



THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Collaborative Governance: Concept, Applications, and Cases

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discontent with the functioning of representative democracies has led to a widespread questioning of the definition, content, procedures, and results of this system of political representation. In this context, a governance model emerges as one of the possibilities to redefine the field of politics and its internal operating procedures. This article addresses first the concept of collaborative governance as a mechanism to change the relationship between politics and society. To that end, the article presents two main approaches for its implementation. The first is oriented toward the management and provision of services by public administrations and the second is aimed towards the deliberation and decision-making by governments. Secondly, the article presents the case of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* (Building the Future), a collaborative governance initiative of the Government of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, designed as a model for an innovative and specific means of understanding, applying, and representing an open and collaborative governance. The implementation of this model shows how the existence of contexts that favor the concurrence of different participants interacting cooperatively can strengthen the ties and links between governments and citizens, thereby demonstrating that collaboration and intermediation between the public sphere and other spheres of social life is increasingly necessary and occurs with small steps and setbacks that result in political decisions.

Keywords: governance model, collaborative governance, public administrations, citizenship, deliberation, decision making, Gipuzkoa.

Short bio

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Concept

Discontent with the functioning of representative democracies first began to take root four decades ago in the western world, and subsequently expanded among broad social sectors. Such discontent has crystallized into a widespread questioning of the definition, content, procedures, and results of this system of political representation.

This being the case, the symptoms of the deterioration of democracy have been described in different ways. Some representative examples include: impotence (Sanchez Cuenca, 2014), failure (Simone, 2016), downfall (Applebaum, 2021), crisis (Urquizu, 2016) and rupture (Castells, 2017).

Besides these descriptors, the vast majority of observations warn that the system of political representation has been exceeded due to different events:

- Legitimacy problems (discrediting of the political class, questioning of political parties, professionalization of political activity, etc.).
- Representativeness problems (citizen participation limited to voting, disaffection, disenchantment, etc.).
- Problems of inefficiency (discourses far from the ordinary citizen's reality, inability to solve the growing social needs, increase in inequality, etc.).

The result of all of the above is a notable lack of adaptation between the functioning of representative democracy and social dynamics (Ganuza and Font, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Fourest, 2021; Gil Calvo, 2015).

In social terms, as this happens, a politics of *sub-politics* is taking shape, which has its roots in the more or less spontaneous activity of people and groups, usually without a high degree of organization, who recognize each other based on action. Such action does not usually follow established channels and is less instrumental and closer to citizen concerns, pedagogical content, and states of consciousness. The truth is that representation has become a fiction that is progressively less acceptable and more questionable (Jurado, 2015; Del Olmo, 2018; Fukuyama, 2019; Urquizu, 2021).

At the same time, the dynamic that tends to go beyond the limits of representative democracies is not expressed solely through the manifestation of problems of legitimacy, representation, and inefficiency. The limits of representative democracies are also the consequence



of several factors, which include a set of sociopolitical changes, questions and practices that go beyond statehood and that have no nationality, the emergence of new cultural patterns, the differential role of individuals, demands that do not find sufficient answers, and the belief that the search for solutions already exceeds the possibilities of traditional politics and requires activating new procedures and practices.

It is in this context that the concept of *Governance* emerges as one of the possibilities to redefine the field of politics and its internal operating mechanisms. Governance constitutes one of the tools of what has been called “models of democratic experimentalism” (Dorf and Sabel, 1998), which favors public intervention in deliberation and political decision-making and, to that end, creates an intermediate political space, a connector between political leaders and citizens.

Subirats (2010) adequately summarizes the assumptions on which governance is based and the implications of implementing it:

- “Governance implies the recognition, acceptance and integration of complexity as an intrinsic element of the political process”.
- “Governance implies a system of government that is based on the participation of diverse actors within the framework of plural networks”.
- “Governance implies a new position for the public authorities in government processes, the adoption of new functions, and the use of new government instruments”.

The definition offered by Kooiman (2005) is also very helpful: “Instead of being based on the state or the market, governance aims at the creation of patterns of interaction in which the traditional hierarchical political government organization and the self-organized society are complementary, and in which the responsibility and accountability of the interventions extends to public and private actors”.

Based on these premises, collaborative governance involves setting up consortiums of a very different composition that may include the State, the private sector, civil society or a community, as well as governmental associations and hybrid public-private, public-social, or co-managed typologies (Emerson et al., 2011).

After establishing these definitions, I will show some examples of how we are witnessing, albeit partially, the reformulation and reinterpretation of politics and its limits, as well as less



hierarchical forms of cooperation between public and private actors. This development is taking place in two connected, though different, areas.

On the one hand, the structures and management tools that can modify the work of the public administration need to be considered; that is, the way in which collaborative governance can contribute to developing new models of organizational management in the public sphere must be explored. It is a matter of reviewing the mechanisms and channels that should help to bring the public administration closer to the citizenry.

On the other hand, it is about understanding politics as an activity carried out by both public authorities and society. This necessarily implies incorporating people into political deliberation and decision. This way of exercising governance implies that, beyond the will or preferences of political leaders, the definition of public policies and, on occasion, their execution, is conceived as an open, interactive, plural, and democratic process. It requires deliberation, exchange of opinions, and the presentation of arguments between people with different views, all of which promote the expression of diversity in public life.

Applications

To illustrate the preceding considerations, I will now focus on two applications of governance in two different political spheres, although in practice there are multiple connections between the two.

The first application refers to the notion of collaborative governance oriented toward management and providing services of the public administration.

The second points to collaborative governance oriented toward deliberation and decision making in government.

A.- Collaborative governance in public administration: Good governance.

Good governance fundamentally refers to a set of actions and measures in pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency in management while enabling procedures that guarantee transparency and accountability. On the contrary, *bad governance* is increasingly identified as one of the causes of citizen dissatisfaction with politics.



Good governance seeks to replace the functioning of public administration based on bureaucratic rationality (Weber, 1982) with shared spaces in which citizens increasingly participate in the design and application of public policies (Osborne, 2010).

The Weberian model built around bureaucratic rationality was based on three fundamental principles:

- First consideration is given to regulatory compliance (regulatory surveillance)
- Importance of routine execution (distributive surveillance)
- Absolute respect for the procedural control (hierarchical surveillance)

Collaborative governance in public administration is based on a collaboration between diverse agents (institutional and social), which fundamentally seeks to improve the provision of public services and the performance of administrative activities. Through governance processes, governments facilitate, in a certain sense, a transfer or a sharing of their legitimacy with agents and agencies of a public-private nature; that is, with non-political and extra-governmental actors.

According to Jiménez Asensio (2018), the proposal for collaborative governance in public administration focuses on the following dimensions:

- Ethics-Integrity: exemplarity, honesty
- Transparency: greater control by citizens.
- Open Data: available to anyone who wants to consult it.
- Citizen Participation: deliberation and collaboration, participatory budgets.
- Intra-Organizational Governance: digitization, customer service, simplification of procedures, public employment of the future.
- Rendering of Accounts: regular information on processes and results.

In general, collaborative governance in public administration emphasizes the importance of citizen participation and the implications of the third sector in providing public services. That is, in public and private networks from which citizens play more active roles in the co-production and co-creation of public services and policies that affect them or that, as users of these services, they may demand or need.



According to Cantó (2012), the application and extension of Collaborative Governance models in public administration can produce the following effects:

- A reduction of the power of the administration since they share deliberation and decision-making processes with self-organized networks and with the market itself.
- Regular participation of civil society and the private sector in decision-making.
- Co-creation and co-responsibility.
- Increased efficiency and/or democracy.

In sum, the development of a collaborative governance model in public administration could result in a greater presence and control of civil society over public affairs, better consideration of citizens' priorities in public policies, and an increase in efficiency in public administration.

B.- Collaborative Governance in deliberation and political action.

Collaborative Governance applied to deliberation and political action aims to become a new model which transforms the traditional way of doing politics to which we have become accustomed in western representative democracies. The reality is that the principle of representation has been understood so literally that the voice and interests of citizens have been erased from the political agenda. Thus, political institutions (governments, parliaments, parties, etc.) have gradually become the property of professional politicians who practice politics in a manner increasingly distant from the people they represent (Bauman, 2001).

This trajectory that has progressively distanced politics from citizenship has led to an increasing predominance of the role that political parties play, which some authors have defined as the “government of parties” (Ware, 2004). The parties are constructed as fairly closed communities made up of people extremely dependent on the electoral dynamics in which they measure the support and weight of their respective clienteles. The distance between parties and voters has only widened (Mair, 2015).

As I have previously written (Barandiaran, Unceta and Peña, 2020), it is a known fact that there is a high percentage of voters who currently do not identify with any political party. Additionally, there is an increasingly evident tendency of candidates and political leaders to break with the classic platforms established by their own parties in an attempt to attract groups far removed from politics.



This and other reasons have produced such a distance between politics and citizenship that disaffection and lack of interest in politics have permeated an increasingly large group of people.

Consequently, a combination of factors that include the complexity of contemporary social problems, the fact that many of these problems have no clear delimitation, the new forms of communication made possible by technology and the important role that social movements have today, finds us in a new scenario in which there is a widely shared feeling that citizens are subject to rather than represented by political power.

The resulting diagnosis can be synthesized into three major problematic frameworks that are shared by various scholars (Estévez and Messina, 2015; Noguera, 2013; Villoria, 2011):

- A citizen's democratic participation is limited to voting.
- Governments represent the interests of citizens poorly and limitedly.
- Civil society does not have sufficient channels of expression and participation.

In this scenario, collaborative governance applied to deliberation and political action implies a new approach to raising and debating the issues on the public agenda and to the decision-making mechanisms regarding them.

The emerging model is then based on the presence of new contexts with little to no hierarchy. This model involves the creation of contexts that facilitate spaces for deliberation (places open to exchange), the intensification of co-creation and co-production processes, the need to listen to different people (top-down to bottom-up approaches), and the search for shared solutions (ideas, learning, proposals).

Collaborative governance models applied to deliberation and political action re-configure the traditional ways of exercising politics, either in a sporadic or discontinuous manner or in a more structured and integrated way of doing politics. Here are some implications:

- They generate processes and activities that have a complementary influence on governments in matters of the public agenda and government action.
- Through these processes and activities, governments achieve, in a certain sense, a transfer or a sharing of their legitimacy with public-private agents and agencies, that is, with non-political and extra-governmental actors.



- The processes of joint listening and deliberation and co-production in which the government and social and private organizations participate normally share the objective of solving social problems and facing current or future challenges.
- In a tacit or explicit manner, collaborative governance processes are the result of a questioning of traditional representative democracy (parties, traditional politics) and strengthen the idea of an administration that works partially with civil society in a more horizontal and networked governance.

The *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* case

Etorkizuna Eraikiz (Building the future) is a collaborative governance initiative of the Government of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa. *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is a model that offers an innovative and specific way of understanding, applying and representing open and collaborative governance, a way of “doing politics”. The purpose of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is to collectively predict future challenges for Gipuzkoa, to design ways to confront them, to experiment with possible responses in real environments through collaboration with different agents, and to apply the results to the public policies of the Gipuzkoa Provincial Council.

From the moment it was launched in 2016, the three main tasks of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* were clear:

- To anticipate the future. To identify and foresee challenges in the region.
- Public-private-social collaboration. To enable systematic collaboration with citizens to meet these challenges.
- Experimentation. To promote joint work between different institutions, people and organizations to design public policies.

In response to these objectives, the institutional architecture capable of channeling all these tasks was constructed based on two large spaces: the “listening” space and the “experimentation” space.

Gipuzkoa Taldean is the space for “listening”. It functions as a great observatory in which diverse individuals and organizations contribute their knowledge and vision.

Gipuzkoa Lab is the space for “experimentation”. It is the laboratory for seeking solutions and for promoting public policies.



The “Listening” and “Experimentation” spaces were complemented with a third option, the “Strategic Specialization”. This is how the **Reference Centers** were born, to increase the region’s response capacity in the face of some of its challenges. These are specialized structures dealing with particularly complex issues such as cybersecurity, sustainable mobility, ecological transition, ageing, etc.

The radical novelty of this design is based on the coexistence of objectives, tasks, spaces, organisations, and people; all of them aligned and committed to the challenges of Gipuzkoa. Importantly, it is the Gipuzkoa Provincial Council government itself that promotes and leads the initiative. It is precisely this last notion which explains why the general model incorporates four action processes whose impetus lies with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, and which have been designed to guarantee the development and sustainability of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*:

- **Management.** A sustained push over time for managerial tasks, management of designed spaces, planning and implementation of Reference Centers, implementation of collaborative dynamics with organizations and people in the territory, definition of a system of indicators and monitoring of activities, evaluation methodologies, etc.
- **Research.** The fundamental task is to formalize and structure the knowledge generated, creating an open repository of lessons learned for consulting, comparing and disseminating. For this task, the region’s universities must play a fundamental role.
- **Dissemination.** The *Gipuzkoa Taldean* and *Gipuzkoa Lab* spaces are conceived to be staffed by people and organizations that produce knowledge, develop projects, and offer solutions. Undoubtedly, this is how a community emerges that participates, cooperates, and connects through the use of different channels. Dissemination is key to informing and connecting people and organizations.
- **Internationalization.** Internationalization takes the form of extending networks in a world in which *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* needs contacts to similar initiatives; to show what is being done in Gipuzkoa, to learn from what is being done in other places, and to compare experiences and establish alliances.

As we can see, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, albeit in a modest way, illuminates and anticipates a new order. If we commit to a new order that changes the way of doing politics, which modifies the relationship between the Provincial Council and society, which incorporates the citizenry into the deliberation of the public agenda, which seeks solutions to the challenges of Gipuzkoa, then it will



be necessary to change the attitude towards and forms of interaction with the government, as well as to modify the structure of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa. In this sense, Etorkizuna Eraikiz constitutes an excellent laboratory that has been in existence for more than five years and has produced meaningful and encouraging results.¹

By way of conclusion

There are many activities, initiatives, and structures that, although may take very different names, are all related to what is today called governance. These different operating logics tend to crystallize in networks, movements, thematic mobilizations, and agencies. They all have in common the existence of objective driven actions (actions according to goals) and the fact that they are subject to a decision-making process (according to non-hierarchical principles).

The notion of goal-directed actions subjected to decision-making processes not driven by a hierarchy is the main concern for local authorities when they think of cooperative relations of a stable or semi-stable nature with other organizations, or with private citizens. This idea is guided by the desire to turn the participants in this relationship (whatever the initial motivating goal) into actors capable of organizing themselves, learning and deciding collectively on a specific issue (a specific goal).

The so-called co-creation, co-production and co-decision processes are expressions of the principles of participation and cooperation, and strengthen the image of a common ambition and decision. Thus, such a common vision is the result of relationships that take shape in contexts in which different agents participate in a non-hierarchical way in goal-oriented actions.

Additionally, the existence of stable or semi-stable contexts that favor the turnout of different participants interacting cooperatively strengthens the ties and links between the actors. If we also take into account that such actors participate and cooperate by virtue of their different affiliations (administration, private companies, Non-Governmental Organizations, citizen associations, etc.), then this creates a relationship of greater proximity between the citizen and the political representatives, even in cases in which the actions and decisions may be framed by a clear conflict of interest.

¹ See <https://www.gipuzkoa.eus/es/web/etorkizunaeraikiz>



Collaboration and intermediation between the public sphere and other areas of social life is increasingly necessary and occurs with small steps and setbacks that result in political decisions. How we participate, how this participation takes shape and how these contributions are valued are aspects that must be taken into consideration when analyzing and evaluating *collaborative governance* initiatives.



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