

GOVERNANCE ACROSS DISCIPLINES: A NARRATIVE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS

Bruno Nunes Vaz
Aeronautics Institute of Technology (ITA), São José dos Campos, Brazil
brunovaz@ita.br

Lucas Novelino Abdala
Aeronautics Institute of Technology (ITA), São José dos Campos, Brazil
lucas@ita.br

Abstract

Despite its widespread use, governance lacks a single, clear definition across the disciplines that study it. This article addresses that gap through a cross-disciplinary review combining insights from political science, public administration, systems science, and cybernetics. The review identifies seven interconnected analytical dimensions—structural elements, mutual adjustment mechanisms, systemic pathologies, historical waves, coordination modalities, measurement methods, and metagovernance—organized into a four-cluster taxonomy and an integrated conceptual model. A simplified analytical map is then developed, anchored in the three-dimensional governance diamond, which situates these dimensions within the relational structure of governance. The map shows how history, definitions, measurement, pathologies, and adjustment mechanisms together constitute a complex governance system. Governance is portrayed as a dynamic, multilevel process of social coordination, driven by feedback loops, multiple modalities, and ongoing interactions among the state, civil society, the private sector, and biophysical systems. The discussion identifies a key gap in current research: while existing frameworks describe governance at a single point in time, they rarely explain how these relationships develop over time. Future research could examine how connections among actors and institutions form, strengthen, and change across governance trajectories.

Keywords

governance; complex system governance; cybernetics; process theory; viability.

1 | Introduction

The concept of governance dates to the 14th century, while literature on corporate governance dates to the 17th century (Ison & Schlindwein, 2015; Ruhanen et al., 2010). Despite its widespread adoption, there is no consensus in the literature on its definition, scope, or key elements (Bressers & Kuks, 2003; Ruhanen et al., 2010). The term governance has gained prominence over the past three decades for describing and explaining changes worldwide (Bevir, 2011), becoming a central topic in the social sciences and a significant concern for political and non-profit actors alike as states attempt to adapt to the evolving global order and the increasing complexity of society (Bevir, 2011; Ison et al., 2015; Jessop, 2003).

A review of existing literature highlights three widely accepted principles of governance (Ruhanen et al., 2010). First, governance differs from government and management: it encompasses a broader scope, including steering and rule-setting (Ison & Schlindwein, 2015; Keating, 2014). Second, governance usually involves less direct government control and predictability, lacking inherent leadership or a fixed hierarchy, although government can still play

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a supervisory role. Third, governance involves multiple stakeholders with vested interests in the task, thus incorporating stakeholder relationship management.

While several reviews of governance exist within specific fields—such as tourism (Ruhanen et al., 2010), public administration (Gjaltema et al., 2020), or systems engineering (Keating, 2014)—no comprehensive review has yet synthesized governance definitions and frameworks across political science, public administration, systems science, and cybernetic traditions into a unified conceptual map. This article fills that gap by providing a cross-disciplinary narrative review that identifies common themes across these fields, proposes a taxonomy to organize definitions of governance, and develops an integrated conceptual model grounded in the Viable System Model (VSM) and organizational process theory. The goal of this review is to answer the research question: What is governance?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The Methods section outlines the narrative review methodology. The Results section presents the seven analytical dimensions, the four-cluster taxonomy, and an integrated conceptual map of the governance landscape. The Discussion explores the main analytical tensions identified by the synthesis. The Conclusion recaps these contributions and points towards a future research agenda.

2 | Methods

This article employs a narrative review methodology to synthesize governance literature across political science, public administration, systems science, and cybernetics. Narrative reviews are appropriate when the goal is conceptual integration across heterogeneous disciplinary traditions rather than the aggregation of comparable empirical findings (Snyder, 2019). The approach is inductive and interpretive: rather than applying a fixed coding protocol, it aims to identify convergent structural themes and theoretical tensions across a dispersed corpus.

Sources were identified through iterative searches of Scopus, Elicit, and Google Scholar using the terms “governance,” “metagovernance,” “network governance,” and “governance measurement,” with no formal date restrictions but with an emphasis on foundational and influential works. Forward and backward citation tracking was applied to ensure coverage of seminal contributions. Inclusion criteria prioritized conceptual and theoretical works that offered definitions, frameworks, or typologies of governance; empirical studies were included selectively when they illuminated definitional debates or introduced widely adopted governance concepts. Purely sector-specific applications without conceptual generalization were excluded.

The analytical process proceeded in three stages. First, definitions and characterizations of governance were inductively extracted and coded, yielding seven interrelated dimensions that recurred across disciplinary traditions. Second, these definitions were organized into a cross-disciplinary taxonomy of four clusters that group conceptually proximate approaches: classic and state reform; coordination and networks; effectiveness and institutions; and systemic and cybernetic. Third, the taxonomy and the seven dimensions were integrated into a conceptual model (Exhibit 4) that interprets governance through the joint lens of the Viable System Model (Beer, 1984) and organizational process theory (Hernes, 2014). This final synthesis constitutes the article’s principal theoretical contribution.

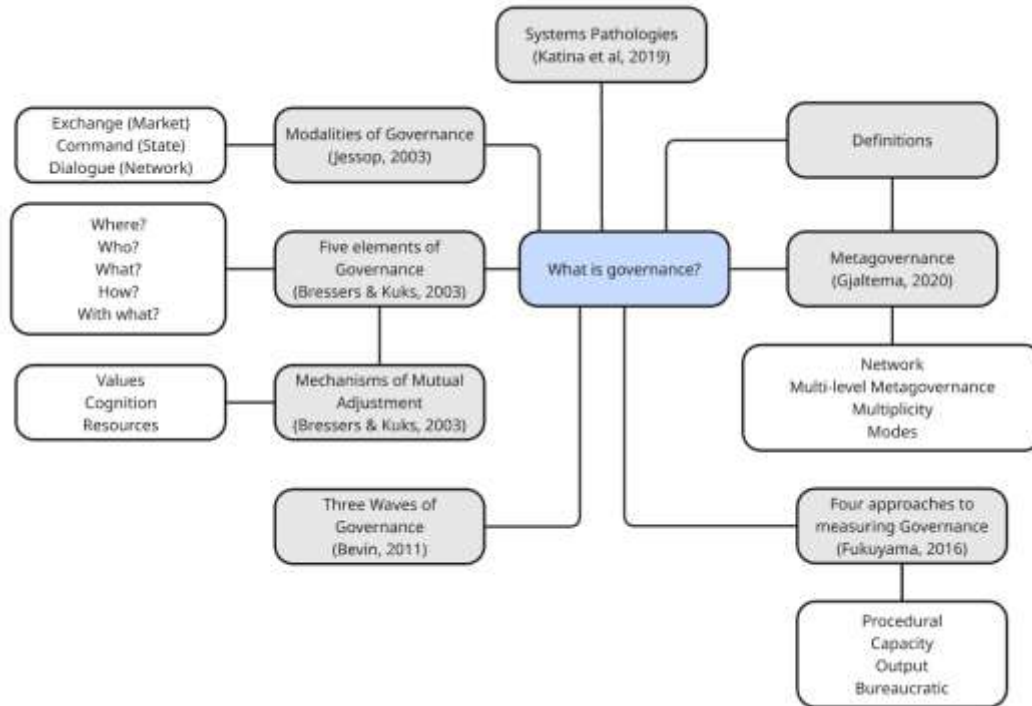
3 | Results

The main findings from the literature are summarised in Exhibit 1 and discussed in this section. The review identified seven interconnected dimensions that together characterize governance. These begin with the structural foundations of governance systems—their core elements and mechanisms of internal coherence—before addressing the systemic pathologies that arise when those foundations are compromised. The analysis then explores the historical development of governance through three successive waves, the different modalities through which coordination is carried out, the methods used to measure governance quality, and the role of metagovernance

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in coordinating across these dimensions. The definitions found in the literature are organised into a cross-disciplinary taxonomy comprising four clusters (Exhibit 3), and all dimensions and clusters are integrated into a conceptual model (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 1. Main findings describing governance.



A characteristic of modern governance systems is that they are multilevel, involve multiple actors, and are multifaceted, multi-instrumental, and grounded in diverse resources (Bressers & Kuks, 2003). These five elements of governance can be described as: the levels (where), the actors (who), the perception of problems and objectives (what), the strategy and instruments (how), and the responsibilities and resources (with what). This systemic stability is supported by three mechanisms of mutual adjustment: a value-based adjustment where actors pursue consistent objectives; a cognitive-based adjustment that involves integrating information into a shared interpretive framework; and a resource-based adjustment arising from mutual dependence and the exchange of power or authority among participants. When these structural foundations and adjustment mechanisms are impaired, governance systems become vulnerable to a range of systemic dysfunctions.

Systemic pathologies are dysfunctions that impair the performance, stability, and sustainability of complex systems by disrupting their core functions (Katina et al., 2019). These dysfunctions manifest as failures in dynamic environmental interactions, an inability to set or achieve goals, and disruptions in information flow or communication essential for deriving meaning. They also involve flaws in both internal and external processes, poor regulation and control, and inefficient use of resources. Structural problems related to patterns and relationships, coupled with limited human capacity to understand complex behaviors, complete the set of factors that hinder a system from reaching optimal performance.

These dimensions provide the analytical foundations against which the historical evolution of governance can be situated. The three waves of governance trace the historical evolution of the relationship between the state and other governance actors. The first wave depicts a world in which state power is distributed across numerous spatially and functionally diverse networks

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composed of public, voluntary, and private organizations (Bevir, 2011). The second wave embraces the shift from bureaucracy to markets and networks but argues that this change does not significantly diminish state power; instead, the state emphasizes metagovernance. Moving beyond structural frameworks, the third wave views governance as an emergent outcome of actors drawing on diverse traditions to address specific issues. It opposes the “bewitching reification” of the state, arguing that such a centralized perspective oversimplifies and conceals the dynamic nature of modern political practices. These historical waves provide the macro-context within which different coordination logics operate.

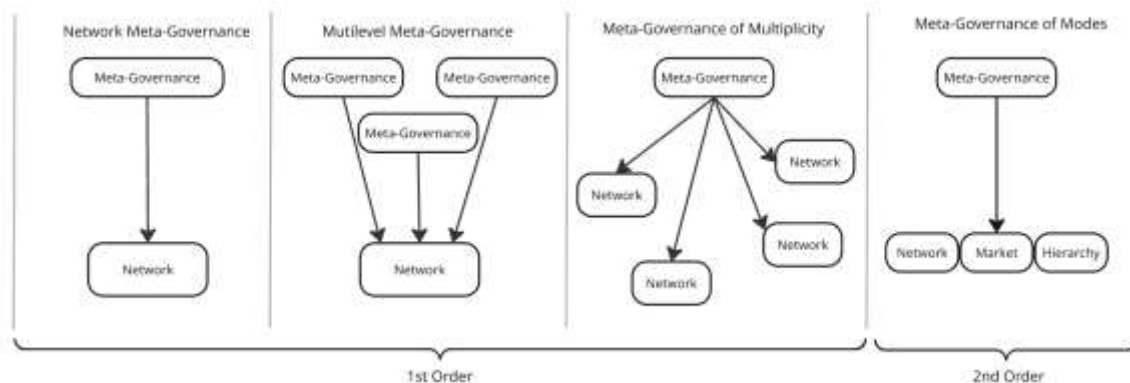
Operating within these historical waves, governance is enacted through distinct coordination logics. Governance modalities are distinct approaches to social coordination, each with its own logic and measures of success (Jessop, 2003). The exchange modality, often represented by markets, employs formal procedures to achieve efficient resource allocation. The command modality, centered on the state, relies on substantive, goal-driven rationality to achieve specific outcomes. The dialogue modality, based on networks, involves reflexive and procedural rationality to negotiate consensus among actors. Failures in these arrangements appear as economic inefficiency in markets, ineffectiveness in state efforts, or unproductive deliberation in networks. To address these failures, metagovernance strategically combines market, hierarchical, and network arrangements to manage the contradictions of complex social relations.

Alongside these coordination dynamics, the literature has also developed specific approaches to assessing governance quality. Four approaches recur in the field: procedural, capacity, output, and bureaucratic (Fukuyama, 2016). Procedural measures focus on classic criteria of administrative modernity, such as merit-based recruitment and the application of technical standards for decision-making. Capacity measures assess the professionalism of the bureaucracy and the availability of essential resources, such as tax revenues. Output measures track services delivered, such as health and education, but are often dismissed as indicators of governance quality because they are influenced by factors beyond government control. Finally, bureaucratic autonomy assesses the degree to which administrative bodies operate independently from direct political intervention.

When coordination among modalities proves insufficient, metagovernance emerges as a higher-order steering mechanism. Metagovernance functions as a coordinating mechanism that uses policy instruments—such as authority, informational resources, and economic strategies—to guide networks made up of public, market, and civil society participants (Gjaltema et al., 2020). Driven primarily by public metagovernors aiming to reduce fragmentation and improve coherence, this approach is categorised into four ideal types, each representing a distinct steering configuration, as shown in Exhibit 2. First-order types include network metagovernance, which manages a single cross-domain network; multilevel metagovernance, where governance across different levels coordinates a specific network; and metagovernance of multiplicity, directed at a “network of networks.” Second-order metagovernance of modes seeks to balance hierarchical, market, and network governance by adjusting the emphasis on each, thereby fine-tuning the overall system to better handle complex social interactions.

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Exhibit 2. Four ideal types of metagovernance. Adapted from Gjaltema et al. (2020).



The definitions of governance from the literature are listed in Exhibit 3 and categorized into four groups: classic and state reform, coordination and networks, effectiveness and institutions, and the systemic and cybernetic perspective.

Exhibit 3. The diversity of governance definitions.

1. CLASSIC AND STATE REFORM	
Concept	Description
Good Governance	The exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs effectively and transparently (Rhodes, 1996; World Bank, 1992).
Government Reform	A practice mainly intended to help accelerate the functioning of the public sector and to maintain and improve the connection between the state and its citizens (Mukrimin, 2023).
Hollowing out the State	A process where the public sector becomes smaller and fragmented, raising problems regarding fragmentation, steering, and accountability (Rhodes, 1996).
Governing Without Government	A stipulation that governance refers to self-organising inter-organisational networks that resist central guidance and become autonomous (Rhodes, 1996).
Minimal State	A blanket term redefining the extent and form of public intervention and promoting the increased use of markets and quasi-markets (Rhodes, 1996, 1997).
New Public Management	An approach that emphasises disaggregating bureaucracies and providing greater competition through contracting out to quasi-markets (Rhodes, 1996).
2. COORDINATION AND NETWORKS	
Concept	Description
Self-Organisations	The reflexive self-organisation of independent actors involved in complex relations of reciprocal interdependence, based on continuing dialogue and resource-sharing to develop mutually beneficial joint projects (Jessop, 2003).
Sectoral Governance	Policy formulation by private and/or public actors in delimited sectoral areas which takes place outside the main political

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	legislative avenue of decision-making (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008).
Governance as Dilemma	Contingent practices that emerge from the competing actions and beliefs of different people responding to various dilemmas against the background of conflicting traditions (Bevir, 2011).
Self-Organising Networks	Self-organising inter-organisational networks that complement markets and hierarchies as structures for authoritatively allocating resources and exercising control and coordination (Rhodes, 1996, 1997).
Metagovernance	The “governance of governance” or the organisation of the conditions for governance, involving the judicious mixing of market, hierarchy, and networks (Gjaltema et al., 2020; Jessop, 2003).
3. EFFECTIVENESS AND INSTITUTIONS	
Concept	Description
Executive Function	A government’s ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless of whether that government is democratic or not (Fukuyama, 2013, 2016).
Principal-Agent Framework	A perspective where governance is about the performance of agents in carrying out the wishes of principals, rather than the goals set by the principals (Fukuyama, 2013, 2016).
Environmental Sociology	Institutional interactions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised, and how stakeholders are included (Davidson et al., 2006; Ison et al., 2014).
New Concept of Governance	A dual view: one holding that governance concerns rules for public relations and directing public affairs; the other seeing it as the practice of humans doing things and the outcomes pursued through those mechanisms (Hydén & Mease, 2004; Mukrimin, 2023).
4. SYSTEMIC AND CYBERNETIC	
Concept	Description
Corporate Governance	The whole system of rights, processes, and controls established internally and externally over the management of a business entity with the objective of protecting the interests of all stakeholders. It emphasises giving overall direction to the enterprise and overseeing executive actions (Ruhanen et al., 2010; Tricker, 1984).
Complex System Governance (CSG)	A methodological approach to improve system performance through purposeful design, execution, and evolution of essential metasystem functions, emphasising communication, control, coordination, and integration (Katina et al., 2019; Keating, 2014).
Cybersystemics	Governance understood in terms of the design, enactment, and response to feedback processes. It involves a cyber-systemic understanding of the relationship between a governance system and its environment (Ison, 2010; Ison et al., 2014).

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Systemic Governance	The complexity of man-made rules and the outcomes shaped by spontaneous reactions of firms, individuals, and local and foreign players in a multimillion-actor game (Csaba, 2023).
Decision Agents	Governance, whether in cells or corporations, depends on effective decision agents that are the proximate cause of corrective actions, ranging from simple thermostats to complex policy formulation (Mobus, 2015).

These four clusters organize the conceptual diversity of the field into analytically distinct, yet interrelated, perspectives. The Classic and State Reform cluster examines the shift from traditional government policies to broader governance approaches that prioritize administrative efficiency and transparency. These reforms often lead to the “hollowing out” of central authority, dispersing functions across autonomous networks and reducing direct state intervention (Rhodes, 1996, 1997). The Coordination and Networks cluster highlights the rise of horizontal coordination through interorganisational structures, indicating a move towards collaborative governance. These networks are considered self-organizing entities that supplement traditional markets and hierarchies, enabling the distribution of resources through ongoing dialogue and interdependence (Rhodes, 1996, 1997). In this context, metagovernance involves strategically balancing different modes of coordination to maintain stability, while governance is understood as a set of flexible practices for resolving complex social dilemmas (Bevir, 2011; Jessop, 2003). The Effectiveness and Institutions cluster assesses governance quality based on technical skill and institutional stability within the executive branch. Governance is defined by a professional bureaucracy’s ability to create and enforce rules while maintaining autonomy from political influence (Fukuyama, 2013). This approach uses the principal-agent model to monitor performance and analyze how institutional interactions shape power and stakeholder participation in decision-making (Davidson et al., 2006; Fukuyama, 2013, 2016). The Systemic and Cybernetic cluster views governance as a key metasystem function that ensures the performance and sustainability of complex organizations. Its main goal is to design mechanisms for communication, coordination, and integration to synchronize the actions of diverse participants (Katina et al., 2019; Keating, 2014). Applying cybernetic principles and feedback loops, governance is seen as managing systemic diversity to foster adaptive capacity and corrective responses within a large, multi-actor environment (Ison, 2010; Mobus, 2015). These principles find application across various governance domains—from environmental co-management and urban resilience planning to public health systems and digital governance infrastructures—affirming their practical relevance beyond theoretical framing (Chaffin & Gunderson, 2016; Espejo & Reyes, 2011; Janssen & Van Der Voort, 2016; Kickbusch & Gleicher, 2012).

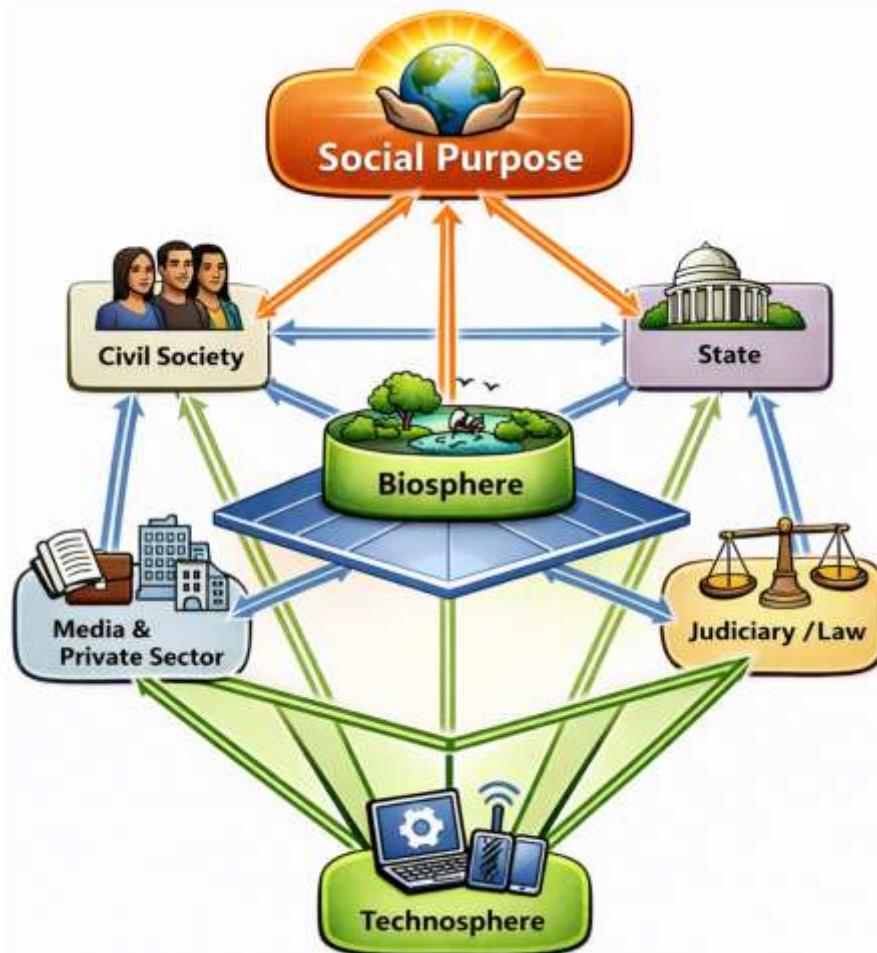
The concept of governance can be understood as an enacted practice of purposeful steering—responding to feedback while navigating uncertainty in pursuit of situated purposes (Ison & Straw, 2020). Drawing on the Greek roots of cybernetics—*kybernetes*, the helmsperson who steers in response to feedback—this perspective frames governance not as an institutional arrangement but as an ongoing practice of navigation. The two-dimensional governance diamond maps this relational field across four poles: the state (including civil servants and executive bodies), civil society (families, NGOs, and charities), the private sector (firms and multinationals), and the judiciary. In this configuration, governance emerges from the shifting relationships among these actors, broadly corresponding to the first and second waves: from hierarchical state authority towards the market-mediated and network-based coordination characteristic of New Public Management and beyond.

The three-dimensional governance diamond extends this model by adding two further relational planes: the biosphere, placed at the systemic center, and the technosphere, which mediates relations among the four classical poles. This expanded configuration resonates with

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the third wave of governance, which rejects the reification of state authority and understands governance as an emergent outcome arising from actors drawing on diverse traditions to address specific situated problems (Bevir, 2011). In the third wave's terms, the biosphere and the technosphere are not external additions to governance but constitutive dimensions of the social–biophysical relationships that any meaningful governance system must actively steer. The three-dimensional diamond thus integrates what has been termed Anthropocene complexity (Ison & Schlindwein, 2015) into the relational logic of governance: the helmsperson is no longer steering among human actors alone but navigating the structural coupling of social and biophysical systems—a governance challenge that demands systemic, rather than merely systematic, praxis.

Exhibit 4. Three-dimensional Governance Diamond.

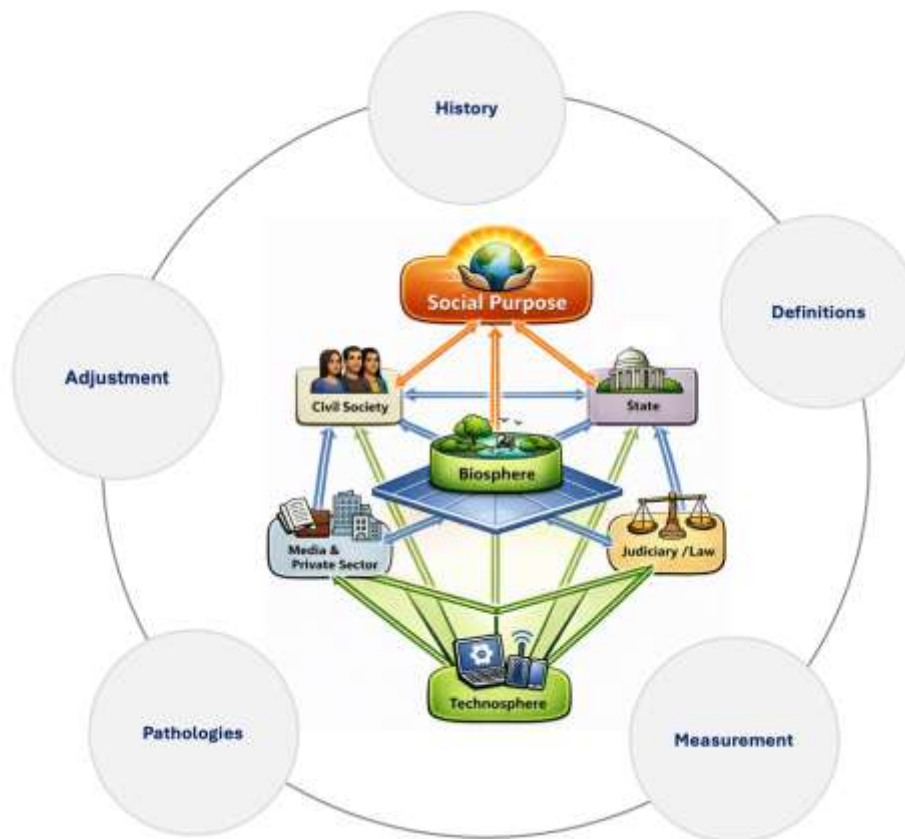


Source: Adapted from Ison & Straw (2020)

The preceding dimensions and their interrelations are summarised in Exhibit 5, which provides an integrated conceptual map of how the governance literature addresses the complex relationships within the three-dimensional governance diamond.

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Exhibit 5. Synthesis of governance literature findings.



The history layer encompasses the three waves of governance, tracing the evolution of the relational configuration among state, market, and civil society actors. Definitions organise the field's understanding of governance—drawing together the coordination modalities (exchange, command, and dialogue), the conceptual clusters in Exhibit 3, the five structural elements identified by Bressers and Kuks (2003), and the metagovernance function. Measurement identifies how governance quality is assessed across procedural, capacity, output, and bureaucratic-autonomy dimensions (Fukuyama, 2016). Pathologies characterise the systemic dysfunctions that impair governance performance when core functions are disrupted (Katina et al., 2019). Finally, mutual adjustment mechanisms describe the value-based, cognitive, and resource-based processes through which actors sustain systemic coherence across levels and domains (Bressers & Kuks, 2003). Together, these five analytical layers constitute a multidimensional account of governance as it operates, fails, and seeks renewal across contexts.

4 | Discussion

The following discussion addresses three analytical tensions that emerge from the governance literature as synthesised in Exhibit 5: the tension between governance as structure and governing as dynamic process; the erosion of accountability in fragmented, multi-actor arrangements; and the limits of synchronic frameworks in capturing how governance unfolds over time. Together, these tensions point towards a view of governance grounded in the three-dimensional governance diamond.

Exhibit 5 condenses the findings of this review into a single analytical frame that maps how the governance literature describes the complex relationships represented in the three-dimensional governance diamond (Ison & Straw, 2020). Five analytical layers are at work within

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this frame: history, definitions, measurement, pathologies, and mutual adjustment. Together they reveal a fundamental tension that the literature has long circled but rarely resolved: governance is treated primarily as a structure, yet the very act of governing is irreducibly dynamic. It is from this tension that the discussion departs.

The distinction between governance as a noun and governing as a verb—between the rules, arrangements, and institutional frameworks that enable social coordination, and the ongoing act of steering, adjusting, and sense-making in real time—is a productive starting point (Ison & Straw, 2020). Each layer of Exhibit 5 reflects a different face of this tension. The history layer shows governance drifting across three waves: from hierarchical state authority, through market and network logic, towards emergent, actor-driven practice (Bevir, 2011). Definitions, modalities, and the five structural elements address the arrangement side—what governance consists of. Pathologies and mutual adjustment mechanisms address the dynamic side—how governance fails and how actors sustain it. Metagovernance bridges both, managing the contradictions among modalities precisely because no single arrangement suffices (Jessop, 2003). Exhibit 5 makes visible what the individual dimensions, taken separately, obscure: governance is not one of these layers but the ongoing interaction among all of them.

A second tension concerns accountability. As the locus of decision-making shifts from hierarchical state structures towards networks of public, private, and civil society actors, traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability are strained (Bevir, 2011; Rhodes, 1996). Responsibility becomes diffuse; the capacity to assign it for specific outcomes diminishes (Gjaltema et al., 2020). Davies (2025) captures this dynamic with the concept of the *Unaccountability Machine*: large-scale governance systems develop pathological breaks in their feedback loops that erode accountability capacity systemically, not incidentally. In the terms of Exhibit 5, this is a pathology of the first order—one in which mutual adjustment mechanisms are not merely impaired but structurally decoupled from the formal architecture of governance. The act of governing becomes disconnected from the structure of governance, producing opaque decision-making that resists correction. Power asymmetries deepen this problem: policy networks are not neutral arenas but sites where access and influence are unevenly distributed, and where the mutual adjustment mechanisms presuppose a degree of shared normative orientation that asymmetric power relations systematically undermine (Bressers & Kuks, 2003; Rhodes, 1997).

A third tension—less visible in the structural literature, yet consequential—concerns temporality. The five layers of Exhibit 5 capture what governance is at any given cross-section, but they do not account for how governance trajectories unfold, stabilize, or degrade over time. Governance systems are path-dependent, conditioned by inherited structures and prior reform cycles (Bevir, 2011; Rhodes, 1997), yet they must remain oriented towards future possibilities under conditions of deep uncertainty (Ison et al., 2014). The existing literature treats this temporality as historical context or adaptive orientation, but it is, more fundamentally, a question of how governance recursively sustains—or erodes—its own operational coherence across timescales. Tracing how actors connect and disconnect, how adjustment mechanisms strengthen or erode, and how viability is sustained or lost across a trajectory remains an open analytical challenge. The Viable System Model (Beer, 1984) provides a structural reference for such an inquiry, while organizational process theory (Hernes, 2014) offers conceptual and methodological tools to capture governance as a temporal trajectory rather than a static arrangement. This integration constitutes the principal gap identified by this review.

5 | Conclusion

The main question of this review—What is governance?—has been examined through a cross-disciplinary narrative synthesis that includes political science, public administration, systems science, and cybernetics. The proposed answer, based on Exhibit 5 and the three-dimensional governance diamond, is that governance is a dynamic, multilevel process of social coordination:

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it develops from the continuous interaction among the state, civil society, the private sector, and biophysical systems. This interaction occurs through competing modalities, maintained by feedback loops and mutual adjustment mechanisms, and influenced by historical paths. The synthesis is organized around seven interconnected dimensions (Exhibit 1), a cross-disciplinary taxonomy of four definitional clusters (Exhibit 3), an integrated conceptual model (Exhibit 4), and a concise analytical map (Exhibit 5). Together, these elements show what the field converges on beyond disciplinary differences: the role of metagovernance in resolving systemic contradictions and the importance of feedback, accountability, and adaptive capacity for effective governance.

Exhibit 5 serves as the article's main organizational contribution. It outlines five analytical layers—history, definitions, measurement, pathologies, and mutual adjustment—surrounding the relational structure of the three-dimensional governance diamond (Ison & Straw, 2020). Taken together, these layers highlight a highly complex governance system: one shaped by historical paths, organized through competing modalities, susceptible to systemic failures, and sustained—or not—by the integrity of its feedback channels and adjustment mechanisms. Although existing literature addresses each of these dimensions, it rarely examines them collectively or dynamically.

This review opens several directions for future research. Empirically, longitudinal case studies are needed to trace how specific governance configurations stabilise, fragment, or recover across successive reform cycles. Methodologically, integrating the Viable System Model with organizational process theory offers a route to analyzing governance as a temporal trajectory rather than a static arrangement, capturing both its structural integrity and its processual continuity. Pursuing this agenda promises a richer account of how governance systems sustain—or fail to sustain—the coherence required to navigate complex, multi-actor environments.

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