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Panel: Understanding Successful Public Governance

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Panel outline:

Societies cannot survive and thrive if they are not governed well. The public's business – e.g. security and safety; health and well-being – needs to be managed effectively and efficiently. Achieving this in the current era of connectivity, transparency, accountability and assertive, skeptical and empowered citizens deeply challenges the institutions of government, which were largely designed for a drastically different era. We urgently need to learn more about how we can govern societies successfully under these new circumstances.

However, in both the popular and academic discourse, the focus is on the frailty and fallibility of our government institutions. Pessimism and negativity bias abound in contemporary discourse about government performance. In academia, this is echoed by a large body of research in public policy and public management, from Hall's (1982) classic *Great Planning Disasters* and Bovens and 't Hart's (1996)*Understanding Policy Fiascos*, to contemporary accounts of government, policy, project and agency failures, scandals and blunders (e.g. Allern and Pollack, 2012; Crewe and King, 2013; Schuck, 2014; Opperman and Spencer, 2016; Light, 2015). Consequently, the institutional, behavioural, political and media dynamics contributing to the occurrence and escalation of failure are increasingly well understood. We excel in explaining how policies fail, reforms falter, public money is wasted, public leaders are distrusted, and public institutions eroded.

And yet good governance is all around us, allowing us to learn from successes as well. In many parts of the world, the bulk of public projects, programs and services perform adequately and sometimes incredibly successfully. About the latter category – major accomplishments, striking successes in difficult circumstances, effective 'public value creation' in and by governments – political science and public administration have had little to say (lone voices are McConnell, 2010 and Moore, 2013). Therefore robust knowledge about the practices that produce good governance is hard to come by.

This imbalance will be addressed in the panel Understanding Successful Public Governance at the NIG conference 2017. Our panel aims to focus on the conceptual, methodological and theoretical challenges of studying what can be considered 'successful' public policies, programs, agencies and networks. The panel's goal is to investigate the nature of 'success' discourses and successful practices in 21st century public governance.

Paper proposals for this panel stream can focus on the following topics:

1. How is success in public governance defined and assessed by those who engage in it and those who experience it? E.g. performance indicators versus public value creation.

2. How is success in public governance framed in the political debate and media, and can behavioral insights help us comprehend the effect of this framing on key public actors (e.g. citizens or politicians)?

3. How does the concept of success in public governance relate to long-standing concepts within public administration research such as public service performance and legitimacy?

4. What can we learn from the (systematic, comparative, reflexive, in-depth, up-close) study of purportedly successful *public policies* as well as *public management practices*, highly reputed *public organizations,* and robust forms of *collaborative governance* about the conditions, principles and practices associated with successful public governance?

We invite authors to submit their papers on any of the above topics. These papers might take several forms. Submitted abstracts can contain conceptual or empirical, descriptive or explanatory and qualitative or quantitative research. The papers can be focused on a broad range of public organizations, collaborations and public policies. We will combine authors engaging with similar theoretical, empirical, or methodological issues within the same timeslot to stimulate focused discussions, but do seek diversity overall. What ties the different papers together is a shared interest in the factors and mechanisms which can make public action successful despite complexity, uncertainty, and social unrest.

Linkage between the panel and subthemes of the NIG research program
This panel is linked to two of the NIG subthemes, namely Public Management and Multi-Actor Governance in Complexity. First, success is often regarded as a result of good public management and leadership. The panel offers a platform for public management studies focusing on the relation between management practices, public service performance and successful public governance. Second, the panel topic is also concerned with multi actor governance in complexity. In Public Administration literature many studies claim that societal problems cannot be solved by government alone, governments have to cooperate with other parties to be successful. The panel also offers possibilities to link the two subthemes. Studying successful public governance can be a vehicle to connect the internal, organizational focus of public management with the external, environmental focus of multi actor governance.

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