

The Logics of Legitimacy of Metropolitan Planning Organizations

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Presenter Introductions



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**Transportation Planning Director
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Sam is the Transportation Planning Director for the Bel-O-Mar Regional Council, Vice Chair of the West Virginia Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations and serves on the WV LTAP Advisory Board.

He brings more than seven years of experience in regional governance and infrastructure planning, with a strong record of advancing safety, accessibility, and local capacity through competitive federal grants.



**Ethan W. Combs,
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Ethan Combs is a Transportation Planner with the Bel-O-Mar Regional Council, where he works on regional transportation planning and public transit coordination across local governments.

His work focuses on MPO policy and compliance, human services transportation, and the collaborative foundations that support effective regional planning.



Believe it or **not**, there is a
“**Science of Public
Administration**”



Public administration can be traced to early administrative systems such as the Roman Empire, which developed formal hierarchies for taxation, law, and military governance

Public administration emerged as a formal field of study in 1887 with Woodrow Wilson's *The Study of Administration*

By the mid-20th century, the field expanded to include organizational behavior, decision-making, and policy processes

Today, public administration is an interdisciplinary field drawing from political science, economics, and management

The field examines how authority operates through formal organizations and administrative systems; It focuses on how public decisions are carried out through management structures



Why do **MPOs** have
authority and **why** do
people **accept** It?



Why do MPOs Have Authority? *(The Easy Question)*

Where MPO Authority Comes From

- Federal Law (Title 23)
- State Recognition
- Required Regional Role
- Formal Planning Products

BUT...

- Authority alone does not explain acceptance
- Many institutions still lack public trust

Why do People Accept it? *(The Harder Question)*

Why do People Accept it?

- MPOs do not control land use
- MPOs do not levy taxes
- MPOs does not enforce the law

BUT...

- MPOs work. Why is that?



MPOs Operate in Legitimacy (*The Real Answer*)

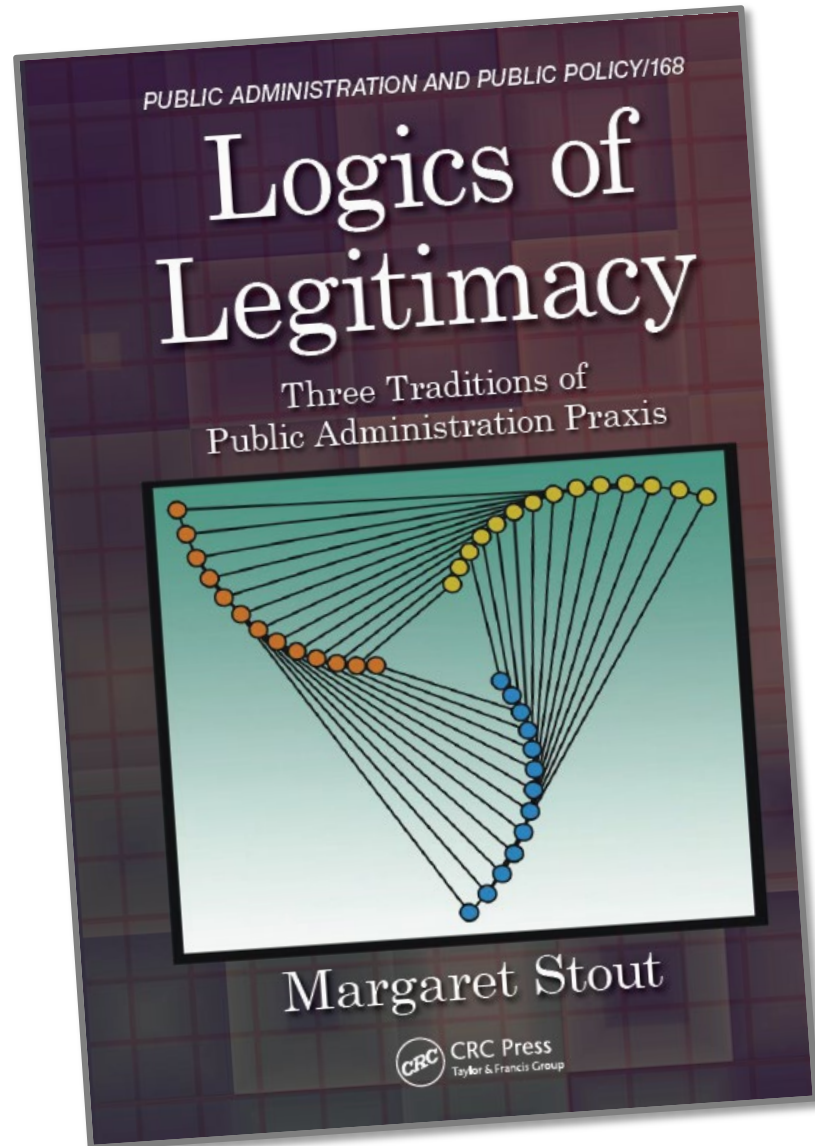
Legitimacy is Not Power

- Legitimacy means:
 - Decisions feel reasonable
 - Processes feel fair
 - Outcomes feel justified
 - The institution is trusted, even in bouts of disagreement

MPOs operate on legitimacy more than control



Logics of Legitimacy by Margaret Stout



Logics of Legitimacy

- Dr. Margaret Stout examines how legitimacy is understood in public administration
- She argues that legitimacy is not singular, but shaped by competing traditions within the field
- These traditions differ in how they define authority, administrative roles, and public engagement
- She organizes these into three logics: **constitutional**, **discretionary**, and **collaborative**



The **Three** Logics of Legitimacy



The Three Logics of Legitimacy

Constitutional

- Constitutional = Law, rules, representation
- We are legitimate because **we are authorized**

Discretionary

- Discretionary = Expertise, analysis, performance
- We are legitimate because **we know**

Collaborative

- Collaborative = Participation, trust, shared decisions
- We are legitimate because **we decide together**





Most Organizations Often Rest on One or Two Logics

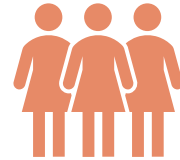
Some rely mainly on Law



Some rely mainly on Expertise



Some rely mainly on Participation



Problems arise when one logic dominates

- Law without trust
- Expertise without consent
- Participation without influence



Where We (MPOs) Sit

MPOs

Constitutional

- Title 23 Requirements
- Formal Adoption and oversights

Discretionary

- Data, modeling, technical analyses
- Performance Measures

Collaborative

- MPO Boards
- Interagency Coordination
- Public Involvement



The Three Logics of Legitimacy

Constitutional

- Constitutional = Law, rules, representation
- We are legitimate because **we are authorized**



- The U.S. Constitution grants Congress authority to write laws and allocate funding
- Congress uses this authority to pass surface transportation authorization bills
 - *Establish funding programs*
 - *Set requirements for how funds are used*
- Federal law (Title 23, NEPA, Title VI) ties transportation funding to public interest and accountability
- These requirements introduced key questions into the planning process
 - *Do we want this project?*
 - *What will it cost?*
 - *Who is impacted?*
- MPOs emerged within this framework to support regional decision-making and coordination
- State DOTs have traditionally focused on system efficiency, not community-building



History of the Federal Highway System and MPOs

1998 - The FAHA of 1958 is signed increasing funding for Interstate System

1964 - The Urban Mass Transportation Act is signed, providing funds for mass transit

1973 - FAHA of 1973 funds Highway Safety Program and permits states to withdraw segments of interstate system to fund mass transit

1991 - The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) is signed

2005 - Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) is signed

2021 - Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) signed providing historic levels of funding

1956 - Dwight D. Eisenhower signs the Federal-Aid Highway Act (FAHA) of 1956

1962 - The FAHA of 1962 is signed and requires a 3-C planning

1968 - FAHA of 1968 is signed, establishing fair housing standards for those displaced

1983 - Surface Transportation Assistance Act is signed

1998 - Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) is signed

2015 - Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act is signed

1962 - MPOs introduced in the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1962

1964 - Urban Mass Transportation Act establishes Urban Mass Transportation Administration (Now the FTA)

1992 - Original System of the 1956 FAHA mostly completed

1952

1960

1968

1976

1984

1992

2000

2008

2016

2024



The Three Logics of Legitimacy

Collaborative

- Collaborative = Participation, trust, shared decisions
- We are legitimate because **we decide together**



- MPOs are required to support public participation, but often go beyond minimum requirements
- Engagement is continuous, not limited to MTP or TIP update cycles
 - *Feedback gathered through meetings, activities, and ongoing outreach*
- Public input directly informs project development and regional priorities
- Planning is guided by the 3-C process (continuing, cooperative, comprehensive)
- MPOs function as collaborative teams rather than one-time presenters
- The goal is meaningful public involvement, not just formal compliance



The Three Logics of Legitimacy

Discretionary

- Discretionary = Expertise, analysis, performance
- We are legitimate because **we know**

- Meaningful public involvement depends on technical and professional knowledge
- Research and training occur continuously in the background
- Applied research embedded in the work program
- Professional expertise is developed through credentials and continuing education
 - *AICP, GISP, PE, MPA, CNU-A, WV LTAP Road Scholars*
- Administrative legitimacy is reinforced through demonstrated competence and expertise





Example of how Two Logics can Coincide

Discretionary

- Discretionary = Expertise, analysis, performance
- We are legitimate because **we know**

Collaborative

- Collaborative = Participation, trust, shared decisions
- We are legitimate because **we decide together**



- Discretionary and collaborative logics often operate together in practice
- Partnerships with programs like LTAP strengthen technical expertise and credibility
 - MPOs work with training providers to identify needs and deliver relevant support
- Special Topic Meetings
 - Mode-based committees
 - Freight, pedestrians, cyclists, public transportation
 - Specific road or street development groups
- Collaboration expands capacity while reinforcing professional competence
 - See *WV LTAP/MPO Panel: Success Through Collaboration*

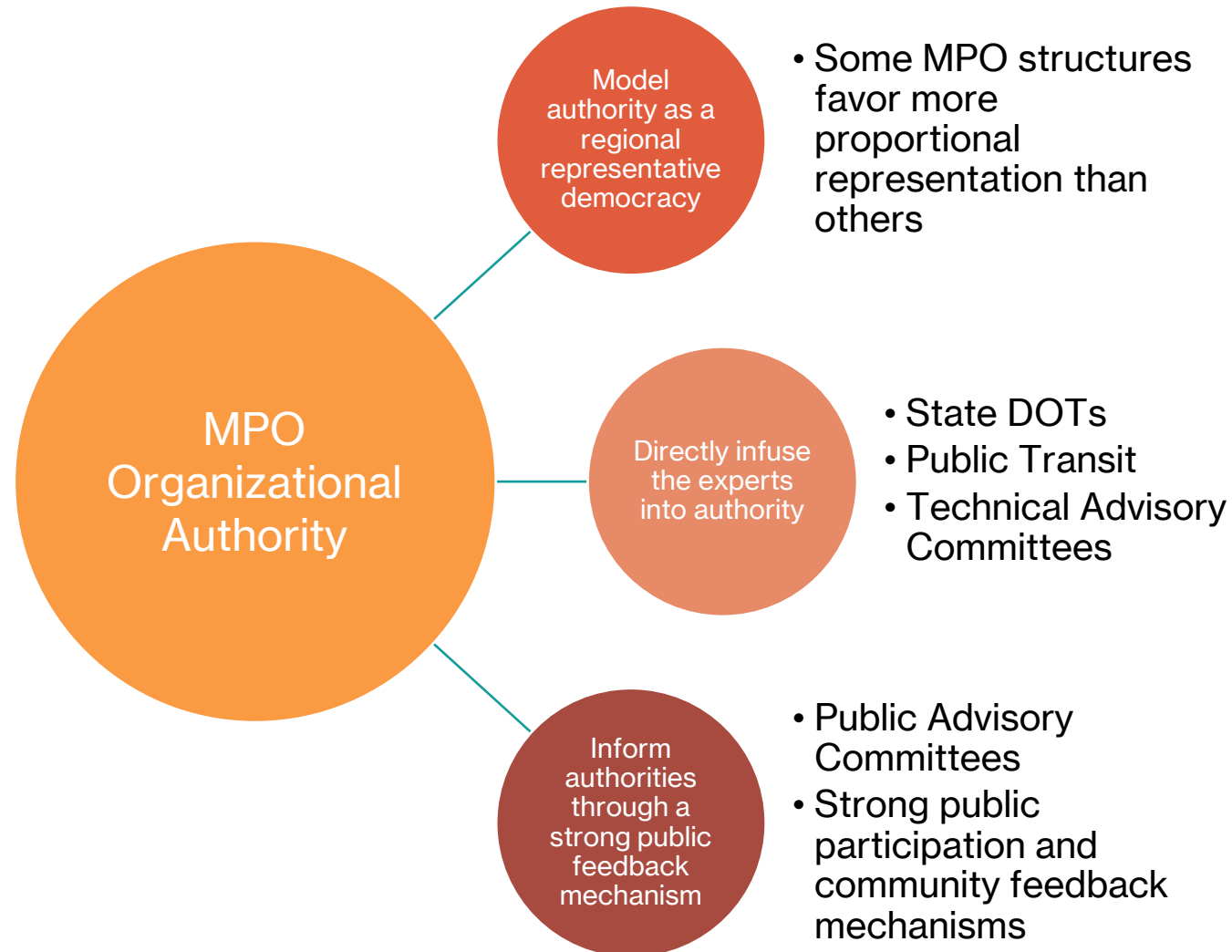


MPO Organizational Structures Are

Constitutional

Discretionary

Collaborative





MPO Public and Stakeholder Participation Is

23 CFR 450.316

Interested parties, participation, and consultation.

Constitutional

- Stakeholders and techniques are defined by federal authority
- Requires a discretionary and collaborative approach

Legitimate

Decision-Making

Discretionary

- Freight shippers, transportation authorities, port authorities and more

Collaborative

- Techniques are governed to provide guarantees of accessibility to the process

Authority



The **Tensions** of the Logics that **MPOs Live** Within



Common MPO Tensions

- Technical rigor vs. public understanding
- Compliance vs. meaningful participation
- Regional priorities vs. local autonomy
- Speed vs. deliberation

These tensions are structural, not failures



Why Integration of all Three Legitimacies is Hard

- You cannot perfectly satisfy all logics at once
- Someone must decide
- Most institutions default to hierarchy or expertise

But MPOs do something different

- They manage tension through process
- They rely on credibility, not coercion



Contemporary Governance is:

- Networked
- Multi-jurisdictional
- Inter-sectoral
- Trust-dependent

Legitimacy matters more than command



MPOs emerge as some of the most legitimate public organizations

NOT because they are:

- The most powerful
- The most technical
- The most participatory

But because they:

- Balance law, expertise, and collaboration
- Govern through consent, not force
- Fit the world we actually work in



In Conclusion...

In today's networked governance environment, MPOs are among the most legitimate public organizations operating today because they rely on trust, shared decision-making, and coordinated action rather than control.

Thank you!

If you want to talk about this topic more, here are our emails

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