

The Politics-Administration Dichotomy: Was Woodrow Wilson Misunderstood or Misquoted?

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Literature which explored the theories of “politics-administration dichotomy” remains divided as to whether Woodrow Wilson was the author of the politics-administration dichotomy theory or not. While classical literature seems to agree that Woodrow Wilson was the author and champion of the politics-administration dichotomy, contemporary literature seems to disagree, claiming that those who ascribe the politics-administration dichotomy to Wilson have misunderstood and/or are misquoting him. The objective of this paper is to analyse all available electronic and printed material to provide unequivocal evidences that the theory of politics-administration dichotomy was conceived and promoted by Woodrow Wilson’s own writing. The paper also provides evidence that Wilson was neither misunderstood nor misquoted as claimed by some authors. This paper also shows that Wilson and anyone who advocated the politics-administration dichotomy (i.e., separation of politics and administration in government) lost the battle to those who advocated what this paper calls “politics-administration complementarity”.

Keywords: Woodrow Wilson, politics-administration dichotomy, politics, public administration

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of theorists who endorsed or rejected the thesis of the “politics-administration dichotomy” in order to find out whether Woodrow Wilson was misunderstood or misquoted. The paper concludes with a recommendation of the way forward.

Politics-Administration Dichotomy

Historically, Woodrow Wilson (1887, p. 1, 1941) was considered as the author of the separation of politics and administration in government (i.e., the politics-administration dichotomy). Thomas Woodrow Wilson (December 28, 1856 to February 3, 1924) was the 28th President of the United States (1913-1921). Among his main contributions, Wilson served as President of Princeton University from 1902 to 1910, as the Governor of New Jersey from 1911 to 1913 and was elected President as a Democrat in 1912 (Woodrow Wilson’s Biography, n.d.). Literature also shows that Woodrow Wilson was enormously successful as a doctorate graduate of Johns Hopkins University in 1883 and the author of *The Study of Administration* which he published in 1887. It is in this master piece that Wilson’s ideas and passion about the politics-administration dichotomy are succinctly presented. A careful analysis of literature shows that any understanding or misunderstanding of Wilson’s intentions about the politics-administration dichotomy is based on different interpretations or misinterpretations of this famous article.

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Although the understanding and concept of the politics-administration dichotomy varies from writer to writer, depending on the historical period in which they write and the context they are writing about, the term dichotomy as applied here refers to the separation of politics and administration in policy design and implementation. The politics-administration dichotomy envisages public employees who can be said to be “impersonal” and “apolitical”, in the sense of having no political interests or political affiliations (Wilson, 1887). Writers and politicians who are also considered to be the pioneers in the advocacy of Wilson’s ideas of politics-administration dichotomy include Goodnow (1900) and Taylor (1912). Like Wilson, these two writers also see the attempt to create a bureaucracy with a distinct separation of the organisational and the political lives of bureaucrats or public administrators as underpinning this dichotomy.

The apolitical public employee is also what Max Weber envisioned when he developed his famous “bureaucratic” model in 1948. The ideal model of Max Weber’s bureaucratic structure was characterised by a clear division of labour, a well-defined authority hierarchy, high formalisation, career tracks for employees, and most importantly, “impersonality” and a total separation of members’ organisational lives from their personal lives and interests (Gildenhuis, Fox, & Wissink, 1994, p. 51; Fox, Schwella, & Wissink, 2000, p. 79; Robbins & Barnwell, 2002, pp. 42, 487). Following are Wilson’s own views of the politics-administration dichotomy.

Wilson’s Own Writing

One of the main evidences about Wilson’s ideas of the politics-administration dichotomy is his own writing—*The Study of Administration* published in 1887. In his famous article, Wilson (1887, pp. 209-210) stated that: “The field of administration is... removed from the hurry and strife of politics; [and that] it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study”. He went further to argue that “administration is a part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product”. Most importantly, Wilson viewed civil-service reform as “clearing the moral atmosphere of official life by establishing the sanctity of public office as a public trust, and, by making service unpartisan, it is opening the way for making it business-like”. Wilson’s argument that “administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics” and that “administrative questions are not political questions” is best expressed in his argument that “Politics is state activity in things great and universal, while administration, on the other hand, is the activity of the state in individual and small things” (Wilson, 1887, p. 210). According to Wilson, “Politics is thus the special province of the statesman, administration of the technical official. Policy does nothing without the aid of administration; but administration is not therefore politics”. Wilson stamped his authority on the authorship of the theory of politics-administration dichotomy in his statement that “we do not require German authority for this position; this discrimination between administration and politics is now, happily, too obvious to need further discussion” (Wilson, 1887, pp. 209-210; Murphy, 2002, p. 72; Shafritz, Hyde, & Parkes, 2004, p. 28).

Wilson championed the ideas of the politics-administration dichotomy because, according to him, an “apolitical bureaucracy” was necessary in order to meet the economic and efficient implementation of the popular will (i.e., the will of the American people according to the Declaration of Rights and the Constitution) and the needs of a democracy operating in an increasingly industrialised economy (Wilson, 1887, 1941; Van Riper, 1990).

Past and Contemporary Writers

A number of classical and contemporary authors confirmed that Woodrow Wilson did indeed champion

the ideas of politics-administration dichotomy. The politics-administration dichotomy as envisioned in Wilson writing was also the central tenet of renowned classical writers and researchers such as Goodnow (1900) and Taylor (1912) among others. According to Gulick and Urwick (1937), Sayre (1958), and Campbell and Peters (2005), these classical authors conceptualised a government in which public officials (bureaucrats) had no affiliation to political parties and no aspiration to politics or to political life. Some contemporary authors who ascribed the ideas of politics-administration dichotomy to Wilson included Van Riper (1990) who argued that Wilson strove vigorously and self-confidently in the quest for “political neutrality”, coupled with technical competency in the civil service. However, while the classical literature (i.e., up to the early 1940s) seems to be unanimous on the author of the politics-administration dichotomy, some contemporary literatures claim that those who ascribe the politics-administration dichotomy to Wilson have misunderstood him.

Could Wilson be Misunderstood?

In spite of Wilson’s own writing which unambiguously presented the idea of politics-administration dichotomy (as presented above), a number of authors, such as Stillman (1973, p. 588), Van Riper (1984; as cited in O’Toole, 1987), and Rosenbloom (2008, pp. 57-60) as well as M. Dimock and D. Dimock (1969; as cited in Dunn & Ledge, 2002a) offered critiques of those who attributed the politics-administration dichotomy concept to Wilson’s writings. Their claim was that Wilson did not set out to separate the public administration and politics functions, nor did he wish to exclude administrators from political affairs.

For example, Rosenbloom (2008, pp. 57-60) claimed that although Wilson’s article was very popular at the time, most authors who endorsed its thesis missed the point. As Rosenbloom put, its original intention was simply to advocate detaching partisan politics and patronage from sound public management. M. Dimock and D. Dimock (1969; as cited in Dunn & Ledge, 2002a) also claimed that Wilson’s intention was not to advocate a “strict separation between politics and administration”.

In addition, despite a clear belief of the politics-administration dichotomy found in the summary of classical authors such as Wilson, Goodnow, Taylor, Gulick and Urwick among others discussed above in this paper, a number of authors such as Golembiewski (1977), and Van Riper (1990, pp. 209-210) argued that “these founding fathers of the field never advocated the dichotomy attributed to them”.

Finally, there are some authors who would neither ascribe the politics-administration dichotomy to Wilson nor publicly deny that he championed the idea of politics-administration dichotomy. These include O’Toole (1987, p. 18) who claimed that Wilson’s article was ambiguous, full of contradictions and poorly written to the point that it was difficult to be entirely certain of what message he was attempting to convey. There is also Svara (1999, p. 676) who rejected the idea of politics-administration dichotomy on the basis that those who represented the politics-administration dichotomy model as historically significant, or as conceptually and empirically faulty, have missed two fundamental points. The first is that classical theorists such as Wilson were not explicitly suggesting or advocating the separation between politics and public administration, a concept that the literature of the 1940s and 1950s initially explored (Svara, 1999, p. 676; 2001, pp. 176-183). The second, as Svara (2001, pp. 176-183) continued to argue, is that the term “dichotomy” itself was rarely used before the 1950s. As such, Svara (2001) concluded, the “founders” of the field, who were supposed to have invented the politics-administration dichotomy model, could not have used this particular term in their writings (Svara, 1999, p. 676; 2001, p. 176). The argument about the beginning of the use of the term “dichotomy” is not the subject of this research. However, it was inconceivable to admit that the meaning and the ideas represented by the term

“politics-administration dichotomy” were not what the literature of the early 1940s, including Wilson’s famous article—*The Study of Administration* quoted above, championed. While Svara might be right about the non-existence of the term “dichotomy” before the 1950s, its proper meanings such as: “discrimination between administration and politics, administration which lies outside the proper sphere of politics...” are clearly used in Wilson’s article which summarised in this paper.

In the absence of literature of the early 1900s and late 1950 which found Wilson’s writing confusing, and lack of evidence about Wilson’s defending himself against writers of his era who ascribed the idea of politics-administration dichotomy to him, Svara’s argument that the politics-administration dichotomy concept “was rather a poorly grounded characterization of the early literature that took hold in the late 1950s” (Svara, 1999, p. 676) cannot hold water.

Did Wilson Modify His “Politics-Administration Dichotomy” Theory?

Some, such as Martin (1988) went as far as to argue that Wilson modified his theory later, after discovering that his proposed politics-administration dichotomy was fundamentally wrong as it was different from the European version. Martin’s (1988) claim that Wilson’s mistake was mainly due to his incorrect translation of the German sources he was consulting did not go further to clarify Wilson’s proficiency in the German language or lack thereof. There was also no clue as to whether Wilson made this confession or not. Even if Wilson could have lacked proficiency in German language, it was highly impossible that he also lacked translators who were proficient in foreign languages including German. Despite such unanswered questions, Martin also went on to claim that after realising his mistake and the implications of his fundamentally flawed politics-administration dichotomy theory, Wilson abandoned his theory altogether within three years of publishing his famous article—*The Study of Administration* (Martin, 1988). Unfortunately, Martin did not provide the circumstances that led to Wilson’s realisation of the alleged mistake. As a Doctorate graduate, a professor of Johns Hopkins University in 1883, and a president of a powerful country such as the USA (1912), Wilson had the power to contests anything wrongly said or written about him in his lifetime. Yet, there is no record of his protests.

Implications of the Politics-Administration Dichotomy

Literature shows that there is no known example of an administrative system in a democratic government where the head of the executive branch of government is practically excluded from the legislative and the judiciary functions of government. For example, in their analysis of the tripartite separation of power or *trias politica* in South Africa, Venter and Landsberg (2007, pp. 47-48) argued that the executive, as provided in the present constitution, had both judicial and legislative powers and was not systemically separated from the legislature. The same findings were confirmed by the analysis done by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000, p. 139) in some selected OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, such as Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands. According to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000, p. 139), in these countries, “the borderline between the government and politics frontier has not shifted”. As they put it, the “political and civil service elite (which, significantly, in both countries are intermingled rather than separate) have retained their grip and the ‘politically led’ state is still seen as a major socially integrating force to be reckoned with” (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000, p. 139). While dictatorships and absolute monarchies are not the focus of this research, there is no need to emphasise that in these two forms of government one individual holds the legislative,

judicial, and executive powers. In contrast to a democratic society, dictators are characterised by the arbitrary and unchecked exercise of power (Heywood, 2002, p. 381). Combining political and administrative roles and functions is not limited to the higher levels of government. A recent study using empirical data collected from a nationwide sample of city managers serving on councils of local governments in the USA concluded that “the politics-administration dichotomy fails to obtain its predicted tendencies in actuality” even at local government level (Demir & Nyhan, 2008, p. 81).

This confirms the view shared by Rutgers (2001, p. 3), who argued that the whole issue of a politics-administration dichotomy was and is simply “a false assumption”. Some of the main attackers of the politics-administration ideas include Waldo (1955, p. 42), and most importantly, Lilienthal (1944), whose work is considered by many political analysts to constitute an obituary for the politics-administration dichotomy (Heywood, 2002). By 1984, Waldo was questioning the doctrine of a politics-administration formula on which the orthodox model of public administration had hitherto been based (Waldo, 1984; as cited in Shafritz et al., 2004, p. 150). There is no doubt that Waldo disagreed with the notion that the work of government could be divisible into two parts: the parts of the “deciding” (i.e., policy and decision-making) and of the “executing agencies of government” (i.e., policy implementers) as Wilson envisaged. Waldo was also against the very idea of “scientific” management in administration because, according to him, execution (administration) cannot be made a science (Waldo, 1984; as cited in Shafritz et al., 2004, p. 150). Waldo (1984, pp. 199-204) argued that “Science to the orthodox supporters of scientific management connotes fact-finding, rejection of theory and perhaps pragmatism”, which was not always practical in the real environment. Louis Gawthrop (as cited in James, 2006; Lowery, 2001) commented on Waldo’s argument:

Dwight looked beyond the strict politics-administration dichotomy to recognise the unwritten aspect of public administration: You had to be a pragmatist. You had to play the political game to get things done. Public administration is hooked on the political system.

Waldo’s argument was supported by Paul Appleby whose analysis of the difference between government and other institutions concluded that “Government is different because government is politics” (Appleby, 1945; Brower, 2006, p. 2; Shafritz et al., 2004, p. 135). According to Appleby (1945; as cited in Shafritz et al., 2004, p. 135), government was by nature a “blatantly political enterprise” in the sense that “every public employee hired, each one demoted, transferred, or discharged, every efficiency rating, every assignment of responsibility and each change in administrative structure, is always politically charged”.

Besides Waldo and Appleby, Brownlow, Merriam, and Gulick (1937, pp. 1-6) also rejected the assumption or concept of a politics-administration dichotomy. They argued that all three traditional functions of government: the executive, the administrative, and the judiciary, were practically embedded in the executive branch of government. These three co-authors of the “Report of the President’s Committee on Administrative Management” used the example of the USA to argue that the USA presidency unites at least three important functions. As Brownlow et al. (1937, pp. 1-6) put it:

From one point of view, the president is a political leader—leader of a party, leader of the Congress (i.e., law-making bodies), and leader of a people. From another point of view, he is head of the nation in the ceremonial sense of the term, the symbol of our American national solidarity. From still another point of view the USA president is the chief executive and administrator within the federal system and the services... while these three duties are divided, or only in part combined, in many other types of government, in the United States they have always been united in one and the same person whose duty it is to perform all of these three tasks.

This was also the view of Svava (1999, p. 676; 2001, pp. 176-179) who argued that the politics-public administration dichotomy was not the founding theory of public administration in the United States, as was commonly assumed.

The following argument lays aside all possibilities for separation between politics-administration in social life and in government.

“Political Beings” Do Policy-Making and Policy Implementation

The most compelling reason for the loss of ground of the politics-administration dichotomy debate is that the individuals, or human beings, who design and/or implement policies are, as several philosophers and theorists have argued, “political beings” (McLaughlin, 1997; Cline, 2000). Aristotle (384-322 BC) in his work circa 335 BC, and in his well-known statement, argued that “the city belongs among the things that exist by nature and that man is by nature a political animal” (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2002, p. 1; McLaughlin, 1997, p. 1; Yack, 1993; Kullman, 1991, p. 94). By “man is a political animal by nature”, Aristotle meant that human beings can only live the good life if they live and interact in a political community/organisation (Heywood, 2002). McLaughlin’s (1997, pp. 2-3) interpretation of Aristotle’s philosophical concept was that “man” was a “political animal naturally because of his innate inclination to take part in the affairs of the city and become a human being”. Besides the fact that man is a political animal, policy is also made and implemented within political institutions (i.e., organisations). The argument of “organisational politics” is discussed in the following section.

Politics Is Part and Parcel of Any Organisation

Greenberg and Baron (2000, p. 424) defined the term “organisational politics” as “actions not officially approved by an organisation that are taken to influence others to meet—not organisational objective/s—but one’s personal and selfish goals” (emphasis added) within the organisation. Alagse (n.d., p. 1) argued that “organizational politics is an inescapable and intrinsic reality” in policy implementation, which was so intricately interwoven with management systems that relationships, norms, processes, performance, and outcomes were hugely influenced and affected by it (also see Ballam, 2011, p. 1; Beautiful Mind, 2009, p. 1). Some, such as Butcher and Clarke (1999, p. 12), went even further to suggest that the executive development programmes of tomorrow should rank “organisational politics” as important a discipline as “marketing, finance, and human resources”. Greenberg and Baron (2000, p. 424) referred to a survey conducted by the Commerce Clearing House in Chicago in 1991, where more than 1,000 human resource professionals were interviewed concerning their feelings about the ethics of various managerial practices. According to Greenberg and Baron (2000), this survey found that organisational politics took place at all levels of the organisation, although it tended to be more concentrated at the higher organisational levels. The survey also found the following to be among the most serious political activities reflecting abuse of power in the organisation: 31% of respondents cited making personnel decisions based on favouritism instead of job performance, 31% of respondents reported basing differences in pay on friendship, while another 23% of the sample cited making arrangements with vendors or consulting agencies leading to personal gain (Greenberg & Baron, 2000, p. 433). There has been no known similar research published that has been conducted in the public sector.

The Way Forward

Based on the argument presented in this paper, it is impossible to create or imagine totally apolitical

government institutions. This is the reason why the argument about politics-administration dichotomy gave way to new argument: the “politics-administration complementarity” (Svara, 2001, p. 176). Svara (2001, p. 177) defined the “politics-administration complementarity” as a conceptual framework that included differentiation with interactions as an alternative to the dichotomy. Literature shows that too much politics could be as dangerous as lack of politics in the business government. This is, for example, the view of Cameron (2003) who argued that any attempt to introduce a policy based on a rigid politics and administration distinction was conceptually unsound and undesirable. He cautioned against any attempt to fuse politics and administration through having a totally politicised administration. The danger of a totally politicised administration is that it can lead to bureaucratic corruption and maladministration, laziness and lack of accountability to the citizens (Cameron, 2003). According to Cameron (2003), the best way to avoid the undesirable outcomes of a totally politicised and totally depoliticised public service was to strike a balance or to find a middle way between the two extremes. The way forward should be therefore to find ways to balance politics and administration in the business of government.

Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to analyse all available electronic and printed material to provide unequivocal evidences that the theory of politics-administration dichotomy were conceived and promoted by Woodrow Wilson’s own writing. Based on the evidence presented in this paper, it can be confidently concluded that the theories of politics-administration dichotomy are Wilson’s ideas. He was neither misunderstood nor misquoted and there was no evidence to prove that he did change his mind about the politics-administration dichotomy in his lifetime.

There is, however, ample evidence to show that the politics-administration dichotomy envisaged by Wilson and his supporters is neither practical nor possible in a real organisation (both government and private). Politics cannot be separated from the policy implementation process due to the fact that: policies are made and implemented by people who are “by nature political beings”, and the fact that policies are made and implemented through political institutions. In this case, the way forward is to strike a balance between the two equally important and inseparable aspects of any organisation and of government in particular.

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