
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Professor:

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This course examines how the *res publica*—understood as the domain of collective purposes and public authority—is defined, organized, and enacted in contemporary societies.

The course provides coordinates for understanding public administration as a field of study, while moving beyond a purely disciplinary perspective to examine how states govern under conditions of complexity, contestation, and technological transformation. It focuses on the institutional, organizational, and individual mechanisms that enable public action, as well as the tensions that arise when public authority is distributed across multiple levels and actors.

The course is structured around four analytical axes, which are deliberately interrelated. While presented separately for clarity, the empirical and theoretical materials discussed throughout the course cut across them. The course invites participants to understand how these dimensions overlap and jointly shape public action.

State capacity and administrative order: how public authority is constituted, stabilized, and coordinated. This block introduces the foundational problem of how the state organizes collective action. It examines the traditional model of public administration and its administrative traditions, and explores the cognitive and organizational limits that shape public decision-making, with particular attention to bounded rationality.

Boundaries of the public: how the public is defined in relation to the private. This block examines the public/private distinction and its transformations, focusing on how different meanings of *public* emerge across institutional, organizational, and social domains. It explores the implications of New Public Management and the shift towards hybrid forms of governance.

The practice of governing: how public action is produced and experienced in practice. This block focuses on policy instruments, administrative burden, and the role of discretion in implementation, highlighting how public action is enacted, negotiated, and even contested at the frontline.

Transformations of public authority: how contemporary changes reshape governing across levels and contexts. This block examines the impact of digitalization and algorithmic decision-making on public organizations, as well as the role of international governance and organizations in structuring public authority beyond the state.

Foundational frameworks and cutting-edge debates enable participants to engage with both the intellectual core of the field and a selection of its recent developments. The course combines lectures, structured discussions, and candidate-led presentations. Participants will engage critically with key readings and connect them to their own research interests.

By the end of the course, candidates will be able to:

- Identify and critically assess the main theoretical traditions in public administration;
- Understand how public action is shaped by institutional constraints, organizational dynamics, cognitive limits, and value conflicts;
- Analyze how contemporary transformations—especially technological and transnational—redefine the boundaries of the *public*;
- Connect public administration debates to adjacent fields, including but not limited to political sociology, comparative politics, and international governance.
- Develop a researchable argument linking public administration to their own doctoral agenda.

Course Evaluation (out of 31):

Class participation (up to 8 points)

In-class short assignments (up to 5 points)

Final essay (up to 18 points)

- CLASS PARTICIPATION includes (attendance and) meaningful contributions to class debates. It is an essential component of learning in this course, as it fosters critical engagement with the readings, the ability to articulate and defend arguments, and collective reflection through discussion.
- The IN-CLASS SHORT ASSIGNMENTS consist of 6 brief assignments with open questions, mostly based on the assigned readings - or occasionally on a specific prompt. They are designed to kick off or wrap up class discussion and assess engagement with the background materials. Each assignment is graded on a Pass(1) or Fail(0) basis. A Pass requires a clear and relevant answer that demonstrates familiarity with the assigned material. Answers need not be exhaustive but must be substantively grounded in the readings. To obtain full marks, you need at least 5/6 Passes.
- The FINAL ESSAY consists of a theory-driven essay as close as possible to one of your research interests. Instructions will be provided in class.

Syllabus

# and date	THEME	Topic	Readings
#1 April 13	State capacity and administrative order	Course presentation & overview An introduction to <i>public administration</i> as a discipline and a substantive area.	
#2 April 16		The bureaucratic state: foundations and limits of the traditional model	Hughes, Owen E. <i>Public management and administration: An introduction</i> . 2021. The traditional model of public administration (chapter 3). Please skim through: Wilson, W. 1887. The Study of Administration. <i>Political Science Quarterly</i> , 2(2): 197-222.
#3 April 16 Feat. Marlene Jugl		Varieties of bureaucracy: administrative traditions in comparative perspective	Optional - Jugl, M. (2025). Patterns of bureaucracy: Conceptualizing administrative traditions. <i>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory</i> , 35(3), 277-291.
#4 April 20		Public decision-making under bounded rationality	Please select one: Lindblom, C.E. (1959) The Science of "Muddling Through" <i>Public Administration Review</i> , Vol. 19(2):79-88.) Bellé, N., Belardinelli, P., Cantarelli, P., & Mele, V. (2019). On iron cages and suboptimal choices: An experimental test of the micro-foundations of isomorphism in

			<p>the public sector. <i>International Public Management Journal</i>, 22(2), 373-414.</p> <p>Extra - Background reading: Kingdon, J. W. (1984). <i>Agendas, alternatives, and public policies</i>. Boston: Little, Brown. Chapter IV.</p>
#5 April 27	Boundaries of the public	The public <i>vs</i> private divide and the NPM project	<p>Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons?. <i>Public administration</i>, 69(1), Extract: pp.3-9.</p> <p>No need to read in advance: Weintraub, J. (1997). The theory and politics of the public/private distinction. <i>Public and private in thought and practice: Perspectives on a grand dichotomy</i>, 1(7), 1-42.</p>
#6 April 29		Governance and hybrid public authority	<p>Mayntz, R. 2006. <i>From government to governance: Political steering in modern societies</i>. Greenleaf Publishing, 18-25.</p>
#7 May 4	The practice of governing	Policy instruments and administrative burden	<p>Herd, P., Hoynes, H., Michener, J., & Moynihan, D. (2023). Introduction: Administrative burden as a mechanism of inequality in policy implementation. <i>RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences</i>, 9(4), 1-30.</p> <p>+</p> <p>Please select one empirical article from the RSF special issue on administrative burden and be prepared to briefly discuss: where administrative burden arises; what types of costs are involved; and who is most affected.</p> <p>Vol. 9, No. 4, SEPTEMBER 2023, Administrative Burdens and Inequality in Policy Implementation, Part I and Part II</p>
#8 May 7		Street-level bureaucracy and discretion	<p>Tummers, L., & Bekkers, V. (2014). Policy implementation, street-level bureaucracy, and the importance of discretion. <i>Public Management Review</i>, 16(4), 527-547.</p>
#9 May 7		Contesting public action	<p>Select one position and be prepared to articulate and defend your argument:</p> <p>Ceva, E. (2015). Political justification through democratic participation: The case for conscientious objection. <i>Social Theory and Practice</i>, 26-50.</p> <p>Fiala, C., & Arthur, J. H. (2014). "Dishonourable disobedience"—Why refusal to treat in reproductive healthcare is not conscientious objection. <i>Woman-Psychosomatic Gynaecology and Obstetrics</i>, 1, 12-23.</p>
#10	Transformations of	Algorithms and public decision-making	<p>Busuioc, M. (2021). Accountable artificial intelligence: Holding algorithms to</p>

May 11	public authority		<p>account. <i>Public Administration Review</i>, 81(5), 825-836.</p> <p>+</p> <p>Please identify one example of algorithmic decision-making in the public sector (e.g., drawing on OECD materials) and be prepared to briefly discuss how it affects decision-making, discretion, and accountability.</p> <p>OECD (2025) <i>Governing with Artificial Intelligence. The State of Play and Way Forward in Core Government Functions.</i></p>
# 11 May 13		Digital bureaucracy	<p>Please select one:</p> <p>Mele, V., Bellé, N., & Cucciniello, M. (2021). Thanks, but no thanks: Preferences towards teleworking colleagues in public organizations. <i>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory</i>, 31(4), 790-805.</p> <p>Mele, V., Belardinelli, P., & Bellé, N. 2023. Telework in public organizations: a systematic review and research agenda. <i>Public Administration Review</i>, 83(6), 1649-1666.</p>
# 12 May 13		International governance and organizations beyond the state	<p>Please select one:</p> <p>Baccaro, L. and V. Mele. 2011 “For Lack of Anything Better. International Organizations and Global Corporate Codes”. <i>Public Administration</i>. 89(2).</p> <p>Mele, V., Anderfuhren-Biget S., & Varone, F. (2016). Conflicts of interest in international organizations: Evidence from two United Nations humanitarian agencies. <i>Public Administration</i>, 94(2), 490-508.</p>