

# WORKING PAPER

## Towards a Definition of Public Administration

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### Abstract

Scholars of public administration have been encumbered by a crisis on the definition of the field since its move away from classical theory. The confusion arises from three areas—the lack of clarity in scope for both the practice and the study, assertions on the purpose of public administration as being the attainment of only the 3Es or only the public interest, and scholars' aversion towards any definition or theory that employs the notion of structure. A definition of public administration must: (1) unify the scope of its study and its practice; (2) not be conceptually restricted to a specific structure, method, or values of governance; (3) encompass all the concerns of the state; (4) allow the use of other bodies of knowledge; and (5) preserve the uniqueness of the field from the bodies of knowledge that it employs. A sample of definitions from Stillman's (2009) compilation are each tested whether they meet all five criteria. The author concludes that such a definition is: public administration refers to all the work involved in the implementation of government policies and programs.



The scholar of public administration sets out to study the field with a general understanding of what “public administration” is. It is unusual, in fact, for the prospective scholar of any field to have such debilitating doubts as to the nature of one’s study. Yet, from the very beginning of the academic journey, the public administration scholar is confronted by the field’s intellectual and identity crisis. Suddenly, public administration is also politics... but if it is, then how does it differ with political science? If it is the management of an office, how is it unique from business administration? If it is the allocation of scarce resources, it must be economics; if it is budgeting, it must be finance; if it also concerns the legislative and the judicial, then it must be law; and if it is the discussion of what values a public administrator must espouse, how is it not moral philosophy?

The pondering of these questions occupies much of American public administration scholarship immediately after the time of the traditionalists and even today. To the new scholar, it is a true experience of analysis-paralysis or existential dread. But, to disagree with Mosher (1956), who wrote that public administration is probably best left not defined, it *must* nonetheless be defined, for it is a definition that sets the direction of one’s study and one’s purpose for its practice. How, then, must the scholar proceed with resolving this internal conflict?

## Points of Contention

The entirety of scholarship on the definition of public administration can be understood as the history of a debate. With every proposed definition or normative theory of public administration, disagreement emerges from any one of three primary areas.

First, there is lack of clarity in the scope of public administration both as a practice and as a

study. As a practice, the dispute is in its *locus* in the organizational structure of government. Traditionalists, most prominently Wilson (1887) and White (1926), insisted that the activity of public administration resides in the executive branch alone. As our understanding of political systems (and cynicism thereof) grew over time, that administration is not and must not be fused with politics began being put into question. Even if public administration were to be accepted, for example, as merely the processes and not the politics of government, it can still be argued that the legislative and the judicial branches have their offices and processes, too. How is it, then, that public administration is being constrained to the executive? Then, as a study, there are also issues of scope in terms of its *episteme*. If the activity is present in all branches of government and it encompasses all the ministries under the executive branch, then what is its knowledge domain? Is it a valid standalone field of study, or does it merely apply the various bodies of knowledge that it employs, such as economics, finance, engineering, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences? How can one even coherently combine all of these fields into a single body that is also unique from its individual parts?

Second, every school of thought that offered a definition for public administration proposed that its objective should only be one of two values: either the attainment of the 3Es (efficiency, economy, effectiveness) or the fulfillment of the public interest. No school of thought was a true and practical synthesis of the two. Traditional public administration scholars, for example, can be credited for being the first to orient the field towards the 3Es. New Public Administration would then emerge to become the first formal, organized rebellion against the classical movement and orient the field towards the public interest, although H. George Frederickson, its proponent, wrote that he only meant to add *social*



equity to the objectives of public administration without fully rejecting the empirical findings of classical scholarship (Frederickson, 1971). Later, New Public Management (NPM) would emerge, employing the latest, battle-tested approaches from private-sector capitalism into the administration of public institutions, such as seeing citizens as customers, introducing market-like competition among government offices, decentralizing decision-making powers to frontliners, and fostering public-private partnerships for the delivery of public services (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). NPM thus creates an emphasis towards the attainment of the 3Es, attracting criticism for its propensity towards utilitarian instead of egalitarian ethics—it was, after all, the oft-credited father of modern capitalism himself, Adam Smith, who wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* as he was explaining the invisible hand: people in free markets participate in mutually beneficial exchange not out of sheer benevolence but for the attainment of their underlying self-interests (Smith, 1887). Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) would then criticize NPM and propose seven principles in New Public Service, yet another call-to-arms to focus on the public interest. To be sure, there is nothing inherently evil in working towards the 3Es or in attending to the best interests of the public, but a normative theory in which one cancels the other is fundamentally detached from the reality of public administration practice. There is yet to emerge a school of thought of public administration which creates a true synthesis of 3Es and the public good, and whose proposed methods are specific and actionable.

Finally, modern scholars of public administration developed an aversion to any definition or normative theory—especially those that have a strong inclination towards the attainment of the 3Es—that employs the notion of structure in solving the problems of governance. One of the most resounding criticisms against classical

scholarship is that its proponents defined rigid and inadaptably structures and methods that do not correspond to the constantly changing circumstances of real-world administrative work. Weber (1946) intricately defined a bureaucracy, its offices, and its roles; Taylor (1919) asserted that in every trade, “there is always one method and one implement which is quicker and better than any of the rest”; and Gulick (1937) enumerated, as though to restrict, the functions of a chief executive in his mnemonic POSDCORB. However, in *The Science of Muddling Through*, Lindblom (1959) proposed the use of decision-making frameworks such as *successive limited comparisons*, where a public administrator identifies the givens and constraints of the current situation, analyzes them, and then decides as he goes, and the *rational-comprehensive* method, where a public administrator outlines a clear goal, exhaustively considers all possible solutions, and then meticulously chooses and plans the step-by-step approach towards the completion of the goal. Arguably, these frameworks are forms of structured and methodical thought in themselves even in an essay that is titled to suggest otherwise. Thus, while breaking away from inadaptably theories is a step in the right direction, it is as though public administration scholars simply cannot make do with the absence of structure or method—it is only that the proposal of any such definition or theory must account for the changing realities of the practice and its surrounding circumstances.

### Characteristics of a Good Definition

Kuhn (1962) wrote in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that what truly defines a body of knowledge is the set of paradigms upon which the scholars of the field more or less agree. Admittedly, arriving at a consensus among public administration scholars is a tall order, but a good definition of public administration, if the field exists at all, must be unifying despite its long history of disagreement. Can such a



definition exist? If public administration exists, and scholars generally agree that it does, then it must necessarily follow that a definition exists. But what would be the characteristics of a verbiage that unifies all proposed positive and normative theories of public administration?

A good definition of public administration must, first of all, define a common domain of thought or *aboutness* for both the practice and the study. That is, when one is asked what public administration is, the answer must indicate what it is about. The shared aboutness keeps public administration from having to be defined twice—once as a practice and once more as a study—because the issues in scope, stated above, are different. The practice and the study must have the same scope. For example, it can no longer be that the practice of public administration is civil service alone, but the study also involves process management, performance analysis, economics, and ethics. Resolving this disconnect between study and practice results in a rejection of the Waldonian tradition of capitalizing Public Administration to refer to the study and of lowercasing it when referring to the practice. After all, the convention only creates unwarranted linguistic complexity—one cannot tell the capitalization of letters in spoken discourse, and confusion can easily arise from unintended context-switching. When one speaks of public administration, whether it refers to the practice or the study must simply be derived from the context of the discussion.

Second, a good definition of public administration must not be conceptually restricted to a specific set of structures, methods, or ideals of government. Much of American public administration scholarship and its progenies rest on the assumption that a government is democratic, republican, and has exactly three distinct branches—executive, legislative, and judicial. Such assumptions can only ever truly

apply to the situation of the United States. In reality, the number of branches and the separation of powers among them are arbitrary, varying from country to country and across time. Not all bureaucracies are or aspire to be the Weberian ideal of a monolithic hierarchy, and yet, the activities of such varying states and even autocracies and aristocracies, from a comparative standpoint, remain subject to the scrutiny of public administrators and scholars. This non-imposition of structure and method results in a true abolishment of the politico-administrative dichotomy, for the dichotomy requires that a legislative branch exist distinctly and disjoint from a certain executive branch. More importantly, however, the absence of imposition on ideals allows for cultural sensitivity, the lack of which was a criticism against the Comparative and Development Administration movements post-World War II. It also allows for disagreement among proponents of normative theories, to which public administration scholars can attribute the thriving of the field in the first place. New PA, NPM, and New Public Service are merely a few amongst many normative theories of public administration, after all.

Third, a good definition of public administration conceptually accommodates all of the concerns of the state. The vastness in scope and complexity of public administration has been acknowledged by Wilson himself as early as 1887 in his canonical essay *The Study of Administration* (Wilson, 1887). People in earlier societies, he explained, lived simpler lives, which was why the establishment of constitutions and the exercise of the rule of law were of primary concern. Civilizations grew, and suddenly, governments must bother with state revenues, tax collection, the postal service, and the cost-efficiency and the success of its operations. Consequently, classical American public administration adopted these administrative functions as the aboutness of its scholarship, and as the study grew and

**Table 1. Topics in the Domain of Public Administration**

Agriculture	Administrative history	Budgeting and finance	Culture	Education
Ethics	Energy	Environment	Health	Housing
Industries	Information and communication technology	Infrastructure	International relations	Labor
Law enforcement	Local government	National defense	Organizational management	Policy analysis
Poverty alleviation	Sports	Transportation	Tourism	Urban planning

modernized, personnel management and policy analysis. Philippine public administration, as a progeny of the American study through the Bell Mission (Reyes, 2015), began with the same topics and then grew to more areas such as public enterprises, local governments, voluntary sector management, technology management, and public health. There can be, however, even more subtopics within the practice and the study of public administration. Table 1 enumerates more such concerns which any proposed definition of the field must have the room to encompass.

Because of its vast scope, it follows that public administration, both as a practice and as a study, is necessarily interdisciplinary. A good definition of public administration, therefore, must also allow for the employment of all bodies of knowledge that are needed to fulfill all the functions of government.

Finally, however, a good definition for public administration must preserve its uniqueness from the bodies of knowledge that it necessarily employs. While it may employ economics in the design of a state's markets and international trade programs, public administration must not be economics. If it employs the computer sciences in the administration of the state's ICT infrastructure, it must not be the computer sciences. The design and management of public health programs must not make public

administration the study of medicine, the study of its sociopolitical environment must not make it political science or sociology, and so on. Truly, finding and proving the existence of a unique epistemic identity for public administration is one of the biggest challenges towards a satisfactory definition of it. Yet, public administration must remain the application of other disciplines instead of being the disciplines themselves. If scholars cannot arrive at this uniqueness, then it can be argued that public administration simply is not and cannot be its own body of knowledge, despite the fact that it already is and has always been even since its days under the name of *cameralism* in Europe.

### A Test-Driven Approach

In retrospect, only the traditionalists truly attempted to provide a positive and direct definition of public administration. The schools of thought that followed are rejections of classical scholarship, yet they are mere negations or normative theories at best which do not provide a direct description of what public administration is.

Still, by using *truth tables*, there seems to be a way to resolve the field's identity crisis in a positive and direct manner. First, we attempt to identify the characteristics that a definition must have for it to suffice, and then carefully convert each characteristic into a question that can only be





answered by yes or no. Already, we have a list of characteristics from the section above. We then either compile the definitions already put forth by scholars of the field or craft our own. Next, we evaluate each definition against each of the five questions. If all of the answers are yes, then we have arrived at a good, unifying definition of public administration. If at least one of the questions yields a no, then the definition being considered is invalid.

Why is a test-driven approach an appropriate method? Because it provides clarity to where there is none. The absence of a logical acceptance criteria is precisely why the intellectual crisis came to last so long in the first place. There was no clarity as to what a definition must aim to fulfill. A logical framework forces us to assess whether our expectations of the field are realistic, whether we truly understand it, and whether the object in consideration truly exists.

Stillman (2009), in his book *Public Administration: Concepts and Cases*, compiled a list of fifteen definitions offered by authors of public administration textbooks. Now, we consider some of them as test cases to demonstrate the use of this test-driven approach.

Table 2 shows the truth table for a definition offered by Fesler and Kettl. This 1996 definition,

which does not improve much on Wilson's 1887 essay, proposes a common aboutness for both practice and study that is unique enough, since there is not quite a field of study that is dedicated to the workings of a state's executive branch. However, the conceptual restriction to an executive branch makes rigid the structures of government that can be the subject of such a public administration scholarship. It also reduces the scope of public administration to only the executive branch, when what occurs in the other branches of government are also public administration concerns. This reduction in scope, in turn, limits the theories that can be applied.

Dimock, Dimock, and Fox in Table 3 propose a definition that is very characteristic of New Public Management. It succeeds in proposing a common aboutness but fails in everything else. The use of "citizens-consumers" here is a value judgment to the role of a citizen and is, therefore, a restriction on ideals. The production of goods and services is not the entirety of the functions of the state, and the definition's NPM slant suggests the employment of profit-driven theories from the private sector, which does not make its idea of public administration unique from business administration or economics.

**Table 2. Definition by J. W. Fesler and D. F. Kettl**

Definition	Question	Yes or No?
"Public administration in all modern nations is identified with the executive branch."  – James W. Fesler and Donald F. Kettl, <i>The Politics of the Administrative Process</i> (Second Edition, 1996)	Does it propose a common <i>aboutness</i> for both practice and study?	Yes
	Does it allow for variation on structure, methods, and ideals?	No
	Can it encompass all the activities and the concerns of the state?	No
	Does it accommodate all bodies of knowledge necessary to fulfill all the functions of government?	No
	Does it keep PA unique from other fields of study?	Yes

Rosenbloom and Goldman's definition in Table 4 is a mouthful, but it defines a common aboutness for practice and study, and the vast coverage of its mentioned governmental mandates aims to cover the concerns of the society as a whole. The application of managerial, political, and legal theories specifically for the purpose of governance also allows public administration to become unique as its own field. However, as with

other definitions, it assumes the three branches of an American democratic government and provides only a limited set of theories for the field to draw from. For example, managerial, political, and legal theories may only be a subset of all the theories employed in an executive ministry that administers the state's use of science and technology.

**Table 3. Definition by M. Dimock, G. Dimock, and D. Fox**

Definition	Question	Yes or No?
"Public administration is the production of goods and services designed to serve the needs of citizens-consumers."  – Marshall Dimock, Gladys Dimock, and Douglas Fox, <i>Public Administration (Fifth Edition, 1998)</i>	Does it propose a common <i>aboutness</i> for both practice and study?	Yes
	Does it allow for variation on structure, methods, and ideals?	No
	Can it encompass all the activities and the concerns of the state?	No
	Does it accommodate all bodies of knowledge necessary to fulfill all the functions of government?	No
	Does it keep PA unique from other fields of study?	No

**Table 4. Definition by D. H. Rosenbloom and D. D. Goldman**

Definition	Question	Yes or No?
Public administration is the use of managerial, political, and legal theories and processes to fulfill legislative, executive, and judicial governmental mandates for the provision of regulatory and service functions for the society as a whole or some segments of it."  – David H. Rosenbloom and Deborah D. Goldman, <i>Public Administration: Understanding Management, Politics, and Law in the Public Sector (4th Ed., 1997)</i>	Does it propose a common aboutness for both practice and study?	Yes
	Does it allow for variation on structure, methods, and ideals?	No
	Can it encompass all the activities and the concerns of the state?	Yes
	Does it accommodate all bodies of knowledge necessary to fulfill all the functions of government?	No
	Does it keep PA unique from other fields of study?	Yes

Finally, a definition that applies all criteria is one that is proposed by Graham and Hays in Table 5. It proposes a common aboutness for practice and study, and a focus on the implementation of policy is truly unique and definitive of modern public administration scholarship. There are no assumptions made of structure, methods, and ideals—even the activities of non-democratic states can be studied in such a definition. The term “public policies” conceptually encompasses

all the concerns of the state since both its presence and its absence are representative of the concerns of the citizenry. Consequently, the definition can accommodate any body of knowledge needed to implement such policies. However, Graham and Hays are hardly the pioneers of such a definition. There are many other similar proposals in Stillman’s compilation, as seen in Table 6.

**Table 5. Definition by C. B. Graham, Jr. and S. Hays**

Definition	Question	Yes or No?
“In ordinary usage, public administration is a generic expression for the entire bundle of activities that are involved in the establishment and implementation of public policies.”  – Cole Blease Graham, Jr. and Steven W. Hays, <i>Managing the Public Organization</i> (1986)	Does it propose a common <i>aboutness</i> for both practice and study?	Yes
	Does it allow for variation on structure, methods, and ideals?	Yes
	Can it encompass all the activities and the concerns of the state?	Yes
	Does it accommodate all bodies of knowledge necessary to fulfill all the functions of government?	Yes
	Does it keep PA unique from other fields of study?	Yes

**Table 6. Definitions Similar to Graham and Hays**

Public administration is concerned with the management of public programs. – Robert B. Denhardt, <i>Public Administration: An Action Orientation</i> (1995)
Public administration can be portrayed as a wheel of relationships focused on the implementation of public policy. – William C. Johnson, <i>Public Administration: Policy, Politics and Practice</i> (Second Edition, 1995)
The practice of public administration involves the dynamic reconciliation of various forces in government’s efforts to manage policies and programs. – Melvin J. Dubnick and Barbara S. Romzek, <i>American Public Administration: Politics and the Management of Expectations</i> (1991)
Public administration is centrally concerned with the organization of government policies and programs as well as the behavior of officials (usually nonelected) formally responsible for their conduct. – Charles H. Levine, B. Guy Peters, and Frank J. Thompson, <i>Public Administration: Challenges, Choices, Consequences</i> (1990)





## Conclusion

Public administration refers to all the work involved in the implementation of government policies and programs. This definition does not improve much upon Wilson's original proposition in 1887: "[Public administration] is government in action; it is the executive, the operative... Public administration is detailed and systematic execution of public law." Perhaps, if he did not go as far as orienting the field towards being an exact science, the existential crisis would not have happened and he would have gotten its definition mostly correct from the beginning. What does this say of the public administration scholarship in the century and decades more that followed? Does this mean that we did not go very far?

The struggle for self-identity is often experienced by an individual at youth which, for novelty's sake, compels even the best among us to reject the wisdom of the ages. At the end of one's phase of philosophical experimentations, one might come full circle and return to the starting point, although coming around does not necessarily mean resignation or conformity. People come around, too, for having grown much wiser, carrying with them a clarity of thought and a fuller understanding of what and who they truly are.

If a definition of our young field does not stray too far from where we began, it is only because of that deeper understanding which flourishes from wandering around for long enough. We come back only wiser and knowing our true selves. To come around, for the field, is to overcome our existential crisis. If, after all that has been said, we have only come back, it is only because we have come home.

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