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Pragmatism Versus Formalism: Theoretical Analysis and Reform Reflections on the Dilemmas of Modern Governance

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Abstract

This paper explores the persistent tension between formalism and pragmatism in modern governance, analyzing their theoretical underpinnings, real-world manifestations, and policy implications. Formalism, rooted in bureaucratic rationality and institutional legitimacy, often leads to governance inefficiencies through over-compliance, risk avoidance, and symbolic conformity. Drawing on case studies from China's local governance and Western regulatory systems, the paper illustrates how formalism manifests in performance fabrication, digitalized formalism, and compliance overload. In contrast, pragmatism offers a problem-oriented, outcome-driven approach that emphasizes adaptability and stakeholder collaboration. Through examples from Singapore and Denmark, the study highlights pragmatic strategies that can enhance governance responsiveness. However, it also acknowledges the institutional risks of pragmatism, such as blurred accountability and short-termism. The paper concludes by proposing an integrated governance model that balances formal rules with practical effectiveness, supported by adaptive institutions, robust feedback mechanisms, and a culture of responsible experimentation.

Keywords: Formalism; Pragmatism; Governance Effectiveness; Institutional Legitimacy; Accountability; Policy Implementation; Performance Management; Compliance Overload

Evidence for Practice

- Shifting from process-oriented evaluation to outcome-based accountability can curb bureaucratic formalism and improve governance effectiveness.

- Digital tools should support substantive problem-solving rather than become new vehicles of "technical formalism."
- Establishing a "forgiveness and experimentation" mechanism is essential to foster innovation and resilience in governance systems.
- Combining top-down performance targets with bottom-up flexibility enables adaptive implementation and avoids symbolic compliance.
- Institutional reforms must align incentives with public value creation to overcome risk-averse and image-driven administrative behavior.

Modern governance faces increasingly complex and evolving challenges, one of the most persistent of which is the widespread and deeply embedded phenomenon of formalism. Formalism manifests in an excessive emphasis on procedures, rules, and appearances, often at the expense of substantive outcomes and the realization of public value. Across the globe, governments are affected by this issue to varying degrees. Despite its diverse expressions, formalism consistently leads to diminished administrative efficiency and eroded public trust.

In contemporary governance, formalism takes on various concrete forms. In the Chinese context, it is often embodied in practices such as “performance by paperwork” and “governance by meetings,” where the volume of documents and frequency of meetings are used as proxies for performance, rather than actual problem-solving capacity. Grassroots officials are frequently burdened by endless paperwork and meetings—commonly referred to as “wen shan hui hai”—leaving little time for substantive engagement with real issues. As a result, many officials focus on signaling responsiveness to superiors rather than producing meaningful outcomes, earning the derisive labels of “puppet officials” or “second-hand officials.” More recently, the rise of “finger-tip formalism,” which relies on digital tools like government apps for mandatory check-ins, ranking systems, and performance dashboards, has added new layers of administrative burden while further displacing attention from tangible results.

In Western countries, formalism often appears in the form of excessive compliance. This overregulation increases the administrative burden and shifts risks onto lower-level actors. For instance, British financial regulators have been criticized for a “risk-aversion ratchet effect,” which stifles innovation and inflates compliance costs. In the U.S., inefficient regulatory processes and constantly shifting rules consume significant public resources and cause policy implementation delays. Similarly, the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) suffers from “unnecessary bureaucracy,” with repetitive reporting and overly complex approval mechanisms detracting from direct patient care.

This pervasive and multifaceted manifestation of formalism reveals a deeper systemic issue: while its forms may differ according to political and cultural contexts, its core pathology—a disconnection between form and substance—is universal. Formalism is not confined to any single institutional regime but is instead an endemic risk in large, hierarchical administrative systems, regardless of ideology. Its specific forms are shaped by a country's incentive structures, accountability mechanisms, and normative cultures. In China, it is often driven by top-down accountability emphasizing visible "traces" to secure promotion, while in Western democracies, it is commonly rooted in legal formalism and risk-averse bureaucratic logic designed to preempt liability. This deeper understanding suggests that efforts to curb formalism must move beyond superficial remedies and be tailored to address its structural underpinnings in varying political and cultural environments. It also highlights the "control paradox": attempts to strengthen control through formal mechanisms may inadvertently perpetuate formalism, resulting in systems that are tightly regulated on paper but inefficient and unresponsive in practice.

Against this backdrop, pragmatism has gained renewed attention as both a philosophical orientation and a governance framework. Pragmatism values the usefulness, feasibility, and real-world consequences of ideas, policies, and recommendations. It privileges action over doctrine, experience over fixed principles, and holds that the meaning of ideas lies in their outcomes, while truth is determined by verification. This problem-oriented, results-driven logic resonates strongly with the modern pursuit of effective, responsive, and value-generating public administration.

The rise of pragmatism is not accidental. It reflects an urgent response to the deficiencies of rigid and overly formalistic governance systems. When bureaucratic procedures undermine effectiveness and sever institutions from their public mission, societies inevitably seek more flexible, responsive, and outcome-oriented approaches. Pragmatism offers precisely such a framework—one that encourages continuous adaptation, learning, and problem-solving, particularly in the face of "wicked problems" that cannot be resolved through rigid rules alone.

This study aims to examine the theoretical confrontation and practical interaction between formalism and pragmatism in the context of modern governance. Theoretically, it seeks to move beyond conventional institutional critiques of formalism by introducing a pragmatist perspective that provides a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of administrative behavior—emphasizing iteration, learning, and practical problem-solving rather than static rules and structures. Practically, it aims to offer concrete, implementable pathways to improve administrative efficiency, enhance responsiveness, and ultimately increase the effectiveness of public service delivery—thereby addressing widespread governance failures caused by regulatory red tape, compliance overload, and bureaucratic inertia.

This inquiry centers on three core questions:

- Why does formalism persist in modern governance systems?
- Can pragmatism offer a more effective normative and operational foundation for governance?

- How do the two logics interact and generate tension within institutional practice?

Theoretical Foundations

This section examines the theoretical underpinnings of the formalism-pragmatism tension in modern governance. It begins by analyzing the roots of formalism through three major lenses: classical bureaucratic theory, neo-institutionalism, and cultural-institutional structures. These perspectives collectively illuminate why formalism not only persists but becomes entrenched in public administration systems.

The Structural Roots of Formalism

Formalism is not an incidental or temporary administrative flaw; it is structurally embedded in the design and operation of modern bureaucratic systems. Its persistence can be traced to three mutually reinforcing sources: bureaucratic rationality, institutional legitimacy pressures, and deeply ingrained political-cultural logics.

Bureaucratic Rationality and Weberian Pathologies: Max Weber's model of bureaucracy sought to promote efficiency, predictability, and impersonality through hierarchical organization, task specialization, professionalization, and rule-based authority. Yet these very features can lead to dysfunction when taken to extremes. When administrative behavior becomes overly focused on procedural compliance, the result is a rigid and depersonalized system characterized by excessive documentation, lack of discretion, and inflexible rule-following. Formalism, in this sense, is not a breakdown of Weberian logic but a pathological extension of it. As Kaufman (2015) observes, red tape often originates from well-intentioned efforts at control that become detached from performance outcomes once institutionalized. The pursuit of control and predictability, if not balanced by adaptive mechanisms, leads to systems that are formally rational but substantively ineffective.

Street-Level Bureaucracy and Frontline Coping Mechanisms: Lipsky (2010) further illuminates how formalism emerges at the micro-level through his theory of street-level bureaucracy. Constrained by inadequate resources, conflicting directives, and ambiguous goals, frontline officials often resort to procedural compliance as a defensive strategy. Rather than exercising discretion or solving problems, they prioritize minimizing risk and avoiding blame. This dynamic reinforces symbolic conformity and erodes the meaningful implementation of public policy.

Institutional Isomorphism and the Quest for Legitimacy: Neo-institutional theory reframes formalism as a product of organizations' quest for legitimacy rather than efficiency. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), organizations adopt formal structures to appear rational and compliant with societal expectations—even when these structures are decoupled from actual performance. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) elaborate this process through the concept of

institutional isomorphism, whereby organizations converge around similar formal practices in response to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures. The result is a proliferation of symbolic compliance, in which formal procedures are replicated and ritualized across organizational fields, often without critical assessment of their effectiveness.

Performance Metrics and the Illusion of Accountability: As Hood (2007) argues, modern public management systems often rely excessively on quantifiable indicators to evaluate administrative performance. This "management by numbers" approach tends to reward easily measured activities—such as report writing or meeting frequency—over difficult-to-measure outcomes like policy impact or public satisfaction. Consequently, public managers may become more focused on producing "audit-friendly" outputs than delivering substantive public value.

Cultural Hierarchy and Ritualized Compliance: Cultural traditions of hierarchy and ritualism further institutionalize formalism, particularly in governance systems where authority is concentrated and accountability flows vertically. In China, for instance, long-standing administrative traditions rooted in *guanbenwei* (official-centered governance) and the *administrative contracting system* emphasize loyalty to superiors over legal accountability or responsiveness to citizens. This produces what is often described as a "hat-preserving" mentality, in which career survival and advancement depend on demonstrating visible compliance with superior expectations—regardless of policy effectiveness. The result is an incentive structure that privileges symbolic performance over substantive governance.

Taken together, these theoretical foundations reveal that formalism is not merely a technical deficiency but a complex, adaptive response to institutional incentives, political culture, and bureaucratic norms. Addressing formalism, therefore, requires structural, normative, and cultural reform—not simply procedural streamlining.

Pragmatism as a Theoretical Foundation for Governance

Pragmatism, as a philosophical tradition, emphasizes the practical, instrumental, and experiential dimensions of thought. It offers a unique lens for addressing the complex, evolving problems of modern governance. Rooted in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, pragmatism proposes that the value of ideas lies in their consequences, and that truth is dynamic, pluralistic, and action-oriented.

Philosophical Origins: Peirce, James, and Dewey: Charles Sanders Peirce, widely regarded as the founder of pragmatism, asserted that the meaning of any concept derives from its conceivable practical effects—a principle he coined as the "pragmatic maxim." For Peirce, ideas must be evaluated through their observable implications and consequences, which he considered the foundation of scientific inquiry. Later, he refined his philosophy into "pragmaticism" to distinguish it from looser variants, incorporating modal realism and conditional logic into a broader normative science of inquiry.

William James popularized pragmatism by interpreting it as a method of assessing ideas through their practical consequences and experiential impact. He contended that truth is not a static property but a process—ideas become "true" through successful application in real-world contexts. James sought to reconcile the idealism of "soft thinking" with the empiricism of "tough-minded" inquiry, underscoring pragmatism's capacity for intellectual integration.

John Dewey extended pragmatism into what he termed "instrumentalism," arguing that concepts and theories are tools for solving problems and guiding action. He rejected dualistic epistemologies in favor of a naturalistic, experimental method grounded in the human organism's adaptive engagement with its environment. Dewey's philosophy of education, especially in *Democracy and Education* (1916), emphasized cultivating problem-solving, critical thinking, and participatory skills to equip individuals for a dynamic and democratic society.

Core Principles: Empiricism, Instrumentalism, and Pluralism: Despite their differences, Peirce, James, and Dewey shared three foundational commitments that underpin pragmatism as a theory of action and governance:

- **Empiricism**: Knowledge is rooted in experience, not a priori logic. It emerges from confronting obstacles to human action and testing ideas through active experimentation in the real world.
- **Instrumentalism**: Ideas are not ends in themselves but tools or hypotheses whose validity is judged by their practical utility and consequences. Truth, in this view, is aligned with usefulness—what works in solving problems is what matters.
- **Pluralism**: Pragmatism embraces the diversity of perspectives and recognizes that truth is provisional and corrigible. It avoids rigid ideological frameworks in favor of openness to multiple interpretations and adaptive solutions—especially in addressing so-called "wicked problems."

These principles collectively form a philosophical foundation that is highly compatible with the values and challenges of modern public administration—particularly the need for effectiveness, responsiveness, and continuous learning.

Contemporary Applications in Public Administration: Recent scholarship has expanded the application of classical pragmatism to public administration theory and practice. Patricia M. Shields and Joseph Soeters have been especially influential in this regard. Shields (2003) proposed that the core ideas of Peirce, James, and Dewey should serve as "organizing principles" for public administration. Her work initiated ongoing interdisciplinary debates in journals such as *Administration & Society*, where she also introduced feminist-pragmatist insights through the work of Jane Addams.

Shields has also made methodological contributions by adapting Dewey's notion of the "working hypothesis" for qualitative and exploratory research and developing the concept of "pragmatic ideal types" for evaluating public programs. Together with Soeters, she has extended pragmatist thought to peacekeeping and military administration, highlighting its relevance for conflict resolution and interagency coordination.

This body of work demonstrates pragmatism's value in enhancing governance capacity through problem orientation, experimental method, and interdisciplinary collaboration. As Stivers (2008) argues, pragmatism provides a "practical philosophy" for public service—one that aligns with democratic values and confronts uncertainty not with rigid rules but with adaptive reasoning.

By offering a dynamic, outcome-oriented framework, pragmatism empowers public administrators to address complex governance problems more effectively than formalistic or overly doctrinal approaches. Its emphasis on learning, participation, and contextual judgment makes it a compelling alternative in the face of bureaucratic inertia and formalism.

Modeling the Competing Logics of Formalism and Pragmatism

Formalism and pragmatism represent two fundamentally distinct logics in modern governance. Their tension and interaction provide critical insight into the dilemmas of administrative practice. This section models their competing dynamics by contrasting the logic of *process legitimacy* with that of *performance legitimacy*, and explores their interaction through institutional behavior and game-theoretical mechanisms.

Formalism: The Logic of Process Legitimacy: At its core, formalism operates under the logic of process legitimacy. According to this view, the legitimacy of a decision or action derives from its strict adherence to established rules, procedures, and legal frameworks—regardless of outcomes. In legal theory, formalists often rely on deductive reasoning from authoritative texts, assuming that legal interpretation should be clear, complete, and yield one correct decision. In public administration, this manifests as an excessive emphasis on procedural compliance and documentation.

In China, for instance, local governments often prepare extensive files, records, and photographs to demonstrate that every step of policy implementation complies with higher-level directives. This focus on "traceability" creates a burdensome cycle of paperwork and inspections, leaving frontline officials little time for substantive work. From a supervisory standpoint, this reflects a well-intentioned effort to constrain arbitrary governance and protect citizen rights by ensuring legal compliance. However, for local officials, documentation becomes a protective mechanism to shield themselves from blame when policies fail.

While this focus on procedural legitimacy is aimed at fairness and predictability, it can inadvertently lead to a decoupling between mission and performance. Organizations allocate excessive resources to meet formal requirements at the expense of innovation or public value creation. De Graaf and Paanakker (2015) characterize this tension as a conflict between procedural and performance values in governance—a divergence that risks undermining both administrative efficiency and citizen trust.

Pragmatism: The Logic of Performance Legitimacy: In contrast, pragmatism is grounded in a results-oriented logic. It assesses the value and validity of ideas, policies, and actions by their tangible outcomes and practical effects. Rather than asking whether procedures have been followed, pragmatism asks whether goals have been achieved and problems effectively solved.

In public administration, this translates into a performance-centered approach. The New Public Management (NPM) movement emphasized quantitative outcome-based evaluations to counter the inefficiencies of traditional bureaucracy. Singapore's performance evaluation framework, for example, incorporates multidimensional assessments of civil servants, focusing not only on output but also on potential, adaptability, and professional growth—an embodiment of pragmatic principles in administrative practice.

This logic encourages policymakers to move beyond abstract norms and rigid precedents, directing attention to experiential knowledge, problem-solving, and adaptive success. As pragmatist philosophy asserts, an idea is "true" insofar as it works—it is a "warranted expedient," validated by its success in human experience and practice.

Tension and Interaction Between Legitimacy Logics: The interaction between process legitimacy and performance legitimacy forms a complex and often contradictory dynamic in governance. Process legitimacy focuses on whether mechanisms are fair, participatory, and transparent, while performance legitimacy centers on whether governance actors effectively deliver services, resolve disputes, and fulfill public needs. Ideally, both forms of legitimacy reinforce one another: effective governance enhances trust, which strengthens legitimacy and enables further capacity-building. Conversely, a failure in either dimension can provoke public dissatisfaction and resistance.

However, value conflicts between these logics are frequent:

- **Legal compliance vs. effectiveness**: Strict legal rules may hinder effective governance. For example, rigid public procurement procedures can delay implementation, forcing administrators to operate on the "legal margins" to expedite delivery.
- **Transparency vs. efficiency**: While openness is central to democratic legitimacy, confidentiality may sometimes be necessary for sensitive negotiations. Officials may limit information disclosure to avoid opposition or facilitate smoother approval processes, even at the cost of public understanding.

These conflicts reflect what De Graaf and Paanakker (2015) describe as value pluralism—the coexistence of equally important but mutually incompatible goals. A state may be highly efficient (high performance legitimacy) but lack inclusive or transparent processes (low process legitimacy), or vice versa. Either imbalance can erode public trust and legitimacy.

A Game-Theoretical Perspective on Formalism-Pragmatism Dynamics: Although formal game models are not provided, game theory offers a useful lens to analyze the strategic interaction between formalism and pragmatism in hierarchical governance systems. The Chinese bureaucratic model, characterized by *administrative contracting* and *upward accountability*, illustrates how formalism is maintained through signaling and incentive structures.

- **Administrative contracting and upward accountability**: Central authorities delegate performance contracts to lower levels while retaining oversight powers. Local officials, accountable primarily to their immediate superiors rather than to citizens or horizontal peers, prioritize upward signaling.
- **"Upward ratcheting" and adaptive response**: Intermediate levels intensify targets ("ratcheting") to ensure goal achievement, while grassroots officials, constrained by resources, engage in tactical adaptation, selectively implementing directives or faking compliance.
- **Collusive compliance and blurred accountability**: To pass inspections, superiors and subordinates may engage in tacit collusion, masking performance failures or manipulating data to demonstrate success. This undermines genuine accountability and limits the central government's ability to assess true effectiveness.

These dynamics reveal how formalism can persist and even flourish through rational, strategic behavior within hierarchical systems—even when it undermines public interest. Pragmatism, in contrast, seeks to disrupt these patterns by emphasizing transparency, cross-level engagement, and outcome-oriented accountability. It reframes governance not as a ritual of form but as a practice of meaningful problem-solving.

Empirical Dilemmas: Manifestations of Formalism in Practice

Formalism manifests differently across countries and contexts, yet its detrimental effects on governance efficacy are globally observable. This section analyzes two contrasting cases—China's local governance and Western regulatory regimes—to illustrate the persistence of formalistic practices and their structural roots.

Case I: Formalism in Local Governance in China

Formalism in Chinese local governance is both persistent and evolving, taking on increasingly nuanced forms in response to administrative pressures.

- **"Performance by Paper" and "Meetings as Execution":**

  Local governments often substitute policy implementation with repetitive meetings and documentation. Known colloquially as “performance by paper” (材料政绩) and “implementation by meetings” (会议落实), these practices prioritize visible effort over substantive results. For instance, some local agencies convene over 800 meetings annually—more than three per working day—leaving little time for fieldwork or service delivery. Performance assessments that overemphasize visible metrics and procedural traceability further exacerbate this problem, encouraging a culture of “upward pleasing” rather than problem-solving.

- **"Digital Formalism":**

  With the proliferation of digital tools, formalism has shifted into the realm of mobile governance. Apps and group chats on platforms like WeChat are used for mandatory check-ins, rankings, and data reporting, creating "form over substance" digital labor. These practices add invisible workloads to frontline officials and prioritize traceable data over meaningful engagement, reflecting a bureaucratic adaptation to technological oversight mechanisms.

- **Structural Drivers of "Trace-Based Governance":**

  A core driver of these behaviors is the bureaucratic expectation of leaving a paper trail for inspection. Local governments often undergo numerous audits requiring exhaustive documentation (台账), photos, and meeting records to validate compliance. In extreme cases, weekends and holidays are canceled to meet these administrative demands. Moreover, tight deadlines and delayed upstream planning frequently force local cadres to fabricate evidence as a matter of survival, not choice. The result is a system in which formal compliance becomes both a shield against blame and a distortion of true governance outcomes.

Case II: Compliance Overload and Risk Displacement in Western Contexts

In Western countries, particularly those with developed regulatory states, formalism often emerges through over-compliance and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

- **Regulatory Overload:**

  The expansion of legal and administrative codes in sectors such as finance, healthcare, and environmental protection has significantly increased compliance burdens. For example, by 2011, U.S. businesses had to navigate over 165,000 pages of federal regulations, up from 145,000 in 2007. Such proliferation of rules not only increases operational costs but also stifles innovation. The UK’s Financial Services Authority has been criticized for fostering a “risk-averse ratchet effect,” where compliance becomes an end in itself.

- **Red Tape and Inefficiency:**

  Excessive bureaucracy reduces efficiency in public service delivery. For example, mandatory boiler upgrades under new federal rules required not only costly equipment replacements but also legal consultations, internal audits, and administrative delays. Within the NHS, repeated data requests and multilayered approvals erode clinicians' ability to focus on patient care. Even Singapore's civil aviation authority once required permits for each individual drone in a light show, inflating costs—later reversed through procedural simplification.

- **Risk Displacement:**

  Over-regulation can also lead to the externalization of risk. In supply chains, core firms often maintain high compliance standards while shifting cyber and regulatory risks to less capable subcontractors. The 2013 Target breach and the 2020 SolarWinds incident demonstrate how peripheral vulnerabilities can undermine systemic security. Similarly, in anti-money laundering (AML) compliance, ultra-high-net-worth individuals exploit complex legal structures to obscure ownership, thereby relocating risk to regulatory blind spots.

Mechanistic Analysis: Shifting Accountability and Incentive Distortions

The resilience of formalism is rooted in self-reinforcing structural mechanisms:

- **Responsibility Shifting:**

  Formal procedures serve as buffers for blame deflection. In hierarchical governance systems, lower-level actors "leave traces" to protect themselves from top-down scrutiny, while superiors leverage procedural lapses to deflect failure. In China's "contracted administration" system, for example, responsibility is pushed downward without commensurate resource allocation, creating a disconnect between authority and execution.

- **Incentive Distortion:**

  Performance systems that prioritize formal indicators (e.g., reports, attendance, materials) skew incentives toward appearances. This encourages short-term, high-visibility projects over long-term, high-impact reforms. Cadres invest in "image projects" that demonstrate loyalty or alignment rather than effectiveness, fostering a logic of career protection over public service.

- **Accountability Vacuums:**

  Despite the existence of accountability mechanisms, these often function symbolically rather than substantively. Fuzzy standards, diluted enforcement, and collusive behaviors ("ritualistic compliance") render evaluations performative. In China's layered bureaucracies, joint complicity between levels of government

enables data manipulation and obfuscation, undermining central oversight and entrenching unaccountable practices.

This complex ecosystem of proceduralism, performance optics, and political survival forms a vicious cycle that undermines genuine governance. Whether under authoritarian pressure or democratic regulation, formalism persists as a coping mechanism within bureaucratic structures unable or unwilling to reconcile performance demands with institutional constraints.

Pragmatic Governance: A Problem-Oriented Alternative to Formalism

In response to the dysfunctions induced by formalism, pragmatism offers a governance pathway centered on problems, outcomes, and multi-actor collaboration. This section explores empirical examples and theoretical mechanisms that illustrate the feasibility and risks of embedding pragmatic logic in modern governance.

Empirical Support: Performance-Driven and Collaborative Governance Models Singapore's Performance Evaluation System

Singapore exemplifies a results-oriented governance model that operationalizes pragmatic principles with remarkable consistency. Far from embodying cautious or incremental pragmatism, Singapore's approach is characterized by a "ruthless focus on results," transcending ideological boundaries to ensure state survival and adaptive success.

The government's annual performance appraisal system evaluates civil servants using seven distinct forms, covering personal traits, job performance, and potential. These assessments yield dynamic and holistic performance portfolios that feed into promotion, compensation, and redeployment decisions. Criteria such as integrity and attitude are assessed with concise, targeted metrics, ensuring clarity and comparability across departments.

Singapore also embraces digital pragmatism through the integration of AI-based tools like the "PAIR" suite, which automates routine tasks, increases administrative productivity, and shortens service delivery times. Importantly, these tools are iteratively improved based on real-time feedback and citizen needs—a prime example of "product-first" public management.

This performance regime reflects what scholars call comprehensive pragmatism: an institutional capacity to borrow, adapt, and synthesize policy tools across traditions in pursuit of empirically grounded governance solutions.

Denmark's Adaptive Collaborative Governance: Denmark's co-governance model offers another manifestation of pragmatism, particularly suited for addressing "wicked problems" that defy linear solutions. Drawing on bricolage and

robust governance theories, Danish approaches view collaboration as a fluid, adaptive process of experimentation rather than a prestructured consensus.

Projects evolve over time, participants shift, and collaborative structures disassemble and reassemble as needed. Shared goals may not preexist but are constructed through overlapping interests, practical narratives, and contextual flexibility. Results are often heterogeneous and unexpected—but what matters is that they work, not that they adhere to predefined plans.

This model challenges idealized visions of cooperation and instead offers a grounded framework for managing complexity: success in collaboration need not depend on consensus or coherence, but may emerge from resilience, multiplicity, and learning-by-doing.

Institutional Mechanisms of Pragmatic Governance

Pragmatism contributes several distinctive governance mechanisms:

- **Problem Orientation:**
  Governance should begin with and return to the real-world problems citizens face. Instead of being driven by ideology or abstract theory, policymaking is rooted in empirical diagnosis and adaptive experimentation. Pragmatism thrives in dealing with persistent, cross-cutting issues like poverty, healthcare, or homelessness—where no single actor or solution suffices. It promotes iterative questioning of status quo strategies and encourages recalibration based on context-specific feedback.

- **Outcome Evaluation:**
  Pragmatism shifts evaluation from procedural compliance to actual results. It emphasizes the experimental consequences of beliefs and policies, and measures success by the achievement of public goals—not merely adherence to plans. In legal reasoning, this manifests in a tendency to weigh social outcomes over textual purity. In public administration, it calls for integrated quantitative and qualitative evaluation frameworks that assess efficacy, not just input or process.

- **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:**
  Complex problems demand diverse perspectives. Pragmatic governance engages not only experts but also affected communities through participatory inquiry. In urban mobility planning, for instance, policymakers must consult drivers, transit users, cyclists, and the disabled to develop inclusive solutions. Such engagement fosters legitimacy, innovation, and responsiveness across sectors and levels of government.

Institutionalization Challenges and Risks

Despite its appeal, pragmatic governance is not immune to institutional risks:

- **Discretionary Ambiguity:**
  Pragmatism's emphasis on flexibility can backfire if not grounded in transparent norms. Without clear principles, discretionary power may lead to inconsistent or arbitrary policy execution. In contexts lacking strong legal culture or professional accountability, pragmatic discretion risks devolving into selective enforcement or regulatory capture.

- **Overemphasis on Results:**
  While outcomes matter, excessive focus on performance can undermine procedural fairness. Authorities may pursue efficiency at the expense of equity, transparency, or legality—justifying rights violations as collateral damage in the name of effectiveness. Past instances of heavy-handed policy enforcement in China illustrate how "result obsession" can erode civil liberties and public trust.

- **Short-Termism:**
  Pragmatism's focus on "what works now" may inadvertently encourage political short-termism. Officials may prefer quick wins and visible gains over long-term structural reforms. This can lead to fragmented, reactive policymaking that sacrifices sustainability for expediency.

- **Diffuse Accountability:**
  Collaborative governance blurs traditional lines of authority. When multiple actors co-create policies, failures become harder to trace and punish. This undermines accountability and weakens incentive structures—mirroring some of the "accountability voids" already seen in formalist systems.

In sum, pragmatism offers a compelling corrective to formalist pathologies by restoring focus on problems, performance, and participatory solutions. Yet its institutionalization must be carefully balanced with normative safeguards, legal structures, and coherent oversight mechanisms to avoid becoming a new form of managerial ad hoc-ism or governance-by-improvisation.

Policy Recommendations and Pathways for Reflection

Given the complex interplay between formalism and pragmatism in modern governance, this study proposes the following recommendations. The goal is to integrate the strengths of both approaches to build a more effective and resilient governance system.

Institutional Design: Aligning Incentives with Accountability for Results

To effectively curb formalism, fundamental reforms are needed at the institutional level to ensure that incentive mechanisms align with the public interest while reinforcing performance-based accountability.

- **Optimize Incentives and Dismantle "Hat Preservation Mentality":** A core driver of formalism is the "hat preservation" mindset, where officials prioritize personal promotion and interests. The cadre appointment and evaluation system should shift focus from procedural compliance and documentation to actual results and public satisfaction. This means reducing the weight of metrics such as document volume, meeting frequency, and app check-ins, and instead emphasizing outcomes, problem-solving capabilities, and genuine public approval. For instance, China's science and technology reforms now encourage result-oriented performance evaluation through lump-sum funding models and institutional accountability.

- **Strengthen Accountability Systems for Targeted Enforcement:** To address superficial or misdirected accountability, reforms must ensure accurate, rule-based, and lawful enforcement. This includes amending accountability regulations to prevent weak enforcement or excessive generalization, and clarifying roles and responsibilities to avoid overlapping mandates that overwhelm local officials. Clear delineation of duties ensures accountability is directed at the right actors, preventing blame-shifting behaviors.

- **Establish Incentive-Compatible Governance Structures:** Drawing on the "administrative contract system" model, governance structures should allow local governments greater flexibility and discretion in implementation, while still being held accountable for outcomes. This encourages local initiative and innovation tailored to regional realities. However, strong oversight and strict penalties for falsification must accompany this flexibility to prevent collusion and performative compliance.

Political Culture Reform: Weakening Cultural Reliance on Formalism

Formalism is deeply entrenched not only institutionally but culturally. Overcoming it requires fundamental shifts in political culture.

- **Promote a Proper View of Political Achievement:** Formalism stems from subjectivism and utilitarianism, often due to a misaligned view of achievement. Officials should be educated to view serving the people and solving real problems—not grand gestures—as their primary goal. This entails dismantling the "only please superiors" mentality and encouraging firsthand investigations that lead to pragmatic decision-making.

- **Foster a Culture of Action and Responsibility:** Create a political environment that values diligence and accountability. Discourage "inaction to avoid mistakes" by supporting officials who demonstrate initiative,

even after previous disciplinary actions. At the same time, hold to account those who evade responsibility, shift blame, or perform incompetently.

- **Dismantle Bureaucratic Hierarchies and Ritualism:** The deep-rooted "official-centered" mindset in China promotes power-worship and hierarchical formalities. Ongoing anti-corruption efforts and political style reforms should challenge these tendencies and promote a more egalitarian, pragmatic, and citizen-focused political culture. Reducing unnecessary ceremonial events and rigid protocols will free up officials to engage directly with the public and address real problems.

Technology and Feedback Mechanisms: Supporting Outcome-Oriented Governance (While Avoiding "Technocratic Formalism")

Digital tools can enhance governance efficiency and outcomes—but must not devolve into a new form of formalism.

- **Advance Data Governance and Promote Information Sharing:** Data is the nervous system of modern governance. Governments should integrate and share data resources across departments to eliminate silos and reduce redundant reporting. For instance, connecting police, civil affairs, and social security databases can streamline procedures and reduce burdens for citizens and officials alike.
- **Use Digital Tools to Strengthen Results Monitoring:** Technologies such as AI can enable real-time monitoring of policy implementation and help detect non-compliance. However, this must not lead to "technocratic formalism"—e.g., forcing app downloads, check-ins, or superficial digital engagement. A "negative list" should prohibit excessive data collection or misuse of tech that infringes on public rights.
- **Establish Bottom-Up Feedback Loops:** Digital platforms should facilitate continuous feedback from frontline staff and citizens, allowing real-time identification and resolution of inefficiencies. This supports iterative process improvements, higher service quality, and better responsiveness to evolving social needs.

Creating a "Tolerance Mechanism": Fostering Innovation and Learning Through Trial and Error

Since pragmatism values experimentation and adaptation, a robust tolerance mechanism is essential to encourage innovation and enhance governance resilience.

- **Clarify Boundaries for Trial and Error:** Clearly distinguish between genuine reform-driven mistakes and misconduct such as corruption or negligence. Officials who act in good faith and follow due process should be protected from excessive blame when experiments fail, encouraging them to take calculated risks.

- **Encourage Local Experimentation and Learning:** Given China's regional diversity, central policies should allow for localized adaptation rather than imposing one-size-fits-all solutions. Successful local experiments should be scaled up, while failed attempts should be analyzed constructively rather than punished reflexively.
- **Enhance Risk Assessment and Early Warning Systems:** While encouraging innovation, governments must also assess and anticipate potential risks. A sound risk management system should proactively evaluate the downsides of new policies and include contingency planning to keep risks within acceptable limits.

Conclusion

Modern governance faces a profound challenge from formalism, which manifests as an excessive obsession with procedures and appearances. This fixation leads to inefficiency, resource waste, and a corrosion of public trust. The roots of formalism lie in the distortion of Weberian bureaucracy, the legitimacy pressures under neo-institutionalism, and a deep cultural reliance on hierarchy and ritual. Through mechanisms such as responsibility shifting, distorted incentives, and ineffective accountability, formalism forms a self-reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break.

In contrast, pragmatism offers a governance philosophy that is problem-oriented, result-driven, and grounded in experience and action. It treats ideas and policies as tools for solving real-world problems and evaluates their value based on practical outcomes. Real-world examples, such as Singapore's performance evaluation system and Denmark's collaborative governance model, vividly demonstrate the power of pragmatic approaches in improving governance effectiveness.

In practice, the logic of procedural legitimacy underpinning formalism and the outcome-driven logic of pragmatism create a complex tension. While procedural legitimacy ensures fairness and predictability, its overemphasis can result in a disconnection from core public missions. On the other hand, result-orientation enhances efficiency, but without proper safeguards, it risks arbitrary implementation and the erosion of procedural justice. The true challenge of governance lies in striking a dynamic balance between the two—ensuring transparency and fairness in processes while also delivering tangible outcomes and public value.

Therefore, restructuring governance with pragmatism at its core, along with a critical reflection on formalism, is an essential path forward. This entails:

- Institutional Design: Ensuring compatibility between incentives and accountability for results by optimizing evaluation mechanisms and clearly defining roles and responsibilities—redirecting officials from "form for form's sake" to "striving for results."

- Political Culture: Deep reform to eliminate the "hat-preservation mentality" and bureaucratic elitism, establish a correct understanding of political achievement, and foster a culture of responsibility and practical action.
- Technological Application: Leveraging digital tools to enhance governance precision and efficiency, while guarding against "technocratic formalism" and ensuring technology serves the resolution of substantive issues.
- Environmental Support: Building a robust tolerance mechanism to encourage innovation and experimentation, injecting vitality and resilience into the governance system.

Looking ahead, modern governance should strive to construct an integrated model that blends values and performance. This means not only pursuing efficiency and outcomes but also upholding the bottom line of public values, justice, and citizen well-being. More importantly, it means continuously adapting governance through practice, reflection, and recalibration—ultimately achieving a model of effective, responsive, and sustainable good governance that harmonizes form and substance.

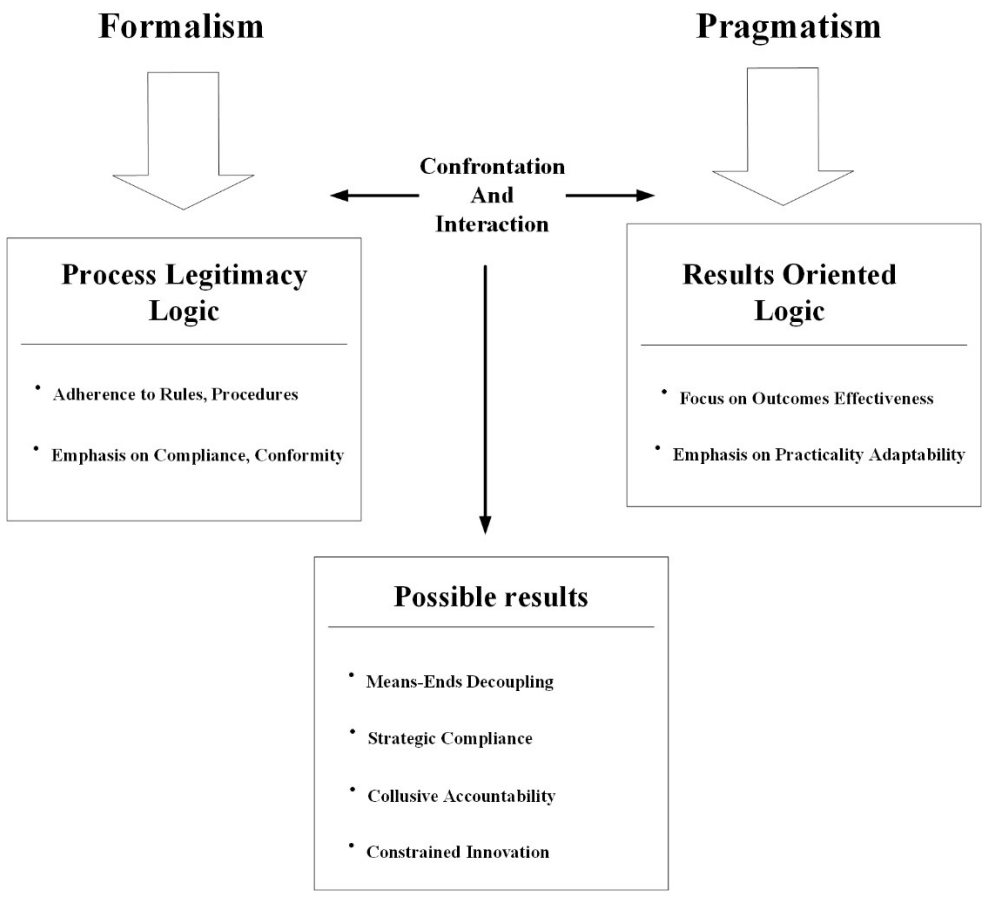
Tables and Figures

[Table 1 Key Characteristics of Formalism in Public Administration]

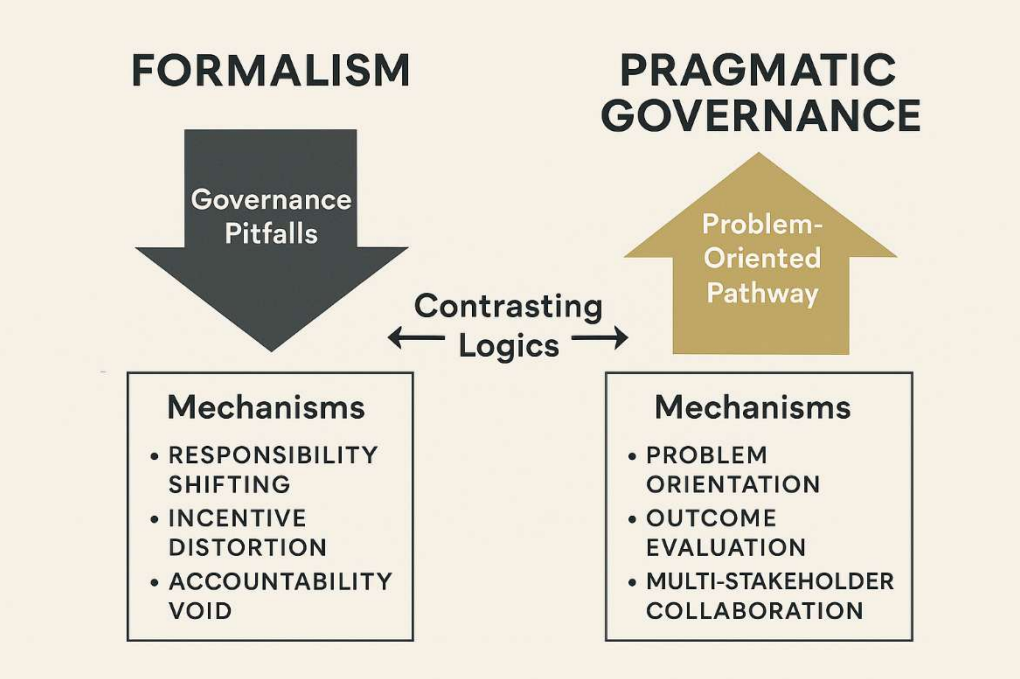
Dimension	Description	Typical Expressions (China)	Typical Expressions (Western Contexts)
Definition	Deviation between prescribed forms and actual practice; excessive focus on procedural compliance at the expense of substantive outcomes.	Emphasis on documentation and frequent meetings in “performance-through-paperwork” and “implementation through meetings.”	Rigid adherence to complex regulations and procedures, resulting in compliance overload.
Core Characteristics (Theoretical)	Overemphasis on rules, proceduralism, hierarchical accountability, functional specialization, and conservatism; decoupling of formal structures from actual effectiveness in pursuit of legitimacy.	Escalation of targets and over-documentation caused by upward accountability in bureaucratic hierarchies.	Regulatory bodies adopt excessive and detailed rules to mitigate risks, leading to widespread red tape.

Specific Manifestations (Practical)	Digital formalism, focus on appearances over substance, data falsification, avoidance of responsibility, performative bureaucracy.	Mandatory app downloads, point-based evaluations, ranking announcements; vanity projects; inflated reporting; inaction and blame-shifting.	Cumbersome approval processes, redundant data collection, inflexible procurement policies, and suppression of innovation and adaptability.
Underlying Tendencies	Prioritization of process over outcomes; pursuit of legitimacy via formal compliance; diminished discretion; shifting of responsibility; focus on pleasing superiors ("hat-preservation mentality").	Grassroots officials assemble documentation to pass inspections, emphasizing "performance on paper."	Public service entities over-document to avoid audit scrutiny and shift risks to others.

[Figure 1. Contrasting Governance Logics: Formalism vs. Pragmatism]



[Figure 2. Contrasting Logics and Mechanisms of Formalism vs. Pragmatic Governance]



Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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