



Governance for living better together: A special issue on public administration and self-governance

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Accepted: 9 February 2021 / Published online: 19 February 2021

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Abstract

The modern notions of public governance and public administration are inextricably linked to government and an expanding scope and scale of government programs and regulations. However, an alternative notion of governance, based on the ideas of classical liberalism, focuses on the role of citizens, non-elites, and collective action to find ways to live better together. Two recent books, *Public Governance and the Classical Liberal Perspective* by Paul Dragos Aligica, Peter J. Boettke, and Vlad Tarko (2019) and *Public Entrepreneurship, Citizenship, and Self-Governance* by Paul Dragos Aligica (2018) advance this notion of governance. In this special issue, scholars react to these books and discuss the implications for academic and policy research.

Keywords Public governance · Self-governance · Institutional analysis · Public policy

JEL Codes B52 · B53 · D70 · H11 · P16

1 Introduction

The primary goal of governance should, arguably, be to establish a set of rules and institutions that promote human flourishing. The establishment of the rule of law, private property rights, and contracts provide the necessary foundation for social and market interactions based on mutual benefit rather than predation, and particular programs, like national defense and social safety nets, provide support and protection for citizens. Examining how these institutions are designed, who has power within them, and how effective they are at advancing human flourishing is crucial

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for understanding governance systems and reforming or improving inadequate institutional arrangements.

The modern notions of public governance and public administration are inextricably linked to government and an expanding scope and scale of government programs and regulations. Such government activity is largely implemented and enforced by bureaucracies filled with civil servants and technocrats. While laws and executive orders give directives to and the budget process constrains bureaucracies, the daily operations of public administration are, for the most part, independent of the checks and balances of government. For the proponents of modern public administration, this independence ensures that government initiatives continue despite political changes and provides space for experts to design and enforce policy. Furthermore, proponents see bureaucratic public administration as the providers of technical solutions to pressing economic and social problems, including national security and defense, worker safety, health care, education, financial markets, trade, and welfare.

While this approach has led to a more expansive government with programs for addressing many issues, bureaucratic management is not a panacea for collective action. As Vincent Ostrom argues in *The Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration* ([1973] 2008: 16–17), “Bureaucratic structures are necessary but not sufficient for a productive and responsive public service economy. Particular public goods and services may be jointly provided by the coordinated actions of a multiplicity of enterprises transcending the limits of particular governmental jurisdictions.” Similarly, Peter J. Boettke (2018) reflects on the increasing reliance on public administration and advances the notion of self-governance and polycentricity along with a humbler role for scholars and experts. From this view, an approach to governance must recognize the constraints of centralized government and the often-overlooked potential of democratic collective action. As Boettke (*ibid.*: 956) states, “This polycentric vision of governance stands in stark contrast with one that sees the necessity of a single hierarchical government that must induce compliance from its citizens.”

Two recent books further develop this approach to governance: *Public Governance and the Classical Liberal Perspective*, by Paul Dragos Aligica, Peter J. Boettke, and Vlad Tarko (2019), sheds light on the capabilities and limitations of public administration and provides a framework for thinking about the proper scale and scope of government; and *Public Entrepreneurship, Citizenship, and Self-Governance* by Paul Dragos Aligica (2018), advances the theory of decentralized self-governance by citizens and non-elites.

In *Public Governance and the Classical Liberal Perspective*, Aligica et al. (2019) articulate a classical-liberal perspective on public governance, grounded in the Austrian, Virginia, and Bloomington schools of political economy, that can enrich our understanding of when and how public governance can be employed for the common good, and when it cannot. Aligica et al. (*ibid.*) assert that classical liberal governance is more robust to the knowledge and incentive problems that plague collective action than modern administrative governance and suggest that our modern time presents an opportunity for a greater shift away from the administrative and welfare state, and toward polycentric governance. This approach

embraces a “seeing-like-a-citizen” perspective which emphasizes normative individualism, limited and dispersed knowledge, and a realistic appraisal of human motives and potential rather than the “seeing-like-a-state” perspective of modern public administration, which emphasizes preference aggregation for control by a governance expert.

A key contribution of the book lies in polycentric governance – a system in which many competing decision authorities exist throughout the system and at different levels, allowing for contestation and experimentation to find and implement the best solutions for addressing public issues. In this system, there is no single expert who can devise an efficient plan. Instead, there are many experts who all maintain checks on each other. In the authors’ vision, governing happens with one another to create and co-design methods of addressing the pressing issues of living in a diverse society. This approach allows for reform within the current system and a vision for an alternative governance structure. Aligica et al. (2019) then go on to discuss modern challenges and examples of a more polycentric approach including independent regulatory agencies, corporate responsibility, and metropolitan governance.

In *Public Entrepreneurship, Citizenship, and Self-Governance*, Aligica et al. (2019) expands on this theory of polycentric governance by further developing the concepts of public entrepreneurship and citizenship. For Aligica, who is building off the contributions of public choice and the work of the Ostroms, public entrepreneurship and citizenship are the prerequisites for self-governance, consisting of an array of institutional arrangements that can tackle pressing problems and enable collective action. Aligica explains how these elements and ideas relate to one another in the creation of effective governance that is based on liberal democracy within a society that has an inescapable diversity of preferences, constraints, and morality. Further advancing the Ostromian concepts of coproduction and association, this approach to governance is dynamic and flexible yet also requires commitment and participation from citizens.

Together, these two books advance a framework for understanding, studying, and reforming current governance structures in ways that advance liberty, accountability, and human dignity. In this special issue, scholars react to these books and discuss the implications for academic and policy research.

2 Applying public governance from the classical-liberal perspective

Inspired by Aligica et al. (2019), several policy scholars explored the application of classical liberal public governance and are featured in this special issue: Anne Hobson and Eileen Norcross argue that polycentric public governance is a fruitful framework for policy scholarship, as it not only provides a framework for analyzing and critiquing public policies but also provides alternative solutions grounded in self-governance; Jennifer Huddleston explores the importance of courts in public governance; and Jerry Ellig examines the federal regulatory process through the lens of polycentricity. These explorations highlight the potential of research and policy from this perspective.

Hobson and Norcross argue that the polycentric approach to political economy implies governance as a process of dynamic experimentation, in which institutional arrangements adapt and evolve to address the needs of society. Public policy, and regulatory policy in particular, grounded in this perspective should focus on developing and facilitating the institutions necessary for human flourishing. To fulfil this goal, policy scholars and policymakers must reimagine public policy within a polycentric governance ecosystem that engages stakeholders from private organizations, civil society, and government at various levels. In other words, instituting a policy practice of governing *with* people as opposed to governing *over* people.

Hobson and Eileen go on to examine the role of policy researchers in engaging in institutional analysis at the constitutional, policy, and operational levels. Not only should policy scholars aim to analyze and reform current systems, but also embrace broader social change at the constitutional level; to aim for not just short-term reactions to policy challenges but long-term systemic reform. They provide examples of policy scholarship that embrace this approach, including the application of soft law to address technology regulation as a more adaptable approach to a dynamic and innovative sector than traditional regulation, which has historically struggled to keep pace with technological advancement.

Huddleston then highlights the role of courts in the system of polycentric public governance, an area of governance largely lacking from the discussion by Aligica et al. (2019). Huddleston says that to maximize personal freedom and liberty in an ideal polycentric governance system, the courts must be recognized as a vital element of ensuring that institutional arrangements and mechanisms of public governance are properly maintained and not abused in the process of their reimagining. Additionally, courts and administrative law will continue to supply necessary checks on the balance of power. However, Huddleston warns that the courts need to improve their ability to protect and uphold individual liberty and property rights by providing an external view based on constitutional principles and the rule of law. For example, she discusses the issue of judicial deference – a concept that explains instances in which courts defer to agency actions under the presumption of agency expertise – and argues that such a practice is suboptimal for preserving liberty and checking administrative power.

Finally, Ellig explores current methodologies and approaches of creating federal regulations and how effective they are at value heterogeneity, coproduction, and polycentrism. He analyzes a dataset of 130 regulations of economic significance, summarizes the methods of stakeholder participation in creating those regulations, and evaluates the level of consistency of rulemaking with the polycentric approach. He finds that U.S. federal agencies sometimes use methods that include stakeholder participation; however, the stakeholder participation strategies employed only somewhat resemble a polycentric approach to solving regulatory problems. Ellig concludes that the U.S. regulatory system, while it utilizes some approaches consistent with polycentricity, has not evolved into a polycentric system that aligns with and promotes value heterogeneity, coproduction, and polycentrism.

3 Exploring public entrepreneurship, citizenship, and self-governance

In January 2019, the F. A. Hayek Program for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University hosted a book panel on Aligica's *Public Entrepreneurship, Citizenship, and Self-Governance* (2018). The panel included philosopher Gerald Gaus and political scientists, James Johnson and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, who analyzed and expanded on the key findings of the book.

Gaus praises Aligica (2018) as a comprehensive articulation of democratic theory grounded on diversity. It provides an in-depth analysis of a diverse social order and explains how self-organization, self-governance, collective problem solving, classical liberalism, and public entrepreneurship are tightly intertwined elements that can help achieve a stable democratic society. Because moral and philosophical disagreements present a great challenge for a stable democratic society and people organize when they face a common problem, democratic citizenship must be grassroots, self-organizing, and problem-solving. From this perspective, potential divisiveness is thwarted in a collective search for better solutions to governance.

Johnson, likewise, agrees with Aligica (2018) on democracy being a problem-solving enterprise in which citizens engage cooperatively and that its normative and positive concerns are entangled and will not be successfully addressed by centralization. If public entrepreneurship is a better solution, Johnson contends, then it is important to get clarity on the scope of its activity in the provision of the public good and who is to be considered a public entrepreneur. He further suggests that there is room for institutional experimentation including building unconventional institutional arrangements that do not exclude cooperation with state-level governments. Johnson provides the example of Rochester, NY, where different types of cooperatives are employed as methods of encouraging economic development.

Finally, Murtazashvili advances the concepts of public entrepreneurship and citizenship as integral elements of self-governance. She applies the analysis of the book to extreme cases in which state oversight is either authoritarian or absent and finds that polycentrism is a direct consequence of self-governance. Through her extended research in Afghanistan, where state oversight is virtually absent, and in Uzbekistan, with its heavily centralized governments, she observes extraordinary public entrepreneurship and self-governance. Such hard cases show that polycentricity and self-governance is achievable even where governments are less receptive to democracy and engaged citizenship.

4 Conclusion

Governance from a classical liberal perspective must both address the proper scale and scope of public administration through formal government as well as the potential and challenges of self-governance. The two books featured in this

special issue seriously engage this task by employing the Austrian, Virginia, and Bloomington schools of political economy and developing a cohesive project on polycentric governance. Such an interdisciplinary project requires a reimagining of governance institutions and a developing of alternative institution arrangements that preserve human dignity and promote human flourishing. Social scientists and policy analysts interested in how we can live better together should read these books for they provide a foundation for further exploration within academia and policy that will hopefully be picked up by scholars and students in the years to come.

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