). Finally, when these processes operate separately, you find cases of decoupled governance, where there is little coordination between actors, institutions and

processes (Scholten, 2013). This mismatch may occur granularly – that is, in terms of mismatch within the structural, relational or policy factors, or at a higher level, where there is mismatch between the processes and their intended outcomes.

The paper will now look at how this framework for understanding governance on structural, relational and policy processes can be applied in practice, using governance in Wales as a case study.

Methodology

This paper focuses on an analysis of governance in Wales, both as a snapshot (prior to the 2016 National Assembly for Wales election) and over time (through a 2011-2017 analysis of debates on governance in the Assembly). As this paper focuses on broader views of governance as a process, it will focus only on the 2011-2017 period, as this aligns with an increase in powers held by the Assembly, along with its ability to create primary legislation. This also covers the 4th and 5th Welsh Assemblies, minimising any churn created by changes in party make-up and government. The main sources of data are a candidate survey of Welsh Assembly candidates in the 2016 NAW election, along with a documentary analysis of all NAW plenary debates held from 2011 – 2017.

All party candidates in the 2016 NAW election were surveyed about various issues related to the election, Europe and politics in the UK (Trumm, 2016). Use of the candidate survey focuses on one specific question asked of respondents about how they perceive the importance of various considerations in evaluating governance processes

Politicians often make decisions by balancing political participation, processes, and outcomes. In your opinion, what are the most important considerations in making political decisions? Please rank the following statements from 1 'most important' to 3 'least important'.
Political decision-making should result in the best outcome for the most people
Political decision-making should involve the largest number of people and groups possible
Political decision-making should follow clearly-defined rules and processes

The survey was sent out to all party candidates apart from those running on the Official Monster Raving Loony Party list. The overall response rate for the survey was 35%, with 150 responses out of 429 requests. In total, between 119 and 128 candidates answered the question[1] for a response rate of 28%-30%. The responses to this question were then analysed based on other factors such as party, position on the left-right spectrum and views on Welsh/UK/EU power sharing.

To deepen the analysis, plenary debates in the NAW were also analysed for any discussion directly revolving around governance. A simple keyword search was conducted, and references were coded by date, speaker, party lines, and full quote. Each speech was separately coded, but multiple references to governance in one speech were only coded once. In addition, these responses were coded as either structural (discussing governance arrangements, how governance is conducted and related ideas), relational (discussing who is

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[1] Some people did not rank all three options.

involved in the governance process) or policy (discussing specific outcomes from governance) responses about governance. If these discussions included references to multiple types of governance, they were coded as 'Multiple'. Responses were coded as not applicable if they referred to a title including governance (such as the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery), and were coded as 'General' if these discussions used the word governance with no context or further information, and both of these instances were removed from the final analysis. This analysis turned up 487 instances of debate around governance between April 2014 and March 2017, with 327 of these instances relating to structural, relational or policy views of governance.[2]

The National Assembly for Wales

The National Assembly for Wales (NAW) was founded in 1999 after powers were devolved to Wales following a successful referendum on devolution. In Wales, devolution was perceived to be 'a process not an event' (Davies in BBC, 1999) and the devolution settlement has changed in the subsequent years. The initial devolution settlement only gave Wales secondary legislative powers within a single corporate structure that fused the role of the government and the Assembly. The work of the Welsh Government and the NAW were separate through the 2006 Government of Wales Act, and following a 2011 referendum, the NAW was given further powers, including primary legislative powers. The latest changes to the powers of the Assembly came in January 2017 with the Wales Act 2017, which moved the Assembly from a conferred powers to a reserved powers model. In a sense, the creation of the Assembly created an entirely new level of governance within the UK governance structure, along with new structural, relational and policy processes within the level. As it has changed over time, it has in turn created a changing narrative of governance within the nation. This leaves it well placed to examine how governance is conceived and perceived by political elite in Wales over time.

Elite narratives form a key part of how governance is conceived and executed, and this research focuses on political conceptions of governance within Wales. As part of a survey of all candidates for the NAW elections in 2016, they were asked to rank whether political decision-making should focus on governance processes that emphasised policy inputs, throughputs and outputs.

Table 1: Politicians often make decisions by balancing political participation, processes, and outcomes. In your opinion, what are the most important considerations in making political decisions? Please rank the following statements from 1 'most important' to 3 'least important'.

	1st Choice (%)	2nd Choice (%)	3rd Choice (%)
Political decision-making should result in the best outcome for the most people	68.0	22.7	9.4
Political decision-making should	27.3	55.4	17.4

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[2] This data will eventually go back to 2011, when the National Assembly for Wales initially got primary legislative powers.

involve the largest number of people and groups possible			
Political decision-making should follow clearly-defined rules and processes	12.6	17.7	69.8

The candidates showed a strong tendency to favour an output-orientated view of governance, with a large majority (68%) of respondents ranking that as their first choice. Conversely, an even larger majority rated a throughput-orientated view of governance as the least important consideration. Just over one quarter of respondents saw an input-orientated view of governance as the most important consideration in decision-making.
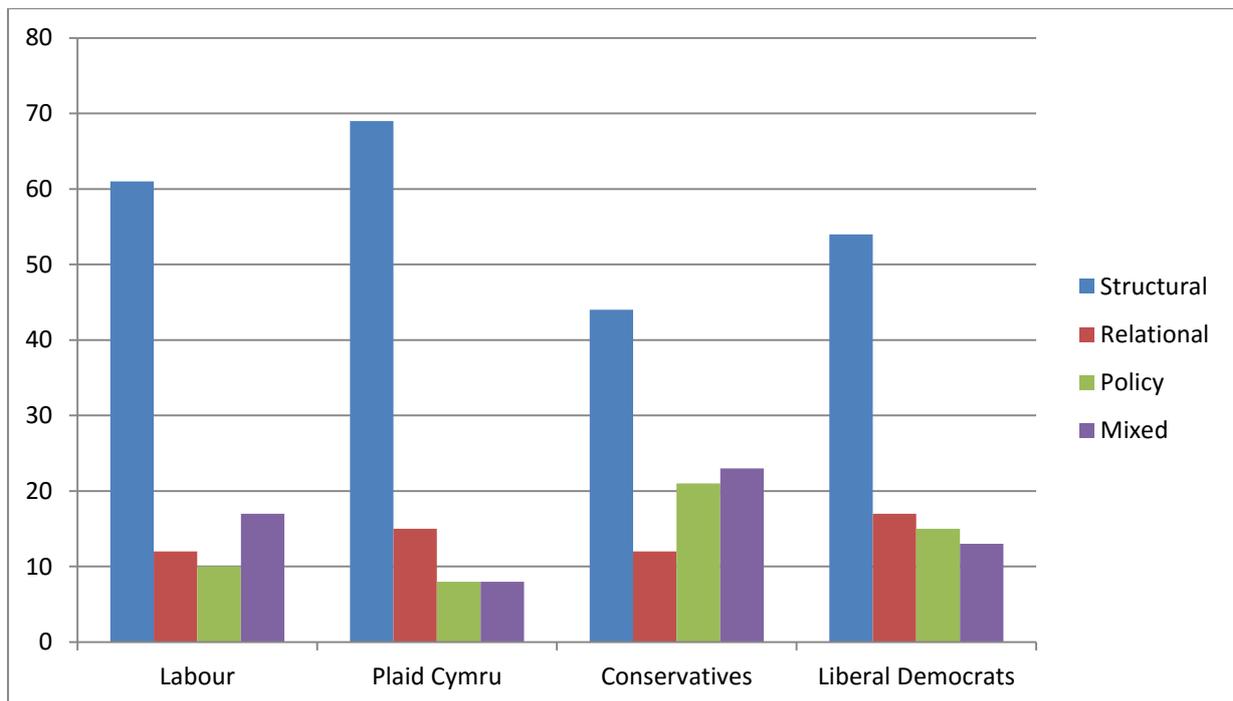
These results were examined for correlations on other political factors. No clear correlations were discerned based on questions about what level of government should have the most influence (local, Welsh, UK or EU). While there were no statistically significant results given the small sample size, a few trends could be identified. People who chose output-oriented governance approaches as the most important were closest to the overall mean in terms of placing themselves on a left-right spectrum, while people who focused more on inputs tended to lean slightly more left-leaning and people who focused on structural ideas of governance were slightly more right-leaning. There was also a slightly stronger tendency for Plaid Cymru candidates to support an output-based view of governance (88%), which is interesting given their focus on input-oriented ideas of moving governance closer to the people of Wales. Liberal Democrats were least likely to support an outcome view of governance (53%). Again, however, it must be emphasised that these results are not strong enough to draw any wide-sweeping conclusions about political or party preferences. However, when combined with information from the plenary debates, the findings become more robust.

Plenary debates were analysed for references to governance in their speeches. These references were coded along the same input, output and throughput lines as laid out in the rest of the paper and the candidate surveys. Results were analysed along party lines, contextual references to governance and temporally. Overall, 487 references to governance were found (excluding references to specific initiatives with governance in the title). Of these references, 160 were general references to governance without any specific intent, leaving 327 references to specific governance processes, be they structural-, relational- or policy-focussed.

Labour was the most likely party to discuss governance, which is not surprising considering it has consistently had the largest party representation in the Assembly. A rough average gives approximately 8.2 references to governance for each AM. The Conservatives were the second most likely to discuss governance in total number, with an average of 8.9 references per AM. Interestingly, Plaid Cymru was considerably less likely to discuss governance, despite being the second- or third-largest party, with an average of only 4.7 references per AM. The Liberal Democrats averaged the highest average number of references per AM, with 12.4 references per AM.

Party	Frequency	Percentage	References/ AM
Labour	245	50.31	8.2
Plaid Cymru	52	10.68	4.7
Conservatives	116	23.82	8.9
Liberal Democrats	62	12.73	12.4
Independent	6	1.23	6
UKIP	5	1.03	0.71[3]
Other	1	0.21	N/A

When these numbers are broken down based on structural, relational or policy references to governance, some trends emerge. While all parties talk most about structural, throughput conceptions of governance, the Conservatives were the only party not to talk about it a majority of the time. Instead, the Conservatives were more likely to focus on policy (output) and mixed conceptions of governance. The Liberal Democrats were, perhaps unsurprisingly, relatively more likely to focus on relational, input-orientated views of democracy, and in this measure Plaid Cymru was also somewhat more likely to discuss governance inputs. However, these differences are relatively minor and should not be overplayed. Overall thought, the Conservatives are a statistically significant outlier in their stronger focus on policy outputs.
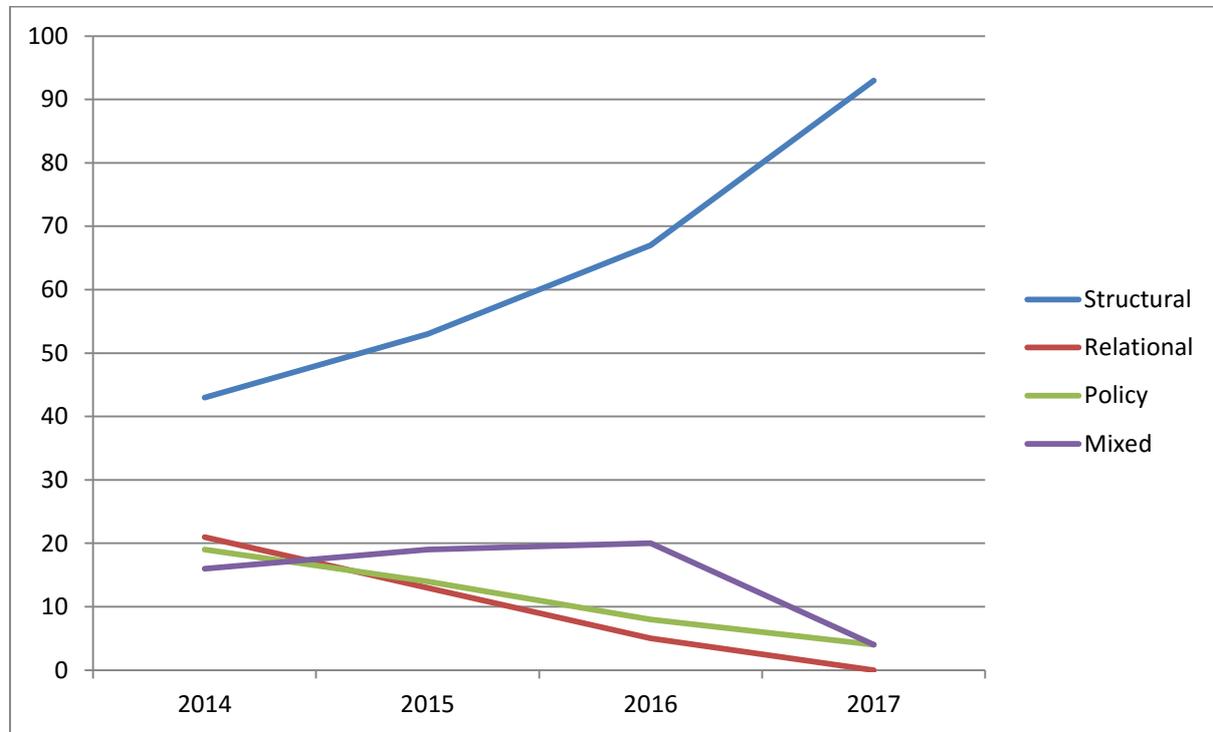

P value of Chi Squared (Conservatives)=0.002

Finally, the results were analysed over time. While structural discussions of governance always dominated, there has been a clear and marked increase of this tendency over time,

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[3] This number is artificially low as UKIP did not have any AMs in the 2011 Assembly.

from less than half of the debates to over 80% of debates.4 All three other types of governance conceptions (including mixed) decreased significantly over the same time period, from a starting point of nearly 20% of the debates for each type to less than 5%.

P Value of Chi Squared: 0.001

These findings show a clear elite focus on structural, throughput-orientated conceptions of governance in debates. This is a marked contrast to the output-orientated type of governance that elites say should be emphasised. Only the Conservative party came close to matching their debates with their intent, but even there output-orientated discussions around governance only constituted just over 20% of their discussions.

Discussion

After presenting a conception of governance that separates out input, output and throughput factors that shape governance processes, these findings shed some light on the relative importance that elites give to each type of governance, as well as the mismatch between perceptions of how governance should operate and how it does in practice. The survey of NAW candidates showed a clear and strong preference for focussing on output-orientated types of governance, but debate in plenary sessions showed an equally clear and strong tendency to discuss governance in structural, throughput terms. Only the Conservative party spent a higher proportion of time talking about output, policy-focussed conceptions of governance. This points to a clear governance mismatch between elite perceptions and

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4 As 2017 results are incomplete, they are more likely to be influenced by specific debates, so definitive conclusions should not be drawn. Still, the trend is clearly upwards.

governance focus in practice, as measured through the debates. More specifically, this appears to point towards a disjointed form of governance, where there is a clear disconnection between perceptions and practice, rather than a case of decoupled governance where these processes may operate separately but more equally. To bring this back to a decentred view governance, it also displays an incongruity between how governance is being conducted in the NAW and elite narratives on how governance should work and what values should be emphasised.

As always, there are some shortcomings to this research. In empirical terms, the candidate survey response was too low and too small to draw definitive conclusions, apart from general descriptive statistical views of governance. While the plenary debate data is more robust, it focuses on only one aspect of governance in Wales and does not look into detail on other ways that input- or output-orientated views governance may be manifested. However, the triangulation of these sources does provide a relatively rich view of the state of governance and governance narratives in Wales both as a snapshot and over time.

Conclusions

This paper has presented a mixed-methods approach to understanding governance narratives both in theory and practice. A new framework for understanding and assessing governance narratives was developed, looking separately at structural, relational and policy factors that shape governance in ways that either produce mutually-reinforcing governance processes or ones that are mismatched in execution or design. This framework was then used to examine governance in the National Assembly for Wales. A survey of the 2016 candidates for the NAW elections on perceptions of governance was combined with a content analysis of NAW debates that pulled out discussions on governance within the Assembly plenaries. The findings from these sources show a clear preference for elite narratives focussed on governance as output- and policy-focussed, but debates show relatively little focus on this type of governance in Assembly business. Interestingly, policy inputs – that is, involving more people in the policy process – was not emphasised in either the survey or the debates, despite an increasing focus on referenda, co-creation, participatory budgeting and other processes to involve more stakeholders in the policy process. This points to a clear governance mismatch between perceptions of how governance should be and how it plays out in practice.

This research provides a solid base for assessing governance narratives and practice, with the Welsh case providing evidence that the framework proposed here provides a nuanced and theoretically-bound view of how governance can be assessed and evaluated in practice. It also provides a methodological toolkit for assessing governance in different contexts and ways. Moving forward, the research can be developed in several ways. First, the implied connection between governance and legitimacy that is developed through the use of Scharpf's and Schmidt's work can be more fully developed, looking at how political legitimacy is conceptualised and related to governance. Second, the framework can be applied in additional cases, as well as used to examine the perceptions and narratives developed by other actors

that take part in the governance process, such as citizens, the media, bureaucracy and experts. Finally, the methods used can be refined and utilised in more depth, as well as combined with deeper qualitative approaches to assessment, such as interviews, focus groups, or experiments, to identify how perceptions and narratives of governance may change over time either individually or collectively.

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