

## Problems for Polycentric Governance Theory

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Vincent Ostrom's idea of polycentric governance has become increasingly popular over the past couple of decades, gaining ever-more adherents. But as the idea has become more popular, its meaning-in-use has become increasingly diverse. Some scholars continue to employ the term as Ostrom did – as a testable normative theory of governance according to which overlapping governance systems, with varying amounts of competition and cooperation in supplying public services, are expected to yield better outcomes than centralized governance structures. But others conceive it differently, e.g., as a discursive “lens” through which to analyze and evaluate governance systems or as subtype of “new governance” theories. The diverse uses of the compound term “polycentric governance” (a.k.a., polycentricity or polycentrism) create potential for confusion. Even more importantly, the *development* of polycentric governance theory simply has not kept pace with its increasing popularity. Proponents of the theory have not yet overcome some of the fundamental questions it raises. The purpose of this discussion is to bring at least some of those questions to the fore. Unless and until they receive more attention, it is not clear what empirical studies of polycentric governance systems actually accomplish.

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