

The Persistent Influence of the PA Dichotomy on Public Administration

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Executive Summary

The ongoing debate about Woodrow Wilson's intent on his brief idea of a politics-administration dichotomy explores a theoretical framework that is still relevant in modern political analysis, but the conversation should move beyond the influence of Woodrow Wilson. Considering both the size of the government and the role of the executive branch during Wilson's administration and in the early twentieth-century, the breadth and influence of government has evolved requiring a new theoretical framework. While Wilson will always be regarded as a founding father of the field, it is time to leave his dichotomy behind and develop dichotomies that mirror the political and bureaucratic make-up of the current government.

Subject Matter Paper

The current structure and political influence of the modern American government is undoubtedly complicated. Recent Supreme Court decisions like *Citizens United* and partisan disputes causing the government to shutdown are indicative of a changing bureaucratic and political system. Therefore, the traditional models of government, especially the bureaucracy are limited in explaining the current phenomenon. The politics-administration dichotomy articulated by Woodrow Wilson is a debate that persists into 2013 (see McCandless & Guy, 2013), and while the end is not in sight, there is sufficient reason to desire a new model. Overall, the discourse is beneficial to the field of public administration, but it is no longer the best model to explain the relationship between the bureaucracy and the politics that surround it. Wilson's government is not foundationally different from the modern U.S. government, but I wonder if Wilson would recognize the bureaucrats if he were to suddenly appear somewhere in the deep belly of the Department of Homeland Security. Would he see a semblance of the government he participated in during his presidency and political life?

In Woodrow Wilson's seminal 1887 article "The Study of Administration," Wilson articulates the key points on evaluating administration as a science and study of government which was a relatively new concept at the time. His ideas have been debated by academics since. While Wilson later advocated for a business-like government focusing on efficiency (Wilson and Goodsell, 1984), the original idea put forth in "The Study of Administration" supports a framework focusing on the development of public administration as a field and not a comparison to the private sector. However, the complicated and often disputed idea Wilson posits pertains to the separation of elected politicians from bureaucracy, and the debate persists due to the concept's inarticulate suggestion in the piece. Had Wilson clearly stated an opinion on the

division of politics and the bureaucracy then perhaps scholars would have moved beyond the mere rhetorical tennis match. McCandless and Guy (2013) articulate three interpretations of Wilson's dichotomy ranging from strict to narrow interpretations, but the presence of three interpretations means that scholars cannot agree on a single interpretation. While that might be the nature of academia, the question remains – is there still merit to studying Wilson?

Wilson's America was fundamentally different than the America consumed with Twitter and twerking. His two-term presidency from 1913 to 1921 reveals a pre-New Deal government that had not expanded or endured long-term influence from partisan politicians. The expansion of the executive branch in a post-World War II America through the current administration is indicative of a new governmental structure. While Wilson created a theory based on his understanding of the field and the differences between public administration and political science, modern scholars are left clinging to the ideas of the founders when there is ample opportunity to generate newer models to analyze the changing bureaucracy. Waldo (2007) details the different philosophical movements of both the field of public administration and the bureaucracy in *The Administrative State*, and he argues for a less divisive interpretation of Wilson (Svara, 2001; Vick, 2011). Waldo's interpretation of the dichotomy offered a new theory to consider, but even it remains heavily debated within the field (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Skelley, 2008). Waldo adapted and redefined the Wilson argument to fit a relationship that was more cooperative relationship than a strict interpretation of the dichotomy. However, theorists continue to debate the relevance and reliability of the dichotomy.

Theorists have tested the validity of the dichotomy using modern models and data collection, and they do not present a united front in support of the merit of the dichotomy. Demir and Nyhan (2008) generated a model to test the PA dichotomy and could not find empirical

support for their interpretation of the dichotomy, yet they insist that the dichotomy remains a vital component of the field's dialogue about the relationship between the politicians and the administrators. Svava (2001; 2008) suggests that the two poles of the dichotomy complement each other, and we cannot conceptualize a complete view of the government without both the bureaucrats and their elected leaders. Overeem (2005; 2008) argues for a narrower interpretation of Wilson's dichotomy meaning there should be a strict separation between the politicians and the bureaucrats. Although, Svava and Overeem dispute the validity of discarding the dichotomy in favor of a complementary system (Overeem, 2005; Overeem, 2008; Svava, 2001; Svava, 2008). Through a historical lens, Moynihan and Ingraham (2010) detail bureaucratic movements within the field, and they articulate the partisanship divide that has caused a high level of distrust in the government. The distrust of the bureaucracy provides insight into how the field has changed and bureaucrats, G-Men, and the social construction of "government" are no longer the same as when Wilson theorized about government (Moynihan & Ingraham, 2010). Due to the prolonged debate, there has yet to be resolution to the dichotomy's inability to define modern politics.

If scholars research the bureaucracy, then they will most likely test the veracity of the politics-administration dichotomy. If theorists research the philosophical tenets of administration, then they will most likely reference the dichotomy. However, the debate over the relevance of the dichotomy demonstrates that the dichotomy does not fully or unanimously explain the field. While it might be overwhelmingly optimistic and a bit naïve to desire a dichotomy or theoretical framework that does apply to modern government, out-rightly discarding the dichotomy would be senseless. The dichotomy serves as a historical foundation to understanding a predominant relationship in the field. Wilson's dichotomy reveals a dialogue explaining the theoretical foundation of where the bureaucracy has been, and the dispute about

the function of politics and administration is an integral component of public administration theory. However, newer models are needed: models that are designed to explain recent governmental changes, partisan divides, and shutdowns that hold the bureaucracy hostage.

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