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REFLECTIONS ON
“GOVERNANCE”

Marc F. Plattner

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The subject I have been asked to address is “Governance, Leadership, and Democracy,” which is also the name of the new master’s program launched last year within the Institute of Political Studies. In my view, it is almost always a good idea to begin thinking about a topic by inquiring into the key words that we use to discuss it. The term democracy, of course, is a highly contested one, and much has been written, in the Journal of Democracy and elsewhere, in an effort to define it. Later in this essay, I will have a bit to say about this question, but here I intend to focus on the meaning of another of the terms in this tripartite title—namely, governance—and then to explore its relationship to democracy.

Governance is fast attaining the status of a buzzword. It is now heard almost everywhere that issues of politics or economic development are under discussion. The theme of the International Political Science Association’s upcoming 2014 World Congress is “Challenges of Contemporary Governance.” New graduate schools or programs that once would have had the word “government” (or “public administration”) in their titles now use “governance” instead. (The new master’s program at the Portuguese Catholic University is part of a much wider trend in that regard; other examples can be found not just in Europe and North America, but in such countries as China, Costa Rica, India, and Ghana.) Within development-assistance agencies,
the pairing of the terms “democracy and governance” to describe work in political development has become so common that this sub-field is often referred to as “D&G.”

Once a term becomes a buzzword, it is all but futile to try to give it a precise meaning. This is a lesson that I have learned from observing efforts to give precision to such prior catchphrases and buzzwords as “civil society” and “globalization.” These terms come to be sprinkled about so widely and with so many different meanings and intentions that the best one can hope to do is to make readers aware of the variations in usage and try not to be too promiscuous in one’s own employment of such terms. At the same time, tracking their careers and the ways in which their meanings evolve and metastasize can be quite instructive. For it can yield insights into real issues that the new labels sometimes may help to illuminate but often tend to obscure.

So let me begin by briefly looking at the history of the word “governance.” This term, whose frequency of use has grown exponentially in recent years, now often displaces the kindred word “government.” According to etymologists, both words derive from the Greek verb ku-bernan, meaning to steer a ship—one source traces this back to Plato’s metaphor in *The Republic* likening the governing of a polis to the piloting of a ship.1 (Interestingly, the Greek kubernan is also the source from which we derive such Information Age terms as “cybernetics” and all the related words that use the now-common “cyber” prefix.) From the Greek came the Latin verb gubernare, which in turn gave birth to the old French gouverner. From the French, it passed into other languages, including English and Portuguese, along with the twin nouns governance and government. It is not easy to find a consistent differentiation in the meaning of these two nouns over the centuries; government became by far the more common term, with governance much more rarely used. There seems to be general agreement, however, that this began to change in the 1990s, when governance acquired a new meaning and a new lease on life. Though a comparable development has occurred in other European languages, it also seems agreed that governance in its contemporary sense originated with the new usage in English.

A landmark in the term’s reemergence was the 1992 publication of an influential World Bank report entitled “Governance and Development.”2 This report defines governance as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development,” and adds that “good governance, for the World Bank,
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is synonymous with sound development management.” But why the use of “governance” here rather than “government”?

One clue may be found in the report’s opening pages, where it states, “The World Bank’s mandate, as laid down in its Articles of Agreement . . . is to promote sustainable economic and social development. Its concern for governance must be driven by that mandate.” The report further notes the judgment of the World Bank’s general counsel that the organization “cannot be influenced in its decisions by political factors that do not have a preponderant economic effect.” In short, while the Bank recognizes that corruption and other weaknesses of government policy and performance have a deleterious effect on development, it also acknowledges that its charter curtails its ability to become involved in political matters. In this context, the use of the word governance rather than government seems intended to sound “managerial” rather than political, and thus to minimize the impression that the Bank is seeking to go beyond its mandate and to meddle in the politics of the countries to which it provides assistance.

There are other reasons why governance might seem a less politically charged term than government. The term government, after all, is also used to refer to the ruling body of a state—the government. By contrast, it is increasingly common to speak of governance in less political contexts—for example, “corporate governance” or “global governance”—that do not apply to the realm of enforceable law that constitutes the state’s unique domain. Building upon this difference, a number of scholars have sought to define governance in ways that distinguish it from government. One prominent early foray in this direction was made by R.A.W. Rhodes in his 1996 article “The New Governance: Governing Without Government.”

At the outset of his article, Rhodes states that governance is not “a synonym for government. Rather governance signifies a change in the meaning of government.” He notes, however, that the term is employed in a number of different ways, identifying at least six separate uses. In an interesting if sometimes confusing discussion of the evolution of the concept, he suggests that its origins may be traced back to Thatcher-style efforts to trim the power of the central state and to apply market principles and private-sector management techniques to the public sector. This weakened the clout of traditional centralized bureaucratic structures and hierarchies, but it was not just the private sector or market forces that filled the space left by the shrinking central state. Other entities such as local governments, health authorities, and the voluntary sector also took on greater public roles. As a result, Rhodes argues, “Central government is no longer supreme. The political system is increasingly differentiated. We live in ‘the centreless society,’ in the polycentric state characterized by multiple centres.” Thus the state “becomes a collection of interorganizational networks
made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor able to steer or regulate.”

The themes set forth by Rhodes have now become commonplace, and as an Internet search for the terms “governance” and “government” quickly makes clear, they are echoed by scholars dealing with a wide range of policy issues. Here is a sampling: Andra I. Milcu of Germany’s Leuphana University states, “Governance is a way to manage power and policy, while government is an instrument to do so. Governance is seen as an alternative to conventional top-down government control.” Filipina scholar Ledivina V. Cariño writes, “The state is the wielder of power, the principal actor in government. In governance, all of society [is] involved in managing public affairs.” According to this view, the state or government has an important role in governance, but it “works almost in the background, creating an environment that enables and facilitates the market and civil society to make their own creative and decisive contributions.”

Kenyan author Rose N. Osinde of Bradford University, writing on water-management issues, distinguishes between “government governance” and private governance: “The difference is that private governance is voluntary, while state-based governance is coercively imposed on the people within some jurisdiction.” And Elizabeth Meehan of Queens University in Belfast, in an article on civic participation and women’s political representation, states that “governance arises from a lack of capacity on the part of governments, acting alone, to effect desired changes. Instead, public power manifests itself through increasingly blurred boundaries between different tiers of government, the public and the private, and between the state and civil society.”

**The Role of the State**

Not everyone, however, has accepted this distinctive meaning of governance. As the term became more popular, it also came to be used by other authors simply as a synonym for government. In 2004, Francis Fukuyama published a short volume entitled *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century*, in which he largely equates improving governance with improving the capacity of states. In early 2013, Fukuyama published a much discussed essay entitled “What Is Governance?” Here again, he defines the term in a way that is largely interchangeable with government. His focus is precisely on the state, which he laments has largely been neglected by contemporary political scientists in their preoccupation with democracy and with institutions intended to provide checks on political power through accountability and the rule of law. He calls for new attention to “the institution that accumulates and uses power, the state.” With this agenda in mind, he limits his focus on the state to “the functioning of the executive branch and its bureaucracies.” As Fukuyama makes clear, his essay is animated by
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the desire to find better empirical indicators of good governance (which he also refers to as “high-quality government”), and he winds up suggesting that bureaucratic capacity and autonomy are the key factors that need to be analyzed and measured.

Fukuyama’s essay has drawn responses from a wide variety of scholars, many of whom accuse him of using a narrow, “state-centric,” and old-fashioned concept of governance. In his reply to their critiques, he acknowledges that the title of his essay might have been misleading, as he was not seeking to offer a broad analysis of the way in which the term governance is used today. Instead, he had deliberately focused on “the performance of states” because, despite the increasing involvement of nongovernmental actors, “well-functioning states” remain essential for providing basic public goods. Moreover, he stresses that he sought to exclude from his measures factors relating to democracy precisely so that democratic and authoritarian regimes could be compared in terms of “the state’s ability to deliver services and to carry out policies.”

This very brief summary of the dispute over the meaning of governance points to two key issues that underlie this debate: The first is the relationship between the state and the other entities that can claim to be involved in governing in the broad sense. The second is the relationship between what type of government a country has (that is, its regime) and the quality of its governance. Although I will focus principally on the latter issue, let me begin by discussing the former—the role of the state.

The tendency to downplay the importance of the political that has fueled the broad use of the term governance is of a piece with much other analysis of the allegedly post-Westphalian era that the world is said to have entered. According to this understanding, the primacy of the state in modern Europe was an historical anomaly. More normal was Europe’s feudal era, which featured rule by all kinds of different and sometimes overlapping political or religious entities, or the various forms of imperial rule that historically dominated much of the world, with people’s local or religious attachments mattering much more to them than their ties to the political order of which they were subjects. Today, it is said, we have entered a new, postmodern era, and the territorial state is losing its preeminence due to a variety of developments: the growth of transnational corporations, institutions of global governance, and a global civil society; the emergence of “postnational” entities such as the European Union; and the rise of communications technologies that easily transcend international borders. Thus the governments of states have been reduced to relatively weak, though still not inconsequential, players on the world scene.

While some elements of this analysis are not without merit, I believe
that its conclusion is fundamentally mistaken. Rumors of the demise of the state have been greatly exaggerated. Its presence is visible almost everywhere, except in those few ungoverned territories (such as Somalia) that are commonly referred to as failed states—and these are places of human misery, not of human flourishing. There is much room for debate about how much power the state should devolve to smaller units (whether public or private) within it and how much it should cede to larger regional or international bodies. Yet while the state may agree to limit or to share its power in all kinds of ways, the agreement to do so must come from the national government. Even if the national government is not the only significant decision maker, it ultimately is responsible for deciding where the power of decision on a given issue will be lodged. That is why the most important international organizations are composed of states, represented by their governments. And that is why the private sector and civil society can flourish only if they are afforded freedom and protection by the state. As Fukuyama argues, the nongovernmental players who may have a role in governance will not be able to accomplish much in the absence of effective states.

While I fully share Fukuyama’s emphasis on the centrality of the state, I do have some doubts about his tendency to narrow the sphere of governance (or government) to the functions that are performed by bureaucracies—essentially the implementation of policy and the delivery of services by the executive branch of government. In the first place, it is hard to see why the other major branches of government—the judiciary and especially the legislature—should not be seen as engaged in governance. The making of laws is an essential part of government, and even the best bureaucracies may not be able to overcome the deleterious effects of wrong-headed or poorly crafted laws. At the same time, an impartial and efficient judiciary would also seem to be a critical aspect of a well-governed society.

Fukuyama’s focus on bureaucratic administration as the crucial element of an effective state is also reflected in his magisterial 2011 study *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. Given the remarkable temporal and geographical sweep of this work, as reflected in its subtitle, it is striking that it omits any systematic treatment of the experience of republics (as opposed to monarchical and imperial states); neither ancient Greece nor Rome nor the Italian city-states get chapters of their own. Fukuyama’s emphasis on the role of a centralized and professionalized bureaucracy seems to go hand-in-hand with his deemphasizing of the importance of republics, where government is conducted by citizens who rule and are ruled in turn rather than by career officeholders.

It is true that small republics were notorious for being faction-ridden, tumultuous, and unstable, and in this sense were often regarded as far from being models of effective governance. Yet it is also true that
some of them displayed an enormous capacity to foster prosperity and to mobilize and effectively deploy resources, frequently enabling them to prevail politically and militarily over much larger despotic states. Moreover, republics addressed some of the challenges of governance in quite different ways than did other states. An interesting example, elucidated in a forthcoming article by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, may be found in the structures and policies employed by medieval Italian city-states to minimize corruption. Mungiu-Pippidi concludes that in many of these the “republican principle of short-term, non-professional office holding seems to have worked reasonably well” in terms of controlling corruption.

In my view, then, it is entirely appropriate for the study of governance to focus primarily on the state and to consider how government (in all its branches) can be led to perform as effectively as possible. This requires knowledge not just of administration but of politics as well. I have been told that these days—in the United States, at least—courses in leadership are taught largely in business schools, and even when taught elsewhere emphasize the kind of management techniques and approaches that are effective in the business world. It would be unfortunate if governance studies were to drift in this direction as well.

Governance and Democracy

Let me now turn to the question of the relationship between democracy—a particular type of political regime—and good governance. This question is, of course, complicated by the difficulty of defining good governance in its fullest sense, but let us begin by taking it in the manner that Fukuyama defines it in his aforementioned reply—namely, as “the state’s ability to deliver services and carry out policies.” A cursory glance at how countries fare in rankings of democracy, on the one hand, and government effectiveness (another of the World Bank’s six Governance Indicators), on the other, shows a considerable degree of overlap. Most advanced democracies also have relatively effective governments. And most authoritarian regimes have governments that rank poorly in terms of effectiveness. But there are also significant exceptions to this pattern. A few authoritarian regimes score fairly well in terms of government effectiveness, and a number of longstanding democracies score poorly. In his book The Quality of Government, Swedish scholar Bo Rothstein presents an extended comparison of authoritarian Singapore and democratic Jamaica, two small former British colonies that were similarly poor when they gained their independence in the 1960s. Yet despite the fact that Jamaica has been ruled democratically and Singapore autocratically, the latter has become wealthy and scores very highly on many measures of good governance, while the former remains poor and receives much lower governance rankings.
The dramatic contrast between these two countries is surely misleading in terms of the overall correlation between democracy and good governance, but it certainly does prove that the two do not always go together. In short, it clearly is possible for many aspects of good governance to be present in the absence of democracy. If we think about it a bit, this should not be surprising. Although liberal democracy did not exist prior to the modern era, and the classical form of direct democracy was found only in small city-states, people certainly understood the difference between good and bad government, no matter what kind of regime they lived under.

The distinction between good and bad rulers has been known to all civilizations, even those that were ruled by absolute monarchs and were furthest from entertaining any notion of popular participation in government.

One striking premodern illustration of this may be found in “The Allegory of Good and Bad Government,” a series of marvelous frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, painted in the late 1330s by Ambrogio Lorenzetti.16 These paintings decorated the walls of the room in which the Nine, the chief magistrates of the oligarchic republic of Siena, held their meetings, offering them a constant reminder of the importance of their tasks (which extended across executive, legislative, and judicial matters). The frescoes include a depiction of the effects of good government and another of the effects of bad government. The former portrays a city that is peaceful, busy, and prosperous and a countryside in which people cultivate the soil and travel freely. On the opposite wall, bad government is shown to result in a city filled with rubble, with houses in disrepair and robbers roaming the streets, along with a countryside where houses are burning down and the land is barren.

No one wants to live under bad government (except perhaps the robbers who benefit from weak law enforcement). So even if we highly value democracy for its own sake, we cannot be indifferent to the question of whether it provides good governance. Citizens of new democracies, in particular, are not likely to remain supportive of democracy for very long if it fails to bring progress toward greater security and prosperity.
That is why many of those involved in promoting democracy around the world have begun to stress the importance of “democracy that delivers.” This obviously must also be a concern of democratic politicians, who typically try to persuade voters that they and their own party will provide better governance than their rivals will. Moreover, modern liberal democracies are dynamic and open societies whose citizens have come to expect not just a moderate level of prosperity, but continuing economic progress. Each generation expects to live better that its parents did. If democratic governments cannot deliver economic growth, they are unlikely to do well at election time.

While we know that by far the greater part of the regimes in the world today regarded as having effective governance are democracies, the causal connections linking democracy and good governance remain obscure or contested. Some emphasize the importance of elections in holding governments accountable to their citizens as a reason why democracies are better governed. This is doubtless true, at least to a modest extent, insofar as free and fair elections enable citizens to toss out of office governments that are dishonest or incompetent. But it is not only dishonesty or incompetence that leads to inferior governance—poor or inconsistent choice of policies can have the same effect. And there is no particular reason to think that democratic electorates are especially given to making wise or consistent policy choices, or indeed to electing the best people to office.

The unfavorable aspects of democratic government are discussed in some detail by Alexis de Tocqueville in a chapter in *Democracy in America* entitled “The Government of the Democracy in America.” Among the weaknesses of democratic government that he notes are the election of inferior people to office (partly because the most able men tend to seek private wealth rather than a public career); the mutability and instability of both legislation and administration; a tendency toward excessive public spending; the frequency of corruption among public officials; and a tendency to be shortsighted and wavering in matters that demand a long view and a perseverance of purpose (this last being a particular hindrance with regard to foreign policy). Although many things have changed since Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s, it would be hard to deny that the weaknesses he analyzes largely persist, and are often decried today by friends of democracy.

In the following chapter, Tocqueville turns to the question “What Are the Real Advantages That American Society Derives from Democratic Government?” He answers that democracy, among its other advantages, fosters public spirit, patriotism, and law-abidingness; a greater capability for self-correction; a general conformity of interests between the governors and the governed; and above all, the energy that is given to a society by democratic liberty. The latter, in particular, can often out-
weigh the defects of popular government, as Tocqueville eloquently asserts in a passage from this chapter:

It is true that, even when local circumstances and the dispositions of the people allow democratic institutions to exist, they do not display a regular and methodical system of government. Democratic liberty is far from accomplishing all its projects with the skill of an adroit despotism. It frequently abandons them before they have borne their fruits, or risks them when the consequences may be dangerous; but in the end it produces more than any absolute government; if it does fewer things well, it does a greater number of things. Under its sway the grandeur is not in what the public administration does, but in what is done without it or outside of it. Democracy does not give the people the most skillful government, but it produces what the ablest governments are frequently unable to create: namely, an all-pervading and restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy which is inseparable from it and which may, however unfavorable circumstances may be, produce wonders. These are the true advantages of democracy.

As these remarks suggest, effective government is by no means all that we seek from a political regime. If that were so, then Alexander Pope would have had the last word in the famous couplet from his *Essay on Man*:

> For forms of government let fools contest;  
> Whate’er is best administered is best.

I think few of us, however, would really be willing to accept Pope’s maxim. In the first place, it is not always so easy to determine what constitutes good governance or even good administration. One striking example of this is the case of China, which sometimes seems to be the unnoticed “elephant in the room” in discussions of the relationship of democracy to economic development. Despite its authoritarian political system, China over the past three decades has made remarkable gains in developing its economy and raising the living standards and social welfare of its people—an extraordinary accomplishment in a country of 1.3 billion. This has made the “China model” appealing to many developing countries.

Yet China does not rank very high on the World Bank Governance Indicators, even on those (such as “government effectiveness”) that do not incorporate elements of democratic government. So in some respects, China’s achievements in terms of good governance seem to be severely undervalued. Yet in other respects, ranging from its acute environmental problems to widespread corruption, China seems very far from being a model of good governance, even apart from its lack of democracy.

Bo Rothstein (who surprisingly does not even mention China in his book) suggests that democracy is a characteristic of the “input side” of the political system, which he identifies with the quality of elections or of political representation. Good government, by contrast, he character-
izes as a product of the political system’s “output side.” It is success on the output side, he argues, that is not only most important to citizens but also is most responsible for securing political legitimacy. If democracy is viewed solely in terms of elections, this distinction makes sense. But as I have elaborated elsewhere, democracy as we use the word today means not just making decisions via majority rule but also protecting individual and minority rights. The latter constitutes the liberal side of liberal democracy, and it is by no means restricted to the input side of political life. It is what enables citizens to be confident that their rights and their property will not be infringed either by their fellow citizens or by their own government. It gives them what Montesquieu defines as political liberty: “the tranquility of mind that comes from the opinion that each person has of his own security.”

Providing this combination of liberty and security certainly seems to me to be a proper goal of good government. And in this sense, it is hard to see how good governance can be achieved without the protections provided by liberal democracy.

I have tried here to shed some light on the meaning of governance and its relationship to democracy. Doing so, however, has revealed above all how difficult to define these terms are and how complicated the concepts are that they seek to express. We cannot think seriously about governance without trying to clarify what we mean by good governance. And we cannot establish what good governance is without asking ourselves what are the aims of political life. In short, serious reflection about good governance quickly leads us onto the terrain of political philosophy. This may be an unwelcome detour for those who are engaged in the practical task of trying to improve the functioning of government, but it is an unavoidable one for anyone seriously seeking to understand the relationship between good governance and democracy.

NOTES


5. Ledivina V. Cariño, “The Concept of Governance,” ch. 1, in “From Government to


10. The Governance Blog (http://governancejournal.net), posted responses to Fukuyama’s essay by Shiv Visvanathan, Matthew Flinders, Sudhir Kumar, Thomas Risse, David Levi-Faur, Thomas Hale, Paolo de Renzio, Christopher Pollitt, Kishore Mahbubani, and Lan Xue, along with a response by Fukuyama.


13. An especially strong statement about the “vices of government” in small republics appears at the opening of Federalist 9, as a prelude to the case for the large republic that is put forward by Alexander Hamilton later in Federalist 9 and then by James Madison in Federalist 10: “It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy. If they exhibit occasional calms, these only serve as short-lived contrast to the furious storms that are to succeed. If now and then intervals of felicity open to view, we behold them with a mixture of regret, arising from the reflection that the pleasing scenes before us are soon to be overwhelmed by the tempestuous waves of sedition and party rage. If momentary rays of glory break forth from the gloom, while they dazzle us with a transient and fleeting brilliancy, they at the same time admonish us to lament that the vices of government should pervert the direction and tarnish the lustre of those bright talents and exalted endowments for which the favored soils that produced them have been so justly celebrated.”


17. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 1, ch. 13; in the original French text and in some English editions, this chapter is numbered as ch. 5 of vol. 1, pt. 2.
