

# Revisiting the Political-Administrative Dichotomy: Navigating the Blurred Lines

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## Executive Summary

The relationship between political leadership and administration has been debated in public administration. Based on the review of extant literature, this article examines the relationships between politics and administration. It is worth noting that despite being distinctive, their relationships are an evolving and dynamically interactive process in contemporary governance. Therefore, it is unwise to overlook their constant cross-cutting engagements, power relations in politics, and the administration's influence in policymaking. Against this backdrop, this article underscores the need to move beyond the simplistic dichotomy of the political and administrative spheres to understand the distinctive logic that shape political and administrative behaviour.

## Keywords:

Politics, elected officials, administrator, dichotomy, complementarity

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between elected political leaders (politicians or elected officials) and public administrators (administrators or appointed officials) and their dynamics are central topics in public administration. Their interaction is crucial for understanding how government organizations function, and public policies are formulated and implemented. In addition, Their complex and sometimes contentious relationship and the appropriate boundaries between political and administrative functions are directly relevant to the roles of public leaders and have broader implications for the constitutional and democratic underpinnings of government (Callahan & Mau, 2024).

The core of government and public administration is the relationship between political leaders, administrators, and the public. The appropriate roles of political leaders and administrators in the political processes and the politics-administration dichotomy grounded in an ideological construct have significantly influenced public administration discourse (Skelley, 2008; Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011) because the relationship between political officials and appointed officials is fundamental to understanding the governing process (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002).

Although the politics-administration dichotomy has been centuries long central issue in the study of public administration (Agnihotri & Sharma, 2011) and remains highly relevant in

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public administration theories and practices (Svara, 2008; Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011), it has been a central problem (Grønnegaard Christensen, 2006), a subject of ongoing extensive debate, and the most disreputable theories of public administration (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002; Overeem, 2005; Skelley, 2008) since its inception in the late 1880s (Demir & Nyhan, 2008). The debate revolves around defining and separating the proper roles and boundaries between the political and administrative domains, significantly influencing public administration theories and practices (Grønnegaard Christensen, 2006; Svara, 2008; Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011).

This article examines the relevance of the traditional political-administrative dichotomy and the independent nature of politics and administration. It assumes the traditional separation of politics and administration fails to capture the politics-administration relationship in the contemporary governance paradigm. It takes an interpretive approach to analyzing the theoretical and empirical evidence on the political-administrative interface. It uncovers explicit and implicit historical and philosophical ideas by analyzing scholarly works and comparative literature on politics-administration relationships and synthesizes the appropriate boundaries, overlaps, and interdependencies between the political and administrative functions of government. It reviews key tenets of the traditional politics-administration dichotomy, its complexities, and shortcomings of the strict separation between the two domains, emerging theoretical perspectives that account for the complex and interdependent interface between them, and how they have become blurred and integrated. Based on the review of extant literature, the article offers a new theoretical framework that captures the realities of their dynamic relationships.

## **2. Traditional Politics-Administration Dichotomy**

The politics-administration dichotomy (the dichotomy) is rooted in Montesquieu's ideas in 1748. He postulated separating legislative and executive powers to protect individual liberty, laying the philosophical foundation for separating politics and administration (Agnihotri & Sharma, 2011). The dichotomy, a contentious issue for over a century (Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011), is conceptually linked to administrators' political neutrality, central to classical American and European public administration theory (Overeem, 2005).

The distribution of power and authority between elected and appointed officials has been a central topic in public administration in the seminal works of influential scholars Max Weber and Woodrow Wilson (Agnihotri & Sharma, 2011; Carboni, 2010). The dichotomy model was further promoted and institutionalized in the Progressive Era in the USA since the late 19th to early 20th century, as progressives recognized its potential to achieve their political goals. They entrenched the dichotomy to insulate public personnel systems from partisan influences and pursue their broader political objectives (Rosenbloom, 2008).

In the American context, the traditional dichotomy was deeply entrenched, primarily in the influential work of Wilson's 'The Study of Administration' (1887) and Frank Goodnow's 'Politics and Administration' (1900) (Dahlström, 2012). Wilson (1887) emphasized that politics is concerned with policymaking and values, while public administration is concerned with implementing politically determined policies through the expertise and skills of the

administrators. He argued that although politics sets the administrative tasks, it should not manipulate administrative offices, as the administration operates outside the spheres of politics. Similarly, Goodnow (1900) identified two government functions: policymaking and administration. Policymaking is the expression of public will and is the field of elected officials. On the other hand, the administration is concerned with implementing political will through the institutional apparatus of states (Idris & Lawal, 2019). Wilson anticipated a strict separation between politics and administration, and Goodnow emphasized a hierarchical, superior-subordinate dynamic between elected and appointed officials.

Weber's work largely influenced the politics-administration relationship as he conceptualized a clear separation between the roles and influence of elected political leaders and appointed bureaucrats in the European context (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002), arguing that the increasing power of bureaucrats required the conceptual distinction to protect the administration from the influence of politics (Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011). Weber's model predicted a division of labour between elected and appointed officials. While the former formulated visions and goals, later implemented political directives, and managed daily government operations (Weber, 2017), aiming to streamline the relationship between elected and appointed officials.

The American tradition, advocated by Wilson, and the European tradition, portrayed by Weber, arrived at the traditional politics-administration dichotomy from different and contrasting perspectives and reasons (Overeem, 2005). Although they stressed the political neutrality of administration, Wilson was considered the pioneer of the conceptual separation between politics and administration (Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011). Wilson emphasized studying public administration separately from politics, arguing for distinct hierarchical relationships (Demir & Nyhan, 2008).

Wilson aspired to establish public administration as a professional and impartial field distinct from politics. He emphasized a clear division between politics and administration to protect public administration from the turbulent realm of politics. He thought administrative and political issues were fundamentally different and politicians should not manipulate the administration. His perspective was rooted in a hierarchical superior and subordination relationship where politics was formally superior to the administration, and administration was subordinate to politics. Elected officials formulate policies, and administrators implement them, maintaining political neutrality (Dahlström, 2012). His ideas delineated the different roles of politicians in policy formulation and administrators' roles in providing neutral, nonpartisan, and technical advice in policy implementation (Cameron, 2003).

The influential scholars Wilson, Goodnow, and Weber emphasized the strict separation of politics and administration and the division of work within the government to operate effectively and avoid the influence of partisan politics on the administration (Plessis, 2022). They aimed to keep the administration out of partisan politics, improve the functions of politics and administration (Overeem, 2005), and increase democratic accountability and administrative performance by dividing authority between elected and appointed officials (Demir & Nyhan, 2008). The classical dichotomy model was a purposeful mechanism and a political tactic for achieving a more profound political transformation by protecting the administration from the

influence of partisan politics (Rosenbloom, 2008). The Weberian's perspective held that policy implementation, as the exclusive domain of administration, allows the selection of public administrators based on merit and competence (Cameron, 2003). Thus, the meritocracy in appointing bureaucrats is the core of Weber's bureaucratic model.

### **3. Critiques of Traditional Dichotomy**

The politics-administration dichotomy faced growing criticism during 1927-1936 (Rosenbloom, 2008), as scholars and practitioners argued that administration plays a legitimate role in policymaking rather than being a neutral implementer (Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011). The dichotomy has been characterized as 'political metaphysics' (Demir & Nyhan, 2008) and an oversimplified foundation for public administration (Huber, 2007). Critics contend that classical scholars like Wilson conflated 'politics' with partisan politics rather than the broader policymaking process. Rosenbloom (2008) contends that the traditional dichotomy was strategically constructed by civil service reformers to serve specific political purposes rather than represent a proper separation between the two domains. Post-war public administration scholars have rejected the classic dichotomy, re-conceptualizing bureaucratic political neutrality as excluding administrators from partisan politics rather than policymaking (Overeem, 2005).

The traditional dichotomy prevailed as a longstanding debate due to the lack of alternative conceptual frameworks (Plessis, 2022). Contemporary scholars assert that politics and administration are distinct but overlapping and interdependent domains (Agnihotri & Sharma, 2011). The dichotomy is better conceptualized as a fluid rather than a rigidly defined notion, representing a contestable political space subject to democratic discourse rather than a fixed boundary (Miller, 2015). The erosion of the assumptions of dichotomy marked a significant turning point in the evolution of the academic discipline and professional practice of public administration (Tahmasebi & Musav, 2011). The essence is that the classical dichotomy is not reflected in practice as administrators exercise discretion and influence over policy matters.

### **4. Conceptual Models Beyond the Traditional Dichotomy**

Scholars have questioned the assumptions of the classical politics-administration dichotomy model and the traditional conceptualization of the relationship between politicians and administrators and their roles in the political process. In their views, classical scholars failed to capture how the politics-administration relationship manifests in practice. Carboni (2010) argues that rigid dichotomy necessitated an alternative bridging the gap between the two spheres. Politics and administration are distinct spheres of government. Politics determines how to address issues and challenges a government faces and involves choosing alternatives, values, and goals and shaping the direction and priorities of government and public policy (Agnihotri & Sharma, 2011). Administrators are primarily guided by organizational goals and formal rules (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002) and can play a range of advisory roles, from passively presenting information to actively framing issues in the political process (Svara, 2008). High-level administrators tightly control subordinates to implement policies (Huber, 2007).

Wilson distinguished between partisan politics and policymaking. However, Goodnow recognized a conceptual and institutional dichotomy (Montjoy & Watson (1995), suggesting that the traditional dichotomy was a complex phenomenon. Maynard-Moody (1998) further differentiated administrative and legislative policymaking. According to Maynard-Moody, the administrators' values shape administrative policymaking, and elected officials' values legislative policymaking. The growing complexity and scope of the government and expanded demands from elected officials have blurred the traditional boundaries between the two spheres (Grønnegaard Christensen, 2006).

Overeem (2005) reconceptualized traditional dichotomy by distinguishing partisan politics and policy politics. He argued that appointed officials could participate in policymaking but should remain outside partisan politics. Hansen and Ejersbo (2002) proposed an alternative model, namely the 'Dichotomy-Dulaty-Model' (DDM). This model comprehensively explains complicated interactions and relationships between elected and appointed officials. The model has four dimensions: mission, policy, administration, and management. While mission and policy are political functions and fall under political leadership, administration and management are administrative functions led by appointed officials. Since elected and appointed officials have monopoly power in their particular functions and shared power in other functions, the distinction between the two domains gets blurred.

Huber (2007) introduced the strategic neutrality model (SNM), which represents an administrative behaviour model. According to Huber, strategically neutral appointed officials function within internal and external political constraints and exercise power to shape and influence policy agendas. Likewise, Demir and Nyhan (2008) offered two constructs: natural competence and political guidance. While the former includes administrators' expertise and neutrality and political guidance from political leadership, the latter consists of political leadership and legislative oversight, where politicians determine public preferences, communicate them to administrators, and monitor administrative functions. It points out that the neutral competence of administrators to implement policies can ensure democratic accountability towards political leadership.

## **5. Evolving Trends and Perspectives**

In recent years, scholars have challenged the strict separation of roles and responsibilities of administrators and elected leaders (Idris & Lawal, 2019). Building on traditional dichotomy and empirical studies, they demonstrated the inextricable links between the political and administrative domains: administrative actions have political consequences as appointed officials shape policy and elected officials oversee administrative functions (Skelley, 2008). As an alternative to traditional dichotomies, Svava (2001) presented a 'Complementarity' model, which rejects rigid separation between functions of politics and administration rather than recognizes their high interdependence. Administrators maintain professional independence, respect political control, and implement public policies in the interest of citizens. Svava emphasizes that although political leaders and administrators have distinct roles, they are interdependent with each other and pursue effective government.

The Complementarity Model highlights focus on political control and professional neutrality, that is, the capacity of elected leaders to provide policy directions and political oversights and appointed officials' ability to provide expertise in policy formulation and implementation per their backgrounds and values (Carboni, 2010). In this regard, appointed officials respect elected officials' political supremacy, and elected leaders acknowledge the involvement of administrators in policymaking and their discretion and expertise (Svara, 2008). The complementarity perspective emphasizes administrative independence, respect for political supremacy, compliance with political leadership, and administrative professionalism for effective policy implementation (Idris & Lawal, 2019).

First, scholars assert that the complementarity perspective views the relationship between elected and appointed officials as an interaction between political control and professional independence (Svara, 2001), arguing that political guidance has a limited impact on administrators, elected leaders dominate policy legitimization, and administrative expertise and neutrality are insufficient for effective policy implementation (Demir & Nyhan, 2008). The model contends that administrators need strategic political direction, and elected officials need effective administration to implement their interests (Idris & Lawal, 2019).

The Italian case demonstrated that the NPM reforms resulted in productive collaboration between elected and appointed officials, their complementary contributions to successful policymaking, and the reconciliation of dilemmas between political control and administrative autonomy (Carboni, 2010). The case suggests distinct but overlapping functions and mutual dependency rather than a clear separation between politics and administration.

In addition, it underscores the interdependence and reciprocal influence between elected leaders and administrators. Accordingly, elected leaders appoint administrators to lead government agencies and influence bureaucratic functions to promote their public image (Grønnegaard Christensen, 2006; Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002). On the other hand, administrators shape the political agenda by pressing politically neglected public issues in the policy process and advancing their priorities (Maynard-Moody, 1998). This interdependence between them arises because political appointments of administrators allow control of administration. Similarly, administrators have the information and expertise that elected leaders need to perform their functions (Dahlström, 2012; Grønnegaard Christensen, 2006). The Complimentary model recognizes their interdependence, reciprocal influence, mutually supportive roles, unique perspectives, values, norms, political oversight, and professional standards.

However, it is worth noting that as sovereign representatives of political values, norms, and interests, elected officials are primarily motivated to maintain a high public profile, engage with their constituencies, and popularize their political interests to get re-elected (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002) and consider administrators as their subordinates (Carboni, 2010). Similarly, rather than neutral actors, bureaucrats exercise discretion and professional judgment in policymaking by drawing on their experiences and expertise rather than strictly following political doctrines (Miller, 2015).

Second, studies have found that administrators emphasize compliance with formal rules and regulations, and politicians focus on democratic principles. They influence administrators to implement their perceived interests in their constituencies (Agnihotri & Sharma, 2011). The studies indicated misunderstanding and conflict between bureaucrats and their political leaders if the administrators are indifferent or oppose complying with political interests. Hansen and Ejersbo (2002) argue that elected leaders are guided by inductive logic and context, while appointed officials are driven by deductive logic and rules. Their distinct logic of actions and thinking leads to disharmony. It is argued that political control and bureaucratic autonomy can be balanced with a stable political and institutional system and favourable organizational cultures (Carboni, 2010). The overarching theme is that there should be clear boundaries between the two spheres and their functions. Effective cooperation and joint efforts between elected and appointed officials result in better government performance.

Third, in the contemporary governance paradigm, politicians' political will and administrators' administrative capacities are not the primary determinants of policy agendas and government outcomes. Instead, diverse actors with distinct interests engage in complex interactions beyond the dichotomy (Plessis, 2022). Thus, the previous discussion on politics and administration largely overlooks contemporary policy formulation and implementation practices. Callahan and Mau (2024) recently introduced a multilateral model that recognizes the complex and fluid interactions among elected officials, political appointees, administrators, and other actors. Going beyond the political-administrative dichotomy, the model acknowledges the complex and multilateral dynamics that characterize the relationships between politics and administration in the contemporary governance paradigm.

## **6. Conclusion**

Since the mid-20th century, the traditional politics-administration dichotomy has faced growing criticism that administrators play legitimate and significant roles in policymaking instead of being neutral implementers. In this regard, the Complementarity model offers an alternative perspective recognizing distinct roles and high interdependence, reciprocal influence, and dynamic relationships between politics and administration in pursuing effective government.

Similarly, the recent multilateral model goes beyond limited bilateral relationships, which depicts complex interactions among diverse actors and the exercise of their political power in government. Effective collaborations between appointed and elected officials may vary depending on organizational, institutional, and environmental contexts. It is worth noting that joint efforts of diverse actors and clear boundaries between administrative and political functions result in desired government outcomes. A deeper understanding of the complex and interconnected relationship between elected and appointed officials contributes to better governance. It further enhances public administration's position in the political system and its interface with political leadership to navigate the complex relationship.

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