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Politics and Administration

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Synonyms

[Political-administrative relations](#); [Politics-administration dichotomy](#); [Politics-administration relationship](#)

Definition

Politics and administration is the study of theoretical relationship between political and administrative realms of government. It attempts to understand both normatively and empirically if, and to what extent, these two sets of activities differ from each other. Specific areas of inquiry cover links, similarities, and differences between the two domains of government.

Introduction

The relationship between politics and administration has been, perhaps, the most fundamental question in the field of public administration since its emergence as a self-acknowledged

discipline in the late 1880s. From the dawn of human civilization, states have had clearly distinguishable administrative apparatus in place to implement policies of their rulers; systematic study of this apparatus, however, is a fairly recent phenomenon. It is common in the field to mark 1887 as the foundational year for public administration, at least, in the United States. In that year, a young scholar named Woodrow Wilson published an article entitled “The Study of Administration” in *Political Science Quarterly* in which he implied a strict separation between political and administrative spheres of government. It was later called “politics-administration dichotomy” and has had a lasting influence on both theory and practice of public administration. Challenged very often in the field, both on empirical and normative grounds, the politics-administration dichotomy has lost most of its early appeal in the field and was replaced by more practical and accurate models of politics-administration relationship. The debate on how to link politics and administration in a democratic government continues to engage both scholars and practitioners, as the question has significant implications for both institutional development and intellectual identity of public administration.

The Politics-Administration Dichotomy

When putting this term in its historical context and social setting, it should be noted that the politics-

administration dichotomy was a strong reaction to inefficient government caused by partisan political influences on the daily affairs of administration since the inauguration of Andrew Jackson as the president of the United States. Following the assassination of James Garfield in 1881, this period of so-called spoils system came to an end with the passage of Civil Service Act (a.k.a., Pendleton Act) in 1883. This act marks the beginning of the merit system in the United States by prohibiting personnel practices based on partisan considerations and introducing competitive civil service exams in the hope that only the qualified people with the right mix of knowledge, skills, and abilities would be placed in public office. Their selection, promotion, discipline, and compensation would be based on knowledge, skills, and performance, not on political loyalties. Since partisan influences had been blamed for widespread corruption, waste, and incompetence in government, the progressive movement aimed to minimize the role of politics in daily, routine affairs of administration. It is not coincidence that Wilson's article was published only 4 years after the passage of Pendleton Act. The idea is simple. There should be a sharp separation between political and administrative domains of government. Politics is about policymaking, a set of activities that involve value choices. This domain is responsible for deciding "what to do" or, as Wilson (1887) put it, "setting the task" for administration. Administrative domain, however, is for policy implementation, a set of activities that involve translating political choices into concrete accomplishments with the aid of technical knowledge and skills called expertise. In the years following Wilson's article, other contributors made this rudimentary idea a normative theory, further to be used to perfect administrative apparatus of government and to draw the boundaries of public administration.

Evidence on Political-Administrative Relations

Following World War II, however, the politics-administration dichotomy has been criticized and

attacked by opponents on both normative and empirical grounds. Normatively, the inherent limitations of the concept of dichotomy were clear. If public administration is all about policy implementation in a value-free and neutral manner, then it was easy to use this apparatus for evil purposes, like it was done in Nazi Germany during WW II. Politics-administration dichotomy leaves no room for public administrators to question the ethical foundations of public policies or political orders, and they cannot act upon their assessment of what is right and what represents the public's best interests. Knowing that public servants are human being with values, emotions, and ideologies, the politics-administration dichotomy sits on a very shaky foundation, sounding somewhat naive, leading critics to say that it is nothing more than political metaphysics. Empirically, a nontrivial amount of research showed that political and administrative domains are linked and they are in constant interaction. Politicians often interfere with administration, mostly for the benefit of their constituencies, and administrators also get involved in policymaking due to their expertise. Studies at federal, state, and local levels of government in the United States have revealed a complex web of interactions between political and administrative spheres. Vague and ambiguous legislations often leave public administrators with significant latitude and discretion to make their choices when they begin implementing public policies. Bureaucratic expertise also gives public administrators an important edge over policymaking, as they are frequently called upon by their political superiors for their knowledge and skills. As policy issues evolved and grew even more complex, an expert cadre of bureaucrats became very critical for society. Also, lack of a strong political center, which should provide consistent, fast, and clear policy direction and support to administrative agencies, makes power and politics a necessity for managers (Long 1949). On the other side of the dichotomy, elected officials have always maintained a keen interest in the administrative domain. Since their reelection depends on satisfying their constituencies and public administration is responsible for routine, daily decisions that affect the lives of citizens, it

becomes a political necessity for elected officials to seek influence in the administrative affairs and routine decision-making processes. This is known as casework and makes up an important part of any elected official's work.

Empirical studies in the literature generated very little evidence, if any, to support a sharp separation between political and administrative domains of government. Observations and empirical tests in local government research have actually provided strong evidence against the dichotomy view, corroborating the significant roles played by professional administrators in the policymaking process. Public administration scholars have produced a substantial amount of research output on the role of public administration in the broader political processes and policymaking. Research methodologies used to provide evidence against the dichotomy varied including interviews, anecdotal evidence, case studies, personal experiences, comprehensive surveys, descriptive data analyses, and theoretical model construction and evaluation.

Examining politics-administration relationship in US local governments, some scholars utilized descriptive data analysis to determine the degree of politics versus professionalism in public administration. Newell and Ammons (1987), for example, studied the time allotment patterns of municipal managers and found that city managers spent an average of 17 % of their total time for political roles that involved community leadership. Similarly, French (2005) evaluated time allocations of mayor and managers in small cities and towns. His research found that managers in small cities and towns spend more time on policy and management activities and less time on political activities than mayors.

Some researchers attempted to test theoretical models using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Browne (1985) tested Svara's dichotomy-duality model (re: complementarity model) and found some supportive evidence for that model; however, the research had an important limitation in that it examined only policy initiatives. Dunn and Legge (2002) used three models that they culled from the literature and surveyed local government managers to

understand whether public administrators' relationships with elected officials conform to the three models that public administration scholars had used to characterize that relationship. Dunn and Legge (2002) found empirical evidence supporting a partnership model, pointing to the strength of blending politics and administration in policy development and administration. Demir and Nyhan (2008) specified a theoretical model of politics-administration dichotomy and tested the theoretical model with comprehensive survey data collected from city managers. Their research failed to provide support for the politics-administration dichotomy, a model that favors very limited policy role for public administrators.

Summarizing the outcome of various research and observations, Van Riper (1983) concluded that:

As we all should know by now, politics and administration are inextricably intermixed. Both are central to effective action. One problem is to bring them together in a symbiotic association yet keep each in its proper place. The other is to understand that the "proper place" of each will vary through time. There is no permanent solution, no fixed paradigm, to this or any other ends-means continuum. (p. 489)

Roles that Public Administrators and Elected Officials Play

It is perhaps an oversimplification to subsume all public managers in one type, portrayed as neutral, expert, and apolitical, or the opposite, as highly politically involved. Prior research identified a diverse set of roles played by administrators. Scholars proposed typologies that would help distinguish more active managers from less active ones. In his study of city managers, Loveridge (1968) identified nine roles for city managers. They can be policy innovators, policy advocates, budget consultants, policy administrators, policy neutrals, political advocates, political leaders, political recruiters, and political campaigners. Lewis (1982) examined the role behavior of city managers and proposed seven roles, extending from "traditional textbook administrator" to "near-boss type." Moore (1995) offered two distinct roles for managers as technicians and

strategists. The research on role conceptions places city managers' roles on a continuum from political to professional. City managers with political role definitions are more likely to get involved in a variety of policymaking activities, whereas those managers with a greater focus on professionalism would refrain from policymaking and give much of their attention to policy implementation tasks.

The same can be said about elected officials. Their involvement in administration is subject to significant variation. Some are more involved and do play the role of micromanagers. Some are relatively distant and deal mostly with broader political issues. According to Svava (1999), some elected officials, at the local level, are electoral activists and they try to help their constituents by acting as their spokesperson and representative. These elected officials are willing to make a major investment of time and talent to gain and exercise political influence. Electoral activists, according to Svava (2002), are often involved in administrative sphere by playing the role of ombudsman and attempting to promote responsiveness to constituencies. This role is very different from what Svava (2002) calls the trustee role, which requires no involvement in administrative side of the policy process.

As identified by empirical research, the roles played by appointed and elected officials vary significantly and are contingent on a variety of external and internal factors. Demir and Reddick (2012) modeled some of those factors that increase cross-functional contributions of elected and appointed officials into policymaking process. Their findings show that a manager's role conception and elected officials' expectations increase managers' involvement in the policymaking process. On the other hand, the context of policymaking, elected officials' access to resources, and managerial support to elected officials are factors that enhance elected officials' involvement in the administrative activities. More research in the future will likely provide a more refined understanding of how elected and appointed officials define their roles.

Complementarity View: An Alternative

A search for a better conceptualization of politics-administration relationship resulted in a number of models. Complementarity is one of them and emerged as both descriptively more accurate and a normatively desirable model and has gained prominence in the literature.

The complementarity view rests on the premise that there is a continuum between politics and administration. This notion implies that elected officials and public administrators should be active in all dimensions of the governing process, from developing and determining missions and policies to administering and managing policies and programs. Most of the research on the complementarity view has been done in US local governments. Henry and Harms (1987, pp. 154–55) specified the four constructs of the continuum as follows:

1. Mission: identifying public concerns, problems, or needs for services that require agency action
2. Policy: developing goals and plans for agency action that address identified concerns and determining how much of the agency resources should be allocated to carry out the plans and goals
3. Administration: reassessing the plans for agency action to determine if the concerns are being addressed or the goals are being achieved
4. Management: establishing administrative procedures to carry out the plans for agency action

According to this model of political-administrative relationship, elected officials play a much larger role in developing mission and public managers play a dominant role in management. However, policy and administration are open to the contributions from both sides. Complementarity model encourages elected officials and public administrators to frequently interact and cooperate in policymaking process by acknowledging overlapping roles and shared responsibilities. As Nalbandian (1999) states:

In an evaluation not too long ago, one of the Commissioners suggested that she would be more comfortable if I brought to her the projects as I was working on them rather than when they were completed. She used the analogy of a baby. She said she was part of the family and she wanted not only see the clean baby with a shiny ribbon in her hair, but she wanted to see the baby, messy diaper and all. (p. 194)

Complementarity conceptualizes the relationship between politics and management as a continuum. One part of the continuum is construed between politics and policy and the other is between administration and management. Complementarity is often called dichotomy-duality as it accepts duality between policy and administration, the two areas toward which elected officials and public administrators are expected to make substantive contributions. A dichotomy, however, is preserved for the polar ends of politics and management.

According to the proponents of the complementarity view, public administrators do and should engage in various policy activities, yet should refrain from what falls within the realm of politics, especially political partisanship. What makes an activity political or policy is answered by complementarity scholars with reference to (1) partisan nature of the activities and (2) leadership initiatives of managers taken “independently” from elected officials. According to the complementarity view, elected officials do and should engage in administration, yet should refrain from what falls within the realm of management. The question of what makes an activity administrative or management is answered by complementarity scholars with reference to the impact of that activity on (1) administrative integrity and (2) management efficiency. The activities undertaken by elected officials, if they interfere with administration in issues that clearly fall within the authority of administrators (e.g., appointments to management positions, bypassing the manager and giving orders to lower level personnel), are considered to be intrusions into management. This kind of activities not just undermines the authority of public administrators but also weakens their control over organization and staff. Also, elected officials’ activities

that circumvent routine and consistent enforcement of adopted policies are considered to be political intrusions into management. The complementarity view seems to be a middle ground between the dichotomy and political bureaucracy perspectives, in that it acknowledges “the logical and psychological distinctions” between politics and administration but also addresses the problem of bringing the two together in a symbiotic association yet keeping each in its proper place.

In one of the most comprehensive empirical tests of the complementarity view, Demir (2009) administered a nationwide city manager survey to explore the idea of a continuum in political-administrative relations. His findings support the existence of overlapping roles and mutual influence between elected and appointed officials when it comes to policy and administration. The research also found that political and management activities are characterized in a way closer to the dichotomous view. Complementarity has been supported by a nontrivial number of other empirical studies, and review of the extant literature shows that this model has emerged as a strong alternative to the politics-administration dichotomy (Georgiou 2014).

Conclusion

Politics and administration relationship is considered one of the most important questions in the field. That the overly simplistic notion of the dichotomy has been discredited does not mean that the field developed a conclusive answer to this long-standing issue. The research on this question will continue to remain important in the foreseeable future and more research is likely to be generated in the years ahead. Demir and Nyhan (2008) suggest that to settle this issue, three things need to be done. First, a more cooperative relationship between politics and administration should be conceptualized as the complexity of problems challenge traditional boundaries and require constant interaction, shared responsibility, and reciprocal influences. Second, the alternative model(s) should be evaluated with systematic and data-based research to identify patterns in

practice. Third, empirical evidence should be provided for that the alternative model produces desired results without compromising democratic accountability and administrative performance.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Politics and Bureaucracy](#)
- ▶ [Public Administration Theory](#)

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