

Peer Review

# Review of: "Expanding Contracting Authorities Across the Department of Health and Human Services Family of Agencies to Address Critical Public Health Needs"

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The paper addresses an important issue, namely the institutional constraints that limited the U.S. federal government's capacity to rapidly expand COVID-19 testing during the pandemic.

The manuscript is clearly written and empirically grounded, but a substantially stronger theoretical engagement would be required.

Major comments:

- The manuscript does not sufficiently engage with the rich literature on public procurement and contracting. This is a major shortcoming given that procurement is at the core of the argument. The authors should explicitly situate their analysis within key debates.
- OTAs are presented as a technical workaround rather than as a theoretically meaningful shift in procurement governance. The authors should conceptualize OTAs as a form of hybrid governance instrument, balancing hierarchy, market, and network logics. This would allow the authors to engage with theories of emergency governance and temporary rule suspension. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a paradigmatic case of high-uncertainty, high-stakes decision-making, yet the authors do not explicitly frame their analysis in these terms.

The authors should theorize: (i) how crisis-induced flexibility interacts with post-crisis institutional reversion; (ii) why standard procurement rules have been reverted despite persistent public health needs.

This would allow the authors to move beyond description and explain institutional dynamics during and after a crisis, a central theme in the literature on crisis governance.

Summarizing, the manuscript addresses an important policy problem but currently lacks the theoretical depth required for publication. With a stronger engagement with public procurement theory and crisis governance literature, the paper could make a meaningful contribution to the field.

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript.

## **Declarations**

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.