

## Politics–Administration Dichotomy: Insight from a Developing Country



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### Synonyms

Administration; Bureaucracy; Bureaucratic politics; Politics; Politics and bureaucracy nexus; Public administration.

### Brief Definitions

*Politics* – the expression of the will of the state in terms of formulating policies for control, allocation, and use of resources.

*Public administration* – the execution of the will of the state by carrying out that policy.

*Politics administration dichotomy* – is a theory that constructs boundaries between political and administrative functions and holds that political interference in administration would erode the opportunity for administrative efficiency, and that the policymaking activities of government ought to be wholly separated from the administrative functions.

### Introduction

The predominance of extant knowledge relating to the politics–administration dichotomy has almost exclusively been derived from wealthy, advanced democracies. However, in stark contrast, only scant research attention has been given to understanding this dichotomy and the way in which politicians and bureaucrats engage with one another in developing countries (Dasandi and Esteve 2017). This has led to a severe gap in understanding of the dichotomy from a developing country perspective. Compounding this significant knowledge gap, and of concern, is that “best practice” governance approaches adopted in developed countries are “suggested” by donors and developmental organizations and transferred to developing countries, with simplistic, prescriptive intentions aimed at addressing public sector improvement failures. These good-intentioned strategies ignore the significant country-to-country political and administrative differences and have the potential to severely exacerbate underlying politics–administration tensions (Levy 2014).

To lay a foundation for understanding a brief explanation of the politics–administration dichotomy, an underlying theory, history, and various interpretations are provided. Insight into the means by which politicians and administrators engage with each other and the factors that shape this engagement and reform efforts in the public sector of a developing country, namely Fiji, are

also discussed. The aim is to inform researchers, scholars, donors, developmental organizations, and policymakers, and in so doing, aid closure of the noticeable developing country knowledge gap.

## Politics–Administration Dichotomy

It is suggested that two basic government functions exist in all government systems, namely politics and administration. Reference to these terms as applied in this chapter respectively refer to the expression of the will of the state in terms of formulating policies for control, allocation and use of resources (“politics”), and the execution of the will of the state by carrying out that policy (public “administration”) (Goodnow 2003). The politics–administration dichotomy is a theory that constructs boundaries between political and administrative functions and holds that political interference in administration would erode the opportunity for administrative efficiency, and that the policymaking activities of government ought to be wholly separated from the administrative functions (Shafritz 1985, p. 415). Notwithstanding, many authors do not use the term “dichotomy” but rather refer to “differentiation” (Goodnow 2003) and “discrimination” (Wilson, 1887) between politics and administration (Overeem 2012).

The politics–administration dichotomy “has been subject to much academic interest and debate... this debate centers on the respective roles of politicians and administrators in the policy process and the nature of the relationship between them” (Dasandi and Esteve 2017, p. 2). Based on the principal-agent theory, it would seem reasonable to suggest that clearly defined roles and responsibilities of politicians (as elected officials and the “principals” responsible for formulating policies) and bureaucrats (as “agents” tasked with implementing policies) exist, and conflict and tension between the two authorities would not exist (Nyadera and Islam 2020). However, in reality politics is directly and indirectly involved in public administration to ensure practical implementation of policies and

decisions made by politicians. Also, public administrators are increasing involvement in politics at all levels of government, through influence on and making of political decisions (Alford et al. 2017) and design and drafting of public policy (Svara 2001). Hence, an uncomfortable nexus exists in the core relationship between politicians (desirous of policymaking, while pleasing citizens and posturing for reelection) and bureaucrats (confronted with the complexity of simultaneously balancing support of politicians in policymaking and reacting to directions and interference of politicians and other interested parties in policy implementation, while maintaining political neutrality and professional integrity, efficiently and effectively managing public sector organizations, and serving the public) (Svara 2001; Waterman et al. 2004). Conflict and tension inevitably arise as a result of the related complexity and breaches and the interplay of the forces of control and independence that could lead one to dominate the other (Krause 1999); associated issues including overlap in roles, accountability, and responsibility; and conflict of interest between elected and appointed leaders (Nyadera and Islam 2020).

## History and Interpretation of the Politics–Administration Dichotomy

Woodrow Wilson (28th US president from 1913 to 1921) proposed administration to be separated and distinct from politics in government. Wilson authored and published *The Study of Administration*. In this seminal article Wilson (1887, pp. 209–210) argued 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” and “Politics is thus the special province of the statesmen, administration of the technical official. Policy does nothing without the aid of administration; but administration is not therefore politics.” Wilson went on further to state that “administration lies outside the proper spheres of politics” and “administrative questions are not political questions.”

Literature remains divided as to whether Wilson authored and championed the politics–administration dichotomy or not, and as to interpretations of the dichotomy (Uwizeyimana 2013). Some contemporary authors attribute to Wilson the idea of the politics–administration dichotomy based on his “unambiguous” writings and suggesting that while politics influence policies and administration is the execution of such policies (Goodnow 2003), a boundary exists between both spheres (Overeem 2012). Other authors openly critique such attribution and interpretation on the basis that Wilson “did not set out to separate the public administration and politics functions, nor did he wish to exclude administrators from political affairs” (Uwizeyimana 2013, p. 167). Some of the main critics (Lilienthal 1944; Waldo 1955) dismissed and rejected the indefensible concept of a politics–administration dichotomy and the idea that the work of the government could be divided into two parts: policy decision-making and policy execution (Uwizeyimana 2013, p. 169). There are even some authors who publicly neither attribute the politics–administration dichotomy to Wilson, nor deny he championed the dichotomy, and they contend that Wilson’s article was poorly written, contradictory in nature, “ambiguous” and at best difficult to interpret (Uwizeyimana 2013). Additionally, they argue for a less divisive and more cooperative relationship than a strict dichotomy proposed by Wilson (Waldo 2007), and that the two poles of the dichotomy complement each other and should be conceptualized with both bureaucrats and elected leaders in collaboration (Svara 2001).

### **Complementarity of Politics and Administration**

According to Svara (2001, p. 179), “the complementarity of politics and administration is based on the premise that elected officials and administrators join together in the common pursuit of sound governance.” Complementarity acknowledges the interdependence and reciprocal influence between elected officials and

administrators. Also, while elected officials and administrators maintain separate and distinct roles, both operate in a mutually supportive manner, and their functions overlap (Svara 2001, p. 179), and both are instruments and contributors to the political process (Cook 1996). Complementarity is suggested to reconcile the contradictory aspects of the politics–administration dichotomy with politicians maintaining control, while at the same time allowing administrators involvement in policymaking and independence to implement policy and serve the public (Svara 2001). Reciprocating values also underpin the complementarity. Nevertheless, elected officials could dominate administrative activities but are constrained by respect for administrative competence and commitment; and administrators could use their resources and take a self-directed approach, but are constrained by a commitment to accountability to the complementarity relationship (Svara 2001, p. 179). The interrelationship between the elected officials’ degree of political control and the administrative level of independence provides an assortment of relational models. Where the level of political control or administrative independence is extreme, and the reciprocating value is absent, respectively, “political dominance” or “bureaucratic autonomy” can be present. Another relationship that could also exist is with low political control, low administrative independence, and an absence of a reciprocating value, which could result in a “stalemate” between both parties. Complementarity occurs with “ongoing interaction, reciprocal influence, and mutual deference between elected officials and administrators” (Svara 2001, p. 180).

### **Politics/Administration Zones**

Alford et al. (2016) are of the view that a fluid, blurred transition area (“purple zone”) with indeterminate roles and relationships, and ambiguity, exists between the domains of politics (“red zone”) and administration (“blue zone”) in addition to a clear line of delineation. The zone concept suggests that public managers formally and informally move in and out of the political domain

through the shared area of the “purple zone,” not to usurp the authority of politicians but rather to assist administrators in achieving desired outcomes. Alford et al. (2016, p. 14) also suggest that the clear line of delineation between politicians and administrators may have been devised at a time “where situations are routine, stable, and uncontested, and the orderly separation of roles inherent in the dichotomy may apply,” as opposed to the current times where wicked and complex problems are now commonplace.

### Types of Bureaucratic Relations

Dasandi and Esteve (2017, pp. 3–4) introduced four models of political–bureaucratic relations. These relations are suggested to be based on two dimensions, namely separation (“the extent to which political and administrative spheres are formally distinct”) and autonomy (the extent to which bureaucrats have the freedom to perform their assigned functions without political interference). Under conditions of high role separation between politicians and bureaucrats (“intrusive” and “integrated” models), bureaucrats must act in accordance with political demands while maintaining neutrality in policy implementation; however, with low role separation (“collusive” and “collaborative” models) responsibilities are diluted between politicians and bureaucrats, who both perform the various functions. With high autonomy (“integrated” and “collaborative” models) politicians and bureaucrats’ functions are clearly assigned with bureaucracy provided sufficient space to work out policy implementation; while with low separation (“intrusive” and “collusive” models) bureaucrats when undertaking their responsibilities are subordinated to politicians.

### Public Enterprise Reform in Fiji

Structural adjustment policies of many developing countries like Fiji were introduced in the 1990s to address the internal pressures resulting from sluggish national development and high

levels of inefficiency and ineffectiveness, and external pressures from the donor and developmental agencies (Rahman et al. 2013). New Public Management (NPM) practices formed the basis of political, economic, and public sector reforms (An and Sharma 2015) and emphasized an adoption of commercial practices, and a transition from accountability for inputs controls (bureaucratic procedures, rules, and standards) to quantifiable outputs and results, devolution of management controls, enhanced reporting, and cost-cutting and efficiency (Awio et al. 2007).

In Fiji, when the Public Enterprise Act 1996 came into effect, the Ministry of Public Enterprises and Public Sector Reform was established. The Ministry was responsible for monitoring and encouraging state-owned enterprises to reform and adopt commercial practices in order to enhance their profitability, efficiency, and accountability, and to return a dividend to the government. The Public Enterprise Act 1996 also defined how state-owned enterprises were established, managed, and supervised, and provided a markedly different governance structure for state-owned enterprises. The government remained the “owner” and maintained oversight of each state-owned enterprise; however, it appointed a commercial board of directors responsible for strategic direction, commercial performance, and government reporting (An and Sharma 2015). Currently, 15 state-owned enterprises are established, including enterprises such as Airports Fiji Limited, Fiji Ports Corporation, Fiji Rice Pte Limited, Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji, and so on. Subsequently, to ensure Fiji state-owned enterprises remained relevant and aligned with international best practice, the politics–administration dichotomy was mitigated, reform efforts were more effective, and the legislation governing those state-owned enterprises was updated with gazettal of the Public Enterprise Act 2019 (Government of Fiji 2019).

## The Politics–Administration Dichotomy in Fiji

Over a ten-year period (2010–2020) interactions with, feedback from, and observations of politicians and public servants in Fiji in terms of how they engaged with each other, and the politics–administration dichotomy, were compiled and have been interpreted according to the types of political–bureaucratic relationships as promoted by Dasandi and Esteve (2017), politics/administration zones as supported by Alford et al. (2016), and the complementarity model as advocated by Svava (2001). These interpretations provide meaningful insight into the politics–administration dichotomy experienced between politicians and administrators of state-owned enterprises in Fiji.

A number of characteristics of the political–bureaucratic relationships in Fiji suggest that a collusive model (low role separation and low bureaucratic autonomy) has been inculcated and is in existence for some time. Relational characteristics to support such a suggestion include: due to personal ties, control is vested in a small number of politicians and bureaucrats; bureaucratic “machinery” of government is geared such that rent-seeking is a primary objective; employment in the bureaucracy is conditional upon absolute loyalty to the politicians in power; high degree of political interference in the day-to-day operationalization by the administration of the government policies; and large, inefficient, and ineffective bureaucracies predominate. It is important to note that “all states at some point in time had public services based on patronage systems with collusive political-bureaucratic relations” (Dasandi and Esteve 2017, p. 15). Relational conflict has been extreme and perpetuated the politics–administration. Notwithstanding, concerted efforts have been underway by the government to transition to a more integrated (high role separation and high bureaucratic autonomy) model. This desired transition is also typical of donor-promoted governance reforms of developing nations undergoing NPM reform (Dasandi and Esteve 2017). Evidence of this transition is noted in clearer role separation between

politicians and bureaucrats and bureaucratic autonomy (with the introduction of the Public Enterprise Act 2019), implementation of merit-based civil service systems for recruitment and promotion that limit political interference, and a more “rule-of-law based politically neutral civil service,” with bureaucrats primarily focused on advising politicians and implementing their decisions and reform (Dasandi and Esteve 2017, p. 14).

As suggested by Alford et al. (2016, p. 3), administrators undertake “forays into the political domain” in order to “deliver quality services in the public interest” and in so doing create a blurred zone between politicians and administrators. Evidence of administrators’ foray into politicians’ domain was noted in Fiji. Political behavior of administrators included selective control and delay in the provision of information to politicians and other stakeholders; restriction of time available to either speed up or delay a decision; use of bureaucratic processes to delay decision-making; questions posed to create confusion; distortion and downplaying of critical issues; and influence of stakeholders in order to unduly limit politicians’ room to maneuver. Each of these administrator behaviors had the potential to usurp politicians’ decision-making. Conversely, politicians also forayed into the administrator’s domain, further creating a blurred and overlapping zone of the interface. Politicians’ high degree of interference in the day-to-day operationalization by the administration of the government policies was noted in public administrative matters such as planning, allocation, and use of public funds, staffing, budgeting, reporting, and decision-making. Such interference was continuous, frustrating administration and reform efforts, and also had the potential to usurp the administrators’ decision-making. The fluidity of the zones and boundaries between politicians and administrators, the absence of a clear line between policy and administration, no general agreement in the blurred zone as to who should do what, and the continuous operation within the blurred zones by both politicians and administrators frustrated both politicians and administrators and only

contributed further to the perpetuation of the politics–administration dichotomy.

In Fiji, history has shown that conditions of high political control and low administrative independence have prevailed, with a great emphasis on hierarchy and subordination of administrators (politicians dominated over administrators), low-quality governance and service, tensions between politicians and administrators unreconciled, and the politics–administration dichotomy exacerbated and perpetuated. Under conditions of high political control and low administrative independence, the propensity for loss of administrative competence, degradation of administrative morale and performance, and political corruption is high (Svara 2001). Notwithstanding, concerted NPM and other reform efforts (reinforced by the recent gazettal of the Public Enterprise Act 2019) have been undertaken by the government to transition toward complementarity of politics and administration, and in so doing “politicians and administrators join together in pursuit of sound governance” (Svara 2001, p. 179). These efforts have been evidenced by enhanced “interaction, reciprocal influence, and mutual deference” (Svara 2001, p. 180) between politicians and administrators, more regular communication with citizens and administrators assisting in shaping policy and providing meaning to policy implementation, while politicians oversee policy implementation and address complaints about poor policy implementation performance.

A study of the politics–administration dichotomy also has important implications relating to avoidance of using public servants for partisan political purposes, and the need to maintain political impartiality when administering the laws.

## Conclusion

A collusive model of political–bureaucratic relations, the fluidity of the zones and boundaries between politicians and administrators, and conditions of high political control and low administrative independence have prevailed in Fiji for many years and perpetuated the politics–administration dichotomy and conflict between politicians

and administrators. These prevailing conditions have adversely affected public sector governance, reform, and service delivery. In more recent times, concerted efforts by the government of Fiji to transition toward a more integrated model of politics and administration, with complementarity and clarification of role separation between politicians and bureaucrats and bureaucratic autonomy, has provided the opportunity for politicians and administrators to mitigate the politics–administration dichotomy somewhat and in so doing drive much-needed governance and public sector reform outcomes beneficial to the nation.

Elected politicians and an innumerable number of actors seek to influence the policy choices of public administrators. These influences have wide-ranging impact on public service professionalism, leadership and decision-making, efficiency and effectiveness, and ultimately service delivery to citizens. Future studies should focus on the challenges, dilemmas, coping patterns, and “crafted” practices of public servants to navigate the politics–administration dichotomy, in what is “an increasingly turbulent, incident-prone and unforgiving political environment” (van Dorp and ‘t Hart 2019, p. 889).

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Accountability, Politics, and Power.](#)
- ▶ [Bullying in Public Administration.](#)
- ▶ [Bureaucracy and Politicians: Dynamics and Challenges.](#)
- ▶ [Governance and Public Administration.](#)
- ▶ [Government Bureaucracy.](#)
- ▶ [Policy Formulation and Policy Implementation Dichotomy.](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Administration.](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Public Policy.](#)

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