

Lucas, Patrick, Nabatchi, Tina, O'Flynn, Janine, & 't Hart, Paul (eds.) (2024). *Pathways to Positive Public Administration: An International Perspective*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. Hardback, 490 pages, ISBN: 978 1 80392 916 3.

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Zusammenfassung: *Pathways to Positive Public Administration: An International Perspective* stellt die vorherrschende Negativität in der Verwaltungsforschung in Frage, indem es effektive Regierungsführung und Erfolge im öffentlichen Sektor hervorhebt. Das von Patrick Lucas, Tina Nabatchi, Janine O'Flynn und Paul 't Hart herausgegebene Buch gliedert sich in drei Abschnitte: theoretische Grundlagen, globale Fallstudien und praktische Instrumente zur Umsetzung von *Positive Public Administration (PPA)*. Das Buch verfolgt einen kritischen und nuancierten Ansatz, der die Subjektivität von „Erfolg“ und die Risiken politischer Kooptation hervorhebt. Anhand von Fallstudien aus verschiedenen Regionen wird gezeigt, dass effektives Regieren nicht nur in wohlhabenden Demokratien möglich ist. Während das Buch überzeugend für *PPA* argumentiert, wirft die vorliegende Rezension Fragen zur Rolle der Verwaltung bei der Verteidigung der Demokratie und zur Notwendigkeit klarerer Strategien für die Umsetzung von *PPA* auf. Zusammenfassend ist das Buch ein hochaktueller Beitrag, der zum Nachdenken und zu einer ausgewogeneren und konstruktiveren Perspektive auf die öffentliche Verwaltung anregt.

Pathways to Positive Public Administration: An International Perspective is an edited volume that explores the concept of “Positive Public Administration” (PPA), a relatively new approach within the field of public administration. Edited by Patrick Lucas, Tina Nabatchi, Janine O'Flynn, and Paul 't Hart, the book argues that public administration scholarship has traditionally been dominated by a focus on failure, inefficiency, and mismanagement, often overlooking the successes and achievements of the public sector.

At a time when there is so much negativity about bureaucracy, a book about the positive aspects of public administration and its contribution to making societies work couldn't be more timely. With Elon Musk and Xavier Milei “chainsawing” their countries' bureaucracies, German politicians finding common ground in preaching “de-bureaucratisation,” and *The Economist* diagnosing a revolt against bureaucracy, a book highlighting the positive aspects of public administration could be considered downright countercultural (and the passing reference to *The Grateful Dead* in the introductory chapter seems to elegantly underline this ambition).

Here, then, is an attempt by a group of leading scholars to redress our imbalance in thinking and talking about bureaucracy, and to replace the often-exaggerated negativity with a more balanced picture. *Pathways to Positive Public Administration* is divided into three main parts. The first section, “Foundations” provides the theoretical and historical underpinnings of *PPA*. It argues that focusing solely on administrative failure creates a “negativity bias” that distorts our understanding of the public sector and its performance. Instead, the contributors argue for a more balanced perspective that recognizes the value of learning from positive cases

of public administration. The second section, “Practices,” presents empirical case studies from around the world that exemplify successful public administration. These cases range from Canada’s implementation of Indigenous self-governance arrangements to Burkina Faso’s efforts to eliminate female genital mutilation. The authors of these case studies analyze the complexities and trade-offs involved, recognizing that no policy is without its challenges. The final section, “Tools,” discusses different approaches and conditions that civil servants can use to animate *PPA* in their professional environments. It explores tools such as co-production, participation, partnerships, sensemaking, procurement, collaboration, parliamentary settlements, and cultural competency in a wide variety of settings to illustrate how *PPA* can be realized in practice.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is its nuanced and critical approach to *PPA*. Rather than simply celebrating the achievements of the public sector without question, this volume adopts a balanced perspective, recognizing that success is often partial, contested and difficult to define. The authors acknowledge that what constitutes “success” in public administration is inherently subjective and that interpretations of policy effectiveness can change over time.

The book also acknowledges the potential risks of *PPA*, including the danger of political co-option—where governments selectively highlight “successes” to mask systemic failures (see in particular Chapter three by Matthew Flinders). The approach to *PPA* developed throughout the book is also historically embedded, as Chapter two by Grant Duncan makes clear. In his telling, *PPA* has a long history, with attempts to establish principles and practices of good government going back millennia in different regions of the world.

A related strength of the book is its global perspective. Rather than focusing exclusively on Western democracies, the editors included case studies from different political and cultural contexts. For example, the analysis of “pockets of effectiveness” in Kenya’s Department of Immigration Services provides valuable insights into how policy success can be achieved in resource-constrained environments. Another chapter explains the successful creation of Mauritius’ light rail transit system, where officials developed a unique “cultural chameleoning” strategy that enabled them to manage stakeholders in a multicultural environment. These examples show that effective governance is not limited to wealthy countries with well-established bureaucracies.

Moreover, by looking at and learning from related approaches such as positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship and appreciative inquiry, the authors also avoid falling into the trap identified by Albert Hirschman in an article in 1994, where he observed that scientific endeavors that go against the grain and challenge dominant assumptions are often so fascinated by their revolutionary change of perspective that they enthusiastically start from scratch, even when they could have built on existing knowledge bases.

While the authors are well aware of the difficulties of judging positive outcomes in all circumstances and therefore deliberately opt for a non-normative, “balanced” approach to analyzing and interpreting success and failure, I also wonder whether such a stance is tenable in today’s world, where anti-democratic attacks on bureaucracies increasingly threaten to undermine the operating systems on which our democracies depend. In this context, doesn’t *PPA* automatically become a rallying call for citizens, academics and organizations concerned with defending public administrations against anti-democratic attacks? Especially since the authors and editors are aware that *PPA* only works in democratic regimes where the purpose of government is good. In autocratic regimes, as Hannah Arendt warned, an effective bureaucracy usually doesn’t do good, but only evil.

Moreover, while the book makes a compelling case for the value of *PPA* and presents concrete tools that can help put it into practice, I would have liked a clearer roadmap for how scholars and practitioners can systematically incorporate *PPA* into their research and policymaking. The case studies are informative and fascinating, but they do not always offer concrete strategies for replicating successes in other contexts. A more structured framework for applying *PPA* principles in different governance settings would have been a valuable addition.

But these are suggestions for follow-up work rather than criticisms that detract from the enormous importance and quality of this very timely contribution.

References

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