

UGBS 105

Introduction to Public Administration

Session 4—The Politics-Administration ‘Dichotomy’ Debate

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College of Education

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session 4

The Politics-Administration Dichotomy Debate

Learning Objectives

- By the end of this session, students should understand the following:
- i. The concepts of politics and administration
 - ii. The nature of the politics-administration debate
 - iii. The politics-administration dichotomy model
 - iv. The politics-administration complementarity model
 - v. The challenge of managing the relationship between elected politicians, technocratic Administrators and political citizens in a democratic society



What is Politics?

→ Several definitions, but let's look at three key ones:

○ Harold Lasswell (1936): Politics is about “Who gets what, when and how”

○ David Eastern (1953): Politics is “the authoritative allocation of values”

○ Adrian Leftwich (1995): Politics is “all the activities of co-operation, conflict and negotiation involved in decisions about the use, production and distribution of resources”



What is Politics? A Working Definition

→ In the context of public administration, to help us understand the politics-administration dichotomy debate:

○ *Politics is defined as all the activities of conflict, negotiation and co-operation involved in decisions about the production, allocation and use of state resources*



The Concept of Administration

- From Session 1, we know from various definitions of scholars that administration is a purposive process of co-operative human effort working towards the accomplishment of defined common goals
- ➔ It is essential for co-operative human actions to have a defined common goal, objective or purpose in order to be labelled administration even if “we can never be sure whether or not a particular action has a goal, or if it does, what that goal is” (Dye, 1998)

Defining Politics and Administration



○ Politics: All the activities of conflict, negotiation and co-operation involved in decisions concerning the production, allocation and use of state resources



○ Administration: Cooperative human action towards the accomplishment of defined common objectives

The Politics-Administration Debate

→ Defining the Politics-Administration problem for debate: To understand the nature of the debate, we first need to define the problem that generated the debate

○ The problem: What is the best way to deal with the inherent tensions of public administration in a democratic society where administrative officials strive for political independence from elected officials, honesty, influence in policy and responsibility; while elected officials strive for the control, obedience, deference, and compliance of administrative officials

→ In other words, the problem is about “how a potentially powerful corps of administrative officials would constitute itself and interact with elected officials and the public [in a democratic society].” (Svara, 1999:667)

The Politics-Administration Dichotomy Debate

→ The two camps of the century old debate:

- a. On the one side of the debate are scholars who hold the view that politics and administration are distinct and separate activities. This politics-administration dichotomy model is associated with the works of scholars including Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow
- b. On the other side of the debate are scholars who hold the view that politics and administration are intertwined and complementary activities. This politics-administration complementarity model is associated with scholars including Dwight Waldo, Luther Gulick and James Svara



The Politics-Administration Dichotomy Model

- The politics-administration dichotomy model stressed the absolute difference between politicians (partisan and responsive) and administrators (nonpartisan, neutral, and scientific), the strict division into separate spheres of activity where partisan politicians make policy and scientifically neutral administrators are tasked with policy execution
- In 1887, Woodrow Wilson who is usually credited with laying the foundation of the politics-administration dichotomy school wrote that “The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics”
- Politicians debate and decide on public policies concerning which actors in society gets what, when, and how; while Administrators are to remain politically neutral in using their technical competence to carry out the wishes of the politicians



The Politics-Administration Dichotomy Model (cont'd)



- **Politics:** Politicians decide who gets what, when & how
- **Administration:** Technically competent and politically neutral administrators carry out the policies of elected politicians



Contributions of the Politics-Administration Dichotomy Model to Public Administration

→ Woodrow Wilson (1887) summed up the envisaged contribution of the politics-administration dichotomy model as follows:

○ “The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question.” (p.217)

Contributions of the Politics-Administration Dichotomy Model to Public Administration

→ Dwight Waldo (1971:264) has argued that the development of the politics-administration dichotomy school “was a substantial achievement...in the history of political thought and institutional invention.” Many scholars have noted that the dichotomy model helped prevent political interference in the recruitment and career development of administrators

○ The politics-administration dichotomy model contributed to the development of a supposedly politically neutral and technically competent class of administration called the Civil Service where personnel recruitment, promotion, discipline, remuneration and service to society were to be removed from the strife and hurry of Government partisan politics

Criticisms against the Politics-Administration Dichotomy Model

→ The politics-administration dichotomy has been criticised by some scholars as “conceptually and empirically faulty” (Svara, 1999) and “a serious erroneous description of reality” (Waldo, 1971:264). The empirical criticisms include the following:

- i. In democratic states, politicians usually rely on the advice of Administrators in formulating public policies
- ii. Administrators are not a-political human beings: “The administrator who carries out orders without question is a nonman, a beast, or an automaton” (Waldo, 1971:267)
- iii. Administrators and political leaders continuously engage with each other in the formulation and implementation of public policies for the larger society

Politics-Administration Complementarity Model: Distinct but Supremacy of Politics over Administration

- The position of the politics-administration complementarity school of thought is that “politics and administration are essentially distinct functions and activities, that administration should be instrumental to politics, and that when this relationship obtains in a democracy, the problem of making democracy work in modern, large-scale, complex society is solved.” (Waldo, 1971:264)
- In other words, the complementarity of politics and administration model “holds that the relationship between elected officials and administrators is characterized by interdependency, extensive interaction, distinct but overlapping roles, and political supremacy and administrative subordination coexisting with reciprocity of influence in both policy making and administration. Complementarity means that politics and administration come together to form a whole in democratic governance.” (Svara, 1999:678)

Contributions of the Politics-Administration Complementarity Model to Public Administration

- The complementarity model has helped to shed light on the “false dichotomy” of politics and administration in the real world of public policy making; and re-energised the involvement of Senior-level Administrators in the making of policy decisions by politicians
- Scholars of the complementarity school have helped to straighten the history of intellectual development by the founding father of Public Administration, including Woodrow Wilson and Franknow Goodnow. They have showed that the founders “did not advocate a dichotomy” of politics and administration; but while Wilson “stressed the concepts of insulation and neutrality” (Svara, 1999:678), Frank Goodnow emphasized that the execution of policy by Administrators “must of necessity be subordinated to the function of politics” (Goodnow, 1900:79 in Svara, 1999:689)

Conclusion: Politics and Administration are Complementary, but....

- The politics-administration dichotomy model and the politics-administration complementarity model both recognizes the distinct roles of politicians and administrators
- The politics-administration complementarity model emphasize interaction between elected politicians and administration during policy making
- The complementarity model does not appear to offer a clear model of a democratic system of governance in which administrative Civil Servants can effectively interact with elected politicians in policy making, and be accountable to politicians in policy implementation, and at the same time be insulated from undesirable political interferences from elected politicians

What is your position on the Politics-Administration dichotomy debate?

