

# How Can Scholars Help to Embed Institutions of Public-Sector Change? (Or Things I Wish I'd Known When I Was a Grad Student)

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## Abstract

What is the purpose of the applied study of government? In this essay, I lay out one response—that scholars of this topic should help in the job of what I characterize as *embedding institutions of public-sector change*. Public institutions offer the key means to direct governance, but at the same time also risk becoming sclerotic, failing to adapt to public concerns. How can academics help resolve this duality, matching public values to contemporary challenges? First, we as scholars can play a role in purposeful problem framing. Second, we can study and document related behavior and empirical outcomes. Finally, we can design solutions. I illustrate these processes with examples from my own research, discussing performance management, administrative burdens, and public personnel systems.

## Introduction

Perhaps some of us came to do research on public sector institutions, or other applied areas of social science, with a very clear notion of the normative purpose of our efforts. I didn't. I had studied public administration as an undergraduate at the University of Limerick, seeing it as a useful domain of knowledge, although I originally assumed I would engage in practice, mostly likely as a civil servant in my native Ireland. I moved to the United States thanks to a scholarship that allowed me to complete a Master of Public Administration (MPA) at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

In the years that followed, whatever vague sense of purpose I had was overwhelmed by the demands of the next professional hurdle—becoming a PhD student, passing the methods classes and preliminary exams, completing a dissertation, stressing about the academic job market, publishing, and getting tenure. The effort in overcoming each hurdle tended to blur rather than sharpen the vague sense of purpose that originally drew me to the field.

Inattention to normative intent does not mean that the normative effects of our research disappear. Questions about the purpose and professional norms of an applied academic field are also necessarily interrogations about the role of those asking the questions, and how the two things interact. We cannot answer *who are we?* without relating our identity to our function: *what purpose do we serve?* Answering this question, in turn, depends upon both a mixture of normative concerns *what sort of government do we want?* *what public values shall it serve?* and empirical questions *how do we achieve those values?*

So, what is the purpose of the applied study of government? This is, or should be, a question that all students of

governance ought to explicitly consider and debate, and the answer they come up with should shape how they approach their work. To engage in this topic first means recognizing publicness and public values, and considering what obligations and constraints they pose for governing. It next compels us to probe and incrementally revise those obligations and constraints to devise compatible institutions.<sup>1</sup>

This essay presents a multipart argument about the nature of government and the people who study it. The previous paragraph reflects an assumption that the particular nature and constraints of government pose both a normative and design challenge that researchers cannot ignore. Public organizations lack market pressures for improvement. Democratic forces for change may miss the target, focused on political goals, some of which may themselves be antidemocratic or prioritize dysfunction over performance. Hierarchically imposed solutions, especially in authoritarian regimes, often lead to disastrous outcomes, as they miss the necessary feedback loops and experimentation needed for government to succeed. The applied study of government, properly understood, is able to not just bear witness to such problems but play a role in resolving them.

Another part of the argument deals with the normative and professional understanding that scholars of governance hold about the purpose of their work. Academics can (but often don't) play an essential role in helping to identify and test institutions of change. They can perform this role better if they are aware of and purposeful about it. Such engagement means more than doing good empirical work. It poses two

<sup>1</sup>I am thinking here of institutions in broad terms, consistent with North's (1991, 97) definition of "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interactions" but with particular focus on institutions governing actors who work in the public sector.

other challenges. First, that we reflect explicitly about how our research relates to normative goals. Some are uncomfortable with this, believing that it turns us from dispassionate researchers into advocates. But research about the role, structure, and effectiveness of government is inherently normative, tied to often unstated assumptions of the role of democracy and markets, individual rights and the limits of state power, equality and how we evaluate organizational goals. It is just a matter of whether we are explicit about this fact or not. The case for being more explicit has become stronger as taken-for-granted normative goals come under more open challenge, via, for example populist or antidemocratic movements. The second challenge is that we think about the world in design terms: not just to offer accounts of how it is, but how it could be. This must mean something more than a tagged-on discussion of policy implications. If we are to take seriously that public administration is part of a science of the artificial (Simon 1996), it is worth considering how scientists of this particular type of artificiality should operate. How might we better orient ourselves to do the hard work of fixing problems, and not just recording them?

I discuss three characteristics of a problem-driven and solution-oriented approach to the study of governance. First, we have enormous agency in *purposeful problem framing*. Second, we can choose how to *understand behaviors and empirical outcomes*. Finally, we can *design (and implement) solutions*. None of these ideas are entirely new. But it may be useful to suggest both that they are central to our work and that we should think of them as part of a coherent professional framework for doing research on government.

I consider the role of public values and the public setting as key factors in such efforts, while giving attention to the dynamics of particular stages in the process of both problem framing and devising solutions. Such discussions lend themselves to abstraction. To reduce this, and with advance apologies for the ensuing self-referentiality, I reflect on these ideas in the context of my own research in various research domains, including efforts to reduce administrative burdens, reforms to improve public-sector performance, and public personnel systems.

The three examples raise questions, such as How do we reduce unnecessary frictions that government imposes on the public? How do we encourage public employees to be mindful of organizational goals and outcomes and not just bureaucratic rules? How do we design public personnel systems where employees invest in acquiring expertise and acting in the public interest? The answer to all of these fundamental questions of governance is that public settings demand stable institutions capable of embedding processes of functional change. These questions are largely considered in the context of US political institutions and thus only generalize in a limited fashion to other settings, where administrative issues of concern may be more basic, such as maintaining territorial sovereignty, the provision of core services, or extrademocratic forces competing for power (see, e.g., Roberts 2019). Nevertheless, the interplay between scholarship, institutional, and administrative questions is certainly one that extends beyond the United States.

In the following sections, I outline the ways in which academics can engage in purposeful problem framing, understand behavior and devise solutions, and how the three fit together. I then offer my three examples, before concluding with

some lessons about the framework I propose. I start where we should always start, with a consideration of values.

## Being Explicit about Public Values in Research Purposeful Problem Framing

The framing of problems is an exercise in choosing and prioritizing public values. Sometimes this is done implicitly, or barely done at all, prioritizing a description of gaps in prior research over the values at stake. Incremental academic improvement is important but being explicit about values makes it more likely that we purposefully consider what frame we are using, and why we are using it. How to get started? Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) offer an inventory of public values, though the range of relevant values broadens as we look at more fragile states (Ghani and Lockhart 2008; Hirsch, Kotwal, and Ramaswami 2019).

Framing involves asking *what is the problem to which we should direct our attention?* Why should we care about this? In a world of competing issues, why focus on this one, and this particular understanding of the issue? The frame both shapes what topic we look at and how we look at it.

The invocation of public values reflects the applied nature of problem framing: they should reflect a consideration of real governance issues. But there is considerable room left to the researcher in how they relate to frames. Most of us, most of the time, will be engaged in empirical work that tests a particular claim nested within a broader frame. Sometimes we try to amend an existing frame, or create a new one (though in truth, given how long people have been studying governance, there is almost nothing that can be truly new: mostly we are reframing past ideas).

## Understanding Behavior and Empirical Outcomes

The idea we should empirically analyze behaviors and outcomes is the least contentious claim I could make, and so does not bear extended discussion. But it is worth explicitly stating, and considering its relationship with framing. Framing will sometimes involve naming, that is, establishing a title and associated language with a set of ideas. It will also assume certain behavioral outcomes. But if it *only* involves naming, never gets beyond assumptions, and neglects empirical study of the problem, it has limited value either to practice or social science. Framing without empirical follow-up risks epistemic closure that prevents falsification. Such a criticism can be fairly laid at doctrinal models of public management that not only identify problems, but also confidently advocate for under-investigated solutions (Hood and Jackson 1994).

This is not to say that the same piece of scholarship, or even the same scholar, that engages in problem framing is obliged to engage in empirical analysis. Rather, it is to be able to ask of any particular problem framing not just “what are the practical implications?” but also “how shall we study these claims?” It involves making falsifiable claims about human behavior and public outcomes.

For more novel framing of policy problems, much of the relevant empirical work may be descriptive, mapping the scale and occurrence of the problem. In social science research, causal models are prized. This preference creates a potential blind spot, a risk that we miss large and meaningful changes to the state simply because there is little reward to descriptively characterize those changes (Moynihán, Gerinza, and Herd 2022; Roberts 2020).

## Designing Solutions

Calls for more of a design focus in the applied study of government are hardly new (Barzelay and Thompson 2010; Douglas et al. 2021; Duflo 2017; James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017; Simon 1996). We might therefore assume that there is general acceptance of the idea that providing useful and relevant work to the study of government is relatively uncontroversial. But we have many more theories than widely agreed upon solutions to practical problems, reflecting institutional and cultural academic norms to raise rather than resolve questions (Watts 2018).

The design of solutions can take multiple forms. Simon lays out the basic ethos. Design is “concerned with how things ought to be, with devising artifacts to attain goals” (Simon 1996, 114). In the context of government, it therefore implies developing a proposed change in existing governance processes. It should explicitly rest upon problem framing. It can both flow from existing research (*based on what we already know, here is a design that should work*) and be the precursor to such research (*let’s see if it works*).

In our contemporary moment, where behavioral models and evaluations are prioritized, it is easy to assume that the design of solutions involve randomized controlled trials to test some specific behavioral question. This mode of solution seeking has been embedded into government in various ways since the 1960s (Kroll and Moynihan 2018), most recently with the establishment of nudge units or laws like the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. But design thinking can also take the form of an ongoing “deliberative argumentation” including “careful observation, thick description, normative reasoning about what constitutes a good outcome, and evaluation, reflecting different beliefs, values, and attitudes” (Barzelay and Thompson 2010, 295). What Barzelay and Thompson describe reflects the idea of design as an ongoing practice and ethos, one where there is a deep connection with communities of practice.

I next offer some examples of how these processes can work in practice and the role researchers may play.

### Example 1: Administrative Burden

The administrative burden literature examines the causes, natures, and consequences of people’s experiences of friction in processes of policy implementation. The ideas of frictions are not novel in social science, or even in the study of government in particular. But they have been far from a central feature of analyzing how citizens experienced the state (Jakobsen et al. 2019). The gradual emergence of the administrative burden framework over the last decade has changed this, arguing that burdens are a central feature of citizen–state interactions, that they have large effects, and that they often serve to reinforce patterns of inequality (Burden et al. 2012; Heinrich 2016; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015).

### Purposeful Problem Framing

Academic research in this domain drew belated analytic attention to an aspect of government people intuitively understand. After all, everyone has experienced burdens in their daily lives. By distinguishing between types of costs (the learning costs of finding out about programs and services, the compliance costs of time and money spent on completing administrative demands, and the psychological costs from such

interactions, including stress, frustration, and even fear), the framework allowed researchers to identify how specific types of frictions exist, can be measured, and generate specific types of outcomes (Madsen, Mikkelsen, and Moynihan 2020).

In offering this framework with Pamela Herd and coauthors, we were explicit about normative goals, arguing that people’s actions with government should be simple, accessible, and respectful. These public values are sometimes at odds with others: such as the efforts to minimize fraud. But we also offered evidence that these value tradeoffs are often not considered. Those who say they want to reduce fraud in social programs will ignore the effects of their proposed actions on access, for example. Thus, we urged that consideration of value tradeoffs be made more explicit and informed by empirical evidence. In other words, policymakers should ask, and have answers to, questions like: if I add a work requirement, how many eligible program recipients will lose benefits? If I make voting easier, will it lead to significant increase in fraud? How much do documentation requirements or administrative fees discourage those with fewer resources from seeking help? A call for evidence on such basic questions also appeals to traditional notions of rationality and equity, the idea that government actions should not hurt some groups more than others, and that we should have the best available information when making decisions. The value of such analysis might seem obvious, but it has not been a feature of either social science or government practice.

### Understanding Behavior and Empirical Outcomes

The framing of administrative burdens both drew from and generated empirical research. Much of our work in *Administrative Burden* (Herd and Moynihan 2018) was to pull together empirical research by sociologists, political scientists, public administration scholars, and economists within specific policy domains who largely did not think of their work as connecting to some broader project of frictions. The framework of burdens clarified the invisible connections and common interests in such work, establishing a generalizable set of claims about how frictions worked in public settings and launching a new wave of research that consciously identified with and contributed to the framework.

Some of the pressing questions in this empirical framework are as follows:

- How do burdens emerge from political-administrative systems?
- Why do people tolerate burdens?
- What are the effects of burdens on access, inequality, the experience of government, and subsequent political beliefs?
- What policy or design solutions can reduce burdens, especially for groups most negatively affected by them?

### Designing Solutions

The example of administrative burden illustrated two pathways to solutions. First, it offered an opportunity to work directly with government in specific design alternatives to reduce burdens. Second, governments took the administrative framework to institutionalize processes of solution-seeking within government.

As an example of the first pathway, I and others (see, e.g., Linos, Quan, and Kirkman 2020) looked for opportunities to partner directly with governments and nonprofits. In a recent field experiment with the state of California and the civic tech organization Code for America (Moynihan et al. 2022), we examined the problem of welfare recipients underclaiming public benefits they were eligible for because of confusion around administrative categories. While much of social science has studied how the state constructs administrative categories, there is much less attention to the ways in which people struggle to match to appropriate administrative categories, often at tangible costs to themselves. After consultation with case workers, advocates, and potential clients, we found ways to reduce learning and compliance costs by presenting categories in ways that the public understood intuitively. The result was to increase by about a third the claiming of a more generous benefit.

The second pathway of solution-adoption occurred when policymakers began to adopt the administrative burden framework. The framing itself was simple and intuitive, able to rest on relatable examples that all could understand. It also spoke to deeply held frustrations, some of which may reflect the particular dysfunctions of American political systems, such as the idea that we worry intensively about over-regulating businesses, but not individuals, or that policymakers would deliberately use burdens to sometimes make rights and benefits inaccessible.

Efforts to reduce administrative burdens as an institutionalized practice in government are starting to emerge. The Biden administration offers one model. By issuing two executive orders, the first on social equity and the second on customer experience,<sup>2</sup> the administration directed attention to the topic by:

- Introducing the theme of administrative burdens in the federal government via various governmentwide guidance issued by the Office of Management and Budget (2021),
- Identifying it as a problem to be addressed, partly because it facilitates inequality,
- Offering a set of tools to identify and evaluate burdens, and
- Establishing an annual review process, where public-facing agencies must report their efforts to the center of government on an annual basis.

In embedding new institutions of change, the federal government drew directly on social science framing and empirical research. The newness of such institutions will challenge old assumptions and ways of doing things. Will they succeed? To understand that, we can learn from our second example of performance management.

<sup>2</sup>See Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/> and Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on-transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government>. The administration also changed guidance for the implementation of the Paperwork Reduction Act to encourage agencies to better identify learning and psychological costs, and to reduce administrative burdens, consistent with Office of Management and Budget guidance. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/M-22-10.pdf>.

## Example 2: Performance Management

The United States has experimented with different models of performance management for much of the twentieth century. Counting things was a central focus of progressives concerned about waste. Various forms of performance budgeting were proposed for decades, with little abiding success.

### Purposeful Problem Framing

The public value here—“performance” or effectiveness—seems unobjectionable. After all, who wants bad performance? Of course, “performance” can appeal to multiple public values, ranging from efficiency and effectiveness, transparency, and accountability. Concrete “performance management” reforms reflect politicians expressing shared public frustration with government, and offering solutions that appeal to rationality and control: government is broken, but I know how to fix it. It is easy to dismiss such frustrations as symbolic—one consistent finding is that politicians are generally uninterested in the operation of performance management systems they create after they have created them—but symbolic beliefs have concrete implications for practice (Moynihan 2006).

And symbolic does not mean inaccurate. While reports of poor public sector performance tend to be both cherry-picked and exaggerated, public organizations have fewer external pressures to innovate and improve. This reflects not only the absence of market competition, but also the imposition of procedural constraints (some of which reflect other important public values that we do not impose on private actors): goal ambiguity, legal fights about processes, and the potential for failure to become national news. These are not prime conditions for experimentation.

Conducting my own research as a PhD student, I struggled with the perennial issue of how to study the topic of performance management. Much of the existing literature documented the creation of reforms, their general struggles, and eventual demise, often focusing on the budget process. Because of challenges of measurement and causal attribution, it was almost impossible to know if any particular reform made a difference, though hard to claim they had changed budget outcomes. But the symbolic appeal of such reforms spoke to other public values at play beyond the abstract notion of performance, and these values were about behavior.

People want public officials to be purposeful, rational, to look at data, and use that information to innovate and improve. This behavioral wish opened the door for reframing the study of performance management in behavioral terms: did reforms generate such purposeful behavior? Or were they met with a passive response, become part of political advocacy, or instead encourage perverse behavior (Moynihan 2008, 2009b)? While I have published a good deal of empirical research on this topic, I’m convinced that my lasting contribution was framing the purpose of performance reforms, and the studies of those reforms, in behavioral terms. This reframing moved us away from studying discrete reforms and toward studying human behavior, focusing attention on public employees rather than policymakers engaged in the public budget process.

### Understanding Behavior and Empirical Outcomes

The shift to the focus on performance information use aligned with the rise of behavioral science and behavioral public administration (James et al. 2020). In the intervening years, we

have accumulated significant evidence. For example, we know much more about the centrality of negativity bias in how performance data are used. Policymakers and members of the public pay more attention to negative rather than positive performance data (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017; Olsen 2015).

We also have accumulated ample evidence of motivated reasoning in the use of performance data. People select performance information that fits with their ideological priors and discount data that does not (James and Van Ryzin 2017; Moynihan 2008). Their judgment about performance can be shaped by ideological allies (Nielsen and Moynihan 2017). They will make erroneous interpretation of performance data if the data contradict ideological beliefs (Baekgaard and Serritzlew 2016; Christensen et al. 2018). Policymakers are more resistant to debiasing efforts than the public, reflecting their status as more skilled and dedicated motivated reasoners (Christensen and Moynihan 2018).

It is fair to say that research has better documented the problems of performance management, rather than offered solutions for how to do it better. This is perhaps a trait of the study of behavior, at least in the context of government. We have focused more on biases and cognitive errors in human judgment and decisions and less on how to structure institutions to facilitate better use of information.

Much of the practical study of performance management institutions in the United States comes from observational data. Causal insights are harder to claim with certainty, but there remains great value in documenting how people are behaving in the context of actual and evolving government institutions. Here, across a series of studies with Stephane Lavertu, David Lewis, and Alexander Kroll, we have developed some insights. This comes in the context of the creation of the contemporary US performance management system, which finds its recent origins in the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), revised in 2010 with the GPRA Modernization Act (GPRAMA). These research findings both reflected contemporary efforts and fed back into discussions about updates to the system, so I discuss them in the context of design.

### **Designing Solutions**

The US performance management system arguably represents the most stable and successful such institution globally (Moynihan and Beazley 2016). It has gradually become associated with purposeful use of performance data, while veering back from politicization of the process. This perhaps surprising outcome is the result of a slow, uneven, consistently revised process of practices, some of which were informed by lessons from academic research.

Some of these lessons have broader applicability beyond the specifics of performance management. First, routines matter. In the absence of strong incentives, the main lever for change becomes adjustments of organizational processes. Second, the nature of routines matter. Routines of data collection and dissemination established with the original GPRA did little beyond encouraging a passive response from bureaucrats, where public officials provided new performance information as required by law but did not actually use it (Moynihan and Lavertu 2012). Routines that encouraged use, such as quarterly reviews, were associated with purposeful performance information use, especially if they were skillfully implemented (Moynihan and Kroll 2016).

Third, new routines need to be institutionalized, that is, supported by leaders, culture, and resources. The Bush-era innovation of creating the positions of Chief Operating Officers and Performance Improvement Officers was rolled into GPRAMA, ensuring that performance management became a defined professional responsibility rather than an after-thought of the budget office. As performance management reforms connected to other processes of evaluating performance, such as evaluation, they became more embedded (Kroll and Moynihan 2018). As leaders became more involved in performance management routines and were seen as committed to both the process and outcomes by employees, employee performance information use increased (Moynihan and Kroll 2016).

Fourth, as reforms become viewed as politicized, they become less effective. Just as some Bush-era reforms were cemented in place, others were abandoned, most obviously the PART evaluation of the performance of federal programs. Programs in more liberal agencies systematically received lower scores in these evaluations, and managers in agencies with liberal programs believed they had to expend greater effort to satisfy requirements (Lavertu, Lewis, and Moynihan 2013). Not surprisingly then, Bush-era reforms were associated with purposeful use in more conservative agencies (Lavertu and Moynihan 2013), but lower use in more liberal agencies. The bipartisan nature of GPRAMA helped to reverse this trend, with later evaluations finding no difference in purposeful performance information use between conservative and liberal agencies (Kroll and Moynihan 2021).

### **Example 3: Public Personnel Systems and Administrative Capacity**

We turn finally to the oldest institution considered, which is public personnel systems, the basic institution by which we seek to maintain administrative capacity. The US civil service system has not engaged in significant legislative change since 1978. It is, by most measures, no longer an employment model that reflects contemporary markets or employee expectations. There are, therefore, strong pressures for reform. How we understand and frame those pressures and reform proposals matters a great deal to how we legitimize them and what solutions we end up with. In short, framing may cause us to miss the bigger picture about the public values that public employment serves.

### **Purposeful Problem Framing**

A defining tension of the US system of government is between responsiveness to political masters, and the development of the expertise and professionalism necessary for not just running a government, but for transforming America from a fledgling democracy to a world power (Ingraham 1995). Guarantees of job security and some measure of autonomy allowed public officials to invest in accumulating expertise that benefited political principals, even if those principals sometimes had different goals than bureaucrats (Gailmard and Patty 2012).

Efforts to reframe the purposes of public employment are worth noting. Some of these use the language of managerialism. For example, both the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act and Clinton-era reinventing government reforms put a strong emphasis on “flexibility” (Moynihan 2003, 2004). Conservative legal scholars working in Republican administrations have

advanced similar claims under the guise of unitary executive theory (Moynihan 2022c), which join other conservative reinterpretations of the constitution, framed as originalist, that cast doubt on the ability of Congress to delegate authority to agencies (Sunstein 2022). Such views are extreme in their rejection of a century of precedent and practice in governing, conveying that the President, and the President alone, has ultimate control over the executive branch (Skowronek, Dearborn, and King 2021).

These managerial and legal reframings of the civil service system have provided fuel for populist leaders. Most strikingly, President Trump sought to largely eliminate the guarantee of basic civil service protections for potentially hundreds of thousands of employees at the end of his administration. He failed because he ran out of time, but this will certainly be a priority in future populist administrations (Moynihan 2022c), who will have learned to also select for more loyalist appointees (Pfiffner 2022).

Meanwhile, scholars of the bureaucracy and the administrative state are largely disinterested in the topic, or too apt to portray them as simply another wave of reforms much like those of the past. Our framing of problems of state capacity was based on a certain set of assumptions: that the United States was a relatively stable democracy, where both parties had an inherent and rational interest in good government. Like slowly boiling frogs, our theoretical models largely neglected the increasing temperature, as one political party came to see the bureaucracy as the enemy. Our collective ability to protect and modernize state capacity is weakened when one party has engaged in an ongoing pattern of delegitimization, deconstruction, and control of public services (see Table 1, Moynihan 2022a).

Beyond the novel reinterpretations of the Constitution, the most significant change in how public personnel problems are framed is the mainstreaming of conspiratorial thinking. The paranoid style that Hofstadter wrote about in the 1960s has become increasingly dominant in American political life, largely finding home in the Republican party. Such beliefs have consequences. A majority of Republicans believe the 2020 election was subject to massive fraud, for example, even though election officials performed heroically amidst a pandemic. As a result, election officials feel increasingly unsafe, and are more likely to quit their positions, paving the way for unscrupulous partisans who pose the type of threat to democracy that the conspiracy theorists warn about (Moynihan 2022a).

**Table 1.** Undermining the Administrative State

*Delegitimization:* a suspicion of the public sector that has curdled into claims that public officials are deep state enemies of the people. This undermines belief in the capacity of government to deliver on democratic promises.

*Deconstruction:* undermining administrative capacity and delivery of services, making it harder for institutions to deliver on democratic promises, or to do so in ways that are transparent or generative of conditions in which the public sees government helping.

*Control:* loyalty to the political leaders is a primary virtue, weakening structural protections of public employees and the capacities of government agencies to pursue their statutory mission or respond to other sources of democratic control such as Congress.

Adapted from Moynihan (2022a).

The threat of populism makes it impossible to frame our work as engaging in a serious study of bureaucracy without accounting for the political context. As we ignore, for example, threats to election officials, public health employees, teachers, and the supposed “deep state” engaged in fantastical conspiracies, we ignore the very real damage being done to the contemporary American state. If the contemporary study of bureaucracy cannot address this threat head on, what purpose does it serve?

### **Understanding Behavior and Empirical Outcomes**

Expertise matters for public sector performance. This is not a new insight. More than 2,300 years ago, Chinese empires were sustained by careful selection, training, and specialization of a caste of officials (Loewe 2006). The growth of European powers depended on military, financial, and administrative professionalization (Wyman 2021).

In the contemporary US context, we also know that political appointees are less effective managers than experienced careerists (Lewis 2008). Instability and politicization make public service less attractive, leading to higher turnover of experienced civil servants (Doherty, Lewis, and Limbucker 2019), lower employee engagement (Condreay et al. 2022), and less reason for public officials to develop expertise (Richardson 2019). By contrast, giving managers autonomy and capacity to pursue goals that they value increases their investments in expertise (Andersen and Moynihan 2016). Messages of delegitimization make public employment less attractive (Garrett et al. 2006). Distrust of public officials undermines tasks that require co-production between the public and public employees, a tendency starkly illustrated by variable rates of acceptance of basic public health actions during the pandemic (Fridman, Gershon, and Gneezy 2021).

Scholars need to both actively point to the clear, existing evidence about the corrosive effects of politicization and develop more such evidence. More research is also needed to show if and when administrative changes cause dysfunction and trace those changes to political choices. Some of the motivation of the administrative burden framework, for example, was to make clear when costs were deliberately imposed on citizens as a function of political choice (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015), reflecting political preferences (Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2021).

### **Designing Solutions**

The achievement of democratic projects is sometimes lost in the banality of their operations. Decades of delegitimization have made it an uphill battle to explain the necessity and value of effective public institutions. This is not to say that stagnation does not exist, and modernization is not needed. Rather the point is precisely that because such modernization is needed, it should be guided by democratic public values and careful scholarship, rather than surrendered to those whose goals are, instead, the consolidation of political power for antidemocratic purposes.

Students of bureaucracy are thus faced with a double challenge: defending the values necessary for public institutions to continue while looking for opportunities to modernize in ways that do not threaten those values. The relevant key values and the evidence on how they can be realized will vary from one setting to another (Roberts 2019). In a US context, we should reclaim the public values inherent in nonpartisan, merit-based

public work for a democracy, one where accountability rests not on loyalty to a single individual by virtue of misguided theories of governance, and more broadly not just to elected officials but to the public as a whole. We should also look for ways to modernize existing systems of governance. And we should not be shy in communicating to the public what we know, rather than leaving the field of policy debate to those engaged in a project of administrative vandalism.

There is also much that can be done to improve the functioning of public personnel systems that does not require civil service changes. How organizations interpret their constraints matter: organizational culture and leadership can moderate the effect of structural factors, for good or ill (e.g., Pandey, Coursey, and Moynihan, 2007; Jensen, Moynihan, and Salomonsen 2018; Wright, Moynihan, and Pandey 2012). To the degree that understanding these other factors helps public employees do their jobs better, the more we can contribute to the broader project of renewing a functional public service that confounds bureaucratic stereotypes and offers employees an opportunity to see the impact of their work on public outcomes.

## DISCUSSION: LESSONS FOR EMBEDDING INSTITUTIONS OF CHANGE

Based on my experience working in the different example areas and others, Table 2 summarizes some general lessons about how researchers and institutions might engage to embed institutions of change.

### Lesson 1: Both an Institutional Base and Mechanisms of Change Are Needed

Institutions provide the stability and familiarity necessary to embed routines and reshape culture. In non-market environments these are essential tools. Over time, institutions become self-reinforcing as associated norms become widely shared and accepted. This creates the risk of staleness, and maladaptation, and institutions fail to keep up with external demands placed upon them. This point becomes clearer if we talk about the three topics of this essay in order of novelty: administrative burdens, performance management, and public personnel systems.

Institutionalization lends salience, legibility, and coherence to a management project where people do not have clear ideas about the nature of the problem or what to do about it. That is the current status of efforts to institutionalize within government the ability to routinely detect, evaluate, and minimize administrative burdens on individuals. Compare this to the application of cost-benefit analyses, which have been institutionalized as a means of performing the same function on costs that fall on businesses since the 1980s. Four decades later, current reforms such as a broadened reinterpretation of

the Paperwork Reduction Act provide a belated effort to give similar attention to how individuals experience costs in their interactions with government.

Performance management reforms have been around for decades. The problem was not too few efforts, but too many, reflecting insufficient institutionalization. President after president proposed their own reforms, subsequently abandoned by their predecessors, and thus not taken seriously by those whose behavior they sought to change (Moynihan 2010). The statutory framework offered by GPRA and GPRAMA resolved this problem, constraining presidential tendencies to abandon administrative processes not of their own making. For example, the Bush administration focused its energies on its own system—the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART)—but could not displace GPRA. The Trump administration's indifference to performance improvement in government allowed the GPRAMA model to hum along. In the very last days of the administration, Trump appointees did their best to undo the performance framework, telling agencies they no longer needed to report key information (Moynihan and Roberts 2021). But the statutory nature of the system protected it from such administrative vandalism, and the system was fully restored under Biden.

The statutory nature of the framework allowed purposeful learning over time, including from the Bush-era PART (Kroll and Moynihan 2015). These lessons were incorporated into the Modernization Act of 2010. The stability of the institution meant that reformers could focus over a long period of time on understanding what worked with the previous system, and what needed fixing. They did not start anew. This runs contrary to executive-led models of change (e.g., Moe 1984), which offer a rosy view of the incentives and power of Presidents, while underestimating the value of bipartisan institutional longevity offered by legislative approaches to management (Kroll and Moynihan 2021).

For the civil service system, the story is less positive. The system has not undergone major revision since 1978 and has been Balkanized with seemingly little central direction. It continues to provide job security and attract public service motivated individuals, but has struggled to match changing approaches to work, especially when it comes to rapid recruitment, or recruiting those who are not interested in a lifetime career. Here, Congress has abrogated its responsibilities, and anti-institutionalists will take advantage.

### Lesson 2: Institutionalization Leads to Bureaucratization

As ideas of public service governance are institutionalized, they become bureaucratized, i.e., formalized, made legible using bureaucratic roles and processes, and focused on what is technically and politically feasible via bureaucratic processes.

Take the example of the application of behavioral science in government. Nudge units proliferated, institutionalizing one type of vector of change. To make some overly broad characterizations, these units followed three patterns, at least in their earliest and most public iterations.<sup>3</sup> First, they focused on low-cost adjustments that triggered positive changes in human behavior, such as changing messaging. Second, they

**Table 2.** Lessons for Embedding Institutions of Change

*Lesson 1: Both an institutional base and mechanisms of change are needed*

*Lesson 2: Institutionalization leads to bureaucratization*

*Lesson 3: The process of framing and reframing never ends*

*Lesson 4: Beware the risk of internalism*

*Lesson 5: Beware the risk of faddishness*

*Lesson 6: Find, build, and sustain communities of practice*

<sup>3</sup>As these units themselves become institutionalized, they will evolve to meet environmental demands and opportunities. For example, the US Social and Behavioral Sciences Team evolved to become the Office of Evaluation Services, reflecting a lower-profile but more wide-ranging agenda that addresses some of the concerns that I raise.

also largely neglected the inner workings of government itself: the question of how to change the behavior of government employees in ways that generated better outcomes was left largely unaddressed. Third, nudges tended to be one-shot experiments, rather than long-term iterative engagement with projects of change, institutionalization, and improvement.

In short, nudge units rarely reflected the deeper contributions of behavioral science. Why? Policymakers prefer free-lunch solutions, ones that do not challenge underlying structural factors. They value quick and observable wins, rather than the messy long-term business of interactive and ongoing process changes that may take decades to displace deeply embedded patterns of implementation.

There is no reason to believe such traits would not apply to other forms of institutionalization of change, and thus must be anticipated. It is likely, for example, that while the research framework on administrative burden is explicit about structural factors, including politically engineered frictions, the application of that framework in administrative practice will focus on improvements that are politically and technically feasible. A bureaucrat may know they cannot change the need for certain eligibility requirements they believe are unfair or unnecessary for example but will look for solutions that mitigate the negative effects of those requirements within their domain of discretion.

Just because such work does not address structural factors does not mean it is trivial. The nature of bureaucratic organizations means that by themselves they will often miss the burdens imposed on the public. There might be no benefit, and even some budgetary reward, for producing negative externalities such as making services harder to access. Status quo bias favors not improving processes as new options become available, and negativity bias, combined with an asymmetric attention to fraud, directs attention to avoiding false positives in program participation. Processes that correct for these tendencies by pursuing bureaucratic sources of burdens can therefore play a significant role, even if they drain political urgency and conflict from those processes. The tendency for institutionalization to exclude or render invisible certain types of politics underlines the need for other actors, such as academics, to continue this work.

### Lesson 3: The Process of Framing and Reframing Never Ends

We might think that purposeful problem framing is useful only for what is new, but that is not the case. Across the three examples given, all benefited from purposeful framing, or in the case of the older examples, reframing. In the case of administrative burdens, framing established the initial presentation of frictions as a policy, political, and administrative problem. In addition, it pointed to structural sources of burdens, in the hope that this work will support a broader political movement to address such factors even as the more technocratic work of smaller bureaucratic fixes goes on inside of government.

The reframing of older institutions requires revisiting their original purpose, questioning how they have met those goals given contemporary values and demands, and whether changes are needed. In the case of performance management, it meant reframing the key variable as centering on whether reforms made people more likely to use performance data. In the case of civil service systems, it is how to modernize with an awareness of populist threats. This last challenge

feels difficult for researchers to reconcile, since it demands disavowing the policy agenda of one of the two major American political parties, a departure from nonpartisan neutrality. Academic professional instincts and norms are, contrary to much conventional wisdom, not to engage in such explicit partisan criticism, but rather to consider generalized incentives and structural factors that apply to all politicians. For scholars of the bureaucracy, the last few years have reflected a mismatch between us privately shaking our heads at antidemocratic threats, attacks on state capacity and the career bureaucracy, and our scholarship, which is largely unreflective of these trends.

One challenge to my claims is that political polarization has eroded agreement on public values. Those who agree that bureaucrats are part of a corrupt deep state elite are unlikely to perceive public services through the same value framework as others. On the other hand, even populists still evoke traditional values, such as transparency, accountability, and performance. In doing so, they make empirical causal claims. For example, advocates of the unitary executive perspective buttress their constitutional interpretations with the claim that enhancing executive power over bureaucracy will improve performance. Social science studies of the bureaucracy can cast light on which value-based claims are consistent with evidence, and which are not.

### Lesson 4: Beware the Risk of Internalism

One risk in studying bureaucracy is that our work becomes so distant from practice that it resembles an intellectual parlor game, where we deign not to consider the practical implications of the intellectual frames we develop. Alasdair Roberts (1995, 304) notes the risk of an “internalist” perspective in the study of administration “in which the process by which ideas evolve is characterized as a dialog within the academic community alone.” One signal of the internalist approach is that we simplify administrative history into blurred and simplified snapshots of great books, ideas, or scholarly figures, rather than as a historical accounting of the administrative state. Ironically, such a tendency would have seemed odd to many of the seminal figures of the field who wrote those books. The early leading figures in the field of public administration saw a direct link between the study and practice of governance, with both study and practice needing to directly reflect the evolving political and cultural values to maintain legitimacy. For example, in the first textbook in the field of public administration, Leonard White argues that “the role of administration in the modern state is profoundly affected by the general political and cultural environment of the age” (White 1926/1948, 7). In the aftermath of World War II, White proposed “one foundation for the future of American democracy is a sound administrative system, able to discharge with competence and integrity the tasks laid upon it by the people. The present system is far in advance of that which sufficed in 1925, but its improvement has no more than kept pace with the added responsibilities heaped upon it” (White 1926/1948, vii).

As White updated his textbook, he not only updated scholarly discussion of the state, but also reflected upon the changing nature of the challenges it faced. In his first edition, written in the shadow of World War I, he pressed the idea that democracies need to be as organized administratively as their autocratic foes. In the final edition, he reflected the growing role of the military in the government, presaging Eisenhower’s

concerns about the military-industrial complex. White's consideration of public administration is very much about the challenge of maintaining a democratic system of government through sound administration in a complex, changing, and challenging world (Moynihan 2009a).

White represented a generation of scholars that looked at the world and reflected upon its meaning for administration. He was not alone. Many public administration scholars at the time moved in and out of government. Perhaps not coincidentally, these early years in the development of US public administration also reflected the time of its greatest prestige and value (Kelman 2007). Herbert Simon's work correctly noted that much of the scholarship was not scientific enough. This Simonian perspective in favor of positivism has largely won the day among scholars, as it should. But it also underestimated the challenges of scholars being pressed by policymakers for ideas about how to organize the growing administrative state, even as Simon's own work paid little attention to publicness as a constraint in this domain.

### Lesson 5: Beware the Risk of Faddishness

The opposite threat to internalism is what we might label faddishness. Purposeful framing is not just mirroring what is happening in the world. It also involves interpretation. There is a difference between being responsive to and engaged with the world around us, and mindlessly accepting the frames that emerge from that environment.

Let me offer an example that will make this point clearer. When I started working in the field of public administration, dynamics of institutional change were framed by a New Public Management (NPM) framework. The NPM reflected actual (though not consistent) changes in governments and needed to be considered. But its role as an "administrative argument"—complete with its own set of assumptions and prescriptions—exerted an outsize intellectual influence (Hood and Jackson 1994). While framed in terms of good governance values and economic theories of organization, it served a broader neoliberal agenda that seems more apparent now than it did then, one that weakened the capacity of the state to evolve consistent with the challenges and opportunities of the time. While it was certainly critiqued, the NPM as a framework left little room for contradictory empirical evidence, immunizing itself from falsification. Many of the countries that promoted NPM ideas have stepped away from them, but no coherent anti-NPM doctrine emerged that carried equivalent sway.

Some of the criticisms made by the NPM were fair. But let us consider the opportunity cost with a thought experiment. At the time scholars of governance debated the NPM, information technology changes were generating extraordinary changes to society. Relative to its importance, this topic received little attention, and public administration offered little useful advice to policymakers. At a time when new information technology was altering the private sector and society, both the practice and study of American public administration missed the boat.

Decades later the public sector, in the United States at least, is anchored with outdated technological systems and practices, at least in part because of the adoption of neoliberal policies. One small but telling example is that in the aftermath of retaking Congress in 1994, Newt Gingrich decided to kill the Office of Technology Assessment that had existed since 1972, judging that technology policy was better made by the

private sector. A Bush-era plan to develop free and broadly accessible electronic tax-filing was smothered by a public-private partnership between the IRS and the tax preparation industry, whose purpose seemed to be to ensure the IRS never developed such a product and taxpayers were duped into paying for services to private vendors (Moynihan 2022b). The failure to invest in state capacity made the reliance on outside actors inevitable, or left outdated systems running software from the 1960s, such as the state unemployment systems that collapsed during the COVID pandemic.

Inattention to technology in an increasingly technological world could not be sustained without a heavy price. The US federal government did not make digital services a priority until the disastrous roll-out of the website for the Affordable Care Act. Congress just created a Digital Services Team in 2022. Governments' belated attention to this issue has seen them turn not to the scholarly field of public administration, but to civic-minded technologists, who are the modern-day equivalent of the public administration scholars of White's era, moving in and out of government (Harrell 2020).

You could imagine an alternative history of the study of American governance in recent decades, one that engaged more seriously with information technology, laid out the case for considering the benefits of new investments in capacity, new practices about the potential for leveraging administrative data, and put as much weight on digital interfaces as we do street-level bureaucracy. It could be that government would have ignored those conversations, but it clearly is not ignoring them now, and change in these domains is being driven much more by civic technology than public administration. As a result, consideration of traditional public values is less embedded in practices of institutional change. Indeed, one reason why the administrative burden framework has been embraced by the civic technology community is precisely because it offered a value-based logic to the work in which they were already engaging (Moynihan et al. 2022).

### Lesson 6: Find, Build, and Sustain Communities of Practice

Between the risks of insularity and faddishness, how does a scholar find a goldilocks solution? The answer is to find, build, and sustain communities of practice that make room for scholarship. It is not just possible to adopt a balance between insularism and faddishness, but there is a professional obligation to do so. Scholars are privileged with the time and critical training to think more expansively about how to make sense of the world. We have the capacity and freedom to define the terms of the phenomena we are studying, critically, with an eye towards empirical rigor.

Knowledge does not use itself. Frames, empirical research, and design solutions depend upon people to share, question, improve, learn from, and implement them. The existence and nature of those communities matters to the ability of institutions to change.

The importance of communities of practice became clear to me in the study of performance management and helps us to understand how the US performance system turned out relatively well despite an unpromising start. Actors from GAO, OMB, and those outside of government including scholars like myself, and former political appointees engaged in an ongoing professional dialogue over the course of years. GAO collected data that served not just as the basis of reports, but also was shared and became the basis for academic research.

Career staff at OMB were receptive to lessons about what worked and what didn't. Some of the research cited above made it into Presidential budget proposals of both President Obama and Biden, and the Circular-A11 guidance that OMB provides to agencies as they prepare their budgets. In some cases, academic research helped practitioners to better understand and reframe actions they were already taking. For example, it was not until after academic work conceptualized performance reforms as a set of distinct routines that OMB started using the language of "routines" to explain their logic model for change.<sup>4</sup>

The existence of an ongoing and bipartisan community of both practitioners and academics in performance management is not mirrored when it comes to public personnel systems. When the Trump administration attempted to implement the most significant change to the civil service system since its inception, it did so in secret, driven by a myopic cohort of partisan actors, excluding scholars of bureaucracy and relevant research on the public sector (Moynihan 2022c).

The community of practice interested in administrative burden is in the process of being built. An audience interested in this topic already existed, but has been better able to find one another through the frame of administrative burden. Thus, frames can serve as orienting logics—or to put it more crudely, brands—around which communities of practice can identify and organize. The current processes of institutionalization by the federal government and other professional domains such as the United Nations (2022) will expand this community.

Engagement with communities of practice helps with every stage of the process of framing, research and devising solutions. It also matters to marketing. Marketing is another crude metaphor, but expressive enough to be useful. Academic researchers spend a great deal of time generating a product, which is knowledge, and very little relative time and effort in marketing what they found to the audience who could most usefully apply that knowledge. Engaging with policymakers and bureaucrats helps with marketing. Better yet, if researchers engage with policymakers and bureaucrats in the problem framing stage, they will have greater reassurance that their consideration of problems reflects practitioners' understanding of public values, and that there will be a customer for the product that results.

## CONCLUSION: HOW DO WE EMBED INSTITUTIONS OF CHANGE?

My perspective on the purpose of our field will not be to everyone's taste. One might argue that blurring the lines between science and practice is unhelpful, though this raises the question of the relevance of applied research. If nothing else, I hope it will give both newer entrants and more sage hands a moment to consider what their purpose is, and perhaps offer a viewpoint for outsiders to understand the practical reason why we might study the bureaucracy.

Embedding institutions of change perhaps sounds like a Simonian proverb: offering two contradictory pieces of advice. And it could easily become so. But it also reflects the point that public venues are beset by contradictory values,

and such institutions are not self-sustaining. They depend not just on the efforts of public servants, but also the insights and innovations that outside actors (including political appointees, stakeholders, but also scholars of governance) can bring to the table. The seemingly paradoxical nature of these qualities—the public needs institutions, but public institutions are generally resistant to change—offers a role for applied academic research to help.

This essay has reviewed the way academics might usefully contribute to embedding institutions of change in government. Scholars, of course, like to talk and write about themselves and their own importance. Stepping back, my focus is but one partial consideration of a much broader question, which is how to form resilience in public institutions, and the maintenance of state capacity in mature administrative states. This is a question that should intrigue all scholars of governance. To the extent this essay has itself been an effort toward purposeful problem framing, it is to pose this question as an important one, especially in moments of democratic backsliding and populist peril. Answering it demands an ability to take a long-term perspective on the evolution of institutions, their capacity to satisfy essential public values, and threats to their existence.

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the discussion of routines in President Biden's FY 2023 budget request: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ap\\_5\\_delivering\\_fy2023.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ap_5_delivering_fy2023.pdf).

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