

Perspectives on New Public Governance: A Term Worth Legitimizing?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: New Public Governance (NPG) has gained significant attention in the public management literature, yet its precise nature and legitimacy remain unclear. This study assesses the status of NPG and examines whether its legitimacy as a concept, theory or paradigm has been established.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A two-pronged methodological approach is employed: the first prong comprises a thematic-realist review of legitimacy theory, situated in relation to the literature on NPG theory legitimacy; the second entails a bibliometric analysis, conducted as a semi-systematic literature review, to trace its scientific impact. The study explores whether the term 'NPG' indicates potential for practical application, the direction of its development and its classification within the 'concept-theory-paradigm' framework.

Findings: The research concludes that NPG is a distinct, contemporary strand with its own characteristics and potential for theoretical development. However, scientific clarity within the 'concept-theory-paradigm' triad has not yet been achieved, necessitating further research.

Academic contribution to the field: This study fills a research gap by positioning NPG within public management and assessing its potential for further substantive development. It contributes to discussions on the legitimacy and trajectory of NPG as an evolving framework.

Originality/Significance/Value: This is the first study to comprehensively assess whether NPG can progress towards becoming a fully established theoretical framework in public management. The findings encourage further scholarly exploration and conceptual development in this field.

Keywords: New Public Governance, NPG, legitimization of theory, public management, public administration, literature review

Perspektive novega javnega upravljanja: izraz, vreden legitimacije?

POVZETEK

Namen: Novo javno upravljanje (NJU) v literaturi o javnem menedžmentu uživa veliko pozor-nost, vendar sta njegova natančna narava in legitimnost še vedno nejasni. Članek ocenjuje status NJU in preučuje, ali je njegova legitimnost kot koncept, teorija ali paradigma že vzpostavljena.

Zasnova/metodologija/pristop: Uporabljena je dvotirna metodologija: (1) tematsko-realistični pregled teorije legitimnosti, postavljen ob bok literaturi o legitimnosti teorije NJU; ter (2) bibliometrična analiza (polsistematični pregled literature), ki sledi znanstvenemu vplivu NJU. Članek raziskuje, ali izraz »NJU« nakazuje potencial za praktično uporabo, smer njegovega razvoja in njegovo umeščanje v okvir »koncept-teorija-paradigma«.

Ugotovitve: Članek ugotavlja, da je NJU samostojna, sodobna usmeritev z lastnimi značilnostmi in potencialom za teoretični razvoj. Vendar znanstvena jasnost znotraj triade »koncept-teorija-paradigma« še ni dosežena, zato je potrebno nadaljnje raziskovanje.

Prispevek k stroki: Članek zapolnjuje vrzel v raziskavah, saj umešča NJU v javni menedžment in ocenjuje njegov potencial za nadaljnji vsebinski razvoj. Prispeva k razpravam o legitimnosti in razvoju NJU kot razvijajočega se okvira.

Izvirnost/pomen/vrednost: To je prva študija, ki celovito ocenjuje, ali lahko NJU napreduje do popolnoma uveljavljenega teoretičnega okvira v javnem menedžmentu. Ugotovitve spodbujajo nadaljnje akademsko raziskovanje in konceptualni razvoj na tem področju.

Ključne besede: novo javno upravljanje, NJU, legitimacija teorije, javni menedžment, javna uprava, pregled literature

JEL: H83

1 Introduction

New Public Governance (NPG) is a novel paradigm in public administration, particularly for the variety of stakeholders who eventually can feel and be involved in the creative process of management and creation of public policies (Jing, 2015; Sharma and Kumar, 2023). The involvement and the creative participation of others seem to be more than just a passing trend or recommendation but even a necessity for contemporary public organizations due to permanent changeability (Noone et al., 2021). In the pre-NPG realms, stakeholders were placed lower in the organization management paradigm, but now they can, within the spirit of collaborative governance and based on NPG, get involved in decision-driven policies made by the public organization

(Lindqvist, 2019). The potential of NPG is so impactful that it also influences others, such as the EDM approach (emergency disaster management) which, with the help of horizontal structures, finds applications of common and urgent health, climate or financial crises, so current in today's functioning of organizations (Hattke & Martin, 2020). A broad, deeper definition of NPG was undertaken by Brock (2020), who associated New Public Governance with governance through networks, with active stakeholder involvement, through the lens of values such as trust, transparency and mutual cooperation. The new paradigm is becoming increasingly recognizable and investigated by public management experts despite their relatively short 19-year experience by scientific standards. Insufficient understanding and development of the terminological foundations of New Public Governance led authors to conclude that NPG is perceived as a concept, in other cases, as either a theory or trend or even a managerial revolution or paradigm in public organizations. This research issue affects the recognition of a new concept for coordinating public administration in scientific terms.

The main motivation of the manuscript is to fill the scientific gap that is the contemporary understanding of the NPG concept, to determine its status in public management and its potential as a scientific term for the future. The authors note the considerable interest in New Public Governance in the literature and have the intention of assessing whether a scientific saturation of the terminology has taken place. The sources of the research efforts undertaken can also be found in the broader initiative aimed at expanding the principles of New Public Governance within academic discourse and public discussion. The innovativeness of the study is contained in both the substantive (clarification and contribution to the new concept of public management) and methodological (hybrid approach realized in thematic-realist way) layers.

Therefore, the objective of the paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to examine whether New Public Governance has become a well-established scientific term that has obtained sufficient evidence for its constitution and legitimization.¹ On the other hand it strives to verify whether this legitimization has shifted towards capturing the NPG as a concept, theory or paradigm. Hence, the possible implication of such investigation is also settled on two complementary layers. The first is a philosophical one concerning the theoretical, scientific conditions of the NPG theme discerned as a concept, theory, or idea for transforming public administration. The second stratum is analytical, where we scrutinize the potential to anchor the NPG concept in the management sciences from a bibliometric perspective. However, considering the novelty of New Public Governance and the growing interest in this phenomenon, and therefore in the formation of novel theories, our research is presented as a short-form theoretical (perspective) paper, given the urge to propound

1 For full clarification and understanding of the authors' purpose, legitimacy/legitimization is used in this article as a construct to explain the scientific consolidation, constitution and perpetuation of phenomena that become concepts, theories or paradigms through their impact on learning and development from terms. This process lays the groundwork for a given scientific concept to become an important contribution to science, to be utilitarian for prosumers and consumers of science, and to be worthy of further conceptualization.

the load-bearing and entrenched findings and the imperative to develop the theory in the chosen field further. The authors of this study take the position that the creation of the NPG theory still needs to be completed. Still, the research material accumulated so far makes it possible to undertake a scientific dispute. The NPG concept has yet to be investigated thoroughly in definitional terms. The motivation for addressing this topic is to reflect on new theories of public management, including NPG, as a response to the state of public administration. By design, they are expected to bring fresh, constructive solutions to public organizations. Therefore, it is essential to consider whether they have the necessary scientific background, research visibility, and scientific consideration to transport them toward decision-makers. This is especially relevant in the context of New Public Governance, which can potentially solve some of the sector's problems, particularly along the organization-stakeholder line (Sørensen and Torfing, 2017).

The authors pose the following research questions that guide this study:

- Does the use of the term NPG in literature indicate the potential for its further use in factual public management realms?
- In which direction is the development of NPG heading, and how can its potential be harnessed considering the identified trends?
- How to determine the status of New Public Governance in terms of concept, theory or paradigm?²

The above research questions are aimed to contribute to a stronger theoretical legitimization of NPG, providing valuable insights for its further development. Additionally, they will foster stronger connections and collaboration between various entities involved in public management.

2 Methodological Approach and Structure

This paper utilized a mixed two-pronged methodology that combines the advantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the research problem. This kind of research strategy addresses the scientific challenges and research questions posed earlier in a more comprehensive, broader manner (McChesney and Aldridge, 2019). Therefore, this study employs a hybrid approach to the literature review, combining elements of both a semi-systematic and realist review. The semi-systematic review of literature, which we developed, is inspired by the PRISMA methodology (Page et al., 2021) and aims to broadly establish the relevance of the topic, synthesizing key trends in the literature rather than focusing on an exhaustive analysis of each individual study. This approach helps demonstrate the significance of the subject matter and provides a solid theoretical foundation. On the other hand, the thematic-realistic review (cf. Paré and Kitsiou, 2017) adopts a more interpretative and theory-driven perspec-

² The authors intentionally and interchangeably refer to New Public Governance as a concept, theory or paradigm to avoid repetition. This is a purely linguistic procedure, and is not meant, however, to dissect or decide what NPG is.

tive, delving deeper into selected works to highlight connections between them. This approach emphasizes the theoretical contributions and quality of the studies, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms at play, particularly in complex policy-making contexts (Greenhalgh et al., 2011). Thematic-realist review methodology was applied to explore the conceptual foundations of NPG, including: (i) the development of new theories in social sciences, (ii) the legitimacy of NPG as a scientific theory, and (iii) comparative positioning of NPG within governance models. By integrating both methods, this hybrid approach enables a comprehensive analysis that not only identifies key trends but also explores the theoretical core of the literature, while also proving the (ir)relevance of the given research area.

To achieve the paper's objective, we split the main part of the research (Section 3) into three subsequent segments. The first section (3.1) strives to highlight the timeliness and relevance of the NPG topic, which incorporates a semi-systematic literature review based on automated selective screening according to PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Regarding the topic's relevance, the future direction of research in this area may be to conduct a comprehensive systematic review of the literature on NPG and its applicability with detailed bibliometric analyses. Incorporating this quantitative approach on the review of literature ensured that key publication patterns, along with co-occurrence keyword networks were identified. International bibliographic databases (i.e., Scopus and Web of Science), whose effectiveness in analyzing the literature has been scientifically proven (Wang and Waltman, 2016), were used as data sources. We conducted the analysis using the Bibliometrix package (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017) to properly aggregate, and visualize bibliometric findings, as well to remove duplicates.

The second section (3.2) provides an umbrella review (more specifically, "theory about theory") and the basics of developing scientific concepts. This passage does not directly refer to New Public Governance but attempts to define the procedure for creating new theories and their constitution. The section was developed in line with the thematic-realistic review principles (cf. Paré and Kitsiou, 2017), while highlighting the aspect of the creation of new theories and verification of their status, deliberately omitting issues related to the philosophy of science, which is a separate and rich research topic. A literature review and research material search were conducted for keywords such as theory formation, theory legitimacy, legitimization of theory, new theories, concept, paradigm.

The third section (3.3) references previous considerations, especially from Section 3.2 to the NPG construct. The analysis focused on tracing how NPG has been framed, debated, and validated in academic discourse. It draws from Section 3.2 by emphasizing the grounding in considerations of theory creation and from Section 3.1 by accentuating the validity and timeliness of the research problem addressed. It is also a juxtaposition between the process of theory creation and the NPG concept to determine whether New Public Governance is an independently functioning, isolated, and scientifically supported

theory. To this end, a thematic-realist review of the literature regarding theory creation was again used. Thanks to the review, the authors join the debate on NPG conducted by an increasing number of scientists and analyze New Public Governance in terms of strong supporters of its functioning as a defined and well-established theory and other scientific trends. A literature review and research material search were conducted for keywords such as NPG legitimacy, legitimization of NPG, understanding of NPG, meaning of NPG.

To ensure theoretical rigor in sections 3.2 and 3.3, a two-step thematic coding process was applied: (i) inductive coding was used to identify recurring theoretical perspectives, and (ii) deductive coding was applied based on existing frameworks of theory development and legitimacy (cf. Paré and Kitsiou, 2017). Findings from the qualitative part of the study (theory formulation vs. NPG legitimacy) were juxtaposed in a meaningful way to undertake an assessment of the legitimacy status of the theory. The results of this part were supplemented with conclusions from the bibliometric part. All the collected research material was subjected to interpretation in order to make research conclusions, according to the adopted thematic-realistic methodology. Using the possibilities of the article's structure, authors synthesize the obtained information, add their comments to the topic, make their recommendations based on the collected research material, and enter into dialogue with other researchers with the orientation on the NPG concept in order to achieve the main goal of the article.

The sections of the paper, although methodologically different, constitute an inherent compendium that aims to achieve the objectives of the article and answer the research questions. In order to understand whether New Public Governance is viewed as a concept, theory or paradigm or otherwise (Section 3.3), the authors deliberately introduce the reader to the theoretical underpinnings of the legitimization of the theory, with reference to the concept and the paradigm (Section 3.2). The use of various methods (semi-systematic, and thematic-realist literature review) is intentional and aims to provide the broadest possible view of the subject under study. The paper culminates in Section 4, with conclusions, study's limitations, and directions for future research.

3 Legitimization of the NPG Term

3.1 Bibliometric Analysis

To explain the relevance of the NPG topic, we analyzed literature sources in a systematic manner in internationally recognized bibliographic databases: Scopus (Elsevier) and Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics). Records were retrieved from these databases on May 4, 2024. We decided to track how many sources correspond to the "new public governance" search query – abstracts, titles, and keywords were searched. Due to the ambiguity of the acronym "NPG," the occurrence of which is also common in material science, it was decided that this phrase would not be analyzed. The Scopus database searched for 346 such sources, while the Web of Science database searched for 282. To remove

duplicate records, the Bibliometrix library (based on the R language) was used for bibliometric analysis (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). The 211 duplicates were eliminated, and the ensuing merged results from these databases consist of 417 unique records, with NPG as the axis. Papers that solely focused on New Public Management (NPM) or other governance models without direct reference to NPG as a distinct framework were excluded. Criteria for further inclusion of sources were then determined; only the following sources were allowed: article, book chapter, conference paper, and the publication language was English. Using Microsoft Excel, sources that did not meet the inclusion criteria were filtered out, and thus, 353 records were admitted for further analysis. Due to the desire to illustrate the emergence of NPG topics in various scientific areas and the relatively small number of sources, it was decided to perform a bibliometric analysis on this dataset without further manual screening. The inclusion criteria proved sufficient to demonstrate the relevance of the subject matter using the automated part of the PRISMA methodology (Page et al., 2021), which was applied in this analysis of the literature sources. The process of identifying and admitting scientific sources for bibliography analysis is illustrated in Figure 1. Inclusion criteria are presented in Table 1. The analyzed Microsoft Excel file containing the sources (generated with Bibliometrix package utilization) is attached to the article as a Supplementary File.

Figure 1. The progress of bibliometric analysis in the Scopus and Web of Science databases

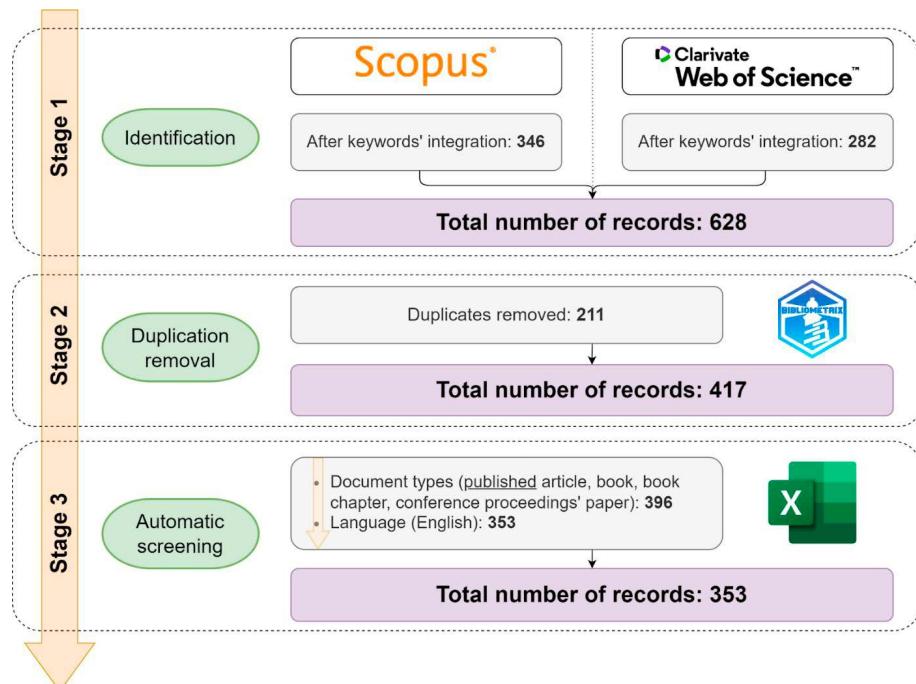


Table 1. Basic information about inclusion criteria and source retrieval process

Databases:	Scopus (Elsevier), Web of Science Core Collection (Clarivate Analytics)
Query:	– Scopus: TITLE-ABS-KEY (»new public governance«) – Web of Science: »new public governance«
Document types:	<u>Published</u> article, book, book chapter, conference paper*
Language:	English
Software used:	RStudio, Bibliometrix library (R language extension), Microsoft Excel
Date of sources' retrieval:	May 4, 2024

Note ():* Osborne's articles from 2006 and 2009 (Osborne, 2006; 2009) were initially classified as editorials, but for the study's purposes, they were assigned to the 'article' document type.

3.1.1 Publication Trends

The analysis consists of 353 papers published in 199 sources, whose time range of publication was from 2006 to 2024. The largest number published at the time of the analysis were scientific articles (229),³ book chapters were published slightly less (61), and the smallest number in bibliographic databases were conference papers on the theme of NPG (49). NPG books with 14 published titles were also submitted for analysis. By the time of the analysis, 642 unique authors had written on NPG, whose papers are indexed in Scopus and Web of Science databases. It should be emphasized that the average age of a paper is less than six years (more precisely, 5.76 years), indicating the subject matter's timeliness. This is also confirmed by the high average citation rate per paper (more than 20 citations on average) and the annual growth of articles on NPG, which is almost 20 percent (precisely 18.11%; also including publications in 2024, where there were statistically fewer published papers at the time of the analysis held at the end of the first quarter of 2024). The growing trend of published articles on NPG is shown in Figure 2, where the distribution of articles published each year is illustrated. Table 2 shows general information about analyzed documents about NPG, while Table 3 illustrates the number of published documents according to their type.

³ The earliest occurring source that talks about NPG (and is somewhat credited with being the article giving life to the NPG concept) is Osborne's 2006 article (Osborne, 2006), however, it is originally classified as editorial. For the purposes of this analysis, due to the relevance of this source, it will be assigned to the 'article' document type. A similar treatment was applied to Osborne's (2009) article elaborating on NPG's original thought, which was also classified as editorial.

Figure 2. Annual scientific production of NPG-related articles



Note. Data retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science databases on May 4, 2024.
Data for 2024 is still incomplete.

Table 2. General information about analyzed documents about NPG

Timespan	2006:2024
Sources (Journals, books, etc.)	199
Documents	353
Annual Growth Rate	18.11%
Document Average Age	5.76
Average citations per doc	20.09
Authors	642

Table 3. Document types

article	229
book chapter	61
conference paper	49
book	14

Note: Osborne's articles from 2006 and 2009 (Osborne, 2006; 2009) were initially classified as editorials but were assigned to the 'article' document type for the study's purposes.

The chart above (Figure 2) shows the annual number of scientific documents created to treat New Public Governance. What emerges from it is a clear annual upward trend, which has been accelerating since 2013. Also, since then, the annual number of papers has doubled. This confirms the thesis that NPG

is of growing interest to scholars, who are increasingly studying the phenomenon of New Public Governance annually. Since 2011, it is possible to observe "pits" that are higher as the years go by, as well as the years in which most papers were produced (2020, 2014, 2023). The trend is upward, and by the current number of articles for 2024 at the time of writing this paper (20), one can conclude that it will continue.

The above Table 2 totals information on the unraveling scientific trend of New Public Governance. Noteworthy is the noticeable double-digit annual growth rate of scientific papers that study and analyze this topic. On the other hand, the average scientific article's average period does not exceed six years, which means the relative pioneering of NPG as a scientific term. At the same time, the number of sources and authors writing about NPG allows more authors to enter this subject of public governance and, arguably, to find interesting scientific niches.

Table 3, seen above, shows the kinds of scientific documents dealing with the notion of New Public Governance. The most important finding from this source will be the claim that NPG is being analyzed using a wide range of scientific instrumentation through shorter scientific forms (scholarly articles) and chapters in monographs or entire monographs. The latter may be evidence of the thematic breadth, depth, and, at the same time, the need to provide a theoretical basis for New Public Governance through longer scientific forms for academia.

3.1.2 Most Globally Cited Documents

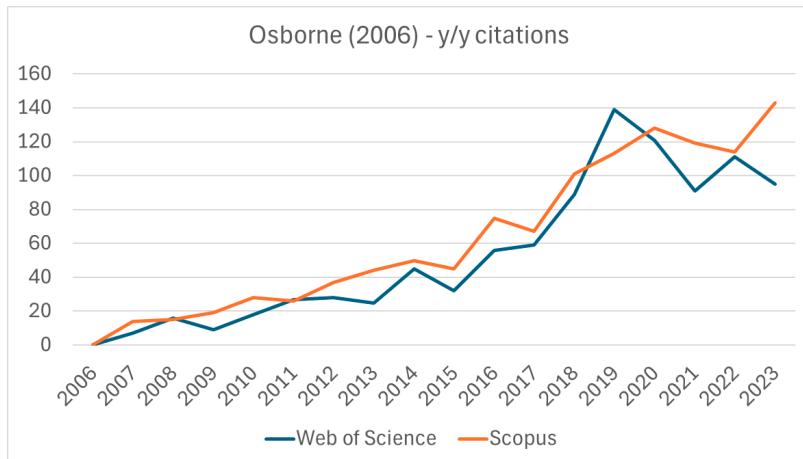
The bibliographic dataset analyzed includes 14 documents with the highest impact, i.e., those with at least 100 global citations or an average annual number of global citations of ten. Among them are four papers authored (or co-authored) by Stephen P. Osborne, two documents by Jacob Torfing, and two by Eva Sørensen. Table 4, presented below, shows the discussed source documents that can be referred to as the most influential and those that, over time, have been most readily used by researchers to analyze the NPG concept and its applicability. Figures 3-6 highlight the annual citation data from Table 4 for the four most-cited journal articles from Scopus and Web of Science (which are thus the most influential), underscoring the growing interest in NPG topics.

Table 4. Most cited documents on the NPG theme

Document reference	Type of publication	Total global citations	Total global citations per year
(Osborne, 2006)	journal article	1199	63.11
(Osborne et al., 2013)	journal article	507	42.25
(Osborne, 2010a)	book	461	28.81
(Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012)	journal article	274	21.08
(Torfing et al., 2019)	journal article	273	45.50
(O'Reilly & Reed, 2010)	journal article	155	10.33
(Sørensen & Torfing 2017)	journal article	146	18.25
(Torfing & Triantafillou, 2013)	journal article	145	12.08
(Fledderus et al., 2014)	journal article	137	12.45
(Sorrentino et al., 2018)	journal article	124	17.71
(Christensen & Lægreid, 2016)	book	124	10.33
(Osborne, 2010b)	book chapter	123	8.20
(Casady et al., 2020)	journal article	95	19.00
(Nesti, 2020)	journal article	62	12.40

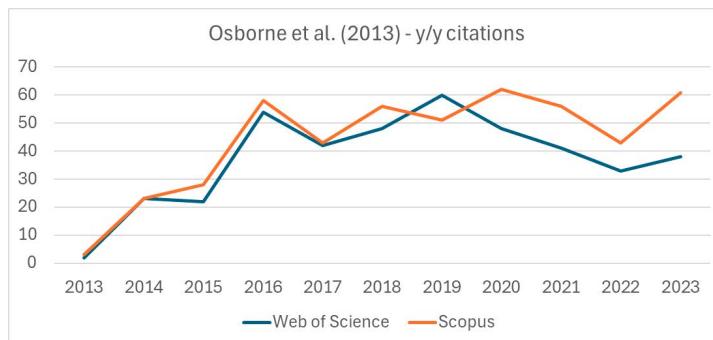
Note. Citations registered in Scopus and Web of Science databases (Google Scholar results are not included). Data as of May 4, 2024. Source: own elaboration with the use of Bibliometrix package

Figure 3. Annual citability of Osborne's (2006) article in Scopus and Web of Science databases.



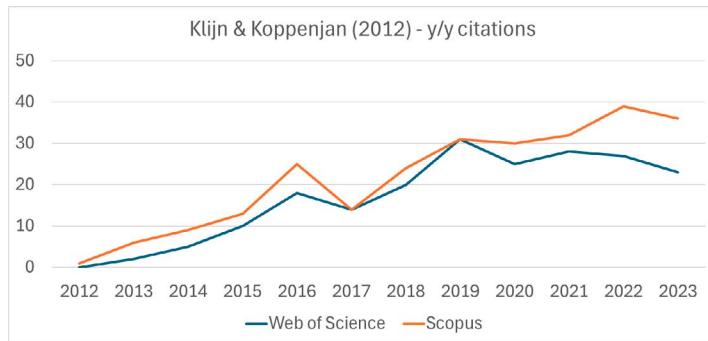
Note. Data as of May 4, 2024. Source: own elaboration

Figure 4. Annual citability of Osborne et al. (2013) article in Scopus and Web of Science databases.



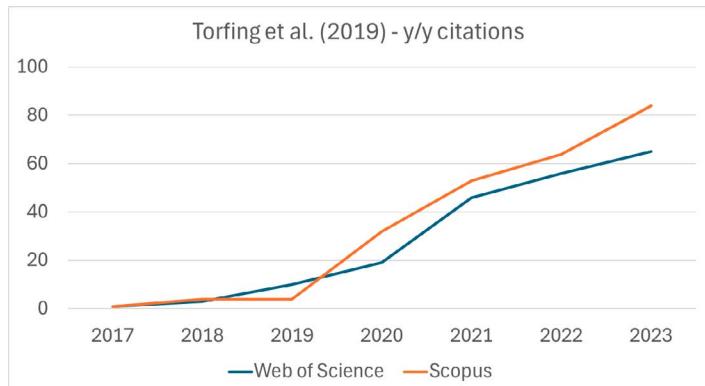
Note. Data as of May 4, 2024. Source: own elaboration

Figure 5. Annual citability of Klijn & Koppenjan (2012) article in Scopus and Web of Science databases.



Note. Data as of May 4, 2024. Source: own elaboration

Figure 6. Annual citability of Torfing et al. (2019) article in Scopus and Web of Science databases.

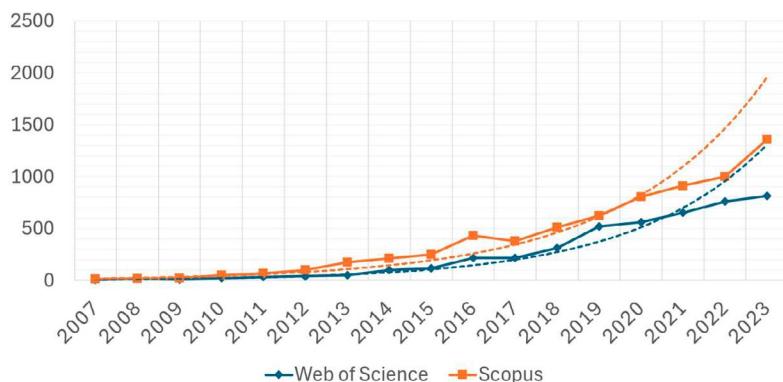


Note 1. Data as of May 4, 2024. *Note 2.* The article was published as an early view (online first) in 2017 but was assigned to the journal's 2019 issue. Source: own elaboration

Table 4 presents the most cited works on New Public Governance (over 2006 by year); four were identified as having the highest global citation rates, regardless of the year of publication. As a result of this procedure, two works by the creator of the NPG concept, Stephen Osborne (Osborne, 2006; Osborne et al., 2013), the work by Jacob Torfing, Eva Sørensen, and Asbjørn Røiseland (Torfing et al., 2019), and the work by Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2012) were selected. Indicating the annual number of citations of these most influential works confirms the increase in the potential and thus interest in the concept of New Public Governance itself, with reference to the works that constitute a reference point for the entire theory. However, it should be observed that apart from Torfing et al.'s (2019) article, the remaining citations relating to three other works have been stagnant since 2020.

The above considerations are better visible if we consider the citations of all scientific works in which researchers analyze New Public Governance (Figure 7). In this approach, the total number of citations presented in years increases exponentially. A strong trend of annual citation growth is visible regardless of the scientific database. The slight difference between the dynamics of global citation growth and the dynamics of citation growth of the most influential scientific articles allows us to hypothesize that an increasing number of scientists are writing about NPG and that in their works, they use the knowledge of an increasing number of researchers.

Figure 7. Total year-by-year number of citations of NPG-related documents



Note 1. Data as of May 4, 2024. Note 2. Dashed lines indicate exponential trend lines (R^2 values for Scopus and Web of Science are as high as 0.9502 and 0.9051, respectively). Source: own elaboration

3.1.3 Keywords' analysis

Based on the keywords of the documents to be analyzed, a network of their co-occurrence was created, as shown in Figure 8. According to its analysis, it is possible to discern current trends and pressing topics in NPG-driven public management.

Figure 8. Co-occurrence network of keywords in the analyzed NPG-related documents



Source: own elaboration – output from Bibliometrix package

Thematic analysis highlights frequent references to co-production and citizen engagement. This trend emphasizes the role of citizens not just as passive recipients of public services but as active participants in the design and delivery of those services (Grubb and Frederiksen, 2022). Research on co-production is expanding as governments seek to harness the potential of citizen involvement to improve service delivery, increase trust in public institutions, and create more responsive governance models (Fledderus et al., 2014).

The rise of public-private partnerships (PPPs) is another emerging trend, where governments collaborate with private sector entities to deliver public services. This aligns with the NPG emphasis on governance networks and the role of multiple actors in delivering public value. Papers discussing contracting, outsourcing, and service delivery partnerships highlight how NPG principles can guide the governance of these partnerships to ensure accountability, transparency, and the efficient delivery of services (Torfing and Triantafillou, 2013; Casady et al., 2020; Casady and Pecj, 2021).

The concept of collaborative innovation is prevalent in NPG-related studies, particularly in the context of network governance, where multiple stakeholders (i.e., governments, NGOs, private sector partners, and citizens) collaborate to develop innovative solutions to public challenges. Governance networks are increasingly being used to address complex, "wicked" problems (such as climate change, health pandemics, and social inequality), where traditional hierarchical governance models have struggled to find sustainable solutions (Chandra et al., 2022; Jayasinghe et al., 2020; Pinho de Oliveira and Hernández, 2023). Also, a shift toward outcome-based governance reflects a growing emphasis on achieving specific results in the public sector. NPG's focus on public value creation aligns with this trend, as governments strive for measurable impacts through collaborative and network-based approaches (Greve, 2015).

Also, NPG has prompted a reevaluation of leadership styles within the public sector. New forms of adaptive leadership and network management are

necessary to support collaborative governance structures. Research explores how leadership needs to shift from hierarchical control to enabling network-based solutions (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010; Vallentin, 2022).

While digital governance was not explicitly dominant in keyword analysis, the recent focus in public management literature suggests that digital transformation is becoming an increasingly important theme in NPG. Governments worldwide are transitioning to digital platforms to deliver services more efficiently, and NPG's network-based governance model is well-suited to support this transition. Papers on smart cities (Broccardo et al., 2019), digital platforms (Davide, 2021), and e-participation (de Moraes et al., 2024) likely explore how NPG frameworks can be applied to manage complex governance challenges in the digital era.

The most recent publications demonstrate an emerging focus on how NPG can be applied to global governance challenges, such as sustainable development, climate action, and social justice. Sustainable governance frameworks are being linked to NPG's collaborative and networked approach, particularly in addressing global issues that require cross-sectoral cooperation and multi-level governance approaches (de Oliveira and Hernández, 2023; Osborne et al., 2014).

* * *

This concise bibliometric analysis clearly allows us to conclude that New Public Governance is a niche that attracts international attention among public management researchers. Regardless of whether one considers the number of citations or the authors' analysis, New Public Governance is a trend that is being increasingly studied globally and is becoming an enthralling trend for subsequent researchers. A more in-depth literature analysis, which focuses on a qualitative literature review of NPG theory formation using a thematic-realist approach, is illustrated in Sections 3.2 and 3.3. The considerations drawn from this bibliometric analysis also allow us to conclude that New Public Governance has an exploration potential for the coming years, which - looking at the data - has not exhausted its possibilities. This, in turn, proves that the NPG has a chance to establish its theoretical foundations further.

3.2 Foundations

Creating new theorems is the foundation of society's development, particularly in science. Even if different countries or civilizations may differ considerably from one another, new philosophical notions that arise from the globalization of knowledge become so prevalent that everyone experiences an impression of loyalty to them (Eubank, 1936). New ideas and theories ought to be established to advance scientific know-how and certain knowledge areas, address most contemporary and imminent challenges, and serve as a foundation for further investigation and evaluation in specific fields of study (Wacker, 1998). Organizational operations now take place in dynamic periods. Therefore, there is a need to observe new management approaches that

emerge and, above all, to research and analyze them. The primary motivation of scientists is to create knowledge that can turn into theory. It can be both well-defined and unambiguous.

On the other hand, a theory may be an idea or an attempt to redefine or extend current knowledge. In the theory-driven empirical research approach, the theoretical base is the basis for further continuous procedure of theory testing, so it does not have to be the final construct (Melnyk and Handfield, 1998). One of the basic scientific tasks is the creation of theoretical structures, especially in traditional science (Stam, 1991).

A demanding challenge is to imagine the contemporary dimension of science without theories that serve as a guide to predicting the future. However, new theories should not replace old paradigms but complement new fragmented levels of knowledge into a single whole. Moreover, they should be assessed in terms of usefulness and effectiveness and in terms of proposing new solutions to old problems or new solutions to new problems. The change in the conditions of human functioning forces the development of new theoretical concepts adapted to different issues. Theories that are substantiated and prove their efficiency in economic practice deserve to continue to exist for development, as opposed to theories about which this cannot be said (Kurtines and Silverman, 1999).

When considering the attempt to establish a theory, it is worth referring to the definitional bases. Thyer (2001) reminds us that the traditional understanding of theory is comprehensive and covers everything related to every scientific procedure, including conjectures, models, assumptions, and hypotheses. There are four primary conditions for a theory: extraction of definitions, creation of a framework for analysis and substantive limitations, the ability to build relationships, and the ability to predict (Wacker, 1998). The notion of theory itself is highly convoluted, and the number of attempts to define it is as diverse as it would be the focus of various scientific studies. Depending on how the definition of "theory" is constructed, researchers have identified broad characteristics from this array that establish whether a particular scientific trend or set of scientific viewpoints qualifies as a theory. These include theoretical structure, functions, elements, and the relationship of research to theory. The study's authors reach a conclusion consistent with the above that there is no single coherent assessment of what is and is not a theory (Pedersen, 2007).

The theory-building process was much more rigorous in the past. Instead of conventional falsification tools that were the basis for legitimizing the theory, scientists strive to reveal all mechanisms and sources and reliable data about a given phenomenon that allows the theory to strengthen its foundations and theoretical ground (Lane, 1996). This view was criticized by the father of the scientific method, Karl Popper (2002), who created the concept of falsification – the need for testability of theories and deduction, because of which a concept appears: an idea, a mental construct or an untested theory that should be subject to scientific rigor. Popper also received substantive criti-

cism. For example, Paley (2006) argued that some untestable theories exist. This is because, by definition, no appropriate or applicable scientific apparatus could check them. However, there is no one right way to create a theory. It is a creative process that should not be subject to limitations, including methodological or logical ones, which can use various sources and thought bases. Nevertheless, the primary condition for new theories is the deductive process towards qualitative research (Bergdahl and Berterö, 2023).

There are many approaches to theory emergence. On the one hand, literature talks about a mechanical, deductive effort to create something with a new scientific basis. However, this approach leaves no room for creativity and mental freedom (Walker and Avant, 2005). Opponents disagree with the instrumental approach, claiming that science needs freedom that will lead to the essence of a given theory, undisturbed in any way by the research process and resulting from in-depth searches (Dahlberg, 2008). The literature also claims that a theory may consist of smaller concepts. We are talking about fragmented theorems, which, when put together into one logical sequence of thought, can constitute one whole, i.e., a new theory (Polit and Beck, 2017). A surprising conclusion is the claim that new theories do not have to be based on any single thought process, methodology, or method. Theories can arise from many different methods, approaches, and logic, the choice of which is up to the researcher (Reed, 2018, p. 30).

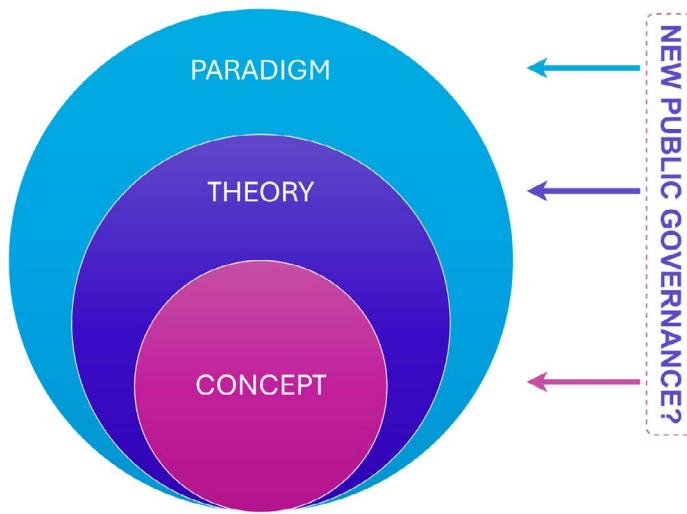
The differences between "theory" and "concept" shall now be highlighted. A concept is an ambiguous term, bridging the philosophy of science and linguistics. In basic terms, it is a word or expression that gives meaning to a phrase. As a rule, it needs a scientific explanation and underpinning. The concept's ambiguity stems from the debate between logicians who categorize the concept according to its function. These philosophers distinguish between rules of inference and psychologists for whom the concept depends on internal representation (Rey, 1998). Concepts are techniques for using particular words, but more important from the perspective of this paper are their features, that is, their ability to classify and infer concepts (Glock, 2010). The leading researcher in this area was Ludwig Wittgenstein. However, some scholars believe that the term "concept" is too narrow (or understood too narrowly), extending it to the term "conception." In their esteem, a concept inadequately describes the changes that are going on in science. Therefore, when considering conception, on the one hand, it can mean the same thing as a concept but, on the other hand, it means something unknown, but which allows further work towards knowledge by giving a scientific basis to the concept for understanding science or particular areas of science (Koshlakov and Shvyrkov, 2020).

And how does a paradigm relate to understanding theories and concepts? The notion of "paradigm" emerged in a groundbreaking way in 1962 with "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" book. The author describes a paradigm as a way of legitimizing new scientific areas or research areas that are recognized by the scientific community and create new knowledge. Kuhn

recommended that researchers follow paradigms in their scientific work as guidelines in which they find acceptance among other scientists and meet their standards. (Kuhn, 1962). Paradigm is not just a scientific concept. This perspective stresses that paradigms are more than just theoretical entities; they represent shared worldviews that shape how practitioners read and interact with their field (Poulter, 2005). But paradigms are subject to constant change due to changes in the economic environment, approaches, society itself or the development of technology, although this is not a close list. In the social sciences, in which NPG undoubtedly fits, paradigms combine scientific and practical perspectives, indicate what is relevant today, and prove the comprehensiveness of research, which, after all, is not identical in the edition of different scientists (McGregor, 2019). Kuhn called this process "paradigm shifts," or milestones, which are changes in the assumptions of an entire discipline. And these shifts are inherent in the nature of the concept of paradigms, which evolve with the development of science (Solesvik, 2018).

Thus, it seems that the scientific sequence from concept to conception to final theory or paradigms finds its justification, and this order for creating new theories may be correct. As can be seen, the study of science as a creative process aimed at creating theories is a non-obvious, multi-threaded process that evokes scientific emotions. It seems that in theory verification, there is a belief in the validity of qualitative rather than quantitative thinking. Figure 9 shows the generalization of the meaning of the concept, theory and paradigm. This representation developed by authors is meant to clarify the weight of terms, and to arrange them in a certain logic treating concept as the narrowest term and denoting single scientific characteristics, theory as an argued set of scientific characteristics, and paradigm as an enduring, and broad space of scientific beliefs.

Figure 9. Generalization of the concepts – a hierarchical approach



Source: own elaboration

3.3 General Validation

Based on the assertion that under the influence of new challenges, public administration must constantly innovate multifaceted aspects of operation (Van der Val and Demircioglu, 2020), it is not surprising that new approaches in the sector, such as New Public Governance, are emerging. NPG is a creation that consists of several characteristic features that distinguish it from other current trends in the transformation of public administration. These include striving to network public organizations, flattening the decision-making center and decentralizing power, actively participating stakeholders in decision-making, and creating policies; the common denominator is cooperation for the “production” of public goods. This set of features, tools, and characteristics or the emphasis on them may differ slightly from each other but is very similar in terms of the fundamental goals of the organization managed by the NPG and the tools used within this concept (Osborne, 2006; Osborne, 2010b; Torfing and Triantafillou, 2013). In general, in the theoretical layer of the NPG paradigm, scientists emphasize that all characteristics focus on the very citizen and their participation in implementing public goals. The trend is the newest theory or wave among other public management theories (Young and Tanner, 2023). One of the most influential public administration scientists, Joyce Liddle (2018), believes that the concept of NPG should be excluded from the broad trend called public governance. In the latest research on New Public Governance, it can also be read that this concept – apart from New Public Management and Neo-Weberian State – contains its own exclusive set of features, paradigms, tools, and distinguishing characteristics, which is sufficient to recognize its uniqueness and distinctiveness about other trends as a public reform (Krogh and Triantafillou, 2024). New Public Governance is frequently used instrumentally, named, and treated as a theory of interest to scientists and research procedures – in various contexts, not only public management but also the functioning of administration at various levels or sectors of the economy. However, there is no uniform spelling of the term “NPG” (and the resulting extension: “new public governance”) in the literature because it is written in capital letters occasionally and in lowercase letters other times (Bilhim and dos Santos, 2017; Salvador and de São Pedro Filho, 2023; Young and Tanner, 2023; Evans and Vesely, 2014; Evans and Wellstead, 2014).

However, numerous voices need to be made aware of the finalization of the New Public Governance theory, focusing on theoretical and practical shortcomings concerning previous trends. Torfing et al. (2012) states that NPG is not a complete trend but has only a supplementary function because it does not answer the question of how public managers should navigate the field of traditional hierarchy, market orientation, and the network, which is elaborated in this novel approach. Some scientists treat and describe New Public Governance in their research merely as a concept, not a well-established theory (Neves Pereira et al., 2017; Mierauskas and Smalskys, 2013; Weng and Christensen, 2019). Other researchers recognize the existence and applicability of New Public Governance as a new approach in management sciences that changes the perspective on public administration and shifts it toward the

citizen. However, they consider the analysis of only NPG as a theory to be an incomplete approach, suggesting that this concept has an umbrella nature, dividing it into other theories and grouping it into a new wave (Evans and Vesely, 2014). The same authors conclude that we are at an early stage of forming the NPG; therefore, the final shape of New Public Governance is still ahead of us.

There are also mixed approaches that do not decide on the status of New Public Governance as a concept or a clearly defined theory but approach this phenomenon differently, which only confirms, on the one hand, the lack of scientific transparency but also the ambiguity and advancement of NPG as a scientific construct. Stanica and Aristigueta (2019) multidimensionally examine the notion of New Public Governance in the trans-organizational (national) area. Researchers consider NPG in two dimensions: (i) a framework based on socio-political governance, public policy governance, administrative governance, contract governance, and network governance, which were initially proposed by the creator of Osborne's theory, and (ii) a set of practices which can be analyzed from many aspects, but overall in a sense they lower the foundations of the concept as a new theory. Some scientists understand NPG (tentatively called "New Governance") differently, i.e., concept meaning a transformation of the entire public sector, in which there will be less government responsible for all aspects of the organization's functioning and more management functions spread among other participants (Rhodes, 1996). Krogh and Triantafillou (2024) speak in a similar tone, treating NPG as an umbrella concept that has become a conglomerate of various tools, solutions, or ideas aimed at improving the functioning of the organization – mainly external ones, forgetting about the aspects of the organization's interior. The definitional incongruity also appears in other recent scientific works that do not exhaust the distinction between understanding NPG as a theory, concept, or paradigm (Popęda and Hadasik, 2024). This conscious or unconscious mixture proves terminological ambiguity and, at the same time, motivates the current considerations. The above scientific works only illustrate the common phenomenon of terminological freedom about New Public Governance. However, Osborne, being the originator of the New Public Governance, considers NPG to be a paradigm based on other theories, particularly network theory and organizational sociology (Osborne, 2010). The following Table 5 is intended to clearly explain the issue of the diversity of approaches to NPG at the conceptual and definitional level.

Table 5. Understanding and definitional classification of the NPG

Source	Understanding the NPG in the paper (core values of the term)	A general definitional approach to the NPG (theory / concept / paradigm / other)
Rhodes (1996)	management by self-organizing, inter-organizational networks, complementing market mechanisms	concept
Osborne (2006, 2010a, 2010b)	increased use of management networks and partnerships to improve public-private cooperation to deliver public value and solutions to complex problems	paradigm/framework
Torfing et al. (2012)	multilevel interactive management with other social actors	trend
Mierauskas and Smalskys (2013)	decision-making process with active participation of stakeholders	concept
Torfing and Triantafillou (2013)	empowered participation (of private and public actors), collaboration (between levels, sectors, and actors), new tools (for engaging stakeholders), multiple forms of accountability (based on organizational learning)	concept/conception
Evans and Vesely (2014)	transformation of public administration through collaboration, deliberation, and stakeholder engagement aimed at achieving consensus and sharing power	(umbrella) notion: theory or paradigm (related to other theories)
Evans and Wellstead (2014)	involvement of non-governmental organizations in creating public policies in the political process	theory
Bilhim and dos Santos (2017)	public administration based on co-decision, coordination and inter-organizational negotiations	theory
Neves Pereira et al. (2017)	promoting the common good as a central value, implementing consensus mechanisms with all stakeholders and actors, targeting collective rather than individual preferences	concept
Liddle (2018)	a set of approaches aimed at promoting the common good and delivering public services through interdependent interorganizational networks that regulate the processes of achieving public value	concept

Source	Understanding the NPG in the paper (core values of the term)	A general definitional approach to the NPG (theory / concept / paradigm / other)
Stanica and Aristigueta (2019)	management tool not only inside the organization, but also outside the organization, regulating the political and administrative context, striving for self-management of citizens	framework
Weng and Christensen (2019)	a type of cooperation based on a network of public and private entities in a spirit of partnership instead of competition	concept
Salvador and de São Pedro Filho (2023)	a participatory approach to management, based on network models, relational contracts, co-production and flexibility in the use of management tools	theory
Young and Tanner (2023)	increasing citizens' participation in the implementation of public goals, which leads to influencing the political process and solving the problem of fragmentation of the system	theory
Krogh and Triantafillou (2024)	increase the creation of public value by developing relationships and cooperation between different sectors and strata of society	umbrella term/concept
Popęda and Hadasik (2024)	a new wave that is changing the relationship between citizen and government leading to the conundrum that both individualists and organizations are becoming consumers and co-producers in independent networks	concept/theory/paradigm

Source: own elaboration

Given the above, it can be concluded that both the understanding of the NPG core and the attempts by researchers to classify it are varied and lack uniform progression. This is particularly evident along the concept-paradigm axis, where scientific approaches tend to shift indecisively between different perspectives. At the same time, the theoretical, albeit somewhat chaotic, interpretation of NPG aligns with values such as participation, networks, partnerships, shared power, and the public good. While a clear and unambiguous classification may not be achievable, a shared understanding (and consequently, the legitimization of NPG) remains possible.

4 Concluding remarks

New Public Governance is a widely acknowledged construct that is ardently debated in the academic community. Specific characteristics illustrating this

novel concept also emerged, focusing on ubiquitous decentralization, active participation of stakeholders, social participation, and network management. The emerging trends in NPG research point to an evolution of governance models that are more collaborative, citizen-centric, and innovative. These trends reflect the broader shifts in public administration towards networked governance systems capable of addressing complex, interdependent challenges in modern societies. As governments continue to face evolving challenges, NPG principles will likely remain central to shaping the future of governance practices. It is also worth noting not only the research of individual authors in the field of public management but also the progressive and lasting trend of popularizing NPG in terms of bibliometrics. In this sense, NPG is undoubtedly a scientific creation accepted and recognized by the academic community, particularly experts in the field of public management. Therefore, New Public Governance's progressive and significant legitimization process should be recognized.

On the other hand, the categorization of NPG still needs to be solved. As seen by some researchers, it is an umbrella concept that contains individual scientific sub-elements. According to others, New Public Governance is a full-fledged theory that should be separated from the general trends in public management theory.

In contrast to the above, however, some authors take away the privileges of the NPG theory by treating it as a concept and, therefore, a kind of idea that needs to become entrenched enough to be honored as a theory. However, as indicated in the main body of the manuscript, the process of developing this theory could be more transparent, and there is no single correct way to proceed in this area. It largely depends on the scholar apparatus (which is selected solely by the researcher) and the researcher (including their outlook, assumed objectives, etc.), who can lead to and prove a new theory with their creativity, new observations, and logic. Therefore, these categorical doubts should be alleviated with a constructivist approach, typical of qualitative research and recognized as a characteristic of this phenomenon that will undoubtedly change over time.

The most significant value of the paper for the modern discipline of public governance is to address the issue of the growing popularity of New Public Governance by identifying the theoretical framework and perceived scientific potential for the future of the concept. No previous study has measured the legitimacy of NPG. In addition, the authors make a pioneering attempt to place NPG in the "concept-theory-paradigm" triad and use an original research strategy by combining qualitative (thematic-realist review) and quantitative (bibliometrics) approaches, while referring to classical theories about the foundations of science. This comprehensive research approach contributes greatly to the understanding of a rather non-obvious concept such as New Public Governance. This paper also contributes to legitimizing the New Public Governance as a separate theory. In addition, the study contributes both to the development of the concept of New Public Governance itself but

also proves the plasticity and utility of mixed (hybrid) methods in the social sciences in studying new concepts.

As mentioned, NPG is an increasingly popular scientific term, which will result in a better understanding of the problem, a more significant number of studies and sources, and thus, ultimately, the entire establishment and legitimization of the New Public Governance theory. In summary, NPG is a recognized scientific construct that is well and dynamically on its way to fully consolidating its theoretical foundations.

4.1 Study limitations

This study carries several important limitations. The most significant of these is that this is the first holistic attempt to theoretically ground the term NPG, making it clear that there are no other reference points in such a field. Public governance researchers are recommended to deepen their work on the status of NPG and the various substantive aspects of the trend to understand it better. In addition, there is a great deal of conceptual noise (through similar meanings of terms) between "concept," "conception," "theory," and "paradigm." This causes a great deal of fragility in the attempt to ground the theory presented in the article. In addition, it should be noted that Section 3.2 is inexhaustible and more outlined in terms of the legitimacy of theories, including NPG, rather than the whole process of grounding all theories and analyzing the philosophical basis for the creation of science, thus requiring further scientific work. Also, while a structured coding process was applied, thematic analysis remains subject to researcher interpretation.

There are also several limitations associated with bibliometric research. First, the analysis covered only two databases (Scopus and Web of Science). Although comprehensive, they only cover some scholarly literature, potentially excluding relevant studies published in other databases or regional journals not indexed by these platforms. Moreover, citation counts, and other bibliometric indicators come only from these two content aggregators and may only partially reflect the impact or quality of research. Highly cited papers may not necessarily represent the most innovative or influential work in the field, and newer publications may still need to accumulate citations despite their potential significance.

4.2 Implications and further research

The most important implication of this research is to provide public management scholars with a theoretical foundation for further research on strengthening co-governance as a management thought. Although it is one of the newer management concepts, the uncertain environment, altering challenges, and the need for an organization to adopt a resilient posture means that public organizations require an ongoing scientific debate on how best to fulfill their role for societies. This research indicates that NPG has become a permanent fixture operating in public management sciences. The research re-

sults and the lack of unanimity in the theoretical view have revealed the need for further research and the potential for finding research niches. Future studies could triangulate findings with expert interviews or deliberate panels. On the other hand, the analysis has also presented progenitors of New Public Governance with whom it is worthwhile engaging in a dispute. Combining this with its relatively short existence in academia prompts researchers to take up the subject of new management concepts and the development of New Public Governance itself. At the end of this process, public administration practitioners face even more dynamic challenges and expect solutions that are effective and tested through the prism of various scientific problems.

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