

The Dynamics of Public Policy-Making in Public Administration: From Classical Management to the New Public Administration

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Abstract

This article examines how public administration shapes policy-making. Scholarship typically treats Classical Management, Neo-Classical Management, and New Public Administration (NPA) as successive stages, while policy studies often analyse decision-making, participation, and implementation separately. Consequently, literature lacks an integrated account of how shifting administrative logics structure policy-making and contribute to persistent governance challenges. Drawing on a systematic literature review guided by PRISMA, the study analyses 23 peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed articles. Rather than aggregating empirical effects, it uses thematic coding to examine policy-making dynamics across paradigms, from Classical Management to NPA. Findings show each paradigm embodies a distinct logic: hierarchical technocratic control in the classical model; behaviourally informed but administratively managed decision-making in the neo-classical model; and collaborative, reflexive governance in the NPA model. Paradigms coexist rather than replace one another. In the Global South, although NPA principles support SDG 16.6 and 16.7, implementation is constrained by neo-classical reforms and residual classical bureaucracies, limiting participatory engagement envisaged by SDG 16.8. Effective governance reform requires aligning institutional capacity with participatory processes rather than adopting a new paradigm.

Keywords: Classical Management; Neo-Classical Management; New Public Administration; Public Policy-making

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Introduction

Classical Management Theory emerged not from abstract academic speculation, but as a pragmatic response to the organisational instability generated by the Industrial Revolution (Bueno & Salapa, 2022; Muldoon et al., 2023; Valeri, 2021). The transition from family-based production to the factory system created managerial challenges for which owners and administrators were largely unprepared (Wren & Bedeian, 2023). These conditions produced structural inefficiencies and waste (Muhammad et al., 2022; Pandey et al., 2023), weak control mechanisms and the practice of “soldiering” (Hurl-Eamon, 2023; Kaldor, 2024), disorder in organisational design and authority structures (Omachi & Ajewumi, 2024; Turner, 2022), and patterns of nepotism accompanied by crises of legitimacy (Hudson & Claasen, 2017; Mokyr, 2008). In response, Fayol, Weber, and Taylor advanced scientific and administrative principles intended to replace disorder with order, rationality, and predictability.

In many developing regions, particularly Southeast Asia, where colonial legacies and post-colonial state-building produced hybrid administrative systems combining formal rules, strong managerialism, and developmental imperatives, classical management principles—embodied in Taylorian scientific management, Fayolian administrative doctrine, and Weberian bureaucratic rationality—have left a durable imprint on public administration. The historical diffusion of Taylorist techniques into Asian bureaucratic and industrial contexts shaped expectations concerning efficiency and work organisation (Hamilton, 2024). Moreover, colonial-bureaucratic and developmental administrative forms continue to shape governance in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, despite subsequent reforms associated with New Public Management and later paradigms (Haque, 2007). These traditions function not merely as management doctrines but as institutionalised logics that influence how public problems are defined, who participates in decision-making processes, and how policy authority is exercised.

Neo-Classical Management developed as a corrective to the mechanistic assumptions of the classical approach. It challenged the Economic Man model, arguing that excessive specialisation and rigid rationalism produced bureaucratic dysfunction and worker alienation (Christensen & Lægreid, 2025; Coniglio, 2025). Empirical observations highlighted worker resistance (Putterman, 2025; Qian & Pun, 2025) and the neglect of informal organisational structures essential to effectiveness (Mhella, 2025). In the aftermath of the Great Depression, legitimacy concerns further underscored the need for more humane and participatory labour relations (Billet, 2023).

In Latin America, administrative reforms have been significantly influenced by neo-classical principles emphasising behavioural insights, bounded rationality, organisational flexibility, and participatory decision-making. Consistent with Simon’s critique of comprehensive rationality, public administrations in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil increasingly recognised the limitations of rational-comprehensive planning and adopted more incremental and problem-driven approaches (Grindle, 2004). Although political volatility, path-dependent bureaucratic cultures, and

uneven professionalisation continue to shape reform outcomes, empirical studies suggest that neo-classical principles contributed to improved policy adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and service quality (Bresser-Pereira, 2020; Ocampo, 2013).

Conversely, legitimacy crises and growing public distrust in traditional bureaucracy stimulated the emergence of New Public Administration (NPA) (Ansell et al., 2023; Jackson, 2023). Social movements and political upheavals exposed the limitations of conventional public administration in addressing social justice concerns. The politics–administration dichotomy and the doctrine of bureaucratic neutrality were increasingly viewed as untenable (Portillo et al., 2022; Shafritz et al., 2022). A narrow emphasis on efficiency was criticised for neglecting equity and justice (Norman-Major, 2023; Wang, 2023), while the widening distance between citizens and bureaucratic institutions further deepened policy gaps (Chang & Brewer, 2023; Eckhard, 2021).

Across several European contexts, NPA principles—centred on social equity, citizen-oriented service delivery, participatory governance, and responsiveness—have influenced administrative development. Since the late twentieth century, reforms in countries including Italy, Austria, and Germany have incorporated mechanisms to enhance citizen voice, accountability, and the integration of social justice objectives into policy design and service provision (Peters, 2018). Similarly, the United Kingdom and Ireland institutionalised practices such as co-production, co-governance, and participatory consultation to address legitimacy challenges in complex policy environments (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Although prior scholarship provides substantial insight into each administrative tradition, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary domains. Management theory focuses primarily on organisational efficiency; public administration research examines institutional reform; and policy studies analyse policy cycles and governance networks. Few studies explicitly synthesise these perspectives to explain how administrative paradigms shape policy-making dynamics over time. Existing research is often either conceptual-historical or confined to single-case empirical analysis, limiting understanding of the cross-era mechanisms through which administrative logics influence participation, authority distribution, and policy legitimacy. This fragmentation constrains policymakers—particularly in the Global South—who must interpret reform experiences that reflect overlapping administrative traditions. This study therefore advances an integrative analysis of administrative paradigms and policy-making dynamics across historical eras.

Addressing this gap is increasingly important in light of contemporary public policy challenges, including the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16: building effective, accountable, and transparent institutions (16.6); ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making (16.7); and strengthening the participation of developing countries in global governance institutions (16.8). Accordingly, this study examines the concrete dynamics of policy-making across administrative eras through a synthesis of prior research.

Similarly, searches combining “public policy” and “neo-classical management” yielded 24 articles (see Figure 2). Network visualisation suggests that research linking policy-making dynamics to neo-classical management remains limited, with policy studies more frequently associated with themes such as demography, economics, and spatial distribution.

Figure 3. Research Networks on Public Policy-Making in the New Public Administration Era
Source: Processed by the Authors Using VOSviewer (2025)

By contrast, searches using “public policy” and “new public administration” identified 7,967 articles (see Figure 3). Despite the larger volume of publications, visualisation indicates that research tends to cluster around public administration, organisational management, human resources, and healthcare planning, rather than systematically integrating administrative paradigms with policy-making dynamics.

The figures included in this article serve as heuristic illustrations of the research landscape, supporting the interpretive synthesis rather than functioning as conclusive evidence regarding the presence or absence of prior research. Accordingly, this study addresses the research question of how the dynamics of public policy-making have evolved across the eras of Classical Management, Neo-Classical Management, and New Public Administration.

Research Methods

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how administrative paradigms structure public policy-making processes. Rather than aggregating empirical findings, the review aims to identify how the dynamics of public policy-making in public administration evolve across eras, namely the Classical Management, Neo-Classical Management, and New Public Administration periods. Accordingly, the systematic review functions as an analytical synthesis that enables conceptual integration across heterogeneous studies in public administration and policy research. The review follows the PRISMA transparency procedure for search and screening; however, its analytical logic is interpretive rather than statistical. The objective is not to estimate effect sizes or test hypotheses, but to synthesise how different bodies of literature conceptualise the dynamics of public policy-making across these administrative eras.

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is a research process that provides solutions to particular research problems (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2023; Sauer & Seuring, 2023). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) diagram was used to transparently document the step-by-step screening of prior research using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Agrawal et al., 2024; Hijriyah et al., 2024). Before extracting essential data, each eligible study was subjected to critical appraisal to ensure thorough assessment. Meanwhile, the synthesis stage employed in-depth narrative analysis to connect findings across studies.

The study proceeded in several phases. The first phase was identification. Papers were sourced from the Scopus database. Scopus was selected because it provides broad and multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed journals in public administration, governance, and policy, while maintaining consistent indexing standards. The use of a single database mitigates search replicability issues and ensures comparability in bibliometric mapping, which is important for interpretive synthesis. The database is therefore treated as a bounded corpus rather than as a comprehensive census of all existing scholarship.

Searches were conducted separately using three keyword combinations: (1) “public policy” AND “classical management”; (2) “public policy” AND “neo-classical management”; and (3) “public policy” AND “new public administration”. All records were exported from Scopus in RIS format and merged into a single reference library using Mendeley. Duplicate records arising from overlap among the three searches were automatically identified and subsequently verified manually. A record was considered a duplicate when the title, authorship, and publication year were identical. After duplicate removal, the remaining dataset constituted the initial screening corpus.

The initial search produced 338 articles for “public policy and classical management”, 139 articles for “public policy and neo-classical management”, and 7,976 articles for “public policy and new public administration”, resulting in a total of 8,453 records in Scopus.

The second phase was screening, also referred to as data identification and selection. This step aimed to select the most relevant articles addressing public policy dynamics in the Classical, Neo-Classical, and New Public Administration eras. The screening applied the following inclusion criteria: (1) articles published between 2020 and 2025; (2) journal article document type; (3) English-language publications; (4) freely accessible full-text articles; and (5) relevance of the abstract to the research topic.

After screening, the next phase was eligibility. This stage involved thorough examination of the filtered articles by applying the inclusion criteria and assessing substantive relevance. Full-text retrieval was based on relevance and analytical quality. The main research question guiding this process was how the dynamics of public policy-making in public administration evolved across the Classical Management, Neo-Classical Management, and New Public Administration eras. The sub-research questions included:

RQ1: How have the dynamics of public policy-making evolved in the Classical Management era?

RQ2: How have the dynamics of public policy-making evolved in the Neo-Classical Management era?

RQ3: How have the dynamics of public policy-making evolved in the New Public Administration era?

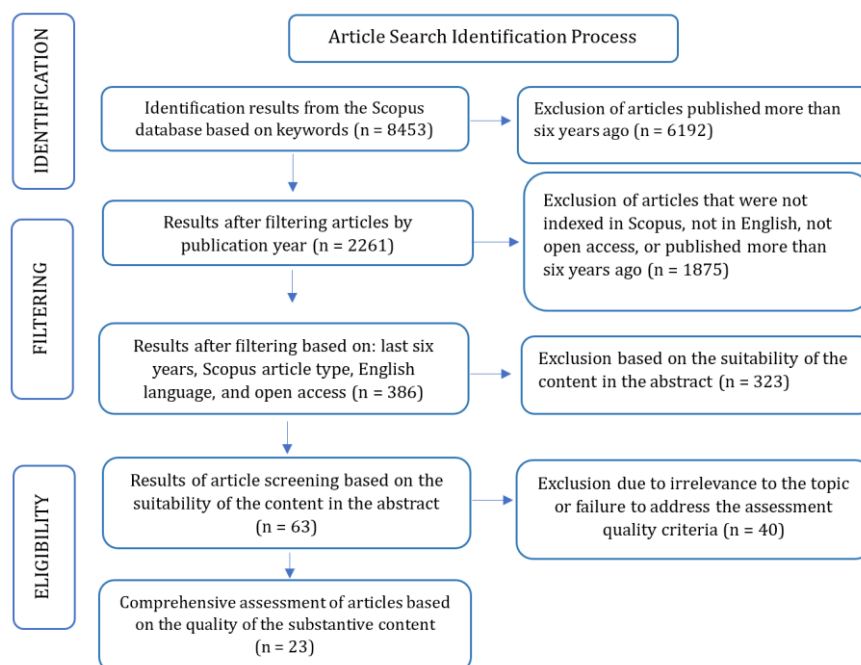


Figure 4. PRISMA Filtering Flowchart
Source: Processed by the Authors (2025)

The review process is illustrated through a PRISMA flowchart (Figure 4), which documents the procedural flow of article identification, screening, and eligibility. The diagram ensures transparency of selection decisions rather than implying statistical completeness. Bibliometric visualisation using VOSviewer was applied as an exploratory

mapping tool to identify thematic clustering and keyword proximity within the sampled corpus. The mapping is interpretive and heuristic, not conclusive evidence regarding the existence or absence of prior research.

Based on Figure 4, after applying the inclusion criteria, the Scopus search yielded 11 journal articles for “public policy and classical management”, 3 for “public policy and neo-classical management”, and 372 for “public policy and new public administration”. In total, 386 articles met the inclusion criteria, while the remainder were excluded.

An additional extraction process was conducted by filtering articles based on the substantive relevance of their abstracts and full texts. This stage resulted in 63 articles. Articles were classified as highly relevant when they provided substantive discussion linking administrative structures with policy-making processes, rather than merely mentioning administration as contextual background. Relevance was determined through full-text reading and coded using predefined analytical categories: policy rationality, authority distribution, participation mechanisms, and implementation capacity. An article was retained in the final corpus only if it contributed conceptual or empirical insights to at least two of these categories. This procedure resulted in a final analytical sample of 23 articles.

The screening was conducted in two stages: title–abstract screening and full-text eligibility assessment. Two reviewers independently examined each record during the title–abstract stage to determine whether the article addressed policy-making processes, governance structures, administrative reform, or implementation dynamics. Prior to screening, both reviewers calibrated their interpretation by jointly reviewing a pilot sample of 20 randomly selected articles to harmonise the inclusion criteria. Disagreements were discussed and the screening protocol refined accordingly. During the main screening process, disagreements were resolved through discussion, and articles were retained only when both reviewers agreed on relevance.

Eligible full-text articles then underwent quality appraisal to ensure analytical reliability. The assessment evaluated conceptual clarity, methodological transparency, and relevance to policy-making dynamics. Each criterion was scored on a three-point scale (0 = absent, 1 = partial, 2 = clear). Articles with insufficient relevance across all criteria were excluded. The appraisal was conducted independently by two reviewers, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussion. This step was not intended to rank studies by methodological rigour, but to ensure interpretive validity and conceptual relevance to the research question.

Results and Discussion

Twenty-three papers that underwent a substantive quality appraisal were identified through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and will be examined in the Results and Discussion section. The conclusions of these publications shed light on the processes of public policy-making during the classical management, neoclassical management, and New Public Administration eras. The following research questions (RQs), presented in Table 1, will guide the analysis and further discussion.

Table 1. Results of the Systematic Literature Review Quality Assessment
Source: Processed by the Authors (2025)

Title	Relevance of Content Substance with RQ		
	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Modal Dynamic Equilibrium Under Different Demand Management Schemes (Balzer & Leclercq, 2024)	✓		
Strategizing for Grand Challenges: Economic Development and Governance Traditions in Malaysian Local Government (Hughes et al., 2023)	✓		
Evolution of Canadian Immigration Policy. The Experience of Resettlement and Measures Towards Inclusiveness (Wrońska, 2023)	✓		
Place-Based Policy in Southern Italy: Evidence from a Dose–Response Approach (Cusimano et al., 2021)	✓		
Conceptions of Professionalism in U.S. Research Universities: Evidence from the gradSERU Survey (Brint & Ilhan, 2022)		✓	
Relationship Between Public Sector Reforms and Culture: The Implementation of NPM-Related Performance Management Reforms in a Collectivist and Risk Averse Culture (Ugyel, 2021)		✓	
Sustainability Mindsets for Strategic Management: Lifting the Yoke of the Neo-Classical Economic Perspective (Farias et al., 2020)		✓	
How the Political Elite Make Decisions (Wynn et al., 2025)			✓
Potentials of Administrative Informatics for the Analysis of Policy Making: Notes on the Integration of Administrative Informatics into the Policy Cycle (von Lucke & Frank, 2025)			✓
Conjectures on a Relational Turn in Policy Studies (Lejano & Kan, 2025)			✓
Artificial Intelligence and Public Administration: Understanding Actors, Governance, and Policy from Micro, Meso, and Macro Perspectives (Criado et al., 2025)			✓
Critical Reorientation of Bureaucratic Reform and Good Governance in Public Sector Administration in Indonesia (Wahyurudhanto, 2020)			✓
Immigration, Bureaucracies and Policy Formulation: The Case of Quebec (Paquet, 2020)			✓
Neoliberalism and the Origins of Public Management (Knafo, 2020)			✓
Making Public Administration Great Again (van Ostaïen & Jhagroe, 2022)			✓
Does Public Consultation Affect Policy Formulation? Negotiation Strategies Between the Administration and Citizens (Choi & Wong, 2024)			✓
Processing Societal Expectations: Entrepreneurship Initiative Decision-Making at a Research University (Tuunainen & Kantasalmi, 2024)			✓

Assessing the ‘Forgotten Fundamental’ in Policy Advisory Systems Research: Policy Shops and The Role(S) of Core Policy Professionals (Migone & Howlett, 2024)	v
Expertise, Policy Advice, and Policy Advisory Systems In an Open, Participatory, and Populist Era: New Challenges to Research and Practice (Craft et al., 2024)	v
Policy Growth, Implementation Capacities, and The Effect on Policy Performance (Fernandez-i-Marín et al., 2024)	v
Urban Sustainability Commitment: Actor Constellations and Motivations (Schwarz & Behnke, 2025)	v
Challenging Common Assumptions in Explaining Welfare Administration Reform: A Three-Decade Analysis of The Netherlands and Norway (van Gestel & Alm Andreassen, 2025)	v
A systems thinking approach for examining the turning points in the Finnish public sport policy (Lehtonen et al., 2025)	v

Based on Table 1, there are four Scopus journal articles whose content is in accordance with Research Question (RQ) 1, three Scopus journal articles whose content is in accordance with RQ 2, and sixteen Scopus journal articles whose content is in accordance with RQ 3. Furthermore, the following presents the results of the Systematic Literature Review mapping by RQ category, together with discussions and their alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically: 16.6. Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels; 16.7. Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels; and 16.8. Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance, particularly in the context of the Global South.

Dynamics of Public Policy-Making in the Classical Management Era

Rather than treating the Classical Management tradition as merely an organisational doctrine, the reviewed studies consistently depict it as a distinct policy-making logic. Across the four articles analysed, policy processes are structured by centralised authority, technocratic reasoning, and limited public engagement. The convergence of findings indicates not merely a historical administrative style but a recurring governance mechanism that shapes how public problems are defined and resolved. The synthesis of the literature reveals four recurring themes characterising policy-making dynamics under the classical paradigm. Evidence from local government planning and regional programmes demonstrates that policy consistency is prioritised over local adaptation. The repetition of this pattern across cases suggests a governance mechanism in which administrative order is valued more than contextual responsiveness.

First, policy-making is defined by a top-down hierarchical framework in which power is centralised. In Malaysian local government, strategic plans were centrally dictated, resulting in consistency but compromising local responsiveness (Hughes et al., 2023). This is reinforced by a study of place-based initiatives in Southern Italy, where the

underlying framework remained tied to centralised Regional Operational Programmes, demonstrating how central authority frequently subsumes local nuance (Cusimano et al., 2021).

Second, this centralisation is justified by a dominant technocratic orientation that assumes social problems can be solved through quantitative models. Policy makers are positioned as analytical actors, as reflected in the mathematical precision of transportation models and Canada's points-based immigration system (Balzer & Leclercq, 2024; Wrońska, 2023). Policies are constructed through quantitative modelling and technical analysis, framing public problems as managerial or engineering challenges. Policymakers therefore appear as technical experts rather than political negotiators. The recurring reliance on models, standardised indicators, and formal evaluation tools suggests that legitimacy is derived from analytical precision rather than public deliberation.

Third, classical bureaucracy operates as a closed system that purposefully limits public participation. Stakeholder involvement has a weak tradition, with participation confined to predetermined incentives and, in some cases, policies used to exclude ethnic groups (Hughes et al., 2023; Wrońska, 2023). Public participation is thus minimal and instrumental. Engagement occurs after decisions have been formulated and primarily serves to ensure compliance rather than co-creation. Participation functions as administrative communication rather than democratic input.

Fourth, implementation is treated primarily as rule enforcement. Street-level discretion is constrained and adaptation discouraged. The recurring implementation difficulty identified in the literature arises not from policy ambiguity but from contextual mismatch between uniform rules and diverse social conditions. The application of a rigorous dose-response function to evaluate Italian policy highlights an important paradox: while a centralised and uniform approach to evaluation may be administratively manageable, it fails to capture the complex realities of implementation on the ground (Cusimano et al., 2021). Similarly, uniform policies such as licence plate rationing schemes often fail to account for local variation, revealing the limitations of a one-size-fits-all rationale (Balzer & Leclercq, 2024). Moreover, a technocratic fixation on measurable factors produces a hazardous reductionism that marginalises politics, values, and justice. Technical sophistication, including counterfactual assessments (Cusimano et al., 2021) and mathematical modelling (Balzer & Leclercq, 2024), may inadvertently legitimise existing power structures while concealing injustice beneath a veneer of objectivity.

Viewed through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 16, the Classical Management paradigm is not merely outdated but structurally misaligned with the principles of effective, accountable, and inclusive governance. Its hierarchical rigidity and opaque decision-making processes contradict SDG 16.6 and 16.7, which emphasise effective, accountable, transparent, and participatory institutions (Agruña Barrón et al., 2025; Hart & Kroon, 2024; Putra et al., 2025). By orienting accountability upward within bureaucratic chains of command rather than outward toward citizens, the classical paradigm privileges control over responsiveness and opacity over transparency.

For countries in the Global South, where colonial administrative legacies intersect with managerialist traditions, this paradigm continues to shape governance structures. Highly centralised and technocratic bureaucracies often generate policies that appear rational in formal design but fail to resonate with local realities, thereby contributing to legitimacy crises. Limited avenues for citizen engagement restrict the development of vibrant civic spaces necessary for institutional accountability.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that while classical policy-making structures promote administrative stability, they weaken responsiveness and democratic legitimacy. The governance gap emerges because institutional accountability is directed internally rather than toward citizens. Consequently, although such systems may sustain procedural order, they conflict with SDG 16.6 and 16.7 by undermining inclusive and accountable governance.

Dynamics of Public Policy-Making in the Neo-Classical Management Era

According to the Systematic Literature Review, the Neo-Classical Management era represents a more complex evolution rather than a complete departure from the classical model. The neo-classical paradigm modifies, rather than replaces, classical managerialism. The reviewed literature indicates sustained efforts to humanise administrative decision-making while retaining managerial control.

The synthesis identifies three recurring dynamics. First, persistent value conflict during policy formulation. Empirical evidence shows that reconciling market-oriented efficiency with socio-ethical imperatives is difficult to achieve. The “hybridisation” of these principles remains limited, with divergence between business logic and social orientation as the prevailing pattern (Brint & Ilhan, 2022). This tension is compounded by the weak sustainability assumptions of neoclassical economic thought, which overlook ecological limits and assume cultural uniformity, thereby neglecting local value diversity in policy design (Farias et al., 2020).

Such value tensions contribute to context-insensitive institutional design. Administrative institutions, still embedded in technocratic traditions, frequently adopt governance arrangements that are detached from social and cultural realities. The case of Bhutan illustrates this challenge, where performance management reforms based on individualistic incentives conflicted with collectivist cultural norms, resulting in implementation failure (Ugyel, 2021).

Second, neo-classical policy-making incorporates behavioural decision-making and bounded rationality. Policymakers acknowledge cognitive limitations and rely on incremental adjustments rather than comprehensive planning. However, although bounded rationality is recognised, it is often regulated through performance indicators and measurement systems, generating a new form of managerial control. In the Bhutanese civil service, for example, performance evaluation systems became ritualistic, as negative evaluations were culturally discouraged, thereby privileging what is measurable over what is substantively meaningful (Ugyel, 2021).

Third, participation increases relative to the classical model but remains administratively structured. Participation is permitted yet mediated through formal

consultations, procedural mechanisms, and performance frameworks. As such, it remains controlled participation rather than fully deliberative engagement.

In relation to SDG 16, the neo-classical paradigm represents partial progress. Its recognition of organisational culture and human behaviour aligns with the objective of strengthening effective institutions (SDG 16.6). However, its inability to resolve underlying value conflicts and its limited contextual sensitivity constrain its capacity to realise genuinely inclusive and participatory decision-making (SDG 16.7). Accountability systems centred on quantitative performance indicators may create a facade of accountability while obscuring deeper issues of justice and trust.

For countries in the Global South, where governance reforms are frequently inspired by neo-classical ideas, these limitations are particularly significant. Imported performance management systems and participatory models often encounter resistance due to entrenched bureaucratic traditions, informal networks, and historical legacies (Issa et al., 2024; Nahar et al., 2025; Peters, 2021). This results in a decoupling effect in which formal policies are adopted symbolically while informal practices remain unchanged, widening the gap between institutional appearance and practical reality.

Overall, the Neo-Classical Management era leaves a legacy of acknowledged complexity but unresolved contradiction. Although it exposes the limitations of mechanical classical administration, it does not fully transcend technocratic dominance. The recurring implementation gap arises from tension between managerial accountability systems and social legitimacy.

Dynamics of Public Policy-Making in the New Public Administration Era

The New Public Administration (NPA) literature reflects a shift from administrative control toward interactive governance. Across sixteen reviewed articles, policy-making is described as a collaborative and reflexive process rather than a hierarchical decision.

First, the era is characterised by reflexive rationality, which reconceptualises policy as an ongoing process of social learning. Administrative informatics and artificial intelligence are portrayed as transforming the policy cycle into an adaptive learning system (Criado et al., 2025; von Lucke & Frank, 2025). However, concerns emerge regarding algorithmic dominance and the ethical implications of digital governance (Knafo, 2020; Paquet, 2020). Successful digital transformation requires substantial institutional preparedness; otherwise, technology merely automates outdated processes (Lehtonen et al., 2025).

Second, policy-making increasingly reflects polycentric relationality. Decision-making occurs within complex networks involving multiple actors (Craft et al., 2024; Migone & Howlett, 2024), a development described as a “relational turn” (Lejano & Kan, 2025). Yet participation may become performative if formal consultation does not translate into meaningful influence (Choi & Wong, 2024).

Third, adaptive institutional capacity becomes a critical challenge. Ambitious policy goals may exceed implementation capabilities (Fernandez-i-Marín et al., 2024), particularly in contexts shaped by heuristic decision-making (Wynn et al., 2025) and institutional path dependency (van Gestel & Alm Andreassen, 2025). Fourth, legitimacy

is increasingly grounded in public values, including social responsibility, fairness, and trust (Knafo, 2020; van Ostaïen & Jhagroe, 2022; Schwarz & Behnke, 2025; Wahyurudhanto, 2020).

Collectively, these dynamics signal a transformation from government as controller to governance as facilitator of complex ecosystems. Policies become dynamic processes shaped by feedback, negotiation, and power exchange between state and non-state actors. However, this transition risks diffused accountability and new forms of opaque technocracy, particularly when algorithmic systems are insufficiently scrutinised.

In normative terms, the NPA paradigm aligns most closely with SDG 16.6 and 16.7 by prioritising accountability, transparency, and participation. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that participation without institutional capacity may result in performative engagement. Governance reforms therefore generate expectations that exceed administrative capability, particularly in contexts marked by asymmetric global pressures and limited institutional maturity.

For the Global South, the NPA offers a conceptually robust yet operationally demanding framework. Its successful implementation requires not only technical reform but also institutional readiness, critical engagement with digital transformation, and sustained political commitment to substantive rather than symbolic participation. Without these conditions, the NPA risks becoming an aspirational governance script rather than a transformative institutional model capable of achieving SDG 16.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that three major eras have shaped the evolution of public policy-making dynamics, each characterised by a distinct driving force. The Classical Management era emphasised control, implementing policies through inflexible hierarchies and technical expertise that prioritised order while disregarding public participation. The Neo-Classical era acknowledged the importance of interpersonal relationships, informal networks, and employee motivation, yet struggled to balance these human factors with its persistent focus on economic efficiency. Finally, the New Public Administration (NPA) era is defined by the pursuit of social equity, promoting adaptive, participatory, and value-driven policy-making that directly engages citizens.

The transition from top-down, closed decision-making to open, cooperative, and often contentious co-creation represents a fundamental shift in policy-making dynamics. This evolution aligns closely with the ambitions of Sustainable Development Goal 16. The Classical model fundamentally conflicts with SDG 16.6 and 16.7, generating institutions that are opaque and unresponsive, whereas the NPA model explicitly aims to establish effective, accountable, and transparent institutions (16.6) and inclusive, participatory decision-making (16.7).

For countries in the Global South, this historical and empirical insight carries significant practical implications. While encouraged to implement NPA-style reforms, these states frequently face the enduring legacy of classical bureaucracies, creating a substantial implementation gap. Efforts to increase participation may be undermined if

participatory approaches are imported without strengthening local institutional capacity (SDG 16.8). Developing the state capability to integrate operational management with genuine citizen engagement in policy-making, therefore, represents a primary challenge, not merely the adoption of one administrative era over another. Future research should examine how hybrid governance models in the Global South can effectively embed NPA ideals of participation and equity into existing administrative systems, transforming outdated bureaucracies into organisations capable of achieving the SDGs.

This study contributes to public policy scholarship by proposing an integrative cross-era analytical framework for policy-making. Rather than interpreting Classical Management, Neo-Classical Management, and New Public Administration as sequential evolutionary stages, the analysis demonstrates that they coexist as governance logics influencing contemporary policy processes. Three theoretical contributions are offered. First, the study advances an integrative model explaining the implementation gap as a structural misalignment between hierarchical administrative capacity and participatory governance expectations. Second, it provides a cross-era analytical lens linking decision rationality, authority distribution, participation, and implementation capacity across administrative traditions. Third, it reconceptualises New Public Administration in the context of the Global South, arguing that its limitations stem not from normative weakness but from institutional layering, where participatory reforms are embedded within bureaucratic structures designed for control. In this sense, governance reform should be framed not as paradigm replacement but as the alignment of administrative capability with the demands of participatory policy-making.

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