

From Governance to Poweranance: The Politics of Power in Public Administration

Isra muksin

Universitas Bumi Hijrah Tidore, Indonesia

Email: isram23@unibrahtidore.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examines public administration beyond the conventional lens of neutral governance by introducing the concept of poweranance, which emphasizes the role of power relations in shaping administrative practice. While governance frameworks highlight accountability, coordination, and institutional order, empirical evidence shows that administrative decisions are deeply influenced by political control, bargaining, and resource asymmetries among actors. A qualitative interpretive method was employed through document analysis of policy and regulatory texts and semi structured interviews with public administration practitioners across different governance contexts. The findings reveal that hierarchical accountability, performance management, collaborative networks, expert advice, and regulatory compliance are consistently mediated by power dynamics rather than purely procedural considerations. Administrative discretion, negotiation, and dominance emerge as key mechanisms through which governance principles are enacted. The discussion demonstrates that governance operates within political environments where actors strategically influence administrative outcomes. The study concludes that public administration is better understood as poweranance, where governance structures function within dynamic configurations of power. Recognizing this perspective provides a more realistic understanding of how policies and public services are produced in practice.

Keywords: Public administration, Governance, Poweranance, Power relations, Administrative decision making

1. Introduction

Public administration has long been framed through the lens of governance: rules, accountability, coordination, and institutional arrangements designed to deliver public value in an orderly and neutral manner. Classical doctrines such as the politics–administration dichotomy positioned administration as a technical and impartial executor of political will. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges this assumption, arguing that administrative action is inseparable from power relations, political interests, and struggles over authority. Administrative decisions are not merely procedural outcomes of governance principles but are deeply embedded in political contexts where actors negotiate, contest, and exercise power (Peters et al., 2022).

Recent studies demonstrate that across paradigms of Traditional Public Administration (TPA), New Public Management (NPM), and New Public Governance (NPG), the distribution of resources and authority among actors significantly shapes administrative behavior. Hierarchical control in TPA often turns bureaucracy into an instrument of centralized political dominance. In NPM, dispersed authority among elites and market actors allows powerful stakeholders to influence administrative outputs through performance contracts and managerial tools. In NPG, collaborative networks require



repeated negotiation, where power asymmetries among actors affect governance outcomes (Eckersley et al., 2024; Aristovnik et al., 2022; Hafer et al., 2022). These findings indicate that governance structures are inseparable from configurations of power.

The phenomenon becomes even more evident when administrative practice is observed in different political regimes. Research on authoritarian systems reveals that administrative architecture is directly shaped by the concentration of power at the top of the regime. Administrative choices, policy solutions, and bureaucratic behavior differ fundamentally from democratic settings because they are embedded in distinct power structures (Chan, 2024). This shows that administration is not simply governance in action but governance filtered through political power arrangements.

Administrative decision making, therefore, can be understood as an arena of control, bargaining, and dominance. The relationship between politicians and bureaucrats has been described as a continuum ranging from political dominance to administrative dominance, with zones of negotiation and value convergence in between (Callahan & Mau, 2023). Politicians and administrators alike use design controls and intervention mechanisms to steer expert advice toward their preferred outcomes (Hesstvedt & Christensen, 2021). In contexts of democratic backsliding, the transaction of authority between political actors and bureaucracies changes as expert advice becomes contested, and the resilience of expertise depends on the solidarity of epistemic communities (Koga et al., 2023).

These dynamics are also evident in international and regional organizations such as the European Union and the African Union, where administrative actors adopt strategies such as acquiescence or preference building to manage conflicts with multiple political principals (Fleischer & Reiners, 2021; Iroulo & Boateng, 2023). Administrative actors are not passive implementers but strategic players navigating complex power environments. Studies from China and other authoritarian regimes further illustrate bureaucracy as a battlefield where officials across levels negotiate, compete, and defend their interests within fragmented power structures (Liu et al., 2022; Chan, 2024). This perspective challenges the assumption that administration is a neutral instrument of governance and instead highlights it as a space of political contestation.

Despite this growing recognition, mainstream public administration research still tends to treat governance as a technical, depoliticized concept. Many studies emphasize institutional design, performance measurement, and accountability mechanisms while underplaying the political and power dimensions that shape administrative behavior. Scholars have noted that the “lifeblood of administration is power,” calling for deeper integration of power and democracy into administrative studies (Peters et al., 2022; Hafer et al., 2022). However, such calls remain underdeveloped in empirical and conceptual research.

Collaborative governance studies, for instance, often adopt functional or critical perspectives on power but rarely employ constructivist or pragmatic lenses that capture how power is enacted and negotiated in daily administrative practices (Hafer et al., 2022). Administrative research is frequently over operationalized and under politicized, lacking connections to broader elite power dynamics and macro political contexts (Peters et al., 2022; Fleischer & Reiners, 2021).

The limitations of current frameworks become even clearer when examining authoritarian contexts, where mainstream public administration theories lack the vocabulary

to explain how authoritarian power architectures shape administrative practice (Chan, 2024). This reveals a conceptual gap between governance theory and the lived reality of administrative power. The research gap, therefore, lies in the need to reconceptualize public administration not merely as governance but as “poweranance” a practice where governance mechanisms operate within, and are shaped by, power relations. This concept emphasizes that administration is not neutral but is continuously influenced by political bargaining, dominance, negotiation, and control among actors.

The novelty of this study is the introduction of the concept of “poweranance” as an analytical lens to understand administrative practice. By integrating insights from governance paradigms, political–administrative relations, and studies of authoritarian and collaborative contexts, this research offers a more comprehensive framework to analyze how power operates within administrative systems. Based on this background, the objective of this study is to analyze how public administration functions as a practice of power rather than merely a neutral governance mechanism, by examining how administrative decisions reflect political control, bargaining processes, and power configurations across different governance contexts.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach with a comparative case-oriented design to examine how public administration operates as a practice of power rather than as a neutral governance mechanism. Data are collected through two primary techniques. First, an extensive document analysis is conducted on policy documents, administrative regulations, official reports, and institutional guidelines that reflect decision-making processes within public organizations across different governance contexts. These documents are selected to capture how administrative actions are framed, justified, and operationalized in practice. Second, semi structured interviews are carried out with public officials, policy advisors, and administrative practitioners to explore how they perceive and experience political influence, bargaining processes, and power relations in their daily administrative work. The combination of documentary sources and practitioner insights enables a comprehensive understanding of both formal governance structures and informal power dynamics.

Data analysis follows an interpretive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and documents are coded to identify recurring themes related to political control, negotiation, dominance, collaboration, and administrative discretion. Pattern matching is used to compare how power manifests across different governance paradigms such as hierarchical, managerial, and network-based administration. Cross case comparison is then conducted to interpret how administrative practices vary in democratic, collaborative, and authoritarian contexts. This analytical process allows the study to reveal how governance mechanisms are embedded within power configurations and to conceptualize administration as “poweranance” shaped by ongoing political and institutional interactions.

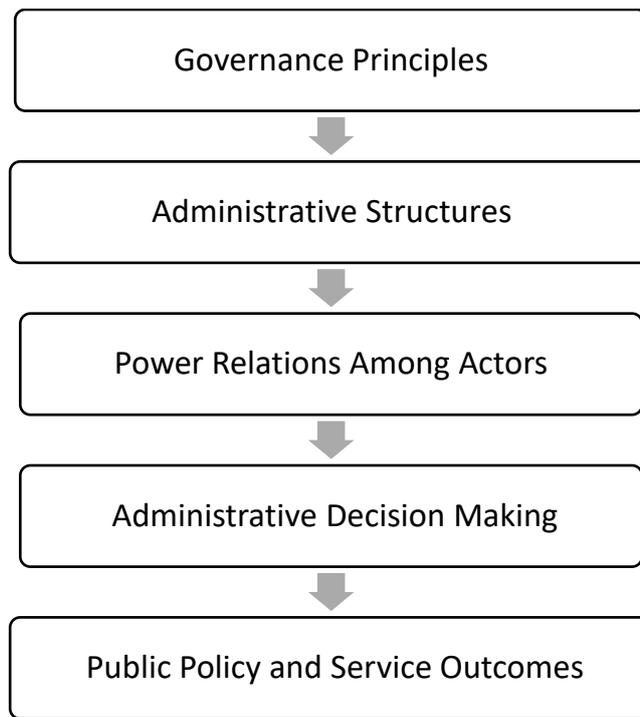


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results and Discussion

The following table summarizes findings derived from policy documents, administrative regulations, and interviews with public administration practitioners. It illustrates how formal governance principles are applied in administrative settings, yet in practice are shaped by power relations, negotiation, and control among actors in the decision-making process.

Table 1. Manifestation of Power Relations in Administrative Practice

Governance Principle Applied	Observed Administrative Practice	Form of Power Relation Identified	Impact on Policy/Service Outcome
Hierarchical accountability	Top-down directives dominate implementation	Political dominance over bureaucracy	Policies reflect central political priorities
Performance-based management	Targets negotiated between elites and administrators	Bargaining between managerial and political actors	Outputs adjusted to satisfy powerful stakeholders
Collaborative governance networks	Repeated negotiation among unequal actors	Power asymmetry within networks	Decisions favor actors with stronger resources/influence

Expert-based policy advice	Selective use or control of expert recommendations	Control and intervention by political actors	Expert input aligned with political preferences
Regulatory compliance	Flexible interpretation of rules in sensitive contexts	Administrative discretion influenced by power	Uneven implementation across sectors
Multi-level governance (regional/international)	Preference building and strategic accommodation	Negotiation with multiple political principals	Compromise-driven policy choices

The table shows that although public administration is formally grounded in governance principles such as accountability, performance, collaboration, and regulatory compliance, actual practice reveals the dominance of power relations. Administrative decisions do not merely follow formal rules but are influenced by political dominance, bargaining processes, power asymmetries within networks, and bureaucratic discretion shaped by the interests of powerful actors. These findings reinforce the argument that public administration is better understood as a practice of *powerance*, where governance operates within dynamic configurations of power.

Discussion

The findings presented in the table, derived from document analysis and practitioner interviews, demonstrate that administrative practice cannot be adequately understood through a purely technocratic governance lens. Although governance principles such as accountability, performance management, collaboration, expert advice, and regulatory compliance formally structure administrative work, the empirical evidence shows that these principles are continuously shaped, negotiated, and sometimes distorted by power relations among actors. This confirms the central argument of this study that public administration operates as *powerance*, where governance mechanisms are embedded within political control, bargaining, dominance, and asymmetrical resource distribution.

A major starting point for this discussion is the limitation of the depoliticized governance paradigm. Peters et al. (2022) show that mainstream public administration research has increasingly emphasized managerialism, institutional design, and operational performance, while underrepresenting the role of politics, power, and democracy. This is reflected in the table where hierarchical accountability appears as a formal governance principle, yet in practice is dominated by top-down political directives. Administrative actors reported that policy implementation often reflects central political priorities rather than neutral procedural adherence. This mirrors the argument by Christensen and Lægreid (2022), who demonstrated during the COVID-19 crisis in Norway that the boundaries between political and administrative domains became blurred as administrative leaders acted as political actors in decision-making processes.

The table also highlights how performance-based management becomes a site of bargaining between elites and administrators. Rather than objective measurement of outputs, performance indicators are negotiated to satisfy powerful stakeholders. This finding aligns with

Eckersley et al. (2024), who conceptualize accountability as a function of resource distribution and power within governance networks. In NPM settings, actors with greater economic or political resources are able to influence how performance targets are defined and evaluated. As Aristovnik et al. (2022) argue, governance structures do not eliminate power asymmetries but reorganize them into contractual and managerial forms.

Collaborative governance networks, often celebrated as egalitarian spaces of participation, were found in this study to exhibit significant power asymmetries. Decisions tended to favor actors with stronger resources and influence, confirming Hafer et al. (2022) that collaborative governance still operates through uneven power relations despite its rhetoric of cooperation. Repeated negotiation among unequal actors reinforces existing hierarchies rather than dissolving them. This observation directly supports the conceptual move from governance to powerance, where collaboration becomes a medium for power negotiation.

Another critical finding concerns expert-based policy advice. Although governance models emphasize evidence-based decision making, the table reveals selective use or control of expert recommendations. Political actors intervene in the design and interpretation of expert input to align outcomes with their preferences. Hesstvedt and Christensen (2021) explain this phenomenon as the use of design control mechanisms by both politicians and administrators to steer expert contributions. Similarly, Koga et al. (2023) show that during democratic backsliding, expert advice becomes politicized and its acceptance depends on the resilience of epistemic communities.

Regulatory compliance, often assumed to be rule-bound, was also found to involve flexible interpretation in politically sensitive contexts. Administrative discretion is exercised in ways that reflect power interests rather than strict rule adherence. This finding resonates with Liu et al. (2022), who describe bureaucracy as a battlefield where actors negotiate and reinterpret rules to defend their interests within fragmented power structures. Administrative discretion becomes a technique of power rather than a neutral professional judgment.

The multi-level governance dimension further illustrates preference building and strategic accommodation. Administrative actors negotiate with multiple political principals and adjust decisions to maintain institutional stability. Fleischer and Reiners (2021) and Iroulo and Boateng (2023) demonstrate how administrators in supranational organizations adopt strategies such as acquiescence or preference shaping to navigate complex political expectations. This confirms that governance across levels is deeply political and shaped by power considerations.

These findings are consistent with studies from authoritarian contexts. Chan (2024) argues that in authoritarian regimes, bureaucracy is fundamentally shaped by elite power configurations. Administrative choices are embedded in political control structures, and bureaucrats operate within a battlefield of fragmented authority. The empirical patterns observed in this study, though not limited to authoritarian contexts, echo this logic: administrative practice reflects underlying power architectures.

The concept of powerance is further supported by empirical cases in different contexts. Tambunan and Muda (2025) show how bureaucratic reform in Indonesia, intended to enhance accountability and transparency, was shaped by patronage, political intervention, and electoral interests. Accountability became a formal ritual rather than substantive practice. This closely mirrors the finding in the table where governance principles exist formally but are reshaped by power dynamics.

Similarly, Yidana (2025) demonstrates in the context of university governance in Ghana how legal documents and centralized structures concentrate authority in external boards, creating pseudo participation while maintaining executive dominance. This illustrates how documents and procedures become instruments of power discipline, aligning with Kawakami et al. (2024) and Oleiwi and Abdalwahid (2025) who analyze procedures and discretion as micro techniques of power.

The Norwegian COVID-19 case (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022) further exemplifies how crisis situations intensify power centralization and blur political-administrative boundaries. Administrative leaders and experts became key political actors, reinforcing the idea that administration is inherently political.

From these discussions, it becomes evident that governance frameworks alone are insufficient to explain administrative behavior. The distribution of resources, authority, and influence among actors determines how governance principles are interpreted and applied. This supports Eckersley et al. (2024) who link accountability patterns to power-resource configurations across TPA, NPM, and NPG.

The research objective of this study was to analyze how public administration functions as a practice of power rather than merely a neutral governance mechanism. The findings clearly show that administrative decisions reflect political control, bargaining, negotiation, and dominance across governance contexts. Governance provides the formal structure, but power determines the operational reality.

The direction for future research, as suggested by Peters et al. (2022) and Liu et al. (2022), is to re-politicize public administration studies by reintegrating concepts of power, democracy, and citizenship into analysis. The concept of *powerance* offers a vocabulary to bridge this gap, allowing scholars to examine how governance operates within political power configurations.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms that public administration cannot be adequately understood as a neutral application of governance principles, but rather as a practice deeply embedded in power relations, political control, bargaining processes, and resource asymmetries among actors. The findings demonstrate that formal mechanisms such as accountability, performance management, collaboration, expert advice, and regulatory compliance are consistently shaped by underlying configurations of power that influence how administrative decisions are interpreted and implemented. Across hierarchical, managerial, and network governance contexts, administrative practice reflects dominance, negotiation, and strategic discretion rather than procedural neutrality. These patterns validate the study's objective by showing that public administration operates as *powerance*, where governance structures function within dynamic political environments. Therefore, understanding administrative outcomes requires analyzing not only institutional arrangements but also the political and power dynamics that define how governance is enacted in practice.

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