P71 / Government Orchestration and Soft Steering in Collaborative Governance: Mechanisms, Instruments, and Dynamics

Topic : Governance, Policy Networks and Coalition

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Contemporary public administration confronts fragmented, polycentric, and “wicked” societal challenges that exceed the capacities of hierarchical or New Public Management style governance. Collaborative governance arrangements and multi-actor networks offer ways to address these challenges, but they do not necessarily emerge, coordinate, or sustain collective action on their own. This raises a central question for public administration and public policy: how can governments steer collaborative arrangements while respecting the autonomy of participating actors?

Scholarship offers several starting points. Research on collaborative platforms examines how public actors can enable and sustain multiple collaborative initiatives (Ansell and Gash, 2018). Work on metagovernance considers how public authorities shape the conditions under which governance networks operate (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009), while network governance research identifies different organizational forms through which such networks are governed (Provan and Kenis, 2008). Others (Meuleman 2008, 2018; Jessop 2011) consider metagovernance as a means to combine and manage hierarchical, network and market governance styles. Within this broader field, orchestration draws attention to forms of indirect, often non-hierarchical steering that mobilize other actors toward shared governance goals (Abbott et al., 2016). Empirical research on state actor orchestration further shows how public authorities can structure coordination, encourage experimentation, and frame collective action across sectors (Myers and Kellogg, 2022). These literatures provide valuable insights, yet further work is needed to specify how distinct steering mechanisms operate, how instruments are combined, and how their effects vary across institutional settings and over time.

This panel examines government steering in collaborative governance broadly, with orchestration as a particularly important—but not exclusive—analytical focus. It welcomes studies of facilitation, network management, metagovernance, implementation arrangements, and the use of policy instruments to shape collaborative action. Rather than assuming a strict divide between “soft” and “hard” steering, the panel asks how public actors combine relational and epistemic practices with formal authority, funding, regulation, and institutional design—and with what consequences for effectiveness and democratic legitimacy.

The panel addresses three core research questions:

1. Mechanisms and trajectories: What mechanisms and instruments do public actors use to initiate, coordinate, adapt, and sustain collaborative governance arrangements? How do steering roles and practices change across policy processes, network development, and different administrative traditions?
2. Instrument mixes and network governance: How do governments combine facilitation, convening, resource support, and shared framing with formal rules, funding conditions, regulatory oversight, or the shadow of hierarchy? How do network structures and implementation arrangements shape these choices?
3. Power, accountability, and legitimacy: How do government steering practices affect participation, power asymmetries, public value, and democratic accountability? Under what conditions do they enable collaboration, constrain actor autonomy, or risk collaborative capture?

By bringing collaborative governance, network governance, metagovernance, and policy design into conversation, the panel aims to develop more precise accounts of what governments do when they steer collaboration as a way to address fragmented, polycentric, and "wicked" societal challenges, why particular approaches are adopted, and how their consequences can be assessed across policy domains.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites empirical, theoretical, and methodological papers on government steering in collaborative governance. We welcome research on how public actors initiate, facilitate, coordinate, or reshape policy networks and multi-actor arrangements, including—but not limited to—studies explicitly framed in terms of government orchestration.

Situated at the intersection of collaborative governance, network governance, metagovernance, and policy design, the panel provides a forum for examining both the possibilities and the limits of public steering. Contributions may study informal and relational practices, formal policy instruments, network structures, implementation arrangements, or combinations of these across different institutional and socio-political contexts.

We particularly encourage papers addressing the following themes:

- Conceptualizing and operationalizing government steering in collaborative governance: Clarifying concepts and identifying observable practices and mechanisms—including orchestration, facilitation, network management, and metagovernance—across policy domains.
- Instrument mixes and steering strategies: Examining how public actors combine convening, consensus-building, resource support, and epistemic framing with statutory authority, conditional funding, regulation, and other formal instruments.
- Network governance and implementation arrangements: Investigating how network structures, intermediary actors, coordination roles, and institutional designs shape collaborative processes and policy implementation.
- Temporal dynamics and comparative contexts: Tracing how steering practices and actor roles evolve over time, and comparing them across policy sectors, administrative traditions, institutional settings, and levels of state capacity.
- Power, accountability, and public value: Assessing representation, unequal influence, collaborative capture, democratic oversight, and tensions between collective goals and participant autonomy.

The panel welcomes contributions from established scholars and early-career researchers across public administration, public policy, political science, and related fields. Papers may offer empirical findings, conceptual advances, comparative or methodological approaches, or practitioner-informed insights. Abstract submissions (maximum 500 words) should state the research question, theoretical framing, empirical material or methodological approach, and expected contribution to the study of government steering and collaborative governance.

Selected References

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- Meuleman, L. (2008), Public management and the metagovernance of hierarchies, networks and markets: The feasibility of designing and managing governance style combinations. Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag HD.
- Meuleman, L. (2018), Metagovernance for sustainability: A framework for implementing the sustainable development goals. Routledge.
- Myers, J. E., and Kellogg, K. C. (2022). “State Actor Orchestration for Achieving Workforce Development at Scale: Evidence from Four US States.” ILR Review, 75(1), 28–55. (sage.cnpereading.com)
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- Sørensen, E., and Torfing, J. (2009). “Making Governance Networks Effective and Democratic through Metagovernance.” Public Administration, 87(2), 234–258. (forskning.ruc.dk)