

ROBERT H. ELLIOTT

PUBLIC PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION

A VALUES PERSPECTIVE



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Public Personnel Administration: A Values Perspective

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Preface

This book examines public personnel administration from a value-oriented perspective. It is designed to be used as a supplement to any of the public personnel textbooks currently in use. Because of its supplementary nature, it is designed to explore several areas in greater detail than is possible in a general survey textbook. The main thesis of this book is that public personnel specialists face conflicting value dilemmas and that the way in which they resolve these dilemmas has considerable impact on the formulation of public personnel policy. Before students and practitioners in the public personnel field can understand the public personnel policy-making process, attention must be devoted to the field's underlying value dimensions. A number of writers in the past have noted the importance of values in the public personnel field, but none have emphasized the value elements to the extent that they are covered in this book. Chapter One sets forth a set of primary values important to the field, and each subsequent chapter looks at a specific area of public personnel policy using a value-oriented perspective. I have taken an eclectic approach to the selection of the policy areas explored. Because this book is designed to be used as a supplement to a major textbook, certain areas that are normally treated in most textbooks are given little emphasis (particularly historical development of the field and labor relations). However, this approach has allowed more in-depth coverage of a number of contemporary issues, such as the general area of women's rights (including comparable worth, sexual harassment, the emergence of the dual career couple, and pregnancy discrimination), race relations, the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, cutback management, and the sometimes "pseudo-scientific" nature of the personnel field.

Many people have contributed valuable inspiration, advice, and constructive criticism during the writing of this book and for that I will always be grateful. My parents instilled in their children the value of education, my family provided support, my university provided encouragement and some of the time necessary in such an under-

taking. Important insights have been gained from the following individuals who reviewed different parts of this book: Anthony F. Campagna of The Ohio State University, Eugene L. Barrington of Texas Southern University, Jack A. Kerr of the University of Southern California, Jack Rabin of Rider College, and Harry Wolf of Golden Gate University. At Reston Publishing Company, I am particularly grateful to the editors and editorial assistants who have worked very patiently with me during this book's construction. People such as Ted Buchholz, Catherine Roszbach, Monica Finnigan and Barbara Gyles deserve special mention. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the inspiration provided by a number of scholars in the field. People such as Frederick C. Mosher, Herbert Kaufman, Herbert Simon, Donald Klinger, and David Rosenbloom have, through their writings about values and the role of values in the shaping of public personnel policy, planted the seeds of curiosity which ultimately led to the writing of this book. Certainly, all of the above individuals have in some way contributed to this book, however, this in no way implies that any of the above individuals or their university affiliations endorse this book. The organization and ideas are my own and any shortcomings are my responsibility.

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Chapter 1

Values in the Field of Public Personnel Administration

INTRODUCTION

Public personnel administration is still a very young field of study. It has developed considerably since the passage of the Pendleton Act¹ of 1883, but a consensus has never been achieved over many of its goals and objectives. It started as a reaction to the era of spoils politics and spent its infancy acting as a protector of the merit system. By the 1930s, the field had started to develop its own professional specialists in selection, classification, job analysis and other functional areas. By the 1960s and early 1970s, personnel became a primary vehicle for the implementation of public policies designed to bring about a more representative public work force and, by the late 1970s, the personnel field started to feel the crosspressures caused by claims of reverse discrimination by the white majority class. In the 1980s discussion is focusing on the role of women in the American work force and on policies and procedures designed to cope with shrinking resources sometimes referred to as "cutback management".

The time has now come to examine many of the policy decisions facing the field of public personnel administration using a value-oriented framework. Before we can begin to understand the shaping of public personnel policy, we must come to grips with the value-

laden dimensions of the public personnel world. Before we can fully appreciate decisionmaking and problem solving in our field we must come to the realization that values and value conflicts play a central role in many areas. Problem-solving strategies based on pure rationality and scientific objectivity, while necessary in many areas, can inhibit constructive progress if the value dimensions are ignored.

In the 1940s, Herbert Simon pointed out the role of facts and values in public sector decisionmaking. In so doing, he warns that "... problems do not come to the administrator carefully wrapped in bundles with the value elements and the factual elements neatly sorted."² When examining our public bureaucracies in the 1960s, Herbert Kaufman described three values—representativeness, politically neutral competence, and executive leadership—which he felt served as the dynamic that motivated various reform efforts in our administrative machinery.³ Frederick Mosher has also examined the role of values in the development of the public personnel field.⁴ More recently, writers such as Rosenbloom and Klingner have addressed the importance of values for modern public personnel management.⁵

Several excellent textbooks on public personnel administration are currently available,⁶ and some of these works are beginning to address the place of values in the personnel management process.⁷ In his book, Klingner sets forth a "value-analytical" framework that is an important pedagogical step in understanding the dynamics of modern public personnel processes. This four-quadrant model combined with a systems analytical perspective paints a more colorful picture of the personnel field (and hopefully a more accurate picture) than some of the earlier process-oriented texts. While the earlier works are still valuable resources, their functional, technique-oriented approach often failed to stress the politically charged nature of the environment within which the public personnel administrator must operate. This "one best way" philosophy placed such a heavy emphasis on technique and scientific objectivity that the field of personnel came to be viewed as the application of a series of routine procedures related to the recruitment, selection, evaluation, promotion, or dismissal of employees.

Objectivity and scientific rationality were essential criteria to an infant public personnel field trying to justify its existence against political corruption and against a long history of politics based on political favoritism. It was only natural for a young and still highly vulnerable field to seek neutrality, objectivity, and scientific precision to establish its identity in a somewhat hostile political world. Many personnel texts, therefore, were both a reflection of and a perpetuation of this image.

Today, after the radical social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, to continue picturing public personnel administration as

the neutral, objective, and value-free implementation of societal objectives is to perpetuate a myth. To be regarded as a mature field worthy of scholarly analysis, public personnel must recognize this political value-laden atmosphere. As Klingner has observed, "rather than there being 'one best way' of personnel management, there exists a variety of personnel policy choices which have different outcomes for the employee and client groups competing for scarce organizational resources."⁸ What was a necessary picture of public personnel at one point in time may not be appropriate and, indeed, may be deceptive at another point in time. As the biblical phrase goes, "but when I became a man, I put away my childish things." Today, it is time for a more adult, pragmatic approach to the study of public personnel, focusing on the values inherent in personnel decision-making. An approach such as this, exposing the built-in value conflicts that must be considered in formulating public personnel policy, may bring with it a new appreciation of, and respect for, the delicate nature of the public personnel profession. This book is based on this value-laden approach.

Before we consider value conflicts that impact on public personnel management, let us examine the primary values that have played a major role in the evolution of this field. Fourteen values were selected for analysis and are displayed in Figure 1. Another writer might select others or might word these values in a slightly different way, but these, at least from this perspective, have played the major historical role in determining the present shape of the public personnel field. Some may take issue with the way in which these primary values are defined and it is recognized there are several possible definitions. While one may disagree with the wording, it is hoped that there is general agreement that the ideas expressed in these value definitions have all been major forces forming the contemporary face of public personnel administration. It is these definitions that will form the basis for the value conflicts that will be discussed in later chapters.

Primary Values of Public Personnel Administration

Elitism — a belief in control by a small and privileged group. Generally used to characterize our very early public service—especially prior to the time of Andrew Jackson. A tendency to view the upper levels of the public bureaucracy as being occupied by a privileged and closed group.

Spolls — rewards in the form of government jobs or other types of preferential treatment given by successful political candidates in

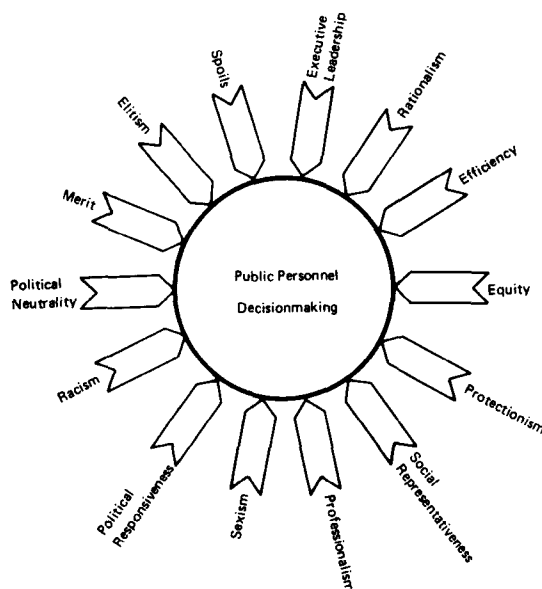


FIGURE 1.1. Public Personnel Administration's value-laden environment.

exchange for partisan support. Spoils still exists to a limited extent at all levels of the public service in the United States.

Racism — the notion that one race is superior to another race and therefore is entitled to differential treatment based on race. A racist personnel system is one that gives unwarranted advantage in its personnel policies to one race.

Sexism — prejudice based on a person's sex. An arbitrary stereotyping of males and females on the basis of their gender. A sexist personnel system would condone unwarranted advantage in its personnel policies to one sex.

Merit — value, excellence, or superior quality. A merit system bestows rewards based on a person's merit sometimes determined through competitive examinations. A reaction against the spoils system.

Protectionism — an attitude or opinion that politicians are out to subvert the merit system concept, throw out of office current employees, and insert their political cronies into merit system

positions. Therefore, a major responsibility of the public personnel professional is to guard public merit system employees from partisan political abuse. Elaborate procedural safeguards for public employees have been institutionalized in most public merit systems throughout the United States. Rights to public hearings, to lengthy appeals, to unionization, and to collective bargaining all serve to protect today's public employee against arbitrary and capricious treatment by management.

Political Neutrality — the act of not taking sides in a political conflict and exercising detached objectivity in performing job duties. This value is a thread woven deeply into the fabric of public personnel administration. In practice, this means that civil servants hired under a merit personnel system are expected to remain nonpartisan and simply be the objective implementers of the policy directives of whichever party is in power. Politically neutral merit system employees stand in marked contrast to politically appointed officials who gained office because of their political attitudes, loyalties, and service.

Rationalism — being based upon reason or logic; the belief that reason is the prime source of knowledge and that it provides the only valid basis for action. A personnel system based on rationalism would emphasize logical systematic procedures derived from research and study. A part of the "scientific management" approach to organization.

Efficiency — acting effectively with a minimum of waste, expense, or unnecessary effort. It is a value closely tied with rationalism and both are related to the "scientific management" movement. An efficient personnel system maximizes productivity and minimizes waste and cost in its procedures.

Executive Leadership — Public personnel administration should be viewed as a "tool" by which a chief executive can better manage the organization and accomplish stated objectives. The personnel officer should report to and be responsible to the chief executive. The purpose of the personnel officer under this theory is to advise the executive on personnel techniques and policies that will enable him/her to successfully implement programs. A view of the public personnel function as an aid to the chief executive rather than as a protector of the merit system from the chief executive.

Political Responsiveness — an idea akin to the previous definition of "spoils" but in a larger context. Political responsiveness

implies a recognition by the personnel field of the legitimacy of the electoral mandate on the part of the political official and a willingness to yield, in some circumstances, to enable this official to accomplish legitimate stated objectives. This is not to be taken to mean the illegal subversion of merit system rules and regulations, but rather an attitude of cooperation and a willingness to be creative and innovative in finding mutually acceptable grounds that enable the elected official to accomplish stated objectives. Obviously, when carried too far, permanent damage to the merit concept will be the result.

Equity — the state of being just, impartial, and fair. This is not necessarily synonymous with equal treatment. An equitable personnel system is one that is based on a commitment to just and fair treatment in all areas.

Social Representativeness — As decisions made in the public bureaucracy have a tremendous impact on the lives of different citizens, the bureaucracy should, in its physical makeup, its attitudes, and its actions, reflect the heterogeneous nature of the American population. This is still a very controversial assertion based on a number of unproven assumptions regarding the causal links between an individual's background, attitudes, and behavior, but it remains an important pressure on the public personnel system.

Professionalism — Without engaging in a debate over the status or lack of status of personnel administration as a professional field, the term professionalism is used here to imply adherence to a generally recognized body of standards in making work-related decisions. A professional is one who identifies with outside criteria followed by other experts in a field; one who is not strictly guided by the internal morals, ethics, and standards of his/her own organization but often looks outside his/her organizational bounds for other points of reference in decisionmaking. Public personnel has often been criticized for lacking a real pressure toward professionalism.

Brief Historical Overview

Public personnel administration has been blessed with a number of outstanding historical treatments,⁹ and another in-depth historical analysis will not be attempted here. Readers needing an in-depth historical treatment are encouraged to refer to the cited references or to refer to the appropriate historical sections of most general public personnel textbooks. It is, however, important to set each one of our primary values in its proper historical context. By looking at Figure 2, the reader can obtain a picture of the general time frames wherein

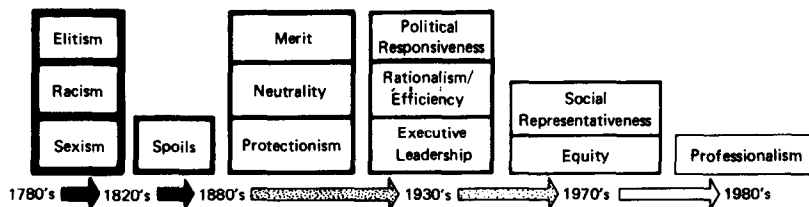


FIGURE 1.2. Public Personnel Administration's value development time line.

different values were dominant. It should be emphasized that a given value did not altogether disappear at the end of a given time period; it simply became less dominant in the future time frames as new values emerged. Personnel decisionmaking in the 1980s is still influenced to some degree by all of these primary values.

The time period spanning our first five presidents is usually referred to as an elitist period because the small governmental service during this time was heavily composed of the aristocratic class. Washington and Adams required of applicants proof of ability, integrity, and fitness. Yet only those of superior social status stood a chance of securing positions in our earliest governmental bureaucracy as very few people could read. Hayes and Reeves estimate literacy at less than 1 percent.¹⁰

Our time line in Figure 2 lists three primary values—elitism, racism, and sexism—as being dominant during this period. Perhaps it is unfair to characterize our first group of presidents as racist and sexist since they were simply following the norms of the time. Slavery was still an accepted institution and a woman's place was still in the home. However, these two values are listed not to condemn our earliest leaders, but to point out that these two values have existed since the founding of our country and have played a major role in the evolution of our public personnel system from its infancy.

Under Jefferson, party loyalty emerged as one consideration for governmental service, though not nearly to the extent that it was to become a consideration later under the spoils system. Jefferson was interested in redressing the balance in the bureaucracy between Federalists and his own Democratic-Republicans. He perceived this balance to be weighted heavily in favor of the Federalist Party.¹¹ Andrew Jackson's election in 1828 marked the emergence of the primary value of "spoils" politics on the national political scene. Spoils was already a deeply entrenched system in many state and local governments, but Jackson gave the spoils system a certain respectability at the national level. Spoils was ushered in at the national level during a period of "democratizing" the American political system by

opening it to new groups. "Elitism," embodied by John Quincy Adams, was soundly rejected. Jackson, who was personally identified with the common man, the use of the spoils system, and the principle of regular rotation in office, emerged victorious.

In many instances in the years following Jackson's election, government jobs were put up for the highest bidder. Competence was no longer as critical a yardstick for employment as it had been under earlier administrations. Political party machines flourished based on the exchange of public jobs for party votes on election day. Graft and corruption were inevitable companions with spoils politics. One political party leader of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party organization in New York City, represented some of the accepted political philosophy of the spoils era when he discussed the distinctions between "honest graft" and "dishonest graft":

Just let me explain by examples. My party's in power in the city, and it's goin' to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a new park at a certain place.

I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.

Ain't it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? Of course, it is. Well, that's honest graft.

The Democratic Party leader quoted above, George Washington Plunkitt,¹² then gives examples of "dishonest graft" such as simply robbing the city treasury, blackmail, or working with gamblers and lawbreakers. He concludes by assuring readers that Tammany leaders would never go in for dishonest graft because "there is so much honest graft lyin' around when they are in power."

We often completely condemn the spoils era and forget that spoils did serve certain functions in the American political system: (1) it rewarded individuals for participation in a successful political party campaign; (2) it allowed elected political officials to appoint friends loyal to their policies to important governmental positions; (3) it guaranteed a flourishing political party machine; (4) it served certain welfare functions such as temporary housing in party headquarters for loyal followers after a fire had destroyed their home, or the traditional turkey for the destitute on Thanksgiving and Christmas; and (5) it opened what had been a rather closed, elite-dominated bureaucracy.

Almost from its inception, however, spoils was severely criticized, as illustrated in the following two quotes:

Every four years, the whole machinery of the Government is pulled to pieces. The country presents a most ridiculous, revolting, and disheartening spectacle. The business of the nation and the legislation of Congress are subordinated to the distribution of plunder among eager partisans. Presidents, secretaries, senators, representatives are dogged, hunted, besieged, besought, denounced, and they become mere office brokers. The country seethes with intrigue and corruption. Economy, patriotism, honesty, honor, seem to have become words of no meaning. (George William Curtis, leader in the fight for civil service reform, 1870.)

The spoils system was more fruitful of degradation in our political life than any other that could possibly have been invented. The spoils-monger, the man who peddled patronage, inevitably bred the vote-buyer, the vote-seller, and the man guilty of misfeasance in office. (Theodore Roosevelt, Civil Service Commissioner, 1895.)

Both of these quotes¹³ illustrate the intensity of the anti-spoils mentality that had gripped the nation by the 1880s. Other primary values were now vying for center stage.

Clean-up-government campaigns had become common by the 1880s as a reaction against the excessive corruption exposed during several presidential administrations. One way to clean up government was the passage of the Pendleton Act, an act embodying the emerging primary values of selection based upon merit and protection of public servants from partisan political control.

There are several theories about why the Pendleton Act was passed, and each has a certain element of truth.¹⁴ The Garfield assassination, the dire straights of the Republican Party, the WASP movement, the demands of big business for a government more competent and free of corruption, and a supportive chief executive, all likely played a part.

The Pendleton Act established the United States Civil Service Commission (CSC) as a semi-independent organ to administer the new merit system, which at its founding covered only 10 percent of the federal civil servants in the Washington, D.C. area and covered none of the field service.¹⁵ The most important feature of the Pendleton Act was its commitment to merit selection based on competitive examination.

The single, simple, fundamental, pivotal idea of the whole bill is, that whenever, hereafter, a new appointment or a promotion shall be made in the subordinate civil service in the departments or larger offices, such appointment or promotion shall be given to the man who is best fitted to discharge the duties of the position, and that

such fitness shall be ascertained by open, fair, honest, impartial, competitive examination.¹⁶

Neutrality in the selection process was to be assured through the use of competitive examination in which "merit" for the position was determined. Neutrality in the execution of administrative duties was advocated during this timeframe, but took on greater significance during the scientific management movement of the twentieth century.

Protection against political abuse was set forth in section 2 of the Act:

... no person in the public service is for that reason under any obligation to contribute to any political fund, or to render any political service, and that he will not be removed or otherwise prejudiced for refusing to do so. ... no person in said service has any right to use his official authority or influence to coerce the political action of any person or body.¹⁷

During the first several decades of its existence, the CSC focused its primary emphasis on the development of written competitive exams and the protection of the nonpartisan nature of appointments to the federal bureaucracy. It was not until the 1930s that this "policeman" role for the CSC started to change into the more positive posture of bringing into government service the very best the work force had to offer. As it has been described elsewhere, the emphasis changed from "keeping the rascals out" to the more forward-looking philosophy of "only the best shall serve the state."¹⁸

Public personnel administration grew up simultaneously with the scientific management movement. Frederick W. Taylor emphasized the importance of rationality in solving work-related problems.¹⁹ Efficiency could be maximized by finding the "one best way" to perform a given task and standardizing this process. Position classification, job analysis, and testing are all based on finding the one best way or one best person to carry out a task. The CSC was greatly influenced as early as the 1920s by this scientific approach to personnel administration. Job analysis, test validation, performance testing, and ratings of training and experience are all highly quantitative personnel processes that rely on their claim to scientific objectivity as their main basis for existence.

It was important to an infant personnel field to identify itself strongly with rationalism, quantification, and objectivity, all of which were bound together in the overall scientific management movement. As the primary values of rationality and efficiency emerged, public personnel administration was positioned not only as an advocate of