Rising to Ostrom's Challenge: An invitation to walk on the bright side of politics, governance and public service

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The thickening of transparency and accountability in our contemporary monitory democracies (Keane, 2009) has led to an enormous amount of energy being directed at pinpointing and dissecting instances in which governments fail our expectations (Flinders, 2011; Aleksovska et al, 2019). By now, there is a vast body of media content, watchdog reports, and scholarly studies on government 'disasters' (Hall, 1981; Gray & 't Hart, 1998), 'blunders' (King & Crewe, 2013; Jennings, Lodge and Ryan, 2018), 'failures' (Light, 2014; Opperman & Spencer, 2016), 'blind spots' (Bach & Wegrich, 2018), and 'fiascos' (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996). Disappointment and concern are couched in ominous metaphors of 'illness', 'breakdown', 'crisis', 'collapse', 'decay', and even 'death' (Diamond, 2005; Fukuyama, 2014; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Is this a reflection of underlying realities of declining performance and viability of our public institutions and our systems of government? Or, as the likes of Pinker (2018) and Rosling (2018) would argue, of a culturally entrenched 'negativity bias' (Vis, 2011) in the way we look at, judge, and speak about our political and administration institutions? There are significant reasons why the latter interpretation is more plausible. We know about the political opportunity structure of bureaucrat-bashing (Schillemans & Den Otter, 2014). We know about the inclination of citizens, civil servants, and political officeholders to think in stereotypical terms about each other (Raadschelders, 2020, p 239-243). We know that citizens rate the performance of public sector organizations lower even if they achieve the same results as private sector counterparts (Marvel, 2015). We know that some of the disenchantment with government performance is fueled by a lack of understanding and an endemic 'expectations gap' (Flinders, 2012). We know that even within government, institutional routines are not attuned equally to investigating and learning from successes as they are to anticipating, managing, and taking remedial or reputational action in response to failures (Luetjens & 't Hart, 2019).

What implications might this have for the academic study of government and public governance? Elinor Ostrom encouraged social scientists to seek out examples of political and resource arrangements that work and then explain them, observing that 'an arrangement that works in practice can work in theory' (Fennel, 2011). To be sure, it remains of pivotal importance to generate theoretical explanations for the genesis of failures, stalemates, breakdowns, scandals, and crises remains of pivotal importance. It teaches us what to avoid, mitigate, and stop in the way we set up and run our public institutions. Conversely, however, we must more systematically pursue theoretical explanations that explain instances of solid or even exceptional accomplishments in public governance, to better learn what to embrace, support, and emulate.

As a group of fifteen scholars from different sub-fields, countries, and generations, we argue that public administration would benefit from launching a self-conscious and cohesive strand of 'positive' scholarship, akin to social science subfields like positive psychology (Seligman & Csikshikszentmihalyi, 2000), positive organisational studies (Cameron & Dutton, 2003, p 4), and positive evaluation (Nielsen, Turksema & van der Knaap, 2015). We call for a program of research devoted to uncovering the factors and mechanisms that enable high performing public problem-solving and public service delivery; procedurally and distributively fair processes of tackling societal conflicts; and robust and resilient ways of coping with threats and risks. The core question driving positive public administration scholarship should be: Why is it that in a universe of like cases, specific public policies, programs, organizations, networks, or partnerships manage do much better than others to produce widely valued societal outcomes?

Walking on the bright side of what governments do and how public governance is performed and how public services are delivered should not follow in the footsteps of business management studies that have become foils for producing 'heroic', agent-centered, rationalistic, success narratives. Instead it should strive to identify micro, meso, and macro *conditions*, and the interplay between agent and institutional context at these levels, i.e., what Little labeled methodological localism (cf. Little 2020, p 8, 29), that produce 'best of the lot' performances (Meier and Gill, 2000). In our effort we shall have to craft usable language, methodologies, and theories to sustain the effort (Compton et al, 2021; Douglas et al., 2021). We must develop conceptualizations of 'good governance' that are not just couched in procedural and process terms but also encompass its substantive, material, and psychological impacts. Notice the plural – conceptualisation*s*. Robust debate about 'good', 'successful', or otherwise putatively 'positive' governance is not just inevitable but also constitutive of its legitimacy (Mouffe, 2000; Flinders, 2012; Fung, 2012). We need a shared

commitment to becoming more consistently curious and less intellectually blinkered about the nature, preconditions, and practices of valuable and valued forms of public governance.

We do not have to start from scratch. Significant bodies of work exist on policy successes (Bovens, 't Hart & Peters, 2001; Marsh & McConnell, 2010; Compton & 't Hart, 2019; Luetjens, Mintrom & 't Hart, 2019); effective government decision making (Crichlow & Schafer, 2010); regulatory excellence (Coglianese, 2016); public value creation (Moore, 1995, 2013; Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2015; Alford, Douglas, Geuijen & 't Hart , 2017); successful collaborative governance and network management (Dickinson & Sullivan, 2014; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Page, Stone, Bryson & Crosby, 2015; Cristofoli, Meneguzzo & Riccucci, 2017); American government accomplishments (Light, 2002); democratic innovation (Smith, 2009; Fung, 2012; Hartley, Sørensen & Torfing, 2013; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Sørensen, 2017); high-performing and highly reputed public sector organizations (Carpenter, 2001; Goodsell, 2011; Boin, Fahy and 't Hart, 2020); unexpected islands of public success in troubled societies (Douglas, 2011); exemplary public administrators (Cooper & Wright, 1992; Riccucci, 1995); institution-building public leadership (Boin & Goodin, 2007, Boin & Christensen, 2008); 'pockets of effectiveness' in developing countries (Roll, 2014), and resilient (Comfort, Boin & Demchak, 2010) and high-reliability systems handling public tasks in high-risk operating environments (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Some of these studies come in clusters where scholars attempt to connect findings – e.g., the relatively cohesive sub-field of performance management (Moynihan et al., 2011; Gerrish, 2016). However, not many studies in this vein work towards cumulative insights.

We can build upon these and other studies to derive an agenda for positive public administration research. The remainder of this essay outlines some core themes, conceptual starting points, and methodological considerations that might provide a foundation for a more coherent program of work.

Core themes
First, a positive public administration program needs to make sense of the discourses of positivity that can be found in the practice of public administration. How do public administrators, political office-holders, citizens, and other stakeholders articulate what they value in the institutions, processes, outputs, and outcomes of public governance? What visions of positive, or good, public administration and ideals of professional practice are being espoused and transmitted through professional awards, ratings and rankings, and similar mechanisms? What recurrent rhetoric of

positive values and success can be discerned and what sense-making functions do they fulfill (Van Assche, Beune, and Duineveld, 2012)?

Second, a positive public administration program should undertake close-up, comparative, and experimental studies of public organizations, policies, or partnerships that manage to combine high performance with strong legitimacy and adaptive capacity to maintain this constructive equilibrium over considerable periods of time. Such studies can be performed in their own right (e.g. Goodsell, 2011; Boin et al. 2020), or as part of controlled-comparative designs where they are matched to 'negative' cases of program, policy, and organizational failure in otherwise similar conditions (e.g. Bovens et al., 2001). There also might build on the emerging strand of work on organizational reputation in the public sector, matching its current focus on reputational pressures, blame avoidance, and image repair with studies investigating how reputations in the media and in the public mind relate to the actual performance of those organizations, policies, or partnerships, and whether and how strong performance translates into reputational gains and increased legitimacy (Christensen and Gornitzka, 2018).

Finally, numerous accounts in public administration reveal where decision-makers promise to learn from successful policies, organizations, or partnerships in other domains and apply these 'best practices' in their own context. But successes are not easily reproduced. Both scholars and administrators should avoid copying and pasting 'cookie cutter recipes' and refrain from uncritically transplanting 'success stories' across time, space, and context (Rose, 1993; Marsh & Sharman, 2009; ; Lam & Ostrom, 2010, p.22). Rather, positive public administration requires a dedication to *learn how to learn* from 'what works' in public policy. How do public actors successfully transfer and circulate programs that 'worked' in one context across policy domains, geographies, and temporal contexts (Baker and Walker, 2019)?

Conceptual starting points

These core questions can be addressed with some shared conceptual starting points. First, positive outcomes can consist both of desirable things happening *and* undesirable things not happening. Research should not only focus on the (antecedents of) positive outcomes but also aim to detect the non-occurrence of negative events. We should observe fluctuations in the frequency of negative events and positive events equally and perform counterfactual analysis in low-n settings (Ferraro, 2009)

Second, as success is multidimensional and multiperspectvist, positive scholars should employ multiple logics in evaluations. We should avoid focusing only on measures for which data is readily available, and not walk away from normative debates about how to assess value (Moore, 2013; Mazzucato, 2018). The use of multiple evaluative modes to compare, contrast, and weigh the assessments of different stakeholders, constituents, auditors, inspectorates, parliaments, courts, media, and others is important (Marsh & McConnell, 2010).

Third, for any positive outcome to remain meaningful, successful governance needs to be robust over time. Private sector studies show that much-heralded companies may go from good to great to gone (Rozensweig, 2014). We should construct time-series through multiple observations of public organizations, policies, and partnerships, gathering assessments across time (Ugyel & O'Flynn, 2017)

Finally, we need to be ambitious but humble. Success, like failure, is always the product of a combination of virtu (agency) and fortuna (structure/context). We should avoid romantic explanations and be wary of hero-centric, top-down, episodic explanations of success. It is imperative to explore the role of institutional complexity, organizational learning, adaptive adjustment, bottom-up processes, feedback loops, structured serendipity, and propitious contexts (Evans, 1995).

Methodological considerations

How do we progress from here? What does this mean for public administration research endeavors? As our field is almost uniquely multi-methodological in nature, a positive public administration approach may mean different things in different types of research. Qualitative studies can be immensely valuable in seeking out, observing, and interpreting *lived experiences of good governance*. Studies will have to move beyond documenting the disgruntlement of frustrated citizens and civil servants, and beyond cozy chats with managers reflecting on their successes. We need to learn from the experiences of those directly involved in and affected by high-performance cultures, well-run public consultations and coproduction processes, effective uses of 'right to challenge' provisions, responsive engagements with social entrepreneurs, smart social investment strategies, agile responses to technological turbulence, and resilient coping with major disruptions. We should engage more in appreciative inquiry – including listening to the voices of those making governance work at the coalface and those at the receiving end of policy decisions

and service offerings – so we get a better feel of what possible success looks and feels like from the inside (Maynard Moody and Musheno, 2003; McQuaid, 2019.

Quantitative studies need to identify organizations, policies, or partnerships that are doing markedly better than others, and generate a structured approach for identifying the tangible conditions that explain this success. Important here is addressing negativity biases in research designs. For instance, public administration research on accountability has a very strong focus on pinpointing failures or lacks of accountability, while in comparison, psychological research on accountability has a strong focus on the conditions that make accountability more effective, for instance in attenuating biases, improving compliance, or enriching complex judgments (Aleksovska et al 2019). The choice of research questions and theoretical propositions is also crucial. Are they ultimately focused on our ability to produce valued outcomes or to our ability to avoid pitfalls and failure? Positive psychology, for example, champions a refocus on measuring well-being rather than pathology and illness, producing new scales and measurement tools.

Finally, a design focus (Van Buuren et al., 2020) can help students of positive public administration understand how different elements of a successful public policy, organization, or partnership hang together and what impacts redesigning and reconstituting them might have. The idea of design induces an appreciation in our research of the craftmanship and continuous tinkering that is necessary to make public governance perform better and adapt over time to maintain high performance in changed circumstances.

On the whole, our methodological considerations center on building a sensitivity to the implicit biases and negative framing of our current methodological apparatus, helping us to challenge 'self-evident truths' about slow bureaucracies and failing democratic government (Ostrom, 2000).

Table 1. Core themes, conceptual starting points and methodological considerations for positive public administration

Core themes	Conceptual starting points	Methodological considerations

• Positivity as frame and discourse • Highly valued public policies, organizations, and partnerships • Learning to learn from 'what works' in public settings	• Success can consist of both desirable things happening and undesirable things not happening • Success is multidimensional and multiperspectvist • Successful governance needs to be robust: both good in time as well as over time • Success is likely to be the product of a combination of *virtu* and *fortuna*	• Qualitative studies of lived experience • Quantitative studies of the antecedents of positive outcomes • Design research and design thinking

Public administration research has from its inception centered around questions of what governments can do and how they can do this to the benefit of citizens and communities (Wilson, 1887). This has inspired many scholars, yet we believe we can further inspire others – in the academy, in the field practice, and in the public at large - with even more dedication and self-consciousness. By terming it *positive public administration* we aim to follow in the footsteps of movements towards positive scholarship in related disciplines and seek to explicate and strengthen our focus on what we should do as in ours: contributing to the quality of democratic government and effective public governance.

We may not always like government, we but we cannot do without it. Pursuing a positive public administration research agenda challenges us to overcome negativity bias in the way people perceive, evaluate, and study government and governance. It aims to give coherence and a new impetus to important but hitherto disparate efforts to conceptualize, reconstruct, interpret, and learn from instances of successful public governance. Heeding Ostrom's admonishment to provide more theoretical explanations for empirical instances of government arrangements that work, would provide publics and practitioners with robust 'usable knowledge' and constructive 'critical friendship' that democratic systems of governance need and thrive on (Raadschelders, 2019, 2020).

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