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Public Interest and the Social Contract: A Dialectical Approach to the Epistemological Foundations of Public Administration

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Abstract:

The public interest has traditionally been the foundation of public administration, but its interpretation remains fragmented as governance evolves. This study argues that this fragmentation arises from a gap between the changing nature of public administration and the epistemological frameworks used to understand it. While social contract theory outlines core legitimating principles such as authority, rights, and collective will, its potential as an epistemological foundation remains underexplored. In contrast, positivism, pragmatism, and constructivism offer limited insights, resulting in a paradigmatic pluralism lacking cohesion. To bridge this gap, this article introduces the Philosophical-Reflective-Dialectical (P-RD) Model, which synthesizes principles from the social contract tradition, dialectical tensions in administrative reality, and reflective learning for ethical adaptability. Through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and

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abductive reasoning, this study reveals that contradictions in administrative practice, such as values versus procedures, centralization versus participation, and efficiency versus equity, drive epistemological growth. The findings suggest that legitimacy and public interest are dynamic outcomes of the interaction between normative ideals, institutional evolution, and reflective interpretation. The P-RD model provides a coherent epistemological foundation, linking philosophy, governance dynamics, and administrative practice, and framing public administration as a discipline capable of adaptive learning within complex democratic systems.

Keywords:

administrative legitimacy, dialectics epistemology, public interest, reflective governance, social contract

1. Introduction

The concept of the public interest has long been a normative foundation of public administration, linking the legitimacy of state action to the morality of citizens. However, its meaning remains ambiguous and contested (Bozeman, 2019; Ochrana, 2022). In theory and practice, public administration strives to align its philosophical roots with contemporary demands for accountability, efficiency, and participation. This ambiguity gives rise to what Ongaro and Yang (2024) call epistemological fragmentation, in which practical reforms evolve faster than their philosophical justifications.

The social contract notion of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau provides a perennial philosophical framework for understanding the relationship between the state and citizens. However, in public administration research, this framework is often treated as a historical reference rather than an epistemological foundation (Loewe & Zintl, 2021; Ongaro, 2024). Contemporary studies of public value (Bryson et al., 2023; Moore, 2014) have also highlighted the importance of public interest. emphasizes effectiveness and collaboration, but rarely examines the philosophical underpinnings of collective legitimacy and public morality. As a result, the concept of the public interest oscillates between pragmatic management and normative ideals without a coherent epistemological bridge (Silva & Santos, 2022).

Public administration is not simply an institutional mechanism for implementing collective decisions; it is a constantly evolving socio-political organism with its own evolutionary ontology (Brusa et al., 2006; Khuroshvili, 2023; Ochrana, 2022; Ongaro, 2017). While contemporary administrative studies have developed sophisticated analytical and managerial tools, they also demonstrate epistemological fragmentation, a condition rooted in the absence of a shared understanding of what public administration is, rather than simply how it functions (Dubnick, 2018; Rosenbloom et al., 2022). From a methodological perspective, ontology precedes epistemology: without clarity about the

"being" of administrative reality, its dynamics, contradictions, and historical evolution knowledge production becomes atomistic and disconnected from practice (Minna et al., 2024; Räsänen et al., 2024).

This study argues that the disconnect between normative philosophy and administrative practice is epistemological, not merely conceptual. The fragmentation of paradigms: positivism, pragmatism, and constructivism, gives rise to a pluralism of meanings without integrative coherence. Consequently, public administration risks becoming rich in methodology but poor in philosophical foundations. An epistemological model is needed that synthesizes philosophical depth with administrative relevance.

To address this gap, this paper introduces the P-RD Model, which reconnects the philosophical foundations of public administration with its contemporary analytical and practical dimensions. This model builds on dialectical reasoning from policy network theory (Marsh & Smith, 2000) and is extended through governance studies kelola (Zhang et al., 2025).

This study, therefore, addresses this gap by grounding administrative epistemology in its ontological foundations. Drawing on the tradition of social contract theory (Kant; Rawls) and recent philosophical contributions (Drechsler, 2009; Ferrari, 2020), this article argues that legitimacy, the public interest, and administrative action emerge dialectically from evolving normative commitments and institutional arrangements. Thus, the current fragmentation of administrative epistemology is not only a cognitive issue, but also a failure to integrate the evolutionary ontology of public administration into its knowledge framework. P-RD emphasizes the reflective interaction between universal philosophical principles rooted in the social contract tradition and the social realities that shape administrative decisions. By integrating dialectics and reflection, this model strengthens administrative epistemology as an autonomous discipline that bridges theory, practice, and moral legitimacy.

This research is motivated by three interrelated observations: 1) The public interest remains theoretically and empirically undefined, leading to policy fragmentation and normative tensions; 2) Social contract theory offers a unifying philosophical foundation, but its integration into public administration remains limited; 3) The absence of a dialectical framework that aligns philosophical universality with empirical diversity weakens the field's epistemological coherence.

This paper, therefore, aims to explain how the concept of the social contract provides an epistemological basis for understanding the public interest in public administration. This study reconstructs the epistemological foundations of the discipline by proposing the Philosophical Reflective Dialectical (P-RD) Model. This integrative approach brings together normative universality, empirical tension, and reflective reconstruction. Through this framework, the research seeks to bridge the gap between administrative ontology and epistemology, while offering a coherent conceptual foundation for renewing legitimacy in complex democratic governance. Furthermore,

the paper examines how reflective dialectics can align philosophical traditions with contemporary governance dynamics. It discusses the epistemological implications of integrating these approaches for a more holistic understanding of the roles and responsibilities of contemporary public administration.

To address these questions, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SRD) with an abductive analytical approach. This combination enables transparent mapping of research and the development of a conceptual synthesis that integrates empirical foundations and philosophical interpretations. The analysis integrates literature from Scopus and Web of Science to trace the evolution of the concepts of public interest and social contract across theoretical traditions.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, outlining the philosophical roots of the public interest and the evolving discourse on legitimacy and governance. Section 3 describes the methodology and search strategy used in the systematic review. Section 4 presents the findings, followed by a discussion in Section 5, which introduces the P-RD model as a conceptual synthesis. Section 6 concludes with key implications for administrative epistemology and future research.

Through this approach, this paper contributes to the debate on the epistemological foundations of public administration and offers a framework for integrating philosophy, reflection, and dialectics in governance analysis. The goal is to re-establish administration as an autonomous discipline with its own epistemological and moral coherence.

2. Reinterpreting the public interest through the social contract and reflective dialectics

2.1. Philosophical Roots of the Public Interest

The notion of the public interest has occupied a central position in public administration theory since its inception, although its meaning remains debated. Classical thinkers such as Waldo and Miller (1948) and Marini (1971) emphasized that administrative legitimacy must be rooted in normative values rather than mere technical efficiency. This principle aligns with the social contract tradition, as formulated by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, which views the relationship between citizens and the state as a moral and rational agreement to achieve collective order and justice.

Hobbes, in Leviathan, defined the public interest as the stabilization of society through sovereign authority to avoid anarchy (Holm, 2024). Locke emphasized the protection of individual liberty and property rights, which derive legitimacy from popular consent (Bruner, 2020). Rousseau expanded this discourse with the concept of the general will, which posits the public interest as a moral synthesis of individual and collective aspirations through participation (Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024).

These three perspectives form the normative pillars of the social contract:

1) the surrender of rights to ensure order (Hobbes),
2) the protection of human rights as the basis of legitimacy (Locke), and
3) the moral and participatory realization of the general will (Rousseau).

Collectively, these principles frame public administration as a moral endeavor rather than merely an instrumental mechanism.

However, in modern administrative studies, this philosophical foundation has begun to be marginalized. The dominance of managerialism and technocratic rationality has shifted the focus from legitimacy and justice to performance and efficiency (Ongaro & Sancino, 2023). As a result, the concept of the public interest often becomes a rhetorical construct detached from its philosophical roots.

2.2. From Traditional Paradigms to Contemporary Public Values

The evolution of public administration theory demonstrates a continuing effort to reinterpret the public interest within a changing socio-political context. The Old Public Administration (OLDP) tradition viewed bureaucracy as a neutral implementer of the sovereign will, emphasizing hierarchy, order, and legality (Wilson, 1887). The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm subsequently shifted the governance orientation toward market analogies, focusing on efficiency, performance, and accountability, often at the expense of public ethics and collective well-being (Bryson et al., 2014; Weigl et al., 2024).

In contrast, the New Public Service (NPS) paradigm, as formulated by Nani et al. (2023), seeks to restore the moral dimension of administration by emphasizing citizenship, participation, and shared values. This approach was later developed in Public Value Management and Collaborative Governance (Bryson et al., 2015; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022), which positions public managers as co-creators of value through multi-actor collaboration. Within this framework, the public interest emerges through processes of deliberation, co-production, and negotiation of meaning.

The social contract tradition, while often considered the normative foundation for legitimacy, has its own evolutionary ontology. Its principles have evolved over history as societies renegotiate the balance among authority, accountability, and the public interest. Understanding the public interest as a dynamic equilibrium, rather than a fixed category, aligns with contemporary evolutionary explanations of governance (Kaganovska et al., 2022; Short, 2023). This dynamic view supports the article's argument that legitimacy is continuously reconstructed through normative deliberation, institutional adaptation, and citizen-state interactions.

Thus, before developing an epistemological reconstruction, it is necessary to recognize that public administration is a non-static, constantly evolving system (Andion, 2023; Silva & Santos, 2022). Its ontology, comprising normative expectations,

institutional contradictions, and adaptive responses, provides the foundation on which a reflective epistemology must build. This ontological foundation provides a logical transition to the dialectical epistemology that follows.

Despite conceptual advances, epistemic tensions remain. Bozeman (2019) and Cluley and Radnor (2019) emphasize that public value is contextual and dynamic. Prebble (2021) even argues that the public interest is epistemically "unknowable" because it relies on moral judgments and social interpretations. This uncertainty underscores the need for a meta-theoretical framework capable of connecting philosophical principles with the plurality of modern governance.

A dialectical perspective provides such a bridge. Marsh and Smith (2000), using a dialectical approach to policy networks, assert that public outcomes are shaped by the tension between structure and agency, as well as the interplay of conflict and consensus. Zhang et al. (2025) expand on this idea by showing that governance systems operate through an iterative feedback loop between institutional structures and social outcomes, which is both analytical and normative. Thus, administrative legitimacy is not static but a dialectical process in which conflicting values are mediated through reflection and negotiation, resulting in a dynamic equilibrium that defines the public interest in each context.

2.3. Toward a Dialectical Epistemology of Administration

The epistemological fragmentation of public administration, reflected in the coexistence of positivism, pragmatism, and constructivism, illustrates a fundamental tension between universality and contextuality (Silva & Santos, 2022; Stout & Love, 2021).

- Positivism emphasizes general laws and objective causality to ensure methodological rigor, but often neglects the moral dimension of governance.
- Pragmatism focuses on problem-solving utility, but tends to reduce normative depth to instrumental flexibility.
- Constructivism asserts that knowledge is socially constructed but is vulnerable to ontological instability.

To transcend these limitations, the reflective dialectical approach offers a meta-epistemological framework that synthesizes all three. Reflection enables awareness of normative assumptions in administrative action, while dialectics provides the logic for reconciling contradictions such as autonomy versus control, efficiency versus equity, and objectivity versus interpretation (Rowe, Whitty, & Van Der Hoorn, 2024; Rowe, Whitty, & Wheeldon, 2024). The synergy of these two forms of epistemological reflexivity is the capacity of public administration to review and adapt its knowledge structures to social change.

Recent studies reinforce this trend. Nastar (2023) and Parra (2023) demonstrate that critical realism provides a philosophical foundation for understanding the invisible causal mechanisms in governance, linking empiricism with reflective interpretation. Van Leeuwen et al. (2024) and Van der Steen et al. (2023) found that reflexivity in leadership

and policy enhances institutional learning and adaptability. Collectively, these findings indicate a shift toward a reflective epistemology, where contradictions are seen not as anomalies but as sources of theoretical and practical innovation.

2.4. The Need for a Philosophical Reflective Dialectical (P-RD) Model

The convergence of philosophical, dialectical, and reflective traditions forms the conceptual basis for the P-RD Model proposed by this study. This model positions administrative knowledge as a dynamic synthesis of philosophical universality, namely, the normative principles of the social contract and reflective contextuality, namely, an adaptive understanding of the complexities of modern governance.

Dialectics operates on two inseparable levels. Objective dialectics refers to the contradictions inherent in administrative reality between values and procedures, centralization and participation, or efficiency and equity. These contradictions are ontological: they exist independently of the observer and drive the evolution of administrative institutions (Hargrave & Van De Ven, 2016; Zhang et al., 2025). Subjective dialectics, in contrast, concerns the epistemological processes that administrators, academics, and citizens use to interpret, negotiate, and reconcile these contradictions. The reflective-dialectical epistemology proposed here emerges directly from the evolutionary ontology of public administration and provides a cognitive tool for transforming tensions into learning opportunities.

Conceptually, P-RD operates through three interrelated layers:

1) Philosophical Layer - Rooted in the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, which establishes the ontological and moral foundations for legitimacy, justice, and collective will.
2) Dialectical Layer - Capturing the interaction between conflicting values and institutional structures through negotiation, conflict, and synthesis (Zhang et al., 2025).
3) Reflective Layer - Embedding epistemological reflexivity to foster adaptive learning and ethical reimagining within public institutions (Nastar, 2023; Van der Steen et al., 2023).

This tripartite synthesis affirms public administration as a discipline capable of theoretical reflection and evolution, transcending the historical dichotomy between theory and practice. Through the P-RD model, this study seeks to reconstruct public administration theory as a scientifically autonomous and morally grounded field, a prerequisite for renewing the legitimacy of governance in complex democratic societies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Rationale

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SRB) combined with abductive thematic analysis to explore how the concepts of public interest and social contract are conceptualized in the public administration literature and to develop an integrative epistemological model. The SRB approach ensures transparency, replicability, and completeness (Snyder, 2019; Schmeisser, 2013), while the abductive method allows for an iterative movement between theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence (Cronholm et al., 2023).

This methodological combination is relevant for exploring epistemological synthesis, as it connects conceptual dimensions with empirical patterns in public administration research. The research procedure was guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure rigor across four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion.

3.2. Search Strategy and Data Sources

A literature search was conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science databases for the period 2014-2024 using the keywords: "public interest," "social contract," "public value," and "epistemology of public administration." The Boolean operators applied were: ("public interest" AND "public administration") OR ("social contract" AND "governance").

The search criteria were limited to peer-reviewed English-language journal articles, excluding conference proceedings, gray literature, and non-peer-reviewed publications. This restriction ensured that only conceptually and empirically relevant works were included.

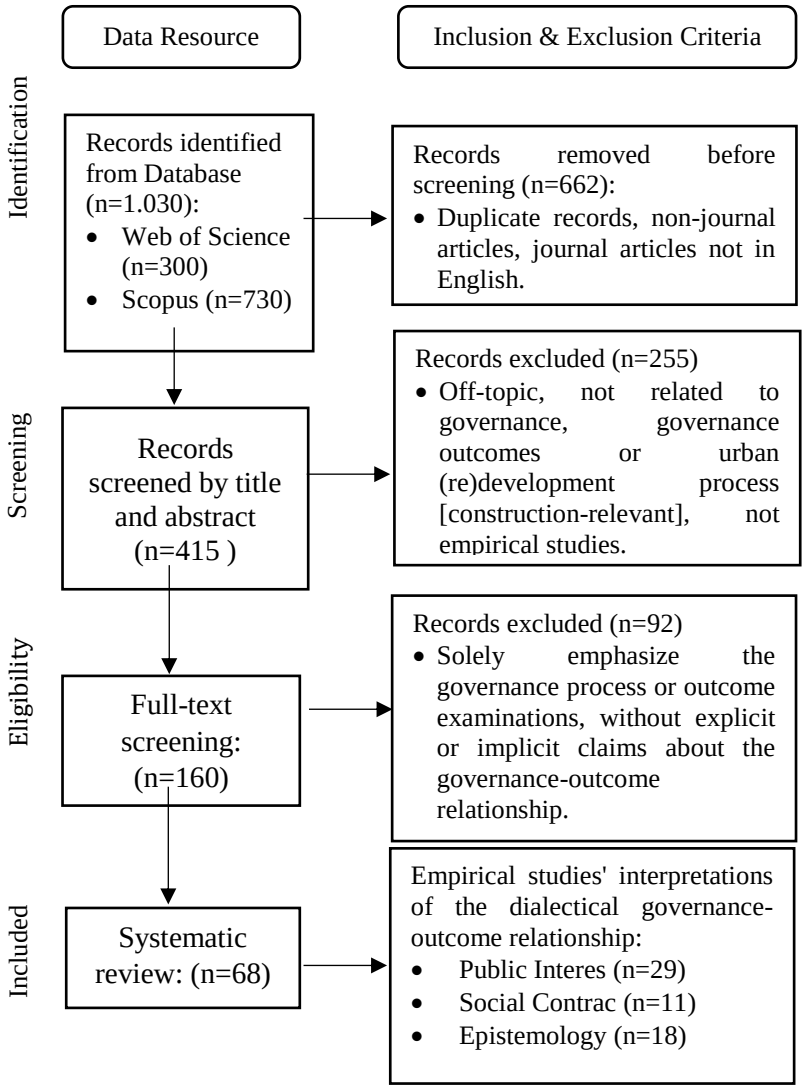
The review process followed the PRISMA protocol to ensure transparency and replicability. The steps included:

1) Identification: The initial search identified 1,030 articles.
2) Screening: After removing duplicates, 662 articles remained.
3) Eligibility: 415 full-text articles were evaluated; 225 were excluded due to insufficient conceptual relevance.
4) The full screening yielded 160 articles, of which 68 were included.

Systematic Review and Screening Process (PRISMA Protocol)

Figure 1:

Flowchart of the Systematic Literature Review Process Based on PRISMA



Source: Authors' own, 2026

Each article was coded based on its core concepts, methodological orientation, and epistemological perspective. Coding was conducted independently by two reviewers, and any differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion until consensus

was reached, ensuring inter-coder reliability.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria followed the PRISMA guidelines and are summarized below:

Table 1:

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

Steps	Criteria	Description
Database	Scopus, Web of Science	Peer-reviewed international journal
Keywords	"public interest," "social contract," "epistemology," "governance," "dialectics," "public values"	Boolean operators applied to conceptual intersections
Inclusion	Empirical or conceptual studies focusing on ambiguity, epistemology, legitimacy, or governance	Published between 2014-2024; full text available
Exclusion	Non-English papers, conference papers, grey literature, or fields outside of public administration	Excluded due to low methodological rigor
Final Results	68 eligible articles	Public Interest (n=29), Social Contract (n=11), Epistemology (n=18)

Source: Authors' own, 2026

3.4. Analytical Framework: Abductive Thematic Synthesis

Following the PRISMA stage, 68 selected studies were analyzed using an abductive thematic approach. The analysis process was iterative between theory and data to identify latent epistemological patterns in the literature. Four main stages were undertaken:

Pattern Discovery - Identifying recurring themes such as social contracts, public interest, epistemology, and dialectical interactions across the literature (Thompson, 2022).

Interpretive Linking - Linking initial patterns to epistemic ambiguity and administrative legitimacy through conceptual mapping (Linnenluecke et al., 2019).

Conceptual Reconstruction - Integrating philosophical and governance dimensions to form a coherent thematic aggregation (Cronholm et al., 2023).

Theoretical Synthesis - Developing the meta-framework "From Ambiguity to Autonomy" that explains the dialectical-reflective relationship between administrative knowledge and social reality (Upmeier Zu Belzen et al., 2021).

The results of this analysis yielded three main thematic clusters : Philosophical Roots, Public Interest in Governance, and Dialectical-Reflective Epistemology that

served as the empirical basis for developing the P-RD Model.

Table 2:

Thematic Aggregation of Selected Literature

Thematic Cluster	Key Concepts	Representative Study
Philosophical Foundation	Social contract, legitimacy, human rights, general will	Hobbes (1651); (Lucke, 1972); Rousseau (1762); (Hobbes, n.d.)(Lucke, 1972) (Rousseau & De Geneve, 1782)(Ward, 2017); Holm (2024); Loewe et al. (2021)
Public Interest and Governance	Collaboration, value creation, legitimacy, accountability	Moore (2014); Bryson et al. (2015); Sørensen and Torfing (2022); Dadashpoor and Sheydayi (2021)
Dialectical-Reflective Epistemology	Conflict, reflexivity, critical realism, administrative learning	Marsh and Smith (2000); Zhang et al. (2025); Nastar (2023); Ongaro and Yang (2024)

Source: Authors' own, 2026

3.5. Validation and Reliability

To ensure analytical rigor, two validation mechanisms were applied:

Conceptual Triangulation - Findings from each cluster were cross-verified with recent empirical studies on governance, legitimacy, and public administration epistemology.

Independent Peer Review - Two external reviewers assessed the thematic classification results to minimize interpretive bias and increase reliability.

This dual validation ensured that the conceptual synthesis underlying the P-RD Model was built on transparent, consistent, and methodologically sound evidence.

3.6. Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this study contributes to public administration research by integrating systematic mapping and philosophical reasoning within a single analytical framework. Unlike conventional reviews that emphasize descriptive aggregation, this approach allows for a dialectical reconstruction of administrative epistemology, revealing the interplay between normative and empirical logics in the evolution of governance thinking.

This methodological framework serves not only as a research tool but also as a reflective mechanism, in line with the epistemic goals of the P-RD Model to strengthen coherence, adaptive capacity, and philosophical depth in the development of public administration knowledge.

4. Results and findings

An analysis of 68 selected studies identified three interrelated dimensions that form the epistemological foundation of public interest in public administration: (1) the philosophical roots of legitimacy; (2) the often ambiguous nature of public interest in governance practices; and (3) the emergence of a dialectical-reflective epistemology. These findings highlight the ongoing tension between normative ideals and empirical reality and the need for an integrative framework that reconciles the two.

4.1. Philosophical Roots of Legitimacy and Administrative Authority

The literature consistently demonstrates that the social contract tradition remains the primary theoretical foundation for understanding administrative legitimacy. Studies of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024; Holm, 2024; Loewe et al., 2021) situate administrative legitimacy within the moral reciprocity between citizens and the state.

Three important strands emerge from this tradition:

Hobbesian authority and order. Hobbes emphasized sovereignty to ensure collective security and order, thereby implying the need for a stable, hierarchical bureaucracy (Holcombe & Robson, 2025). Contemporary critics warn of the potential neglect of individual agency and accountability (Dyzenhaus, 2021).

Lockean consent and natural rights. Legitimacy is conditional on the protection of liberty and property derived from popular consent, which underpins transparency, accountability, and the rule of law (Bruner, 2020; Moloney & Lewis, 2023).

Rousseau's general will and collective morality. Rousseau places legitimacy on the general will formed through participation, a link reflected in modern literature on participatory governance and coproduction (Brenton & Stein, 2024; Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024; McMahon, 2025).

Collectively, these views assert that administrative legitimacy is dialectical: formed through the tension between authority, consent, and collective morality. Consequently, the public interest is better understood as the result of normative-empirical negotiations, rather than as a fixed, objective construct. This synthesis forms the ontological basis for Philosophical-Reflective-Dialectical (P-RD) reasoning.

4.2. Public Interest in Governance Practice: Ambiguity, Conflict, and Fragmentation

The empirical and theoretical literature depicts public interest as a fluid construct highly dependent on institutional and cultural contexts. Rather than a single principle, the public interest represents a process of negotiation between administrative ideals and political dynamics (Prebble, 2021). The analysis reveals three key dimensions: conceptual ambiguity, value conflict, and institutional fragmentation.

1) Conceptual Ambiguity

Ambiguity remains a fundamental problem: the term "public interest" is used to support conflicting policy goals from efficiency to equity without a unifying epistemological framework (Bozeman, 2019; Thabit et al., 2024). Tsagkroni and Dikaios (2024) and Liu and Dool (2022) show how public-interest framing in China and the European Union is selectively used to legitimize political interventions. The case of Romania during the pandemic is also discussed. Radu (2023) demonstrates the shift of moral justification to a tool of information control. Ongaro and Yang (2024) highlight the epistemic pluralism that produces a fragmented theoretical landscape. This conceptual volatility underscores the need for meta-frameworks like P-RD that link moral legitimacy with empirical adaptability.

2) Value Conflicts and Practical Dilemmas

Ambiguity manifests itself in recurring value conflicts:

- Efficiency vs. Legitimacy: Digital transformation increases responsiveness but potentially reduces accountability, a "public value paradox" (Weigl et al., 2024). Similar findings were confirmed by Ochrana and Pavel (2013) from Czech governance practices.
- Fairness vs. Performance: Meritocracy often clashes with patronage practices in post-transition governments (Nemec, 2010; Poljašević et al., 2025).
- Uniformity vs. Contextual Adaptation: Decentralization in Indonesia has shown that national procedures can hinder the development of context-specific and innovative local responses (Aulia & Andhini, 2025). Kovač (2019) emphasizes the need for proportionality between legal formality and contextual sensitivity.

These dilemmas emphasize that the public interest cannot be realized through a single norm; Instead, it requires a dialectical balance that reflects the contradictions inherent in administrative legitimacy (Kovač, 2019; Ochrana & Pavel, 2013; Weigl et al., 2024).

3) Institutional Fragmentation and Governance Disjunction

Institutional fragmentation, multi-level governance and hybrid arrangements often leads to overlapping mandates and inconsistent accountability (Grossi et al., 2022; Oppi et al., 2022). Kovač (2019) has previously emphasized the importance of legal reform and oversight of administrative practices to strengthen public governance. Nemec and Špaček (2023) demonstrated the failure of multi-level coordination during the pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe (disappear in narrative). Machakaire and Mokhele (2024) and Ragolane (2025) found similar patterns in Africa and the regulatory realm.

A study by Adaba and Boio (2024) found that public trust is declining due to overlapping and consequent coordination costs in public services in Africa. This situation reinforces claims (Tonnarelli & Mora, 2024) that the concept of "global" urban

governance often does not fit with African institutional structures, highlighting institutional fragmentation and coordination problems among actors.

This lack of synchrony between political authority, administrative responsibility, and citizen accountability fractures the public interest into competing legitimacy claims, a phenomenon Ongaro and Yang (2024) refer to as "epistemic fragmentation." This fragmentation is not merely organizational but also epistemological: actors at different levels operate with differing conceptions of legitimacy and evidence, thus requiring integrative mechanisms such as P-RD.

Overall, the interplay between conceptual ambiguity, value conflicts, and institutional fragmentation illustrates the public interest as a dialectical phenomenon, a source of contradictions that, when reflected upon, provides valuable epistemological learning opportunities.

4.3. The Emergence of Dialectical-Reflective Epistemology

The third finding demonstrates a growing recognition that contradictions are not anomalies, but rather drivers of innovation and learning, marking a shift toward a dialectical-reflective epistemology (Nastar, 2023; Rowe, Whitty, & Van Der Hoorn, 2024).

Drawing on the dialectical framework of policy networks (Marsh & Smith, 2000), several studies (Douglas & Branch, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025) assert that governance outcomes are the product of the reciprocal interaction between structure and agency, consensus and conflict. Dialectics explains why administrative systems are adaptive yet inherently unstable, the public interest is reconstructed through value negotiations and power redistributions.

Reflective research, Hartley (2023) and Van der Steen et al. (2023) highlight the role of reflexivity, the ability of institutions to review assumptions and learn from contradictions in epistemological renewal. An empirical example in the Netherlands demonstrates how reflective dialogue helps reconcile the tension between bureaucratic control and participatory governance (Van der Steen et al., 2023).

The integration of dialectics and reflection offers a dual mechanism: dialectics identifies contradictions; reflection transforms them into a learning process that enhances adaptability and legitimacy. This synthesis forms Reflective-Dialectical Epistemology (RDE), a theoretical bridge connecting philosophical reasoning, governance practice, and institutional learning. RDE underpins the P-RD Model, which views public administration not only as an explanatory arena but also as a learning discipline that reasons through its epistemic contradictions.

Table 3:

Summary of Thematic Clusters and Epistemological Implications

Thematic Cluster	Key Insights	Epistemological Implications	Thematic Cluster
Philosophical Roots	Legitimacy emerges from the dialectic between authority, consent, and morality	Administrative authority is normative and negotiated	Philosophical Roots
Public Interest in Practice	Conceptual and institutional ambiguity generates value conflict and fragmentation	Governance requires a model that connects universality and contextuality	Public Interest in Practice
Dialectical-Reflective Epistemology	Contradiction and reflection drive institutional learning	Administration evolves through reflexive adaptation, not linear rationality	Dialectical-Reflective Epistemology

Source: Authors' own, 2026

Overall, the findings confirm that the public interest is not a static moral category or simply a managerial instrument, but rather a dynamic epistemic realm where legitimacy, knowledge, and power intersect. This empirical synthesis provides the basis for the Philosophical-Reflective-Dialectical (P-RD) Model, which integrates the normative depth of philosophy with the adaptive mechanisms of reflective governance.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reconnecting Administrative Epistemology with Its Philosophical Core

This epistemic shift is not arbitrary; rather, it reflects a deeper ontological shift within public administration as a complex, adaptive system. As governance structures evolve, contradictions increase, and societal expectations change, administrative epistemology must adapt through reflective reconstruction. The P-RD model illuminates this adaptive process by demonstrating how philosophical universality, practical tensions, and reflective dialectics interact to shape a continually evolving knowledge system capable of responding to contemporary challenges (Bouckaert, 2012; Sandberg, 2020).

The findings suggest that the conceptual fragmentation of the public interest reflects a persistent epistemological gap between philosophical universality and contextual pragmatism. This phenomenon, which Ongaro and Yang (2024) describe as "scattered epistemic foundations," marks the tendency of public administration to adopt diverse paradigms: positivism, pragmatism, constructivism, and critical realism, without forming a coherent philosophical identity.

The social contract tradition offers a normative anchor to bridge this disconnect. As Loewe et al. (2021) note, the social contract signifies a dynamic agreement between

citizens and the state that builds legitimacy through consent and shared values. The contributions of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, stability through authority, justice through rights, and morality through the general will remain relevant for interpreting the intersection of legitimacy, morality, and participation in contemporary governance (Bruner, 2020; Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024; Ezbidi, 2024; Holm, 2024; Loewe et al., 2024; McMahon, 2025).

However, a major challenge is transforming these philosophical insights into an operational administrative epistemology. A review of 68 studies indicates a tendency to separate managerial practice from philosophical reflection, resulting in what Silva & Santos (2022) call "practical knowledge without normative depth." Restoring this depth requires combining philosophical roots with reflective mechanisms that recognize pluralism, negotiation, and institutional learning, the first epistemic move proposed in the P-RD Model.

5.2. Dialectical Interaction: From Conflict to Reflective Synthesis

One core insight is that contradictions between values, institutions, or paradigms should be seen not as failures but as engines of epistemological development. This logic is rooted in Marsh and Smith's (2000) dialectical model of policy networks, which posits that governance outcomes emerge from the ongoing interaction between structure and agency mediated by conflict and compromise. Zhang et al. (2025) extend this idea by highlighting feedback loops that reconstruct the relationship between institutional processes and social outcomes.

Dialectics provides the analytical logic for P-RD: it explains the movement of administrative knowledge across a spectrum of opposing values and rationalities, for example, between state and society, order and freedom, efficiency and equity. However, as Rowe, Whitty, and Wheeldon (2024) emphasize, dialectics must be paired with reflexivity so that contradictions can be transformed into practical insights.

5.3. Reflective Mechanisms as Epistemological Renewal

Reflection functions as a second-order learning mechanism: it allows actors to examine both policy outcomes and the normative assumptions underlying decision-making (Van der Steen et al., 2023). This process transforms bureaucratic tensions into organizational learning that maintains legitimacy while fostering adaptation (Hartley et al., 2016).

Empirical evidence supports this dynamic: Parra (2023) shows that reflective inquiry grounded in critical realism uncovers hidden causal mechanisms, improving policy design; Nastar (2023) emphasizes the role of reflexivity in sustainability research; Van Leeuwen et al. (2024) report that reflective governance drives transformative change in marine policy. Upmeier Zu Belzen et al. (2021) refer to this process as "abductive reasoning", a generative mechanism for theoretical innovation through iterative interpretation.

When combined with dialectics, reflection transforms epistemic instability into a basis for theoretical and practical progress in line with Martyniuk-Pęczek and Pęczek (2026) and Wei (2024)'s call for reflexive governance. This dialectical-reflective interaction constitutes the middle layer within P-RD, mediating between universal philosophical principles and the operational challenges of governance.

5.4. Philosophical Reflective Dialectical (P-RD) Model: Synthesis and Application

The P-RD model integrates the philosophical foundations of legitimacy, the dialectical logic of process, and the mechanisms of reflective learning into a coherent epistemological framework. The empirical and theoretical foundations of this model are derived from the dialectical reasoning of Marsh and Smith (2000), the structural-processual synthesis (Zhang et al., 2025), and the critical realist orientation of Ongaro and Yang (2024).

The core structure of P-RD:

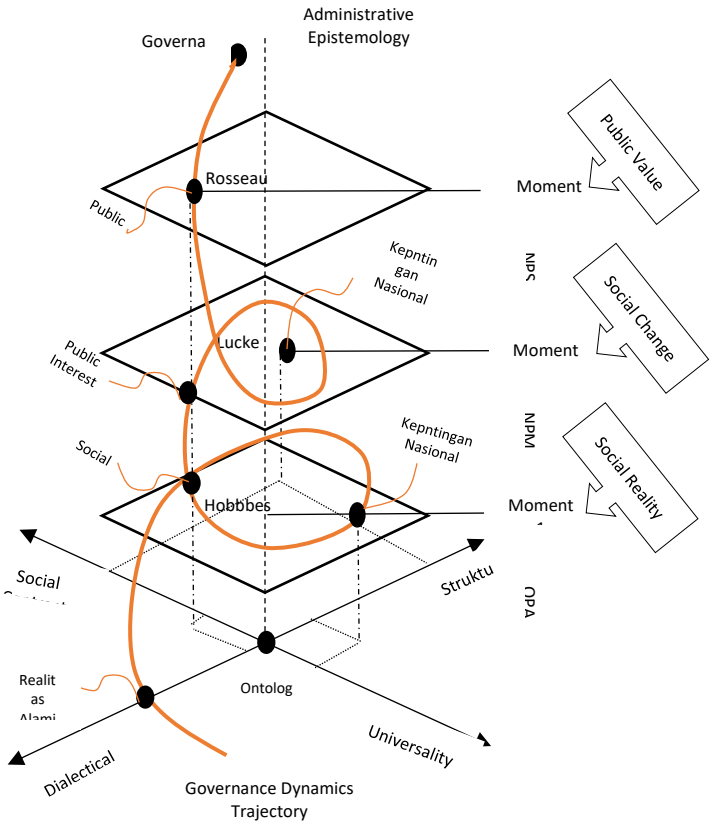
1) Philosophical (ontological) Foundation: The principles of contract social interactions that balance authority, rights, and collective will (Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024; Holm, 2024; Loewe et al., 2021).
2) Dialectical Interaction (processual): Negotiation of values and institutional conflicts that produce normative-practical synthesis (Marsh & Smith, 2000; Zhang et al., 2025).
3) Reflective Learning (epistemological): Institutional self-review mechanisms that calibrate moral principles against empirical reality (Nastar, 2023; Van der Steen et al., 2023).

Conceptually, P-RD views public administration as a learning discipline, knowledge grows not linearly but dialectically: philosophical foundations → practical tensions → reflective reconstruction. The conceptual scheme (Figure 2) illustrates this cycle and identifies policy interventions to enhance governance legitimacy and effectiveness.

Philosophical-Reflective-Dialectical Model (P-RD): Strengthening Administrative Epistemology and the Public Interest from a Social Contract Perspective.

Figure 2:

Skema Konseptual Model Filosofis-Reflektif-Dialektis (P-RD)



Source: Authors' own, 2026

5.5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The P-RD model offers the following theoretical and practical contributions:

Theoretical Contributions:

1) Epistemological Integration: Provides a meta-framework that connects classical philosophical legitimacy with modern governance paradigms, bridging positivist empiricism and interpretive understanding (Elías, 2023; Ongaro & Yang, 2024).
2) Reconstruction of the Public Interest: Defining the public interest as a reflective dialectical process, not a fixed entity, an ongoing negotiation between values, rights, and institutional capacities (Dadashpoor & Sheydayi,

2021; Thabit et al., 2024).

3) Strengthening Disciplinary Autonomy: Reinforces the claim that public administration has its own epistemic status, with theoretical and normative capacities distinct from those of political science and management (Ongaro & Sancino, 2023).

Practical Contributions:

The P-RD Model provides a diagnostic tool for identifying the sources of governance crises, such as policy incoherence, mandate duplication, and legitimacy erosion, by tracing the epistemic roots of these contradictions. The Model thus guides reform strategies that emphasize reflective learning, value integration, and deliberative mechanisms to build adaptive and resilient legitimacy (Hartley, 2023; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022).

1) Institutional Design: Demands an adaptive architecture that balances hierarchy and deliberation, stability and flexibility in line with the notion of collaborative and reflexive governance (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022).
2) Policy Learning: Reforms must foster reflective capacity to evaluate underlying assumptions and value trade-offs, rather than simply pursuing efficiency (Hartley et al., 2019; Head, 2022).
3) Ethical administration: Dialectical-reflective reasoning reinforces moral accountability decisions must be justified based on outcomes and conformity to shared moral principles (McMahon, 2025; Prebble, 2021).

6. Conclusion and research synthesis

This study reviewed 68 peer-reviewed articles (2014-2024) to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of public administration by linking the concepts of public interest and social contract into a unified analytical framework. The analysis reveals a fragmented landscape: philosophical traditions provide normative legitimacy, while empirical governance studies emphasize contextual adaptability. Bridging this gap requires an epistemological model that is both philosophically rooted and reflective and adaptive.

In response to this epistemological fragmentation in public administration, this study introduces the Philosophical-Reflective-Dialectical (P-RD) Model that brings together three key dimensions: 1) philosophical legitimacy rooted in the social contract principles of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024; Holm, 2024; Loewe et al., 2021); 2) dialectical reasoning as the logic of interaction and synthesis of values within institutional dynamics (Marsh & Smith, 2000; Zhang et al., 2025); 3. a reflective mechanism that transforms contradictions into epistemological learning and innovation epistemologis (Hartley et al., 2024; Nastar, 2023; Van der Steen et al., 2023).

The P-RD model emphasizes the importance of strengthening the autonomy of the discipline of public administration, asserting that this field has its own epistemic status. The theoretical and normative capacities of public administration distinguish it from other disciplines, such as political science and management (Ongaro & Sancino, 2023). In this context, understanding public administration requires deepening by reconstructing the public interest as a reflective, dialectical process, meaning the public interest is not considered as a fixed entity, but as the result of ongoing negotiations between values, individual rights, and existing institutional capacities (Dadashpoor & Sheydayi, 2021; Thabit et al., 2024).

Therefore, affirming disciplinary autonomy not only strengthens public administration's position but also provides a more dynamic and interactive understanding of how public interests are formed, thereby enabling researchers and practitioners to grasp the complexities of governance better and to enhance institutions' accountability and responsiveness to societal needs. Overall, this approach encourages us to view public administration as a reflective and adaptable discipline, essential for addressing ongoing challenges and societal changes.

This synthesis affirms the claim of public administration's epistemological autonomy, as discussed by Ongaro and Yang (2024): administration is not simply a derivative of management or politics, but a reflective discipline with its own moral and methodological objectives. Thus, the understanding that public administration possesses epistemological autonomy becomes increasingly relevant in the context of the social contract, which affirms the legitimacy and moral responsibility in the relationship between citizens and the state. The social contract provides a philosophical basis for legitimacy and the public interest by linking authority, consent, and collective morality as ethical relations between citizens and the state (Dahlbeck & Lilja, 2024; Holm, 2024). Within the framework of administrative epistemology, this concept restores a moral orientation and institutional responsibility that transcends utilitarian logic.

Furthermore, dialectics explains institutional change through conflict, negotiation, and value synthesis (Marsh & Smith, 2000; Zhang et al., 2025), while reflection enables the reinterpretation of contradictions as a means of institutional learning (Nastar, 2023; Van der Steen et al., 2023). The interaction of the two forms a dialectical-reflective epistemology that connects universal philosophical principles to the dynamic context of governance. By integrating dialectical and reflective reasoning, public administration becomes a discipline capable of self-renewal, where contradictions serve as sources of innovation and synthesis between normative dimensions and administrative practices (Ongaro & Yang, 2024; Rowe, Whitty, & Van Der Hoorn, 2024).

Finally, the P-RD model asserts that public administration functions as a reflective knowledge system that integrates morality and empirical rationality, thus strengthening the argument for epistemological autonomy. However, this study has limitations, particularly with its limited bibliographic coverage of publications from 2014 to 2024 and English-language literature. To test and enrich the P-RD model, empirical research

is needed that includes: 1) comparative case studies and action research to contextually examine dialectical-reflective mechanisms; 2) investigations into the operationalization of philosophical legitimacy in multi-actor networks and public-private collaborations (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022); 3) exploring the role of reflexivity in digital governance and AI-based policy systems (Weigl et al., 2024), as well as integrating reflexivity into administrative education curricula (Nastar, 2023; Van der Steen et al., 2023). These studies are crucial for examining the strengthening of administrative epistemologies and clarifying the limitations of public interest in enhancing reflective approaches in the future.

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