The Myth of the Dichotomy: Complementarity of Politics and Administration in the Past and Future of Public Administration

At the heart of the practice of public administration is the relationship between administrators, on one hand, and political leaders and the public on the other hand. The nature of that relationship and the proper role of administrators in the political process have been the subject of considerable debate. Anxiety about administrative legitimacy has been particularly intense in the United States, where the rise of the administrative state was out of sync with a democratic society (Stillman 1997), but similar issues have arisen in other countries as well (Rutgers 1997). As the field emerged, it was important to differentiate a practice based on professional knowledge and values from political particularism, but the extent and scope of the differentiation were unclear. It was also necessary to reconcile the tensions among complying with the directions of elected officials, maintaining professional integrity, and serving the public. Observers differ as to whether American thinking about the relationship of public administration to society has experienced major shifts over time or has gradually evolved.

Along the lines developed by Lynn, the case can be made that there has generally been continuity in the development of public administration in the United States rather than an abandonment of the traditions of the field. Whereas Lynn organizes his reexamination around the bureaucratic paradigm, my emphasis is the core relationship between politicians and administrators. Not only did traditional thought, as Lynn observes, seek to maintain “balance between administrative capacity and popular control on behalf of public purposes defined by electoral and judicial institutions,” it also sought to justify the contributions of public administrators to shaping the definition of public purposes. Put simply, early contributors to the development of public administration acknowledged a policy role for administrators that has often been ignored. Even the politics–administration dichotomy that is a part of the traditional paradigm usually incorporates the ideas of accountability and responsibility—although the paradigm can be expressed in ways that seem to preclude these qualities by portraying administration as mechanically instrumental—but the emphasis on a strict dichotomy of politics and administration will not accommodate the policy role of administrators that has come to be widely recognized.

In the past—and, I would argue, in the present as well—there was simultaneous emphasis on separation and insulation of administrators from political interference, on one hand, and interaction and incorporation of administrative contributions in the design and the implementation of public policy, on the other hand. Wilson and Goodnow favored such contributions, as did Leonard White, who acknowledged but dismissed concerns about the growth of administration “controlling in the first instance the application of law to the individual case, cooperating also in the formulation of policy” (1926, 33). Although legislative control of administration is critical, he argued, “it is nevertheless important to remember that the administration cooperates indispensably with the legislature, and that without its assistance, the task of legislation would become much less informed and much less effective.” These founding fathers of the field never advocated the dichotomy attributed to them—a conclusion demonstrated repeatedly (Golembiewski 1977; Rabin and Bowman 1984, 4; Rohr 1986, 31; Van Riper 1984, 209–10). Still, the myth that public administration began as a narrow, confined, and insulated activity is regularly repeated partly because, as Lynn implies, it is self-satisfying to view ourselves as enlightened and to view earlier, particularly prewar scholars and practitioners, as benighted.

There are a number of reasons why the dichotomy idea has persisted. It is convenient to explain the division of
roles in terms of total separation because it is easier to explain than a model based on sharing roles, particularly since the separation model does not limit the actual policy contributions of administrators in practice. At the same time, the dichotomy idea shields administrators from scrutiny and serves the interests of elected officials who can pass responsibility for unpopular decisions to administrators (Peters 1995, 177–8). Miller (2000, 314–5) sees dichotomy as a “useful myth” because it obscures the influence of administrators to constrain efforts by politicians in power to slant the implementation of policies and channel benefits toward themselves. “Partial” versions of the dichotomy persist. Kettl (2000, 8–9), who recognizes the positive contributions of Wilson’s and Goodnow’s work, views the effort to separate politics from administration as creating a dichotomy and labels the emphasis on hierarchy, authority, structure, and top-down accountability the “Wilsonian” tradition in public administration (16–17). Montjoy and Watson (1995, 231) propose a “reinterpreted dichotomy” that permits a policy-making role for the manager but still helps managers resist the forces of particularism. This approach is consistent with the way that dichotomy was defined before the late 1950s. Acknowledging that administrators discretely shape policy behind the scenes reconciled policy influence and hierarchy.

Furthermore, it should be recognized that the idea of the strict dichotomy does have a historical basis in the United States, even though it was not the normative model proposed during the founding period of American public administration. A final reason for the persistence of the dichotomy is the absence of an alternative model. In the next section, I will consider the development of the dichotomy idea in the past. In the final section, I will present the idea of complementarity—a conceptual framework that includes differentiation along with interaction as an alternative to the dichotomy.

The Real and Contrived Dichotomy

The separation theme was dominant during the late 1920s and 1930s in the United States, although the recognition of the need for interaction was never lost among scholars in public administration. I will leave it to others to sort out the features of organization theory during this period. I admit to accepting the image of the “high noon of orthodoxy,” without the critical examination that Lynn encourages. Schachter (1989) deserves credit for debunking the standard characterizations of Taylor and the municipal research bureaus as dominated by concerns about efficiency and oblivious to democracy and responsiveness. It is time to question more critically conclusions like Martin’s (1952, 667): His assertion that in the 1930s “administration was separated severely from the legislative body” rests on the assumption that administration was dominated by a “mechanistic concept” grounded in scientific management.

Still, there is evidence from this period of support for putting distance between policy making and administration. Dimock (1936, 3) noted that the distinction between policy formulation and execution has been important, but “the danger today is in going too far in the formal separation between politics and administration.” In local government, there was a division that was worthy of the label “dichotomy,” although the term was rarely used at the time. Strict confinement of the city manager to administration was the established view in the International City Management Association (ICMA) and embodied in the 1938 code of ethics (Stillman 1974, 43–53). Clarence Ridley and Orin Nolting—director and assistant director of ICMA—in The City Management Profession (1934, 30) stated that the manager should not “let himself be driven or led into taking the leadership or responsibility in matters of policy.” In general, the manager should stay “out of the limelight as much as possible.” Thus, there is a historical basis for the conceptual and normative model of strict separation, but it was an “aberration” (Svara 1998) that departed from earlier and later thinking—conveyed most importantly in the commentary accompanying the second Model City Charter that endorsed the council-manager form, and in the 1924 and 1952 ICMA ethics codes, which acknowledge (at least implicitly) a policy role for the city manager.

Even during the 1930s, however, there were diverse views, as Lynn observes. There was recognition of the centrality of discretion to administration (Blachly and Oakman 1934, 36–8; Gullick 1933), the policy role played by administrators (Gaus, White, and Dimock 1936; Haines and Dimock 1935; Hyneman 1939; Pfiffner 1935), and the linkages between administrators and interest groups (Gaus, White, and Dimock 1936; Herring 1936). There was support for giving the lead role in planning to the executive and administrators, with legislators acting as reviewers of plans (Gullick 1933). There was considerable empirical evidence of the intermixture of politics and administration (for example, Stone, Price, and Stone 1940, 247). Remarkably—in view of our current preconceptions—Price (1941, 578) captured the essence of the administrative role in government at a point just past high noon: Public administrators make “the greatest contribution to policy and administration without even momentary immunity from political responsibility.” The shortcomings of public-administration thinking in this period should not be ignored. Through the 1930s, the formal instrumental relationship of administrators to elected officials was emphasized, only a narrow range of the ways that administrators affect policy were
recognized, and the need for strict insulation from partisan politics continued to be stressed. These limitations and others appropriately sparked dissent and the calls for new approaches in the late 1940s, but they did not warrant the later rejection of all pre-war contributions to the development of public administration. From 1940 onward, the debate about public administrators’ contributions to democratic governance got even more lively (Appleby 1949; Fesler 1957; Friedlich 1940; Gaus 1950; Levitan 1943; Long 1954; Morstein Marx 1946; Waldo 1948), but the early contributors were not ignored or renounced.

What Lynn suggests that Simon (1946) and Dahl (1947) did to stigmatize earlier organization theorists, Wallace Sayre (1958) did to undermine respect for the political-administrative formulations of the founders of public administration in the United States. Ironically, given his interest in expanding acceptance of values in the study of administration (Sayre 1951), his essay had the effect of derailing the evolving discussion of the interaction of politics and administration by asserting instead that this was a new, previously unrecognized concern. To an extent not found previously, Sayre reinterpreted the early literature on political-administrative relations. For the first time in the public administration literature, the dichotomy model, with its emphasis on complete separation of spheres, was enunciated; from this point forward, use of the term (with this narrow definition) increased greatly (Svara 1999a). Sayre asserted that public administration, as defined by the dichotomy, was a “self-contained world of its own, with its own separate values, rules, and methods” (1958, 102) and “was concerned exclusively with the execution of assignments handed down from the realm of politics” (103). He did not cite any sources prior to 1946 objecting to the premise that administration has no involvement in policy, even though the literature is replete with references to policy contributions. Sayre asserted that a strict dichotomy as he characterized it was the founding theory of public administration. Not only did he present the “high noon” image, whose damaging effects Lynn notes, he also claimed there had been darkness at the dawning of public administration.

Remarkably, this new version of history was accepted without challenge, even among public administration scholars, and was eagerly supported by political scientists. The “revisionist interpretation,” as Lynn puts it, was substituted for the original ideas in public administration. The idea quickly took hold that Wilson, Goodnow, and White had advocated a dichotomy model based on strict separation of spheres. Since this version of the model is patently untenable, it followed that public administration lacked a defensible conceptual foundation. Mosher (1968, 6) asserted that, with the demise of the dichotomy, “the finding of a viable substitute may well be the number one problem of public administration today.” Since the late 1960s, efforts have been made to establish the bases of legitimacy for public administration; however, these efforts have been weakened because they start with the faulty premise that public administration could not approximate what its founders in the United States had advocated. A new public administration was being built without a foundation.

There has been a disconcerting tendency in public administration to caricature ideas that are criticized rather than identifying shortcomings and building on strengths. Along with the strict dichotomy as a strawman model—and the bureaucratic paradigm—have come the neutering of neutral competence and the assertion that “technical-rationality” is the dominant and all-encompassing mindset of traditional public administration (Adams and Balfour 1998). Since the field began in the United States, there has been support for applying professional knowledge—broadly defined to include substantive, public-service, and technical values—in an impartial, nonpartisan way to address public problems. This robust form of neutral competence is consistent with definitions by Dunn (1997), Heclo (1975), Rourke (1992), and Wolf (1999). This defining characteristic of public administration—its professional independence—was transformed by its linkage to the strict-dichotomy model into either passivity or valuelessness, even amoral, disinterest in the ends of government, that is, neutrality had been divorced from statesmanship (Green 1998).

To be sure, there are public administrators who are more concerned with means than ends and who assert that administrators should be given free rein by politicians to use a narrowly defined expertise. There have been city managers who used strict separation as a screen to conceal their own power (Newland 1989). There have been cases on a large and small scale of administrators who were incapable of finding the moral fiber to resist harmful policies. Still, commitment to public serving values, substantive ends as well as technical means, and procedural fairness have always been part of the theory and practice of public administration, along with an interest in technique and rationality. It is important to understand the rich tradition of the field if we are to build a stronger future for it. This understanding will force us to abandon simplistic foils—dichotomy, bureaucratic paradigm, neutral competence too narrowly defined, and technical rationality too broadly applied—to make alternative formulations look stronger. When the continuity in the field of public administration is recognized, we must acknowledge that our accomplishments in the past 40 years have been rather modest.

Complementarity of Politics and Administration

To avoid slipping back into the view that public administration began in dichotomy but moved into broader
roles, it is helpful to have an alternative interpretation. There has been an implicit defining model for political-administrative relationships from the beginning, and this model is important for understanding the current and future role of public administration. The complementarity of politics and administration is based on the premise that elected officials and administrators join together in the common pursuit of sound governance. Complementarity entails separate parts, but parts that come together in a mutually supportive way. One fills out the other to create a whole. Complementarity stresses interdependence along with distinct roles; compliance along with independence; respect for political control along with a commitment to shape and implement policy in ways that promote the public interest; deference to elected incumbents along with adherence to the law and support for fair electoral competition; and appreciation of politics along with support for professional standards. The issue is not whether public administrators are “instrumental or usurpative” (Heady 1984, 408)—the standard dichotomy versus nondichotomy options—but how they are both instruments and contributors to the political process, that is, instrumental and constitutive (Cook 1996).

Our understanding of administrative roles has changed over time. Still, the elements of complementarity were present in Wilson (1887), they were central to the development (Woodruff 1919) and early history of the council-manager form of government at the local level (White 1927), and they were clearly articulated in the 1940s and 1950s before the dichotomy-as-founding-theory view took hold. They are also present in a wide range of new models presented since 1970. Complementarity recognizes the interdependence and reciprocal influence between elected officials and administrators. Elected officials and administrators maintain distinct roles based on their unique perspectives and values and the differences in their formal positions, but the functions they perform necessarily overlap.

Complementarity reconciles what has seemed to be contradictory—even paradoxical (Harmon 1995)—aspects of public administration. How can politicians maintain control and, at the same time, allow administrators to maintain their independence to adhere to professional values and standards and to be responsible to the public? The reconciliation comes from recognizing the reciprocating values that underlie complementarity. Elected officials could, in theory, dominate administrative practice, but they are constrained by a respect for administrative competence and commitment. Administrators could use their considerable resources to become self-directed, but they are restrained by a commitment to accountability in the complementary relationship. Overhead democracy by citizens and politicians can work, but only if it is accompanied by undergirding responsibility from administrators. The relationship between elected officials and administrators could be seen as simply the interaction between political control and professional independence. Control involves the capacity to set direction and maintain oversight, while independence involves asserting professional perspectives in policy formation and adhering to professional standards in implementation. If one explains relationships only in terms of what March and Olson (1995, 7) have called “exchange perspectives,” the interplay of these two forces of control and independence could lead one to dominate or to a balance of the two (Krause 1999). A normative institutionalist perspective (Peters 1999), however, would add that officials seek to act in terms of norms of appropriate behavior that will make institutions work (March and Olson 1995, 25–8). These include the reciprocating values of respect for administrators by elected officials and commitment to accountability by administrators that add balance to the relationship. The interplay between control and independence, with the restraining effect of reciprocating values, produces an array of models for describing the political–administrative relationship (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Understanding the Interaction between Politicians and Administrators

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<tr>
<th>Elected officials: degree of control</th>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Administrators: level of independence</td>
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<td>Complementarity</td>
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<td>Bureaucratic autonomy</td>
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<td>Stalemate or laissez-faire</td>
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*Reciprocating values that reinforce the position of other set of officials.

Any of these combinations are possible if the defining conditions are present. The political dominance that results from high political control and low administrative independence is the condition that has been attacked by reformers from the Progressive Era to the present because of their concern for loss of administrative competence and the potential for political corruption. Bureaucratic autonomy is feared by critics of the administrative state, who argue that administrators are self-controlling and advance agency interests rather than the public interest. In both situations, either the level of control or independence is extreme, and the key reciprocating value is not present: Politicians do not respect administrators, or administrators are not committed to accountability. One conceptual possibility is the combination of low control and low indepen-
dence, producing a “live and let live” attitude among officials. Ironically, Sayre’s dichotomy, which is based on totally separate spheres, would logically fit in this category because the distance between the two sets of officials does not contribute to real control or real independence, but to coexistence. In some circumstances, the limited ability to influence other officials could result in stalemate. The largest space in figure 1 is the zone of complementarity. I would argue that most interactions among officials reflect complementarity, and evidence from local governments in 14 countries supports this generalization (Mouritzen and Svara 2001). Although in earlier times there was greater emphasis on subordination of administrators linked to greater reliance on hierarchy as an organizational principle, interdependence and reciprocal influence are common and longstanding. A condition that presumably was common earlier in the century, high accountability and moderate independence, would fit in the upper-left corner of the complementarity quadrant, whereas recent experience with moderate control and extensive administrative initiative would be in the lower-right corner. One can argue that complementarity is rooted in past thought and practice and has important implications for the future. It is not a new model replacing an old one, but a deeply rooted model that continues to evolve. Complementarity entails ongoing interaction, reciprocal influence, and mutual deference between elected officials and administrators. Administrators help to shape policy, and they give it specific content and meaning in the process of implementation. Elected officials oversee implementation, probe specific complaints about poor performance, and attempt to correct problems with performance through fine-tuning. Changes in the governmental process that substantially expand political control and weaken administrative independence (for instance, tilting the relationship by increased reliance on politically appointed consultants and “hollowing out” of administration [Moe 1994] or weakening generalist administrative leadership in local government) weaken the dialogue between elected officials and administrators. Privatization through contracting out breaks the dialogue and replaces it with contract specification and compliance reports. Ironically, contracting out closely approximates the terms of the dichotomy model, as do performance contracts as Kettl (2000, 29) observes, and highlights a central limitation in this kind of approach. Unless it is reserved for services that can be appropriately defined without ongoing broad-based administrative input and appropriately delivered without continuous political oversight, the strict separation of policy makers and service deliverers can lower the quality of governance and service.

In contrast, with extensive interaction, the knowledge and values of those who do the ongoing work of government complement the knowledge and values of those who ultimately set the course for government and ensure that it stays on course. The complementarity of politics and administration holds that elected officials and administrators—both in regular communication with citizens—need and help each other in a partnership for governance. Dividing the partners or skewing the relationship in one direction or the other means that an important contribution is missing. If we continue to accept the simple notion that public administration began as a separate instrumental entity confined to a narrow sphere of activity, we do a disservice to the past, and we run the risk of legitimizing a true dichotomy of policy formation and contracted service delivery. It is important to appreciate the role of public administration in the “old” governance as a basis for understanding the relationship between public administrators and a wider array of actors in the new governance.

Notes

1. This article draws on arguments developed at length in Svara (1999a).
2. This claim has more validity with respect to Willoughby (1927). In his view, elected officials and administrators have distinct roles that do not overlap. The “prime function” of the legislator is “to determine policies and give the necessary orders for putting these policies into effect” (2). The function of administration is “the putting into effect of policies and carrying out of orders as determined or given by other organs” (11).
3. Kettl (2000) carries the specification of traditional public administration too far, however, by claiming that it relied on a clear delineation of roles, with elected officials framing policy and delegating the details to administrators. As we have seen, early contributors did not insist on such a complete delineation and allowed for the upward flow of policy ideas and influence. Even Finer (1941) conceded that “no one in their right mind would deny the importance of suggestions persuasively presented by the expert” (342).
4. Vieg (1946) and Lepawsky (1949) defended the dichotomy as convenient because it focused public attention on elected officials but did not view it as a barrier to policy involvement behind the scenes. Kaufman (1956) presented a broad and complex examination of neutral competence and the politics–administration dichotomy, but it was not central to the coming reformulation of the nature and origins of the dichotomy. He stressed the elimination of partisan politics from governmental decision making through practices in-
excluding creation of independent boards and commissions as well as civil service. Obviously, policy responsibility was assigned to the boards that were insulated from partisan intrusion and, by implication, to the administrators as well. Indeed, the discretionary power accumulated by some civil servants contributed to the fragmentation of government. Although he observed that the politics–administration dichotomy was gradually replaced by the “doctrine of the continuity of the policy-formulating process” (1067), this change began after 1910 and accompanied the increasingly closer linkages between administrators and executives. Later, neutral competence was opposed, not because administrators in federal agencies were divorced from policy, but because it “encouraged the development of ‘self-directing’ groups within the bureaucracy” (1070).

5. Exceptions were Herring (1936), who felt the “balance of power is shifting” to administration, and Price (1941), who asserted it is not possible for city managers to be anonymous in their policy leadership.

6. An important exception is Friedrich (1940) who launched an unreasonable attack on Goodnow and misrepresented his views. He claimed that Goodnow made the distinction between politics and administration “an almost absolute distinction” and “an absolute antithesis” (6). Such a complete division of functions would indeed constitute a dichotomy, but Friedrich did not use the term.

7. Waldo’s position is of interest in view of Lynn’s observations about his rejection of what he viewed as established values in administration. Waldo (1948, 109) did not interpret Goodnow as advocating a simplistic separation of politics and administration, and he notes that “some more recent students have taken the name of Goodnow in vain.” He did, however, advance the practice of lumping together most of the preceding literature and linking it to strict separation. In his summary, Waldo criticizes the “straitjacket” that public administration had made for itself—“the instrumentalist philosophy of the politics–administration formula” (208)—and suggests that the main tenets of public administration emerged before 1914 (211).

8. Sayre did not use the term “politics–administration dichotomy” in the 1951 article, although he linked Simon’s “fact–value dichotomy” to the “earlier formulation of the separation of politics from administration” (Sayre 1951, 5), as did Appleby (1949). In discussing the general-manager plan for large mayor-council cities (1954, 258), he referred to the “politics–administration dilemma” that “plagues” council-manager governments. He foreshadowed the formulation and subsequent rejection of the strict dichotomy with the assertion that “council manager doctrine emphasizes council monopoly over policy,” although in practice, policy leadership from the manager is needed.

9. The term was rarely used before this time; when it was used, it connoted a limited sense of insulating administrators from partisan interference, along with recognizing that administrators influence policy in nonpublic ways (see footnote 4).

10. Long (1954) dismissed the possibility of a governmental process that operates in terms of characteristics that are contained in a strict-dichotomy model. Administration would have been “a neutral instrument solely devoted to the unmotivated presentation of facts to, and the docile execution of orders from, political superiors” (27). In “Power and Administration,” Long (1949, 259) observed that “the bureaucracy under the American political system has a large share of responsibility for the public promotion of policy and even more in organizing the political basis for its survival and growth.”

11. A more balanced and widely held view in the United States and abroad is expressed by Asmeron and Reis (1996, 8–9): “[N]eutrality does not mean that top-level civil servants cannot or should not be involved in the articulation of public policy. Indeed, senior officials are professionally and morally obliged to provide their political leaders with the best policy alternatives based on sound arguments, relevant precedents, and suitability to the changing environment. The expectation that they will render these services from a non-partisan position is the crux of the matter.”

12. In a crossnational study of the highest appointed administrator in city government in 14 countries, the most aloof and the most influential city managers are found in Ireland, which legally mandates separation of policy and administration (Asquith and O’Halpin 1998). American city managers, often supporters of the dichotomy concept, gave themselves the highest influence rating in budgeting and the third-highest rating in economic development among the 14 countries (Svara 1999b).

13. Elsewhere (Svara 1999a), I have summarized the value positions that can be derived from the “old” public administration through the 1950s.

14. Terry (1995, 13), one of a relatively small number of scholars who recognize the broader view that Woodrow Wilson had of administration, sees that early contributors recognized a “complementary” relationship between democracy and bureaucracy.

15. These approaches include the New Public Administration (Marini 1971), and the work of Wamsley et al. (1990), Terry (1995), and Frederickson (1997).

16. Friedrich (1940, 19) observed that responsible administrative conduct “is not so much enforced as it is elicited.” Administrators choose to comply.

17. Redford (1969, 71–2) characterized the concept of overhead democracy—presented as the “traditional model of democratic administration” with “some measure of validity”—as simplistic because it ignored the complex “web of interrelations” that mark political–administrative interaction. Meier, Polinard, and Wrinkle (1999) conclude that change in farm credit policy and administration over time is consistent with overhead democracy.

18. For example, Price (1941, 573) observed that, in local government, “the relationship between council and manager is so intimate that it is generally impossible to prove whether the manager is using his own judgment in taking an admin-
istrative action or is acting under coercion or threat by the council ... or whether the council in adopting a policy is following the ideas originated by its members or the advice of the city manager.”

19. These themes are developed further and variations in complementary relationships are developed in Mouritzen and Svara (2001, ch. 10).

References


