1. Introduction

This book argues that public governance is changing so rapidly and profoundly that public administration research is struggling to keep up and to keep track of the changes and their various implications. A broad range of well-established principles, perceptions and forms of governing in the public sector are being challenged by new ideas, concepts and practices that, when taken together, are transforming the modus operandi of public governance. Hence, new and emerging forms of political leadership, public management, public organization, administrative steering, cross-boundary collaboration, public regulation and societal problem-solving are being combined with new digital technologies and a novel focus on the production of innovative public value outcomes.

The pace of governance changes has accelerated in recent decades. After half a century of an almost undisputed reign of liberal democracy and public bureaucracy, New Public Management (NPM) reforms swept the world beginning in the late 1970s. Despite their positive impact and results, these NPM practices soon gave rise to an array of criticisms that, in the subsequent decades, spurred the proliferation of several new governance paradigms. Hence, public administration researchers started talking about the Neo-Weberian State (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011), Digital Era Governance (Dunleavy 2006), Public Value Management (Benington & Moore 2010) and New Public Governance (Osborne 2010). In many cases, the new ideas about public governance triggered reforms, resulting in new practices. While it is difficult to explain the growing pace of public governance reforms, globalization, new technologies, growing citizen demands and the recognition of the planetary limits seem to have disrupted the established forms of public governance and have engaged elected politicians, public managers and an army of private consultants in experimentation, learning and innovation diffusion. In other words, changes in the public sector reflect both external societal change and internal agency-based learning and entrepreneurship.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the transformation of public governance. Against a tragic background of illness, death and economic hardship, public sectors around the world have produced numerous innovations in response to the immense pressures from the pandemic, lockdowns and the new health regulations. These crisis-induced innovations have transformed both the form and function of administrative systems and the provision of services to citizens (Torfing et al. 2022). Some of them might vanish with the
return to normalcy, but proactive efforts to learn from the catastrophic health crisis and retain new and better practices will help to produce a lasting impact on public governance.

What is perceived as “new” and “changed” is often more a matter of poor memory, as it merely reactivates, recycles and repackages old ideas and practices as part of repetitive pendulum swings. While this is true, we should be careful not to adopt a circular view of history that precludes disruptive change. Hence, we seldom solve new and emerging problems by returning to the past. Instead, we engage in what Schumpeter (1942) once termed “creative destruction.” As such, there is little doubt that much of the current change is “real” in the sense of taking us in new directions that challenge the public governance orthodoxy, which combines national forms of representative democracy and public bureaucracy with NPM elements.

The foundation of the public governance orthodoxy in the Western world was established following the Second World War, when public bureaucracy expanded under the aegis of democratically elected governments. In response to mounting criticisms in the 1970s, the democratic and bureaucratic nation-state gradually integrated core elements from NPM, such as an increased reliance on competitive markets and systematic use of performance management (Hood 1991). The result was a new public governance system that, at least in theory, could deliver democratic accountability, bureaucratic compliance and economic efficiency. It is this public governance orthodoxy that is now being challenged by new trends and developments that are triggered by a combination of organizational learning, chance discoveries, emerging challenges, new possibilities and changing administrative fads and fashions. Yet it is clear that the tried-and-true forms of politics and administration associated with the public governance orthodoxy are neither disappearing overnight nor rendered obsolete by the new and promising forms of public governance. We usually find ourselves stuck in the middle between old and new forms of governance. This pinch tends to make us feel as though we must choose between adhering to the past or embracing the future, when we should rather be searching for ways to combine and balance new and old ideas and practices. Perhaps we should be rearticulating both as part of a robust and future-oriented public governance system aimed at combining the best from the past with the best of the new and emerging forms of public governance, while being prepared to flexibly adapt the combination of disparate public governance tools to changing conditions and new challenges.

THEORIES OF PUBLIC GOVERNANCE CHANGE

This book defines public governance as the more or less institutionalized processes through which political, administrative and societal actors formulate
and achieve common objectives (Torfing et al. 2019). This broad definition
makes public governance inseparable from democracy, public administra-
tion and the exercise of leadership. It also tends to perceive government as
a particular form of governance that is characterized by being both formal
and unicentric. Public governance can in fact assume different forms, since
common objectives may be formulated and achieved by political and admin-
istrative leaders of hierarchical government, quasi-markets involving private
firms in state-regulated competition for public service contracts, or relevant
and affected actors engaged in collaborative forms of governance in networks
and partnerships.

Public governance is constantly changing as new forms of governance
emerge and combine with existing forms of governance. To understand the
changing forms of governance, public administration research has developed
several change theories. The first group of theories is rational reform theories,
which basically argue that public organizations monitor their performance and
regularly identify problems and challenges that trigger the search for alter-
native solutions, along with the calculation of the costs and benefits of each
available solution, and finally select and implement the most promising solu-
tion. There are several modifications of the theories of rational reform. Some
researchers point to the absence of full information about alternative solutions
and the limited decision-making capacity that forces decision-makers to adopt
satisfactory rather than optimal solutions (Simon 1996). Others have stressed
the political opposition and conflicts that tend to prevent the top-down imple-
mentation of public reform initiatives (Peters 2002). Finally, some scholars
claim that the rational change agents are not found at the apex of public organ-
izations but rather at the agency level, where public managers and employees
are engaged in budget maximizing (Niskanen 1968) and bureau-shaping
(Dunleavy 1998).

A second group of change theories is associated with historical institution-
alism, which claims that the institutional density in the field of public govern-
ance tends to lock public policy and administration into stable paths that are
almost inescapable, even in the face of feasible alternatives that could poten-
tially enhance efficiency (Pierson 2000; Torfing 2009). A stable path is created
through a mixture of accidental events and the codification of compromises
between conflicting actors, and it tends to govern the thinking and doing in
a particular field for long periods of time with only small, incremental changes
(Hall 1993; Mahoney 2000; True et al. 2019). A combination of sunk costs and
the uncertainty and risks associated with reform prevents rational reform, so
the stable path will endure until a major crisis destabilizes and disrupts it, thus
opening the window of opportunity for reform.

A third group of incremental change theories questions the sharp division
between stable institutionalized paths and rational intentional reforms, arguing
that even stable paths may be subject to gradual change. Stable paths may defy radical reform attempts but be susceptible to incremental change through the continuous replacement of old rules with new ones, the layering of new rules and values on top of old changes in the environment that alter the meaning and significance of established rules and norms, and strategic changes in the application of existing rules (Streeck & Thelen 2005; Mahoney & Thelen 2009). Echoing earlier theories of muddling through (Lindblom 1959), this incremental change theory complements the historical institutionalist theory of path-dependent lock-ins by accounting for the possibility of change in rather than of a particular path. The gradual changes in a particular path may be completely uncoordinated and thus go in different directions. Hence, we are still far away from the assumptions of hierarchically controlled strategic change found in rational reform theory.

What all of these change theories lack is a clear understanding of the driver of change in public governance. Fortunately, Powell and DiMaggio (1983) come to our rescue as they convincingly show how public organizations tend to adopt the latest fad and fashion in order to appear legitimate in the eyes of external actors. Apparently, legitimacy is more important than efficiency for the long-term survival of public governance institutions. If a public organization is doing either what the government prescribes, what other similar organizations are doing or what their new employees say is the “new black,” the organization is likely to be forgiven for being somewhat inefficient. An important modification to this theory is that public organizations rarely buy the whole package of prescriptions for governance reform, tending instead to use a mix-and-match strategy when adopting new fashionable ideas and practice. New organizational templates are disaggregated and subsequently translated and adapted before particular parts of them are adopted (Røvik 2016).

The role of “magic concepts” in spurring change in public governance has been highlighted by Pollitt and Hupe (2011), who also recognize the limits to theories about the pressures from shifting fashions. What becomes fashionable has a certain bearing on the problems and challenges encountered by leading political and administrative actors. Hence, as famously suggested by Kingdon (1984), innovation is a result of the contingent alignment of separate streams of problems and solutions with favorable political forces that are driven by new ideas, perceptions and discourses. The successful alignment of problems, solutions and discursive contexts is most likely in situations characterized by crisis and disruption and tends to be carried out by skillful policy entrepreneurs (Birkmann et al. 2010). The latter might be found at the apex of government institutions, at lower organizational levels or among private stakeholders. Hence, collaboration and coalition-building are crucial to fostering change.

In Kingdon’s multiple-stream framework, problems and solutions are floating around in the “primeval soup” before policy entrepreneurs seize the right
moment and exploit a particular occasion to join them and show how they fit the discourse they are trying to advance. Hence, we are still in the realm of temporal sorting where solutions may precede problems and vice versa, meaning that traditional means–end rationality is limited (March & Olsen 1989).

This book eclectically combines all of the above-mentioned change theories in arguing that public decision-makers often see themselves as drivers of rational reform, but quickly realize the political barriers and the inertia of highly institutionalized paths, which may be subject to incremental change until they are shattered by disruptive events. These open the window of opportunity and create a terrain for policy entrepreneurs to create what might become a new stable path through the alignment of problems and solutions with new fashionable ideas and discourses (Torfing 1999).

FIND AND ENLARGE

This book is about rethinking public governance. Rather than engaging in a critical and constructive reading of existing theories of public governance (see Ansell 2023) however, it has an empirical starting point. Hence, the present attempt to rethink public governance is prompted by observations of new, interesting and promising trends detectable in some but not all Western countries. The identification of these trends relies on subjective interpretations of emerging ideas and practices backed by empirical accounts and scholarly discussions.

Looking back on my own research, I realize that I tend to use the same method of inquiry over and over again. This method could be called “find and enlarge,” and it begins by looking for new and promising solutions to pressing problems. When a solution is found and positively evaluated, it is time to go back to the drawing board to properly conceptualize, theorize and scrutinize the new promising finding based on existing concepts and theories—and perhaps the invention of new ones that better capture what is happening. This endeavor is crucial to avoid falling into the trap of impressionistic descriptivism and premature diffusion of new fads and fashions. The final step is to enlarge the newly conceptualized promising finding by looking for empirical manifestations in different places, conducting systematic studies of its conditions, forms and impact, and experimenting with its usage to pave the way for its future extension and robust application. The find-and-enlarge method is basically an abductive method aiming to posit a solution to relevant societal problems while alternately drawing on empirical and theoretical resources in a back-and-forth movement (Glynos & Howarth 2007).

To illustrate, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a magnifying glass revealing how the public sector is expected to solve not only simple and complex
problems but also turbulent problems characterized by unpredictability, uncertainty, inconsistency and instability. Looking at the attempts to deal with the pandemic, which has stretched the public sector to its limits, it is interesting and encouraging to see how public organizations have produced an array of agile responses that are flexibly adapted to changing conditions and seek to exploit new opportunities to produce innovative solutions. To capture this promising way of responding to the health crisis, cutting-edge research has started exploring robust solutions to turbulent problems. Robustness is conceptualized as a dynamic resilience aimed at exploiting the crisis situation to foster adaptive and innovative solutions that, instead of aiming to restore a pre-crisis equilibrium, seek to take us to a new and better place (Ansell et al. 2020). Hence, robust solutions aim to bounce forward instead of bouncing back.

The concept of policy and governance robustness provides a new strategy for maintaining key functions, goals and values in the public sector in times of crisis-induced turbulence by means of flexible adaptation and proactive innovation (Capano & Woo 2018).

The find-and-enlarge method is a way of rethinking public governance based on a theoretical and practical interrogation of pressing problems and promising solutions. It aims to describe and advance possible solutions, some of which might sweep the world, while others appear to be dead ends or survive in new and unexpected forms. The method informs all of the chapters in this book, each of which explores a particular aspect of public governance and aims to identify problems and promising solutions that are conceptualized and theorized in order to enlarge their impact.

The method clearly has a normative foundation since it aims to identify promising solutions to pressing problems. This begs the question: What is a “promising” solution? It is certainly neither an ideal or optimal solution, nor is it a proven and well-documented solution. It is a solution that offers an attractive yet feasible solution to an urgent governance problem, thus promising to contribute to the production of a contextually defined value. Hence, the ultimate normative yardstick is the production of public value defined as what has value for society at large and what different publics value (Moore 1995). It goes without saying that there will often be a conflict between what has value for society at large and what has value for particular groups in society, and that the final negotiation of such conflicts is highly contingent and inherently political.

AIM AND CONTENT

This book aims to identify, explain and critically evaluate new and emerging ideas, practices and institutions that are transforming how public governance is perceived and conducted in practice. It focuses on cutting-edge developments
in public governance and analyzes how they are framed and theorized. The hope is that the book will inspire graduate students, established researchers, and engaged practitioners to rethink how public governance and public administration may be functioning, operating, and organized in the future.

The next chapter will paint a broad picture of the public governance orthodoxy that, in recent decades, has combined representative democracy and public bureaucracy with NPM elements. The book then devotes a full chapter to each of the ten most significant transformations that have occurred in the field of public governance and discusses how the new and old forms of governance can be combined in a pragmatic and constructive manner to align the quest for accountability, compliance, and efficiency with the ability to mobilize the knowledge and resources of a broad range of actors in the pursuit of innovative solutions to pressing societal problems. The concluding chapter reflects on how students of public governance can best comprehend, study, and take advantage of the current transformations in public governance.

REFERENCES


