Private Complements to Public Governance

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If Philip Hamburger’s arguments were to win the day, and the administrative state were abolished or significantly reduced in size and scope, what would replace it? If it were abolished completely, perhaps the simplest answer could be given: only the classical institutions of government created by the U.S. Constitution – the Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary – would remain. In the more likely event that the administrative state were reduced in size or scope, one or more alternative approaches might be needed to fill the resulting regulatory gaps. Indeed, a principal justification for the administrative state is that the needs of modern regulation are beyond the capacity of the classical institutions of government. If so, then without administrative agencies, some other institution or approach would be needed to address modern regulatory problems.

This Article suggests that private governance offers an attractive alternative or complement to the administrative state. It is commonly assumed that without administrative agencies, there would be no regulation. As a foundational matter, this Article challenges the notion that there are only two, mutually exclusive options: governmental regulation or no regulation at all. Although it is perfectly natural for public law scholars to focus primarily on regulation through government institutions and programs, much regulation is in fact accomplished via mechanisms outside the administrative state. At least in some circumstances, it is not only possible but may even be preferable to use such private governance – alone or in conjunction with public regulation – to achieve public goals.

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1. See Philip Hamburger, Is Administrative Law Unlawful? (2014). I leave it to other contributors to this Symposium to directly address Philip Hamburger’s arguments against the administrative state. Leaving aside the first-order question of whether those arguments are persuasive, I focus exclusively on the possibility of workable alternatives to the modern administrative state.

2. See U.S. Const. arts. I–III.

3. See Kent Barnett, Why Bias Challenges to Administrative Adjudication Should Succeed, 81 Mo. L. Rev. 1023, 1038 (2016) (“[U]nder a full-throated nondelegation doctrine,] Congress would be required to legislate on technical subjects on a magnitude too large for it to keep a modern economy and government functioning.”).

4. For example, social norms as a non-legal force regulating conduct have attracted significant scholarly attention. See generally Eric A. Posner, Law and Social Norms (2002); Robert C. Ellickson, Order Without Law: How Neighbors Settle Disputes (1991); cf. Richard H. McAdams, Signaling Discount Rates: Law, Norms, and Economic Methodology, 110 Yale L.J. 625, 626 (2001) (“The number of articles using a rational choice framework to discuss the interaction of law and norms is now too large to list even in a law review footnote.”).
Before this possibility can be assessed, “private governance” must be defined. As the term itself suggests, private governance has two components that are both self-evident and yet also warrant elaboration. First, private governance must be private, which most importantly means nongovernmental. It thus includes any action by people, entities, or institutions that exist outside of government. Second, private governance must be governance, defined broadly as actions in pursuit of traditionally governmental ends. These ends may include the protection of public values, the provision of public goods, and the regulation of social conduct in a manner that is beneficial for society as a whole.

To make this abstract definition of “private governance” more concrete, Part I of this Article begins by offering a number of examples of how private governance presently complements the administrative state. Part II suggests that the concept of comparative institutional advantage offers a touchstone for identifying situations in which private governance may be an effective and attractive alternative to governmental regulation. Recognizing that private governance is not always the best option, however, Part II also suggests some limitations on its use.

I. A Spectrum of Private Action Toward Public Ends

There are a variety of ways in which private governance can be used to achieve public ends, and the options can best be understood by organizing them along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are regimes that use or leverage private governance mechanisms but are designed, created, driven, and controlled by government. At the other end of the spectrum are regimes that are designed to achieve traditionally governmental ends but are independently designed, created, driven, and controlled by private sector actors and institutions. Frequently the focus of economic analysis, scholars describe these latter regimes as “private ordering” or “private governance.” Between the two extremes are regimes that mix elements of public and private governance, using each approach in some measure to achieve regulatory goals.


6. Cf. Michael P. Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, 99 CORNELL L. REV. 129, 146 (2013) [hereinafter Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance] (defining “private environmental governance” as “actions taken by nongovernmental entities that are designed to achieve traditionally governmental ends”). Some scholars have used the term “private regulation” to mean essentially the same thing. See, e.g., Lesley K. McAllister, Harnessing Private Regulation, 3 MICH. J. ENVTL. & ADMIN. L. 291, 293 (2014) (using the term “private regulation” to refer to situations in which “private actors engage in developing and implementing rules that serve the traditional social goals of public regulation, particularly health, safety, and environmental protection”).

the last fifteen years, public law scholars have increasingly noted and examined these regimes, referring to them as “public-private hybrids.” Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the full spectrum.

| Government | Public-Private Hybrids | Private Governance |

A. Government-Dominated Approaches

On the government side of the spectrum are programs through which government institutions (e.g., Congress or an administrative agency) establish substantive standards of conduct, leaving it to the private sector to implement or enforce those standards. One way this may be accomplished is through the creation of private rights of action to enforce federal statutes. For example, in the employment discrimination context, federal statutes create anti-discrimination rules, and these rules predominantly are enforced by private litigants bringing lawsuits against offending employers in the federal courts. Government is paramount in this regime: Congress created the regime and the


9. This skips over purely governmental regulation because the subject of this Article is how private governance either complements governmental regulation or offers an alternative to it. Of course, even in “purely” government regulation, private parties have some role. As Professor Vandenbergh explains, however, “[T]he story about private actors has remained essentially static: Firms attempt to influence regulations, but once an agency promulgates a regulation, a private firm is assumed to either comply or not comply.” Vandenbergh, Private Life, supra note 5, at 2031.


11. See, e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, § 706(k), 78 Stat. 241, 261 (1964) (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(k)) (providing attorney’s fees to prevailing private parties as an incentive to litigate employment discrimination claims); George Rutherglen, Private Rights and Private Actions: The Legacy of Civil Rights in the Enforcement of Title VII, 95 B.U. L. REV. 733, 734 (2015) (explaining that “a crucial feature of Title VII as civil rights legislation” is that it “gives control over enforcement of the statute to the individuals whose civil rights have been violated”); Glover, supra note 10, at 1148–1151 (offering labor and employment law as an example of the history of the use of private litigation as a public law enforcement mechanism).
substantive standards that apply within it, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (“EEOC”) plays an important role within the regime, and the federal courts control the incremental development of legal norms via individual decisions that have precedential effect. At the same time, individual private citizens must bring the lawsuits in order to animate the regime and make it effective. 

B. Public-Private Hybrids

Moving toward the private ordering end of the spectrum, there are public-private hybrids that involve a greater degree of independent private participation in the achievement of public ends. A key example is the privatization of traditionally public functions, which is often accomplished through government contracting. In these arrangements, public funds are used to pay a private entity to perform a public function that the government has historically performed, such as providing health and welfare services, public education, or prisons. The government is a driving force in these relationships, defining and paying for the work that is performed and retaining significant contractual control over both the public-private relationship and the contractors’ conduct.

In some cases, public-private hybrids may also participate in the development of substantive regulatory standards and in the implementation and enforcement of those standards. In these cases, there may be some contractual relationship between an administrative agency and one or more private actors. But rather than providing public services to citizens, the resulting public-private hybrid engages in one or more of three tasks that are traditionally the province of administrative agencies: “the setting, implementation, and enforcement (including monitoring) of standards.” This occurs through


17. See Vandenbergh, Private Life, supra note 5, at 2037.

18. Id. at 2038.

Although public-private hybrids involve more independent action by private entities to achieve public ends, the government retains primacy in the relationship.\footnote{See Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 146.} For example, Jody Freeman, a scholar who has worked extensively in this area, has suggested “the possibility of harnessing private capacity to serve public goals.”\footnote{See Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 146.} Indeed, public law scholars often consider public-private hybrids attractive because of their potential to improve government performance or solve perceived problems in public regulatory programs.\footnote{See Vandenbergh, Private Life, supra note 5, at 2039; Freeman, supra note 8, at 548–49.}
Government ordinarily is the driving force in these arrangements, the focus of which is the implementation of regulatory standards or objectives established by government institutions.

C. Private Ordering

Moving still further in the direction of private ordering are alternatives in which the primary public connection is to the ends or goals of a regime that is predominantly controlled and driven by private institutions or actors. A good recent example is found in Michael Vandenbergh’s work on private environmental governance. Private environmental governance includes actions voluntarily and independently undertaken by private sector actors to achieve traditionally public ends in spaces where no governmental regulation presently exists. These activities include collective environmental standard setting, as well as purely private contracts that facilitate bilateral environmental standard setting, monitoring, and enforcement. One example is found in the 465 ecolabelling programs that now exist around the world. In these programs, nongovernmental organizations establish environmental standards and award the privilege of using a particular label on products or services that are certified compliant. Generally, no public law or governmental regulator requires compliance with the standards, participation in the certification process, or display of the label. Private certification systems operate much the same and serve similar functions. Another example is the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (“LEED”) standards, which are established by the U.S. Green Building Council. These “standards allow builders to certify compliance with efficiency and environmental requirements at several levels of stringency (Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze).”

Moving beyond the environmental context, the U.S. technical standardization system is a vast, predominately private, independent governance structure that has both a long history and a significant role in the achievement of traditionally public goals. Technical standards are essential for technological innovation and interoperability, trade, the economy, and public health and

27. See generally Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6.
28. See id.
30. See Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 149–151 (discussing certification systems for forestry sustainability, fishery sustainability, and aquaculture).
32. Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 153.
safety. Although these standards are a ubiquitous part of life, they are largely
invisible to the average consumer. The system through which these standards
are created emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when a number of
private organizations emerged to fulfill the enormous standardization needs
of, first, the industrial revolution and, second, the World Wars.34 Today, this
system remains predominately private. But it has grown in size, importance,
and sophistication, with a large number of organizations using voluntary con-
sensus procedures to create the standards and then maintain them as technol-
y and other circumstances rapidly change and evolve.35

The U.S. standards system has largely escaped the notice of public law
scholars – perhaps because it is predominantly private – but its sheer size and
central importance to significant, traditionally public ends make it well worth
study.36 It is estimated that there are over 100,000 private technical standards
in use throughout the country, created by more than 600 active standards de-
velopment organizations. To give a rough comparison with public regulation,
there are over 100 agencies in the federal government, and not all of these
exercise regulatory power. Although federal agencies commonly incorporate
private standards into federal regulations, it is estimated that only 2 to 4 per-
cent of all private standards are ever so incorporated.37 As these numbers
suggest, the U.S. standards system is an enormous private governance regime
that has relatively minimal interface with governmental regulatory programs.
And yet it has for a long period succeeded in efficiently and effectively ac-
complishing a wide range of public goals.38

One way in which these various private governance regimes differ from
public-private hybrids is that they generally arise in the absence of govern-

34. Id. at 301, 305, 310.

35. See generally ANSI Essential Requirements: Due Process Requirements for
American National Standards, AM. NAT’L STANDARDS INST. (Jan. 2016),
https://share.ansi.org/shared%20documents/Standards%20Activities/American%20Na-
tonal%20Standards/Procedures,%20Guides,%20and%20Forms/2016_ANSI_Essential_R
quirements.pdf.

36. There has been a recent burst of scholarly interest in the incorporation by
reference of private technical standards because the copyrights that standards de-
velopment organizations ordinarily assert in the standards they produce have emerged as
a barrier to making incorporated standards as freely available to the public as regula-
tions and other agency documents have become in the Internet age. See Bremer, On
the Cost, supra note 33; Mendelson, supra note 25; Peter L. Strauss, Private Stan-
dards Organizations and Public Law, 22 WM. & MARY BILL RTS. J. 497 (2013);
Bremer, Incorporation by Reference, supra note 20; see also Administrative Confer-
ence of the United States, Recommendation 2011-5, Incorporation by Reference, 77
solution to the problem of public access to materials incorporated by reference in federal regulation).

37. See Bremer, On the Cost, supra note 33, at 306–07

38. See Bremer, Incorporation by Reference, supra note 20, at 139–41.
mental direction or regulation. 39 In some cases, private governance fills a gap in governmental regulation. 40 For example, as Professor Vandenbergh notes, Congress has failed to enact any major environmental legislation since the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, and so private actors have worked to fill the gap by addressing new environmental problems and generating needed environmental norms. 41 The private standards system similarly emerged because of the failure of states and the federal government to meet widespread standardization needs. 42 In other cases, private actors may regulate themselves in an effort to forestall or preempt governmental regulation. 43

The absence of public regulation distinguishes private governance from public-private hybrids in another important respect: it provides greater latitude for independent private action with little or no governmental involvement. Private control in these areas is more comprehensive, beginning with the development of substantive norms and continuing through the implementation and enforcement of those norms. The resulting regulatory system, although private, may be large, complex, sophisticated, and highly effective. In some instances, so much so that public regulatory authorities may discover that it is necessary to integrate existing private governance regimes into public regulation in order to best protect public values, promote health and safety, or fulfill other statutory mandates. 44 In short, the primacy of government, which is observable at previous points along the spectrum, is generally absent in those areas in which private governance has emerged fully.

II. CHOOSING PRIVATE GOVERNANCE

If private governance can be considered as an alternative or complement to the administrative state, what metric should be used to identify areas in which the goals of existing public regulation might be addressed effectively through private governance? Perhaps an appropriate metric is that of comparative institutional advantage, a concept often invoked in the separation of powers context. 45 Private actors or institutions may have characteristics that

39. See McAllister, supra note 6, at 293.
41. Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 131–133.
42. See Bremer, On the Cost, supra note 33, at 303–04.
43. See McAllister, supra note 6, at 294.
44. See Bremer, On the Cost, supra note 33, at 308–09.
enable them to address certain kinds of regulatory problems more efficiently or effectively than administrative agencies.46 In such instances, those private actors or institutions may be said to have some comparative institutional advantage over public institutions such as federal regulatory agencies.

Private institutions may have several advantages over government agencies. First, in some cases, addressing a regulatory problem may require specialized experience or knowledge that exists outside of government. For example, developing technical standards ordinarily requires cutting-edge engineering or technological knowledge and experience.47 It is not primarily a matter of making policy choices or creating rules to manage human conduct or relations. Reflecting this reality, the people who volunteer their time to participate in technical standards development are typically engineers or other technical experts who work in the industry that will use and be affected by the standards.48 Second, private institutions may be able to respond more nimbly, efficiently, and cost-effectively than administrative agencies to changes in technology, industry practice, or other circumstances.49 This is partially because public law requirements, such as the procedural requirements for notice-and-comment rulemaking, do not constrain private institutions as they do administrative agencies.50 Private governance is often voluntary, accomplished by agreement and in accord with self-interest. Under these conditions, it may be easier to take action. And that action may be accorded greater respect and adherence over time.

Just as private governance may have advantages, it may also have limitations. As noted, private governance is often effective and efficient precisely because it is voluntary. But this suggests the possibility that private governance is unlikely to work well to address matters that are highly controversial or significantly contested. If affected parties have strongly divergent inter-

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46. See, e.g., Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 139 (“[G]overnment may not always be the best actor, and public regulation may not always be the best type of intervention. The optimal response may be private governance or a mix of public and private governance.”).


48. See Bremer, On the Cost, supra note 33, at 308.

49. See Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 138.

ests, they may not be able to come to an agreement.\textsuperscript{51} In such circumstances, the coercive authority of the state may be needed both to decide upon a course of action and to implement or enforce the chosen solution.\textsuperscript{52} It may be more appropriate in these situations for public institutions to govern.

In addition to such practical considerations, private governance may raise normative and procedural concerns.\textsuperscript{53} When a regime is intended to achieve public ends or protect public values, it may also be important for that regime to adhere to rules and norms that reflect public values.\textsuperscript{54} For example, a private governance system should be transparent, so that both its participants and products are knowable to a public that may be affected by that system. Rules to ensure openness and participation by a balanced range of affected interests may similarly be necessary to preserve legitimacy and protect the substantive validity of a private governance regime.\textsuperscript{55} Experience shows that government can influence private entities, both directly through regulation and indirectly through relationships and networks, to adopt these and other socially beneficial rules and policies.\textsuperscript{56}

III. CONCLUSION

This Article has suggested that the possibilities for private governance are as numerous and diverse as are the challenges the modern administrative state is designed to address. These possibilities could prove useful in the event that, as Philip Hamburger has urged, the administrative state were to be abolished or significantly reduced in scope. But private governance is also worth considering – either alone or in conjunction with public regulation – in the absence of such extraordinary circumstances. By considering the comparative institutional advantages of public and private actors and carefully evaluating the public norms that may be at stake in a particular regulatory

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} See Cheit, supra note 47, at 39–64 (discussing the private sector’s inability to develop an effective standard to prevent the risks of combustible dust due to deep disagreement over fundamentally non-technical issues).
\item \textsuperscript{52} See Vandenbergh, Private Environmental Governance, supra note 6, at 143.
\item \textsuperscript{53} See, e.g., Ellen D. Katz, Private Order and Public Institutions, Comments on McMillan and Woodruff’s ‘Private Order Under Dysfunctional Public Order’, 98 Mich. L. Rev. 2481, 2481–82 (2000) (arguing that private ordering must be accompanied by public order in order to achieve “greater legitimacy and fairness”).
\item \textsuperscript{54} The application of public norms to private actors is referred to as “publicization.” See Avishai Benish & Asa Maron, Infusing Public Law into Privatized Welfare: Lawyers, Economists and the Competing Logics of Administrative Reform, 50 L. & Soc’y Rev. 953, 956 (2016).
\item \textsuperscript{56} See Freeman, supra note 8, at 671–73.
\end{itemize}
context, the most effective mixture of public and private governance can be selected. Public law scholars have recognized the potential, and there is significant opportunity to continue and expand upon that work.