

**The Future of Public Administration in the U.S.:**  
**Coping with Political Dysfunction in Scholarship and Practice**

Kenneth J. Meier  
School of Public Affairs  
American University  
Washington DC 20016  
[kmeier@american.edu](mailto:kmeier@american.edu)

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Abstract

This essay contends that the current crisis in US public administration is the continuation of long term trends that have permanently altered the practice of public administration. Three trends are identified: 1) the breakdown of the symbiotic relationship between politics and administration with the resulting politicization of the administrative process, 2) the disruption of the budget cycle, 3) the eroding of bureaucratic capacity to implement effective programs. The result is the creation of permanent crises affecting large areas of public service delivery at federal, state, and local levels. The essay then outlines a set of topics that academic public administration needs to address and then links these topics to changes in public administration curriculum in three areas: politics and administration (or democratic governance), adapting to the new budgeting uncertainty, and management of low capacity organizations in continual crisis.

The dramatic events in the first months of the second Trump administration, while unprecedented in scope and process, are essentially a continuation of a longer term unraveling of the symbiotic relationship between politics and administration (or democracy and bureaucracy) in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The activities create significant principal-agent challenges for the operation of public programs and the delivery of public services that will affect how public managers need to act and thus, what scholars of public administration need to teach in their classes, and in turn necessitate a refocus of public administration research. As in all crises that require major responses, there have long been indications of the current challenges in some areas of public administration that can provide a guide for what future public administration research, teaching, and practice could be.

This essay takes three parts. First, it retraces the argument that the current crisis (with one exception) is the continuation of trends long apparent in the breakdown of the symbiotic relationship between politics and administration in the U.S. Although the current crisis is consistent with the “democratic backsliding” literature worldwide (Bauer et al. 2021; Rockman 2019; Waldner and Lust 2018; Yesilkagit et al. 2024), there are unique contexts in various countries that frame the challenges to democracy differently; and they occur within country level contexts that can influence the response. Contexts in other countries could lead to different paths for public administration, so caution limits the analysis to the US. Second, the U.S. context can be viewed as changes in political behaviors that can theoretically be interpreted as principal-agent problems. Political principals essentially engage in behaviors that prevent bureaucratic agents from effectively applying their advantages of expertise and information asymmetry to solve public problems. This essay will also focus on the public administration’s micro-response,

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparative assessment of this concern see Christensen and **Error! Main Document**

that is how to continue to do the job of bureaucracy given political disfunction rather than macro-political reforms designed to alter the political system (e.g., see Bauer 2024).

Third, three practical problems spawned by the politicization of the administrative process will be discussed – the collapse of the annual budget process, the creation organizational environments that generate continual crises, and the erosion of bureaucratic capacity. In combination these generic problems limit government’s ability to solve public problems. Many of these current problems have long been apparent in some policy areas such as child protective services, elder care, substance abuse or implementation venues, notably the delivery of public services by nonprofits or local governments with limited capacity. Teaching and scholarship focused on these areas of public service with experience dealing with such conditions would create an opportunity for public administration to more effectively train future public servants and to make research more compatible with existing challenges.

In terms of organization, this essay will proceed in four steps. First, it will link current problems to a long term concern of public administration, how to effectively meld democratic processes with the existence of bureaucratic expertise or what can be termed the civil service “bargain” (Hood and Lodge 2006) or a symbiotic relationship between politics and administration. Second, it will argue that the current problems are part of a long term trend that has been apparent for decades. Third, current problems can be appropriately examined as principal-agent problems involving a lack of credible commitments by politicians that result in failure to set clear goals, failure to provide adequate resources to implement effective policy, and failure to permit bureaucracy to apply its expertise by politicizing the administrative process. These credible commitment problems will then be linked to an erosion of administrative

capacity. Finally, in three areas of current public administration that reflect these principal agent problems – the relationship between politics and administration, budgeting and finance, the erosion of administrative capacity in human resources – proposals for changes in both research agendas and teaching will be offered.

### **The Symbiotic Relationship between Politics and Administration**

Lacking the “routinization of charisma” justification for grants of administrative authority (Weber 1946), the U.S. tradition adopted the logic of a symbiotic relationship between politics and administration. Frank Goodnow (1906), in the classic statement on politics and administration, specified that there were two essential functions for democratic governments: politics and administration. Politics involved defining priorities (resolving political conflict) and providing the resources for collective action to address priorities; administration involved the design and implementation of policy with the application of expertise and the use of autonomy to deliver policy that actually worked. Goodnow specifically rejected a politics-administration dichotomy or the full separation of politics and administration reserved for separate institutions. Rather his argument was that both needed to be performed; what can be interpreted as a symbiotic relationship between the two.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Principal-Agent Model**

A symbiotic relationship between two sets of actors is consistent with logic of the principal-agent model, a model originally designed to deal with market-based exchanges with characteristics that deviate from the pure competition market model but frequently used in public

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<sup>2</sup> Goodnow’s book is essentially an argument for a responsible two party system as he viewed the British system at the time. The symbiotic relationship between politics and administration in the US can also be viewed as parallel to what is termed “the public service bargain” in the comparative literature (see Hood and Lodge 2006).

administration. The model specifies a buyer, the principal, who would like some good or service and a seller, the agent, who is willing to provide that good or service. The principal-agent problem arises because the agent has superior information (that is, the seller of a used car knows more about it than the buyer) and there is goal conflict between the principal and the agent (in this case, the principal would like to pay as little as possible and the agent would like to be paid as much as possible). This creates what is termed a “moral hazard” whereby the agent has an incentive to not disclose full information and thus charge more for a good or service.

As applied in public administration (Miller 2005; Waterman and Meier 1998), the underlying logic of the model remains the same but is complicated by the nature of the relationships between political principals and bureaucratic agents. The basic problems of goal conflict and information asymmetry remain. Politicians can have significantly different policy goals from bureaucrats in terms of how serious a problem is, the resources allocated to the problem, or even how the problem should be addressed (that is, do we deal with drug problems via law enforcement or public health?). At the basic level politicians would like the problem to be solved (or reduced in political salience) as cheaply as possible and in time for the next election. Bureaucrats, owing to their superior professional knowledge, generally prefer policies more likely to be effective even at higher costs, with a longer term focus, and consistent with their expertise and professional values. The moral hazard presented is that bureaucrats will alter or subvert policies, what is generally termed “agent cheating” as an extension of the market metaphor (agents doing less work than they charge for or more work than necessary).

Much of public administration, unfortunately, focuses only on the agent cheating side of the principal-agent model, and does not recognize that principal cheating is an equally and

perhaps more serious problem (see Waterman and Meier 1998). Drawing on Friedrich's (1940) statement that most of the political-bureaucratic failures of his day were the result of political failures rather than administrative ones, Meier (1997) focuses on cheating by political principals and how that undercuts effective democratic administration. His (p. 195) normative argument is that bureaucracies are institutions designed to be most effective "when 1) they are given clear goals by electoral institutions, 2) they are allocated adequate resources, and 3) they are given the autonomy to apply their expertise to the problem." He then relates a series of governance problems such as conflicting goals in public policy (a prominent example of the time was the Temporary Aid for Needy Families), the lack of adequate resources (with focus on the inability to pass budgets on time, the use of continuing resolutions and then the claw back of appropriated funds), and the political specification of policy instruments that showed little likelihood of success (abstinence only policies in reproductive health).<sup>3</sup>

Within the principal-agent model, these behaviors can be characterized as principal cheating. The failure to provide clear goals is simply the principal failing to reveal his or her preferences so that the agent cannot provide what the principal wants either because the agent cannot, because the action violates an existing contract (the principal-agent agreement), or because it would be unethical or perhaps illegal to do so. In many cases the actual goal appears to be eliminate programs (violating existing law and procedures), or in other cases the capacity is lacking (securing the borders), or there are serious ethical questions (potential policies on

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<sup>3</sup> The roots of these principal failures existed well before the 1997 essay with the emphasis on tax cuts over fiscal policy and the contentions in "supply side economics" that revenue gains would compensate for tax cuts and avoid deficits. Similarly there were frequent appointments of agency heads who lacked professional expertise but had strong policy views consistent with the president that appeared to undercut effective public policy. The problem could easily be traced back as far as the 1960s and the War on Poverty and the Vietnam War.

vaccines). The principal cheating then sets up the politician to scapegoat the bureaucrat for a future policy failure.<sup>4</sup>

The failure to provide adequate resources is a straightforward credible commitment problem, that is, the agent cannot rely on the principal to provide the agreed upon resources to deliver the services in question. Although one can often rely on the legal system to enforce and thus make commitments credible, it is unclear that the current administration or Donald Trump has a track record on honoring commitments that are made. This is particularly a concern given the short-term, rapid shifts in policy pronouncements.

Perhaps the most severe case of principal cheating is the unwillingness to accept the bureaucratic expertise needed to address public problems. The potential concerns of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., with his unorthodox and widely rejected medical and health views for the delivery of public health services, is a prime example. The termination of the Commissioner for Economic Statistics for reporting economic data that indicated economic problems using widely accepted standards is another. When rejection of autonomy and expertise is coupled with a “cease and desist” order on medical (or other) grants, there are clear principal-agent problems that are likely to have major policy consequences.

### **Principal Cheating and The “Trump Reforms”**

Significant management reforms targeted at the federal government are a hardy perennial in American politics that might focus on making government more productive (the Hoover Commission, PPBS, ZBB, the New Public Management) or more responsive to elected officials

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<sup>4</sup> The bureaucratic agent is trapped in a dilemma. If the initiative fails, the bureaucrat gets blamed; and unlike the ephemeral political administration, the failure would be justification for terminating the bureaucrat. If the policy succeeds, the bureaucrat was probably not needed in the first place; and thus the bureaucrat could be terminated as a cost savings.

(the Civil Service Reform Act of 1974, the Brownlow Commission, the expansion of schedule C in 1953). Although early in the process, the Trump reforms appear different in both scope and kind. First, many earlier reforms had a laser-like focus on performance, that is, improving the effectiveness, equity, or access for government programs and policy; some such as PPBS, ZBB, or the New Public Management were essentially framed as “evidence-based” public policy/administration. The Trump efforts clearly stand out from this effort in that analysis appears to play no role in the process. Claims are made (the role of DEI in the recent Reagan National air crash) before any evidence is gathered, requirements are established without knowledge of existing infrastructure (return to office mandates despite lack of office space or parking space), and one looks in vain for anything related to evidence to support the daily policy edicts especially when data gathering is delayed (employment statistics) or agencies announce moratoriums on publishing research (e.g, the Environmental Protection Agency<sup>5</sup>). From external observation the efforts appear far more targeted at reducing the capacity of government to take effective action than to improve government.

At the same time, aspects of the Trump reforms go beyond what has been implemented by previous efforts. They are generally promulgated by processes of questionable legal or constitutional grounds (see Kellough 2025 for similar first term Trump efforts). There are no study groups, no legislative hearings, and no apparent efforts to make sure a policy is possible (e.g., the voluntary retirement program for federal employees was issued with an acceptance deadline but there was no legal authority to make such offers at the time nor were funds available to pay for the program). This process is consistent with the principal-agent problems noted

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2025/09/20/epa-scientists-research-publications/> accessed Sept 9, 2025).

above. That is, the president cannot make a credible commitment to honor any agreement because he lacks the authority to do so.

Given the radical expansion of presidential powers, one can expect that there will be extensive litigation as state governments, interest groups, and individuals seeking judicial relief. That will likely result in conflicting rulings by different judges and varied implementation strategies in different areas of the country (witness the race and college admissions process during the early 2000s (see Hicklin 2007)). None of these issues are likely to be resolved in the short term and suggest the crisis will be long lasting.

### **Adapting to the New Environment**

Viewing the current crisis of administration as the extension of a longer term trend implies public administration should consider the current situation not as a temporary aberration, but rather a relatively permanent feature of the environment of U.S. public administration. The breakdown in the symbiotic relationship between politics and administration has led to four maladies that are reshaping public administrators ability deliver programs: 1) the politicalization of the administrative process which in turn has generated 2) the instability of the budgeting process and 3) a continued cycle of crises with the result being 4) a significant loss in government human resources capacity to deal with problems. Each will be discussed in turn while noting that some public programs have long operated under these circumstances. Research on these cases and the ability of some organizations to cope with and mitigate these problems offers the promise that public administration scholarship could provide advice and educate public administrators on how to operate effective public programs under these difficult circumstances.

The next four subsections briefly note how this set of problems affects the basic

principal-agent problem and in the process leads to ineffective or at least suboptimal public programs. The subsequent section will then present a roadmap for how public administration should respond by moving its research focus to organizations that have long faced one or more of the problems and then reorient its teaching to provide advice on how public managers can operate in these challenging environments.

The basic discussion assumes that our concern is public services and that public services are not limited to individuals employed by government agencies. With the current emphasis on the network delivery of public services (O'Toole, 1997) and the joint implementation of programs across units of government, public programs could be implemented by local governments, nonprofits, or for-profit organizations. Narrow views of where public services are delivered and by whom seem inappropriate, and the illustrations will include cases from all levels of government and nonprofit organizations that deliver public services.

### **The Politicization of Administration**

Politics has always affected public administration. This essay uses the phrase “the politicization of administration” as those instances where political actions or constraints prevent administrators from using autonomy and expertise to deliver effective public policy. Such actions devalue the contribution of bureaucratic expertise to public programs and reduce the attractiveness of public service as a career. Such examples might include basing disaster relief on unrelated political criteria (e.g., California wildfires), firing inspectors general and disrupting investigations of fraud and abuse, using the administrative process to punish political opponents, issuing decrees on policy or administration with little to no evidence (e.g., the blanket termination of federal employees), and so on.

Such actions have two immediate consequences. They reduce the attractiveness of public service jobs and increase turnover and vacancies. Studies of city managers have long since noted the link between politicization and subsequent turnover of top managers and, therefore, a loss of administrative capacity (Kaatz, French & Prentiss-Cooper 1999). Politicization can also generate negative public perceptions of the public service contributing to employee burnout and a further lack of capacity (Scieपुरa & Linos 2024).

The temporal mismatch between political decision processes and bureaucratic decision processes exacerbates the problems of effective governance under politicization. The punctuated equilibrium literature (Jones et al. 2003) shows that significant political changes occur far more frequently than significant bureaucratic changes owing to election cycles and the short-term focus on reelection. Bureaucratic processes, in contrast, are generally designed with a longer time frame to allow the application of expertise.<sup>6</sup> As politicization increases, and thus policy priorities rapidly change, bureaucracy has little chance to learn from experience and apply expertise to policy solutions. Rapid change and shifting of priorities affect not just the policy process of establishing program objectives but also the implementation via the budget process.

### **The Instabilities of the Budget Process**

The holy grail of budgeting is merging it with planning so that resources are matched with problems and programs and bureaucratic expertise can be applied to produce effective public policies. Starting with the precursors of the Office of Management and Budget and through various reforms such as PPBS and the New Public Management, the objective has been a regularized, predictable process that permits long run planning but allows adaptations based on

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<sup>6</sup> For an assessment of the problems of a short term focus in public administration see Zhang, et al. 2025.

periodic review. The objective is to move away from short term decisionmaking and focus on the key underlying problems. This requires a predictable, regularized budget process so that managers know the resources that they will have in the near and medium term future to deal with the current demands on the agency.

At the federal level, the predictability of the budget process has deteriorated significantly with the failure to pass annual budgets, funding by continuing resolution, and subsequent readjustments via the reconciliation process (Meyers 2024; Rubin 2007; Whitener & Savage 2025). Federal managers, as a result, frequently are uncertain about the availability of funds, or at times must spend funds rapidly to meet deadlines (especially problematic for long term projects such as infrastructure; Liebman and Mahoney 2017). The federal budget instabilities in turn affect state and local programs that rely on federal funds to implement joint programs and in turn nonprofits and for-profit organizations that often deliver the actual public services (Morgan et al. 2017).

Unstable budgets essentially undercut the advantages of bureaucracy as a policy implementation tool. They limit long running planning and rush decision processes to avoid meeting ever changing deadlines for spending money whether government agencies deliver the services directly or contract with others to deliver these services. The instability affects both short term delivery of services but also long term investments in capacity and infrastructure that often take years to develop.

### **The Cycle of Crises and the Erosion of Human Capital**

The politicization of administration with its short term focus and the disruption of the budget cycle has greatly increased environmental turbulence and results in organizations facing

continuing crises with little time to recover or to rebuild organizational capacity. The politicization of the administrative process means that policies change more frequently given election cycles so that both objectives and any potential resources (as the result of the budget disruptions) are uncertain. This creates a cycle of crises that overlays existing crises whether from natural disasters, economic problems, pandemics, foreign policy actions, or other factors.

The cycle of crises and the disruption of the budget cycle resulting from the politicization of administration, in turn, has a significant impact on government capacity through a reduction in human capital. Stable human resources are a prime source of organizational capacity to deliver effective programs and to be able to handle major crises events (see O'Toole and Meier 2011 on the former, Meier, O'Toole and Hicklin 2010 on the latter). Although the reputation of governments is that they have highly stable career patterns (the US federal government has traditionally had turnover rates well below both nonprofit and for-profit organizations), this human resource stability is not a constant across programs.

Systematic assessments have documented high annual turnover rates in many public programs including 29.7% in prison staff (Fifield, 2016), 30–40% in child protective services (US General Accounting Office 2003), and 17.2% in nursing (NSI Nursing Solutions, 2019) with individual health agencies reporting rates as high as 90% (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). High turnover rates appear to have accelerated during the COVID pandemic; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) reported a 9.3% increase in quits, 55.7% increase in layoffs, and a 26.7% increase in other separations. The result is that many government agencies cannot find individuals willing to accept positions resulting in large numbers of vacant positions (14% of state government jobs in South Carolina in 2017, Cope, 2017; 27% of

California's workers' compensation fraud investigators, Barrett & Greene, 2018).

The Trump demonization of government employees and the initial actions of the administration in terms of blanket termination of employees are likely to lower the attractiveness of federal government employment. Across the board termination of employees essentially violates the agreement that good performance will result in job security and thus justifying changing jobs and encouraging employees to invest the skills that are valuable to the specific job they hold (Papay et al. 2020). Similarly, the rapid nature of other terminations makes no assessment of how well individuals are performing in their current role, but rather appears to reflect past disputes or grievances with individuals (e.g., the termination of joint chiefs of staff and inspectors general). Establishing the federal government as an unreliable employer will intensify both the turnover problems that currently exist and increase the number of vacant positions. This replicates the pressures that currently exist in a wide variety of service areas where state and local governments or private sector organizations are the implementing agency (see below). In many cases states have adopted "at will" employment policies for public employees which eliminate many of the protections of a merit system (Cogburn et al. 2010).

When uncertainty of employment is added to other factors such as high stress, low pay or lack of resources, it under cuts the administrative capacity to provide effective programs. It is unclear whether a career civil service can be transformed into a just-in-time personnel system capable of providing sufficient expertise immediately or long term investment of specific skills needed to deliver public services. The mismatch between human resources needs and available skills in public programs involving substance abuse, corrections, policing, elder care and other areas appears not only to be a government problem but also affects the delivery of services via

nonprofits (Selden and Sowa 2015; Knapp, Smith and Sprinkle 2017) and for-profit firms that deliver public services in similar industries/policy areas (health care, child protective services, corrections, see for example, Castle and Engberg 2006; Dhillon 2022; Garland et al. 2003)

Although some private sector organizations can operate with high levels of turnover (McDonalds is a prime example), they operate in areas where positions require little expertise and job training and where high levels of judgement are not required. Within the public sector such strategies might be applied to tasks such as custodial work, but they are unlikely to apply to public sector jobs that require professional training, high levels of expertise, and relatively continued interaction.

The human resource capacity problems in terms of recruiting and retaining personnel will not just affect attractiveness of public service programs, but have a trickle up effect on managerial capacity as managers need to operate under conditions of high uncertainty without access to stable resources or experienced personnel. Existing research shows that management turnover in well performing agencies is associated with a significant decline in future performance (Boyne et al. 2011). Such problems are already apparent in public programs that operate in high stress environments. Dhillon (2022), for example, reports that the average experience of supervisors in child protective services is only three years in Texas. Because human capital markets are often linked across sectors (that is many occupations are employed by government, nonprofits, and for-profit firms to deliver what are public services, especially in health care and social services), human capital concerns in government are likely to reverberate in nonprofit and for-profit providers of public services (Langbein and Roberts 2022; for a review see Cregård, Corin, & Skagert 2017).

## **One Strategy for the Future of Public Administration**

Although the motivation for this essay was to deal with the current crisis and the potential for a drastically changed political environment, this sketched agenda is independent of the Trump administration and its consequences. The problems created by the breakdown of the relationship between politics and administration have been readily apparent for decades, and the current maladies are business as usual for many public service programs. Both our scholarship and our pedagogy need to adjust the world that has redefined the task of public organizations to deliver the values that public administration holds dear. The proposal is also premised that we fully accept that public programs are delivered by government agencies (often in different combinations of state, local and federal agencies and at times international ones), nonprofit organizations, for-profit organizations, and sometimes organizations that fit none of these categories but deliver what would be considered public services (think churches, interest groups and other manifestations of social capital). This section addresses the future of U.S. public administration in regard to the three sets of issues linked to the deterioration of the politics-administration relationship, each section will be divided into two parts – one on a research agenda and one on how the curriculum should change.

### **The Politicization of Public Administration: Research**

A small cohort of scholars, mostly political scientists identifying with the field of bureaucratic politics, are addressing the politicization of administration. Linking to an extensive classical literature (Long 1949), scholars such as David Lewis (2012), Susan Yackee (2024), Daniel Carpenter (1996), Rachel Potter (2019), and others have contributed substantially to a literature on political efforts to “control” bureaucracy. The current emphasis includes

bureaucratic strategies to manage political control so that bureaucracies can still develop autonomy and apply expertise to policy problems. Within the bureaucratic politics literature, several streams of work are relevant to the current crisis and how public administrators can exercise a more political and strategic role to manage the political environment.

One stream of literature focuses on specific procedures used by bureaucracies that can be used to manage the political pressures (Potter 2019) and protect bureaucratic autonomy and discretion (See also Park 2025). Much of this literature focuses on building a bureaucratic reputation on a variety of dimensions including technical expertise but also political knowledge of practical implementation problems (Bellodi 2023; Carpenter and Krause 2012; Lee and Van Ryzin 2019; Meier 1980).

Other work examines how bureaucracies can build bottom up political pressures to balance the top down pressures from elected officials, in essence having bureaucracies aggregating the interests of various publics. This might involve the creation of interest groups (the classic effort of agriculture agencies to organize farmers into collective action processes that in turn spawn interest groups, see Sheingate 2021) or somewhat less politicized strategies such as providing clientele the opportunity to participate in setting priorities, providing feedback on programs, participating in the production of services by coproduction or other strategies (Nabatchi & Leighninger 2015; Jo & Nabatchi 2021). A third strategy follows the logic of representative bureaucracy to recruit bureaucrats who share lived experiences with clientele and thus incorporate public demands indirectly into the bureaucratic process by infusing key values shared with the public (Ricucci & Van Ryzin 2017; or see a hybrid example in France, Keiff 2022).

Other strategies of dealing with the politicization of administration could be gleaned from systematic reviews of the case study literature on top bureaucratic managers who frequently deal with such pressures. A persistent theme in the public management literature is the political use (in addition to the implementation use) of networks to incorporate and deal with political pressures (O'Toole and Meier 2004). The use of network-focused research is now well established in a wide variety of policy areas and different countries and could be transformed into addressing how to manage the politicization of administration. There is a fairly extensive literature on how city managers (Newell and Ammons 1987; Stillman 2016), school superintendents (Petersen and Fusarelli 2006; Rozenzweig 2001) and university presidents (Alsbury 2014; Rutherford and Meier 2015) navigate between their professional and political roles that could also be systematically generalized to assess various potential strategies. Some recent work examines responses to politicization at the local level of administration (Kim, May & Fry 2024; Friedrich 2025).

### **The Politicization of Public Administration: Teaching**

Most of our professional masters' programs have an introductory course on the policy process or a course with the general theme of bureaucracy and democracy that serves as an introduction to the field and reinforces public values (although my experience is what is taught varies a great deal).<sup>7</sup> These courses touch on politicization (or should) but do not deal with it in depth or the strategies that managers use. There are essentially two options to incorporate

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<sup>7</sup> The NASPAA standards list core competencies that link to "public service values" and include to lead and manage in the public interest, to participate in, and contribute to, the policy process and to articulate, apply, and advance a public service perspective. All are likely to be covered in such a course (interview with former MPA director and member of NASPAA accreditation committee, COPRA).

training for more politicized environments, either a specialized course or infusing the general idea into all of our courses. The former is likely easier to implement since it relies on changing fewer courses. The course might start with the policy process, the sources of political pressures on public servants and move to what strategies managers use to deal with political conflict and politicization of administration. One course theme might be how the balance between internal management and external management (including dealing with politics) changes as one moves up the organizational hierarchy. Lacking a separate course, one could integrate this theme into all courses but that would likely be more difficult to implement consistently.

### **Adjusting to Contemporary Budgeting: Research**

Rational budgeting processes rely on a consistent timetable that allows for long term planning for building capacity, delivering services, and integration of evidenced-based evaluation. One of the deleterious consequences of politicizing administration is that the budgeting process has become a primary tool to create artificial crises that permit further politicalization without resolving any conflict. The growth of the reconciliation process at the federal level and the constant readjustments of current and future budgets essentially means that budget planning and rational budget processes taught in schools of public affairs are less reflective of budgeting in practice.

To the extent that the administrative process remains highly politicized and that politically engineered short term crises overlay and exacerbate more long term crises (such climate change, potential pandemics, natural disasters), research needs to shift from examining how traditional bureaucracies manage relatively stable budgets to how public organizations manage uncertain financial resources and are still able to maintain some reasonable level of

performance.

One potential roadmap for future research in public administration is visible in the literature on cutback management. Originally a highly descriptive literature on potential responses to budget short falls (see Levine 1979; Raudla et al. 2015; Schick 1988), current work now demonstrates how targeted responses to budget shortfalls can be absorbed by many organizations with modest consequences. A study of Texas school districts (Meier and O'Toole 2009) demonstrated both the frequency of budget crises (a ten percent or more budget cut appeared in 8.8% of all district years), and that these budget cuts had minimal impact on overall performance because managers strategically reallocated resources to critical core functions (instruction), substituted cheaper inputs for expensive ones, and delayed or paused activities that could not immediately affect performance. These actions were facilitated by the management capacity of the organizations involved and the general impact of organizational slack (see also Gorina, Maher & Park 2019). Similar findings linking capacity to crisis have been found for general purpose local governments in three countries (Barbera et al. 2017) and are linked to specific managerial strategies (Barbera et al. 2021; for a generalized framework see Schmidt, Groeneveld, & Van de Walle 2017). A more recent innovation can be found in experimental work on cut-back management strategies and how they might be framed to gain acceptance by the public (Flink & Xu 2024).

The budget focused literature could be greatly augmented by additional research on nonprofit organizations that are subject to the same budget instability as the result of government budget decisions and the impact of traditional economic cycles on budgets. What has been termed the “nonprofit starvation cycle” investigates this funding instability and how it

systematically reduces fiscal slack and thus prevents nonprofits from maintaining effectiveness in down cycles (Lecy and Searing 2015). Nonprofits tend to minimize overhead expenditures, not establish rainy day funds, and not take on debt with the result being that they lack the capacity to respond to the problems created by crises.

A related literature on revenue diversity could be reoriented to focus on strategies to smooth out budget instability and create the potential for building fiscal and organizational capacity (Hung and Haver 2019). While nonprofit studies are the most prevalent in this area, the concept of revenue diversity also applies to government agencies (as an example higher education is currently making significant adjustments in revenue diversification given the decline traditional public funding, and greater reliance on user fees [student tuition, facility rental, fees for nonacademic services], donor giving, and grant and contract research, see Teixeira et al. 2014). Many public organizations rely on a mix of user fees and voluntary contributions (including coproduction of services) in addition to government budget allocations (e.g., local recreation programs, motor vehicle and other licensing programs, mental health programs, see Bartle, Ebdon & Krane 2003; Harrell et al. 2023).

Although instability in the budgeting cycle was the specific problem that motivated this section, it is only one crisis factor that affects public organizations. Its relevance is its source in the politicization of administration. Equally valuable research focuses on other crises including ones generated outside the political system. Recent scholarship has investigated how public organizations respond to natural disasters (Ryu and Johansen 2017; McCrea 2022), the opioid crisis (McCrea 2020), and the recent pandemic (Song et al. 2024). These and other works stress traditional public administration variables such as managerial strategy, managing networks (see

also Qu 2025), organizational capacity, flexibility, organizational slack, the impact on nonprofits (Hung et al. 2024), and revenue/finance strategy (Elvira-Lorilla et al. 2024; Lozano-Rojas & Ivonchik 2025).

### **Adjusting to Contemporary Budgeting: Teaching**

There is still much merit in the traditional approach to teaching budgeting and finance. Normatively linking budgeting and planning simply makes practical sense and should contribute to organizational performance when conditions allow that linkage. At the same time there are clearly gaps when there are high levels of budget uncertainty either temporarily or chronically. Incorporating research on strategies to deal with budgeting uncertainty from the cutback literature and the more recent experimental literature is clearly worthwhile.

A more radical approach would be to teach finance and budgeting in that order with a focus on finance options that are choices of other people and choices that are open to public managers. Public finance courses appropriately focus on the basic consequences of raising revenue in different ways (different types of taxes, user fees, debt). The problem is these are decisions usually made by the political system so that while public managers need to be aware of this literature, they are not the ones that are making these decisions. Rather the finance discussion needs to also move to the level where managers (I am not making a distinction here between those operating in a government agency and those in nonprofits, see Carroll and Stater 2009) have discretion in using different revenue generating strategies including intergovernmental grants, user fees, voluntary cooperation, volunteers, coproduction, debt, and other methods of procuring resources. At this level the manager needs to understand both the viability of such revenue sources and the capacity that needs to be developed to create and

manage such a revenue source (that is, most organizations are not designed to have a fee for service system and that will require creating such capacity); a similar barrier faces nonprofits interested in applying for government grants (Mandeville 2007). Tapping into alternative sources of funds might also detrimentally affect existing sources of funds (Lu 2016).

### **Chronic Crises and Human Resources: Research**

Politicization of administration and the instability of the budget crisis, while developing trends, appear to be business as usual for a set of public programs that deal with what are multidimensional or wicked problems that have uncertain or contested technologies. Such crises place individuals in high stress situations where cases are highly variable, and failures can be unrelated to program effort, and those failures have major consequences. This collection of problems is characteristic of child protective services, corrections (incarceration, rehabilitation, reentry to society, recidivism), drug abuse treatment, elder care, and similar high touch individualized services with vulnerable populations. Such high stress situations means that vacancy and turnover rates are high with additional stress on both managers and workers in the area. Public services in such areas might be actually implemented by government agencies or via contracts with nonprofit or for-profit organizations (e.g., see Dhillon 2022 on child protective services; Amirkhanyan 2008 on elder care).

While the existing work in crisis organizations that suffer extreme HR challenges is relatively small (likely owing the difficult access to data and the high learning costs of doing research in such areas), existing research illustrates the clear potential to build a body of knowledge in regard to effective management and policies in such organizations. Perhaps the most examined question is the role of organizational capacity in effective administration.

Koerner & Johnston (2022) demonstrate that the impact of Medicaid expansion that allowed coverage of mental health services in probation services resulted in fewer cases of reincarceration when probation agencies had greater human resources capacity. McCrea (2020) shows a similar result in local governments' efforts to address opioid use and a parallel positive outcome with nursing homes and the protection of residents during the Hurricane Katrina evacuations (McCrea 2022).

How shifting to these worst case scenarios affects other common management activities and their impact has also been examined in a few cases. Bauer & Johnston (2020) find incarceration outcomes can be detrimentally affected by the use of private contractors. Van den Bekerom, Torenvlied & Akkerman (2016) show that internal management has the potential to allow better responses to organizational turbulence. Schmidt & Van de Walle (2022) use data from Dutch corrections facilities to reexamine classical management strategies of prospecting, defending and reacting under existing resource constraints. Dhillon's (2022) study of child protective services in Texas showed that the traditional strategies to reduce turnover (a combination of increasing salaries and substituting experience for education) were essentially temporary in impact and thus ineffective. Hawes & Testa (2020) use analysis of organizations under stress to present empirical findings and a theoretical argument that unanticipated crises pose problems different from those that can be anticipated and, thus, cannot be planned for in advance.

Key questions of vacancies, turnover, and the lack of human capital in these continual crisis organizations seem to offer significant potential for reassessing what works in public administration and where research should focus. Some evidence exists that not all turnover is

harmful and that there might be an optimal level of turnover that adds new ideas to the organization to offset the costs of turnover (see Meier and Hicklin 2008; An 2021; 2019). Even in high turnover organizations, there might be strategies where certain HR resources are more crucial for organization success, or specific programs where either contracting out for human services or retaining in-house capacity might be more effective. Other recent work at the state, local, and nonprofit levels has used crisis situations to investigate the role of collaboration (Autioniemi & Jalonen 2025), the role of nonprofit capacity (Prismakova & Pysmenna 2024), the influence of structural factors (Broms, et al. 2024) and even causal inference (Phu & Khuc 2025).

Overall, however, research on organizations under continued crisis remains relatively rare compared to more institutionalized and stable programs. Barriers to additional research include both the intensive investment by scholars to become familiar with the technical details in the policy area and access to quality data sets that contain information on management and performance that can be linked to the ability to survive and even flourish under conditions of continual crises. Creativity in building databases that can be supplemented by additional surveys or qualitative research are a promising approach.

The human resources problems generated by low pay, stressful working conditions, high turnover, and a lack of experienced supervision in these crises organizations need to be a major priority for scholarly research. Some nursing homes were able to weather the COVID19 crisis and protect their residents from the disease and the resulting mortality rates (Song, et al. 2024). Some local governments performed significantly better than others in dealing with opioid abuse (McCrea 2020). Studies that identify better performers in a policy area and how they differ from

others should be a high priority in creating a knowledge base that can then be used to better prepare public administration students for careers that will increasingly resemble those in these continual crisis organizations (Poister et al. 2013).

### **Chronic Crises and Human Resources: Teaching**

Civil service regulations and policy have long attempted to systematize and regularize the process of recruiting, hiring, training, and disciplining public employees. What the continuing crisis organizations show is that these processes will generally fall short in areas with high turnover, unattractive jobs, high levels of stress, low pay and other factors. It appears that such problems are chronic in many public, nonprofit and for-profit organizations that deliver public services. How one can effectively manage a program with an annual turnover rate of 20-30% is unclear but much value could be gleaned from the experiences of managers who face such problems. One exemplary study of nonprofits provides an example how research in this area could focus on organizations that face major HR problems and the strategies that could be used (Selden and Sowa 2015). That study focused on how to reduce high levels of turnover and finding four factors successful organizations use. First, effective on-boarding includes activities for the first full year including the assignment of mentors and frequent evaluation meetings to adapt new hires to the organization. Second effective leadership succession plans signal to employees about future opportunities for growth in the organization, Third, compensation systems need to reward those individuals with demonstrable high performance. Fourth, these are all facilitated by positive relationships among employees and managers.

These practices validated by Selden and Sowa are generally just good human resource practices, and it is important to note that they deal with attempts to reduce turnover. The chronic

and pressing problem in crisis agencies is how to manage in an environment that generates high turnover simply because organizations cannot find individuals willing to take the jobs that are available because they are too stressful, pay too little, or have other factors that make them undesirable. Strategies for managing organizations that face high turnover as the result of these structural factors is a research area that desperately needs greater attention.

Building a curriculum from the limited research literature which is more focused on general patterns than on potential optimal strategies within the capacity of public managers would be difficult. More practically designed courses that incorporate research on the crisis generated HR problems supplemented by practitioners with experience appear to be a more feasible option. Nonprofits in particular operate in situations where they often contract for HR services rather than build the capacity in-house (albeit more for technical compliance with tax laws and other legal requirements). Such strategies should be part of any HR course sequence.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presented an argument that current problems in democratic governance are the result of the breakdown of the symbiotic relationship between politics and administration. The blame for this breakdown lies at the feet of the political process whereby the political system has refused to provide clear policy priorities, failed to provide the resources to build successful programs, and has restricted the autonomy that bureaucrats need to use their expertise to craft programs that work. In principal-agent terms, the system is failing because politicians have not made credible commitments to the principal-agent relationship.

A set of interrelated maladies affecting contemporary governance were noted. First, the administrative process has been politicized by emphasizing responsiveness to electoral officials

at the expense of technical expertise. This politicization has in turn generated a disruption of the budget process that prevents long term planning and forces programs into binge-purge budget cycles that limit any long range solutions. The budget crisis and the politicization of administration, in turn, contribute to a continued crisis cycle for public programs that renders effective policy difficult if not impossible and erodes the human capital of bureaucracies so that they are less likely to be effective in the future. These problems increasingly affect most government programs whether implemented by government agencies, nonprofit organizations or the for-profit sector.

The essay then argued that public administration research and teaching needs to adapt to this new environment and proposes a series of changes in research emphasis that focuses on these acute problems rather than traditional questions of public administration. These changes in research should be designed to build a pool of knowledge that can then change our curriculum so that future public servants are trained to operate in politicized environments with unstable budgets, continued crises, and with potentially eroded human resources capacities.

The essay is focused on the historical and contemporary context of the United States, and this focus brings forth some qualifications and limitations. First, the situations in other countries take place in a variety of different political systems that operate within widely varying institutional arrangements among the political and bureaucratic systems under public service bargains that diverge from the US within national cultures even more divergent. Additional work in other national contexts is needed as is the effort to draw more global generalizations. Second, the essay only illustrated the impact of the crisis as it affects three areas of public administration research and study. Additional work outside of the areas of budgeting, human resources

management, and managing the political environment are needed to address how the crisis affects policy analysis, the lessons of organization theory concerning structural arrangements, the meaning of and the teaching of administrative ethics, or more bottom up processes on how bureaucrats interact directly with clientele including the impact on direct participation via coproduction or other processes.

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