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The Government Performance and Results Act and the Tradition of Federal Management Reform: Square Pegs in Round Holes?

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Abstract

The argument of this article is that GPRA—like a number of earlier federal management reform efforts—does not fit easily into the institutional structures, functions, and political realities of the American system. Despite the array of management reform efforts over the years, couched in different guises and forms, few attempts to deal with management have resulted in significant change. This is not to say that there have been no achievements from the range of reform efforts. But GPRA repeats the tendency of the architects of management reform to focus on what have turned out to be fairly ineffective approaches. The time and energy that have been expended in this process have resulted in significant opportunity costs in the federal government.

This article emphasizes the major weaknesses of GPRA. It is a prime example of the difficulty of dealing with federal management as a government-wide strategy and set of generic activities and requirements. The public administration community has focused on a set of institutions and processes that do not really touch the core of the nation's decision-making processes. These reforms operate largely as rhetorical positions or arguments without the ability to influence substantive policy and budgetary processes.

Three attributes are a part of the American decision-making process: the structures of fragmented decision making in the United States; the imperatives of several decision making functions (particularly the differences between budgeting, management, and planning); and the dynamics of politics and policy making in the American political system. I examine how GPRA has operated within these constraints and the difficulty of fitting the GPRA into them.

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