

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN EUROPE: 'WHERE DO WE GO NOW?'

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger inquiry aiming to investigate the current results published in the scientific literature with respect to strategy development in local governments. The geographical area of interest consists of European Union (EU). The preliminary results of a systematic literature review are reported below. These results suggest that the efforts to analyze the strategy development in local governments are primarily associated to the urban planning field and to a lower extent to public administration journals.

Keywords: CEE, strategic planning, New Public Management, Neo-Weberian State, New Public Governance.

1. Introduction

Public sector reform (also discussed in the literature as public management reform) represents a constant feature of the change efforts undertaken by different government levels in almost all countries in the world in the last forty years (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Developed and developing countries alike have been swiped by the waves of different reform fashions, and attempted, on their turn, to import solutions from elsewhere or to develop their own way of addressing the (social) problems they were facing (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000).

With the benefit of the hindsight, we know that the results achieved so far vary. Different explanations are advanced in the literature and discussed in scientific conferences in this respect. These explanations include the lack of proper theoretical grounding for the design of reforms (Olsen, 2015), the perverse effects of measurements of results (Van Thiel and Leeuw, 2002; Moynihan *et al.*, 2012), legacy effects (Meyer-Sahling and Yesilkagit, 2011) or deficiencies related to administrative capacity (Hințea, Șandor and Junjan, 2004; Junjan and Iancu, 2011). Within the research area dedicated to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations, strategic planning occupies an important role.

This paper aims to provide a summary of preliminary results of a literature review investigating the state of the art of available research concerning strategic planning in local governments in Europe. After describing the theoretical background of the inquiry, the methodology section outlines the choices made in selecting and analyzing the literature. The results are summarized in the fourth section, and the conclusion provides some insights as well as suggestions for the next steps.

2. Theoretical background

This paper starts with three suppositions. The first is that all the reforms that have been advanced during this time are designed, decided upon, executed and evaluated in organizations. Public and semipublic organizations, often within different collaborative arrangements and organizational forms, are carrying out reform decisions taken at political level. Public organizations are particularly vulnerable to turbulence coming from their environment (Rainey, 2014). O'Toole and Meier (1999) outlined in their strategic management model the tasks that the managers need to address in order to facilitate organization performance as: a) create stability, b) shield the organization from outside shocks, and c) use the opportunities provided by the environment. Strategic planning can and, when executed properly, does provide a solid guiding tool to support organizations in the process of dealing with change. The second supposition considers that there are different challenges faced by local level organizations in comparison to the ones faced at national level in carrying out reform efforts. Local context (socio-economic, political, types of relationships with the national level, local organization capacity) does play an important role for the

success of the strategic planning effort. The third supposition refers to the timing of the reform and of the strategic planning effort. This refers to both the moment in the electoral cycle where strategic planning efforts develop (arguably most of the time at the beginning of the cycle, but one needs to take into account also the differences between the local and national electoral cycle). At macro-level, one needs to consider also the spirit of the time (that is, ideas, concepts, and positions on what is legitimate in terms of reforms and of public management, see also Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011, p. 33).

In terms of the major paradigms of public sector reform, the last forty years have registered: a) New Public Management (NPM); b) Neo-Weberian State (NWS), and c) New Public Governance (NPG). These three paradigms addressed different parts of the balance of the public sector values: efficiency-effectiveness-legitimacy, and were predominant at different moments of time. New Public Management focused on efficiency and dominated during the 1989s and 1990s. Initially addressing issues concerning the improving of the performance of public organizations and importing management techniques and methods from private sector management, the NPM looked further into analyzing paradoxes and unexpected results associated to the public sector reforms (Hood and Peters, 2004). Neo-Weberian State (Drechsler, 2005; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011) proposed an alternative to the perceived mechanistic import of managerial techniques from the private sector. Developed at the beginning of the 2000s, this paradigm put forward a strengthening of the Weberian foundation of the professional public administration and attempted to redress the balance of values towards effectiveness and legitimacy. Finally, the New Public Governance paradigm proposed a reinterpretation of the role and function of governmental organizations, and proposed an inclusion of a broader range of societal partners who jointly address societal problems (Agranoff, 2007; Osborne, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011), furthering in this way the importance of legitimacy through broadening societal support. This paradigm developed after the mid-2000s.

The main expectation formulated for this paper at this stage of the inquiry is that the literature on strategic planning in the European context reflected the succession of these three major reform paradigms. This would mean that:

- a) The articles developed within the NPM paradigm would be published until the end of the 1990s.
- b) The articles developed within the NWS paradigm would be published within the first half of the 2000s.
- c) The articles developed within the NPG paradigm would be published after the mid-2000s.

3. Methodology

A step-by-step approach was followed in order to identify the articles¹ to be included in this study.

I. The first step consisted of conducting a query on the Web of Science (v.5.20) database using a combination of search terms (all databases, all years), and using 'AND' as connector. 151 hits resulted after the first search.

The search was further limited to 'only articles', which resulted in 109 hits distributed across the following research areas: Environmental Sciences Ecology (34), Public Administration (22), Business Economics (21), Geography (20), and Urban Studies (12). The search has been further refined by using only the category 'Public Administration', as the goal of the project was to investigate the current state of the art of the research identified under this category. Further, the articles that included case studies or empirical materials from other regions than Europe (EU) have been eliminated.

Finally, 18 articles were included in the analysis. Out of these 18 titles, 13 were available full-text and five were available only as abstract. In the first research phase (reported here) the abstracts were coded along the dimensions indicated below. The coding was repeated after several days by the same investigator in order to check for reliability.

II. The second step of the research consisted of repeating the search on the Scopus Database. The same search terms: 'Local government', 'Strategy' and 'Europe' were used. After limiting the search to 'articles only' written in English, 104 hits remained. An additional check has been conducted in order to eliminate the articles which did not correspond to the geographical condition. As such, 83 entries remained in the analysis.

The three suppositions outlined above were operationalized along the following dimensions:

1. Predominant values: efficiency (NPM), effectiveness (NWS), and legitimacy (NPG);
2. Context: national/regional /local; and
3. Timing of the publication is considered as reference.

4. Results

Step I. The titles included in the first step of the analysis have been distributed across the following journals (Table 1).

This distribution suggests a predominant presence of the articles on the searched topics in two specific journals (Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy and European Planning Studies). It is interesting to note that only one 'typical' public administration journal is included in this overview.

¹ The list of references (articles) included in the analysis is available upon request.

Table 1: Distribution of articles across the journals, step I

Title	Number of articles
Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy	6
European Planning Studies	6
International Review of Administrative Sciences	1
Journal of Rural Studies	1
Journal of Planning Education and Research	1
Studies in Comparative International Development	1
International Journal of Urban and Regional Research	1
Lex Localis - Journal of Local Self-Government	1
Total	18

In terms of geographical distribution, the titles included in the analysis encompass: one comparison United States – Western Europe, two comparisons within Western Europe, five articles investigating UK (two at national level and three referring to different regions: England, Scotland, and a comparison England-Wales). Additionally, another study compares England, Denmark and the Netherlands. Separate cases are discussed within the national contexts of Denmark, Spain and the Netherlands. Central and Eastern European countries are included in two separate studies: one of them specifies Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, whereas the other one (available only as abstract) does not indicate the specific countries. Most of the studies investigate cases in Western Europe, with Central and Eastern Europe included to a lower extent. Even though the applied filter to select the articles was broader defined as ‘Europe’, one needs to note that the results indicate predominantly results from Western Europe.

Table 2: Predominant paradigm, step I

Predominant Paradigm	Number of articles
New Public Management	7
Neo-Weberian State	2
New Public Governance	9
Total	18

Open coding has been used in order to identify the predominant paradigm of the titles used for analysis. Elements specific to each paradigm have been used as proxies to estimate the position. For NPM, we counted economic instruments, privatization, instruments of performance management and competition. For NWS, we counted aspects such as balance between long-term and short-term, and importance of effectiveness in investments. For NPG, mentioning of involvement of broader societal actors (organizations and citizens), networks and cooperation were taken into account in that respect. It is interesting to note that, at least for the titles included in this analysis, NPG seems to be the predominant paradigm, followed by the NPM.

In terms of the year of publications within each paradigm, only the expectation according to which the NPM paradigm becomes predominant after mid 2000s is confirmed. The articles which were identified within this paradigm were published,

all, after 2004. For the other two paradigms, the articles defined within NPM and included in our analysis were published between 1993 and 2013, and the NWS in 2012 and 2015.

Step II. The second step of the analysis included a higher number of articles. They were distributed along the following journals:

Table 3: Distribution across journals, step II

Title	Number of articles
Local Government Studies	13
Local Environment	6
Public Administration	5
Environment and Planning C Government and Policy	4
Urban Studies	3
International Planning Studies	2
Journal of Housing and the Built Environment	2
International Journal of Public Sector Management	2
Environment and Planning A	2
Other	43
Total	82

Under the category ‘Other’ we have included journals where only one article that corresponded to the search criteria was included. It is interesting to note that in this step, more journals with a clear Public Administration/Public Management component are present, such as Local Government Studies, Public Administration, and International Journal of Public Sector Management. Journals in Environment and Planning areas remain well represented here as well.

In terms of the geographical variation, the following results were registered:

Table 4. Geographical distribution, step II

Country	Number of articles
United Kingdom	45
Netherlands	8
Spain	7
Sweden	5
Italy	4
France	3
Belgium	2
Denmark	2
Ireland	2
Total	78

The difference between the total number of abstracts included in the table above and the number included in the analysis stems from the fact that some articles have comparative designs and therefore include more countries in the analysis. It is interesting to note that more than half of the articles included in this analysis address the UK context/case. This corresponds both to more general trends in the literature and indicate as well the higher level of interest and tradition for the area in UK.

When looking further at the distribution of the paradigms, the following results are registered:

Table 5: Predominant paradigm, step II

Predominant Paradigm	Number of articles
New Public Management	29
Neo-Weberian State	23
New Public Governance	30
Total	82

The most striking aspect is that the distribution across paradigms is more balanced than in the previous step, where NPM and NPG are almost equal, with a slightly lower number of articles included in the NWS category (Figure 1).

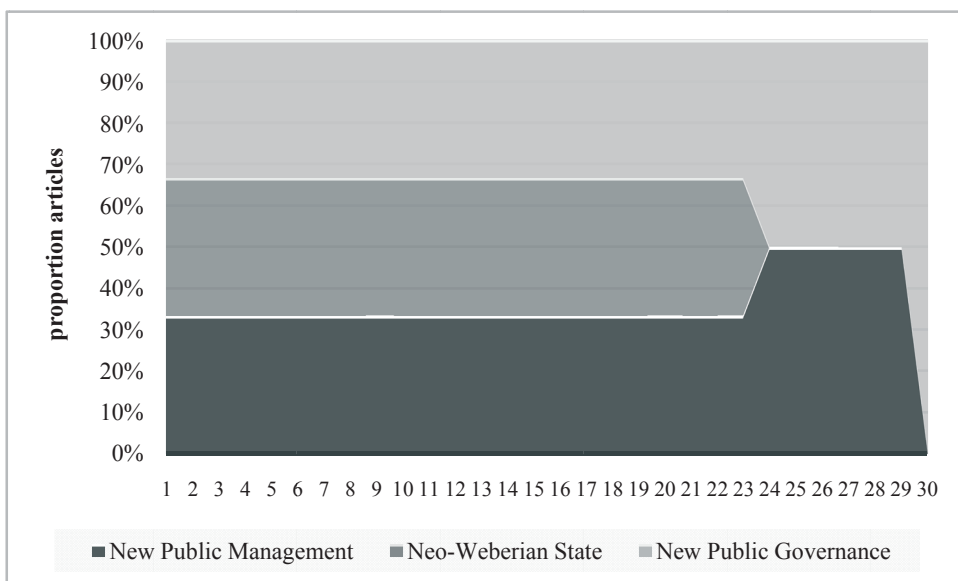


Figure 1: Distribution of articles across the three paradigms, step II

In terms of the distribution of the articles within the time span under analysis (Figure 2), one can note the following: in terms of numbers, there is a peak in publications in 2006, with generally a higher number of articles published in the period between 2004 and 2009.

Whereas NPM and NWS are almost distributed across the whole period under analysis, NPG is represented only after 2004. The latter observation is in line with the initial expectation formulated in regard to the evolution of NPM after the mid-2000s' and corresponds as well to the results obtained in Step I of the analysis.

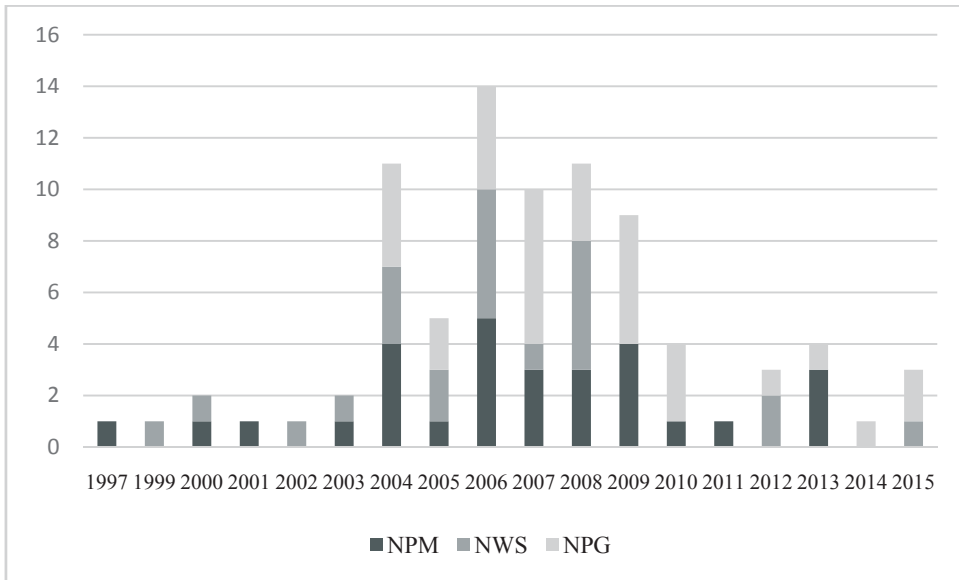


Figure 2: Distribution of articles across time, step II

5. Conclusion

The previous sections provide an overview on the preliminary results of a literature review investigating the state of the art of available research concerning strategic planning in local governments in Europe.

First, we have advanced three presuppositions underlining the relationship between the reform paradigm and the strategic planning process: a) that the reforms do take place in, within and across organizations, b) that there are different challenges in terms of strategic planning between national and local governments, and c) that the timing of the reform depends both on the electoral cycle as well as on the major reform paradigm existent at the moment of inquiry.

Then, we have outlined the main characteristics of the three major paradigms of public management reforms: New Public Management, Neo-Weberian State, and New Public Governance. We have formulated the expectation that the literature available would follow the succession of the public sector reform paradigm which developed within the last forty years. Both steps of the analysis executed in this report confirms so far only the expectation according to which the articles framed in terms characteristic for NPG would be published after the mid-2000s. It was interesting to note that the second step of the analysis brought in a nuancing of the initial expectation referring to the distribution of the NPM and NWS as paradigms used to frame inquiries concerning the strategy development. NPM and NWS remain present as meta-approaches to frame inquiries.

There are, however, a number of issues which have to be addressed before this project progresses both in terms of the theoretical grounding as well as in terms

of the process. First, following up the preliminary results summarized above, the coding would need to be refined for all three paradigms. In the preliminary results discussed above, particular efforts were made to include an article only within one paradigm. Often, this does not do justice to the authors' efforts to develop theoretical frameworks suitable to the research problems they addressed. We considered useful, however, to make the effort to obtain a broad picture of the evolution of the literature, because, so far, we could not find similar attempts made to investigate the extent to which these three paradigms were present in the literature across time. The next step needs to bring in a more fine grained distribution of the concepts specific to each of the paradigms.

Second, the process of coding needs to be improved. In this respect, the texts of the articles would need to be coded as well, in order to control for the limits imposed by using only the abstracts for the analysis. Whereas abstracts provide a concise picture of the article, they are often subject to different pre-requirements imposed by the editorial policy of the journal. The support of a second coder would be needed in order to better control for reliability of coding. In terms of coding the timing, it should be taken into account that in certain cases there is a delay of one, sometimes two years between the moment an article is accepted for publication and when it is actually published. Current analysis was limited only to articles, therefore reviews, conference papers, book chapters and books would need to be included as well.

The preliminary results discussed above attempt to classify the evolution of the literature on strategic planning along the three major public management reform paradigms. Several literature reviews published in recent years contribute substantially to the development of a comprehensive view of the state of the art in the area of public management reforms (Pollitt and Dan, 2011; Dan and Pollitt, 2015). However, to our knowledge, there are no similar attempts aiming to investigate the strategic planning in the European Union context. Current analysis provides a first step in order to address this gap in the literature.

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