

Assignment #5: Literature Review of Public Administration

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The Context of Public Administration

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This paper explores the complex field of public administration through a policy-making lens. It begins with a deep examination of public administration's origins, their responsibilities over time, and what exactly is public administration from a political standpoint. The review then analyzes the modern-day roles of public administrators, values, and their influence on societal outcomes through governance, policy-making, and their approach to crisis' arising. Finally, it delves into the concept of the public, exploring the impact and the response from the public.

What is Public Administration?

Governance within public administration has its roots in foundational ideals established by the American founding fathers, shaped by beliefs about human nature, the distribution of power, and the ethical obligations of those in public office. One core belief of the founding fathers was rooted in their view of human nature: people are inherently susceptible to corruption. Recognizing this tendency, the founders built a system of checks and balances into the fabric of governance, a structural safeguard designed to mitigate the risks of self-serving behavior in public office. "Emphasis on checks and balances became a cornerstone of American governance, serving as a 'structural hedge' against human imperfection" (Hildreth, 1998). In addition to addressing human nature, the founders conceptualized a republican system of government that would grant authority to representatives of the people. In this structure, power is delegated through a structured and complex electoral process, emphasizing the importance of limited government. Moreover, the founders believed that those in public office should pursue ethical standards and seek fame, not for personal gain but as a means to secure a positive legacy. The aspiration for fame, as envisioned by the founders, encouraged public officials to act in ways that future generations would view as socially beneficial, thus emphasizing a commitment to the public good. Ironically, the need to supervise these political appointees, due to inefficiencies or

self serving behaviors, led to the growth of government bureaucracy, as managing these positions demanded increasing levels of oversight and specialization. Operations research during World War II, introduced methods for maximizing limited resources, which soon became useful for broader public policy applications. The systems approach, which gained traction in the 1950s, provided a framework for analyzing and evaluating public programs. Through methodologies like cost-benefit analysis, this approach fostered a greater emphasis on the efficiency and effectiveness of government services. The 20th century marked a turning point in the study and practice of public administration. As governance became more complex, public administration evolved into an interdisciplinary field, applying social sciences to address public issues ultimately transforming public administration into a more data-driven and systematic discipline (Hildreth, 1998).

Many of the commonly held assumptions within public administration about democracy, participatory governance, and public service values may be increasingly tested. By employing methods such as case studies, narrative techniques, lessons from failure, and integrative frameworks, public administrators can appreciate the full complexity of reality. Such methods encourage a broader, interdisciplinary view that goes beyond the limits of isolated disciplinary perspectives. Incidents like the Challenger disaster highlight organizational and human failures that can only be fully understood with a holistic approach. To underscore the importance of the irrational, the emotional, and the role of fate or luck within our institutions, history serves as a valuable tool. Historical cases offer a sounding board for learning, as the past lends insights and "borrowed theories" that guide us in navigating similar complexities today (Raadschelders, 1998). Modern administrators recognize that they are not entirely neutral actors; instead, they are expected to advance both good management practices and equitable outcomes. This dual

commitment is reflected in administrators' roles today as they seek to improve the quality of life for all citizens. As public scrutiny of government efficiency and effectiveness grows, there is an increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes, productivity, and responsiveness to the needs of the citizens they serve.

Public administrators operate guided by four core values: economy, effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. These values are essential for ensuring accountability and responsibility, fostering a system of checks and balances that promotes alignment within public service. However, a crucial additional value, social equity, deserves equal focus. To address social equity effectively, public administrators must engage in both historical and critical thinking to identify, clarify, and examine complex issues (Meyer, 2022) By honing these skills, they can uncover underlying purposes, definitions, assumptions, and consequences, bringing greater insight into the dynamics of social equity. This process places them in a continuous cycle of recognizing patterns, examining change, and revealing overlooked historical narratives and blind spots.

Three approaches to equity within public administration: equal treatment for all, universal access to essential services, and targeted support for disadvantaged populations (Norman-Major, 2011). Equal treatment emphasizes fairness by providing the same opportunities to everyone. Universal services ensure baseline access to resources like healthcare and education, while targeted redistribution directs additional support to those in need, addressing deeper inequalities. Students are encouraged to consider how the public sector should balance these approaches to foster a fairer society,

In the policy process, impartiality is maintained by public administrators. The policy process comprises stages such as problem definition, agenda setting, policy formulation and adaptation, implementation, and evaluation. To understand their role in policymaking, it's

essential to consider the political system in which they operate. During these stages, planners draw on various knowledge sources (Hansson, 2019):

- **Process knowledge** - understanding rules, regulations, and stakeholder engagement.
- **Project/objective knowledge** - clarifying the aims and intentions of a project.
- **Context knowledge** - referencing existing plans, statistics, and investigations.
- **Expert knowledge** - applying empirical, theoretical, and methodological insights to assess causal effects and measure impact.

Administrators and elected officials work collaboratively in the policy adaptation process, balancing the roles of politics and administration. Public administrators uphold impartiality, fairness, and transparency, providing politicians with reliable information that supports well-informed decisions. They also bring in expert knowledge to evaluate policy recommendations in terms of realism and cost-efficiency, ensuring alignment with national political aims.

The necessity to use theories in public administration is crucial in the building block stages. Normative theories consist of guiding principles about what ought to be valued or prioritized. These theories help administrators assess and choose between different institutional and organizational setups and navigate conflicts between values in their daily work. On the other hand, descriptive theories are valued in public administration because they enable administrators to anticipate outcomes and make informed decisions, supporting the view of public administration as a professional field that balances values with practical impact (Weimer, 2020).

What do Public Administrators do?

Current public administration and development literature explores topics such as the evolving roles of local government, the impact of law enforcement practices, and the significance of administrative reforms (Elliot, 2024). In practice, values like equity, efficiency, accountability, and transparency in public administration guide decisions and shape policies that seek to benefit the public. Equity may manifest as policies that ensure equal access to resources or programs targeting underserved populations, while efficiency focuses on optimizing resources to provide services at the lowest cost. Accountability and transparency often appear in the form of public reporting, audits, and open communication with stakeholders to build trust. However, these values can sometimes conflict. For instance, focusing on efficiency might reduce costs but could result in unequal access to services, clashing with equity. Similarly, the need for accountability can create additional administrative layers, potentially hindering efficiency. Balancing these values requires careful consideration of the unique demands of each situation. These values are fundamentally connected to the concept of the public good. However, some argue that other values, such as innovation, adaptability, or resilience, are increasingly essential as governments face complex, evolving challenges. Ultimately, public administrators may need to prioritize or integrate other values depending on the needs of their communities and the challenges they face. Cases and examples that raise the debate over the definition of public good and public versus private sector responsibilities in reducing inequity are also good exercises to get students thinking critically about the role of the public sector in reducing inequity (Norman-Major, 2011).

Public administrators may be uniquely positioned to lead discussions on value-laden issues because they work directly with the practical application of general principles, unlike legislators who often avoid detailed debates to sidestep controversy. Administrators are generally

judged on measurable achievements like decision-making and successful policy implementation, which can build reputations based on concrete results. However, fostering public understanding of social values is less tangible and challenging to quantify. Public deliberation should be cautiously initiated, especially for issues tied closely to social values or those with significant implications for future policy (Reich, 1985). Although administrators are not legally obligated to encourage public deliberation, they hold a prudential responsibility to nurture it due to their role in democratic governance.

Within this policy cycle, administrators play a central role, guiding decisions while interacting with political leaders to ensure a balanced and effective approach adding the best of their knowledge (Hildreth, 1998). To this end, public officials were only permitted to exercise authority within specific, approved frameworks; either through the direct will of the people's representatives or according to constitutional mandates.

Who is the Public?

The public can be thought of as the collective group of people who are impacted by government decisions, policies, and public services, and who together form the larger society. a public is viewed as a condition of political involvement that is not transitory Over time, the field of public administration has evolved, adapting to new challenges and incorporating systematic approaches to meet the needs of a modern society. The public may prefer that administrators handle complex value-driven decisions

But who truly is the public? The term "public" can also refer to the interests that people in a polity share, and how those interests are expressed. Those whose stories and experiences are recognized gain the most attention from administrators (Norman-Major, K. (2011). Equity promotes social welfare by aiming for fair treatment, while efficiency helps ensure that resources

are used wisely to maximize public benefit. For example, responsiveness may sometimes need to be sacrificed to maintain accountability, or effectiveness might be prioritized over efficiency when public safety is at stake. Balancing these trade-offs requires public administrators to weigh the outcomes and impact of their decisions on society as a whole.

A key factor in determining whether people "deserve" support is whether they are seen as responsible for their situation. For example, people who are not viewed as at fault for their neediness, like the elderly, tend to be seen more favorably than those perceived as capable of working, like the unemployed. "Selectivists only support aid for those they see as 'deserving,' based on specific conditions. In contrast, universalists are more supportive of social benefits for all people in need, regardless of their perceived responsibility" (Van Oorschot, 2000). This difference shapes public attitudes toward social programs and who should receive support.

In relation to who should get what, polarization The question of "who should get what" in society is deeply connected to issues of polarization, as resource distribution often reflects and intensifies divisions among social and political groups. When groups within society hold differing beliefs about which populations deserve support, what constitutes fair distribution, or the level of responsibility the state should assume, polarization can deepen. This can create rigid divisions where certain groups advocate for policies that prioritize their interests or values, often at odds with others' perspectives on equity, welfare, or fiscal responsibility. Polarization can be measured in several ways, such as examining voting patterns, analyzing public opinion surveys, studying social media activity, and reviewing political rhetoric. Each method offers a unique perspective; for example, voting behavior may highlight starker divisions, while public opinion surveys can reveal more nuanced attitudes. Although elite polarization has intensified, with politicians often adopting more extreme stances, the general public may not be as deeply

polarized overall, despite increasingly aligning with one party. Even if individuals do not hold extreme positions themselves, emotional distance and hostility toward the opposing side have nevertheless grown in the last decade (Iyengar, 2018).

In conclusion, the literature on public administration underscores the complex and evolving nature of the field, emphasizing the interplay between governance structures, accountability, and responsiveness to public needs. Key areas such as local government roles, law enforcement accountability, and ongoing administrative reforms highlight the importance of adapting practices to address societal changes and enhance public trust. The reviewed research illustrates the field's commitment to balancing efficiency with equity, transparency with adaptability, and stability with innovation. Public administration sits at this challenging intersection, tasked with designing policies that navigate these polarized viewpoints.

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