Political innovations

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Innovations in political institutions, processes and outputs

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Abstract

Public innovation has become a key objective for governments all over the Western world and is a growing research area among students of public policy and governance. At the heart of this new agenda is the search for ways to make the public sector more innovative. Governments and researchers alike are mainly interested in assessing and promoting innovations in public service delivery, but have paid little or no attention to the need for innovations in polity, politics and policy. This article proposes a research agenda for studying innovations in political institutions, in the political process and in policy outputs. It proposes a number of research themes related to political innovations that call for scholarly attention, and identifies push and pull factors influencing the likelihood that these themes will be addressed in future research.

Introduction

Public innovation has risen to the top of the agenda among governments all over the Western world (OECD, 2012; US, 2012, 2013; EU-Commission, 2013; UK, 2014). The message is clear: the public sector needs to become more innovative in order to meet the demands of modern society. There is also a growing interest in public innovation amongst students of public policy and governance, who are currently working to define and conceptualise public innovation, analyse drivers of, and barriers to, innovation in the public sector, and prescribe ways to make the public sector more innovative. However, researchers have so far mainly theorised, studied and analysed issues related to innovations in public services and public delivery, asking questions such as: what new services, production methods, procedures and organisational set-ups for service provision have emerged? How are the innovations produced and who is involved? Which management capacities and tool kits are used, and to what effect? What impact do different innovations have on the quality and price of public service provision (Osborne and Brown, 2005; Osborne and Brown, 2013; Mulgan, 2014)? This burgeoning body of research on public service innovation is both valuable and relevant, as it provides important knowledge about how the public sector shapes public service innovation, as well as about how, and to what extent, such innovations affect the efficiency and effectiveness of public governance. What has so far been overlooked, however, is the fact that public service innovation takes place in a political context, and that innovations in polity, politics and policy are fundamental aspects of public innovation. A comprehensive research agenda on public innovation should, therefore, include studies of *political innovation* that I will, at this point, tentatively define as intentional efforts to transform political institutions designed to make authoritative political decisions (polity), the political processes that lead to such decisions (politics), and the content of the resulting policies (policy).

The aim of this article is to put political innovation on the public innovation research agenda by proposing a number of research themes that, in this particular day and age, call for scholarly attention

and debate. Before moving on, I should clarify that public innovation, be it a service innovation or a political innovation, is not a goal in itself. It is a means to an end, which is to produce public value, however, that may be defined during the authoritative political process. At a given point in time, stability may be perceived as more important than innovation in achieving this goal, and much of the time the trick is to balance the need for stability against the need for change and innovation. The new public innovation agenda is important because it demonstrates that public innovation is actually an option. This is an important insight at a time when Western governments seem particularly eager to transform the public sector in order to improve its ability to deal efficiently, effectively and democratically with proliferating wicked and unruly problems (Levin *et al*, 2012), as well as to overcome growing legitimacy problems (Dalton, 2004; Rothstein, 2009).

The article starts by outlining the emerging public innovation agenda and its tendency to overlook political innovations. Political innovations are then defined, and their important role in public innovation is described. With a point of departure in cutting-edge public policy and governance research, I list a number of research themes and questions that call for studies of, and between, innovations in polity, politics and policy, and I assess the prospects for political innovation to rise to the top of the public sector innovation agenda in the coming years.

The emerging agenda on public sector innovation

Until recently, it was a truism that public bureaucracies were naturally, either for better or worse, resistant and aversive to change, and were capable of no creativity to speak of (Weber, 1947; Downs, 1957). Innovation was perceived as something businesses carried out in order to survive in competitive markets and, if anything, the role of the public sector was to give domestic firms easy access to innovation assets such as cutting-edge scientific knowledge, a well-educated labour force, and a supportive infrastructure. The purpose was to spur economic growth and prosperity in society, and the private sector was perceived as the motor for achieving this (OECD, 2015). A Google search for the terms 'public sector and innovation' illustrates that this approach to the relationship between the public sector and innovation still prevails, with triple helix and partnership models featuring among more recent developments in our understanding of how the public sector can promote private innovation and growth (Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 1998; National Science Foundation, 2015). However, a new public sector approach to innovation is gradually gaining momentum in Western liberal democracies, which focuses on how the public sector itself can become more innovative. In Canada, the government has set in motion an innovation process that aims to recast the public school system in order to focus on learning instead of teaching; Danish municipalities are currently engaged in developing services for the elderly that focus on rehabilitation rather than care; and the UK is on the lookout for new innovative measures to engage the public in ensuring public safety through different forms of community policing. What unites these endeavours is that they represent open-ended attempts to develop new, innovative approaches to solving public tasks.

Claims to causality are a risky business in the social sciences, and caution is called for when it comes to explaining why new issues enter government agendas. Robert Kingdon (1984) points to randomness, coincidence and policy entrepreneurs with a good sense of timing as important factors in agenda setting; and Christopher Pollitt and Peter Hupe (2011: 641) use the term 'magic concept' to describe topics such as 'innovation' that have what it takes to attract broad-based attention from decision makers, notably a vague, fuzzy meaning and positive connotations. Yet none of these factors can explain why public innovation is entering government agendas right now. Innovation theory is

helpful, however, in pointing out that innovations are driven by push and pull factors (Torfing, 2016). Pull factors are when ambitions are voiced and appear realistic to pursue. Push factors are when a given state of affairs is perceived as dangerous and unsustainable.

Taking departure in this *pull-push terminology*, the growing interest in making the public sector more innovative can, on the pull factor side, be explained by positive experiences with introducing ICT in the public sector in the 1990s that have nurtured a growing belief in, and ambition to develop, a new and different kind of public sector (Contini and Anzara, 2009). The push factors include: intensified global competition that has transformed nations into competition states (Cerney, 1997). Whether a country wins or loses in the global competition for economic growth is no longer viewed as depending solely on the ability of domestic firms to innovate, and the support they get from public authorities in doing so. Winning or losing also depends on the efficiency and effectiveness of the way society is governed. Since the 1980s, governments have launched initiatives and reforms aimed at rendering public governance more efficient and effective (Hood, 1991; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993), but disappointing efficiency gains, growing fiscal austerity and rising citizen demands for public services at the beginning of the 21st century have put pressure on Western governments to find more radical ways to create more for less, and innovation promises exactly that (Pollitt, 2010; Hood and Dixon, 2015). In addition to the pressure for increased efficiency, there is a push to improve the quality of public governance. The public performance measurement regimes that emerged in the wake of the New Public Management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s have revealed an effectiveness deficit in a number of policy areas. The problem-solving capacity of the public sector is simply insufficient. Some researchers explain this effectiveness deficit as the result of a growth in wicked policy problems with a high level of complexity (Mayntz, 1993; Kooiman, 1993; Pierre and Peters, 2000; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004); while others speak of policy execution problems stemming from misinformed policies (Macmillan and Cain, 2010; Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, forthcoming). The message is the same, however: the public sector must become more effective, and that calls for innovation.

After the turn of the century, many public policy and governance researchers parted ways with the general assumption that public innovation is an oxymoron, and embarked on open-ended studies of the realities of public sector innovation, developing theories that sought to identify the specific drivers and barriers to public innovation, and proposing ways to make the public sector more innovative (Borins, 2001, 2014; Eggers and Singh, 2009; Bekkers, Edelenbos and Steijn, 2011; Hartley, Torfing and Sørensen, 2013; Agger et al, 2014). The main focus of attention in this research has been on service innovation e.g. innovations in the content of public services as well as in the way they are provided. This service-oriented approach to innovation is inspired by traditional as well as newer theories of private sector innovation (Schumpeter, 1939; Nijssen et al, 2006) that speak directly to the aspirations of current governments to develop a public sector that produces more and better public services for less.

The emerging research on public service innovation is important, but it tends to overlook the fact that, unlike in the private sector, public innovation takes place in a political organisational context. Public service innovations are not only conditioned by what service users want but also by what political decision makers prioritise in terms of funding, and chose to regulate with reference to more or less contested political perceptions of what is right, just and valuable for the individual citizens as well as for society.

This political context has two immediate implications for a research agenda on public innovation. First, it calls for studies of how public service innovation is conditioned by existing policies and the

political climate that exists in a given context. Studies are needed of service innovations in the light of whether or not they are developed in a context of intense political contestation. Also relevant are studies of how bottom-up service innovations initiated and developed by employees and/or relevant and affected citizens are endorsed by politicians, and of how, and to what effect, service innovations are initiated by governments as part of their political programmes.

Second, a comprehensive public innovation research programme must include studies of political innovations in their own right. Political institutions (polity), processes (politics) and programmes (policy) are more or less constantly being transformed, but these transformations are rarely analysed as instances of public innovation. Public innovation research must be able to provide descriptions, analyses and assessments of any resulting changes in the political system, as well as in their purpose and impact, including how the changes affect political systems' own ability to innovate in the years that follow. The proposed distinction between innovations in polity, politics and policy is intended for analytical purposes only, and a research agenda should not fail to include studies of how the three are interrelated. Institutional innovations may or may not promote innovations in politics, and innovations in politics may either reduce or hamper political systems' policy innovation capacity. A new, innovative policy may also affect political institutions in ways that promote or hamper future policy innovations. Hence, theory building and empirical research are needed that improve our knowledge about the interdependencies between innovations in polity, politics and policy (Agger and Sørensen, 2014; Helms, 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the types of innovations and interdependencies that lend themselves to theorising and investigation as part of a research agenda on political innovation.

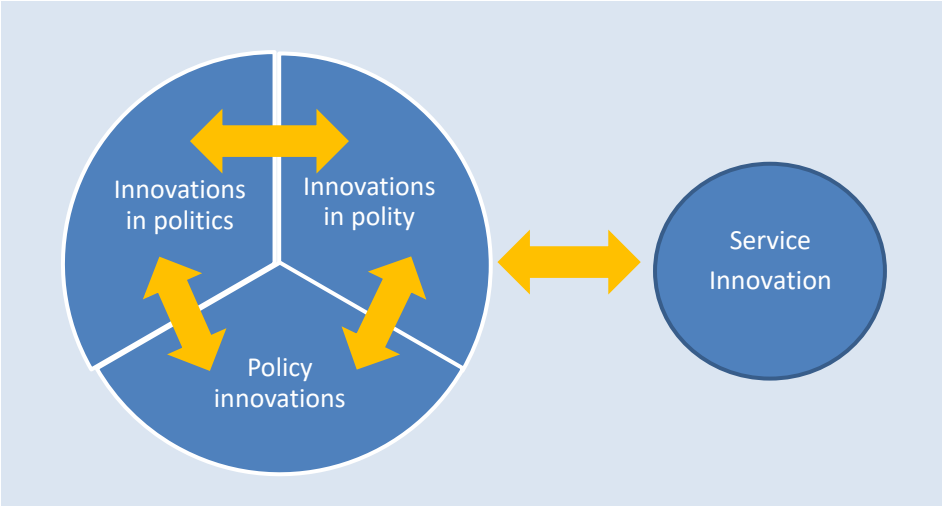

Figure 1: Research agenda on political innovation

What are innovations in polity, politics and policy?

The first step in clarifying what political innovation is must be to define innovation. Although definitions of innovation differ greatly, most innovation theories would agree that innovation involves *an intentional development and realization of new creative ideas* (Torfing, 2016). Innovations can be new products but they can also be new organisational designs and production methods and processes. In order to count as an innovation, the thing that is being developed must be qualitatively new and produce some form of qualitative step change, discontinuity or, as Schumpeter (1939) calls it, 'creative destruction' of existing products, structures or processes. The new thing does not have to qualify as 'never seen before' to count as an innovation, but must be new to the context in question, and innovations can be, and often are, adaptions of innovations developed elsewhere (Rogers, 1995). The diffusion of innovations is therefore not only important because it secures the more extensive application of a new innovation, but also because diffusion tends to inspire and trigger innovations in other contexts. The same dynamic applies to innovations in products, structures and processes.

Innovations can take the form of small, incremental adjustments but they can also be radical in the sense that they turn things around completely, leading to a third order reconceptualization of the meaning and purpose of a phenomenon. All innovations involve risk taking (Osborne and Brown, 2013), but radical innovations are particularly risky because the unintended outcomes that most innovations produce can be costly and difficult to remedy (Keizer and Halman, 2007). Incremental, step-by-step innovations tend to result in fewer, and less devastating, failures and disasters, but the potential gains are also fewer. Although the term 'innovation' has positive connotations, innovations can also have negative outcomes, and appraisals about whether a concrete innovation is good or bad depends on who is doing the looking, and can vary considerably (Hartley, 2005). Seen from the perspective of the innovators, an innovation is good if it meets their initial intentions, but other actors may disagree with those intentions or evaluate outcomes differently. In addition to the ever-present risk of failure, innovations are further complicated by the fact that the wish for innovations must in most cases be balanced against other goals e.g. the need for stability in political systems. Perceptions of what drives innovation have developed over time, from an early focus on technology and entrepreneurship performed by single actors, to a broader perspective involving institutional and systemic factors (Lundvall, 1985; Edquist and Hommen, 1999; Edquist, 2005). A key question is: how do these factors condition and accommodate a productive interplay and collaboration among actors with relevant innovation assets such as public and private actors, employees and the end users of the innovations?

With a point of departure in this broadly canonised understanding of innovation, public innovation can be defined as the intentional development, realisation and diffusion of new and creative ideas about how to define and produce public value. While service innovation involves intended step changes in the way public value is produced, provided and distributed, *political innovations constitute new perceptions of what counts as public value and new ways of transforming these perceptions into authoritative goals, principles and rules for public governance.* Implicit in this conceptualisation is the idea that public sector innovations are always, more or less explicitly, conditioned by political factors. As such, political innovations are not only important in their own right, but also because they condition the scope for all other forms of public innovation. This 'primacy of the political' in public innovation has to do with the fact that what is perceived as non-political at a given point in time, e.g. normalised perceptions of public purpose and routine ways of fulfilling that purpose in the form of existing public services, is a product of what Ernesto Laclau (1990) conceptualizes as hegemonic manifestations of past political battles which can be re-politicised at any point in time. Thus, for example, service innovations that are seemingly devoid of political implications can become re-

politicized from one moment to the next. Political innovations and service innovations are thus intrinsically interlinked.

Political innovations can take three forms. *Innovations in polity* involve intentional efforts to reorganise external boundaries with other polities as well as the institutional framework and procedures that regulate the formation and enactment of democratically authorised decisions about what counts as public value in a political community. *Innovations in politics* refer to the development and implementation of new ways for political actors to obtain democratically legitimate political power and influence. Finally, *innovations in policy* involve reformulations and elaborations of new political visions, goals, strategies, and policy programmes that aim to guide the production of public value.

Research questions to be addressed

Political innovations are, then, arguably an overlooked research area, but is there really a need for this kind of research right now? With a point of departure in literature analysing current challenges to the political system in Western representative democracies, this section aims to show that there is, indeed, a pressing need for studies of the conditions for, and impact of, political innovations in and between polity, politics and policy. Moreover, it lists a number of research questions to be addressed in studies of the innovation capacity of the political system in contemporary representative democracies, and analyses how innovations in policy, politics and policy might enhance the innovation capacity of the public sector.

Innovations in polity

As mentioned above, the term 'polity' refers to spatially demarcated political units as well as to the institutional arrangements that regulate and authorise actors to govern a political community. A polity is both defined with reference to its external sovereignty vis-à-vis other polities, and its internal sovereignty - that is, the way it distributes power internally (Prokhovnik, 2008). In modern Western societies, the polity is a nation state, and democratic institutions distribute authoritative power within that nation state. One of the big challenges of our time is what Bob Jessop (2004) calls the de-statification of politics, referring to the fact that political decision-making is increasingly moving away from the national level of governance to sub-national and transnational levels of governance. With regard to the latter, some researchers are turning their attention towards the potentials of large cities as institutionalized arenas for collective political action (Brenner, 2004; Barber, 2013). In relation to the former, the problem is that the traditional institutions of democracy are designed to distribute power within a polity and therefore cannot function adequately in transnational multi-polity policy-making arenas where authoritative power and sovereignty is distributed horizontally rather than concentrated hierarchically (Nye, 2008; Sørensen, 2012). Transnational political institutions and organizations do exist but they are rarely strong enough to secure the level of collective political action needed to mobilise a collective political response to problems such as global warming, regional conflicts, refugee flows, and natural disasters that call for political action. Decision-makers, like public policy and governance researchers, are therefore intensely engaged in debating how transnational political institutions could be strengthened, what such institutions might look like and how to overcome the barriers that prevent them from being established.

Feltkode ændret

A key issue currently under debate is whether it would be more beneficial to establish some sort of world government or to aim for a network-like transnational institutional political structure; while

others debate whether it would be wiser to develop new political institutions or to build on the ones that already exist (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992; Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1995; Ansell, 2000; Bohman, 2005; Zürn, 1999; Keane, 2009; Held and Koenig-Archibugi, 2014). Despite differences in opinion regarding these difficult issues, it is generally agreed that there is a pressing need to develop democratic political institutions that can promote effective governance and a democratically just distribution of political power between actors on the transnational political scene (Heffe, Kickert and Thomassen, 2000; Hajer, 2003; Bache and Flinders, 2004, Held and Konig-Archibugi, 2014). Among these questions are: how can political authority be distributed between transnational and national levels of governance? How can equal political influence for citizens be secured at transnational levels of governance? What procedures must be in place to ensure that political decisions made at different levels of governance are coordinated and aligned so that they do not undermine each other? How can political authorities engaged in multi-level policy-making be held to account, and how can blame avoidance among them be prevented (Scharpf, 2000; Peters and Pierre, 2004; Benz and Papadopoulos, 2006)? These, and other complex questions related to the development of the institutional set-up of representative governance, are being intensely researched and analysed but they are rarely addressed from a public innovation perspective. We therefore know little about how current institutional changes, e.g. the surge of a multi-level political system, are likely to affect the capacity of representative democracies to launch and implement innovative institutional reforms in the years to come (Helms, 2015; Sørensen, 2015), just as we know little about how those changes will affect institutional stability.

Innovations in politics

The term 'politics' refers to the process through which policy-making takes place in practice within a given set of political institutions. Recent literature that analyses political processes in representative democracies concludes that we are currently facing a disenchantment with representative democracy (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Alonso, Kean and Merkel, 2011; Rosanvallon, 2011). Political parties no longer represent specific classes or social groups with particular interests to be defended (Johnston, 2005), and party politics increasingly appear irrelevant to citizens. The result is a drop in membership of political parties and in voter turnout at elections. Voters are less loyal to specific political parties and shop around. Some citizens are losing interest in politics altogether, while others are turning to extra-parliamentary forms of political participation in local communities or national or global social movements - all of which are forms of political participation that are detached from representative democracy (Norris, 2011; Dalton, 2015). Some researchers argue that the solution for representative democracy would be to engage in a concerted effort to involve citizens more actively in policy-making processes within political parties, from formulating political programmes to campaigning (Faucher-King, 2005, 2015; Stoker, 2006), forming new parties, and other supplementary forms of political participation in and around political assemblies and committees (Roberts and Bradley, 1991; Warren, 2002; Sørensen and Torfing, 2005; Dalton, 2008, 2015; Smith, 2009; Michels, 2011; Sørensen and Waldorff, 2014). It is thought that closer dialogue between citizens and elected politicians will not only rekindle citizens' interest in politics but also ensure that the issues addressed by elected politicians and decision makers are perceived as relevant by the citizens themselves; that citizens' perspectives are brought to the table; and that the affected members of the political community feel a sense of ownership over the political visions, strategies and goals that are formulated and pursued in the political process. A much debated concern is whether this form of policy making is too time consuming, and the extent to which the result will be an activist democracy that further empowers those who are already empowered at the cost of the political influence of citizens with fewer political capacities and competencies (Young, 2000; Fung, 2006; Hansen, 2007).

Another prominent issue in current research on political processes in contemporary representative democracies is that the electoral cycle, as well as the political contestation and majoritarian system of representative party politics, tends to cultivate a short-term rather than a long-term perspective on policy outcomes (Pierson, 2000; Jacobs, 2011). The quest for voter support motivates political parties to choose political solutions that produce positive outcomes in the short term although other political measures would be more effective in the long run. Moreover, majority decisions that lead to large investments in achieving long term results may be abandoned if elections lead to a shift in the political majority and thus a change in policies halfway through their implementation phase (Lees-Marshment, 2014). Coalition building and the formation of broad inter-party alliances is proposed as a way of ensuring that a change in majority does not undermine long-term policy investments, and empirical analyses testify to a growth in inter-party coalitions (Baron & Ferejohn 1989; Laver & Shepsle 1995; Scharpf 1997; Martin & Stevenson 2007; Lees-Marshment, 2011). Studies also show that the formation of broad alliances with strong, relevant and affected stakeholders enhances the sustainability of political reforms (Patashnik, 2003). In addition, broad coalitions may make political parties more willing to go along with unpopular decisions.

The extensive research on developments in the political process in contemporary Western countries has identified important challenges to representative democracy and suggested possible means to overcome these challenges. Suggestions include the more active involvement of citizens at different stages of the policy process, and a move from majority rule to coalition building and negotiated politics that makes long term collective political action possible in an otherwise strongly competitive political world of party and interest politics. However, research on these issues is mostly focused on analysing challenges to the democratic quality and effectiveness of the political process, while leaving unanswered questions related to the innovativeness of the political process itself. Studying these changes from an innovation perspective trains the lens on how new political practices affect the flexibility, as well as the solidity, of the political process.

Innovations in policy

Policy innovations are deliberate efforts to develop and promote new political visions, goals, strategies and policy programmes. All these aspects of a policy are important because they define public value and guide efforts to produce and distribute it. As documented in public policy and governance research, there is a permanent tension between political and administrative aspects of policy content (Peters, 2001). While the formulation of political visions is clearly political, administrative aspects must also be considered when it comes to developing goals, strategies and policy programmes, whose realistic implementation depends not only on what is politically possible but also what is technically feasible in a given context. The growing awareness of the interrelatedness between political and administrative aspects of policy formulation among public policy and governance researchers has led to the broadly held conclusion that policies are, and should invariably be, co-productions between politicians and administrators (Kingdon, 1984; Polsby, 1984; Gray and Lowery, 2000; Svara, 1998, 2001).

The last thirty years of New Public Management and New Public Governance reforms have mainly aimed to de-bureaucratise public service delivery in order to render it more efficient and effective (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004, 2012; Osborne, 2010), the goal being to strengthen the strategic leadership of public managers and to introduce new governance techniques and tool kits such as management by objectives, incentives steering, outsourcing, partnership formation and networks,

user involvement, strategic management, performance measurement and process facilitation. Few reforms have aimed to enhance the political leadership and policy development capacity of elected politicians, however, and many researchers are worried that the content of public policies is becoming increasingly technocratic and weakly rooted in political visions, goals and strategies (Stoker, 2000; Christensen and Lægreid, 2007). Some researchers even talk about a de-politicisation tendency where policies are motivated by references to the necessary and possible rather than to the normatively desirable and chosen (Wood, 2015; Flinders and Wood, 2015). Others point to the growing politicisation of bureaucracy (Aucoin, 2012). An emerging literature calls for policies based on politically anchored visions, goals and strategies, and posits a need to strengthen the political leadership of elected politicians, defined as their capacity to identify policy problems that call for collective political action, propose political strategies for solving them, and mobilise support and willingness to contribute to their implementation among members of the political community (Hartley, 2005; Sørensen, 2006; Koppenjan, Kars and Voort, 2009; Sørensen and Torfing, 2016). Another body of literature claims that what is needed is the reinstatement of a public administration driven by professional values and norms rather than political tactics (Bakvis and Jarvis, 2012). The shared ambition is to promote the balanced politico-administrative production of public policies that are politically motivated and guided by professional norms and standards. Although there are studies showing how recent government reforms have caused a shift in policy content - favouring efficiency and effectiveness over legality and public purpose - few studies have analysed how this change in focus has affected the political system's policy innovation capacity. Has it triggered creativity and enabled the prototyping of new policy ideas? Or has it narrowed the horizons of what it is possible and appropriate to propose in political programmes?

The interrelatedness between innovations in polity, politics and policy

As mentioned earlier, the distinction between innovations in polity, politics and policy is analytical rather than empirical. It helps to clarify that political innovations involve institutional change as well as changes in political processes and output, but we should not overlook the strong interrelatedness between the three forms of political innovation, which calls for research. Political institutions affect policy processes and policy outputs, and vice versa. Due to this interrelatedness, the rise of an increasingly multi-level political system will not only affect the capacity of representative democracies to redesign themselves in the years to come, but also their policy innovation capacity. What effect will this have? Will the growing institutional complexity enhance or reduce the ability of political actors at transnational, national and sub-national levels to develop and pursue new policies? It is also relevant to consider how new forms of coalition building will affect the policy innovation capacity of political assemblies, and whether the involvement of citizens in policy processes will strengthen or weaken the capacity of political parties and political leaders to develop innovative political programmes. Moreover, the tendency to involve more actors in the political process may actually reduce or transform the role perceptions of the involved actors, and thus also their power in terms of political authority and legitimacy. Finally, new innovative policies can transform political processes and institutions. Most new policies involve a redistribution of responsibilities among public actors as well as among public and private actors and, in so doing, those policies also reshape the conditions for future political battles. Hence, policy reforms that decentralise service provision and political choice and voice to local public and private actors and citizens affect political processes as well as institutional forms of representative democracy in ways that have implications for the political innovativeness of the public sector as well as for its ability to initiate and monitor service innovation.

Different aspects of this interrelatedness among political innovations are being analysed in the other articles in this special issue. In 'Political Innovation as Ideal and Strategy: The Case of Aleatoric

Democracy in the City of Utrecht' Albert Meijer, Reinout van der Veer, Albert Faber and Julia Penning de Vries analyse a new innovation in politics e.g. the use of lottery as a means to select participants in minipublics. The purpose of the study is to conceptualize and understand the interplay between idealist and realist drivers in at play in political innovations. The article aims to understand the role of idealism as well as strategy in politics, and show how these forces interact in a concrete political innovation process. Moreover, the article shows how the innovation in politics they call Aleatoric Democracy affects the larger functioning of the institutions of representative democracy.

In 'Strengthening political leadership and policy innovation through the expansion of collaborative forms of governance', Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing study the interrelatedness between political leadership, political processes and policy innovation. They aim to show how collaboration among politicians, citizens and relevant and affected stakeholders can enhance the policy innovation capacity of representative democracy, thereby strengthening the political leadership of elected politicians. Illustrative examples from different levels of governance and different Western liberal states are provided that illuminate barriers to, as well as opportunities for, strengthening political leadership through new collaborative forms of policy innovation.

In their article, 'The challenge of innovating politics in community self-organisation: the case of Broekpolder', Jurian Edelenbos, Ingmar van Meerkerk, and Joop Koppenjan present an in-depth, longitudinal case study of a collaborative policy innovation process involving elected politicians and citizens. The study aims to show how the turn to self-governed forms of community-based policy innovation challenges traditional perceptions of what it means to be a politician, and seeks to clarify how politicians react and respond to this new way of organising the political process. The study shows that the involved politicians have a hard time redefining their role as politicians in ways that allow them to participate in the policy innovation process in productive ways. In this unfamiliar situation, they fall back into a traditional politician role. As such, the study shows that the policy innovation capacity of self-governing communities depends on the extent to which it is possible for politicians to invent and grow accustomed to a new political leadership role.

Flemming Juul Christiansen and Carina Saxlund Bischoff seek to develop a theoretical framework for analysing innovations in political representation. In their article, 'Political parties and innovation', they look at political parties as agents of political representation and explore how current changes in their role and functioning can accommodate or hamper innovations in politics and policy. Their theoretical framework takes its point of departure in the idea that political parties are carriers of new (or old) political ideas, and explores how they promote or preclude the implementation of those ideas. The authors develop a typology for ideal typical dimensions of party representation, and these ideal types are then related to the concept of innovation. The value of applying the typology in analysing political parties is illustrated in a study of the 'The Alternative', a new innovative party that entered the Danish Parliament in 2015, and which has radically redefined what it means to represent the people.

Sarah Ayres' article explores the role of informal governance in creating and shaping political innovation. In her article, 'Assessing the impact of informal governance on political innovation' she argues that an analysis of informal governance is essential if we are to fully understand how political innovation occurs. In a case study of English devolution processes she studies the impact of informal governance on innovations in polity (institutions), politics (process) and policy (outcomes). Defining informal governance as a means of decision-making that is un-codified, non-institutional and where social relationships play crucial roles she concludes even when formal structures and procedures are

weak, political innovation can still thrive if informal structures are in place that support such innovations.

Barriers to promoting a political innovation agenda

As described above, there are mounting challenges to the political system that make political innovations pertinent to the public innovation agenda. How can we then explain the limited interest among governments and public policy and governance researchers in pushing this agenda forward? Seen from the perspective of governments and other political actors, there is neither a lack of push nor pull factors that could trigger an interest in innovations in policy, politics and policy and the interdependencies between them. The push factors include declining trust in elected politicians that undermines not only the legitimacy of the institutions of representative democracy, but also the authority of political leaders (Hetherington, 2004).

Pull factors include the relentless competitive pressures on politicians to develop new, innovative political programmes and policy agendas to reshape political life in representative democracies (Kingdon, 1984; Polsby, 1984). However, these pull and push factors tend to be neutralised by institutional and procedural features within the political system itself (Rahat, 2008). Paul Pierson (2000) calls these kinds of institutional neutralisations path dependencies or increasing returns, while Bob Jessop (1990) speaks of structural selectivity. Even though many politicians might desire substantial step changes in political institutions, the political process provides weak incentives, opportunities and motivation to invest in such an endeavour. Especially discouraging in that regard is the short political time frame dictated by electoral cycles (Pierson, 2000). Moreover, politicians in office are rarely interested in changing the rules of the game that brought them into power, and their powerful position means that they can block change. When it comes to opposition parties and individual politicians, a political campaign aiming to improve the policy innovation capacity of the political system might mobilise some attention, but rarely enough to win elections. Another factor that could prevent politicians from addressing the need for innovations in the political process is that they sometimes prosper from its deficiencies. Hence, political deadlock and stalemate are not always perceived as problematic. Sometimes they function as attractive blame avoidance opportunities or as excuses for not acting (Weaver, 1986). A final neutralisation mechanism has to do with the generally high level of risk involved in innovating. The outcome of innovations is unpredictable and success is far from certain. The willingness to take risks to change the formal and informal conditions for policy making is likely to be particularly low because the cost of rocking the boat could be detrimental and difficult to remedy due to the new political dynamics that result. What we face here is a typical collective action problem. Although a political system with a high polity, politics and policy innovation capacity may be in the collective long-term interest of elected politicians, none of them have an individual short-term interest in bringing this issue onto the political agenda. Research could play a role in reactivating existing pull and push factors through the production of knowledge about existing innovation barriers in the political system, through assessments of the risks and potential gains involved in political innovations, and through the prescription of ways to balance the need for innovation against the need for stability in political institutional arrangements, processes and policy contents.

Why, then, have political innovations remained a relatively unexplored research area? As described earlier, there are plenty of push factors in the form of well-documented and extensively researched

deficiencies and limitations in existing political institutions, policy processes and policies in representative democracies. There is also evidence of how these deficiencies hamper the ability of elected politicians to find new ways to interact with citizens who want more influence than they get through the ballot box (Bang and Sørensen, 1999; Dalton, 2015; Norris, 2011), to pursue new avenues in dealing with unruly policy problems such as poverty, unemployment, lifestyle-related illnesses, public safety, financial bubbles, immigration, and climate change (Levin *et al*, 2010) and to overcome the often detrimental political effects of mediatised party politics (Hindmoor, 2008). Research is obviously needed that can bring new insights about how representative democracies can improve their capacity to innovate their own functioning. There are also pull factors in the form of research funding from the EU and other large-scale funding agencies, although this funding is more limited than when it comes to research on public service innovation. Publication opportunities are also beginning to emerge, and we are particularly grateful to *Public Management Review* for offering such opportunities.

The main barrier to putting political innovation on the public innovation research agenda seems to be disciplinary boundaries. Public innovation was originally developed as a part of a public administration research endeavour to make the public sector more efficient, and the focus was on the role of different forms of steering, managerial tool kits and ICT, and other technical innovations (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993; Kramer, Andersen, and Perry, 1994). This disciplinary anchorage meant that political science issues received little attention. This disciplinary boundary between public administration and political science has prevented the public innovation agenda from spreading from service innovation to issues related to innovations in polity, politics and policy. As such, a research agenda on public innovation that addresses questions related to political innovations as well as service innovations calls for a cross-disciplinary research approach. A cross-disciplinary approach would help to prevent path dependencies in the social sciences that blind us to the interdependencies between politics and administration, and would enable the development of a coherent, systemic understanding of the conditions for public innovation, the interdependencies between political innovations and service innovations, and the relationship between institutional changes, process changes and policy and service content. This type of research approach would support the development of a theory of public innovation that takes full account of the differences as well as the similarities between public and private innovation.

Conclusion

This article set out to show that political innovations are an important field of study for public policy and governance scholars. The growing interest in promoting public innovation among Western governments has mainly focused on service innovations, as has the recent research on public innovation. While public service innovation is an important research area, I argue that political innovations are worthwhile objects of study in their own right. Public service innovations take place within political systems and cannot be fully comprehended without analysing how they are related to political innovations. Unlike private sector innovation research, a comprehensive public innovation research agenda must explore innovations in polity, politics and policy. I should recapitulate that neither service innovation nor political innovation are goals in themselves or even necessarily beneficial. At times, a stable public sector may seem more appealing than an innovative public sector. I have tried to show, however, that governments as well as researchers are currently struggling with problems and challenges that call not only for public service innovations but also for political innovations. This article has taken a first modest step towards developing a conceptual framework

for studying political innovations, and listed some of the research themes to be addressed. There are institutional barriers in the public sector, as well as disciplinary boundaries in research, which seem to prevent political innovations from becoming an integrated part of the surging public sector innovation agenda. I hope that this article, as well as the other articles in this special issue, will inspire other researchers to join forces in this important endeavour.

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