

# The Benefits of Complexity in Public Decision-making Processes

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Abstract:

Many societal issues of our current era are characterized by a high degree of complexity. These issues comprises a variety of public and private actors involved, many and diverging perspectives on problems and solutions, and unexpected events and developments. These characteristics strongly resemble the features of complex, adaptive systems. In complexity leadership, it is acknowledged that societal issues with a high degree of complexity requires a leadership style that fit to that complexity, such as adaptive leadership (Murphy et al., 2017; Lichtenstein et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 2007; Nooteboom and Termeer, 2013; Teisman and Klijn, 2008; Teisman, Van Buuren, and Gerrits, 2009). This leadership type consists of embracing complexity and creating conditions under which "complexity can work for us". For governments, this means allowing a variety of different problems, solutions, and actors, as well as being adaptive to new and emerging desires and developments during the decision-making process. This variety and openness functions as a breeding ground for rich and unexpected solutions to emerge.

However, "complexification" is often a contested and vulnerable approach in governmental organizations in which complexity reduction is strongly institutionalized. Simplification has become a usual approach for governments since industrialization and modernism (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), aimed at straightening complexity and imposing a formal grid to societal issues to create order and control (Scott, 1998). This "simplification" will work and have worked in many settings, but do not give the desired results in complex issues. Nevertheless, governments face strong (institutional) incentives to keep on the simplification path. This brings forward the question how and why governmental organizations will switch from simplification to embrace complexity. First, there is a strong need to "prove" that allowing complexity (and facing the corresponding uncertainty and loss of control) can be very effective and can result in unexpected rich solutions. Second, more insight is required about the conditions under which organizations are willing to move away from reducing the complexity of issues. To make progress and exchange knowledge on these two aspects, we initiate a panel at ECPR about Complexity Leadership. Of course, we are open for additional suggestions in the field of complexity theory, performance, and decision-making processes.

**Abstract 1: Bil, J.A. and Teisman, G.R. (2018). Elaborating complexification: the effectiveness of embracing complexity, and breaking through simplification in complex decision-making processes.**

Societal issues in late-modern societies are increasingly characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, and ambivalence. The increased complexity of issues forces governments to increase the complexity of their approaches to remain fit and effective. In this article, this movement of embracing complexity is called “complexification”. In the approach of complexification, complexity is considered a breeding ground for unexpected rich matches between problems and solutions to emerge. Complexification moves away from the “simplification” of societal issues that is present in traditional modes of government, New Public Management, and project management. In these stances, the focus is on ordering and controlling issues by imposing a formal grid and cutting issues in identifiable parts. This simplification works well in relatively simple contexts. In complex settings, however, simplification is an invitation to chaos. In this article, we explore the potential effectiveness of complexification for complex issues. We complement network and collaborative governance approaches with insights from complexity theory, art/crafting, improvisation, and modest governance. The potential of complexification is demonstrated in an in-depth case-study about the management of the complex and large transformation of Utrecht Central Station (The Netherlands). Because simplification appeared to be strongly institutionalized, we provide favorable conditions for breaking through path-dependent processes of simplification and creating paths for complexification. In these ways, this article contributes to the ongoing debate about realizing societal resilience and developing governance approaches that fit the challenges of late-modern societies.

If you have a Paper you think might fit in this Panel, please contact the Panel Chairs as soon as possible with the following information:

- Title of the paper (no more than 20 words)
- Abstract of the paper (no more than 250 words)
- Author's (and if applicable co-author's) email address as registered in their MyECPR account
- 3–5 keywords

## Literature

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