

**Thinking Institutionally Again about Public Administration:
A Concept Paper for the 50th Anniversary of the Minnowbrook Conference**

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Public administration—*as a field*—has fallen victim to disciplinary siloing that exacerbates focal divides and undermines the position of the field as an academic enterprise as well as its ability to speak to critical issues of governmental legitimacy and crisis. This has happened as the impact factors of our flagship journals and the sophistication of our empirics rapidly increase. Rigor is not lacking. And, indeed, an understanding of the micro-level of human behavior within public and nonprofit organizations is stronger than ever and a definitive strength over some of its neighboring fields. Rather, what’s lacking is an appreciation for and grounding in those cognate disciplines that contribute to the general understanding, profession, and field of public administration writ large... especially insights from the studies of political institutions and administrative law, respectively. In other words, our traditional strengths have become definitive weaknesses in the study of American public administration (specifically, but also in its study in other contexts).

I am arguing for a return in focus to the macro-foundations of the state and the centrality of public law in our field. This is not a new insight, but I see it as a critical one. I ground this argument in classic public administration theory. Specifically, I think of the scholarship of Dwight Waldo, John Rohr, Bert Rockman, David Rosenbloom, Beryl Radin, Camilla Stivers, Bob Durant, Karen Hult, Lou Gawthrop, Bill West, Ronald Moe, and others whose influence in the field of PA has increasingly ceded to behavioralism. I think of myself as a behavioral researcher, in most respects. So, this is no objection to Simon or his many disciples in our field (which we all must be, in part). Rather, this is a call for a *retrofitting* of our field to its traditional roots of public law and political institutions... but with the integration of our current mezzo- and micro-level emphases.

This argument might seem a strange response to an invitation that asked us to be “disruptive” in thought for this important gathering and 50th anniversary of the first Minnowbrook Conference. My argument, today, may indeed be disruptive only in the sense that I embrace Hugh Hecló’s (2011) prescient statement that there is an urgent place for institutional thinkers, and I believe that public administration (PA) scholars are (or should be) well-positioned to “think institutionally” about the implications of *the current disruptions that threaten* liberal democracies everywhere. From the largest to the oldest democracies, the rise of ethnocentric nationalism through populist platforms rejects the traditional liberal democratic conceit.¹ Answers from our ranks to defending the liberal order (i.e., protecting the rights of the individual, and the enshrinement of those rights in law and action) will not come from just notions of bureaucratic “performance,” how prosocially motivated one is, or the general job satisfaction employees enjoy (for example).

All of these things are important and vastly contribute, of course! Again, this is not a call to abandon our more recently discovered strengths. Public Administration was once defined by Marshall Dimock as the study of “the problems and powers of the organization and techniques of management involved in

¹ From BJP in India to Trumpism in the US.

carrying out the laws and policies formulated by the *policy-making agencies* of government. *Public administration is the law in action.*” (Emphasis is mine.) As such, the study of public administration involves understanding the individuals who occupy positions of legal authority within organizations that carry out and define the objectives of democratic governance. But, as a basis of that understanding, one must also explicitly comprehend that legal authority and its implications to the rights of individuals both within and external to the institution. Such a command is critical to a robust democracy. The tensions that emerge between technocratic and democratic authority are many, and these tensions pervade political discourse across modern societies.

But, in our pursuit of scientism, disciplinary identity, and a focus on the micro-foundations of behavior (1) we have forsaken the very bases of our authority on the subject of “the state”² and (2) we risk permanently separating ourselves from legitimate roles in arguing for the administrative state in our constitutional form of governance. If we think back to Rosenbloom’s (1983) classic “Separation of Powers Theory of Public Administration,” we can readily identify the emphasis our studies have given to the managerial dimension of administration.³ However, both the political and legal dimensions are wanting.

In order to understand these tensions, *we must strive for synthetically integrating various perspectives of organizational management, political economy, and public law.* Therefore, our work and our community of researchers must make an effort to speak to the traditions of political science, administrative and constitutional law, organization theory, and organizational behavior *coherently and collectively.* In my opinion, we are not doing so in a comprehensible way or with any perceivable effort.

The primary focus of scholarship found in the pages of our flagship journals has been on the mezzo-level of organizational demands and exigencies of one’s task environment in the public sector. In other words, public servants have a job to get done, and we are excellent at identifying this and working within that limited frame. The micro-level emphasis we’ve acquired in the last couple of decades has centered mostly on the individual motivations of public administrators and how those motivations translate to behaviors. All of this is incredibly important, and I don’t recommend abandoning this. Rather, I argue that *we must reinvigorate a macro-level focus of research on how the political environment in which public administrators are embedded influences their decision-making in everyday work.*

Political principals attempt to advance their policy prerogatives through indirect governance tools, personnel choices, and managerial strategies, for example. Yet, a survey of the scholarship in our leading journals reveals rare attempts to understand how these politically charged maneuvers affect the resilience, capacity, or ethos of our democracy. Neither do we understand how these interventions moderate traditional expectations of organizational behavior, nor how institutional tensions in a constitutional system (e.g., the United States separation-of-powers system) are perceived by administrators and how these perceptions translate to their work behavior and (most importantly) fundamental policy decisions made within the administrative state.

² The very founders of the American Political Science Association are what most would consider public administration scholars (e.g., Goodnow, Gaus, Kaufman, White), who focused on the structure of government and the reconciliation of the professionalized state to democratic accountability.

³ Indeed, researchers in our field have shied away from the term Public Administration in lieu of a “Public Management” rebranding.

But there is hope! The principal-agent paradigm is waning, to some respect, in positivist approaches to delegation issues in American political science. Increasingly (though still marginally), political scientists are recognizing that political moral hazard is at least as likely a possibility as bureaucratic moral hazard (Miller & Whitford, 2016), that civil servants are not inclined to shirk (Golden, 2000), and that agencies do not adhere to unified ideologies (Bertelli & Grose, 2011). And, perhaps most importantly, the realization of perpetual gridlock in our constitutional separation of powers underscores the need for a robust understanding of the administrative state (Michaels, 2017).

We should be yelling from the mountaintops that “Policy is being made in the administrative state!” But, can we explain with much authority on the subject that would provide legitimacy to that process and translate to cognate disciplines and fields? Can we make a cogent argument that the legislative delegation to the administrative state comes with checks and balances similar to the constitutional branches (Michaels, 2017; Rosenbloom, 2010), such as those provided in the Administrative Procedure Act of the US federal government and its progeny in over 80% of its individual states? With what detail and intellectual authority have we trained the next (or current) generation of researchers to do so? Regulations are the lifeblood of politics in developed liberal democracies, at many levels, and an impetus to populist rejections of the liberal order. However, ***regulatory politics and processes are significantly understudied in PA research (e.g., compared to work motivations), nor typically linked to PA research areas of particular strength (e.g., leadership, coproduction, goal theory, transparency).***

In many popular veins of political science, regulations are conceptualized inconsistently (and at times incorrectly) with striking naiveté as to the internal management of agencies and how they actually operate. I find glaring oversights in models of rulemaking that are based on the *frequency* of rulemaking outputs, the *frequency* of observable lobbying, or the *count* of pages of regulatory language. Almost always, agencies are modeled as unitary firms, where process is entirely ignored (re: “assumed”). The decision calculus of these agencies in question is modeled as a passive (rather than active and contributing) function of the political economy in which they operate.

In other words, there is none-to-little effort to study regulatory production by unpacking the *management* of rulemaking from the perspective of the agency itself. This would inform not just the scholarship but directly inform their hypotheses. Indeed, there is the conspicuous lack of empirical evidence of actual bureaucratic behavior and ignorance of the actual content of the regulations being counted. Rather, outcomes in these models emphasize the actions Congress employs to anticipate and, presumably, program bureaucratic behavior. The relative success Congress has in doing so is largely missing, however. It becomes a counterfactual and unprovable.

And, it is not only the role of Congress or the legislature that we miss. Rulemaking is critically centered *between* constitutional branches within the administrative state. Indeed, we can turn to four components of the US “administrative presidency” that have critical implications to how rules are developed: i.e., the president’s relative authority in centralizing policymaking and regulatory review, reorganizing personnel, strategic appointments, and unilateral tools (e.g., executive orders).

What, then, do we know of the administrative presidency from the communications between political scientists interested in the presidency and public administration scholars who study so many areas that are critical to understanding the *Executive* role of the presidency? The answer is very little. In over 4000 articles appearing in 22 leading political science and public administration journals between 1983 and the

present, I conclude that cross-referencing of research on common topics related to the administrative presidency does not occur between political science (PS) and public administration (PA) journals.⁴

I use this as just a small example of what I perceive as a central and critical problem about the field generally. In short, we have lost our bearing as an enterprise that speaks to the core constitutional and political issues of our day. ***I urge a better integration of the macro-foundations of the field (which include grounding in both political institutions and public law) with our current mezzo- and micro-emphases.*** Such a return would reveal how the construction, interpretation, and maintenance of these categorical boundaries have crabbed our understanding of the modern administrative state.

I must repeat that I do not propose abandoning the strengths we've acquired. Indeed, it is those strengths that position us best to "think institutionally" rather than just "about institutions." At the same time, without a macro-understanding of the state that is nestled firmly in the study of political institutions and public law, we risk the very "presentism" that Hecló feared and that is so pervasive today: (i.e., "the arrogant belief in the privileged entitlements and moral superiority attached to one's own little moment in time").

References:

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⁴ In total, 4,534 articles from SSCI (2,173 in PA; 1,992 in PS; 369 categorized as both) were analyzed by how many times they were cited in PS or PA journals. I counted the number of times each article was cited by either a PS or PA source, according to SSCI criteria for the two disciplines. On average, PA journals cite articles from PS journals 1.15 times per article. Articles in PS journals, meanwhile, cite articles in PA journals only .62 times per article, in areas specifically related to bureaucratic politics. Relativity aside, however, these statistics indicate a very low rate of cross-citation of articles, adding support to the disciplinary stove-piping at work over the past three decades in the study of topics related to bureaucratic politics. Turning to specific topics, I continue to find that researchers are working with "blinders" fully on. PA journals are far less likely than PS journals to reference articles in the other discipline when focusing on the bureaucracy. Meanwhile both types of journals are unlikely to overlap in references when the focus is on policy entrepreneurship within agencies or methods of control by political executives. Indeed, PS journals are extremely unlikely to reference PA literature, averaging only .27 citations per PS article with a presidential focus. At the same time, public administrationists average 1.8 PS citations per PA article with a presidential focus. I also find that of the 36 contributions in the pages of *Presidential Studies Quarterly* from the last sixteen years, those explicitly pursuing research of the administrative presidency were unlikely to be relying on PA perspectives or resources in this pursuit. PA sources accounted for less than 13% of their total citations. If we take my own work in PSQ out of that analysis, PA sources account for less than 10% of total contributions.