

## STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT

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### Summary

The concept of government is not self-evident and a rather complex phenomenon in reality. Governing means exercising control over a society by means of ordered rule. At the same time, government is a set of institutions and concerns a body of actors, which define how and to what extent the public affairs within society are shaped and directed. In this article, government is considered as the institutionalized process through which the public order is maintained and collective action is organized in order to enhance the

welfare of the society. The structure of government is then defined by means of a number of functions—managing the state; regulating public affairs; decision-making and policy implementation; exerting leadership—which are considered as essential to the role of government as a life sustainable system.

First, the impact of value systems (or ideology) on the type of governmental regime is investigated. Value systems appear to influence both the working and structure of government and influence the structuring of government in terms of more or less democratic, more or less authoritarian, and more or less enhancing public welfare.

Second, the structure of government is analyzed by means of its formal and informal rules (i.e. institutionalization). The basic distinction made here is between types of representative government and non-representative ones. Obviously the rules of the political game do not only structure government, but also affect its actual working in terms of decision-making and the related performances (i.e. public policy outputs and related outcomes).

Third, the structure of government is discussed by means of its organizational features (hierarchy) and type of government (collective or not). It is observed that these features define the form of government and has implications on its policy-making capabilities and thus on its public policy formation and related performance for society.

The final issue of the article deals therefore with the relationship between the structure of government and its viability as a (stable) system, on the one hand, and between the type of government and its policy performance (or public welfare), on the other. It appears that the structure of government does matter with respect to the quality of a society and its population.

### **1. Introduction: The Meaning of the Concept Government**

If one would ask what a government is and why it exist then most people would be puzzled. Puzzled because "government" is a self-evident concept and as such it appears to be a "natural" phenomenon of contemporary society. Yet, it is not that easy to define what government is and what it entails. Samuel Finer, for instance, attributes at least four different meanings to the term "government."

First of all government denotes exercising a measure of control over others. Second, government is a condition of ordered rule. Third, it refers to a body of people charged with the duty of governing. Fourth, government is the method of ruling a particular society.

In short, government can be seen as an epi-phenomenon, which is obvious and obscure at the same time. Jean Blondel puts this point forward most lucidly: the most curious thing about governments is that so little is known about them.

In this section, the assignment is to develop some kind of definition which is perhaps not encompassing, but is universally (more or less) recognizable and empirically applicable. In accordance with the characteristics of government mentioned, it is at least possible to say, at least, what government is *not*.

### 1.1. Government: A Multifarious Concept

In addition to a descriptive definition of what the structure of government entails, an *analytical* approach will be elaborated for *empirical* use. Government is not the same as politics. This is a contested notion: many political scientists (and others too) see politics basically as an activity that amounts to what concerns the state. Taken in this sense, political science is the study of government, if not the analysis of the public exercise of authority within a society. This is a rather limited view on what politics is, and it is restricted to what is often called the *polity*: the existence and operation of government on the basis of a constitution (or "basic laws") according to the Rule-of-Law (see *Constitutional Government*). Hence, equating "politics" with "government" is not only a too simple and a limited view, it also would lead to circular reasoning as regards what governments do and why they are (supposedly) doing it. In this contribution therefore the meaning of government is considered to be different from "politics" which is a public activity among people, within or without a "polity" and inside or across societies (i.e. also international relations and transnational politics).

Government is, as stated, not identical to the "polity" (i.e. the rules of the political game). Yet, the idea of the "polity" has an implication for the meaning of government, which cannot and should not be discarded: it defines by and large what is considered to be part of "public affairs" within a society. As early as Aristotle the distinction is regularly made between public and private, on the one hand, and between authority and autonomy, on the other. Of course, these distinctions are related to the meaning of constitutional government and also to good and effective governance, i.e. the act of directing matters, controlling actions and exercising authority in a society. The public-private distinction is purely a matter of constitutional debate and details. There have been endless debates about state ownership, public companies and so on, but these matters are not directly relevant in this context. More interesting is what are considered as public affairs and what are not.

Often the mistake is made to consider personal matters as non-political and thus not a matter of public affairs. This view is wrong insofar as it would exclude the fact that governments do regulate society, including personal interests and relations between individuals. One has only to be reminded of issues like military conscription, abortion and euthanasia, and all kinds of individual rights, which—if not enshrined in a "bill of rights"—can imply that public regulation can strongly interfere with the "personal realm" (including the family).

An alternative public/private divide is between public affairs and "civil society". Although civil society can be distinguished from the state and can be legally defined by the polity, it nevertheless contains a range of institutions that are often seen as "public", i.e. non-individual and accessible to the public in the wider sense of the word. Taken in this sense "civil society" denotes a social community governed by various types of rules (from law to custom, derived from law, tradition or religion) which are (often silently) acknowledged by the state. Civil society can thus be seen as that part of the society which has a certain amount of institutional autonomy, and is organized in pursuit of its own ends. It concerns all kinds of social groups (churches, interests, clubs, etc.) and associations (business, labour, etc.) which have organized themselves as private organizations, independent from government, and which become only political, if and

when their own interests are jeopardized. Hence, personal matters and civil organizations are neither part nor a concern of government, but are affected by its actions and conversely, government is influenced by individual and group actions if and when these actions are directed at public affairs. It follows therefore, that it is quite important to know beforehand what is seen as the room for action of a government. This room for action is defined by the structure and organization of government whilst shaping its relationship with society.

From this short survey on the relationship between politics and society, it becomes clear that the meaning of the term government is often confused with other key concepts of political science. In this contribution the point of view is advanced that it should not be equated with "politics", which can concern individual matters, group interests and societal activities. Conversely government should not be considered in a restrictive fashion in terms of the "polity". Finally, government is not by definition the same as the territorial organization and an association which goes under the name of the "state", another debatable term. Rather, the meaning of government ought to be seen as "governance", which is both a normative and material concept. In his seminal book, *Comparative Government*, Samuel Finer puts forward:

...in a given society not all political activity is governmental; some may be societal. And...not all governmental activity is political: some may be routine administration. Government and politics come into contact at the point where the course of action has to be selected for the whole of society – under certain conditions.

The normative impact of governance is then, in addition to the debate about public and private, to what extent and under which conditions government is responsible for the enhancement of public welfare and thus the "common good", i.e. the quality of sustainable life within a society. The material side of governance refers much more to its shape, scope of action and how it affects the social and economic life of the citizens. In modern times, the normative and material significance of government surfaces, for example, by means of the concept of the "welfare state", or, until recently, the creation of a "socialist society". Yet, whatever idea is dominant about the role of government, and however obscure its meaning is, the concept must be defined before its structure and actual role in and for a society can be assessed and understood.

## **1.2. Towards a Definition of Government**

Although most authors do not converge on the meaning of what government is (or is supposed to be), they do agree on the fact that the Executive is the irreducible core of government. Its history is the development of political authority: from ancient times up to the era of absolutist monarchy, government was an almost universal phenomenon. The political executive predates constitutional government and the concomitant emergence of separate legislatures, bureaucracies, judiciaries and other branches of the (semi-)public services. These bodies and branches of government developed as functional aids to the rulers in order to give advice and to carry out measures. Examples of these developments are royal councils, the military and the distribution of offices across the realm. Yet, whatever way government developed as the importance of the

(nation-) state grew, the executive body acquired specific powers, which are not lodged elsewhere. This development is a universal one. Every country has an executive body called government, which is thus considered as responsible for running the public affairs within and for a society. Taken in this sense it is the key point of political life.

This remains true, even if one tends to doubt whether or not government and its executive organization is able to direct effectively the course of events (nationally and internationally), let alone to influence the social and economic structure of their country. Yet, on the other hand, government is the sole organization with authority, more than any other body that has an opportunity to shape society: either by public action or by doing nothing else than "minding the shop". This latter option is often overlooked. Yet, it should be noted that *not* acting implies an act of governance as well.

As a first step to a definition of government, it can be asserted that it is a (relatively small) ruling body of people that form the national executive. "Small" in the sense that the "faces" of governments can be counted easily and hardly ever do they number above 50 people (of which most are not known to the general public). In most cases, governments are much smaller: if it concerns a cabinet-government it is on average 25, if it is a "junta" not more than 10, and presidential government is more often than not considered as a one-person executive. Actually, one may well contest the view that the executive body constitutes a truly recognizable and compact group of people. The exact limits of the set of individuals who form part of government cannot always be clearly observed. For example, many governments include advisors, undersecretaries or junior ministers. In other instances there is a distinction between the core cabinet government and the whole government, where the larger part of the members of government is excluded from the decision-making or policy coordination. Thus we agree with Blondel, that though there is always a nucleus government, which is formed by the "leader" (e.g. President, Prime Minister or the Secretary-General of a Communist Party) and a number of ministers, there is also a "grey zone" of additional officials whose boundaries are not precisely marked.

A second criterion for defining government is easier than the first one. Governments are always structured by means of a political executive and a bureaucratic executive. This denotes the difference between politicians and civil servants, between politics and administration. Although the bureaucracy or civil service is an important branch of government it is formally seen as subservient to the political body of government. In reality, the civil service can be quite influential. This is often due to their continuity in office, their apparent expertise in public policy making and related processes of implementation. This is particularly true in all non-representative forms of governments, where there is a one-person or a party executive with more or less competencies. Especially with regard to policy-implementation, the civil service can be quite dominant and it has been asserted often enough that, in particular, in communist regimes this distinction between political and bureaucratic executives has been blurred. The same conclusion appears warranted in many non-democratic forms of government, where, for example, the military tends to be quite influential. Hence, it can be concluded that it is difficult to delineate (national) government in an abstract and possibly a universal definition that is also applicable empirically.

Formal divisions are not helpful at the end of the day either, nor is it feasible to point to hierarchical relations in reality instead. For example, in some types of governments the president is also Head of Government (e.g. in South Africa), in other types the Prime Minister is the responsible chief-executive, whereas in many, often non-representative regimes, the hierarchical relations are enforced by one party/movement or by a powerful agent: the armed forces, a clan or oligarchy, or a dictator. The third point made is that it might appear easier to understand "government" as to refer to the formal and institutional processes, which operate at the national level to maintain public order and to enhance collective action. Taken in this sense the *structure*, rather than the body (or: agency), is a central characteristic of government. The related actions and performances of government can then be considered as "governance".

### 1.3. A Functional Approach to define Government

A definition of government could well be operationalised in terms of the basic functions, which it fulfils. This will enable an inspection and elaboration of the structure of government by reference to these functions. Yet, these functions are not always clear. In the literature, the following functions are often mentioned:

- *Managing government*, i.e. running the state (and its affairs);
- *Ruling and regulating public affairs* according to constitutional rules and conventions (Rule-of-Law);
- *Making decisions* as regards the direction of policy-formation (i.e. political choice), and
- *Exerting (political) leadership*, both to mobilize popular support as to gain "legitimacy".

To run the affairs of the nation implies that the national executive (of whatever type or form), is formally at the top of the (hierarchical) structure of government. The national executive is where the buck stops. A basic requirement is that government, or the nucleus of the executive, is capable of converting societal preferences into manageable demands that can be transformed into feasible policy formation. This rather systemic view may be too simplistic to many political scientists or even wrong to critics of Eastonian system analysis of political life, it nevertheless describes pretty accurately, the core process of government.

The second function concerns the legalistic perspective of government. Central here, is the exercise of authority in relation to "law and order" in society. In addition to the maintenance of public order, government also regulates social and economic relations in society. Hence, rule making and adjudication is an important function of any government. The way this function is fulfilled and in particular how the rules are observed and enforced is a variable which has been used by many a comparativist to classify types of government. For example, it has led to a division of government into "Rule-of-Law", "authoritarianism", and "totalitarianism." Yet, with reference to the structure of government in relation to the function of rule making, this always means "ordered rule." In other words: it concerns the organization of any society where the distinction between public and private is essential and the guiding principles of good "governance" are prominent. Of course, what is good is a contested issue, be it a liberal democratic polity or another type of regime. The decision-making process is by many,

considered as the key function of modern government. In this way the political executive is meant to direct and (often indirectly) control the policy process. In fact, it is expected that choices are made which are, on one hand, reflecting the preferences of citizens, and on the other, that promote collective action in order to enhance the public welfare. This process has been substantially expanded during the last century in response to the broadening of societal demands. Government is considered, in particular, to develop social and economic policies that meet the needs of more complex and politically sophisticated societies. In addition, governments are expected to control the state's various external relations in an interdependent world. One of the consequences has been that government is not only growing "bigger", but also that it tends to dominate more and more the distribution of power within the polity, but also in society. Among other things, it has meant an increase in the exercise of a wide range of law-making powers, using decrees and related instruments to make policies work in shaping society.

Implementation and co-ordination are therefore increasingly essential features of modern government. Implementation means simply carrying out the decisions made and thus finding and organizing the means (money and measures) by which a policy is made to work and consequently becomes reality. Governments must therefore appoint and supervise a bureaucracy (or civil service) which is able to put policies into operation. The implementation process requires the ability to manage individuals and organizations both internally—the civil service — and externally — society. The broadening of public policy-making and the growing interdependence of policy areas obviously urges the need for co-ordination across governmental departments and related bureaucracies. Policies must not go against each other, and, should possibly be developed in concert (or in harmony). This is a politically driven process since it usually entails setting priorities given material and financial constraints. Hence, co-ordination is part of the implementation process insofar as interrelations and the internal logic of various policies are concerned. Both the form and organization of government is an important consideration if one discusses the structure: it makes a difference whether or not we are dealing with a genuine constitutional government or not, a federal polity or not, a presidential administration or not, an authoritarian regime or not. This latter observation spills over in the final function of studying the structure of government: the "style" of leadership.

Governments are characterized by leadership in the following ways:

First, every government or national executive knows a "leader" who is, often formally but also informally, seen as the person in charge of the internal decision-making of the cabinet, administration, council of ministers, junta, politburo and so on. His or her position can be quite important as regards the way decisions are made, how the government copes with crises, and to what extent government operates as a (more or less) unified body. Obviously, the powers of the Head of Government vary from country to country. On the one side, one can discern unrestricted leadership, as is the situation in case of absolutist or military rule and of straightforward dictatorships. Yet, even in these situations the "autocrats" have to rely on others in order to maintain their position as (unchallenged) leader (e.g., on the military and secret service, or on important clans or chieftains, etc.). On the other side, one can observe various types of internal leadership, which are derived from institutional prerogatives: presidents are

typically one-person executives who run the administration and can fire and hire ministers or secretaries of state. The position of a Prime Minister is different from this and differs from parliamentary system to system. Here the question is whether or not the Prime Minister (or Chancellor) is a *primus-inter-pares*, (as in the Netherlands), or is in fact chief executive (as in the United Kingdom or Germany). These differences are important for assessing how government works as a decision-making body as well as how to fulfil its coordinating tasks.

External leadership is the other face of leading the national government. In general, it is expected that the Head of Government is capable of mobilizing support for its policies, to be responsive to crisis situations and to act as an able political manager of the bureaucracy. The success of popular leadership is vital since it is considered to be crucial for acquiring the compliance and cooperation of the general public. In addition, this leadership role is necessary to develop and maintain the legitimacy of the government in charge. This latter aspect certainly comes to the fore in times of crisis. Personal leadership is then called for and expected to take swift and decisive action. The danger that is lurking in such situations is often that—if and when "emergency powers" are granted or seized by the Head of Government—this can and does often lead to unchecked use of powers, which remain to be used even when the "crisis" is over. Having emergency powers can easily become subject to abuse, in particular in "unstable" political systems.

In summary: government has been defined here as the body of people that make up the national executive. In addition, it must be emphasized that government should also be considered as a (more or less) institutionalized process that defines the "room to manoeuvre", that is: to govern. In general this means that the structure of government is basically characterized by mechanisms through which "ordered rule" is maintained: governments are the machinery for making and enforcing collective decisions by means of public action for a society. This definition implies a number of distinct but interdependent functional roles: managing the apparatus of government; regulating public affairs; making decisions and directing society; implementation and coordination of policy formation; exerting leadership.

These elements will be elaborated and discussed in the remainder of this chapter, attempting to show how governments are structured and thus how they work.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Professor Hans Keman** (1948) is professor of comparative political science in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam). He held positions at the University of Leyden and the Municipal University of Amsterdam. Furthermore he has been research fellow at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy), the Australian National University (Canberra, Australia) and the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (The Hague). He has also been editor of the *European Journal of Political Research* and presently Editor-in-Chief of *Acta Politica*. His research is mainly comparative and focuses on political institutions, parties and government and social and economic policymaking. He has published many articles and several books, amongst others: *The Politics of Problem-Solving in Post-war Democracies*, London: MacMillan Press (1997), *Doing Research in Political Science* (as co-author), London: Sage Publishers (1999; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition: 2006), and recently *Comparative Democratic Politics*, London, Sage Publishers (2002).