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# The ideational robustness of bureaucracy

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## Abstract

To better understand why bureaucracy is still going strong despite a century of scorn, this article asks: How has the bureaucratic governance paradigm managed to achieve its ideational robustness in the face of consecutive waves of criticism and societal challenges? This question is answered by studying the combination of a broad range of ideational robustness strategies that have enabled bureaucracy to weather the storm and stay relevant and praiseworthy in the eyes of public governors. The article describes the core components of the bureaucratic governance paradigm and reviews four consecutive waves of criticism before explaining the ideational changes that have enabled the relative stability of public bureaucracy based on the adaptation and innovation of its content and scope. In addition to summarizing key debates about public bureaucracy, the article develops six ideational robustness strategies that may be used to study other core ideas in public governance.

**Keywords:** bureaucracy; governance paradigms; New Public Management; turbulence; robustness

Max Weber's ideal-typical concept of bureaucracy is probably the most globally influential social science concept. It informs a hegemonic governance paradigm that has dominated our thinking about public governance for more than a century. The bureaucratic governance paradigm rejected the previous Machiavellian ideas of stable political rule based on a mixture of coercive power and deceit and driven by impulsive need satisfaction, and it gradually came to provide the chief organizational template for both public and private organizations (Meyer, 1987). Despite his own warnings against individuals being caught in the dehumanizing “iron cage” of bureaucracy, Weber (1968) claimed that bureaucratic rule—with its emphasis on impersonal legal-rational authority—was better than traditional and charismatic authority systems relying on inherited beliefs, dogmas, and rituals or arbitrary decisions based on the whims of authoritarian leaders, respectively. In the postwar era, the promise of the bureaucratic governance paradigm was confirmed in practice, as bureaucracy proved helpful in securing a stable production of public regulation and standardized service in the growing public sector.

As public bureaucracy expanded, however, criticism of bureaucratic governance surged. Some early sociological critics called for de-bureaucratization to halt the tendency toward an internal usurpation of power by bureaucrats and the concentration of communication with the outer world in the hands of an elite (Eisenstadt, 1959; Michels, 1999 [1911]). Over time, the critique of bureaucracy for leading to technocracy has expanded (Bell, 1973) and is echoed in the works of Habermas (1984, 1987). In line with these criticisms, planning theorists questioned the relevance of linear policy models and bureaucratic implementation in the face of the pervasiveness of wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Later, public choice theorists and neoliberal commentators criticized bureaucracy for its tendency toward

ossification, red tape, its inability to deliver high-quality and/or low-cost services, and its paternalistic and non-responsive approach to those using public services (Downs, 1965; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). Recently, political scientists have criticized public bureaucracy for failing to foster an internal back-and-forth dialogue leading to an informed consensus about means and ends (Heckscher, 1994) and to mobilize societal knowledge, ideas, and resources in a networked negotiation of rules and norms leading to the production of authoritative governance (Hajer, 2009). In the same vein, public administration scholars have criticized the incapacity of centrally controlled bureaucracies to solve complex and turbulent problems by spurring collaborative innovation (Hartley, 2005; Torfing, 2016). Hence, the demand for de-bureaucratization is again in fashion (Argyriades, 2010; De Jong, 2016).

The criticisms of public bureaucracy have been relentless, seriously damaging its reputation and popular support despite several attempts at insisting on its positive and distinct contribution to public governance (Aucoin, 1997; Bannister, 2017; Thompson & Alvesson, 2005). Consequently, the term “bureaucratic” is now frequently used as a scornful, pejorative adjective: A “bureaucratic” proposal involves complicated rules and rigid procedures that will likely cause lengthy delays and lead to poor results. Paradoxically, despite the heavy criticisms, the bureaucratic governance paradigm is still going strong in the sense that few researchers, public leaders, and commentators are ready to abandon the idea of impersonal, rule-bound governance based on hierarchical authority and specialized administrative departments (Monteiro & Adler, 2022). This article aims to account for the ideational robustness of bureaucracy by showing how post-bureaucratic governance paradigms have adapted and innovated the meaning of bureaucracy in response to criticisms and societal changes. Through a series of additions, subtractions, and modifications, post-bureaucratic thinkers have contributed to preserving the relevance of the bureaucratic governance paradigm for solving key governance tasks, coordinating the actions of manifold actors, and generating democratic legitimacy.

To better understand why bureaucracy is still going strong despite decades of fierce criticism and societal change, we ask: *How has the bureaucratic governance paradigm managed to achieve its ideational robustness in the face of several waves of criticisms and societal change?* We attempt to answer this question by studying the ideational robustness strategies that have enabled bureaucracy to weather the storm and remain relevant and useful in the eyes of public governors. The discursive strategies in focus here are advanced by scientific scholars, political commentators, or public leaders, and they may intentionally or unintentionally contribute to salvaging one or more components of the bureaucratic governance paradigm and eventually help to maintain the continued relevance of bureaucratic forms of governance, thereby supporting its ideational robustness.

Our study is based on a selective reading of white and gray literature examined through the lens of competing public governance paradigms (Torfing et al., 2020). It builds on two assumptions. The first is that the problem of bureaucracy cannot be reduced to bad organizational management but is inherent to the bureaucratic model (Heckscher, 1994). The second is that the reason why bureaucracy is still considered the backbone of public organizations is not merely—as suggested by Aucoin (1997) and Schofield (2001)—that it is simply the most effective way for public leaders to control and direct the lower echelons of public employees while ensuring efficiency and accountability. As for the latter, we do not want to deny the power and expediency that bureaucracy affords to public leaders. Rather, our argument is that both the ideas and practices of bureaucracy have changed in important ways to maintain its stable but contested relevance for guiding public governance.

The article aims to contribute to the understanding of how iconic governance ideas such as bureaucracy can remain robust in the face of criticism and unpredictable societal dynamics, thereby providing the ideational foundation for relatively stable public governance. We begin with a theoretical discussion of public governance paradigms and the ideational robustness strategies their proponents may deploy to maintain their relevance despite political, ideological, and economic turbulence. We then define the concept of bureaucracy, identify the key components of the bureaucratic governance paradigm, discuss the tendency toward bureaucratization, and note some of the important additions and changes to the original model of bureaucracy. Next, we consider the fierce criticisms of bureaucracy (and its different components) and some of the recent attempts to defend it before analyzing the ideational robustness strategies that in each their different way have helped to secure the continued relevance of the bureaucratic governance paradigm and discussing the lessons we can draw from our findings. The conclusion summarizes the argument and outlines avenues for future research.

## Ideational robustness strategies in response to turbulence

Ideas—defined as a particular set of more or less malleable meanings and beliefs articulated by individuals and/or adopted by institutions (Béland & Cox, 2010)—can be extremely influential in the field of public governance, as they tend to shape both what political and administrative actors want and what they do (Béland, 2017). But ideas do not arise spontaneously; they are partly shaped by their social and institutional context (Campbell, 2004) and partly by political demands and interests, power struggles, and alliances (Blyth, 2002). Moreover, the spread, selection, translation, and impact of new ideas depend on their interpretation, timing, and circumstances, as well as their resonance with existing discourses (see Greenhalgh et al., 2004). Ideas may take the form of magic concepts, ideologies, and paradigms. Concepts such as “the subsidiarity principle,” “performance management,” and “public–private partnerships” may guide the focus and frame the efforts on public administrators at particular points in time by offering abstract and loosely defined ideas with a positive normative charge (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Such concepts may be part of ideologies, such as “social democracy,” “neoliberalism,” or “the third way,” which are founded on totalizing political visions and value systems, and perhaps even particular stipulations about the nature of society and what drives human action (Glynos, 2001). Concepts and their intellectual and ideological support may form part of public governance paradigms, defined as a more or less coherent set of prescriptive ideas about how to organize, govern, and lead the activities in the public sector (Aucoin, 1990; Torfing et al., 2020). In contrast to the scientific paradigms discussed by Kuhn (1962), which are long-lasting and rarely change, public governance paradigms are plenty and change faster (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Another important difference is that whereas scientific revolutions tend to foster a near-complete conversion from, say, a geocentric to a heliocentric astronomy, governance paradigms tend to compete and coexist simultaneously (Torfing et al., 2020). Still, they behave in much the same way as scientific paradigms in the sense that they aim to offer solutions to the problems, puzzles, and anomalies encountered by past paradigms, provide a set of organizing principles conditioning action, and grow in popularity until new problems begin to accumulate.

Recent research points to the importance of continuous ideational adjustments and transformations aimed at preserving the relevance of concepts, ideologies, and paradigms through rearticulation or renewal of their granular semiotic components (Clift, 2018; Hannah et al., 2022; Jabko, 2019). Hence, when a popular public governance paradigm like “bureaucracy” begins to face mounting problems, challenges, and criticisms, its supporters and advocates will typically react defensively and first try to protect it by denying emerging problems, writing off contingent deviations as dispensable, countering fundamental criticisms, and warning that any attempt to stray from its basic tenets will lead to disaster (see Gholson & Barker, 1985). While the denial of problems and ideational inflexibility may buy the supporters of the predominant governance paradigm time to regroup, this will ultimately prove a loser’s strategy if problems and criticisms continue to grow. Hence, we argue that ideational robustness strategies that not only defend but also stretch, transform, and supplement a governance paradigm are required to secure the long-term survival of a troubled governance paradigm.

We define ideational robustness as the adaptation and innovation of one or more ideational components in order to defend or advance their position as a point of reference in communication in the face of adversity (Carstensen et al., 2024). Our claim is that ideational robustness can be promoted through strategic ideational interventions by social and political actors situated in an institutional environment where disruption creates a space for strategic maneuvering. Building on and extending the strategies for ensuring the ideational robustness of governance ideas presented in the introductory article to this special issue (Carstensen et al., 2024) and seeking inspiration in recent work on conflicts between and persistence of governance paradigms (Torfing et al., 2020), we list six ideational robustness strategies that public-sector scholars, commentators, and leaders may use to maintain the importance and impact of a public governance paradigm that has come under siege (for a similar list of robustness strategies, see Ansell et al., 2023). As we move from the first to the last ideational robustness strategy, the balance between adaptation and innovation tends to shift in favor of the latter, thus creating a continuum of robustness strategies stretching from “static robustness” to “dynamic robustness” (Howlett & Ramesh, 2023).

The first robustness strategy—equivalent to the strategy Kuhn (1962) saw deployed to protect normal science—aims to strike back by criticizing new, alternative governance ideas while reaffirming the general validity of the core components of the predominant but problematized governance paradigm. It builds on the idea that attack is the best defense and, therefore, criticizes the most challenging

ideas advanced by the emerging oppositional governance paradigm for lacking novelty, being naïve and utopian, or being downright dangerous. At the same time, it insists on the necessity of sticking to the core values and tried-and-true principles of the hitherto predominant governance paradigm, although it may drop one of its heavily criticized components, thereby aiming to survive by cutting the losses. Abandoning one ideational component to safeguard the rest is an example of defensive adaptation.

The *second* robustness strategy aims to diminish the criticisms by scaling down the role and ambition of the predominant governance paradigm. Hence, the defenders of the predominant governance paradigm will argue that, basically, there is nothing wrong with its ideas and assertions. The problem is, rather, that the overall public expectations to its general validity and performance are exaggerated and that “some of the good stuff” has been used excessively and more than was originally intended, which creates problems that can be solved by recognizing the limitations of the governance paradigm and its recommendations. Here, adaptation takes the form of contraction.

The *third* robustness strategy continues the previous contraction strategy but takes a step further by admitting that other governance paradigms may be relevant in certain areas. This is basically a divide-and-conquer strategy aimed at creating particularly relevant spaces for different governance paradigms—and thus also for the one being criticized. What is offered here is a sort of contingency theory arguing that different public governance paradigms all contain important prescriptions that are relevant in relation to particular public tasks and goals. This strategy combines the adaptation of the validity claims of the predominant governance paradigm with an innovative account of the contingent (and limited) validity of other competing governance paradigms.

The *fourth* robustness strategy aims to change the relative weight of the different components of the problematized governance paradigm. In response to problems and criticisms, some components are foregrounded, while others are placed more in the background. By changing the relative weight of different ideas and values, it becomes possible to tell a slightly different story about how to govern and be governed. The role of adaptation is considerable in this attempt to repackage and resell a problematized public governance paradigm, but the recombination of the core components tends to foster innovation that may produce a new and powerful storyline.

The *fifth* strategy aims to proactively change the content and meaning of one or more components of a governance paradigm. The ideational components are not merely recombined but also rearticulated and repurposed, for example, by stretching or slightly changing their meaning and specifying their scope conditions (see Carstensen et al., 2023). The discursive rearticulation of the relational meaning of the ideational components may either add further conceptual nuance to existing components (or entirely new components) or broaden the meaning of the various components by creating polysemic concepts and floating signifiers that attach different meanings to the same term, which enhances their flexibility. According to this strategy, innovation takes precedence over adaptation, as the aim is to produce a new “modern” version of the old, entrenched governance paradigm.

The *sixth* robustness strategy aims to merge old and new governance paradigms, thus creating hybrid governance paradigms (Røiseland et al., 2024). This hybridization involves the selective integration of ideas from new and emerging governance paradigms into the hitherto predominant governance paradigm. Innovation prevails, as the aim is to create a new hybrid governance paradigm that samples elements from a range of different governance paradigms based on a situational analysis.

It can be difficult to draw a clear line separating robustness strategies aiming to defensively adapt and/or radically innovate a governance paradigm to stabilize it in the face of turbulence. It is also difficult to distinguish instances of the radical innovation of a paradigm from situations where a governance paradigm is de facto abandoned because it is considered obsolete. To qualify as a robustness strategy, the flexible adaptation and proactive innovation of a particular governance paradigm must produce a minimal remainder that makes it possible to identify notable remnants of the governance paradigm that has been transformed. Hence, change should produce some kind of stability in one or more of the key components and their articulation.

## The key characteristics of the bureaucratic governance paradigm

While bureaucratic aspects can be found in the works of Confucius in ancient China as well as in 17th century Prussian and French state administration, (Weber, 1968) is credited with founding the modern conceptualization of bureaucracy. This conceptualization highlights the impersonal rule of the bureau, defined as an administrative unit that is separate from the political level and populated by a

specialized administrative staff governing the daily administrative operations (see [Scott, 1998](#)). Bureaucracy is founded on a separation of politics and administration. Elected politicians are responsible for value- and opinion-driven goal and policy formulation, and administrators in bureaucratic agencies are responsible for selecting the means by which to implement laws and political decisions most effectively. But despite the politics-administration dichotomy, we must remember that the administration depends on political-level support ([Svara, 2001](#)). Weak political support may amplify bureaucratic goal ambiguity, although internal hierarchical authority may counteract increasing ambiguity ([Stazyk & Goerdel, 2011](#)).

As a governance paradigm, Weberian bureaucracy has numerous core components: (1) top-down hierarchical governance of and within administrative units; (2) a compartmentalized division of labor with high professional specialization; (3) administrative decision-making based on means-ends rationality, rule-following, and written records; and (4) loyal and neutral civil servants who are recruited based on their merits and receive a full-time salary and life-long pension upon retirement, which supposedly eliminates the need for/attraction of side-payments as a form of bribe (Weber, 1968; see also [Lane, 1995](#)). Some scholars tend to see professionalization and professional expertise as another core feature of bureaucracy ([Olsen, 2008](#)), while others contrast bureaucracy with professional rule that tends to create a strong professional autonomy that undermines bureaucratic monocracy that praises the unbroken chain of command within the administrative apparatus ([Torfing et al., 2020](#)).

Weber does not claim bureaucracy based on a rational-legal authority unquestionably to be the absolutely best way of governing a society, contending merely that it is better than other authority systems. Hence, rational decision-making is more effective in terms of problem-solving than reliance on inherited dogmas or the “will of god,” and the bureaucratic legality principle can better ensure equity than the whims of a charismatic leader ruling beyond the law. The relative superiority of the bureaucratic machine also has a technical side, as bureaucratic agencies are better than other forms of administration at delivering precise, speedy, unambiguous, and frictionless decisions ([Weber, 1968](#)).

It should be noted that the actual impact of bureaucracy is conditional upon the implementation of the bureaucratic governance paradigm in the public sector. Since bureaucracy is defined as an ideal type, its implementation in different policy areas, at different levels of government, and in different countries may come more or less close to the ideal-typical prescriptions. To illustrate, political and cultural differences make the public bureaucracy in the USA rather different from the public bureaucracy found in Sweden ([J. Q. Wilson, 1989](#)).

The potentially positive impact of bureaucracy does not make Weber recommend a limitless expansion of public bureaucracy. In fact, he was deeply concerned that the quest for order, discipline, and rationality characteristic of bureaucracy would lock the human individual in an iron cage, and he saw the need to control the increasingly powerful bureaucracy, which with its secrecy and knowledge monopoly undermines the prospect of democratic government control.

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's contemporary description of effective government administration converges on Weber's description of bureaucracy, although Wilson expresses a more ambiguous view of the politics-administration dichotomy that is mostly concerned with keeping politics out of bureaucratic administration ([Sager & Rosser, 2009](#)). Moreover, according to [Wilson \(1887\)](#), the danger of bureaucracy is less that it might outmaneuver the political elite and more that the general public becomes incapable of effectively criticizing and controlling public bureaucracy. As such, the political and administrative elite may not serve the popular interest.

Despite both Weber's and Wilson's worries, bureaucracy and the progressive bureaucratization of the public sector has generally been described as positive, as it has been associated with enhanced effectiveness, responsibility, and equity ([Albrow, 1970](#)). There are competing functionalistic and rationalistic explanations of the ongoing bureaucratization of public administration. Alternative ideational explanations of the expansion of a particular set of governance ideas tend to stress their social, political, and administrative attractiveness ([Hall, 1993](#); [Mandelkern & Oren, 2023](#)) and to view the adoption of particular new governance ideas as solutions to known problems, a political preference of a dominant coalition, and a source of organizational legitimacy ([Moe, 1995](#); [Ouchi, 1980](#); [Powell & DiMaggio, 1983](#)).

Over time (and in some countries more than others), the expanding system of public bureaucracy has been subject to important additions and modifications that have added new and important features, sometimes giving rise to internal conflicts. While bureaucracy was first and foremost seen as an



instrument for the legal and regulatory governance of society and economy, it has become responsible for large-scale public service provision in areas such as health, education, and social affairs. The Taylorism inherent to bureaucracy was conducive to the mass production of services, but the element of discretion in the delivery of welfare clashed with the bureaucratic emphasis on rule compliance (Brodkin, 2007).

The rise of welfare bureaucracy development created a large and growing group of professionally trained public employees working alongside (and often supervised by) traditional bureaucrats. Indirectly supported by the influential scientific management movement (Merkle, 2022), the governance of the growing number of professionals delivering welfare to local citizens spurred a process of devolution to the local agencies. While hierarchical management practices continued to prevail in some countries, other countries gave welfare professionals a high degree of autonomy in return for using their skills and competences to ensure high-quality welfare services (Hood & Lodge, 2006). The growth of local professional autonomy tended to weaken the bureaucratic chain of command based on rules, orders, and accountability (Lipsky, 1980; Wilensky, 1967).

At the executive level, another significant addition is that top-level bureaucrats have become part of corporatist interest mediation that both impact the formulation and implementation of policy (Lembruch & Schmitter, 1982). Executive civil servants increasingly participate in corporatist negotiations with interest organizations, and this tends to politicize the administration as legal norms are superseded by political norms. It also weakens the traditional forms of administrative accountability as civil servants become bound by corporatist agreements (Christensen, 1993).

A final modification of the basic model of bureaucracy is the attempt to give citizens a voice between elections, for example, through the introduction of mandatory hearings and consultations in planning processes (Arnstein, 1969). This addition conflicts with the standard idea in bureaucracy that citizens only influence public decisions on the input side of the political-administrative system, but it heeds Wilson's call for interaction with the people.

## A century of criticisms of the bureaucratic paradigm

In the last century, the bureaucratic governance paradigm has informed the organization and operation of public organizations around the world. However, consecutive waves of criticisms have created significant ideational turbulence.

### The first wave of criticisms of bureaucracy

The first spate of criticisms waged by public administration and political science scholars was not part of any unified movement or intellectual current, and the critics rarely advocated for a particular solution to the alleged problems of bureaucracy, which were not always well documented (see Goodsell, 2005). Smith and Zurcher (1944) criticized the bureaucratic application of rigid, inflexible rules. Fairchild (1955) slammed bureaucracy for leading to procrastination and the refusal to experiment. Eisenstadt (1959) arrested the risk of the usurpation of power by bureaucratic oligarchs. Crozier (1964) took issue with complicated procedures and maladapted responses to public problems and needs. In sum, the bureaucracy was criticized for being less effective than it claimed.

Another key target of criticism was the means-ends rationality that should pervade public bureaucracy and administrative decision-making. Jaspers (1954) and Merton (1957) argued that the means-ends distinction becomes blurred in public bureaucracies as the survival and growth of the bureau become an end in itself. Simon (1957) claimed that the lack of full information about alternative means and their costs and benefits undermines rational decision-making, leading public leaders to satisfice rather than optimize their choices.

Romantic criticisms of hierarchical forms of bureaucracy were voiced by Argyris (1964), who contended that top-down command and control, the focus on rule compliance, and the subordination of employees would inevitably come into conflict with the legitimate needs of the individual for autonomy, recognition, and self-realization. Humans enslaved by public bureaucracy tend to suffer. Peters et al. (1979) advanced realist criticisms of centralized bureaucratic control, arguing that the decisions of executive bureaucratic leaders are often opposed and resisted by lower-level agencies, managers, and staff engaging in political struggles for resources and for the policies and professional values to which they are committed (see also Preston & t' Hart, 1999).

## The second wave of criticisms of bureaucracy

The next and bigger wave of criticisms was firmly anchored in neoliberal and neoconservative political and intellectual movements not least in public choice theory, which was proffered by scholars belonging to or inspired by the Austrian or Chicago schools of economics. In the late 1970s, British PM Margaret Thatcher campaigned to roll back the bureaucratic welfare state and in 1981 U.S. President Ronald Reagan famously claimed that: “Government is not a solution to our problem; government is the problem.” In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton maintained that the “era of big government is over,” and Vice-President Al Gore (1993) published reports from anti-bureaucratic think tanks. More recently, President Donald Trump has blamed the nation’s woes on the “deep state.”

Public intellectuals soon echoed the bureaucracy bashing promoted by major political leaders. In their influential *Reinventing Government*, Osborne and Gaebler (1993) claimed that “the people who work in government are not the problem; the systems in which they work are the problem” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993, p. xviii). Leading news magazines, including *The Economist* and *Harvard Business Review*, regularly brought anti-bureaucratic reports.

While leading politicians and public intellectuals worked in tandem to drive a spate of neoliberal reforms aiming to introduce a new governance paradigm, which Hood (1991) dubbed “New Public Management” (NPM), public choice theorists delivered a series of scientific criticisms of bureaucracy that provided new ammunition to politicians and public commentators.

Working backward through the four core features of bureaucracy, we shall first revisit the public choice theory critique of the Weberian idea of *neutral and loyal civil servants who are only concerned with realizing the public interest*. Downs (1965) boldly claimed that “bureaucratic officials, like all other agents in society, are motivated by their own self-interests” (Downs, 1965, p. 439). Generally opposed to innovation and change, they aim to maximize power, income, job security, and prestige. Downs (1967) focused on how bureaucrats seek to maximize their bureau size to gain power and prestige. Later, Niskanen (1971) claimed that bureaucrats aim to maximize their budget to enhance job security and create a buffer against budget cuts. His argument was supported by the incrementally growing public budgets that became a large problem with the arrival of the long-lasting stagflation crisis in the 1970s. He further argued that bureaucratic organizations will tend to produce an output that is larger than effective demand, because it is paid for by political budget allocations. These criticisms led to new emphasis on budget discipline and parsimony and slow or reverse government growth (Hood, 1991).

Dunleavy’s bureau-shaping thesis (Dunleavy, 1991) argued that if new budget reforms introducing fixed budget frames prevent budget maximization, civil servants can still maximize the number of prestigious tasks in their portfolio. Hence, they tend to prioritize tasks involving policy development, planning, coordination, and evaluation over service delivery and case processing. The self-interested hoarding of prestigious tasks undermines the rational allocation of tasks and resources. Politically induced administrative reshuffling may provide a countermeasure but is often met by administrative opposition.

Le Grand (2003) observed that the recasting of public servants as self-interested utility maximizers has radically changed the perception of the roles and attitudes of professional frontline workers and the citizens they serve. Whereas public workers were previously viewed as public-spirited but paternalistic knights concerned with the interests of those they were serving, they are increasingly seen as self-interested knaves who are likely to shirk. Similarly, citizens, who were previously perceived as essentially passive but content pawns, are increasingly seen as queens equipped with insatiable demands that they actively pursue, for example, as customers in newly created quasi-markets where they vote with their feet by leaving service providers that fail to deliver the excellence they crave.

Public choice theorists also criticized the bureaucratic idea of *administrative decision-making based on means-ends rationality, rule-following, and written records*. Downs (1967) reiterated the aforementioned critique of means-ends rationality; he generally viewed bureaucracies as concerned more with protecting their size, budget, and power than with solving their overall tasks and fulfilling objectives. Hence, goal displacement is seen as an inherent feature of public bureaucracies. External auditing may reduce this problem but may also lead to window dressing. Indeed, effective administration seems to be less important for the long-term survival of bureaucratic agencies than organizational legitimacy obtained by following shifting organizational fads and fashions (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983).

The Weberian focus on rule-following as a precondition for control and accountability was criticized by a particular branch of public choice theory focused on principal-agent problems (Lane, 2005; Moe,



1984). In public bureaucracies, principals hire agents to do particular tasks. The principals will provide formal, rule-based instructions and resources (budgets and wages), and the agents will muster certain levels of expertise and motivation. The fundamental problem is that the principals lack precise knowledge about the resources needed and the competences and performance of the agents—knowledge that only the agents possess. The utility-maximizing agents will presumably exploit this information asymmetry to engage in opportunistic behavior, defined as expedient actions guided primarily by self-interested motives. Ultimately, public servants cannot be expected to comply with written rules and instructions. The main treatment prescribed for this problem by NPM is performance management, which establishes a line of sight from the principal all the way down to street-level bureaucrats, who must regularly report their results and risk punishment for shirking (Barber, 2008).

The bureaucratic emphasis on rule compliance was also criticized in the expanding literature on red tape (Bozeman, 2000; Buchanan, 1975; Gore, 1994; Kaufman, 1977), which basically accuses the public bureaucracy of producing “rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden but do not advance the legitimate purposes the rules were intended to serve” (Bozeman, 2000, p. 12). Rules tend to beget more rules, and while some rules help to safeguard accountability, predictability, and fairness, excessive rules impose administrative burdens that negate any positive contribution (Heckscher, 1994). The cure for this problem is de-bureaucratization that carefully removes red tape and “creates a public sector that works better and costs less” (Gore, 1994).

As Osborne and Gaebler (1993) argued, another problem is how bureaucracies tend to reward rule compliance more than results. At the end of their career, public servants may be rewarded for their administrative reliability, punctuality, and compliance with legal requirements without considering their achievements. Here, the bold recommendation is the development of a new performance culture that shifts the attention from rules to results by incentivizing output and outcome production (Hood, 1991).

Compared with the strong criticisms of bureaucratic rationality and rule-following, there has been little criticism of the use of written records. However, the formal decision-making procedures, where papers are pushed back and forth, have been criticized for being inflexible, formalistic, time-consuming, and preventing more agile forms of informal or self-organized decision-making (for an excellent review, see du Gay & Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016).

Turning next to the criticism of the *compartmentalized division of labor with a high level of professional specialization*, Downs (1965) pointed out how bureaucratic departments tend to either prevent interagency coordination by ignoring each other or to engage in fierce turf wars resulting in the formulation of policies that are so narrow that other departments have no role to play. Hence, policymaking suffers from the presence of bureaucratic silos that prevent information and knowledge exchange and hinder collaborative problem-solving (Ensor, 1988).

Bureaucratic specialization is a problem for service delivery as well as policymaking. Citizens must engage with many different bureaucratic agencies to receive the services they need, and there is often little or no integration between the delivered services that may overlap or contradict each other (Francis, 2000). Hence, organizational fragmentation hampers policymaking and service delivery.

With its emphasis on the use of contract and franchise arrangements, NPM initially exacerbated the fragmentation problem (Hood, 1991). This might be why policy analysts later recommended the development of joined-up government and one-stop shops to combat institutional fragmentation (Askim et al., 2009; Bogdanor, 2005; Pollitt, 2003).

Finally, the bureaucratic concept of *centralized hierarchical governance of and within administrative units* has been subjected to massive critique from public choice theorists. Fine-grained, multi-level hierarchies make decision-making slow, enhance the number of veto points (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), and are likely to distort the information and communication flow within organizations, leading to confusion over goals (Tullock, 1965).

Moreover, Downs (1967) famously described the ongoing ossification of hierarchically ordered public bureaucracies. Public bureaucracies tend to grow in size and then enter a period of stagnation, which is caused by losing their original sense of purpose, the growing hostility of competing bureaucratic units, and problems with ensuring efficient communication, conflict mediation, and talent recruitment. In response to the risk of stagnation, public organizations develop large systems of formal rules and procedures, spending all their energy on external turf wars and securing internal communication and cohesion. Consequently, they become increasingly ossified and less innovative. According to NPM

(Hood, 1991), the antidote to this development is the disaggregation of bureaucratic units, for example, by creating special-purpose agencies and delegating authority to local managers while relaxing the centralized steering through deregulation.

Developed by Williamson (1975), transaction cost theory was used to argue that bureaucracy based on hierarchical surveillance, evaluation, and direction is only efficient when both performance ambiguity and goal incongruence are moderately high (Ouchi, 1980). However, many standardized public goods and services are characterized by the low levels of performance ambiguity and goal incongruence and could therefore be delivered more efficiently by market actors without costs of managers, accountants, and personnel departments.

Marketization based on privatization, outsourcing, and the commercialization of the remaining public sector is one of the main pillars of NPM. It is based on the general argument that the absence of competition in the public sector, where authoritative budget decisions are made by elected political leaders, means that public-sector unit costs tend to be excessive and the quality inferior compared to market solutions (Niskanen, 1971; Saltman & von Otter, 1992). Submitting public service institutions to competition from private service producers will allegedly help alleviate this problem. Competition will allegedly reduce unit costs and boost quality. Since bureaucratic leaders who see themselves as rule enforcers and guardians of bureaucratic values are ill-equipped to compete with private contractors, public leadership must be professionalized and strengthened by importing private-sector leadership technologies (Hood, 1991). Indeed, according to NPM, we should not only let public managers manage but also make them manage by using incentives (e.g., bonuses, renewable short-term contracts) (Norman, 2001). Finally, public leaders must develop and strengthen their entrepreneurial spirit to drive public service organizations toward efficiency and excellence and respond to customer needs (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993).

### The third wave of criticisms of bureaucracy

A series of criticisms comes from advocates of new and emerging governance paradigms that are not only critical of bureaucracy but also of the NPM reforms that swept the world in an effort to improve the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of established public bureaucracies (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004).

A group of public administration scholars who are basically sympathetic to the bureaucratic governance paradigm and its core values has embraced the neo-Weberian state that halts the NPM-inspired marketization of the public sector while strengthening professional public leadership and the development of a more responsive public service sector founded on classical Weberian values (Byrkjeflot et al., 2018; Christensen & Lægreid, 2001; Lynn, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011). Some have recently complained about the blind spots of intra- and interorganizational non-coordination, which have become dramatically visible in the wake of a long series of terrorist attacks and hate crimes (Bach & Wegrich, 2019; Christensen, 2019). Such blind spots call for reforms of public bureaucracies that enhance cross-cutting communication and coordination and cut back on marketization and performance management.

Other researchers have criticized both bureaucracy and NPM for failing to cope with the 2007 fiscal crisis by enhancing the efficiency and productivity of the public sector by exploiting new digital technologies that may help to rationalize administrative routines, solve the perennial fragmentation problem, and provide more holistic service delivery (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Using big data and machine learning to improve efficiency is another key feature of Digital Era Governance (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).

Last but not least, public administration scholars associated with New Public Governance have critiqued how NPM, with its agentification, outsourcing, and strict performance management regime, has enhanced the bureaucratic fragmentation problem and strengthened top-down control with public employees (Osborne, 2006, 2010), thus generating a need for collaborative governance in networks and partnerships as well as a more trust-based management regime that can help mobilize the competences and creativity of public employees (Torfing & Triantafyllou, 2013). The same group of scholars has criticized rigid bureaucratic hierarchies based on linear policymaking models and top-down implementation for failing to solve (super-)wicked and turbulent problems (Ansell et al., 2021; Head, 2022; Lazarus, 2008; Rittel & Webber, 1973) and more generally for being unable to foster public innovation that is necessitated by the concurrence of growing citizen demands and scarce public resources (Hartley, 2005; Torfing, 2016). Finally, the insulated and centrally controlled public bureaucracies have

been criticized for their reluctance to involve relevant and affected actors in collaborative governance arrangements and their failure to mobilize the increasingly critical, competent, and assertive citizens in participatory arenas that can help to restore trust and enhance legitimacy (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

In sum, consecutive waves of criticism have criticized the core components of public bureaucracy, which have all been subjected to fierce criticism. Bureaucracy is either criticized for generating a lengthy list of unintended negative effects or being unable to respond to contemporary challenges, and the solutions offered go against the grain of the bureaucratic model. Bureaucracy has been anything but defeated by this frontal attack, however, appearing to have weathered the storm by deploying a broad range of ideational robustness strategies.

## Accounting for the ideational robustness of bureaucracy

The bureaucratic governance paradigm has been heavily criticized—but also defended. Hence, there have been numerous attempts at rescuing bureaucracy from the claws of NPM (Moore, 1995, 2000), rediscovering its virtues (Olsen, 2005) and highlighting the ability of public administrators to bounce back when attacked by autocratic political leaders and safeguard the core principles of liberal democracy (Bauer et al., 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2019; Raadschelders, 2022). However, reappraising the defining principles of bureaucracy provides a poor defense against criticisms of their negative consequences and shortcomings. As such, we contend that the ideational robustness of bureaucracy *inter alia* has been secured by devising and deploying strategies aimed at adapting and innovating the bureaucratic governance paradigm in response to criticism.

We agree with Du Gay (2005), who concludes that “despite the scorn regularly heaped upon it, bureaucracy, both as an organizational ideal and as a diversely formatted organizational device, has proven remarkably resilient. The reports of its death have turned out to be somewhat premature” (Du Gay, 2005, p. 1). Although public administrators insisting on key bureaucratic values may appear somewhat anachronistic (Peters, 2003), different articulations of the core components of bureaucracy still have considerable purchase and inform how public administration is organized, governed, and led around the world. What we are seeing, however, is not an intellectual and practical comeback that restores the original bureaucratic model, but rather a “many-sided, evolving and diversified organizational device” (Du Gay, 2005, p. 3). Bureaucracy has neither been eradicated nor has it miraculously survived a century of criticisms; rather, it has rearticulated to maintain its ability to influence the form and functioning of public administration. Today, it is not alone in influencing the structuring of the culture, institutions, and processes of public administration, but it has maintained considerable impact and still provide the backbone of the public sector in most countries.

The question we set out to explore is: How has bureaucratic governance paradigm achieved its ideational robustness? Which ideational robustness strategies have enabled the staying-power of the bureaucratic governance paradigm? Let us consider the different strategies deployed by researchers, public intellectuals, and public leaders, while noting that researchers and public intellectuals often get to express new trends and ideas that they have gleaned from observation of public leaders, who in turn legitimize their strategies and actions with reference to new ideas about public governance.

The first robustness strategy, “selective reaffirmation,” aims to criticize new and alternative governance ideas and reaffirms the main thrust of the predominant governance paradigm while cutting the losses. It is clearly visible, especially in the northwestern European countries. Here, the marketization element in NPM has been criticized for triggering a race to the bottom and undermining the universalist welfare state, and performance management has been criticized for conflicting with the low power distance and strong trust culture found in the Scandinavian countries (Klausen & Ståhlberg, 1998). At the same time, the core values of public bureaucracy regarding equity, transparency, and legality, which NPM tends to undermine, have been praised (Du Gay, 2000; Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2002, 2007; Olsen, 2005). Moreover, the supporters of bureaucracy seem willing to make a bold concession. While the classical Weberian conception of the civil servants recruited based on their merits is still maintained, commentators admit that civil servants are not merely loyal and neutral servants but also frequently policymakers and negotiators (Peters, 2010) and not driven by altruistic concerns alone (Le Grand, 2003). Hence, it has been impossible to deny completely the relevance of the alternative economic man model upon which much of the public choice criticisms of bureaucracy is based. In an effort to supply a more realistic view of what motivates public employees, a new mixed-motive model seems to have received

general acceptance. As such, it is argued that public employees are motivated by a combination of extrinsic motivation, intrinsic task motivation, and public service motivation (Amendola et al., 2020; Andersen et al., 2018; Neumann & Ritz, 2015). The recognition of the mixed motives of public employees has important consequences for leadership, which must combine transactional and transformational leadership (Jensen et al., 2019).

The *second* robustness strategy, “contraction,” aims to scale down the role and ambition of the bureaucratic governance paradigm. It is pursued by Olsen (2005), who instead of insisting on the unchallenged principles of bureaucracy works to relativize the bureaucratic governance model vis-à-vis alternative market and network models. Olsen makes clear that, despite its virtues, bureaucracy is no panacea and does not provide the answer to all public administration challenges (Olsen, 2005, p. 1). It may be combined with other governance principles since it is unlikely that public administration can be organized on the basis of one principle alone (Olsen, 2005, p. 16). The use of formal rules illustrates the limitations of bureaucracy. Rules tend to increase action capabilities, efficiency, consistency, and democratic equality. Moreover, rules do not necessarily imply rigidity and inflexibility. Hence, to a point, rules may have many positive effects. However, if there are too many rules, they are not regularly revised and adjusted, and if there is no room for interpretation and discretion, their effects might be negative. The limits of rules are clearly recognized by the new literature on administrative burdens that seek to remove burdens resulting from rigid demands for rule compliance to improve the functioning and impact of public bureaucracy (Herd & Moynihan, 2019). According to Olsen (2005, p. 11), the positive effects of rules depend on public administrators being socialized into the ethics of rule-following, allowing them to reflect on the ethics and appropriateness of rules to see the difference between right/wrong, true/false, and legal/illegal.

The *third* robustness strategy, “divide and conquer,” aims to create zones of validity for different governance paradigms. It is applied by researchers and commentators aiming to carve out a niche for their particular approach to governance while recognizing the value of competing approaches. Echoing insights from transaction cost theory, it has been argued that bureaucratic hierarchies, competitive markets, and collaborative networks are not contenders to the same throne, each having their own kingdom (Torfing et al., 2020, 2012). Accordingly, bureaucratic hierarchies are particularly valid when it comes to the exercise of public authority in areas such as regulatory governance, complex services based on discretion, and the payment of social benefits. Bureaucratic rule-following safeguards transparency, and equity and the allocation of clear responsibilities within a chain of command ensure accountability. Market-based competition, however, provides a preferred tool when it comes to enhancing the quality–price ratio of public services in areas with low asset specificity and where it is possible to define and enforce clear service standards through contracting. Finally, collaborative networks may have an advantage in relation to complex problem-solving and in areas where both input and output legitimacy must be boosted. Such a contingency theory of governance helps to maintain the undisputed relevance of bureaucracy within a well-defined realm where it has a comparative advantage (Alford & Hughes, 2008).

The *fourth* robustness strategy, “repackaging,” aims to change the relative weight of the components of a problematized governance paradigm. It has been used less than the other strategies, although the willingness to drop or at least downplay the idea of altruistic civil servant in favor of a mixed-motive model (see above) shifts the balance between the core components of the bureaucratic governance paradigm. Another core component of bureaucracy that has been downplayed is the celebration of means–ends rationality. Although upheld as an ideal (not least a procedural one), most people agree that rational decision-making models do not provide a realistic description of how the administration works. Alternative incremental decision models have gained increasing prominence (Lindblom, 1959, 1979), although the mixed-scanning model argues that there is often an oscillation between bigger rational decisions and smaller incremental adjustments (Etzioni, 1967, 1986). The policy-stream model has further challenged the idea of an administrative means–ends rationality and led to the recognition of the need for policy entrepreneurs who can use emerging opportunities to make productive problem–solution connections (Kingdon, 1995). The combined impact of the new emphasis on policy entrepreneurship, public service motivation, and public leadership creates a slightly different storyline, as bureaucracy is not merely sold on its efficient and control-based steering model based on hierarchy, specialization, and rule compliance but also on the role of a proactive administrative agency capable of driving change and producing innovative public value outcomes (Moore, 1995).

The *fifth* robustness strategy, “rearticulation,” aims to change the content and meaning of one or more components of a governance paradigm. We have already mentioned the rethinking of the motives of public employees, the limitation of (and alternative to) the traditional means–ends rationality, and the recognition of the administrative burdens associated with red tape (Herd & Moynihan, 2019), which has stimulated the interest in de-bureaucratization and green tape (DeHart-Davis, 2009). These re-articulations leave us with the classical bureaucratic recommendation of centralized hierarchical control and a fine-grained administrative division of labor. But here too, we find examples of major re-articulations of the core components of bureaucracy. Hierarchical steering has been challenged by theories of adhocracy (Birkinshaw & Ridderstråle, 2010; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985), theories of stewardship relations between the top and bottom of public hierarchies (Schillemans, 2013), and theories of governance networks that turn public authority into a metagoverning agency aimed at influencing processes and outcomes of networks without reverting too much to control and command (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In much the same way, the compartmentalized division of labor in public bureaucracy has been challenged by theories of interorganizational, polycentric, and pluricentric coordination (Bouckaert et al., 2016; McGinnis & Ostrom, 2012; Reff Pedersen et al., 2011) and theories emphasizing the role of boundary spanners and bridge-builders (Eggers & Kettl, 2023; Williams, 2002). Taken together, the renegotiations of the meaning of the core components of bureaucracy create a softer, modernized version of bureaucracy that may appear more relevant to those in and around the public sector.

The *sixth* robustness strategy, “hybridization,” aims to selectively combine old and new governance paradigms. It has clearly been at work in the neo-Weberian state literature (Christensen & Lægheid, 2001; Lynn, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011), which seems to have considerable empirical resonance with public-sector leaders who continue to swear by bureaucracy but have taken on board a few of the most fitting NPM ideas (Hammerschmid et al., 2016). While criticizing the marketization of the public sector and incentive-focused managerialism, neo-Weberian state supporters recognize the need to strengthen proactive public leadership steeped in traditional bureaucratic values of legality, accountability, fairness, and equity while enhancing public-sector responsiveness to citizens through consultation procedures, user satisfaction surveys, etc. More recently, the neo-Weberian hybrid combining bureaucracy and NPM elements has been further expanded to include elements of collaborative governance associated with the New Public Governance paradigm (Bouckaert, 2023). While the neo-Weberian state is the most influential hybrid by far, there are also other notable attempts to combine elements from bureaucracy with elements from other governance models. Bourgon (2011) has deliberately aimed to construct a new synthesis by sampling elements from bureaucracy, NPM, and new ideas about resilience. As such, she proposes that the actions of public administrations should be guided by equally important goals of compliance, performance, emergence, and resilience that should be supported by institutional, organizational, innovative, and adaptive capacities. Finally, Koppenjan et al. (2019) recommend using new governance arrangements that are hybrid in the sense of transcending the borders of traditional forms of governance led by state, markets, networks, or civil society and smart in the sense of rarely involving large-scale reforms, relying instead on pragmatic modifications aiming to combine the comparative advantages of different modes of governance.

The different robustness strategies all seem to have been invoked in different measures to reassert the relevance of bureaucracy, albeit some appear to have been used more than others. Hence, while contraction and repackaging strategies have been marginally applied, rearticulation and hybridization strategies have been widely used and received considerable attention, at least in the academic world. This bears witness to the role of ideational innovation in securing the robustness of bureaucracy.

It is impossible to precisely estimate the impact of the different ideational robustness strategies. The effect of scholarly contributions (that are merely the tip of the iceberg) is unclear, as they are often accompanied by blogs, posts, seminars, conferences, public presentations, and other related and supportive manifestations. However, it is more than likely that the different ideational robustness strategies as a whole have contributed to securing the continued relevance of the bureaucratic governance paradigm by means of conceptual adaptation and innovation. The ideational robustness strategies advanced by scores of scholars and commentators help to legitimize the practitioners’ continued adherence to bureaucratic principles.

The ideational robustness strategies are not alone in having secured the continued relevance of bureaucracy. Politicians have an interest in relying on and controlling a well-functioning bureaucracy capable of effective policy execution (Christensen, 2008; Fukuyama, 2023), top-level administrative



leaders are keen to control their organization based on hierarchy, compartmentalization, and rule compliance (Aucoin, 1997), and the survival of the state tends to depend on the continued existence of an impartial rule-based bureaucracy (du Gay & Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016). However, the ideational robustness strategies are doing important work, bolstering the bureaucratic preferences of politicians and executive managers in turbulent times when bureaucracy is criticized and scorned to the extent that its ideational survival is uncertain.

In a bigger perspective, the discursive work of ideational robustness strategies may be positive for the public sector. The combination of different ideational robustness strategies may help key governance ideas such as bureaucracy to maintain their legitimacy and relevance, thus providing a degree of continuity in public governance that ensures administrative predictability and commitment to key liberal democratic values. At the same time, ideational adaptation and innovation may facilitate adjustment to a changing world, thus preventing bureaucracy from becoming an anachronistic relic. Finally, the tendency toward hybridization whereby different governance paradigms are pragmatically combined depending on the problem or challenge at hand nurtures the rise of a pragmatic pluralism where the idea of “one size fits all” is abandoned in favor of a contingent bricolage of governance components associated with different paradigms (Carstensen et al., 2023).

## Conclusion and further research avenues

Few scholars believe that the spate of NPM reforms has left bureaucracy intact (but see Schofield, 2001). Consecutive waves of criticism have bruised and battered the bureaucratic governance paradigm, leading to drastic changes in both content and scope that can be studied by analyzing shifting politico-organizational storylines (Christensen, 2003) and to the introduction of competing and coexisting governance paradigms to be studied using a configurational approach (Monteiro & Adler, 2022). Hence, if bureaucracy has survived the persistent attacks, it is due to the work of the ideational robustness strategies that have adapted and innovated the bureaucratic governance paradigm, thus allowing the supporters of bureaucracy to insist on its continued relevance.

This article has sketched out a broad repertoire of ideational robustness strategies and examined their relevance in a study of the fate of public bureaucracy. Bureaucracy was conceptualized as a public governance paradigm comprising several core components and a century of criticisms has been summarized. Hence, it has been shown how bureaucracy has been refused and reappraised, eventually proving to be relatively robust due to the combined impact of multiple robustness strategies, some of which have fostered considerable innovation.

The story of bureaucracy does not end here. Some new and emerging governance paradigms are gaining ground and will exert growing pressure on the bureaucratic forms of organization, governance, and leadership (e.g., Laloux, 2014). In this situation, securing the continued relevance of bureaucracy will require a skillful combination of several ideational robustness strategies. However, not only will new governance paradigms tend to be layered atop the old ones, thus creating space for the “contraction” and “divide and conquer” strategies. They will also force a “repacking” of the elements of bureaucracy and perhaps “rearticulate” some of them to align with new insights and development. Most importantly, the new and emerging governance paradigms will most likely lead to the creation of new forms of “hybridity” that combine elements of bureaucracy with new forms of organization, governance, and leadership. It will be crucial to study the ideational and practical re-articulations between competing and coexisting governance paradigms that will tend to create a dynamic conservatism that allows bureaucracy to live on in new and altered forms.

In the future, the ideational robustness framework developed and applied here could be used to study the ideational robustness of other public administration icons such as NPM, transformational leadership, or public accountability. New applications of the ideational robustness framework may further sharpen and extend the list of available robustness strategies. Further research on ideational robustness in the field of public governance and administration may also endeavor to analyze the conditions for using particular ideational robustness strategies and find more precise ways of measuring their impact. Last, yet importantly, the interface between academic and public-political governance debates may warrant particular attention in future research, since we know little about how practitioners draw on academic ideas and how academics seek to provide ammunition for political views and practical reforms.



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