

Article

# Learning from Our Mistakes: Public Management Reform and the Hope of Open Government

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## Abstract

In public administration today, many new reform ideas mingle, offering new diagnoses of governmental problems and courses of action. But scholars have highlighted reasons why we should doubt the optimistic claims of reformists. A new set of policy tools called “open government” arrived nearly a decade ago, and scholars have not yet explained its origins or prospects as specific approach to management reform. In this article, we address this lacuna. We compare open government with three other historic reforms, and analyze how likely its ideas are to bear fruit. In so doing, we introduce a framework for evaluating risks inherent in any new reform approach. We conclude that the challenges faced by open government are both new and old, but—like all reform approaches—they result from management challenges in reconciling competing interests and values that raise tensions and can lead to unexpected consequences. We argue that these will need careful attention if the open government approach is to have any hope of succeeding.

## Introduction

Public management reform is a powerful concept. If we look back on government institutions from any era, we find instances of movements within the political system seeking to redesign, revamp, or revise existing institutions. In these different times, the leaders charged with managing public affairs upheld particular approaches to change as general organizing principles for how the affairs of state should be conducted (Kamensky 1996; Laegreid 2017; Tat-Kei Ho 2002). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, 2) define public management reform as “deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better.” Principles of organization, which drive the structural and process changes, inspired the major reform approaches of Western twentieth-century public administration. Thus, early United States public administration took inspiration from the harmony of inter-dependent parts

in a biological *organism* (Barnard 1938) or the regulating system of a *machine* (Taylor 1947). Many predominantly English-speaking countries in the Northern Hemisphere, as well as Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s, were guided by *market* principles of organization (Hood 1991). The turn of the twenty-first century worldwide saw the arrival of the *network* as an organizing principle (McGuire 2002). “Open government,” which has risen to prominence rapidly in the early twenty-first century, is a public management reform approach focused on the central organizing principle of *openness*.

These various reform ideas have, at various times, offered new inspiration for public managers. Reformers adopt new models for present-day economic and political conditions, but, inevitably, public managers face friction and conflict when organization principles and values are put into practice (Nabatchi 2017). For example, a market model, while powerful in many

respects, introduces countervailing pressures between the need to compete in global markets and the need to respond to citizen demands for accountability and better services (Aucoin 1990; Aucoin and Heintzman 2000; Bouckaert and Peters 2002) or legal constraints (Bourdeaux and Chikoto 2008). Networks are ambiguous about the role of central leadership as they see leadership as key to achieving such reforms while simultaneously seeking to decentralize such authority in new organizational forms (O'Reilly and Reed 2010). Increasing involvement of non-governmental organizations in government also, while helpful in many respects, introduces tensions between the competing influence of different interest groups (Christensen and Lægveid 2007; Vigoda 2002). Such tensions account for the challenges movements suffer in delivering their original ideals; they face criticisms from multiple actors, definitions of success come into contention, or the reforms fail in crucial respects or reach implementation impassable in new contexts and conditions (Dunleavy and Hood 1994; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984).

The existence of reform tensions does not mean that reforms are doomed to failure, but rather it highlights the challenges of turning abstract reform goals into the often messy process of implementation. The same could be applied to the open government movement, where enthusiastic proclamations about its potential have set expectations high. In the United States, Barack Obama's presidency was seen by many as the turning point in the fortunes of open government. The ideas of transparency, accountability, and participation bound together by the potential of new digital technologies emerged as a new reform movement in the most powerful country on earth (Jaeger and Bertot 2010). The openness idea also influenced many areas of society from organization and business strategy (e.g., Tapscott and Ticoll 2003), media and communications (e.g., Brabham 2010), psychology (e.g., Norman, Avolio, and Luthans 2010), philosophy of science (e.g., Ince, Hatton, and Graham-Cumming 2012), and art (e.g., Fisher-Gewirtzman and Wagner 2003). Openness is an inherently attractive concept for reform-minded policymakers and citizens, and advocates of openness as a tool for innovation, entrepreneurialism, better social relationships, and democratic forms of decision making are now omnipresent.

But what is yet to be determined by public administration scholars is whether this fledgling movement represents any serious possibility of avoiding or circumventing any of the implementation tensions that we know from prior reforms to be serious impediments to success. Now is an apt time to begin asking some important questions: Can open government change the public sector for the better where so many other attempts have already tried with limited success? How

could open government cope with reform tensions? This article poses these questions in order to explore the ambiguities and risks inherent in public management reforms. Existing scholarly discourse on public management tends to focus on opportunities, but attention to risks can provide public administrators with vital tools to address problems before they become serious (Bullock, Greer, and O'Toole Jr 2018). Drawing on an analytical framework of reform *means* and reform *ends*, which we develop by examining the experiences of earlier governmental reformers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we investigate how we can learn from earlier reform movements to understand the prospects for new reforms and open government as one, particularly important case. We discuss how reform risks affect the open government movement in the realization of both its means and ends. The article thus both advances our theoretical understanding of public management reform tensions and develops our empirical understanding of open government specifically.

## AN OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REFORM

Here we trace a brief history and analysis of prior public management reform movements. Understanding the history of public management reform movements, their growth and decline is key to understanding what is distinctive about how public organizations approach reform today and also understanding what challenges face the open government movement, as they have other movements in the past. We also propose a conceptual framework for evaluating the means and ends of open government reform and describe how it applies to earlier cases of reform. We focus on the three major reform movements of this period that have received the most attention from public administration scholarship: Orthodox Public Administration (OPA), New Public Management (NPM), and New Public Governance (NPG).

In the Introduction above, we referred to the essential concepts—the *organizing principles*—that transformed public organization structures and processes such as NPM (markets) and NPG (networks). These essential concepts can be analytically expanded in terms of the teleological (the goal- or purpose-related aspects) dimensions of means and ends. “Means” are the tools, instruments, and inputs that help the reform movements to accomplish their objectives. For example, governments can pass laws mandating or regulating the reforms. They can also invest in new types of personnel or technologies. “Ends” are the things that the reforms aim to achieve in terms of governance changes, outcomes, and societal impacts. Often, in public management reforms, the means constitute a “toolbox” of

approaches adopted by decision makers, but the ends identify the reforms as something with a cohesive set of purposes. Table 1 summarizes three major phases of public management reform in terms of their means and ends that we elaborate below. These characteristics do not comprehensively describe the movements, but rather convey their most important ideas.

**Orthodox Public Administration**

Scholars of public management characterize the first phase of modern public administration as “orthodox” or “traditional” public administration (OPA); a phase at the dawn of the twentieth century where scholars tried to apply scientific theories to public administration in order to drive the effectiveness and order of government (Roberts 2017). Simultaneously, in Europe and the United States, a progressive movement sought to extend legal rights such as voting and holding public office to more members of society (Rosenbloom 1993; Stivers 1995). Progressives also endeavored to develop massive public infrastructure projects such as the New York Port Authority on principles of scientific public administration. They were meritocratic, focused on serving the interests of the public, and presumed insulated from political interferences (Doig 2001; Rosenbloom 2000). Policy-wise, OPA was manifested in large-scale reengineering projects such as the 1939 Reorganization Act in the United States to strengthen and streamline the executive control of government in a more rational way (Fesler 1987).

Throughout these initiatives, OPA favored a machine-like organization of work units designed to process administrative tasks according to legal precepts and rational division of tasks. However, later scholars such as Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo questioned whether rule-based formulas could really deliver more effective government. Thus, in addition to the effectiveness/legality tension, there was a growing awareness of the tension between effectiveness and rationality. Reform in the approach of OPA was a very concrete type of change with only a limited number of organizational arrangements that could be used to achieve success according to a given set of tasks, resources,

and challenges. As a result, critics labeled it elitist, inflexible, and prone to preaching empty platitudes or “proverbs” about wise courses of action (Simon 1946; Waldo 1948).

**New Public Management**

In the 1980s and early 1990s, a new political movement of conservatives in Europe and new democrats in the United States aimed their critique at sluggish, oversized, bureaucratic government. The quest for better government outcomes took on a distinctive new flavor with the rise of NPM. The means of reform in NPM were based on free-market economics and public choice theory. The United Kingdom, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and the United States, under President Ronald Reagan, were the forerunners of NPM reforms. In Europe, Thatcher was a leading policy entrepreneur in a push to privatize state-run monopolies in energy, utilities, housing, and transport. In the 1990s, U.S. vice president Al Gore led the “Reinventing Government” program. NPM devoted a lot of attention to the role that businesses or nonprofit service providers play in governance. These theories suggested that self-interested actors in a free market with limited interference, entrepreneurial managers, and a customer orientation, could liberate the processes of managing public organizations and result in higher quality and efficiency of service delivery. In fact, higher efficiency was often achieved at the expense of quality of service. Further, highlighting another area of tension, scholars such as Rhodes (1994) have argued that public choice principles have taken decision making and service delivery out of the hands of elected officials and thus diminished public accountability in the long term.

NPM reforms were mostly restricted to the United Kingdom, North America, Scandinavia, and Australasia (Osborne 2007). However, NPM ideas can also be seen in international institutions. For example, in 1989, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) established a Public Management Committee (PUMA) and Secretariat tasked with providing expertise to states

**Table 1.** The Means and Ends of Major Public Management Reform Movements

	Means	Ends
OPA	Laws, public service training, charismatic authority, rational division of tasks	Effectiveness, order, economic power
NPM	Deregulation, decentralization, market competition, outsourcing, performance measurement	Effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, customer focus, entrepreneurialism
Post-NPM	Decentralization, information and knowledge sharing, collaboration, civil society strengthening	Effectiveness, cost-saving, intergovernmental problem solving, governmental relationship building

and local governments for reforming and streamlining government agencies with the help of public–private partnerships, which highlighted the prominence of management reform policy across the entire European continent. Given this gradual geographic spread and connection to global market forces, NPM tended to become reconfigured to fit different regions and scholars have argued that NPM has actually since splintered into a range of Post-NPM reforms (Lynn 2006; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). This is a characteristic that is increasingly important in the later Post-NPM reforms and open government.

Post-NPM

The diversification of NPM defines the most recent phase of public management reform. In this phase, starting from about the year 2000, policymakers increasingly tried to address the efficiency and effectiveness tension by integrating the NPM approach to change with politically and socially oriented reform. Thus, in the early 2000s, NPM became rivaled by another reform perspective focused on the concept of *governance* called the NPG. NPG takes a broader, more fundamental notion of public actors who are involved in reforming government, creating its ultimate values, and sustaining its ability to change through the means of knowledge sharing and collaboration in intergovernmental and multi-sector partnerships (Cheung 2005). The Post-NPM reforms are diverse and the set of actual cases represented by the term is a less cohesive set of programs compared to NPM. But there are some notable examples. In the United States, the Clinton administration, a strong supporter of NPM reforms began to experiment with greater inter-agency collaboration, while premiers Blair in the United Kingdom and Howard in Australia both produced major reports heralding the potential of joined-up-government and whole-of-government approaches, respectively (Alford and Hughes 2008). In the United Kingdom, the white paper on Modernising Government (Prime Minister and Minister for the Cabinet Office 1999) set out how public services would become more coordinated across public agencies, private sector contracts, and citizens. A notable emphasis in Australia and New Zealand was social policies aimed at community sharing of services that would improve access for disadvantaged groups, particularly indigenous peoples (Humpage 2005).

Post-NPM reform movements aim to address the perceived shortcomings of NPM such as its narrow focus on market principles and managerial control that have arguably led to a thinning of administrative institutions and the hollowing of the state (Terry 2005), as well as to an overly narrow focus on governmental efficiency (Lynn 2006; Welch and Wong 2001). In our analysis below, many of these challenges

emerge again in the case of open government. Post-NPM programs became more participative and collaborative. Dunleavy et al. (2006) saw the approach of NPM being directly reversed towards re-integration of previous diversification of service domains and more sensitivity to citizen needs rather than efficient service delivery through a new Digital-Era Governance (DEG). Post-NPM indeed moved beyond NPM’s narrow focus on efficiency. However, this focus also changed the type of challenges that networks face in delivering better services or policy problem solving as higher participation and legitimacy can erode public management effectiveness (Provan and Milward 2001; Provan and Lemaire 2012).

**AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING REFORM CHALLENGES**

We now turn towards investigating how and why reforms experience inherent tensions and obstacles that lead them into implementation difficulties and even to failure. We have seen how the legalistic approach of OPA had a strong means in terms of how public servants engineer government, but suffered from lack of transparency and flexibility. We have also seen how NPM used means of greater private sector partnerships but that it has struggled with realizing its stipulated goals such as efficiency and higher quality services. Post-NPM embraces collaboration as a means of governmental change, but, by the same token, is beset by implementation challenges and political conflicts of values among different organizations.

We conjecture that these challenges are distinct to each movement, but that they can also be generally explained using a framework of the specific means-ends characteristics and the organizational settings and structures used for realizing reform. We represent this framework using two key dimensions in figure 1.

Along the horizontal axis are the means and ends dimensions of reform. Along the vertical axis are two fundamental organizational dimensions involved in managing reforms: (1) *internal* relationships in terms of managing staff, training, division of tasks,

		Reform dimension	
		MEANS	ENDS
Organizational focus	INTERNAL	<i>Implementation problems</i>	<i>Goal ambiguity</i>
	EXTERNAL	<i>Structural barriers</i>	<i>Political conflicts</i>

**Figure 1.** Dimensions of Public Management Reform Challenges and Associated Risks.

relationships with other departments or teams; (2) *external* relationships in terms of managing relationships with other organizations (businesses or civil society groups), citizens, or other states. The means of achieving reform can hypothetically go wrong through internal implementation problems or structural barriers in the external political and institutional environment. The ends can suffer from lack of achievement due to low compliance, low performance or internal contradictions that are externally shown in political conflicts where one political group upholds one type of end value and another group upholds another. Thus, within the analytical lens of [figure 1](#), reform movements can encounter challenges in any one of four main ways, which we expand upon here. While prior scholarship does not often take a systematic approach to understanding the origins of these diverse reform challenges a priori, we find that many of the concepts emerging from the framework have been noticed before. We, therefore, make many connections with these literatures where possible.

#### Implementation Problems

We see four different types of potential implementation problems: (1) design-reality gaps, (2) insufficient resources, (3) cross-country relevance, and (4) political influence. The following section explains each of these in more detail.

##### Design-Reality Gaps

The success of public management reforms is related to the ability of reformers to design and implement changes that reflect the initial visions of the reform. But problems can occur in reforms when clear discrepancies begin to emerge between policy design and the reality of its implementation. According to [Baier, March, and Saetren \(1986\)](#), as this gap widens so too does the probability increase that reform will fail. Given the difficulty of comprehensively measuring the wide impacts of reforms and the disagreements on the meaning of “success” in the eyes of different stakeholders, design-reality gaps are difficult to avoid, and scholars continue to debate whether prior reforms achieved their original objectives (e.g., [Hammerschmid et al. 2019](#)).

##### Insufficient Resources

In many countries where reforms are introduced, governments encounter the reality of resource shortages and adequate public infrastructure even to effectively deliver the necessary public goods such as education, public transportation, and defence. OPA during a time of expanding public services relied heavily on financial resources to implement new programs with new staff and technologies. NPM reforms also involved huge

investments in structural readjustment programs that encourage increasing reliance on global economic markets and privatization. According to some authors such as [Pollitt and Dan \(2011\)](#), NPM also led to the “hollowing” of state institutions through private sector partnerships, has made cost control difficult, and resulted in highly complex governance structures. Post-NPM reformers in many countries inherit these hollowed-out governance institutions and must seek to implement new policies where there are internal challenges, such as reform shortages that continue to be experienced in the wake of the global credit crunch in 2008.

##### Cross-Country Relevance

In order to take root across different governmental systems, new reforms must get copied and diffused in what institutionalist scholars have called memetic isomorphism (e.g., [Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004](#)). Adoption of reforms may also diffuse due to normative or coercive pressures. Regardless of the form of institutional diffusion of reform, the process of diffusion is likely to encounter external challenges. Managers may not have the right skills to translate reform ideas from an original context into a new context ([Kettl 2000](#)). The ability of local or country governments to adopt a public management reform depends on many environmental factors shaping policy transfer, such as the government’s connection to local networks, leadership attitude, institutional receptivity to change, and the type of service area concerned ([Cole and Jones 2005](#)). For this reason, even globally successful reforms such as NPM were implemented in a more fragmented or contextually nuanced way than we might expect despite its nominal adoption by many governments ([Osborne 2007](#)).

##### Political Influence

Problems of implementation may also open the door to a different challenge for reforms: politics. Every country has a unique type of balance among politicians, bureaucrats, and civil society that creates politicization ([Moon and Ingraham 1998](#)). Because different political groups may favor one specific side of a values tension over another (for example, say favoring of efficiency over transparency in NPM reforms), it makes it highly likely that political influences favoring a particular set of public values will drive the reform agenda ([Durant 2008](#)). Furthermore, if the balance of political groups is strong, reforms may endure a compromise of values that leads to implementation ultimately being unworkable. Historically, reform movements have always been linked with political favoritism. NPM was initially promoted by conservative governments, whereas Post-NPM was put into practice by left-leaning governments such as Tony Blair’s New Labour.

### Goal Ambiguity

We see three different types of challenges associated with goal ambiguity: (1) inherent value ambiguities, (2) inter-organizational complexity, and (3) inter-departmental discrepancies.

#### Inherent Value Conflicts and Ambiguities

Reforms can also have internal disagreements or conflicts among its repertoire of reform principles. This kind of tension is inevitable because reforms seek to accomplish multiple things at the same time that may not be able to co-exist comfortably or even at all. Indeed, government is an inherently difficult process that involves trying to balance features such as authority and autonomy that are intrinsically in tension and can undermine managerial effectiveness (Rainey and Jung 2014). Research on public value conflicts has found that specific values repeatedly come into conflict with one another because of their inherent characteristics. De Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders (2016) say that these conflicts occur across three main categories: proper governance (integrity, equality, and lawfulness), performing governance (effectiveness and efficiency), and responsive governance (participation, transparency, legitimacy, and accountability). As Mark Moore (1995) has convincingly explained, public management strategy is largely a matter of finding balances among these values as they cannot all be extended simultaneously.

#### Inter-Organizational Complexity

Tensions are not only inherent in the kinds of values chosen by reformers but are also a product of organizational tension that occurs in modern styles of governance that rely on inter-organizational collaboration. March and Olsen (1976) characterized public organizations as complex amalgamations of technologies, goals, and values, that can be led in unexpected directions by the organizational environment. Such complexity has certainly affected NPM, which tried to manage complex relationships in private-public partnerships. Post-NPM reformers are torn between implementing organizational changes that reflect administrative modernization through better technological efficiency and greater participation from citizens (Nalbandian 2005). Evidence suggests that public management reform movements that give more priority to informal institutional arrangements, such as the way informal networks are treated in Post-NPM, can struggle to implement reforms and administrative tools such as regulations, fines, and incentives (Bruijn and Dicke 2006).

#### Inter-Departmental Discrepancies

Aside from the external organizational environment, tensions can also exist internally between different

governmental departments or agencies representing different policy focuses. Effective implementation of reforms requires decision makers to make choices about how to balance and synthesize these departmental interests (Moulton 2009; Nalbandian 2005; Pandey et al. 2016). In fact, Post-NPM focused deliberately on addressing departmental silos in government. This may affect not just policy areas but different parts of the policy implementation process in the same policy area. For example, information-intense phases of a project shape the value of accountability, whereas phases involving collaboration with external advisors or legal and financial complexity affect the value of understanding (Reynaers 2014).

#### Structural Barriers

We see three different types of structural barriers: (1) institutional large forces, (2) the influence of global powers, and (3) economic and technological barriers.

#### Institutional Large Forces

Strong structural change is hard to achieve even if new leaders of new reforms claim that fundamental changes are underway. That is, despite changes in government rhetoric and attention-grabbing policy initiatives, the old powers and habits of institutions and groups stay in charge as the most significant external drivers of the reforms. Reform possibilities undergo a process of screening by administrative traditions consisting of institutional structures as well as cultural ideas about how government and administration should look (Bach et al. 2017; Christensen and Lægreid 2001). According to Borrás and Radaelli (2011), reforms are driven by “strategic and long-term institutional arrangements” (p. 463).

#### The Influence of Global Powers

Country and local level processes are intertwined with the large-scale processes of change (Bevir, Rhodes, and Weller 2003; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Domestic reform trends are in constant tension with international processes, even when the global picture suggests a dominant process of adoption and integration. While there are country and local level factors that shape the particular form that reforms will take, large-scale changes in the economic and political environment exert pressure on governments to reform, as well as shaping the timing and the depth of the changes. Intergovernmental organizations such as the OECD and international multilateral organizations such as the World Bank have adopted their own views of reforms. They use sticks and carrots to direct countries in a certain reform direction, just as they did for global structural readjustment reforms that were part of the NPM approach. While such influences ostensibly have the

objective of creating better governance systems, they are sometimes criticized for being heavy-handed and creating country path dependency, which might frustrate the emergence of locally grown reforms (Häikiö 2010; Manoharan and Ingrams 2018).

#### Economic and Technological Barriers

Additionally, large-scale global processes involving technological developments and economic shifts can influence the shape of reform (Charles, de Jong, and Ryan 2011). Through mimetic processes of learning and technology sharing between countries, reform movements can diffuse across whole regions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). NPM reforms were supported by computer technologies that made storage and sorting of performance information increasingly feasible (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Ingrams 2017), whereas networks of NPG were enabled by the development of the Internet (Castells 2001). Economic changes also affect how open countries are with each other in terms of trading goods and information. So inter-governmental processes between countries, even across entire global regions, can be significantly influenced by economic fortune and technology change.

#### Political Conflicts

We see three different types of political conflicts: (1) institutional crises, (2) faddism and short-termism, and (3) competing policy actors.

#### Institutional Crises

According to Boin and t'Hart (2003), the low potential for real change in public management reforms derives from the fact that reforms are not fundamentally driven by a rational-instrumental vision of change, but rather are pushed from behind by political or economic crises. That is, decision makers drive reforms not for the novelty or potential impact of a reform per se, but rather for the need to manage systems that no longer function. While new reforms may solve a particular crisis, they only patch-up a crisis in the short term and are not designed to address future problems in a sustainable way. Thus, when NPM emerged as a novel reform approach, it was primarily seen as a solution for the poorly functioning and bureaucratic approach of OPA (Hood 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Randma-Liiv 2008).

#### Faddism and Short-Termism

Critics of reforms have argued that despite the claims of reform champions, upon closer inspection, the originality of new reform ideas is often unclear (Lynn 2001). Politicians are driven by the electoral cycle and the rewards that come from giving lip service to popular ideas that might deliver impressive results in

the short-term. Inevitably, new reforms will require difficult—sometimes politically costly—decisions to be made. If supporters cannot strike bargains to bridge this transition between short- and long-term benefits, the reforms are likely to lose steam and falter (Hood 2002).

#### Competing Policy Actors

In policy-making theory, the competition of policy actors and the shifting normative context of reforms was explained by the multiple streams theory of Kingdon (1984). The multiple streams approach to policy change involves multiple and shifting actors and technology management challenges that converge to shape new policy goals and preferences. Occasional shifts to new models of reform are called policy windows because, at these sporadic moments, the multiple streams have come together in the right combination of unsolved external problems, pressure for change, and the means to achieve change. The shifting character of policy windows underlines the seeming fate of many public management reforms as short-lived trends rather than rationally conceived plans with long-term potential (Zahariadis 2008).

#### An Ex-Ante Evaluation of Open Government Reform

As discussed above, our analytical framework of reform challenges contains a total of 13 possible kinds of obstacle in public management reform. To examine how useful this framework is as a general analytical tool to assess the potential of a new reform, we next introduce the central theories and works of scholarship behind the open government idea and apply the framework to the open government reform movement.

#### What is Open Government?

Openness in government is not an entirely new idea, but what makes it new in the open government approach to reform is its status as the sole focus of reform. Earlier reforms were interested in government transparency and collaboration. In fact, openness in government has deep roots in Western concepts of government. In the eighteenth century, the political philosophies of prominent liberals Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill gave access to public information and deliberation central roles in democratic society (Hood 2007). After the respective 1765 and 1789 United States and French revolutions, these governments recognized the legitimate stake that broad members of society had to participate and influence the conduct of public affairs. This was especially prominent in the self-government ideals of American revolutionaries. Governments in both North America and Europe around this time started to recognize this in new policies such as the printing of internal government information in newspapers and

systematically organizing information stored by public agencies (Jaeger and Bertot 2010). At the turn of the twentieth century, the scholar, and soon-to-be US president, Woodrow Wilson writing in his book “The Study of Administration” argued that government needed to be open to public examination to prevent corruption and the abuse of power.

Principles of openness went on to become core components of modern government. In the mid-twentieth century, access to information became enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and supported in the freedom of information laws adopted by most countries. Intergovernmental institutions such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the Open Government Partnership (OGP) have taken these principles still further in promoting open government initiatives. As these global policy endeavors for greater openness have grown, so too has the attention from public administration scholars.

In the twenty-first century, scholars have given open government the status of a unique public management reform approach. Table 2 summarizes ten of the most highly cited of these works of open government. To develop our framework, we have identified the main concepts of reform means and ends for each work. To elaborate even further, we also detail the types of implementation focus in each article with policy output examples. Our discussion below the table expands on its content. In discussing the literatures in the table, we have decided to bring in other less-well-known scholarly works on open government and to center the discussion on five key means-outputs-ends themes. These themes provide an elegant way to discuss the table but are not meant to be a comprehensive analysis of all open government literature. Thus, while we draw mainly on the works from table 2, we also extend the analysis to discussion of other authors who have entered the debate on open government.

#### Theme 1: Informational and Communicative Policies for Better Governance

Timely and quality information sharing as a means to transparency in public organizations has intuitive appeal and scholars have long identified it as one of the ways to achieve ends of better democracy, economic growth, and good governance (Harrison and Sayogo 2014; Ingrams 2017; Lathrop and Ruma 2010; McDermott 2010). Pooling the types of information accessed by actors from different sectors or organizations can make decision making in government more efficient and effective. This is a *communicative* aspect of transparency (sometimes called “information symmetry”) that has end benefits for encouraging healthier economic markets where competition can flourish (Wirtz and Birkmeyer 2015). Politically speaking, this

also means that transparency makes it difficult for public officials to hide, which has benefits for tackling corruption.

#### Theme 2: Transparency and Privacy to Improve Trust

The importance of transparency in open government is highlighted by the focus on policy outputs of information regulation. Government information access has historically been associated with a raft of specific legal reforms that make government perform more honestly and effectively (Coglianese 2009). According to McDermott (2010), the most important area of transparency laws is freedom of information acts (FOIAs). Governments adopt FOI laws with the rationale that strict standards and better enforcement of the public access to information is more likely to expose and reduce corruption and raise public trust in government (Coglianese 2009; Cordis and Warren 2014). Anti-corruption initiatives focus on specific areas of public organizations where corruption is likely to be deterred by data monitoring, such as for job descriptions and salaries of public officials (Bowman and Stevens 2013).

On the other side of the transparency-trust coin are policies that are designed to actually protect people’s identities and privacy from too much transparency. These laws aim to protect the right to personal privacy while simultaneously supporting openness (Hardy and Maurushat 2017; Ingrams 2017). If there is a reasonable degree of privacy given to internal decision making, it is argued, a more trustworthy climate will prevail and leaders will be better prepared to seek and manage information needed to make important decisions (Coglianese 2009).

#### Theme 3: Participation, Collaborative Governance, and Policy-Making Processes

Open government reforms use the method of better access to information, but there is also a focus on the means available to engage with citizens through participation (Evans and Campos 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen and Feeney 2017; Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt 2012). In Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt’s (2012) terminology, open government has a *voice* as well as a *vision* component. Thus, open government policymakers practice openness not only in terms of information openness, but also as dynamic, relational openness in the way that public organizations interact with citizens. Participation is particularly focused on individual citizens. But participation can also occur at a more organizational level through engagement with nonprofit or private sector organizations or between agencies (Evans and Campos 2013; Piotrowski 2017). Nonprofits and high-tech businesses that specialize in data management and Web 2.0 technologies are needed in open government reform to support the information



**Table 2.** The Means, Ends, and Some Examples of Policy Outputs in Open Government Management Reform

	Means	Ends	Policy output examples
Coglianesse (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reasoned transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political openness</li> <li>• Justice and fairness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive policy-making</li> </ul>
McDermott (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Public participation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efficiency, effectiveness, and democracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open data</li> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• Crowdsourcing</li> <li>• Technology initiatives</li> </ul>
Lathrop and Ruma (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Public participation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Open source technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation and mass participation</li> <li>• Networked government</li> </ul>	
Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Public participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active citizenship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to information</li> <li>• Citizen participation venues</li> <li>• Open data</li> </ul>
Janssen, Charalabidis, and Zuiderwijk (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richer data</li> <li>• Openness between government and its environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger political institutions</li> <li>• Economic improvement</li> <li>• Effective organizations</li> <li>• Technology interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• E-government services</li> </ul>
Evans and Campos (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leveraging of information technologies</li> <li>• Public participation</li> </ul>		
Harrison and Sayogo (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Participation</li> <li>• Accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen participation</li> <li>• Elections</li> <li>• Electronic information</li> </ul>
Wirtz and Birkmeyer (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Public participation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Technology, regulation and law</li> <li>• Accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen acceptance and trust</li> <li>• Better government business and citizen relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen acceptance and trust</li> <li>• Government business and citizen relationships</li> </ul>
Hansson, Belkacem, and Ekenberg (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Public participation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democratic deliberation</li> <li>• Democratic understanding</li> <li>• Democratic representation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E-participation platforms (e-forums, e-consulting)</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>
Grimmelikhuijsen and Feeney (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information access</li> <li>• Transparency</li> <li>• Public participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active citizenship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Website information and data</li> <li>• Website tools for service reporting</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>
Piotrowski (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic and instrumental types of transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transparent relationships between governmental actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal transparency</li> <li>• Access to information</li> <li>• Asset disclosure</li> <li>• Citizen engagement</li> </ul>

chain that turns masses of information into applicable knowledge for better policies (Gonzalez-Zapata and Heeks 2015).

**Theme 4: Public Accountability, Justice, and Fairness**

Public accountability “involves the means by which public agencies and their workers manage the diverse expectations generated within and outside the organization” (Romzek and Dubnick 1987, p.228). While today public accountability is applied to all areas of government action, it retains that original sense of *answerability* (Schedler 1999), both as a statutory system that supports the process of regularly rendering account, but also as in the sense of accessibility.

Answerability can be vertically achieved through political elections or horizontally through “state agencies that are legally empowered—and factually willing and able—to take actions ranging from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to possibly unlawful actions or omissions by other agents or agencies of the state” (O’Donnell 1998, 117). By holding leaders accountable, it is argued by open government supporters that a key end of democratic government will be served by open government: namely, justice (Coglianese 2009). For open government, digitalization of information is a critical means for such justice. The aim of new digital forms of accountability to increase interaction between internal and external

stakeholders rather than increasing bureaucratic reporting as traditional models of accountability aimed to do (Schillemans, Van Twist, and Van Hommerig 2013). For example, online notice and comment policies and spending transparency help accountability (Shkabatur 2012).

#### Theme 5: Transparency and E-government Efficiency

Some scholars argue that open government is a type of electronic transparency initiative that has grown out of the global e-government reforms of the 1990s (e.g., Abu-Shanab 2015; Hansson, Belkacem, and Ekenberg 2015). In the modern era, a type of technology-aided transparency called “computer-mediated transparency” emerged (Evans and Campos 2013; Meijer 2009; Welch and Wong 2001). Indeed, the focus on transparency during the Obama administration was even further driven by applications of new digital technologies such as social media, wikis, application programming interfaces (APIs), and open data (Jaeger and Bertot 2010; McDermott 2010). Today, the aforementioned open government methods of transparency, public participation, and accountability all rely on innovative use of technology in one way or another. Another important policy area for efficiency is open data. Open data initiatives, by pooling data from diverse sources and giving access to a range of organizations to re-use the data has become one important way of facilitating collaboration and even achieving economic ends such as innovation. These organizations are the suppliers of the technologies and, therefore, also can be supported through partnerships or capacity building to facilitate these technology innovation process. Rather than innovation being internally generated, public data makes it possible for the market to produce innovation collaboratively with government (Janssen and Estevez 2013).

#### Applying the Framework

From the discussion above, we can see the main means/ends relationships of open government and the policy ideas that form a loose repertoire of new programs and norms that we refer to collectively as the open government reform movement. Through the five themes, we show that the open government approach has various interrelated strands. However, open government scholars are clear that open government reform has an identifiable set of organizational principles and policies on how public management should operate. Below, we explore how theoretically consistent and plausible these principles and policies are. In order to provide concrete cases to demonstrate our points, in some places we have also used empirical material on open government programs found in the OGP’s database (the OGP Explorer) of thousands of programs

undertaken since 2011. As far as we know, this is the most comprehensive database of open government programs and an ideal place to find real-world illustrations for our conceptual arguments.

#### Implementation Problems

##### Design-Reality Gaps

Evidence suggests that across a wide range of problems, a large number of open government programs in the OGP fail to be completed as they were originally promised by optimistic politicians (Piotrowski 2017). Given the oft-cited characterization of open government goals such as participation and transparency being subjective and ambiguous (e.g., Yu and Robinson 2011), the risk of design-reality gaps appears particularly acute for open government reform. But the challenge of design-reality gaps in open government may stretch further. Even if open government policies are not clear instances of implementation failure, the outputs and ends of such reforms may simply be hard to evaluate because an abstract idea like “openness” is hard to detect and measure (Ingrams 2017).

##### Insufficient Resources

All reforms require new programs and skills for personnel. Open government may not succumb to the risk of adequate government investment as, like many Post-NPM movements, it has emerged in a context of crisis in public finances in many countries. Indeed, open government is designed to reduce government spending by outsourcing tasks to citizens and civil society organizations (Catlaw and Sandberg 2014), so, to a certain extent, it may escape some of the dependency on resources for its success. The enthusiastic implementation of open government programs by low-income OGP countries such as Bangladesh or Mongolia is also testament to the fact that low resources are not a major barrier to implementation.

##### Cross-Country Relevance

There are currently 78 member countries in the OGP. This spread suggests the OGP has been relatively successful in terms of its cross-country relevance. Due perhaps to political culture and historical traditions and institutions, many countries have chosen deliberately not to join the OGP and others such as Tanzania slipped significantly in their obligations and ultimately withdrew. But, overall, the diversity of the countries in the OGP is high. There is evidence that NPM and Post-NPM reforms have had a global reach too in places such as China that are politically and culturally very distinct from the Western countries where the reforms originated, but the OGP has lent the force of a multinational organization of diverse countries to cross-country relevance in a new way.

### Political Influence

Research is lacking on the politics of open government (Ruijter et al. 2019). However, open government appears to offer reform ideas that can appeal to a broader political spectrum as scholars have noted support from both groups on the right (e.g., Catlaw and Sandberg 2014) and left (e.g., Berliner, Ingrams, and Piotrowski 2018). On the other hand, open government can lead to political volatility (Worthy 2015). Under the right conditions, politicians compete to implement openness reforms (Berliner 2014), but they also can use reforms as a smokescreen (Ingrams 2019). Political influence may, therefore, prove to be a particularly complicated and intractable challenge for open government.

### Goal Ambiguity

#### Inherent Value Conflicts and Ambiguities

In a critique called “The New Ambiguity of Open Government,” Yu and Robinson (2011) argued that the open government movement had “blurred the distinction between the technologies of open data and the politics of open government” to the point that “the term ‘open government’ has become too vague to be a useful label.” Others echoed this point. According to Francoli and Clarke (2014, 248), “when discussing open government, scholars and practitioners alike lack definitional clarity.” Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2016, 171) noted “the lack of clarity about the concept of open government,” and the fact that “there is no consensus about open government’s functions and goals.” Chatwin and Arku (2017, 53) wrote that “whether the ambiguity was intentional or not, scholars and practitioners align in their concern that the current lack of definitional clarity for open government presents challenges to developing robust action plans and evaluations of their impact.”

#### Inter-Organizational Complexity

Open government, by aiming to collaborate more with non-governmental organizations, multiplies the likelihood of tensions resulting from organizational hybrids, like Post-NPM. Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014, 2), writing about the incorporation of accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion as a “new development consensus,” note that this consensus bridges “three distinct practitioner communities that emerged from this new direction—those focusing on governance, on democracy, and on human rights.” However, “consensus remains elusive... Democracy and human rights practitioners generally embrace an explicitly political understanding of the four concepts and fear technocratic or purely instrumentalist approaches. Governance specialists often follow a narrower approach, applying the core principles primarily to the quest for greater public sector effectiveness.”

### Inter-Departmental Discrepancies

Open government has a whole range of different policy areas and is likely to suffer tensions between the different agencies responsible for each area. This may affect not just policy areas but different parts of the policy implementation process in the same policy area. For example, it has been argued that information-intensive phases of a project shape the value of *accountability*, whereas phases involving collaboration with external advisors or legal and financial complexity affect the value of *understanding* (Reynaers 2014). On the other hand, open government also potentially offers a way to escape inter-departmental discrepancies by developing some of its hallmark technology solutions such as shared software platforms and open data ecosystems (McDermott 2010).

### Structural Barriers

#### Institutional Large Forces

It has been argued that NPM, Post-NPM, and open government are not different movements but actually part of a single political movement driven by neoliberal ideology (Bates 2014). This is an interesting claim, and it hints at the broader challenge to open government of large forces. While open government poses several new reform ideas on paper, logics of administrative change may still be in place that hide all the old faults of the earlier reform approaches rather than representing fresh change. However, in other ways, open government appears to offer new means to escape this problem. Open government’s model of collaboration with citizens and civil society necessarily introduces opportunities for new actors to influence the political agenda and seems to open up genuine possibilities for new directions. In fact, unlike earlier reform movements, open government is explicitly designed to be influenced by a broad array of new actors many of who would be considered traditionally marginal actors (Berliner, Ingrams, and Piotrowski 2018; van Zyl 2014).

#### The Influence of Global Powers

Open government reforms also are driven by global political powers. Intergovernmental organizations such as the OECD and international multilateral organizations such as the World Bank have adopted their own views of open government reforms (Ubaldi 2013). They use sticks and carrots to direct countries in a certain reform direction just as they did for global structural readjustment reforms that were part of the NPM approach. While such influences ostensibly have the objective of creating better governance systems, they might be too prescriptive and heavy handed. This could create path dependency and prevent the emergence of locally grown open government reforms.

### Economic and Technological Barriers

More so than earlier reforms, open government reforms are heavily dependent on technological innovations. Esmark (2016) has argued that technology is a key driver of contemporary reforms and is an important part of their success. Technology dependency would appear to be a strike against the sustainability of open government in the context of economically undeveloped countries. It may also be that technology creates new structural challenges for developed countries too (Lodge and Wegrich 2015; Worthy 2015). The success of the OGP in developing countries suggests that open government can make inroads into developing countries. However, like earlier reforms, technology dependency may make it difficult for open government to become a success in all countries.

### Political Conflicts

#### Institutional Crises

As we mentioned above, it has been claimed by some that open government is a technology inspired re-interpretation of NPM ideas of market liberalism (Bates 2014; Catlaw and Sandberg 2014). In response to institutional crises of government resulting from economic and political shifts, governments may not be able to carefully consider the best reform approaches but rather engage in quick fixes. Despite the democratic idealism of open government and its stated aims to design a future of rational government-citizen relationships, it may be a knee-jerk reaction to the decline of public trust in government and the broadening of public interrogation and criticism of government performance (Green 2010).

#### Faddism and Short-Termism

Open government reformers claim that their model of change has the ability to bring about fundamental changes to performance of the public sector. Open government as a well-articulated reform movement was first launched by Barack Obama who is no longer in office. And yet, the continued growth of the OGP since that time suggests that the movement has potential for greater longevity. Further, we have already seen how the essential ideas of public information access and citizen involvement in government have a much older pedigree in public administration, which may suggest that open government reform has a more fundamental foundation in public management systems.

#### Competing Policy Actors

While open government reforms are gaining huge attention from policymakers around the world, they are not the only voice competing for influence in the marketplace of public policy. Open government may be exerting strong sway on the public policy market

place precisely because actors from open data, anti-corruption, tech innovation, and democratic participation have all taken an interest simultaneously. This characteristic may herald longevity for open government so long as it can maintain this diverse coalition of advocates. However, in earlier work (Berliner, Ingrams, and Piotrowski 2018), we noted that a strong value divide can be seen clearly across the advocacy camps behind the open government movements; on the one hand, a camp focusing on open data, private innovation, and efficiency, and, on the other hand, a camp focusing on the democratic need for information and participation to support public debate and freedom of expression.

Table 3 summarizes the main findings of discussion above in terms of how public management reform tensions affect open government in comparison to earlier reforms. The four main analytical categories of reform challenges are applied from figure 1. The consequences of these challenges are listed for open government in terms of new ways that the open government approach may solve or succumb to risks.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have developed a comprehensive analytical lens for assessing the risk areas of public management reform, compared public management reform approaches, and used the framework to explore ex-ante a number of challenges that the open government model of reform may face due to inherent instrumental and normative challenges at an internal and external level. Part of the value of this analysis is that this framework has been used to explore previously unexplored territory in the case of open government reform, but the framework could equally be applied to other Post-NPM reform approaches.

Our approach has taken a deliberately risk-focused approach to public management reform. Governments can sometimes be too eager to embrace the latest reform trends. Evidence also suggests that frequent reforms can exhaust and harm governments (Wynen, Verhoest, and Kleizen 2019). However, we do not wish to suggest that it is all bad news with open government. It is apparent that there are both new opportunities to escape the challenges of reform as well as new types of risks that open government reformers face. This remains true of other reform movements. NPM was situated largely in predominantly English-speaking, economically advanced countries, though there are signs that it has been able to adapt to different regions (Christensen and Fan 2018; Kaboolian 1998; McLaughlin et al. 2002). Open government goes further than NPM in this respect as it claims to have a universal appeal of people-oriented government, integrity, and transparency supported by the global

**Table 3.** Risks Facing the Open Government Approach to Public Management Reform

	Risks
Implementation problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide design-reality gaps</li> <li>• Ambiguous results</li> <li>• Political manipulation</li> </ul>
Goal ambiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inherent value conflicts</li> <li>• Inter-sectoral complexity and coordination problems</li> <li>• Policy conflict between departments</li> </ul>
Structural barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominant global actors such as the World Bank, and OECD</li> <li>• Technological and economic dependency</li> </ul>
Political conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependency on political and economic crises such as decline of trust and economic squeeze</li> <li>• Political faddism and short-term interest</li> <li>• Conflict between different political actors and interest group advocates</li> </ul>

Internet. It is too early to know whether this promise can be born out, but evidence of the actual geographic spread of initiatives such as the OGP suggests that the open government model of change does have broad geographic currency. On the other hand, we would stress that this comes with a risk: global relevance raises implementation challenges and also an intrinsic challenge of reconciling competing public values where different government interpret open government in different ways or value one aspect such as efficiency over another such as accountability. Open government does boast a kind of light-touch flexibility of approach emphasizing processes and relationships rather than specific institutional arrangements, and this approach might offer a kind of chameleon-like ability to mutate and evolve to meet different political and cultural conditions.

The open government approach is particularly puzzling when we look at structural barriers. On the one hand, the chameleon-like attribute of open government is enhanced, but its dependence on external supporters can pull implementation in a variety of different directions at once. We have noted the conflict between open data and freedom of information advocates being a particularly sensitive area, but there are potentially many others. A further area of tension lies in the realization of reform ends at both internal and external levels. Earlier reform approaches have suffered from problems of competing values such as lawfulness and effectiveness in OPA or efficiency and fairness in NPM. Open government seems equally likely to succumb to these problems given its attempts to support both efficiency and innovation on the one hand (economic values) and transparency and accountability on the other hand (political values). In sum, there are a number of fundamental challenges faced by open governance.

We cannot predict the level of success that open government is going to enjoy. Our understanding of earlier reform approaches certainly gives us pause, though it can also provide some entry points for further policy endeavors and scholarly discussion on the topic. In open government, there are plausible opportunities such as

geographic adaptability, less dependence on central government, and involvement of new political actors to escape from historic tensions and barriers in public management reform. Given the diversity of open government approaches, another key puzzle in the debate of open government’s prospects is its ability to provide coherency as a distinct and specific reform approach rather than simply being a useful toolbox of bespoke policies and programs available to governments among a raft of other possible Post-NPM policy priorities. Prior reform movements took some time before gaining this kind of definitive identity (Hood 1991). Indeed, Post-NPM movements, in general, remain quite politically and conceptually amorphous (Esmark 2016). The goal of the present article is to give distinctiveness to what the open government reform movement stands for and to assess its potential for success. But, whether or not open government does gain further distinctiveness needs to be determined in future by global country surveys.

These characteristics of open government merit more focus from scholars and practitioners, but so too do new kinds of risks that we have not really seen before. Some of these risks—such as conflicts of ends and means values and structural barriers of economics and technology—have been with us in prior reform movements and governments may be better prepared to address them. Other risks—such as ambiguous ends, wide design-reality gaps, and increased political conflict—will require new forms of risk management and preparedness by policymakers.

**Funding**

This research was partially funded through a grant from the Pratt Bequest Fund at Rutgers Law School.

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