From “New Institutionalism” to “Institutional Processualism”: Advancing Knowledge about Public Management Policy Change

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Research on public management reform has taken a decidedly disciplinary turn. Since the late 1990s, analytical issues are less often framed in terms of the New Public Management. As part of the disciplinary turn, much recent research on public management reform is highly influenced by the three new institutionalisms. However, these studies have implicitly been challenged by a competing research program on public management reform that is emphatically processual in its theoretical foundations. This article develops the challenge in a more explicit fashion. It provides a theoretical restatement of the competing “institutional processualist” research program and compares its substantive findings with those drawn from the neoinstitutionalisms. The implications of this debate about public management reform for comparative historical analysis and neoinstitutional theories are discussed.

During the past several years, the literature on the politics of public management reform has taken a disciplinary turn. While some early studies about public management reform in the 1980s and 1990s reflected historically and empirically oriented political science research styles (Campbell and Halligan 1992; Zifcak 1994), the dominant trend was pre-occupied with the New Public Management (NPM). Its analysis and causal accounts were focused on the ideological, doctrinal, and rhetorical aspects of public management reform (Aucoin 1990; Barzelay 1992; Hood 1991, 1998; Hood and Jackson 1991; Kettl 1997; Pollitt 1993; Pusey 1991; Savoie 1994). Theoretical strategies even more commonly utilized in the study of institutional and policy change were typically overlooked. As a consequence, the causal understanding of public management reform was less incisive than would otherwise have been the case (Barzelay 2000, 2001). The disciplinary turn is beginning to make up the lost ground.

With the disciplinary turn, the literature on public management reform has started to resemble the political science subdisciplines of comparative politics and public policy studies. As part of this trend, many

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