

The politics of public administration

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This *Handbook* puts the politics of public administration at the center of interest. The relationship between politics and public administration is one of the leitmotifs of Public Administration as a scientific discipline since its establishment in the late nineteenth century (Sager et al. 2018). Public administration is a vague concept. It entails the organizational body of the state as well as the process of public management and service delivery within this organization. Public administration hence includes both structure and agency, which makes it prone to politics. Politics includes all aspects of negotiation and influence seeking in the definition and solution of public problems and the pursuit of public welfare.

Our goal is not to bring forward another handbook on Public Administration presenting its history and different elements. There is by now a quite impressive literature about public management and public administration treating the subject in a more general way and handbooks are plentiful (see for example Hildreth et al. 2021; Peters and Pierre 2018; Ferlie et al. 2005). In this volume, and more especially with the selection of the authors and the guidelines given to them, we tried to treat the topic from a distinct and specific perspective. We look at public administration as a product of political decisions with their consequences and as an actor being involved in these decisions.

Our basic take on public administration is institutionalist. The public administration of a country (or of a subunit of a country) bears all the elements of political institutions (Czada 2002: 354 ff.). Lynne G. Zucker (1983: 1) famously labeled public administration as the “preeminent institutional form in modern society”. Public administration is more than a simple part of the executive. Public administration has its own rationale and its specific functioning. As for all political institutions, a broadly accepted theoretical background is found in the different schools of neo-institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996): be it structural or cultural elements as the sociological version points out, be it historical with its path dependency, or be it in the form of a more actor-oriented rational choice version. And despite a commonly bemoaned institutional inertia, public administration can also be reformed. Such reforms are commonly termed institutional or polity policies.

Given the dual ontological status of public administration as process and organization, the politics of public administration has two dimensions: one within public administration as an organization where different actors compete and collaborate for discretion, resources, and ultimately power; and second, public administration as an agent interacting with the various partners in the public sphere. These partners are nodes in the network formed by society, political representation, and the economy. Unlike democratic bodies such as parliaments and

governments, the public administration is not elected by the voting population. Unlike organized interest groups and NGOs, the public administration does not represent specific interests in a pluralistic society. Public administration as a political actor partaking in politics consequently raises a plethora of normative, empirical, and analytical questions this *Handbook* aims to address.

The organization of public administration is by no means apolitical. It is related to power struggles between different parts of the society and different interests, between different ways of organizing the state, and between different policy solutions. The politics of public administration is thus – from a comparative perspective – about the struggles over how to organize the state sector with its facilities and services and the ways to conduct public policies. The politics of public administration also brings the political interests of the civil servants to the forefront. The public administration is not simply executing or implementing the decisions of their political masters, whether they be in government or in parliament, they also have their own political agenda. The politics of public administration finds thus another, additional meaning. It is not about the politics of organizing public administration only, it is also about the political role of the administration.

We also use the two dimensions of public organization in politics and politics within public administration mentioned above to structure the contributions in this volume. After presenting the two dimensions of the politics of public administration in the different contributions that discuss specific aspects of each dimension in depth, Part IV of this volume is dedicated to the politics of public administration in different countries. Our selection of states is not complete and remains eclectic to a certain degree. Our goal was to cover as many parts of the world as possible with the price that not all countries that would have been of interest for comparison entered our selection.

PART II: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN POLITICS

The state becomes active through its administration. Without civil servants or public agents there are hardly any services and facilities at the disposal of the citizens. There is thus a close link with changing interdependencies between the society, the state, and the administration. This link contains both structural and institutional elements as well as more cultural and value-based elements. And finally, as the different components change and might be also subject to reforms, the different relations among them can change. In such a setting, public administration is not only a result of politics but also an important stakeholder of polity and policymaking.

Public Administration Matters for Society and the State

At the beginning of the newer history of public administration, bureaucracy was – at least in the Western world – a sign of modernity and a step towards democracy. Civil service as a duty to the emperor eventually became a duty to the people and the public interest. The activities of the civil service were based on rules and laws and not on the will of the nobility, and all people were to be treated equally by the authorities. This simplistic view is underlined with a separation of powers with the political (decisional) branch on the one side and the administrative (executive) branch on the other.

These more general aspects of public administration are addressed by the first two contributions in Part II of the book. Jos Raadschelders describes in his contribution the development of administration as an instrument of power to the guardian of democracy, and Fritz Sager and Christian Rosser revisit the politics-administration dichotomy (PA Dichotomy). The PA Dichotomy is the evergreen of modern public administrative thought. The authors distinguish and assess the three dominant notions of the PA Dichotomy in the literature. They conclude that while there are no sufficient theoretical or empirical arguments to sustain either the normative PA Dichotomy or the empirical PA Dichotomy, the analytical PA Dichotomy remains a valuable model for the study of the relation between politics and public administration to this day.

The territorial organization of the state and the allocation of tasks to the different levels has also an impact on the organization of the administration. The chapter written by Andreas Ladner looks at the vertical and horizontal aspects of decentralization and their impact on the organization and the functioning of the administration. What differs when state activities are decentralized and in the realm of the lower layers of the state? Does bureaucracy really move closer to the people and is it more knowledgeable and accepted? Does the idea of power sharing and the double security for the sake of the citizens, as it promised in the Federalist Papers (no. 50), really work out? Related to the allocation of tasks and responsibilities is the process of implementation and the agents responsible for it. The chapter by Fritz Sager and Markus Hinterleitner agrees that implementing agents assume an immensely political role by adapting formal policies to concrete cases and situations. The authors also argue that the rise of conflictual politics puts the administration under stress and makes policy implantation more demanding.

In any case, the organization of the public administration reflects the organization of the state and the problems to be addressed. The administration as an institutional setting responds to structural and systemic needs, not without reinforcing them or making them more sustainable, or even imposing its own demands.

Reflecting Dominant Norms, Values, and Practices

The norms and values at the core of administrative activities are also prone to change, be it as mere product of social change or as the product of a more deliberate process. Starting off as law-based, rigid bureaucracy, the claims of new public management (NPM) asked for more citizen orientation and use of the practices borrowed from the private sector within public administration. However, as Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid write in their chapter, there is no convergence towards a common NPM model, but there are significant variations between countries, and also between government levels, policy areas, tasks, and over time which confirms not only the importance of the context but also the politics aspects of public administration. Just as there are different starting points for NPM reforms, there are also different elements that become popular in one country compared to another.

While according to the (new) public management framework the role of the different actors with the distinction between strategy and operation, the hierarchies and relations between them, and the different processes were rather clear and

remained – at least in theory – traceable, the new public governance (NPG) paradigm turns policymaking and policy implementation into a network of multi-level and multi-actor activity. There is – as described in the chapter by Eva Sørensen – much focus in the research on how multi-actor governance emerged and functions as a strategy for enhancing the effectiveness and quality of public activities. However, there is a tendency to overlook that NPG is both a product and a way of doing politics defined as contestations over who gets what, when, and how. This chapter analyzes the politics of NPG in terms of the politics driving its emergence and its structuration of power relations and patterns of political contestation between those involved in governing society.

Public administration is no longer to be seen as a solid and well-functioning machine. Output- and client-orientation, strategic thinking and planning, and a more open and more efficient state sector are – if not implemented – to be seen as possible new options for the organization of the public sector. It is understood that these elements are not conceptually neutral but bear also far-reaching political and policy related consequences.

New References and Sources to Take into Account

The forces that influence public administration's behavior have also changed in the last decades. When it comes to conducting public policies, they very often not only have a domestic logic to follow, but they are influenced by growing international interdependencies. The sovereignty of a state decreases and new points of references emerge. International public administrations – this is the message of Jörn Ege in his chapter – constitute the institutional backbone of global governance and play an essential part in the fight against transboundary problems such as pandemics, pollution, and conflict. They are sometimes also used for domestic politics, since their arguments seem to have a higher legitimacy. If the WHO, the OECD, or the Council of Europe formulate a recommendation, it has more political weight than a similar recommendation uttered by the national administration, even though the national administration or national politicians are sometimes also heavily involved in the creation of the recommendation on an international level.

Complexity also increases the demand for more knowledge and expertise. Decisions can be the product of different ideas or ideologies but should be based on evidence and scientific expertise. Such a shift towards a more technocratic functioning of the state makes the challenges the administration has to cope with more predictable. It remains, however, an open question whether science also produces the information needed for the necessary decisions or whether scientists are misused for political reasons. As noted by Joshua Newman in this book, there is a growing trend in academic scholarship of public administration to discount the role of evidence in informing public sector decisions. At the same time, proponents of evidence-based policy continue to ignore the mechanics of policy decision-making, and as a result, have failed to win over skeptics.

Where do members of the executive get their ideas from and what defines their political program? It is not only the citizens of their constituency or the party they belong to. Interest groups – if not to say private interest – and the administration – which is not entirely bare of its own interests – have their proper claims. There is, as emphasized in the contribution by Thurid Hustedt a growing number of advisors to

government ministers and other executive politicians. They are important actors in the ministries allowed to provide political advice. In addition, they are often closely involved in the coordination of government coalition politics alongside party-political lines and coordinate between the ministry and the party headquarters. Generally, they fulfill a much more political role than civil servants.

The concept of administrative burden – described by Donald Moynihan in his contribution – shows that the beliefs of administrators are consistent with policymakers' ideological views about programs and the organizational goals of stakeholders. Burdens are targeted to some groups more than others, and some have greater capacity to overcome such burdens. Thus, burdens reinforce patterns of inequality. Negative experiences become meaningful in shaping people's views of the state, and their relationship with it. If the leeway of civil servants is quite restricted in this perspective, it is by no means apolitical.

Outlook

Public administration – particularly seen as political institutions – guarantees stability and a certainty of expectation. Nevertheless, they can change over time. This can happen slowly through institutional change or it can be the product of deliberately implemented reform projects. Reform projects usually have a potential for political conflict because existing rules and practices are replaced by others, because there may be winners and losers, and because the intended goals may change.

Jörg Bogumil and Sabine Kuhlmann distinguish between external administrative reforms, which relate to the functional and/or territorial aspects of the state, and internal reforms, which concern the internal organization of the administration. They argue that external reforms in particular are subject to strong politicization. The final chapter of Part II written by Geert Bouckaert revisits the relation between the executive branch of government and public administration. Having overcome the dichotomy approach and having accepted that public administration is not separated from the executive, public administration might possibly also turn into opposition to the executive and to the citizens, especially when populism rises and the politicians in power deviate from mainstream democratic politics. Or in the words of the author: politico-administrative coordination used to be a coherent part of a system handling the interactions of politics and bureaucracy (see Chapter 13). However, in some countries increasingly, this combined system of politics and bureaucracy turns into an opposition, not just a "separation". In this sense, politico-administrative coordination becomes an oxymoron, increasingly perhaps.

PART III: POLITICS WITHIN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In Part III of this volume, we look at more specific aspects of public administration and ask – more or less explicitly – when they are the product of political preferences and how they can have an impact on politics. Political aspects are found in the resources public administration depends upon such as organizational, legal and regulatory, financial, and staffing related elements. But also processes and concepts such policymaking, performance management, evaluation, accountability, reputation, the administrative burden, and digital government reveal that the administration is not free of politics.

Politics about the Resources of Public Administration

Bureaucracy is part of organizational politics or let us say “Bureaucracy is politics” (Frederickson 2012). The relationships between politicians, ministers, and bureaucrats have changed over time, as stressed in the contribution of Adrian Ritz and Daniela Schädeli who understand bureaucracy from an organizational viewpoint.

There is also, as we might expect, room for politics in regulation, in the legal setting, in the implementation of public policies, and in their evaluation. The chapter by Jeroen van der Heijden maps how regulatory scholars have theorized the politics of regulation and reflects on three of the major theories about the need for regulation: an economic perspective, a public interest perspective, and an institutional perspective. Recent regulatory reforms have also begun to embrace non-governmental individuals and organizations as essential parts of regulatory regimes (resulting in theorizing on co-regulation and regulatory intermediaries).

When it comes to legal aspects, the main constitutional foundations in Western democracies are the principle of separation of powers and the principle of legality. The administration is entitled to a distinct scope of action in the application of the law, in legislation, in the preparation of parliamentary issues, and in the budgeting process. It can have a significant influence on the fulfillment of state tasks. However, its actions are subject to the supervision and direction of the government and the oversight of parliament. Its decisions are also subject to judicial control. Finally, the principle of publicity means that the administration is accountable to the public. Its autonomy is thus limited argue Andreas Lienhard, Peter Bieri, and Anna Malandrino while discussing the politics of administration from a legal and political science perspective.

A good insight into the organization of a state and the importance of distributional issues is provided by a look at public finances on the revenue and expenditure side and the way they are presented. In addition to the simple, albeit controversial, questions as to which areas of responsibility the money should flow into and how the financing should be secured, the individual administrative areas have an independent interest in ensuring sufficient resources. This includes, for example, generous budgeting and the avoidance of surpluses which may result in possible budget cuts. Surpluses can also lead to demands for tax cuts, which also takes resources away from the administrations. And finally, accounting and the calculation of the costs of administrative activities provide material for internal political disputes. In addition to the struggle for more resources, there is also the question of whether costs should be allocated to individual products and activities and how internal services should be dealt with.

The chapter by John Bartle shows that different constitutional and legal structures cause fiscal issues to be framed in different ways, affecting policies, which in turn affect the outcomes of tax policy such as the reliance on different revenue sources, the distribution of the tax burden, and the funding of programs. These macro-political structures set the context for micro-political struggles between elected and appointed officials, local officials of different governments, and among local, provincial, and central government officials.

The selection of civil servants also reveals different strategies and can serve different purposes for the administration and those in command. A classic and well-used distinction, for example, separates meritocratic systems from appointment systems, with the latter being more directly exposed to political purposes. To this can be added specific exams or trainings which can become indispensable for higher civil servants. The training facilities can be more or less dominated by politics and the state. The contribution of Frits van der Meer and Gerrit Dijkstra deals with the politics of staffing. They suggest a matrix to classify the systems on different dimensions and ask what kind of staff should be recruited to respond to current and future needs of government. Here they not only have a look at the performance and task demands but also examine transitions of staffing systems and the reasons for these changes. For instance, the change from a system that has a party politicized or a clientele orientation towards a system of staffing based on meritocratic principles.

That an important portion of politics takes place outside elections and within policy processes where governments decide on how to respond to problems is acknowledged by the contribution of Karin Ingold and Paul Cairney. In their chapter, they concentrate on the processes of public policymaking and discuss the accompanying role of public administration. Public administration is particularly influential when designing and planning policies, but it also plays an important role in larger governance arrangements.

New Practices and Concepts

There is a series of concepts more or less newly introduced into public administration which are also directly related to politics. Performance management and, closely linked to it, evaluations ask for measurable activities of the administration. The concepts of accountability and reputation formulate claims public administration is confronted with.

In a somewhat narrower sense, performance measurement cannot escape politics. Some of the many ways in which performance can be measured are clearly political. This is shown in the chapter by Wouter van Dooren. Performance measurement can, for example, provide a basis for accountability of public sector organizations to politicians, it can be used for deflecting blame and chasing credit, or it can make policy implementation and public service delivery legible and susceptible to political intervention. Performance measurement systems thus influence politics through the classifications they make, what they include, and what they exclude. Decision-making on performance is not the task of technocrats; it should be in the hands of politicians. By allowing decisions to be taken within the administration, politicians depend heavily on bureaucrats.

Evaluations of political programs have become a widely used practice within policy cycles. Having started as an (almost) objective strategy to find out whether the intentions and goals have been achieved, it has become a highly political endeavor. The executive branch can evaluate public agencies or policies as an extension of political struggles and use them to advance or legitimize their own objectives. Céline Mavrot and Valérie Pattyn examine the issues attached to the evaluation of public policies and administrative activity in relation to power games within and across the branches of government. They reveal how politicians and public servants can make

strategic use of policy evaluations, as well as how this instrument not only serves reflexive and oversight purposes, but also agenda-setting ambitions.

Rather newly used in the field of public administration are the concepts of accountability and reputation. Accountability often serves to define good governance. If authorization in democracies is the sphere where politicians can act politically, accountability is the sphere where those authorized with power are constrained on the basis of seemingly apolitical norms and values. Thomas Schillemans argues quite convincingly that this distinction between political politicians and apolitical administrators is misleading. Accountability institutions embody and guard specific values and the creation and operation of those institutions thus selectively prioritize some values above others. In addition, both the activation of accountability institutions in specific cases as well as the responses from those authorized with power are political. Public organizations engage in strategic, adaptive, and even opportunistic endeavors to gain, (re-)establish, maintain, or enhance a good organizational reputation, which has implications for public organizations' legitimacy, authority, and power. According to Dovilė Rimkutė, reputational considerations were found to affect how public organizations communicate and respond to public allegations, the content and timing of their core outputs, as well as the public organizations' performance, cooperation, choices, and accountability practices.

Digital Government

Another topic to treat here could fill a handbook in its own right: digital government. One of the open questions is whether digital government is a real game changer or just a more powerful and adequate way to organize the administration.

There are two modes as to how the transformation of digital government works. Each of them has its advantages and shortcomings. According to Tobias Mettler in the final chapter of Part III, top-down politics have slow reaction times resulting from complex funding distribution mechanisms and lengthy agenda-setting procedures, which seem to be particularly vulnerable to lobbying and copycat behavior, and bottom-up politics frequently struggle to unfold broader impact given that the interests and desires of the involved parties are not always representative of the overall population.

PART IV: COUNTRY STUDIES

Part IV of the volume consists of a number of country chapters. In fourteen short chapters authors Kenneth J. Meier and Anita Dhillon, Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans, Falk Ebinger, Tomas Bergström, Andreas Ladner and Fritz Sager, Caroline Schlauffer and Tim Jäkel, Zhiyong Lan, J. J. Woo, Nissim Cohen, Oliver Meza, John Polga-Hecimovich, Tobin Im and Kwang-Hoon Lee, Masao Kikuchi, and Srinivas Yerramsetti respectively cover the USA, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, the Russian Federation, China, Singapore, Israel, Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela, South Korea, Japan, and India.

The countries are not necessarily selected based on their size and importance and but more importantly on their distinctiveness. They show how different public

administrations in other countries can be and to what extent their characteristics are influenced by political values and preferences. More specifically, the authors were asked to address the structure and political function of the administration in their countries and its performance. They also had to provide some information about the historical legacies, especially with respect to public accountability and the bureaucracy of politics, the politicization with a focus on the selection of civil servants and administrative reforms, and the general influence of the administration on political decisions.

The center of interest turns around the politicization of public administration. To what extent is the administration of a country involved in politics and to what extent are politics left aside? A next logical step would be to ask whether the degree of politicization can be explained by structural, cultural, or political variables, and finally, whether politicization matters for the functioning of the administration and the well-being of the citizens. Such a full-fledged research program, unfortunately, goes beyond the scope of this book. We rather try to give some examples of countries which represent the different aspects of politicization most adequately.

Who does the administration report to? If the administration does more than simply executing laws and ordinances, one of the vital questions is whether it has its own political agenda, whether it works on the behalf of the citizens or on the behalf of the parties in power, or whether they follow some other or their own interests?

The US example where the highest civil servants are exchanged after a political shift at the top (spoils system), shows that the leading civil servants are quite clearly related to a party. This is certainly not the case to the same extent in Great Britain where the civil servants are independent and powerful with some of them directly employed by the Crown. A sort of independency is also found in Sweden with small ministries and, compared to other countries, rather independent agencies. Individual ministers cannot dictate decisions in agencies and the steering is general and collective as it comes from the government as a whole. The number of politically appointed staff persons in ministries is also low. A very large portion of public employees are located at the regional or local level, where the division between politics and administration is less clear. Decentralization and federalism prevent countries in any case from having a strong and large central administration with all the problems of large bureaucracies. Little decentralization and no separation between politics and administration is found in Russia and China. Administration and party go hand in hand. The political sphere has become bureaucratized, and the bureaucracy has turned into an influential political actor.

Professionalization and rules-abiding seem to be goals to achieve when we follow Colombia and Venezuela whose administrative structures and histories of administrative development were remarkably similar. Attempting to move beyond pure spoils systems upon democratization at the end of the 1950s, each country attempted to depoliticize and to professionalize their public administrations but ultimately struggled to eliminate patronage hires well into the 1990s. Yet, while Colombia has continued to make incremental gains at merit-based administration in the twenty-first century, Venezuela's public administration under Hugo Chávez and then Nicolás Maduro has become one of the most politicized in the world.

Unconditional bureaucratic neutrality cannot be the solution for all countries either. Following the post-war architects of the administrative system, they emphasized political responsiveness over the Weberian ideal of bureaucracy. Politicizing elements such as the “political” bureaucrat or the right to almost unrestrained party-political activity for civil servants ensured a consonance of meritocracy-driven competence, political steering capacity, and balanced representation of parties in the civil service.

Related to the function of the administration and its civil servants and bureaucrats within society and the state is the selection process. Here again, there is a variety of patterns which are at least partly political. Is employment in the civil service open to everybody or is there a specific appointment system behind it? Is the training and the education of a civil servant to some extent controlled by the state through specific schools, exams, or diplomas or is a general diploma of education sufficient? Singapore’s public administration, for example, has managed to attract and retain a significant proportion of the city-state’s top university graduates within its ranks. This gives the students the opportunity to pay back their grants. A well-known example is the French *Ecole nationale d’administration* (ENA) which was meant to democratize the access to the highest jobs in the civil service but finally created a rather homogeneous group of privileged people running the country for decades. President Macron now wants to replace the ENA with the *Institut du Service Public* which is supposed to be more open and meritocratic and does not directly lead to a job in the civil service.

Public administration is not neutral, objective, or apolitical; this is the credo of this volume. This insight is not entirely new, but in a time of increasing interdependencies and complexity it is even more prominent than it used to be. How to organize the services and infrastructure of a country definitely has an influence on the organization, and the same is the case with political institutions and the way political decisions are made. To this, we can add cultural elements which are more difficult to influence directly but rather the result of a longer process. Just as there is a policy of public administration, there are also political interests and preferences involved.

In addition to these structural elements, there is also a political influence when it comes to policies. This is well described by Jos Raadschelders by referring to Sir Humphrey Appleby in the television series *Yes, Minister* known by all scholars of public administration: “In the great restaurant of government, civil servants are the cooks and politicians are the waiters. We prepare all the dishes, and they serve them up to the customers”. As this volume shows, the metaphor is somewhat incomplete, however. The distinction between cooks and waiters leaves out the question of who writes the menu, i.e. who decides about the offer of services to be provided to the customers. In a democracy, the decision about what is on offer is the task of the people or in most cases their representatives respectively. Applied to the metaphor, the customers directly or indirectly decide about the menu. This is a fact to be kept in mind when customers complain about the dishes they ordered. It is not always and not necessarily the cooks or the waiters who are responsible for what customers get. Customers themselves have their say in it.

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