

THE WILSONIAN TRADITION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

Modern theorists traced the beginning of traditional public administration from the publication of Woodrow Wilson's "The Study of Administration" in 1887, although his essay did not achieve "classic" status until the mid of the twentieth century. This famous essay set the foundations of the American state to move toward a managerially base ideology of separating politics from administration. Wilson's politics-administration dichotomy serves as a historical basis to understand a predominant relationship in the field. The dichotomy articulated by Wilson is a debate that goes on nowadays and its end is not in sight. In contrast to Wilson, who created a theory based on his understanding of the field and the differences between public administration and political science, there are modern scholars, who acknowledge that there is opportunity to generate new models to analyze the changing bureaucracy.

This article is organized around the major theme of the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians that has been always a central issue of governance from the dawn of civilization. The article is focused on this theme because it may be argued that this relationship is the heart of modern governance and affects the attitudes of citizens towards their governments.

It is necessary to start with some introductory notes about public administration and its theory building. There have been many and different views and positions of public administration among academicians and practitioners. A very successful review of various interpretations on public administration has been presented by D. Rosenbloom in his article "*Public Administrative Theory and the Separation of Powers*"¹. As viewed by him, for a group of theorists there has been no such subject as public administration, because "public administration is plagued by a weak or absent theoretical core". Consequently, no science or art can be identified by this title or coherent intellectual discipline. There is a second group of researchers who have considered it a resource that public administration is more an area of interest than a discipline. Yet one more group of theorists exists and they have argued that public administration faces a serious and seemingly irresolvable problem in continually seeking to maximize the attainment of mutually incompatible values. An examination of different viewpoints about

¹ Rosenbloom, David H., *Public Administrative Theory and the Separation of Powers*, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (May - Jun., 1983), p. 219-227, at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/976330>.

public administration reveals that the central problem of contemporary public administration theory is that it is derived from at least three different approaches to the basic question of what public administration is (they are labeled “managerial”, “political” and “legal”). According to D. Rosenbloom, each of these different approaches has a respected intellectual tradition, emphasizes different values, promotes different types of organizational structures and views individuals in markedly distinct terms.

However, there are public administration scholars who consider that public administration has been one of the very old intellectual disciplines, because “as long as humans have been writing, they have been writing about administration as the art of turning big policy ideas into solid results”².

No doubt that theory is of critical importance in public affairs and a powerful argument is that the administration is the link between ideas and implementation. If there are to be better results for the people government seeks to serve, public administrators need to have a theory that utilizes and balances the insights of all of the academic disciplines. We know that theory is a guide to action and an aid in the solution of problems, but D. Kettl³ argues that in public organizations “theory should inform practice, and administrative practices should generate theory”. In general, making abstractions of reality and reflecting on experience is the essence of theory. In modern times theory has maintained much of this concern with grasping the meaning of events. It is interesting to note that the origin of word “theory” is derived from the Greek word *theoros*, which was the practice of sending a representative from the Greek city-state to look on holy celebrations conducted in honor of the gods. The observer had to give up personal views in order to understand what the gods had in mind and to grasp the ultimate rational principles and thus to know the nature of reality.

The theory and practice of modern public administration date from the end of the nineteenth century. Historically, the practice of public administration is very old, while the formal study of public administration and the elaboration of public administration theory are very new. Truly enough, the academic study of public administration is paradoxical. From one side, there can be no understanding of government and politics without a study of public administration, as it is impossible to study government adequately without also studying how it is administered. From the other side, the study of public administration has long struggled to find a place in the academic field. This is often explained either with its messy work, dealing with constant complications of human behavior in complex organizations or

² Kettl, Donalt F., *The Transformation of Governance, Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America*, The Johns Hopkins University press, 2002, p. 27.

³ McKinney, Jerome L. & Howard, Lawrence C., *Public Administration: Balancing Power and Accountability*, 2nd edition, Praeger Publishers, 1998, p. 137.

with the complexity of administrative action, which creates enormous methodological problems frustrating the creation of vigorous theory.

Framing the classical approach in public administration

If we think about public administration as a separate body of knowledge, an academic subject, a field of professional practice, it is young. Measuring it from the publication of Woodrow Wilson's founding essay "*The Study of Administration*", public administration is about 130 years old. For this reason as a separate and self-conscious collection of concepts, ideas, reforms, courses and degrees, and professed answers to public problems, public administration has been defined by many American writers as a "young adult"⁴.

The issue of theory building in public administration can be viewed in different ways. With respect to the scope of public administration theory, Robert B. Denhardt⁵ has identified three main orientations: first, public administration is a part of the governmental process and thus its theory is simply a part of the political theory; second, public administration is as much the same as private organizations and consequently its theory is simply a part of the theory of organizations; third, public administration is as a professional field, which uses various theoretical perspectives to produce practical impacts.

Many early writers in the field share the view that public administration is distinguished by its relationship to the governmental process. From this perspective, the public bureaucracy is recognized not only as an arm of government but also as playing a significant role in the governmental process.

It should be underlined that even before the formal study of public administration emerged in the United States around the beginning of the twentieth century, there were theorists and practitioners who expressed different viewpoints on performing the work of the state. The views and works of Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, as well as of Woodrow Wilson, represent the basic approaches that have framed both the study and practice of American public administration.

Hamilton is known as the true founder of the American administrative state. Studying the history of American bureaucratic development Leonard D. White described him as "the administrative architect of the new

⁴ Frederickson, H. George, Smith, B. Kevin, Larimer, W. Christopher, Licari, J. Michael, *The public Administration Theory Primer*, 2nd edition, Westview Press, 2012, p. 2.

⁵ Denhardt, Robert B., *Theories of Public Administration*, Brooks/Cole publishing Company, 1984, p. 12.

government”⁶. In short, Hamilton’s views on public administration are based on three main principles - independence, power and responsibility and he worked hard to translate these principles into practice. He argued on behalf of a strong national government and believed that in order to be effective, action must have clear direction and this direction must come from one source, a unified executive.

It is well known that there were serious philosophical disagreements and conflicts between Hamilton and Jefferson. Unlike Hamilton, who argued vigorously for a strong national government with a powerful executive and a limited citizen role, Jefferson believed firmly in local government, a strong legislature and popular control. It is obvious that Jefferson’s ideas have represented a counterpoint to Hamilton’s view for a powerful executive branch. Their views on government are clear: If Hamilton pursued an energetic government, Jefferson argued for limited government. In addition, it should be highlighted that Jefferson is well known as author of the Declaration of Independence, president of the United States and founder of the University of Virginia. True enough, his views influenced significantly the development of public administration over the years.

Often James Madison’s work has been defined as a more general approach to politics in America’s republican government and not so much as a theory of administration. It is D. Kettle who describes Madison as “the architect of America’s balance-of-power system and thus a designer of the tactics that Americans have used for centuries to keep an uneasy peace between the conflicting Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian forces”⁷. It is out of question that Madison has been considered as the most influential voice in crafting the Constitution and the strongest voice for developing the separation of powers. Madison did not build a solid theory of administration, because he was most interested in the basic political features of the system – the institutions that exercise government power and how to balance power among them.

The official beginning of the field of public administration dates from Woodrow Wilson’s essay “The study of Administration”. In fact, as it is impossible to clearly point the beginning of public administration scholarship as a self-conscious body of thought, many writers identify Wilson’s work as its starting point. Wilson’s work has a profoundly important theoretical contribution, because it reflects not only the dominant cultural values of his time but also the contemporary problems in administration he aimed to address.

⁶ In: Kettle, Donald F., *The Transformation of Governance, Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America*, The Johns Hopkins University press, 2002, p. 28.

⁷ Kettle, Donald F., *The Transformation of Governance, Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America*, The Johns Hopkins University press, 2002, p. 35.

Woodrow Wilson wrote the article “The study of Administration” in 1887, when he was a thirty-one-year old professor at Princeton University. At that time he was not famous yet. And it was after Leonard D. White wrote his *Introduction to the Study of Public Administration* that scholars paid serious attention to it. Since then, Wilson’s essay has regarded a classic as the first American statement of modern public administration. His views about the relationship between political institutions and public administration were highly appraised. According to Wilson⁸, “it is the object of administrative study to discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and, secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost efficiency and at the least possible cost either of money or of energy”.

To sum up, the works of Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison and Wilson developed the four major themes of American administrative thought. Wilson’s work was and continues to be an enormous influence on public administration. It was entirely compatible with Madison’s separation-of-powers idea, but unlike Madison’s approach it had an explicit role for administration. Like Jefferson, he recognized the importance of responsiveness and local governance, but Wilson shared with Hamilton a strong belief in effective administrative power.

Wilson’s administrative tradition and politics-administration dichotomy

Woodrow Wilson’s theory has been guiding public administrations for more than a century. Its theoretical framework outlines a mechanism for promoting both efficiency and accountability. Efficiency is promoted by building hierarchies and controlling administrators through authority, while accountability is promoted by separating elected officials who make policy from administrators who carry it out.

It must be kept in mind that Wilson’s ideas have dominated the public administration community, although his approach has been attacked for long. Wilson’s approach to public administration outlines a strategy for organizing administrative work. In short, elected officials define policy and delegate the tasks to top-level administrators. Administrators work within a hierarchy to organize the work. And it is authority within the hierarchy that ensures the exercise of administrative discretion to be consistent with policymakers’ goals.

Wilson noted something very important that helped to shape his arguments: every day the functions of government are becoming more complex and difficult, and at the same time they are vastly multiplying in number. On this base he explains why “there should be a science of

⁸ Wilson, W., *The Study of Administration*, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.2, No 2, (June, 1887), p. 197-222, at www.commentary.com/admin_thoughts_1887.pdf

administration which shall seek to straighten the paths of government, to make its business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organization, and to crown its duties with dutifulness”.

The experience of some European nations made Wilson to think that “the field of administration is a field of business ... removed from the hurry and strife of politics” (p. 209). Based on this understanding of public administration he wrote that stable principles of administrative management, “businesslike” principles should guide the operations of public organization. Consequently, in order to achieve some measure of efficiency in the operations of government, we need to turn back to the private sector and look for models of administrative management.

The field of business gave an important lesson to Wilson. Both administrative efficiency and administrative responsibility could be enhanced through the establishment of single centers of power controlling basically hierarchical structures. In Wilson’s view governmental power needed to take on a more integrated and centralized structure. It is his firm belief that the responsibility for public action should be located in a single authority in order to ensure trustworthiness and efficient operations. In this relation R. Denhardt wrote “Wilson saw no real problem with the possible inconsistency of this view with the democratic norms of decentralization and public participation”⁹. True enough, his view was clear enough that in pursuit of democracy, government must follow the model of business, even where it appears nondemocratic.

The recognition of the need for public organizations to work efficiently and in a businesslike manner resulted in the necessary to separate them from the whims of the politicians. This view was the basis for Wilson’s well-known distinction between politics and administration: “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” (p. 210). Thus there are two separate realms: in the realm of politics, issues must be debated and decisions about the direction of public policy must be made; in the realm of administration, politics must be implemented by a neutral and professional bureaucracy. Following this distinction a proper balance between democratic responsiveness and administrative competence could be achieved.

Thus, Wilson has defined the central battle of modern public administration, namely the separation of administration from politics. His strong arguments were based on the examination of the systems of other nations. He firmly believed that the American system could learn from others

⁹ Denhardt, Robert B., *Theories of Public Administration*, Brooks/Cole publishing Company, 1984, p. 43.

how to administer it more effectively and in order to make the American public administration stronger and more effective he suggested borrowing the best practices from administrators around the world. According to Wilson, the system could be made more accountable by separating administration from politics, empowering administration to follow political direction, and making administration ultimately responsible to policymakers. In making this argument, he sought to resolve the field central dilemma. Separating administration from politics could free administration from political interference in their work and thus enhance administrative efficiency. Separating politics from administration could strengthen the ability of elected officials to oversee administration and thus enhance accountability.

It is Kettl Donald, who argues that orthodox public administration seized on Wilson's formulation¹⁰. Wilson's argument made the case for a separate field of study in public administration and suggested, at least implicitly, a methodology. It was one that fit neatly into the orthodoxy that had emerged in the first half of the twentieth century: focus on the process and structure of government organizations; explore strategies to make them more efficient; keep them separate from political institutions to ensure their effectiveness; but ultimately hold them accountable to elected officials for their exercise of power. Discussing the Wilsonian tradition Kettl Donald highlights that "as powerful as some public administrationists found this argument, many political scientists argued that it was hopelessly naïve to pretend that one could actually separate administration from politics. If public administrationists used Wilson's article as a manifesto to define the field, many political scientists seized on it as a justification for dismissing it. The emerging public policy schools likewise saw in Wilson's article – and the field's embraced of it – a validation of their efforts to invent a new approach. To his critics, Wilson neither got to the core of effective program implementation nor made the critical linkages to bureaucratic politics".

At this point it is fair to say that Wilson's small article emerged in the intellectual debates just as critical boundaries were beginning to form. It is Brian Fry's understanding that "Wilson expressed concerns and proposed formulations widely accepted in the Classical approach. But there is little evidence that Wilson's essay was widely known among the authors of the Classical period"¹¹. Nevertheless, the doctrines of the political-administrative dichotomy, of the businesslike managerial ideology, and of "neutral competence" pervaded American public administration for long until they

¹⁰ Kettl, Donald F., *The Transformation of Governance, Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America*, The Johns Hopkins University press, 2002, p. 41.

¹¹ Fry, Brian R., *Mastering Public Administration* & from Max Weber to Dwight Waldo, Chatham House publishers, Inc., 1989, p. 4.

were shattered by the powerful argument that politics cannot and should not be separated from administration.¹²

Today, even a casual observer of politics and administration would quickly reject the idea that the two are truly separate. In reality, there are many clear cases of administration having political impact – or of political incentives shaping administrative decisions. For many authors and observers, Wilson’s argument was not only naïve, but it had the implicit (or explicit) political judgements made by the administrators and limited the ability of elected officials to hold them accountable for the exercise discretion.

Actually, Wilson’s argument was fundamental. He believed that government needed to play an important role in a society that was becoming even more complex. To play that role, public administration needed to be strong and effective. He believed that Americans could learn important lessons from the European experience while maintaining democratic principles. Perhaps most important, he believed that effective democracy required competent, politically impartial administrators, who could work free from political interference.

Wilson’s administrative tradition was founded on the direct government administration of public services. But the government’s changing strategies and tactics pushed the actual management of public programs out of synchronization with the theories that had long guided them. The Wilson’s case for accountability rested on an assumption of a bureaucracy shaped by hierarchical authority. The tradition still powerfully shapes the way people think about and act upon public administration. However, within this tradition new challenges have arisen that pose fundamental problems. Toward the end of the twentieth century government began relying on new tools, especially grants, contracts, and loans, which undermined Wilson’s theory. These tools operated more through incentives and partnerships with nongovernmental players than through governmental managers with hierarchical authority. With the erosion of traditional tactics, governmental managers had to devise new mechanisms to ensure effectiveness and accountability.

Conclusion

This article examines the politics-administration dichotomy that has traced the origin of modern public administration. Wilson’s work laid an important cornerstone in the intellectual building of public administration and outlined the main tradition that represents the basic approaches framing both the study and practice of American public administration since the beginning of the twentieth century. It reveals the key administrative ideas in the

¹² Farazmand, A., (ed.), *Modern systems of Government: Exploring the Role of bureaucrats and Politicians*, SAGE Publications, Inc, 1997, p. 55.

American political tradition expressed by fundamentally different intellectual struggles: Hamilton believed in a strong executive managing from the top down, in contrast to Jefferson who argued for a weak executive held accountable from the bottom up. Madison's balance-of-powers model made the executive just one of the players, and the bureaucracy did not play a role, while Wilson concentrated on the role of the permanent bureaucracy in making the case for the separation of policy and administration.

The study explores the issue of the linkage between politics and public administration and Wilson's essay is most famous for framing the battle lines. The argument for a separation of politics from administration grew directly out of his long-term research and his belief that this approach to administration was critical for taking the United States into the twentieth century.

In Wilson's work, there are two prominent themes that have served as a focus for the study of public administration throughout most of its history: the supposed distinction between politics (or policy) and administration and the search for scientific principles of administrative management that would assist in attaining organizational efficiency. Even today these issues continue to be central to the mainstream or orthodox interpretation of public administration.

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