Preface

Despite the growing research output on public–private partnerships (PPPs), there is less systematic comparison of the PPP policies and politics of European governments. Edited volumes provide a collection of in depth case studies rather than a systematic comparison and scholarly articles mostly focus on details within one or two countries or cases. Against this background, the motivation for this book is to mitigate the gap in comparative research on PPP and to integrate the results of different branches of research on PPPs in Western Europe. Quite often, research on PPP is divided into different branches such as legal and institutional aspects, management, economic and financial dimensions and, last but not least, public policy analysis and politics research. Thus, there is a broad range of disciplines, such as economics, area studies and public policy, which often ignore the genuine political dimension of PPP as well as a comparative perspective.

Quite often, the strongest political support for PPP has been provided by individual politicians such as Gordon Brown in the United Kingdom (UK), Gerhard Schröder in Germany, Nikolas Sarkozy in France or Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. However, for a ‘sustainable’ institutionalization of PPP in a country it takes much more than the commitment of some leading politicians. Some of these factors of influence for the implementation of the PPP approach will be analysed in the course of this book. Due to the complexity of the matter, the focus of interest is on a selection of institutional, socioeconomic and political variables.

Focusing on the ‘politics of PPP’ in this book aims to raise awareness that PPP is not a ‘naturally grown product’ of politics but a result of political decision making based on public and private interests and facilitated or hampered by contextual conditions. Politics is about decision making, and political decisions often influence the ‘performance’ of public and private organizations and institutions. Political decision making has a distributive dimension, as politics influences ‘who gets what, when and how’ (Dye 1976). PPP supporters often argue that the sceptics simply ignore the benefits of public–private collaboration (such as efficiency gains), while PPP sceptics stress the negative impact on public sovereignty and social equality. Against such often normatively
biased debates, the book aims to focus empirically on political drivers and stoppers of PPP in the context of institutional and socioeconomic factors. It does not try to answer questions of efficiency of PPP or even normative ones of the (un)desirability of PPP.

Instead, the book aims to systematically investigate factors explaining the different levels of PPP activity in Western Europe between 1990 and 2009, thereby building on qualitative and quantitative methods. In this macro-comparative approach country studies play an important role and cover aspects of the socioeconomic background, partisanship and institutional context as well as patterns of PPP politics at national and regional level. The book aims to bring together socioeconomic, regional, administrative and policy aspects under the encompassing title of ‘The Politics of PPP’.

In a comparative perspective, we look in the first chapters for factors explaining the different intensities of PPP use in a sample of 14 Western European countries. We look for differences and similarities in political patterns concerning the use of PPP and investigate how these differences can be explained. Among others, we empirically test factors such as partisanship, veto players, structure of interest groups, and public finances. In the remaining chapters, comparative case studies are conducted in order to qualitatively test the results from the earlier quantitative chapter. Here, the comparison is based on a pairwise case selection, trying to put together cases with similar features in their test conditions such as unitary or federal structures. However, two groups encompass three cases: in the north of Europe, policies and politics of the Scandinavian states are often closely interconnected, and in the south, countries like Spain, Portugal and Greece often face similar challenges due to their location at the southern European ‘periphery’. Surprisingly, the countries of the northern group are the least committed in terms of PPP policy support, while the southerners are among the most committed. The central European states are somewhere in between, with the UK forming an outlier in terms of PPP policy support. The book aims to contribute to the question: what are the factors that lead to this variation?

Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (Cologne, Germany) and the Leverhulme Trust (London, UK). The Leverhulme Trust enabled me to spend a year at the University of Kent at Canterbury to study the PPP/PFI phenomenon in the UK, its European ‘epicentre’. The Fritz Thyssen Foundation enabled further research at the Chemnitz University of Technology, Chair of European Government Systems in Comparison. Without their support (and that of many others), this book would have not been realized.