

The Politics–Administration Dichotomy in U.S. Historical Context

Junior–Senior Exchange: The Legacy of Dwight Waldo and *The Administrative State*

This article distinguishes the competing interpretations of the politics–administration dichotomy, noting that as, originally framed, it was intended to detach partisan politics and patronage from sound public management. Waldo, the author suggests, concerned himself with the later, more expansive conception of the dichotomy, which included the process of policy making.

As Patrick Overeem cogently demonstrates, Dwight Waldo wrestled with the politics–administration dichotomy at different points throughout his career. Waldo was not alone in finding that the field of public administration seemingly cannot live with or without the dichotomy. Woodrow Wilson, who is often mistakenly credited with formulating the dichotomy (Van Riper 1984), set the tone in his famous essay on “The Study of Administration.” After asserting that “[t]he field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics,” Wilson concludes that “[o]ur own politics must be the touchstone for all theories. The principles on which to base a science of administration for America must be principles which have democratic policy very much at heart” (1887, 20, 25). This apparent contradiction on Wilson’s part is cleared up by adhering to the original meaning of the dichotomy as established or promoted by the civil service reformers of the 1870s and 1880s for strategic political purposes. When referring to “politics,” the reformers meant what is now considered “partisan” or “electoral” politics. They were not referring to politics over questions of public policy, including administrative organization, budgeting, human resources management, and decision making. Wilson recognizes this, but he fails to make the distinction clear: “Let me expand a little what I have said of the province of

administration. Most important to be observed is the truth already so much and so fortunately insisted upon by our civil-service reformers; namely that administration lies outside the proper sphere of *politics*. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, *it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices*” (20; second emphasis added). That is, administration should not be driven by partisan patronage and electoral politics. Treating the dichotomy in this fashion clears up a great deal of confusion.

The Dichotomy as a Strategy for Political Change

The literature in public administration often presents the 19th-century civil service reformers as primarily interested in the efficiency and morality of the public service (Van Riper 1958, 96–135). This view overlooks the extent to which civil service reform was aimed at fundamental political change. Dorman B. Eaton, the primary author of the Pendleton (Civil Service) Act of 1883, was among the leading reformers who made no effort to hide their contention that the spoils system enabled “a class of politicians [to] become powerful in high places, who have not taken (and who by nature are not qualified to take) any large part in the social and educational life of the people” (Eaton 1880, 392).

Consequently, in Eaton’s view, “Politics have tended more and more to become a trade, or separate occupation. High character and capacity have become disassociated from public life in the popular mind” (393). The reformers believed that patronage was the chief political resource of such unfit politicians and that once merit systems drastically reduced it, a far better class of political leaders would emerge.

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spoils system for “excluding able and upright men from public life” (1884, 19). In his view, that system “creates a mercenary political class, an oligarchy of stipendiaries, a bureaucracy of the worst kind, which controls parties with relentless despotism, imposing upon them at the elections issues which are prescribed not by the actual feeling and interest of the country but solely by the necessities and profit of the oligarchy” (1880, v).

Carl Schurz, also a leading reformer, averred that “the question whether the departments at Washington are managed well or badly is, in proportion to the whole problem, an insignificant question” (1913, 2:123). The truly important matter was to “rescue our political parties, and in great measure the management of our public affairs, from the control of men whose whole statesmanship consists in the low arts of office mongering, and many of whom would never have risen to power had not the spoils system furnished them with the means and opportunity for organizing gangs of political followers as mercenary as themselves” (Schurz 1893, 614). This would “restore ability, high character, and true public spirit once more to their legitimate spheres in our public life, and to make active politics once more attractive to men of self-respect and high patriotic aspirations” (614).

To make the case for appointment to civil services throughout the nation based on open competition without regard to partisan affiliation, the reformers had to argue that of the vast number of government jobs, “very few are political. Political offices are those which are concerned with devising and enforcing a policy which the people have approved at the polls” (Civil Service Reform Association n.d., 1). They were aware that “it may be difficult to determine precisely the limits of the offices which in this sense may be called political” (U.S. Civil Service Commission 1871, 2:76), which suggests they recognized that the dichotomy was imperfect. The key point, however, was “to take the whole non-political public service out of politics” (Curtis 1886, 17).

It is important to note that although the reformers believed merit systems would supply “the best public servants,” the more important point was to “end patronage” and “safeguard against both partisan coercion and official favoritism” (Eaton 1880, 365). The dichotomy was a strategic tool for bringing about fundamental change in the nation’s political leadership.

Institutionalizing the Dichotomy: The City Management and Public Authorities

The potential utility of the dichotomy was not lost on the Progressives, who followed the reformers. Usually dated from 1890 or 1900 to 1924, the Progressive movement could fully achieve its political goals only by further depoliticizing the public service. The Progressives were very much concerned with absorbing and blunting the impact of the tremendous wave of immigration that brought 14,500,000 immigrants—about one-fifth of what the population was in 1900—to the United States between 1900 and 1915 (Shannon 1963, 88). “Settlement women,” as Camilla Stivers (2002) explains, were at the forefront of mainstreaming immigrants. In the process, they established the field of social work as public administration’s sibling profession and academic discipline. “Bureau men,” by contrast, operated in the governmental sphere. They supported merit system reforms. However, they also realized that in an age of high immigration and rapid urbanization, the unfit political class that once fed off patronage could gain political support in return for providing jobs and other benefits to immigrants and could generate resources through the allocation of contracts for infrastructure and other development. Insulating public personnel systems from partisanship was insufficient to achieve comprehensive political change—hence the spread of nonpartisan city management and public authorities for bridges, tunnels, parks, and other public (or quasi-public) goods (Doig 1984). Wilson, a leading Progressive, was quite candid in arguing that “the only way in which we can preserve our nationality in its integrity and old-time originative force in the face of growth and imported change is by concentrating it, putting leaders forward vested with abundant authority in the conception and execution of policy” (quoted in Rohr 1986, 231 n. 61). Taking whole areas of governmental administration out of partisan politics by turning over cities to non-elected managers and infrastructure to nonpartisan

public authorities was a key part of the Progressives’ strategy for “facing an ever-increasing difficulty of self-command with ever-deteriorating materials, possibly with degenerating fibre” brought about by immigrants (quoted in Rohr 1986, 72).

Today, the dichotomy may look untenable because the management of cities and the design, mission, and operation of public authorities are hardly devoid of politics and political consequences. However, when limited to partisan politics versus administration, the dichotomy can be

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seen in a much different light. Then, to a much greater extent, it does describe contemporary reality.

Funding the Dichotomy

Following Dwight Waldo (1987), Alasdair Roberts points out that during the decade “between 1927 and 1936, . . . public administration became established as a field of study” and “faith in the politics–administration dichotomy reached a zenith” (1994, 221). Roberts explains that “the expansion of the public administration community depended on funding from three Rockefeller philanthropies that were sensitive to public criticism of their involvement in ‘political work’” (221). Consequently, “scholars and practitioners in public administration re-asserted their faith in the dichotomy, and tailored their work routines to bolster such assertions, in order to allay the philanthropies’ concern about public criticism of the financial support that they provided to the new field” (221). In short, “the dichotomy was an important part of a *rhetorical strategy* that was integral to the institutional development of the public administration community in its early years” (221).

During this period, treatment of the dichotomy in public administration shifted fully from the civil service reformers’ earlier conception of partisan politics versus administration to a broader concept of the political that encompassed questions of public policy. As Roberts points out, “the strategy adopted by the philanthropies and the community which they supported consisted largely of a set of arguments designed to *depoliticize* their work—or, in other words, to suggest that these projects did not involve a reconciliation of conflicting values and thus did not warrant the attention of the broad public” (1994, 226). Insofar as plausible, public administration was distinguished from both partisan politics and politics involving policy making by asserting that “the domain of administrative work was governed by principles that were analogous to ‘laws of nature’” (226).

Broadening the dichotomy may have hastened its loss of credibility. In 1936, E. Pendleton Herring’s *Public Administration and the Public Interest* observed that public administrators have discretion to define the social and economic values embedded in policy and law and are perforce affected by organized interest groups:

Upon the shoulders of the bureaucrat has been placed in large part the burden of reconciling group differences and making effective and workable economic and social compromises

arrived at through the legislative process. Thus Congress passes a statute setting forth a general principle. The details must be filled in by supplemental regulation. The bureaucrat is left to decide as to the conditions that necessitate the law’s application. . . . This increase in administrative discretion . . . places a heavy duty on the administrator. The words of the statute delimit his scope, but within the margin of his discretion he must write his interpretation of state purpose. (7–8)

Herring further noted that laws themselves “are now more and more frequently formulated in the administrative offices” and called for greater participation by interest groups in the process of writing statutes (386).

As is well known, after World War II, the dichotomy—now incorporating the broader conception of politics—became untenable. Waldo’s *The Administrative State* (1948), Paul Appleby’s *Policy and Administration* (1949), Robert Dahl’s article on “The Science of Administration” (1947), and Norton Long’s on “Power and Administration” (1949) thoroughly destroyed the dichotomy’s standing in academic public administration. These works more or less coincided with the development of the case study movement, which was central to pedagogy in public administration in the 1950s and 1960s (Rosenbloom 1995). Overall, the cases documented substantial roles for public administrators in policy making. Eventually, the dichotomy was considered “naive, at best,” “unfounded,” and obviously false (Roberts 1994, 221).

Waldo and the Civil Service Reformers’ Original Concept of the Dichotomy

By 1970, Waldo was aware of the civil service reformers’ use of the term “political” to mean partisan when advancing the dichotomy, and he seemed to accept that this was their understanding. The foregoing interpretation is drawn from my first book, *Federal Service and the Constitution* (1971). Waldo reviewed the manuscript, in its form as a doctoral dissertation (Rosenbloom 1969), for Cornell University Press and offered several suggestions for revision. He did not suggest changes in my analysis of the civil service reformers’ objectives and strategies. In 1979, when we were colleagues at Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, we discussed how treating the dichotomy as it was intended by the reformers (according to my interpretation) helped clarify their thinking and Wilson’s. Waldo teased me about being “revisionist,” but he conceded that my interpretation was more

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than viable *and made more sense of the dichotomy than any other of which he was aware*. He may not have endorsed that interpretation in his own work because his focus was on the “orthodoxy,” which used the broader conception of politics.

Conclusion

If my interpretation is correct, the major difficulties associated with the dichotomy developed, as Roberts explains, in the period between 1927 and 1936. It was then that the dichotomy was broadened to include politics over public policy rather than limited to partisan politics. At that point, it became intellectually untenable, though difficult to shed, as Waldo and Overeem emphasize. Returning to the civil service reformers’ original understanding of the dichotomy clarifies a portion of U.S. public administration’s intellectual history. It should also make the dichotomy less “confounding” (Golembiewski 1984).

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