

Governing The Contemporary Administrative State

Jarle Trondal

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In the increasingly complex landscape of global governance, understanding the inner workings and organizational foundations of the administrative state is more pressing than ever. Jarle Trondal's *Governing the Contemporary Administrative State* emerges as an important contribution advancing a nuanced organizational theory approach that seeks to bridge longstanding gaps between political science, public administration, and international relations. This volume provides a comprehensive theoretical treatment and an empirically rich exploration of how organizational structures, dynamics, and reforms shape governance at multiple levels domestic, European, and international within a turbulent world.

At its core, Trondal's work challenges the traditional perception of the administrative state as a static and solely nationally bounded entity. Instead, he conceptualizes it as a fluid, multi-layered, and dynamically evolving system, where organizational features serve as the engine driving stability, adaptability, and reform. This perspective resonates with current scholarly debates emphasizing the importance of organizational capacity, networked governance, and institutional resilience in times of crisis. The volume's central argument is that the organizational architecture of public administration its structures, routines, and spatial arrangements fundamentally biases governance processes, influencing policy outcomes, bureaucratic autonomy, and accountability in both national and international contexts.

Trondal's methodology exemplifies a rigorous, mixed-methods approach that combines long-term large-N surveys, case studies, and conceptual modeling. The empirical backbone consists of nine large-scale surveys spanning over four decades (1976–2016), capturing perceptions, contact patterns, and participatory behaviors of thousands of civil servants within Norwegian ministries and agencies (Tables 3.1–3.7). This longitudinal data set is a unique asset, enabling the volume to analyze stability and change over time, particularly in response to reforms, European integration, and internationalization.

Complementing this quantitative analysis, the volume employs a detailed organizational framework, drawing on classic and contemporary organizational theories such as Weberian bureaucracy, bounded rationality, and institutionalist perspectives (Scott & Davis, 2016; Simon, 1965; Olsen, 2010). These are operationalized through variables like vertical and horizontal specialization, agency autonomy, and socialization processes, which are empirically tested across the different chapters. The combination of macro-level data with micro-level insights provides a comprehensive understanding of how organizational structures channel decision-making and adapt to turbulence.

Structurally, the book is divided into three parts: (I) Theorizing the Administrative State, (II) Outlooks on the Domestic Administrative State, and (III) Multilevel and International Dimensions. Each part meticulously examines the organizational underpinnings of governance, from stability in routine behavior (Chap. 3) to the impact of reforms and agency networks (Chaps. 4–7), and finally to the European and international levels (Chaps. 8–12). This division facilitates a layered understanding that underscores the multi-scalar and multi-institutional nature of contemporary governance.

One of the volume's most important contributions is its robust integration of organizational theory into the study of public administration and governance. Unlike traditional political science approaches that often treat bureaucracies as black boxes or formal institutions, Trondal emphasizes that organizational features such as capacity, specialization, and socialization are active drivers shaping policy processes and bureaucratic independence (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). For example, Chapter 5 offers novel empirical evidence on how agency governance within integrated, multilevel systems such as the EU can be understood through organizational lenses, revealing how agencies' autonomy and influence are mediated by their structural positioning (Tables 5.4–5.8). Similarly, Chapter 12 demonstrates that international bureaucracies outside the EU, such as those in Africa, exhibit significant autonomy and behavioral patterns that are systematically biased toward their sectoral and epistemic orientations (Tables 12.2–12.4). These insights extend the literature on international public administration, providing a fresh perspective on actor autonomy and capacity building that had been largely neglected outside Western institutions. Nevertheless, the emphasis on organizational explanations occasionally risks underestimating the extent to which political contestation, ideology, and leadership dynamics may shape administrative behaviour independently of organizational design. Greater engagement with these

alternative explanatory factors would have strengthened the volume's broader theoretical reach.

Furthermore, the volume's emphasis on the resilience and stability of bureaucratic routines amidst turbulence sets a new agenda. It demonstrates that despite waves of reform, austerity, and globalization, core organizational routines such as contact patterns, participatory behaviors, and internal socialization remain remarkably stable over decades (Chap. 3, 4). This challenges the prevalent narrative of bureaucratic decay and suggests that organizational capacity and embedded routines serve as vital stabilizers in turbulent environments. At the same time, this emphasis on stability may somewhat understate situations in which administrative systems experience significant dysfunction, politicization, or institutional erosion. Future research may therefore benefit from examining more closely the conditions under which organizational resilience breaks down rather than persists.

While Trondal's organizational approach is highly innovative, some limitations emerge. First, the heavy reliance on Norwegian data, though empirically rich, raises questions about the universality of findings. The Norwegian civil service, characterized by high professionalism and relatively low politicization, may not fully capture dynamics in more polarized or less institutionalized contexts. Extending the analysis to diverse governance regimes would strengthen the volume's broader applicability.

Second, although the longitudinal data is a major strength, the volume could delve deeper into causal mechanisms linking organizational features to specific policy outcomes or accountability processes. For example, how do organizational routines influence responsiveness or legitimacy during crises? Incorporating case-based process tracing or experimental designs could enhance causal inference.

Third, the volume's focus on formal organizational structures somewhat underplays informal practices, culture, and power relations that are crucial in understanding bureaucratic behavior. While socialization is acknowledged, a more nuanced treatment of informal norms and elite networks would complement the structural analysis.

Finally, the volume's treatment of turbulence centers primarily on stability and resilience, with less emphasis on the dynamics of organizational decay or maladaptation. Incorporating insights from organizational ecology and institutional decay theories could provide a more comprehensive picture of organizational survival in adverse environments.

Trondal's volume significantly advances the literature on the organizational foundations of governance, bridging gaps between political science, public administration, and international relations. Its emphasis on organizational routines, capacity, and spatial arrangements aligns with recent calls for a practices turn in governance studies.

Moreover, by extending organizational analysis beyond the nation-state to multilevel (EU) and international bureaucracies, the volume contributes to a transnational turn, insisting that governance increasingly involves complex networks and border-crossing institutions. Its concentration on actor autonomy and capacity-building resonates with emergent scholarship

on network governance and administrative capacity, especially in contexts of crisis and reform.

Furthermore, the volume emphasizes the importance of organizational design as a practical instrument for reform, aligning with recent scholarship advocating organizing for resilience in public sector institutions. Its integrative approach, combining empirical data with rigorous theory, sets a new standard for future research.

The volume's primary audiences include scholars and graduate students in public administration, political science, and European/international studies. It also offers valuable insights for policymakers, reformers, and organizational designers seeking to craft resilient, efficient, and accountable governance architectures. Its emphasis on organizational routines and capacity-building provides a practical toolkit for reform initiatives, especially in multilevel and international contexts where traditional command-and-control approaches falter.

Jarle Trondal's *Governing the Contemporary Administrative State* is a substantial contribution that advances our understanding of the organizational dimensions of modern governance. Its empirical rigor, theoretical innovation, and practical relevance make it an essential text for scholars and practitioners alike. By revealing the deep stability and subtle flexibility embedded in organizational structures, the volume offers a compelling blueprint for building resilient governance systems capable of navigating turbulence in an uncertain world. While some questions remain regarding the transferability of its findings beyond highly institutionalized administrative contexts, the volume provides a valuable foundation for future comparative research on governance, organizational capacity, and administrative resilience. As governance challenges continue to mount globally, Trondal's organizational lens provides a vital compass for both understanding and shaping the future of the administrative state.

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