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## Struggling out of the garbage can

Towards a serious research agenda for public administration research in not-so-funny times

March/Olsen Honorary Lecture 2025

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## **Abstract**

*The Garbage Can Model belongs to a family of iconic studies that use ironic metaphors – such as muddling through, redundancy and paradox – to reveal insights about decision-making. The model’s irony, later described by the authors as “playfully serious”, is a powerful analytical tool, assuming that policymakers aim to solve problems, settle conflicts reasonably, and uphold democratic ideals. This, regrettably, is no longer self-evident, and irony risks spilling into cynicism. In an era when democratic governance is under strain we must move beyond irony. This essay presents a serious research agenda that builds on the foundations of the Garbage Can Model, reinterpreting it as an urgent call to ‘up our game’. A serious agenda for public administration research in not-so-funny times is outlined. It proposes a shift towards longitudinal research efforts, tackling “big” research questions, synthesizing knowledge and “talking back” to the public and politicians with accumulated collective insights.*

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## About time



### Struggling out of the garbage can

*A serious research agenda for not-so-funny times*

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The garbage can model of organizational choice (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972) belongs to the classic studies in public administration. It is the subject of this essay<sup>i</sup>, aiming to offer a critical

appraisal of the legacy of this article and the generation of classic studies to which it belongs. These classics still offer highly valuable and wonderfully useful insights, yet they have also helped to shape a specific path for research in our fields that we dearly need to reconsider in the current political context.

In short, I am going to argue that it is time to struggle out of the garbage can.

March and Olsen belong to the golden generation of scholars in our fields (Balla, Lodge and Page 2015). It is a generation of scholars whose work is taught in many educational programs and their work has been used by many scholars. In my opinion, the great strength of this generation was the creative, intellectual curiosity with which they theorized what really happens in the messy worlds of politics, policies and public organizations. They challenged the naïve rationalism with which earlier scholars, and people in general, tend to think about public policy and governance. Intuitively, many of us are inclined to believe that politics, policies and public organizations are, can be and should be rational. We tend to think that they are competent and in control, knowing just what to do to realize their goals. And while there is no doubt a lot of rationality going on in the public sector, as a theoretical perspective for fully understanding what really happens this is deficient. The golden generation of studies has given us words with which we can understand and appreciate the messier realities in which we live and work.

This generation has also done this with a particular style. These studies are often simply nice to read. These studies transform the not-so-exciting things that policymakers do into meaningful and interesting events. Part of this is the ‘playfully serious’ writing style, as Cohen, March and Olsen (2012) later coined it. They address serious issues with a lively intellectual attitude. This style is helpful analytically, as it creates a bit of distance to the serious issues that are studied. But it is also a clever marketing tool. This generation of scholars has produced many powerful mental packages that carry their messages. These mental packages often revolve around a little joke in which an apparently negative trait is turned on its head and assumes a positive quality. The golden generation is also the ironic generation.

What does the ironic golden generation teach us about some of the main questions in our fields?

## Rational policy processes?

One main question would be: what do we know about how policy is made? What is it that policymakers do?

Charles Lindblom:

“Agreement on policy (...) becomes the only practicable test of the policy's correctness.”

“It is not irrational for an administrator to defend a policy as good without being able to specify what it is good for.”



The intuitive, rational assumption would be that policymakers develop the best possible solutions for problems in society. It is expected that their work is to craft effective policies. To this end they

formulate clear policy goals, analyze conditions and situations and then deduce causes and effects. Policymakers can furthermore be expected to develop and test solutions which they then implement, evaluate and adjust.

“NO!”, said Charles Lindblom (1959), one of the earliest exponents of the ironic golden generation. While this may sound appealing to some, this is not at all what policymakers do. Rather, he contends, policymaking is a messy business. Means and ends are hard to disentangle. Only after selecting a policy, it becomes clear what apparently the goal is. Policymaking is first and foremost an incremental process, in which policymakers simply bend existing policies a little to the left or to the right. And the next time they bend it a little more or reverse and go back to where they came from. And how do they know the policy is any good? They simply look for confirmation to the other policymakers. If they like it, it must good! It may not even be important what goal is served by a policy. According to Lindblom (1959: 84), it is not irrational to defend a policy of which you can't explain what it is good for.

The ironic marketing slogan used to brand this analysis is ‘muddling through’. Muddling through is intuitively not a positive thing. It is not suggestive of heroic decision-making. Yet this is how policymaking is done and it is not without merits.

### **Rational organizations?**

If policymaking, then, is messy, perhaps we should try to make our organizations efficient? This is another key question in our fields. How can we make the organizations involved in public policymaking efficient?

The naïve rational answer would be that policymakers need to rationalize their organizations. They need to clarify goals, prioritize the things they do, develop optimal decision structures and divide operational tasks. This should lead to the Taylorization of production in which organizations can cut out redundancies in order to be maximally efficient.

Martin Landau:

"The appearance (...) of duplication and overlap (...) are not necessarily signs of waste and inefficiency. On the contrary (...) they may be compensating for the deficiencies of the formal organization (...)."



“NO!” While this may sound appealing to some, Martin Landau (1969) from the ironic golden generation offers a straight rebuttal. Redundancy, he argues, which is the ‘duplication of functions and

overlaps in tasks’, can be a blessing in disguise. Duplications compensate for design failures. They offer resources when organizations face unforeseen events and make organizations resilient during crises. He contends: “The appearance (...) of duplication and overlap (...) are not necessarily signs of waste and inefficiency. On the contrary (...) they may be compensating for the deficiencies of the formal organization (...)” (Landau 1969: 356). Thus, what looks like an inefficiency may actually be a remedy against failed attempts to improve, to rationalize, the organization.

The ironic marketing slogan used here is ‘redundancy’. Again, redundancy seems to be a vice but turns out to be a virtue. So, let us celebrate the extra weight around the waists of public organizations.

## **Effective policies?**

If policymaking then is messy, and messy organizations may be better, do they then deliver effective policies?

“NO!”, a large choir of authors from the ironic golden generation stems up, including at least Pressman and Wildavsky (1979), Lipsky (1983), and Kingdon (1984). Their classic studies, and many subsequent analyses, have shown that policies are not particularly rational, and that effectiveness is not the main thing we can expect. How could it be in the given circumstances?

Deborah Stone:

Politics is a process of argument (...) Political argument may be messy, even angry (...) political argument is our privilege. It allows us to fight our border wars with imagination and words

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Deborah Stone (2012) summarizes many of these insights in a textbook for students about policymaking. Stone claims that policies are not rational and logical; they are paradoxical. The essence of

policymaking is not developing effective interventions for pressing problems, she contends, but the essence lies in meaning making. Policymaking entails giving words to concerns in society and giving words to what policies mean. She thus describes policymaking as a rhetorical activity in which policymakers produce ‘strategic representations’ of societal issues and public policies. Policymaking is essentially a process in which groups of people fight and collaborate with and over words. It is a verbal tussle over meaning which, as she writes in hopeful concluding words: “Helps us to fight our border wars with words and imagination” (Stone 2012: 385).

The marketing slogan used here is the ‘paradox’. Policies are not logical but paradoxical, she contends, which, in the end – paradoxically, one could say – is ultimately *a good thing*.

## **The garbage can**

The garbage can model belongs to this ironic golden generation. In my opinion it is the *highlight* of this generation both in terms of the audacity of analysis and the playful irony used to talk about serious issues. This is summarized in the thought-provoking quote from the article stating that: “an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to

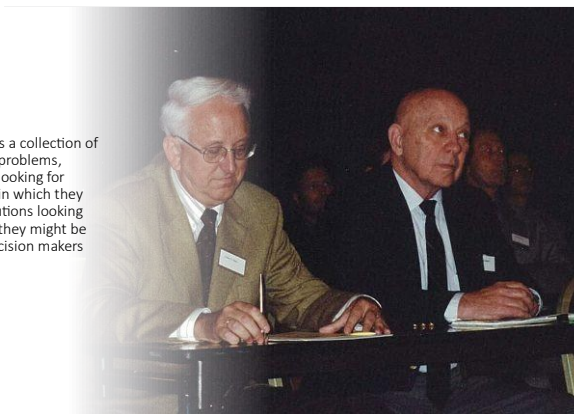
which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work” (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972: 1).

The article was developed in the context of university governance and describes organizations as at times organizational anarchies. Organizational anarchies are characterized by three conditions. These organizations have problematic preferences; it is not clear what they want to achieve. They also have unclear technologies. It is unknown how their activities are related, if at all, to their goals; in part, obviously, because it is not clear what goals they pursue in the first place. And they have unreliable decision-making procedures. Participants shift and drift; they enter and exit. This makes decision-making look like trying to play soccer on a very large field, with no goals, and no teams, but with a flock of over-excited 5-year-olds, frantically chasing a rugby ball.

The article comes with two very powerful marketing slogans. First the idea of the ‘garbage can’, describing decision-making in organizations as a more or less random process in which decisionmakers pull problems and solutions from the garbage can when it happens to be decision-time. Secondly the idea of ‘organized anarchy’, an oxymoron, combining two apparently contradictory qualities: the organization and the anarchy, as if it were dragged from the garbage can itself.

March & Olsen:

“... an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work.”



I have always found this model really useful, certainly when speaking to people who are not from our fields. The fate of a professor in public administration is that often, when people find out that

this is what I do, they think that I might appreciate it when they start ranting about some idiocy

in their organization, or some stupid policy, or the deficiencies of politicians and the government in general. In these situations, the garbage can model comes in handy. In response to such rants – which, by the way, I do not necessarily always appreciate – I suggest that they may be working in an organized anarchy. This often brings a smile or snorting laugh. People in the public sector can relate to this idea. They often find it funny, a little bit naughty. I then go on to explain that this implies that their organizations do not really know what they want to achieve and that their organizations do not know what the effects are of some of their activities. If they work in organizational anarchies, their organizations probably also take decisions in several separate, poorly structured meetings, with shifting participants who are fairly disinterested in what others are trying to decide elsewhere. Many people will again agree with this description and recognize some aspects of their professional realities in it.

For me this little story epitomizes the exceptional strengths of the garbage can model and other ironic ideas from the golden generation. They have an unmatched ability to provide insightful descriptions and explanations for a large diversity of ‘things’. The ironic approach distances people from personal frustrations, from their attachment to particular goals, and from a natural tendency to believe that the world is structured and just. This distance then creates the head space required to truly explore what happens in the messy realities of public organizations, public policies and public administration.

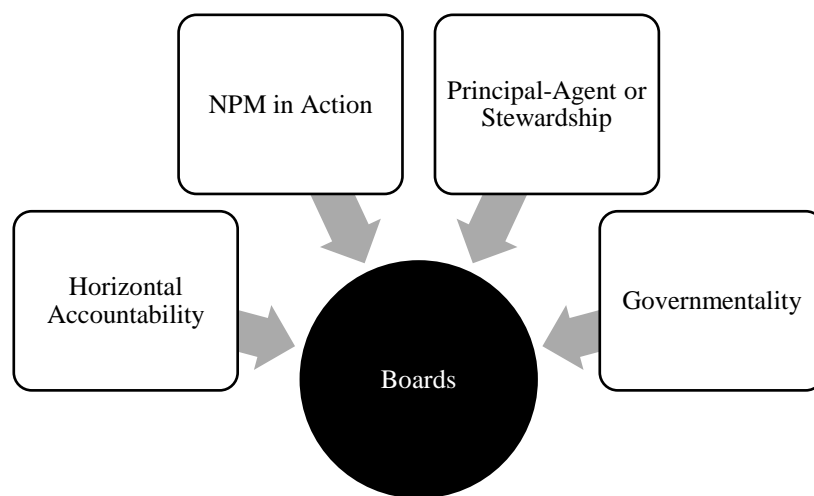
### **The legacy of the ironic golden generation**

The impact of the ironic golden generation on our fields has been profound. The garbage can model belongs to the canon in public policy and administration. In a list of classic studies compiled by Balla, Lodge and Page (2015: 6), it features in a second rung of heavily cited classics, together with other members of the ironic golden generation, such as Lindblom

(1959), Pressman and Wildavsky (1979), Lipsky (1983) and Kingdon (1984). Their insights are still taught to most of our students and their work has played an important role in shaping how we conduct our research.

In the decades since then, these classic theories have been applied to study a very large and highly divergent set of cases in our fields. Often, when public administration scholars choose to study a particular case, they can deploy any of the classic theories mentioned above or numerous recent additions to the theoretical library. These theories are applicable in many situations as they are generic and highlight different relevant aspects applicable in numerous contexts. As a result, many theories can be used to study one phenomenon, while, conversely, one theory can be used to study many phenomena. This can be illustrated with two examples.

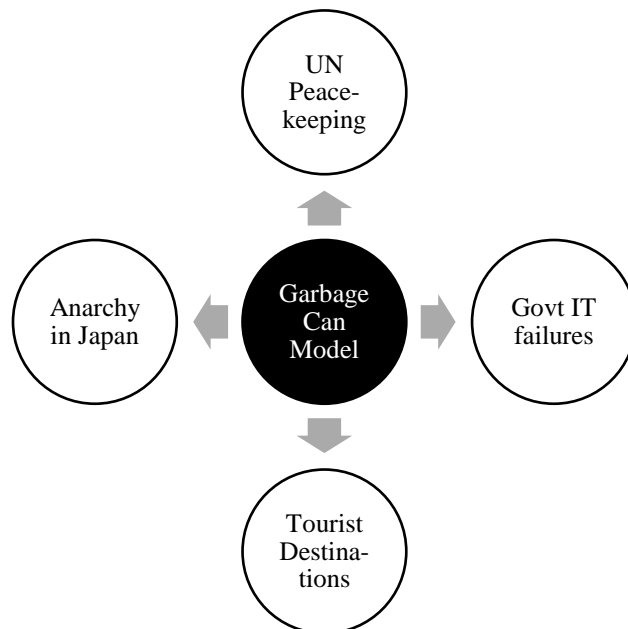
In numerous situations in our field, one particular empirical object has been studied with different theoretical approaches. An example is boards in the public sector. They exist in most



democracies and are important for public sector governance. Boards have for instance been studied as cases of ‘horizontal

accountability’ (Schillemans 2008), as examples of ‘New Public Management in action’ (Ferlie 1996), as indicative of either ‘principal agent theory’ or ‘stewardship theory’ (Caers et al 2006), and they have been analyzed through the lens of ‘governmentality’ (Wilkins and Gobby 2024). There are even studies of boards in which they are studied as *boards* (Cornforth 2003). The empirical object remains the same while scholars look at it through a variety of theoretical lenses.

On the other hand, the broad and generic theories in our fields have each on their own been used to analyze a great diversity of objects. The same theory is then used in many different settings. The academic offspring of the garbage can model illustrates this point. An amusing variety of things has been studied with this model. We for instance have the garbage can model and United Nations peace keeping (Lipson 2007), the garbage can model and government IT project failures (Zhu and Kindarto 2016), the garbage can model and anarchy in Japanese firms (Takahashi 1997), and the garbage can model and decisions to change tourist destinations (Beritelli and Reinhold 2010). Now the theory remains the same, but it is used to shed light on many, highly diverse, empirical objects.



These examples signify an approach to social science in which individual researchers conduct loosely coupled, if not stand-alone, projects, aiming to understand all sorts of cases rather than build a cohesive body of knowledge. As public administration scholars, we know a great deal of things about a great deal of things. The sunny side of this research approach is the autonomy it gives to individual researchers and the relevance their research may have in specific contexts. But the downside is that insights are dispersed and that the quasi-discipline of public administration does not aggregate much knowledge. As a community of scholars, we are not

able to provide many confident answers to the basic questions for our fields. This was already acknowledged by the ironic golden generation itself. After twenty years, Charles Lindblom (1979) happily admitted that he was still muddling and not yet through. And after forty years, Cohen, March and Olsen (2012) ironically acknowledged that the major accomplishment of their theory was that it was a solution still managing to attract a large number of problems.

As a field we are, as the saying goes, still confused, yet on a higher level. I find it significant to note that I have only ever heard social scientists use this expression. And it also strikes me that when others hear it, that they do not understand why it is so funny, and why it is not problematic to invest years of research only to remain confused yet now armed with a more sophisticated vocabulary with which to express your confusion. It is an expression draped in academic irony.

### **Not-so-funny-times**

At the time of the golden generation, the irony made sense. It greatly helped to improve analytical capacity and it was safe and easy to do so in the context of stable democracies. The political parties at the time, as Lindblom (1959: 519) acknowledged, held the same basic views on important policy issues anyway. Furthermore, as Deborah Stone (2024) recently underlined, it could be expected that policymakers in democracies actually *wanted* to contribute to the public good and *wanted* to settle conflicts reasonably. It could be expected that they by and large *accepted* the rule of law and checks and balances and at least used *some* scientific and bureaucratic expertise to craft their policies.

These assumptions, regrettably, no longer hold. The political context within which public administrations operate has changed dramatically since the time of the ironic golden generation. The classic studies were written in stable established democracies. At present, we



are in the twenty-fifth successive year of global democratic decline (V-Dem 2025) as well as in the eighth successive year of global decline of the rule of law (WJP Rule of Law Index 2024). The classic studies were

written at a time when the major political parties were willing to compromise and used their powers with some restraint (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). At present, political polarization is a major problem in democracies, obstructing inter-party collaboration (Levin, Milner and Perrings 2021) and increasing risks of political violence (Piazza 2022). These unfortunate developments have had a major impact on how public administrations can operate, sparking an intense scholarly debate on democratic backsliding and the role of the state (Yesilkagit et al 2024). According to Hanson and Kopstein (2024) we are even witnessing a global assault on the modern state by patrimonial leaders, inspired by Putin's success in stabilizing Russia and reinforcing the country as a global power.

Trump's second presidential term is part of these global trends and simultaneously stands out given the special significance of the USA as superpower. Trump's second term is also of academic and theoretical relevance, given the crucial role the USA used to play as advocate and role model of democratic rule and as *the* site for the development of most classic studies in public administration.

### **From irony to cynicism**

Irony is a rhetorical strategy in which there is a discrepancy between what is literally said and what is actually meant (Milburn 2019). By saying policymaking is like muddling through, by

stating that redundancies may be crucial, by claiming that policies are paradoxical, by asserting that organizations are anarchies, the ironic golden generation was *literally* criticizing public policies. But the underlying *meaning* conveyed in their work was a strong intellectual, often also personal, commitment to public policies for the public good. However, if you read their texts and the quotations I use in this essay with a cynical mindset, you will miss the underlying meaning. What will stand out is that policymakers look for work and that they do not know what their policies are good for.

A cynical observation is at face value identical to an ironic statement. The cynic may mention the same facts and even use the same words. However, cynicism lacks the hidden positive meaning veiled by the ironic mask. Cynicism is used to deliberately banalize morally serious subjects R awel (2007).

For me, this banalization of serious issues, making a laughingstock of politicians, policies and bureaucracies, is currently omnipresent. This makes our ironic intellectual approach vulnerable. If we can laugh about it, if it is so funny to be confused, it cannot be serious. In the current context, what is meant and practiced as learned irony can look like, or be interpreted as, or be misused for, immoral cynicism. In the current not-so-funny context, I believe, our ironic observations are no longer funny.

So, if organizations are marked by decision-makers looking for work, as Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) playfully seriously stated – in a statement that holds more than a grain of truth – governments and citizens can also say: ‘Well, these people can just as well go looking for work elsewhere’.

And if Charles Lindblom (1979) states that public policies are bad, even in the best situations – again a statement holding more than a grain of truth – it makes sense to call for a great reset.

And if Deborah Stone (2012) says that policymaking is essentially a war fought with imagination and words, then she is living under the “rule” of the best president ever. We are currently witnessing an American president who approaches many situations as if at war, with a relentless ability to spin the words and a boundless imagination.

So, at a time when Trump’s administration is actively dissolving the great American bureaucracy, at a time when illiberalism and authoritarianism are on the rise, at a time when cynicism about policies and governance is pervasive, I believe it is crucial to reconsider how, as scholars of public policies and administration, we develop our research and relate to citizens and politicians.

### **Towards a serious research agenda**

I believe it is time to drop the veil of irony. Scholars of public policy and public administration are in it because they *care*. Scholars in our fields have collected a lot of evidence that public policies can be crucial to the public good. But we also know that policies often fall short of expectations. As scholars we should work much, much harder, much more seriously, to sift the one from the other and accumulate knowledge and share this with the public in meaningful ways. It is an illusion to hope to be able to understand exactly when policies will or will not work for what purposes. Policymaking is not like making a math task in which there is one correct and indisputable outcome. But our research can contribute to knowledge that can help us understand when policies are a little more – or a little less – likely to fail for the public good. And this is ultimately the goal we should pursue as scholars of public policy and administration: develop insights with which politicians within the confines of democracy and the rule of law can at least take reasonably informed, the best possibly informed, decisions.

These not-so-funny times call for a serious research agenda. This agenda features some shifts in how our research develops, some shifts in the process and some shifts in focus and approach. These shifts signify an alternative path taking off from the garbage can model. Back in 1972, Cohen, March and Olsen claimed that the properties of organizational anarchy are: “Characteristic of any organization in part - part of the time” (emphasis added). Subsequent scholars have often interpreted this as an invitation to focus their research on the wild and anarchic parts of organizations and policies specifically. They have been nosing around in the garbage can and have come up with many thought-provoking findings. In the process, some scholars even radicalized the interpretation of the garbage can model, suggesting it is descriptive of organizations in all parts, all of the time. Some scholars have aimed to understand how best to operate under the conditions of the garbage can. I however propose to treat it as a different kind of invitation. If preferences, decision-procedures and policy programs are unclear, should scholars of public policy and governance then not lend a hand and help to clear (at least some of) the mist? Their research can help policymakers so that their organizations are effectively anarchies in fewer parts, in less of the time. Rather than nose around in the garbage can, we should try to struggle out of the garbage can. To this end, I think four shifts in how the research in our fields develop are important. Table 1 below provides an overview which will be subsequently discussed.

Table 1: A serious agenda for public administration research in not-so-funny times

<b>Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Long-lasting, focused research programs</li> <li>✓ Aggregating &amp; integrating</li> </ul>
<b>Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Fundamental issues, irrespective of themes-of-the-day</li> <li>✓ On goals, interventions, decision-processes</li> </ul>

<b>Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Historical literacy</li> <li>✓ (Self)-critical &amp; mindful of political positionality</li> </ul>
<b>Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Confident return to the public</li> <li>✓ Active outreach with research evidence</li> </ul>

### **(1) Long-lasting, aggregative and integrating research programs**

A first shift would involve that research in public policy and public administration engages much more in longer research programs that aggregate and integrate knowledge. As mentioned, the research in our fields is marked by a great appetite for diversity. This is symbolized in a word cloud in figure 3. The word cloud was made using the titles from the most recent articles in five of the major journals in our field. The word cloud features a very large number of words. The only ones that are easily legible are the really dull ones, like ‘in’ and ‘of’, or the really mundane ones, like ‘organizations’, ‘local’ or ‘bureaucracy’. The interesting things are the ones that are hard to see; people have to look hard to find them. A great number of topics is discussed in these journals yet most of these only once.

A word cloud, obviously, falls short of any standard of evidence required for making a factual claim. I use it as an illustration of what we produce in our fields. There is a lot of *divergence* but very little *convergence*. We devote scarce time and attention to studies aggregating what we know. We devote scarce time and attention to the integration of insights from different communities of citation. And we devote scarce time and attention to generate generic lessons. Such a shift in our research process is in principle simple. We should simply focus more time and attention on studies that aggregate and integrate insights and collaborate in this endeavor in much larger networks of scholars over much longer periods of time. This would have major

implications, though, for how we fund research, how scholars operate and how we reward individual scholars.



Enduring and aggregating research programs are of course not totally new. There are excellent examples to build on. I for instance truly admire the behavioral research on accountability in which scholars

build on previous studies (See for reviews of this literature: Lerner and Tetlock [1999], Hall et al [2017], Harari and Rudolph [2017], Aleksovska et al [2019]). These scholars use the same concepts and measurements and have gradually expanded the horizon of what is known about the effects of accountability on individuals. There is also a lot to learn from the collaborative governance case study database (Douglas et al 2020). It was developed to generate overarching conclusions from the many, many case studies in our fields, which are so often only loosely coupled and thus do not generate a lot of aggregative insights. And I am also deeply impressed by the integrative theoretical article published by Hattke and Vogel (2023). They provide a topology of the theoretical landscape in public administration. They reduce a whopping number of one hundred fifty different theories in use to just fifteen main theories, as ‘motherships’ from which more fine-grained theories take off. These are just some of the examples of research processes that I think should be much more prominent in our fields in order to truly aggregate knowledge and insights.

## **(2) Continuous engagement with fundamental issues**

A second shift implies that longer research programs also focus specifically on fundamental issues in the fields irrespective of the issues of the day. Funders and policymakers, but also researchers and students, are often motivated by hot potato issues. In effect, many research projects are actually aiming to investigate issues that are prominent in the daily news. It is obviously important that the research in our fields is relevant to current concerns. But I think we would actually be much better at this if our research agenda would, paradoxically, be more independent. If the things we study are determined to a great degree by what is on the political agenda, we risk to be running around in circles failing to make much progress.

Think, for instance about our knowledge of how governments cut spending on programs or organizations. This is a topic that has been, and I quote from the doctoral thesis of Eduard Schmidt (2020: 16): “On and off the research agenda (...) to a large extent mirroring the actual ups and downs of national economies.” Every year most governments and public organizations take *some* decisions where they cut back on funding on some policies. This will always have a huge impact on those who are concerned. It can be done wisely, actually helping to improve things or abolishing programs that are no(t loner) working. But complaints about how budgets are cut are also manifold. Cutbacks are often experienced as incredibly harmful. It is a fundamental and pervasive fact of life in the public sector, yet as a community of scholars we only study it erratically. We only study it at times when cutbacks happen to be politically salient. Why don't we develop permanence and aggregation in research on such an important subject? Why do people interested in cutback management need to wait for a new financial crisis before they can get a new major project funded? And why don't we include the knowledge we have on cutback management in the programs we offer students? They are destined to work in organizations that will make at least minor cutbacks each year and will take more drastic measures every now and then. This is just one example from a host of fundamental

topics in our fields, that would benefit from more focus in how we program our research and what we include in our teaching.

### **(3) Improved self-critical historical literacy**

A third shift is about the approach we take to research. I think we could improve our (self)-critical historical literacy. If we really want to move forward in what we know, we need to look back more seriously and more critically. What do we really learn from earlier research?

At face value, all studies already do this. There is always this section in articles where the literature is reviewed. These sections are usually functional and help to develop the key concepts in an article and relate those to parts of the field. Yet they mostly fall short of a serious, reflective and critical assessment of the state of the field, certainly in cases where the results from previous studies sit uneasy with policy ideals that scholars support.

My favorite example is research on citizen participation. It a subject I have engaged with since my master's thesis as a student in the 1990s. At the time, citizen participation was considered fresh, new, and promising. Almost thirty years later, many of my students are still inspired by citizen participation. They still find it fresh, new and promising. Yet they still go back, as I did, to Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, published thirty years *before* I graduated. In her time, she writes in somewhat different words, participation was also fresh, new and promising. I am unsure whether I should be ironic or cynical about this stagnancy in argumentation.

There has been a tremendous amount of research on participation since then, yet in my view a limited aggregation of knowledge on key issues relating to participation. For citizen participation I could find no less than 15 systematic reviews under somewhat different theoretical labels of fair to good quality (see Appendix 1). The in my view best review by

Voorberg and colleagues (2015) soberly concludes that there are many empirical insights in participation yet that it is impossible to answer whether or when it works. Many studies do simply not focus on the question whether participation leads to its objectives. Many studies start from a belief that more participation is better and end with a list of things that can be done to further enhance participation. But if we don't know whether or when it works, why do we then advise to enhance it? And if you look at the evidence, there is reason not to be too optimistic. One of the most stubborn findings, which can be found in hundreds of studies, is that most people do not *want* to participate as much as many policymakers and social scientists hope they will do.

In this case, there is so much empirical evidence that with more historical literacy, with more serious attention to lessons from the past, but also with more self-critical awareness of political bias, we could draw much stronger conclusions which could then serve as focusing hypotheses for new research projects and as guidance for policy practice. The reviews in Appendix 1 are as such of course excellent examples of attempts to aggregate insights, as is also the case for specific literatures on democratic innovation (Smith 2009; Michels 2011). There are in my view numerous other fundamental areas of study in our field where the same applies.

#### **(4) Back-to-the-Public**

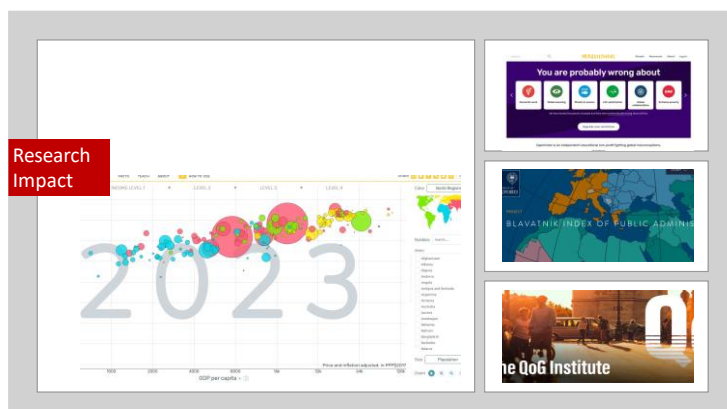
A fourth and final shift would be to actively return to the public, to bureaucrats and to politicians, with the best of insights that have been collectively accumulated.

From a distance one could say that scholars in public policy and public administration are the luckiest researchers in the world. The things we study are in the spotlights of the media and on the public agenda each day. This suggests that we do is apparently interesting. What we study is also crucial for the future of our planet as it is of immediate relevance to major disruptive

events such as wars, climate change, pandemics and education. What we study is thus undoubtedly relevant. The things we study also engage people. People have very strong emotions and opinions about governments and public policies. What we do is apparently engaging and entertaining. People even talk about what we study over dinner or at birthday parties. This hardly ever happens to our colleagues who are into stem cell or sonar wave research.

However, when I join this public conversation as an expert, it feels that my main contribution is to explain that difficult things are, indeed, difficult. I have developed a pretty sophisticated vocabulary with which I can do that. I can for instance resort to the garbage can model or many of the other classic insights in our field. But I find myself frustratingly limited in my ability to provide expert opinion on how to improve policies, based on what we collectively know as scholars of public policy and administration. We should do much better here. I think it is our societal mission as an academic community to aggregate knowledge and then to make this usable for anyone. Our field departs from concerns and questions people have and we should finalize our research by returning to the public with what we have found as scholars.

This is of course again not a totally new thing. Many excellent examples come to mind<sup>ii</sup>. I think of the Quality of Governance institute in Gothenburg that has done an admirable job in collecting and opening up relevant data on corruption and the quality of governance for many years. More recently Oxford's *Blavatnik Index of Public Administration* was launched,



displaying relevant evidence from many sources for 120 countries. And I am a great admirer of the *Gapminder* foundation (cf. Rosling 2018). They have developed a simple website with loads of data

from many sources. Anyone who knows how to use the mouse of his or her computer can make a flashy visualization of reliable evidence with selected data from their website in just 10 minutes.

For me these are great examples for our field as they bring data and insights together and aim to open them up for anyone. As scholars we receive a lot of public funding with which we pursue ever more specialized research. This is good as such; the depth and (methodological) quality of public administration research has strongly improved in the past decades. But scholars should also return to the public and politicians with the outcomes of what has been found. Ideally, as a discipline we should collect and display all reliable data on the quality of policy and administration in a transparent and highly usable way. This entails making evidence and data available (see the Quality of Governance Institute for an excellent example), allowing for insightful comparisons (see the Blavatnik index of Public Administration) and offering tools with which anyone can select the data they find interesting to make meaningful and beautiful visualizations (see Gapminder's data visualization tools). Ideally, the discipline can develop digital go-to-places for anyone interested in reliable facts about the quality of governance<sup>iii</sup>. This should help policymakers when they craft policies, pupils when they make school assignments and journalists and press officers when they quickly need a reliable fact. And scholars from our disciplines can also reach out with such data themselves. During election debates, for instance, their representatives can sit behind their laptops and TVs and respond with the best available data to any claim made by a politician about the quality of governance, irrespective of whether they like this politician or not and irrespective of whether the accumulated evidence in the field supports, nuances or refutes what is claimed. Scholars of public policy and administration cannot make voters, politicians and bureaucrats base their political positions on scientific evidence. But they can make it much harder for them to disregard, and much easier to use, what we collectively know. In order to be able to do this,

much more focused efforts are needed to aggregate, integrate and display relevant findings in reliable and accessible formats for others than social scientists.

## **To conclude**

This essay has sketched a serious research agenda for public policy and administration research in the current not-so-funny-times. The essay has obviously offered a particular view, perhaps a bit of a caricature, of some of the classic studies as well as the developments in our fields. I have certainly offered a selective and simplified narrative that leaves out much more than it covers. I have also not discussed the many areas within our fields where scholars are building on each others' work and a lot of progress is no doubt made. For good measure: there is a lot of excellent research in public policy and administration and in the past years the methodological and theoretical depth of the field has certainly advanced a lot which is a fantastic achievement. And by depicting our field as ironic I have exaggerated gravely. Most publications on public administration are devoid of any sense of humor, ironic, cynical or otherwise.

Nevertheless, I believe there is an urgency to shift more of our time and attention to long-lasting, aggregating research programs on fundamental issues for our fields. I do believe we should improve our historical literacy, our self-reflexivity, certainly when research outcomes do not match our political beliefs. I strongly believe we should 'talk back' to citizens and politicians. *They* speak about our research subjects every day. *We* should make it as hard as possible for them to disregard, as easy as possible to use, the fruits of our research. And overall, I believe we should drop the false ironic mask. While it is true that goals, interventions and decision processes are often problematic, this is not *really* funny. In these not-so-funny times,

it is important to clarify and demonstrate that it is our aim to help policymakers to struggle out of the garbage can, at least more of the time for larger parts of their work.

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## **Appendix 1: Overview of systematic reviews of citizen participation**

The set of systematic reviews below was compiled in May 2024. The claims made in the essay are based on a simple analysis of these 15 reviews. I do not believe this sample is exhaustive but do think I have not missed important systematic reviews of the literature.

As is indicated below, almost all reviews share three features. First of all, they either express a normative attachment to participation – it is a value as such which needs to be strengthened – and/or they observe that the majority of studies in the field are normatively attached to more participation. Probably in relation to this, there is only very limited evidence of realized outcomes stemming from participation. Secondly, almost all reviews conclude, imply or allude to findings that the quality and/ or volume and/ or representiveness of citizen participation is lower than desirable. Thirdly, almost all reviews, even when adopting a more distanced academic position, end with suggestions and recommendations with which more or better participation may be realized. Several authors see it as the task of scholars to promote citizen participation in the first place.

### **Bastos et al 2022**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 67

**Normative attachment to participation:** this is the first paragraph of the article: “Citizens represent the lifeblood of a city and are inextricably linked to its continued existence and prosperity. Therefore, it is imperative for the government of a city to care for its citizens and to pay careful attention to their needs [1]. Moreover, citizens must be active in their cities’

management and governance, since they are aware of the problems of the communities where they live and work and can evaluate the actions of city authorities.” (p. 1).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “19 of the included articles reported the need to implement incentive mechanisms.” (p. 17).

In the conclusion the authors suggest that: “the strategies to incentivize citizen participation require further research.” (p. 22).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** the focus of the article is on applications that promote participation. The entire conclusion and discussion are about how to further improve these.

#### **Benlahcene et al 2024**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 26

**Normative attachment to participation:** the first sentence of the article is: “electronic participation (e-participation) tools provide innovative platforms for public engagement in government decision-making, which is vital to the process of democracy.” (p. 1).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** The authors are not explicit, but I think the following sentences signify that the reviewed studies note limited participation: “Future studies could investigate the effective implementation and strategies for e-participation in order to bridge the gap between expectations and practical outcomes. (...) Third, there is a need for more research on the motivation of citizens to participate in e-government services and how to sustain this participation in the long term.” (emphasis added). (p. 11).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** The key line in the conclusion is: “to effectively promote e-participation among citizens, it is crucial for researchers to investigate additional factors that contribute to its success...” (emphasis added), p. 2.

**Boudjelida, Mellouli, and Lee 2016**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 182

This article does not commit to citizen participation as an ideal, but states that this is an ideal held by many. The authors distance themselves a little bit from the subject and keep approaching it from a research perspective.

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** the authors conclude: “We observe that some of the proposed topics can have unrealistic assumptions, limited impacts on citizens, or simply are away from citizen's priorities.” (p. 36).

**Bouzguenda, Alalouch, and Fava 2019**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 123

**Normative attachment to participation:** The article is based on a broad conception of sustainable development in which community engagement and citizen participation are included. The authors write: “This article will discuss the role of community engagement practices as one of the key components of social sustainability.” (p. 2).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “the long-lasting challenge of low level participation that municipalities around the world have been experiencing.” (p. 12).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** The article advances numerous ideas on how to further participation, including: “How far could DCP (digital citizen participation) enhance the participation of citizens in decisionmaking (...) How can DCP be enhanced further by making the most out of the available state-of-the-art technology?” (p. 13).

### **Clarival et al 2021**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 34

**Normative attachment to participation:** the text does not explicitly state so, but given how the authors are focusing on how to improve citizen participation it is fair to state they take this as desirable per se.

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “Findings- The SLR showed that further research is needed to improve the involvement of citizens in the early stages of the development of public displays, broaden the spectrum of citizen participation achieved through public displays, integrate public displays with other means of participation...” (p. 1).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** Research Direction 1: Large-Scale Methods for Improving Participation in Early Development Stages (...) Research Direction 2: Supporting Higher-Level Participation.” (p. 15).

### **Ghaffari 2020**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 12

**Normative attachment to participation:** Starting lines: “Civic engagement is a basic prerequisite for the success and fulfillment of programs. The role of citizens in the policy making process, from planning to execution, is a fundamental component of the process towards sustainable development.” (p. 2).

This is not a high quality review. It is not easy to see empirical observations.

### **Ianiello et al 2019**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 122

**Normative attachment to participation:** the study takes a distanced perspective and notes in general: “most contributions still consider the benefits of participation as a given.” (p. 22)

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “The main problems concerning community representation that emerged from the 50 articles concern participants’ selection, which is never neutral.” ... “series of negative consequences, such as participation of the ‘usual suspects’, prevalence of hidden agendas, limited representativeness and low motivation.” (p. 29).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** they offer a list of 14 recommendations to improve participation.

### **Igalla, Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk 2019**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 89

**Normative attachment to participation:** these scholars adopt a scholarly perspective. Yet in the way the principal object is defined, in my view, a very clear normative attachment and

positive pre-interpretation of the object studied shimmers through: “In this research, we refer to their activities with the concept of citizen initiatives, which is a form of self-organization in which citizens mobilize energy and resources to collectively define and carry out projects aimed at providing public goods or services for their community.” (p. 1).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** this is not in the study. The focus is on citizen initiatives; so there *are* already initiatives by citizens. The conceptual model (fig. 5 in the article) developed then focuses on a variety of aspects, none of which pertain to citizens.

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** the authors draw a balanced conclusion, on the one hand identifying a set of potentially critical factors for enhancing participation yet on the other hand also drawing attention to the potential ‘dark side’ of participation. (p. 16).

## **Oliveira 2020**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 96

**Normative attachment to participation:** the subtitle of the article already makes a very clear point: the authors care about how to overcome challenges to participation.

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “we observed that citizens do not participate online for the same reasons that they do not participate offline. It was possible to verify a cycle that causes non-participation.”

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** “As future work, we intend to create a solution for citizen engagement”.

## **Pereira and Figueira 2022**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 371

**Normative attachment to participation:** “The idea of democratic governance – along with its multiple approaches to public budgeting – compels states to become more open and permeable to citizens’ voices and oversight in order to enhance their legitimacy, justice, and effectiveness.” (p. 1)

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** the following text from the conclusion implies that participation was often found to be difficult: “These barriers seem to be rooted in two interdependent factors: the increase in size and specialization of the administrative state and citizens’ lack of knowledge of budgetary matters. In other words, while the administrative state insulates itself with its technicalities, its citizens are prevented from understanding how the state works. However, this only happens in the absence of effective measures to educate citizens and provide meaningful dialog.

Hence, our findings suggest that to ensure that participation in public budgeting is a solution to responsiveness and trust issues, participatory mechanisms should be developed with a twofold focus: addressing not only citizens’ capacities to understand public budgeting but also states’ capacities to speak citizens’ language and take their voices into consideration.” (p. 24).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** in the citation above an already rather radical agenda is suggested, transforming both citizens (via education) so that they *can* participate and transforming public budgeting, to align with citizens.

## **Santini and Carvalho 2019**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 44

**Normative attachment to participation:** “Taking into account the problematic legitimacy of the political and electoral models, new digital technologies have been adopted in order to modify the contemporary political scenario. The adaptation to digital media by governors and citizens has allowed the emergence of initiatives aimed at reducing the gap between civic participation and political protagonists. However, questions about the role of citizens remain, namely whether if their role is genuinely reinforced by the use of digital platforms and if the decisions taken by administrators are influenced by such online political participation.” (P. 164).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “one of the most crucial aspects of this article deals with the argument that participation represents little more than opportunistic rhetoric on the part of political representatives. Several online governmental initiatives communicate a promise of promoting civic participation, but are, in practical terms, complex, closed platforms, controlled and monitored by their managers and with very little or no feedback about the result of the participation, characterizing a kind of “participation washing”. Furthermore, behind the so-called participatory processes, informal hierarchies and other disguised power structures can be hidden, acting in an authoritarian manner and in the interest of small groups. The rhetoric of participation promoted by governors may result in an

environment of elitist citizenship, a false politicization, and an example of manipulative participation and the rise of a new kind of populism. (p. 177).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** the study ends with an agenda for increasing and strengthening political participation with specific recommendations for citizens, governments and researchers.

## **Sharma et al 2022**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 72

**Normative attachment to participation:** “Empowered citizens form the backbone of a well-functioning democracy (Sørensen, 1997). For some time, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been accepted and promoted by governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) as being instrumental in empowering their citizens by improving their capabilities and the control they have over their own lives.” (p. 1).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “having more participation is just one part of the solution, but the complete goal is also dependent on the quality of participation.” (p. 17).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** in this article, the theoretical, conceptual and policy perspective are linked. The authors develop a theoretical model with policy implications. Integral to the model, though, is promoting participation as this is assumed to be desirable.

## **Varwell 2022**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 69

**Normative attachment to participation:** “As higher education sees continuing turbulence overlap with a strengthening of student engagement, this systematic literature review reappraises how students as ‘citizens’ are enabled to shape their learning.” (p. 108).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** the article does not report findings on actual participation. It is a review focused on ideas and conceptions.

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** the article is a strong plea for including pupils in shaping learning and signifies that Arnsteins Ladder is also about power, something on which the teachers and schools should reflect,

### **Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2015**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 122

**Normative attachment to participation:** the authors take a scholarly perspective, aiming to answer the question:” What do we know about the types, objectives, outcomes and conditions under which co-creation and co-production with citizens take place in innovation processes in the public sector?” (p. 1334).

They not about the literature: “Hence, we may conclude that co-creation/co-production is perceived as a value in itself, which is also supported by the observation that several authors addressed the increase of citizen involvement as an objective to be met.” (p. 1347).

And: “However, studies that address the outcomes of the coproduction/co-creation process are scarce. If specific outcomes were reported, the emphasis was on whether effectiveness of public service is being enhanced. The limited number of specific outcomes also adds up to our idea that co-creation/co-production is primarily considered as a virtue in itself, which does not need to be legitimized by referring to external objectives.” (1348).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** “On the citizen side, factors identified refer to the willingness to participate. These involve the education level of individual citizens, family structure and personal characteristics. Next to this willingness, citizens need to be aware of their ability and possibility to actual influence public services.” (p. 1347).

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** the authors focus their conclusions on research of, not the practice of, participation.

**Wuebben, Romero-Luis, and Gertrudix 2020**

**Number of studies analyzed:** 44

**Normative attachment to participation:** “Citizen science democratizes knowledge, often by including members of public in the collection and analysis of scientific data [1,2]; energy communities democratize power, often by giving members of open organizations opportunities to plan, finance, own, or manage energy systems and services [3–6]. Both practices promote public engagement, challenge top-down infrastructures, and work to transform passive consumers of information (or energy) into active coproducers and stewards. In the European Union (EU), energy communities seem to be edging closer to citizen science. (p. 2).

**Concluding or implying that citizens participate less than what is hoped for:** the authors do not address whether the amount, quality and representatives of participation was either uplifting or an issue.

**Making suggestions on how to further participation:** the article ends with a lengthy discussion of how participation in this particular case can be furthered. Throughout the article sends the message that participation is a crucial value.

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## Bio

**Thomas Schillemans** is a Professor in public governance at [Utrecht University School of Governance](#) in the Netherlands. He initiated the Instituut Kwaliteit Overheid in the Netherlands in 2025, together with colleagues. He teaches public policy professionals at the [Netherlands School of Public Administration](#) and is one of the associate editors of [Public Administration Review](#). His work is marked by persistence in focus, collaboration in networks, and the ultimate aim that academic research should enable decision-makers to make better-informed decisions.

‘Accountability’ of public sector organizations is the common thread throughout his academic career. It started with his PhD thesis on the new concept of [horizontal accountability](#), followed amongst others by a collective effort to consolidate what we know in the [Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability](#), an [Accountability Dissertation Series](#), an exploration of the impact of [populism](#) on accountability to studies of the [behavioural effects](#) of accountability. In his research collaboration is crucial, for instance with [communication](#) scientists and [behavioural](#) scientists as well as international collaborations with colleagues from, for instance, [Oslo](#) and [Bergen](#).



## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This essay is based on the March/Olsen Honorary Lecture 2025 held May 9, 2025, in Bergen, Norway.

I would like to thank the Department of Government, University of Bergen, and Lise H. Rykkja for the invitation. I further like to thank all participants at the Lecture for the stimulating questions and discussion. This certainly also includes the students whom I spoke. I further like to thank Fabian Hattke, Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, Per Laegreid, Zuzana Murdoch, Johan P. Olsen, and Jos C.N. Raadschelders for valuable feedback.

I must admit that the prospect of giving an honorary lecture felt a bit daunting at the time. I do not actually give honorary lectures every day. But it was simultaneously a simple pleasure to speak in honor of some of the most important sources of inspiration throughout my career.

As a student in the 1990s, I read *rediscovering institutions* at a time when my interests were shaping up. As a PhD candidate in the 2000s, my first major academic conference was the EGOS conference, held in Bergen, starting off with a keynote by James G. March (2007). As an aspiring scholar in the 2010s, I welcomed Johan P. Olsen to Utrecht for a seminar on accountability. On the occasion we found out that my linkage to the March and Olsen heritage preceded my studies. It transpired that Olsen was living in a street named after a little village close to Oslo, connecting to this little village. This happens to be the village where I was born within just a month of the publication of the Garbage can model. Olsen then suggested that this birth connection probably explained why I had become a decent scholar in the first place. An ironic joke, of course, with a compliment for me (and one for himself as well).

<sup>ii</sup> Quality of Governance Institute: [www.gu.se/en/quality-government](http://www.gu.se/en/quality-government), visited 27-5-2025.

Blavatnik index of public administration: <https://index.bsg.ox.ac.uk/>, visited 27-5-2025.

Gapminder: [www.gapminder.org/tools](http://www.gapminder.org/tools), visited 27-5-2025.

<sup>iii</sup> In the Netherlands, we have started developing an institute for the quality of governance, focusing exclusively on the Netherlands, aiming to make all relevant and reliable data pertaining to quality of governance available for the general public. I work on this together with Marija Aleksovska, Paul ‘t Hart and Henrico van Roekel. See: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/109527300>