Revisiting the Relevance of Collaborative Governance to Korean Public Administration*

Taehyon Choi**

Abstract: Skepticism as to the relevance of collaborative governance theory and practice is often found in the literature on Korean public administration. It is not always clear, however, why and how collaborative governance is irrelevant. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the relevance of collaborative governance theory to South Korean public administration from the perspective of statelessness of the United States via three theoretical approaches: descriptive and explanatory, normative, and instrumental. Although collaborative governance can generate desirable public values related to participatory democracy, this paper suggests that if we are to apply the practice to Korean public administration, we need to develop an empirical theory of collaborative governance that incorporates the characteristics of a strong state and an instrumental theory of collaborative governance that explicitly considers group dynamics within the indigenous culture. To do this, furthermore, we first need to consider the degree to which Korean civil society appreciates the values related to collaborative governance.

Keywords: collaborative governance, statelessness, theory, comparative, state

INTRODUCTION

Interest in collaborative governance from both a theoretical and practical point of view has grown in recent times in the United States as well as South Korea. Collaborative governance is considered to be a way of solving chronic social conflicts among diverse stakeholders, of formulating local development plans or environmental protec-

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** Taehyon Choi is an assistant professor of public policy and administration in the Graduate School of Public Administration at Seoul National University. E-mail: taehyon@snu.ac.kr.

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tion policies through self-organization among stakeholders in a creative, deliberative, and mutually beneficial way (Thomson & Perry, 2006). In collaborative governance, participants such as social actors and governments are treated as equal and autonomous (Booher, 2004), and collective decisions are made not by voting but through consensus (Chambers, 2003). In short, collaborative governance is an avenue through which participatory democracy is achieved in the area of social conflict, local development, and environmental protection.

What has attracted theoretical interest in collaborative governance is the question of whether the ideal of collaborative governance developed uniquely in Western societies and in the United States in particular is universally applicable across countries with different political cultures and levels of democratization; in particular, whether the inherent nature of collaborative governance, which is characterized by weakened government power in decision making, or “steering,” and by enhanced citizen participation, is acceptable to countries with a history of a strong state and administrative power (Jung, 1996). Obviously, this is a variation of the traditional question from comparative politics with regard to policy and political system transfer (Dolowitz, 2004; Michael, 2004; Peters & Pierre, 2010).

The United States has been described as a “stateless” country, meaning that the U.S. Constitution does not prescribe any specific form of public administration and bureaucratic system (Stillman, 1990; Waldo, 1980). In establishing a whole new country, the founders of the U.S. Constitution sought to design a government with limited, checked, and balanced power (Rohr, 1986). Although the United States has also gone through an “administrative state” era (Majone, 1997; Schick, 1970), the ideal of the Constitution still remains the same. Collaborative governance, which emphasizes citizens’ self-determination and self-governance, is in this sense quite consistent with the statelessness of the U.S. Constitution in that it does not put strong government at the center of governance. However, the adoption of collaborative governance in other state-oriented countries such as South Korea has been understood mainly from the perspective of improving democracy or mitigating negative aspects of bureaucracy (Park & Lee, 2009; Yoo & Hong, 2005). More importantly, although previous research has sought to investigate the process through which collaborative governance in South Korea unfolds and the factors that affect the success and failure of collaborative governance (e.g., Chae & Kim, 2009; Cho, Roh, & Seoung, 2009; Eun, 2010; Kim, 2011; Yoo & Hong, 2005; Yoon, Jung, & Jeong, 2011), the question of what theoretical development is necessary for collaborative governance to be better employed to solve social conflicts and facilitate local development in those countries has not always been clearly addressed. In summary, what is lacking is a systematic understanding of the relevance of collaborative governance theory in terms of its descriptive and explanatory