

# The Suitable Bureaucracy in Different Societies: Lessons and Solutions for Developing Knowledge Regarding the 21st Century Bureaucracy\*\*

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## Abstract

Societies in the 21st century are complex, diverse and dynamic. Therefore, it is impossible to create a bureaucracy that is suitable for all societies, but developing a suitable bureaucracy for various societies will face the problem of fragmented knowledge that makes it challenging to understand and apply such knowledge practically, potentially leading to the decline of the discipline similar to the past. Therefore, this article proposes a solution by using a comparative study approach to create models of relationships between factors and practices in the form of conditions to develop suitable Bureaucracy in different societies without facing the above issues.

**Keywords:** Bureaucracy in 21st century, comparative study, governance

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## Introduction: Lessons Learned from Studying the Development of Bureaucratic Knowledge

Knowledge about bureaucracy has always been a focus in the field of public administration. Bureaucracy is when state agencies play a significant role in achieving governmental goals. The knowledge related to bureaucracy can be classified into two types: the creation of universal theories that can be applied to any society and the detailed description or explanation of specific situations. From the perspective of the philosophy of social science, this distinction arises from differing ontologies or views of the nature of reality. The first type of knowledge has a foundational ontology, while the latter has an anti-foundational ontology<sup>1</sup>. Reflecting on the development of bureaucratic knowledge from the inception of the discipline in 1887 to the present, it is clear that the ontological basis of various theories follows the pattern shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Changes in Ontology in Bureaucratic Theory Concepts**

Period	Example Theories	Ontology
Traditional Public Administration (1887 – 1950)	Ideal Bureaucracy (Weber, 1922)	Foundation
Neoclassical Public Administrative (1950 – 1960)	Informal Bureaucracy (Gouldner, 1954; Crozier, 1964)	Anti-foundation
1980	New Public Management	Foundation
1990 - Present	Governance	Anti-foundation

Table 1 shows that the ontology of bureaucratic theory concepts alternates between foundation and anti-foundation. During the inception of the public

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<sup>1</sup> Foundation Ontology views reality as naturally existing, allowing the discovery of that reality and the creation of theories that can explain and predict phenomena. In contrast, anti-foundation ontology sees reality as dependent on human perception and interpretation, influenced by different environmental conditions across time and place. Therefore, it is impossible to create theories that can predict or explain phenomena under all conditions. This perspective further impacts the epistemology and methodology of subsequent studies.

administration field, which Bowornwathana (2012) refers to as the Traditional Public Administrative Paradigm (1887 – 1950), the ontology was of the foundation type. This period was characterized by a negative view towards value-based factors and aimed to establish universal principles of bureaucratic operation that could be applied in any society (Wilson, 1887; White, 1926). For example, Weber's (1922) concept of the ideal type of bureaucracy posits that a bureaucracy or administration that operates strictly according to rules, without incorporating the values of individuals within the organization, would be the most effective system for implementing political policies, regardless of who, where, or under what conditions.

Later, during the period from 1950 to 1960, which Bowornwathana (2012) refers to as the Neoclassical Public Administrative Paradigm, scholars questioned the belief in the universality of theoretical concepts. They began to see that for bureaucracy to work effectively, it needed to adapt to changes in the environment or the conditions of the relevant situation. There was a shift in emphasis towards value-based factors such as beliefs, culture, and informal traditions, which were seen as having a more significant impact on the behavior of individuals in an organization than structure or regulations (Gouldner, 1954; Crozier, 1964, as cited in Bowornwathana, 2012, pp.69-73). These factors vary according to place and time, making it impossible to create universally applicable bureaucratic theories. This perspective aligns with an anti-foundation ontology.

However, the group of ideas that believes in the appropriateness of theory with environmental conditions faced another type of challenge in the study. Bowornwathana noted that an "identity crisis" occurred within the Neoclassical Public Administrative Paradigm (1950 – 1960). This crisis meant that the discipline was confused, stagnant, and declining in popularity because it could not propose widely accepted solutions to societal problems among scholars (Bowornwathana, 2012, p.126). This led to the behavioral revolution after 1960, which viewed the study of political science and related fields as overly descriptive and overly focused on values in the study. As a result, the knowledge obtained lacked credibility and could not be practically applied.

After the behavioral revolution, studies in the field of public administration began incorporating scientific methods and knowledge from other fields of administration into the study of bureaucracy (Waldo, 1975, pp.58-62). The goal

was to create universal or scientifically-based theories in line with the behavioral science trends of that period. This crystallized into the New Public Management movement in the 1980s, which proposed applying business administration concepts to public sector organizations. This period saw a return to a foundational ontology, which believes in the universality of concepts. Research by the OECD, Osborne, and Gaebler (1992, pp.325-328) concurred that the shift towards an “entrepreneurial government,” which emphasizes steering rather than rowing, was essential for addressing bureaucratic issues globally.

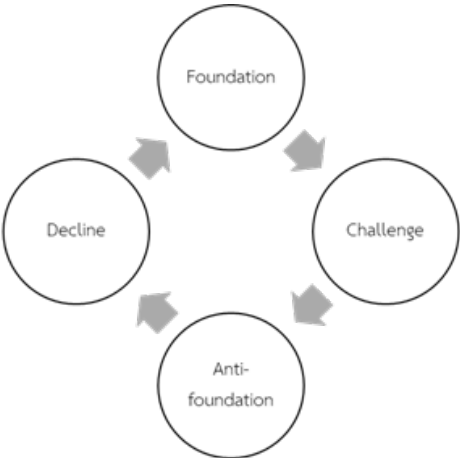
The ontology of knowledge about bureaucracy returned to an anti-foundation nature after 1990 with the emergence of the “governance” concept. This shift arose from questioning the universality of New Public Management theories (Hood, 1991), specifically whether they could truly be applied in diverse social environments. Additionally, there was criticism regarding the overemphasis on business administration tools, which neglected the differences between public and private sector management. This approach overlooked important values in political science, such as citizenship and democracy (Denhardt, 2000).

Even though the governance concept is currently famous for developing or reforming Bureaucracy, there are criticisms regarding the ambiguity in its definition and the precise scope of governance. In the fields of political science and public administration, there is a consensus that governance aims to transform public administration into a collaborative effort between central government and other societal sectors, distinguishing it from traditional “government.” Nevertheless, the term can have broad and varying meanings when used by scholars from different disciplines, such as anthropology or economics (Dimitrova, 2020). Even within public administration, interpretations of the concept differ in practice according to social contexts. This issue has been discussed by early 21st-century scholars such as Peters and Savoie (1995), Rhodes (1996), and Bowornwathana (2008). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) noted that the current knowledge of bureaucratic reform lacks a mainstream concept.

Lessons from studying the development of knowledge about bureaucracy, from the inception of the field in 1887 to the Behavioral Science era, through the lens of the philosophy of social science, reveal that attempts to create universal theories with a foundation ontology applicable to all societies, are often

challenged by anti-foundation theories. These latter theories emphasize values and appropriateness to specific environments, developing knowledge to describe or explain the unique characteristics of particular situations in diverse societies. This leads to fragmented, less credible knowledge that is difficult to apply in practice, resulting in the field’s decline. Consequently, there is a cyclical return to developing foundational knowledge, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Cycle of Ontology in Knowledge about Bureaucracy



The problems currently emerging in studying public management concepts may signal a return to this cyclical pattern. This article aims to propose a feasible study approach as a solution to prevent the decline in the development of knowledge about bureaucracy, similar to what happened during the Behavioral Science era.

**Solution for Developing Knowledge in the 21st Century**

Knowledge with foundation and anti-foundation ontologies each has its strengths and weaknesses. They are adhering strictly to one ontology while altogether rejecting the other, which leads to disputes and subsequent decline. Therefore, we should learn from and seek solutions for developing knowledge about bureaucracy by leveraging the strengths of both perspectives while also

considering the limitations imposed by their weaknesses. Popper's viewpoint suggests that creating universal laws through causal correlations in social sciences is not feasible, as social phenomena involving humans have brief regularities<sup>2</sup> and are constantly changing. However, this does not imply that phenomena occur so randomly that they cannot be studied at all. Human decision-making is constrained by choices influenced by environmental conditions and values. Thus, predicting trends in phenomena using "probabilistic laws" is possible by studying these environmental conditions and values (Thornton, 1997).

Popper's proposal offers a perspective that can reduce the conflict in knowledge creation between foundation and anti-foundation ontologies. This view aligns with the opinions of 21st-century scholars on the development of public administration knowledge. Understanding the complex nature of public administration requires an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating concepts and methods from various fields. This includes knowledge and techniques from both natural sciences and social sciences, using evidence from empirical studies and values. It involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to test hypotheses, build theories, or conduct in-depth analyses to understand different phenomena (Nyadera & Islam, 2022)

One approach that embodies this interdisciplinary nature is "Comparative Public Administration" (CPA). CPA is a multidisciplinary study that applies techniques from natural sciences to compare similarities to differences and successes to failures in public administration across various societies. It utilizes quantitative and qualitative research methods, as well as comparative techniques and causal relationships between different variables, encompassing empirical factors and values (Nyadera & Islam, 2022). This approach mitigates the weaknesses of descriptive studies commonly used in social sciences, making developing knowledge or theoretical concepts in public administration more profound, realistic, and credible. As Newton and Van Deth (2010, p.1) argue, comparative study is essential in political science because we cannot understand ourselves without knowledge of others, and we cannot understand others without knowledge of the history, institutions, culture, and context behind them.

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that such relationships can be empirically proven to occur in all cases under the same conditions.

Comparative Public Administration in the 21st century, as discussed here, refers to studies conducted after the decline of comparative public administration before 1976. Contemporary comparative public administration has tried to address the shortcomings and issues of earlier approaches, which were criticized during that period. Additionally, many problems have been resolved due to political, economic, and social changes in the 21st century. Issues such as the high costs of conducting studies and difficulties in collecting data abroad, which led to most theories being developed through seminars rather than actual data collection (Balutis, 1973, pp.3-13), have been mitigated by globalization and advancements in information technology. There has been an increase in primary research and case studies from various societies that are more accessible and applicable compared to the past. Fitzpatrick (2011, p.821) emphasizes the importance of utilizing diverse contemporary studies and research, including experimental, descriptive, and survey-based works, drawing from reliable quantitative databases and in-depth qualitative information. This integration of various methods, concepts, and theories from other social science disciplines in comparative analysis will contribute to the creation of new knowledge in the field of public administration.

The increased availability and accessibility of academic work from various countries and societies in the 21st century help address the issues of perceiving comparative public administration as a tool of American colonialism and the problem of focusing solely on theories and models applicable only to the Western world, as noted by Heady (1978, pp.358-365). Besides the changing roles of major powers and international relations, a significant reason for this problem relates to the early weaknesses of comparative public administration studies, which often emphasized formal interactions and neglected the consideration of informal environmental and cultural factors influencing human behavior. These informal factors are challenging to study and vary across societies, leading to findings that lack robustness and are challenging to apply in other countries (Springer, 1976). Efforts to study, understand, and apply academic work from other societies demonstrate an increased emphasis on cultural factors such as values, traditions, and mindsets, which significantly influence social phenomena (Jirungruangwong, 2021). This emphasis is a crucial focus in contemporary comparative public administration. Additionally, academic work conducted by scholars from within those

societies, who have a deeper understanding of their own culture, tends to be richer in information compared to studies conducted by foreign scholars with different cultural backgrounds. Heady (2001) points out that one obstacle in comparative studies is researchers' value and cultural bias, which can lead to the neglect of unique characteristics of non-Western societies.

Current comparative public administration studies provide a platform for scholars to explore different environments and social contexts, whether institutional, administrative, or cultural (Onder & Nyadera, 2020). This approach combines the strengths of foundation ontology, offering reliability and coherence of knowledge by creating “probabilistic laws” to predict trends in line with Popper’s perspective. This reduces the chaos and fragmentation often associated with anti-foundation ontology. Simultaneously, it leverages the strengths of anti-foundation ontology by ensuring that the knowledge can be effectively applied to develop or solve problems within various societies. This addresses the shortcomings of Foundation ontology, which often overlooks the importance of context, environment, and societal values

### **Application in the Development of Bureaucratic Knowledge**

As mentioned in the first part, a significant issue in the study of governance in the 21st century—a popular concept for developing or reforming Bureaucracy—is the broad and often vague definitions and boundaries of governance. Although there is consensus in political science and public administration about the goals of these changes, this vagueness leads to the fragmentation of knowledge and diverse interpretations of how to implement these concepts in practice. This issue could signal the decline of bureaucratic studies, a concern raised by many scholars since the early 2000s. For instance, Peters and Savoie (1995) categorize governance models into four types: market, participatory, flexible, and deregulated. Each type differs in organizational structure, management, policy formulation, and perspectives on public interest. Additionally, governance has been interpreted in various other ways, such as new public management, good governance, cybernetic social systems, self-regulating networks (Rhodes, 1996), new public service (Denhart, 2000), ethical interpretations, royal virtues, Thaksin regime, democracy (Bowornwathana, 2008), and AI-based governance (Kuziemski & Misuraca, 2020).

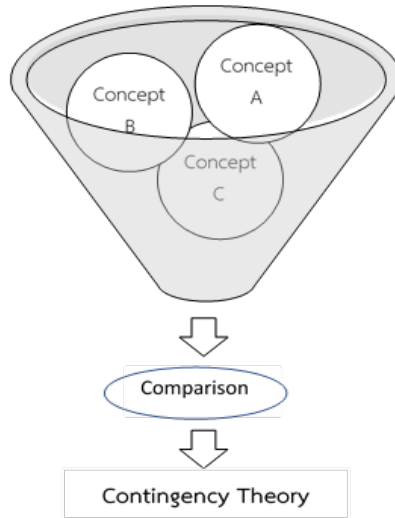


This problem persists and seems to be worsening due to the increasing complexity of societal changes affecting governance. Governance involves interactions and cooperation among various institutions impacted by these societal changes. Structurally, various forms of collaborative network organizations have emerged at multiple societal levels, from local organizations, districts, provinces, and regions to national and international cooperation groups. Rosenau (2021) argues that the study of public administration in the 21st century should not be confined to state and inter-state levels but should include micro-level analysis. Furthermore, values have shifted towards greater openness and acceptance of cultural and ideological diversity. This includes citizenship, participation, civil society, transparency, and social accountability (Ayhan & Önder, 2017). Additionally, the impact of technological advancements and artificial intelligence (AI) has enhanced the ability of individuals to access, search, process, and transmit information quickly and cost-effectively, which is another factor influencing current governance practices (Kuziemski & Misuraca, 2020).

The term “governance” is now used more broadly by scholars from disciplines beyond political science and public administration (Dimitrova, 2020). This widespread use complicates the study and understanding of the core concepts and propositions of governance due to the dispersal of knowledge. It also confuses translating theoretical concepts into practical methods or details, creating a significant gap between theory and practice. This gap is a current issue, as noted in studies on the politics of bureaucratic reform. For example, Bowornwathana and Wescott (2008), as well as Dahlström and Lapuente (2022), observe that political considerations and the interests of stakeholders often have a more significant influence on practical changes in Bureaucracy than academic principles or rationality.

This article proposes to address the issues mentioned above by applying a comparative study method to develop knowledge related to Bureaucracy. This approach emphasizes the differences in environments and values across different societies and connects this knowledge into flexible probabilistic laws, as suggested by Popper. It focuses on studying the “conditions” in the manner of Contingency Theory to organize and integrate knowledge into a cohesive whole, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Proposal for Developing Bureaucratic System Knowledge Using Comparative Methods



	Practice Guideline A	Practice Guideline B	Practice Guideline C
<b>Structural Factors</b>	<i>Condition 1</i>	<i>Condition 2</i>	<i>Condition 3</i>
<b>Value Factors</b>	<i>Condition 4</i>	<i>Condition 5</i>	<i>Condition 6</i>
<b>Other Factors</b>	-	-	-

Figure 2 illustrates the creation of knowledge by analyzing diverse and scattered concepts based on differences in dimensions such as place and time (who/where/when). This involves breaking down management issues, such as organizational structure and personnel management (what), to understand the proposed practices of these concepts (how) through comparative methods. The various components are then integrated into a unified whole, using the contextual conditions of society, including institutional structures and values (why).

The proposed method for creating knowledge about Bureaucracy builds on the approaches of comparative bureaucratic reform and comparative governance studies. These fields aim to study the functioning of Bureaucracy within different societies' diverse and varied contexts, considering factors such as history, economy, society, and politics. The goal is to compare these models' effectiveness while considering these factors (Heady, 2001; Önder & Nyadera, 2020; Jirarungruangwong, 2023). This approach adheres to the principles of development administration, a branch of comparative public administration. It posits that different societies and civilizations must develop their administrative strategies based on their unique attitudes and values within organizational systems and bureaucracies (Loveman, 1976). Therefore, development should occur gradually, leveraging internal potential through trial and error and adjusting to conditions, opportunities, and environments. Knowledge from other societies' successes or failures can serve as "lessons" rather than goals or models. Kennedy (2013, p.162) argues that considering other societies' experiences improves decision-making about adapting theories or practices to one's society, leading to more successful administrative development than planning based on external factors, such as using developed countries' models as templates, aiming to achieve development that progresses in a unified direction according to the steps outlined in these concepts (Bendor, 1976). Additionally, what one society values at a given time may be irrelevant or unimportant in another. Studying only the concepts or theories of other societies provides understanding under specific conditions, and this contextual difference is crucial. This is why developmental theories from developed countries cannot adequately explain the administrative systems in developing countries (Riggs, 1969).

Examples of factors that should be considered for comparison and related to practice guidelines from various reform theories are shown in Table 2

**Table 2: The factors affecting public administration**

Factor	Condition
<b>Central Administration</b>	
State Structure	Single State/ Federation/ Confederation
Government Structure	Parliament/President
Command Structure	Robust/Vulnerable
Provincial Government Agency	Significantly/Slightly Robust/Vulnerable
Internal And External Coordination Process	Significantly/Slightly
Transparency	Significantly/Slightly
Audit	Robust/Vulnerable
Independent Entity	Significantly/Slightly Robust/Vulnerable
Political Culture	Liberal/Conservative
Administrative culture	Involved/Uninvolved
<b>Local Government</b>	
<b>Agency</b>	Significantly/Slightly
Budget Authority	
Political Authority	Significantly/Slightly
Form	Committee/Mayor/Manager
Source	Appointment/Election
Policy Decision-Making Process	Existing/None
Supervision from Central Administration	Significantly/Slightly
Form of Decentralization	Authority Distribution/Authority Delegation/Authority Transfer/State-Owned Enterprises Privatization

**Table 2: The factors affecting public administration (Continue)**

<b>History</b>	
Colonization	Colonized (Period) / Uncolonized
Centralized Bureaucracy	Significantly/Slightly
Stakeholders in The Bureaucracy	Aristocrat/Military/Tech nocrat
Role of The Military in The Bureaucracy	Dominant/Influential/Sl ightly Involved/ Uninvolved
Relationship between Politics And Bureaucracy	Dominant/Influential/Sl ightly Involved/ Uninvolved
Political Ideology	Nationalism/Religion/S ocialism/None
<b>Legal Structure</b>	
Constitution	Written/Unwritten/Com bined
Source of Law	Military/Public
Law Stability	Significantly/Slightly
Court system	Robust/Vulnerable
<b>Government Officer Management</b>	
Bureaucracy	Career Based/Position Based
Ratio of Government Officer/Other Types of Employment	Significantly/Slightly
Selection/promotion	Seniority System/Merit System/Patronage/Syst em Justified /Unjustified
Nationwide Employment Assessment Test	Existing/None
Political Influence	Significantly/Slightly
Social Status	Honorable/Non- Honorable

**Table 2: The factors affecting public administration (Continue)**

<b>Civil Society Organization</b>	NGO
Size	Member/Volunteer/Employment
Institutionalization	Robust/Vulnerable
Relationship with The Government	Significantly/Slightly
Political Influence	Significantly/Slightly
Source of Income	Government Funding/Donation/Personal Income/Fundraising/Membership Fee/Loan
Social Status	Honorable/Non-Honorable
<b>Reform Philosophy</b>	
Concept	NPM/Governance
Policy Importation	Adaptation/Adoption
E-Government	Existing/None
Artificial Intelligence (AI)	Existing/None

Source: Adapted from M. Önder et al. (2022), A Framework for Comparative Analysis: Public Administration Across the Globe, The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative Public Administration (pp.69-72)

Therefore, despite a large and continually growing body of research and studies related to Bureaucracy or governance in various societies, which may lead to differing or conflicting ideas, theories, and proposals, understanding and applying them in practice can be challenging. This could lead to confusion in the field and its decline, as seen in the lessons from the 1950s and 1960s. However, this does not mean these proposals are inherently right or wrong. The differences arise from varying study contexts, making the resulting divergence not a crisis but an opportunity to create new knowledge and revise existing knowledge that has been falsified in the 21st century, a key characteristic of “science” emphasized by Popper (Smith, 2000, p.11). Using comparative methods

to understand the contextual conditions of societies that generate such knowledge, other public administration theories can be integrated to explain and construct models of the relationship between practices and contexts.

## Conclusion

This article addresses the current challenges in studying governance in the 21st century, which closely resemble past issues in developing bureaucratic knowledge. The ongoing cycle of contention and decline alternates between creating universal and context-specific knowledge for each society. Presently, research and studies related to bureaucracy or governance are fragmented due to differences or contradictions in the content or practical proposals of each society's theories, even if they share common goals. This makes it difficult to understand and apply this knowledge in practice. The differences arise from the varying contexts of the studies, not from the correctness or incorrectness of the theories. The article proposes a way to turn the current crisis into an opportunity for creating new knowledge and improving existing knowledge. This can be achieved by employing comparative methods to understand the contextual conditions and build models of relationships between context and practice in the form of flexible rules as suggested by Contingency Theory. This approach aims to integrate the fragmented knowledge by finding coherence in contradictions, order in disorder, and continuity in change. These elements are essential for studying governance in the 21st century, as Rosenau (2021) highlighted.

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