POLITICS AND MANAGEMENT

Revisiting the Politics/Administration Dichotomy to Build a More Complete Understanding of Public Management

SEAN NICHOLSON-CROTTY
University of Missouri

ABSTRACT: *Despite persistent scholarly interest in the politics–administration dichotomy, we know relatively little about the ways in which administrators influence political decision making. This essay briefly reviews the evidence that exists and argues that an assessment of the bureaucratic role in policy formulation is vital to a comprehensive model of public management.*

KEYWORDS: *networks, politics/administration dichotomy, public management, public policy*

The relation between the political and the administrative dimensions of our democracy is arguably one of the most persistent sources of interest for scholars of public administration. Indeed, it was among the questions that Dwight Waldo hoped to address when he convened the first meeting at Minnowbrook. So it seems appropriate on the occasion of Minnowbrook III to take stock of what we know empirically—or, more important, what we have yet to learn—about the relation between politics and administration. While there are potentially numerous benefits to such an inquiry, I focus herein on the payoff for our understanding of public management.

Waldo, along with those who asked questions about the electoral–bureaucratic interface both before and after him, identified three dimensions of this relation: the exercise of political judgment in the implementation of policy, the influence of political actors on bureaucratic behavior, and the influence of bureaucratic actors on the formulation of policy. We know a great deal empirically about the first two of these elements. The belief that administrators authoritatively allocate resources and values in the implementation process is the foundation for the entire field of public management. That line of inquiry, along with others such as representative bureaucracy, has provided empirical evidence in literally thousands of studies that bureaucrats do exercise political judgments when implementing policy and

Public Performance & Management Review, Vol. 32, No. 4, June 2009, pp. 610–617.
© 2009 M.E. Sharpe, Inc. All rights reserved.
1530-9576/2009 $9.50 + 0.00.
DOI 10.2753/PMR1530-9576320411

المنارة للاستشارات

that those choices have an impact on program outcomes. Similarly, scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to the influence that elected officials have on administration. This research has provided rich insights into the panoply of ex ante and ex post tools that political principals have at their disposal when they wish to influence bureaucratic behavior and program outcomes.

Considerably less attention has been paid to the third element of the politics–administration question, regarding the role of public administrators in the formulation of policy. Scholars have long suggested that they play such a role and that it has a nontrivial influence on decision making by politicians, but there is relatively little generalizable empirical evidence regarding the nature, scope, and impact of policy-related activity by bureaucratic actors. This essay briefly reviews the evidence that exists and argues that an assessment of the bureaucratic role in policy formulation is vital to a comprehensive model of public management. It raises a host of questions about the relationship between managers, politics, and public programs and suggests that finding answers to these should be a major component of the scholarly public administration enterprise in the coming years.

Before moving on, it is important to note that I do not wish to become involved here in the still vibrant debate over whether Waldo and others really rejected a complete separation of the formulation and administration of public policy (see Overeem, 2008) or what the politics–administration dichotomy meant historically (see Lynn, 2001; Rosenbloom, 2008). Instead, I begin with Stivers's (2008) seemingly reasonably assumption that there is a natural and necessary tension between elected and appointed officials in democratic systems, which can and does have significant influence on the behavior of both. From that hopefully noncontroversial vantage, we can try to take stock of the state of empirical knowledge regarding the relationship between political and administrative actors, particularly in terms administrative involvement in the formulation of policy and its relation to the study of public management more generally.

Administrators and the Formulation of Policy

Scholars have long asserted that administrators play an important role in policy formulation. Friedrich, for example, argued, "Politics and administration play a continuous role in both the formulation and execution of policy" (1940, p. 6). Modern theories of administration and management have continued to suggest that public managers are not only shaped by, but also have an important role in shaping, both the institutional and policy context in which their organizations exist (see especially Moore, 1995; also see Kaufman, 1982; Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2001; O'Toole & Meier, 1999). Despite the theoretical attention paid to this third dimension of the politics–administration relation, however, there has been relatively little empirical research on the matter compared with the other dimensions

المنارة للاستشارات

of the dichotomy mentioned previously. This is particularly true if one is interested in the question from a public management perspective. Empirical management studies often acknowledge the important role that managers have in shaping the political environment, but they typically test for the influence of political variables on managerial behavior (e.g., Moynihan & Pandey, 2005).

Obviously, it is inaccurate to suggest that the literature offers no empirical insights into the political activity of public managers. Over the years isolated pieces of work have provided empirical evidence that public administrators at least attempt to influence policy formulation (e.g., Freeman, 1958; Lee, 2001; Schneider & Jacoby, 1996). There have also been more consistent efforts in some corners of the field to illuminate these activities, and this section will provide a very brief (and obviously incomplete) review of this work.

Authors have empirically tested for the influence of administrators on political decision making from several vantages. While it is not directly related to influence on policy formulation by any particular agency or manager, there is a relatively large body of literature on the political activism of bureaucrats. Work in this area has suggested that bureaucrats are politically active, although not as the liberal agitators envisioned by conservative politicians (Daniel & Rose, 1991; Rothman & Lichter, 1983). Research has also suggested that bureaucrats vote at substantially higher rates than the general public and thus may influence elections and subsequently policy, particularly at the local level (Bush & Denzau, 1977). Finally, this body of work has argued that public employees tend to be unionized at high rates and may engage the political process in this manner as well (O'Brien, 1992).

In a more direct approach to the question of the bureaucratic role in policy formulation, several political scientists have developed and tested models of administrative influence on decision making by lawmakers. For example, Krause (1999) demonstrated that federal bureaucratic agencies, particularly those independent of the executive, have a significant impact on regulatory and appropriations policy crafted by Congress. Specifically, he suggested that the expertise and innovative capacity of administrative agencies forces an "adaptation" by political institutions, which manifests in policy outputs. Carpenter (2001) also explored the impact of administrators on political decision making and argued that, historically, it has been the ability to mobilize powerful interest groups that has allowed them to influence policy. Within the research in political science, Carpenter's work is particularly significant because he demonstrates that individual mid-level bureaucrats—in other words, managers—can change the policy directives issued by Congress and the president.

Probably the most significant line of inquiry into the influence of administrators on policy decision making comes from the literature on council–manager governments in U.S. municipalities. This is perhaps unremarkable because the council–manager system was pioneered by progressive reformers explicitly to separate

المنارة للاستشارات

the execution of policy from partisan politics (Rohr, 1986). Interestingly, this research tends to downplay the separation between the political and administrative functions of these governments. Nalbandian (1999, p. 190) marshaled significant evidence that city managers perceive themselves not as neutral administrators, but rather as enablers of democracy who are expected to participate in "public policy and problem solving" in their communities (see also Nalbandian, 1991). Beyond perceptions of political influence, Svara (1990) provided evidence that in a nontrivial number of cities, the manager may have more political power than the council due to longevity or community support. In the most methodologically sophisticated work to date, Demir and Nyhan (2008) employed a structural equations approach to determine how concepts of neutral competence and political guidance from council members inform city managers' perceptions of democratic accountability and their own planning ability. From these analyses, the authors concluded that politically active public administrators may be better able to resist interest group pressure and, therefore, be more accountable to the citizenry. Additionally, they conclude that political activity among managers may be more necessary, as elected officials are less able to provide sufficient guidance regarding the execution of policy.

(A Small Sample of) Questions Remaining About Political Activity and Public Management

So, the empirical literature provides evidence that public administrators routinely engage the political sphere. Whether authors talk of endogeneity (Krause, 1999) or complementarity (Svara, 2001), they tend to agree that administrators can and do influence policy decisions made by elected officials and that the reverse is also true. For scholars of public management, however, this insight raises significantly more questions than it answers. For example, when do managers engage politically? How do these efforts structure the organizational environment and affect performance? What are the impacts on other management activities? This section offers an obviously truncated list of the things public managers do to generate more specific questions about the relation between managerial involvement in the political process and other management activities.

Moore suggested that modern public managers must be politically active because "to achieve their operational objectives public managers must often engage actors beyond the scope of their direct authority" (1995, p. 113). He is obviously not the first to highlight this management function, but as previously noted, we still know relatively little empirically about the specifics of political management. Despite the centrality of the concept to his theoretical story, Moore actually does little to contribute to that knowledge, and it seems fair, therefore, to use his work to begin generating research questions. The author outlined four conditions under

المنارة للاستشارات

which political management is particularly necessary, including, for example, authorizing change and innovation, but he provides little or no empirical evidence that managers pursuing innovation are more likely to attempt to manage the political environment. So the question natural arises, are managers who wish to innovate more likely to try to manipulate political decision making? In a related question, we might ask, are managers who engage political principals more successful in pursuing innovations?

After introducing the concept of political management, Moore (1995) reminded readers that interest groups are powerful players in the organizational environment and suggests that they can be managed by mobilizing opposing interests or co-opting group preferences. Here as well, however, only a single case provides evidence for these assertions, and thus we are left with a host of questions. Are managers who are facing a conflictual interest group environment more or less likely to engage it? Are performance gains possible via strong relationships with interest groups? What are the costs to the manager and his or her organization if establishing such a relationship puts that manager at odds with the preferences of legislators or the executive? Are there generalizable conditions when public managers should engage interest groups rather than remain aloof or focused on other actors in the political environment? Obviously, any of these questions and many others could be asked about relationships with the media, elected officials, or the other players in the political sphere.

The paucity of empirical research on administrative involvement in policymaking also generates important questions about the other elements of public management. According to many scholars, one common activity for modern managers is interaction with other actors in nonhierarchical collaborative or networked implementation arrangements (Agranoff, 2003). From this body of work, we know that networks or collaborative arrangements are a common governance structure (see McGuire [2006], for a review), that these arrangements take different forms (Mandell & Steelman, 2003), that they require different managerial strategies than hierarchical arrangements (Vangen & Huxham, 2003), and that they can sometimes produce performance gains relative to traditional structures and managerial techniques (O'Toole & Meier, 1999). What we do not know is whether networked or collaborative governance schemes encourage or require more or less political engagement by public managers. One could envision competing scenarios. On the one hand, the flexible nature of networks might give managers incentive to try to alter that structure to their benefit via interaction with political decision makers. Alternatively, the significant demands on managerial time and energy created by interactive nature of collaborative arrangements might make it almost impossible for managers to find the time to cultivate political relationships. As the study of public management almost always has an eye to the impact on performance, these scenarios raise another set of questions on this dimension.

المنارة للاستشارات

Are managers able to alter the structure of collaborative arrangements or networks in a way that matches their preferences via political activities and do they reap performance gains for the programs they administer? Do managers ignore this element of collaborative management at their peril (at least in terms of performance) in all cases or only some?

Finally, there is the traditional view of what managers do, focusing on internal activities such as financial, personnel, and capital management (see Ingraham, Joyce, & Donahue [2003] for the best incorporation of these concepts into a modern theory of management). Here, also, are important unanswered questions about the potential impact of political engagement on other managerial activities. For example, it is well known that there are substantial constraints on public hiring related to compensation relative to the private sector. Could a politically engaged manager lessen those constraints by convincing the legislature to provide higher pay or better benefits? Similarly, managers often decry the lack of flexibility in the financial management systems, but are the specific elements of those systems manipulatable by politically engaged managers? To approach the question from the opposite side, are managers who are laboring under systems with overly rigid compliance mechanisms more likely to alter those systems through political management? Finally, the potential payoff of political engagement for internal management activities raises another more general question about the relation between managerial involvement in politics and traditional management activities. Namely, is there necessarily a tradeoff between the two? Having finite time and energy, do managers who spend more time trying to influence political decision makers spend less time governing the internal processes of their organizations? If so, what are the consequences for organizational performance?

The inquiries listed are obviously a very small fraction of the possible empirical research questions regarding the relation between political activities of managers and the study of public management generally. I encourage the reader to let his or her mind run, allowing each unanswered question to generate a new set of inquiries. In that way I hope my assertion that a comprehensive story of public management requires an understanding of political management will seem plausible. I also hope that it will convince readers that this topic is worthy of significant attention by public administration scholars in the coming years.

References

Agranoff, R. (2003). *Leveraging networks: A guide for public managers working across organizations.* Washington, DC: IBM Endowment for the Business of Government.

Bush, W., & Denzau, A. (1977). The voting behavior of bureaucrats and public sector growth. In T.E. Borcherding (Ed.), *Budgets and bureaucrats: The sources of government growth* (pp. 90–99). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Carpenter, D. (2001). *The forging of bureaucratic autonomy: Reputations, networks, and*

المنارة للاستشارات

policy innovation in executive agencies 1862–1928. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Daniel, C., & Rose, B. (1991). Blending professionalism and political acuity: Empirical support for an emerging ideal. *Public Administration Review, 51*(5), 438–441.
Demir, T., & Nyhan, R. (2008). The politics–administration dichotomy: An empirical search for correspondence between theory and practice. *Public Administration Review, 68*(1), 81–96.
Freeman, J.L. (1958). The bureaucracy in pressure politics. *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science, 319,* 10–19.
Friedrich, C. (1940). Public policy and the nature of administrative responsibility. *Public Policy 1*(1), 1–24.
Ingraham, P., Joyce, P., & Donahue, A.K. (2003). *Government performance: Why management matters.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Kaufman, H. (1982). *Administrative behavior of federal bureau chiefs.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
Krause, G. (1999). *A two-way street: The institutional dynamics of a modern administrative state.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
Lee, M. (2001). Looking at the politics administration dichotomy from the other direction: Participant observation by a state senator. *International Journal of Public Administration, 24*(4), 363–384.
Lynn, L. (2001). The myth of the bureaucratic paradigm: What traditional public administration really stood for. *Public Administration Review, 61*(2), 144–160.
Lynn, L.E., Jr., Heinrich, C.J., & Hill, C.J. (2001). *Improving governance: A new logic for empirical research.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
Mandell, M., & Steelman, T. (2003). Understanding what can be accomplished through interorganizational innovation. *Public Management Review, 5*(2), 197–224.
McGuire, M. (2006). Collaborative public management: Assessing what we know. *Public Administration Review, 66*(Suppl.), 33–43.
Moore, M. (1995). *Creating public value: Strategic management in government.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Moynihan, D., & Pandey, S. (2005). Testing how management matters in an era of government by performance management. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 15*(3), 421–439.
Nalbandian, J. (1991). *Professionalism in local government: Roles, responsibilities, and values of city managers.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
Nalbandian, J. (1999). Facilitating community, enabling democracy: New roles for local government managers. *Public Administration Review, 59*(3), 187–197.
O'Brien, K. (1992). Compensation, employment, and the political activity of public employee unions. *Journal of Labor Research, 13*(2), 189–203.
O'Toole, L.J., Jr., & Meier, K.J. (1999). Modeling the impact of public management: The implications of structural context. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 9*(4), 505–526.
Overeem, P. (2008). Beyond heterodoxy: Dwight Waldo and the politics administration dichotomy. *Public Administration Review, 68*(1), 36–45.
Rohr, J. (1986). *To run a constitution: The legitimacy of the administrative state.* Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
Rosenbloom, D. (2008). The politics–administration dichotomy in U.S. historical context. *Public Administration Review, 68*(1), 57–64.
Rothman, S., & Lichter, S. (1983). How liberal are bureaucrats? *Regulation, 7*(1), 16–20.

المنارة للاستشارات

Schneider, S., & Jacoby, W. (1996). Influences on bureaucratic policy initiatives in the American states. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 6*(4), 495–522.
Stivers, C. (2008). The significance of the administrative state. *Public Administration Review, 68*(1), 53–56.
Svara, J. (1990). *Official leadership in the city: Patterns of conflict and cooperation.* New York: Oxford University Press.
Svara, J. (2001). The myth of the dichotomy: Complementarity of politics and administration in the past and future of public administration. *Public Administration Review, 61*(2), 164–171.
Vangen, S., & Huxham, C. (2003). Nurturing collaborative relations. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 39*(1), 5–31.

Sean Nicholson-Crotty is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. His research focuses on public management, particularly the interface between managers and the extra-organizational environment, as well as intergovernmental relations. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including Public Administration Review*,* Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, and* Journal of Policy Analysis and Management.

المنارة للاستشارات

Copyright of Public Performance & Management Review is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.