

## 10th Anniversary Special: Series 2

# A Neglected Subject: How Grand Politics Affects Public Administration

**Alasdair Roberts**

University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA

### **Abstract**

Specialists in public administration often deny a significant connection between questions of administration and high-level politics. But there is a close and important connection: the subjects we examine at the middle- and micro-levels of administration are largely determined by choices made in the higher realm of grand politics. Understanding the connection between grand politics and administration is especially important during turbulent phases of history, such as the last twenty years. One way to comprehend grand politics and its connection to administration is through the analytic lens of governing strategy. Leaders of states invent strategies that identify key national objectives and the main lines of national policy, and institutions are built or reformed to give expression to those strategies. But strategies are fragile, and consequently the institutional architecture of the state requires constant renovation.

**Keywords:** public administration, politics, strategy, reform, fragility, resilience

### **The Missing Link**

My purpose in this paper is to argue that it is impossible to study or practice public administration without paying some attention to matters of grand politics, and that a useful way of viewing grand politics is through the analytic lens of governing strategy.

It is helpful to begin with definitions. Public administration is largely concerned with the design and operation of institutions to achieve public purposes. And grand politics is largely concerned with the methods developed by the ruling group within a state for resolving

foreign and domestic problems, and remaining in power. It is the process by which the overall direction of government policy is determined. This may also be called high politics, macropolitics, or the politics of grand strategy (Cowling 2005, 3–12; Trubowitz 2011, Chapter 2; Paragi 2016, 105).

For many reasons, there has been a tendency within the field of public administration to deny that the field has any connection to grand politics. I will enumerate the main arguments in defense of this position and explain why these arguments are ill-founded. I will then advance the contrary position, that we cannot grapple properly with problems of administration without an appreciation of grand politics. This means that we need a way of thinking about grand politics, and I will sketch a simple framework for doing this. I will argue that leaders are compelled to craft an overall strategy for governing, and that the work of building and operating institutions – which is the main concern of public administration – should be understood as a way of giving expression to strategy.

There are moments in which domestic and international affairs are untroubled, and in which leaders do not think much about whether the strategy they are pursuing is the right one. In moments like that, the study and practice of public administration is straightforward. Premises about the aims and methods of governmental action can be taken for granted. However, these moments of calm are unusual. More typical are periods of turbulence, like the period we are experiencing right now. In periods of turbulence, strategy is unstable. Overall priorities are likely to shift dramatically, with important consequences at the level of administration. In periods like this, it is especially important that specialists in public administration pay attention to grand politics.

### **Why we Avoid Grand Politics**

There are many reasons why specialists in public administration avoid explicit discussion of grand politics. In some countries, an open discussion of grand politics is not permitted by the regime. For example, Chinese universities operate under the strict supervision of the Communist Party, and professors are expected to “adhere to correct political orientation” (Phillips 2016). Under such conditions, it

would be imprudent for scholars to undertake a candid appraisal about the motivations of top-level leaders or the soundness of their decisions. It makes more sense to accept the overall direction of government policy and focus strictly on details of administration.

In liberal democracies, professors have more freedom to think about grand politics. Still, specialists in public administration have sometimes been reluctant to do this. In the United States, the people who founded the field of public administration insisted that they could draw a clear line between politics and administration. This was a defensive move, designed to mark out a territory – that is, the domain of administration – that would be protected from interference by politicians. But this technique for protecting the new field required that scholars engage in self-censorship. To uphold the premise that politics and administration were separate topics, scholars had to avoid “political questions” or acknowledge that administrative reforms had any political significance (Roberts 1994).

The technique of separating politics and administration had another advantage: it became easier for Americans to engage with specialists in other countries that had different and sometimes objectionable political systems. Woodrow Wilson took this approach in a famous essay written in 1887. Wilson claimed that specialists in administration have no interest in “political principles,” only in questions of pure administration, and for this reason that it is possible for specialists from different countries to talk about administration even when they disagree profoundly on political principles. “If I see a murderous fellow sharpening a knife cleverly,” Wilson famously said, “I can borrow his way of sharpening a knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it” (Wilson 1887, 220).

Modern-day scholars often disparage Wilson’s reasoning while following it in practice. The trend in present-day research has been to develop a body of knowledge about “public management” that has been validated through the rigorous scientific method. The scholarly community that is engaged in the production of this knowledge spans national borders. The community operates on the assumption that administrators in different countries face common managerial problems. This makes it possible for scholars to agree on a common research agenda and develop propositions about public management

that are applicable, with some caveats, across national borders. In other words, we assume that differences at the level of grand politics do not obstruct international collaboration on research about managerial practices.

There is a second technique for side-stepping grand politics that should be noted. We may acknowledge that there are general features of a particular regime that shape administration – such as the rule of law, separation of powers, federalism, democracy, and a free market economy – but that these features are fixed. They may be described as the enduring, founding, or constitutional principles of a regime (Farmer 2005, 89). On the one hand, this is a way of acknowledging how high-level political considerations influence administration. On the other hand, we side-step the task of explaining how these “enduring principles” became established or how their meaning has changed over time. We take them simply as givens or constants. No theory about the dynamics of grand politics is necessary because grand politics never changes the regime’s essential characteristics.

### **How Grand Politics Shapes Administration**

Neither of these techniques for avoiding grand politics is satisfactory. It is easy to show how the attempt to separate politics and administration must fail. The difficulty is not just that every administrative act involves some judgment about competing values, and is thus political in a narrow sense. Rather, the difficulty is that grand politics determines which aspects of administration matter and which do not.

For example, there have been moments in American history when political leaders were mainly concerned with threats to national security or internal order, and the priority was to build up the armed forces and other security services. At other moments, the emphasis has been on expanding social services, such as education or healthcare. At yet other moments, the priority has been to build physical infrastructures, such as canals, railroads, highways, and municipal utilities. There are important qualitative differences in administration in these three domains. Security forces are run differently than social service agencies or quasi-commercial enterprises engaged in large-scale engineering projects. Each type of organization has a distinctive culture and way of working (Jacobs 1992). The prevailing

view about what counts as good administration at any moment is likely to be influenced by the type of administrative capabilities that are being constructed at that time.

The values that suffuse cross-governmental administrative reform projects may also be affected by grand politics. For example, the “public management movement” that emerged in many advanced democracies in the 1970s and 1980s put an unusual emphasis on restructuring public services to improve efficiency (Bovaird and Loeffler 2016, 5). This emphasis was clearly shaped by broader economic and political conditions – or more accurately, by the way in which political leaders interpreted those conditions. Economies had stagnated in the 1970s, and voters were angry about taxes. As Owen Hughes has observed, “governments were faced with declining real revenue [and] political demands to maintain services at the same levels. In these circumstances, the only avenue was to improve productivity” (Hughes 2003, 51). The public management movement was preoccupied with making government “work better and cost less,” as the Clinton administration’s National Performance Review said in 1993 (Gore 1993).

It is tempting to think that the new wave of micro-level studies of administration – that is, research into the interactions between “citizens, employees, and managers within the public sector” – might be unaffected by the tumult of grand politics (Grimmelikhuijsen, Jilke et al. 2017, 46). But even this is not true. The mistake is to assume that the units of analysis – citizens, employees, managers – are stable and unaffected by high-level political considerations. We can easily show how this is not the case. For example, politicians constantly change the rules about who counts as a citizen, and what it means to be a citizen, and they do this for reasons of grand politics. Political leaders expand and restrict individual rights based on their understanding of what is necessary to maintain legitimacy or advance other national interests. These adjustments to legal status have important effects on “front-line” interactions between ordinary people and government officials. Expectations about service levels and fair treatment are determined by the understanding of what citizenship means that prevails at a particular time (Roberts 2020a, 635–636).

The second technique for side-stepping grand politics – that is,

assuming that a regime has a set of “enduring principles” – is equally vulnerable to criticism. It is easy to show how the content of these so-called “enduring principles” has changed radically over time. The United States has always been described as a democracy -- but little more than a century ago, most adult Americans could not vote. Similarly, it has always been a federal system, but the role of national government is more expansive today than it was in the nineteenth century. While national leaders have always endorsed the rule of law, understandings about the relationship between administrators and courts has varied substantially. Similarly, the extent of government involvement in the economy is broader than it was a century or two ago.

There is no simple story about the evolution of these “enduring principles.” In particular, we are not witnessing a steady advance toward the perfection of these ideals – that is, toward the advancement of democracy or the rule of law or the refinement of a certain type of federalism or regulated economy. The pattern of historical development is not consistent (Roberts 2017). Periods of democratic advancement have been marked by periods of democratic retreat. The role of national government has been restricted after moments of expansion. As the economy has evolved, some sectors have been deregulated, while others have been regulated more closely. The exact meaning of any “enduring principle” at any moment is determined by political leaders through the process of grand politics. Principles are amended as the national interest seems to require.

Moreover, shifts in the meaning of these “enduring principles” have important consequences for public administration. During “democratic surges,” such as in the 1960s, administrators will be more concerned with inventing methods for improving public participation in decision-making (Huntington 1981, 98). When free-market ideals are in the ascendant, as in the 1980s and 1990s, administrators will be more interested in industry self-regulation techniques. When centralization is in fashion, as in the 1930s, there may be more emphasis on top-level planning and less emphasis on techniques of governing devolved networks. And when executive action is privileged during emergencies, there may be less emphasis on close judicial review.

We can describe the connection between grand politics and public administration in yet another way. We often define policy analysis as a matter of selecting the right “policy instrument” or “policy tool” for fixing a particular problem (Weimer and Vining 2017, Chapter 10; Wu, Ramesh et al. 2017, 33–35). The list of instruments typically includes government regulation, direct provision by government, economic incentives, and market-making, among others. The choice of instruments is sometimes considered to be a clinical matter, driven by technocratic judgment and considerations of efficiency alone. But the choice of instruments is clearly influenced by grand politics as well. In the 1930s, for example, national leaders in the United States were enthusiastic about regulation and direct provision; in the 1990s, they were enthusiastic about economic incentives and market-making (Salamon and Elliott 2002). For mid-level policy analysts, it is important to understand high-level politics because it constrains the range of tools available to fix a problem and guides their judgment about what constitutes a problem in the first place.

### **How to Think about Grand Politics**

Grand politics and public administration are inextricably connected. Woodrow Wilson himself recognized this fact. In his 1887 essay, he stated: “Seeing every day new things which the state ought to do, the next thing is to see clearly how it ought to do them. This is why there should be a science of administration” (Wilson 1887, 201). To put it more plainly, choices about administration – the question of how to do things – are preceded by choices about objectives – the question of what the state should do. “The ends of administration,” Leonard White agreed in 1939, “are the ultimate ends of the state itself” (White 1939, 7). If we want to understand where the field of public administration is going, and why we emphasize one aspect of administration rather than another, we must pay attention to the higher level of political affairs, where the “ends of the state” are determined, and so we need some framework to structure our understanding of how grand politics works.

I have proposed such a framework in a recent book, *Strategies for Governing: Reinventing Public Administration for a Dangerous Century* (Roberts 2019). My argument in that book begins with the proposition that we should recognize the state as the foundation of the political

order in the modern world. Scholars in public administration once regarded the state as an essential concept in their field, but this has not been the case for the last few decades, at least in the United States. The next proposition is that all states have a ruling group, which in liberal democracies consists mainly of elected officials, but also of influential senior officials selected by other means – such as Supreme Court judges, top military commanders, and senior bureaucrats. In a federalized democracy like the United States, the ruling group is large, heterogeneous, and highly susceptible to influence from voters and organized interests.

It is possible to articulate in general terms the objectives that concern leaders in any state. These are (1) the maintenance of internal order and popular legitimacy, (2) security from external attack and the recognition of legitimacy by other states, (3) the promotion of economic growth, and (4) survival in office. Furthermore, there is another objective that we encourage leaders to consider: (5) advancement of the welfare of the governed population, which we might also express as the advancement of human rights. Leaders make decisions about the relative importance of these objectives at a particular moment in history, and also about the broad lines of policy that are most likely to achieve their topmost priorities under those circumstances.

We can describe that combination of top-priority objectives and major policies as a *strategy for governing* (Roberts 2019). Sometimes strategies are closely associated with individual leaders: for example, Reaganism, Thatcherism, Nehruism, or Maoism. When there is a broad consensus within the ruling group about strategy, it might also be described as a governing paradigm (Heath 2016; Torfing, Andersen et al. 2020). To borrow a phrase coined by John Kenneth Galbraith, a well-entrenched strategy might become established as “the conventional wisdom” (Galbraith 1998). Around 2000, for example, elites in many countries considered it obvious that states should pursue market-friendly policies, open borders, and democracy. This was a strategy for governing that had become established as conventional wisdom. Of course, faith in this strategy has been badly shaken since 2000, and we would not describe it as conventional wisdom today (Roberts 2020b).

Strategy is put into practice by passing laws, building and reforming public organizations, and adopting new programs and practices (Roberts 2019). These are all different ways of building institutions. Many scholars have defined the state as a compound or agglomeration of institutions that have been constructed to accomplish key state objectives. In other words, the institutional apparatus that constitutes a state is the means by which a governing strategy is put into effect. Strategy is expressed through the construction and renovation of institutions. This is the realm of public administration. Specialists in public administration must be experts in adjusting administrative capabilities to align with the overall strategy. At the same time, they must advise leaders about whether proposed strategies are practicable, given existing or possible administrative capabilities.

For many reasons, crafting a good governing strategy is hard work. Objectives often conflict with one another, so that achieving one important goal means compromising another. People will disagree about tradeoffs between goals. Added to this is massive uncertainty about circumstances – that is, about the character and severity of threats and opportunities confronting the state – and also about the likely effectiveness of alternative policies in achieving goals. At the same time, leaders are constrained by institutional and ideological legacies: their ability to head in one direction may be limited by the fact that existing institutions and the conventional wisdom are both oriented toward heading in another direction. A final complication is a turbulence in the circumstances. The conditions confronting leaders – consisting of geopolitical, demographic, economic, technological, and climatic factors – are never stable. The world changes incessantly, so that a strategy crafted in response to a particular historical moment may become outmoded quickly.

Three implications can be drawn from the approach to grand politics that I have just outlined. The first is that modes of governance are likely to vary substantially from one state to another. In the abstract, leaders in different countries may have a common set of objectives, but the circumstances they confront differ radically, as do leaders' judgments about how to reconcile conflicting objectives and manage uncertainties. Differences between states will exist in terms of ideas – that is, governing strategies – and also in terms of institutions,

since the institutional apparatus of government is an expression of strategy.

This observation about the inevitability of variation may seem obvious – but it conflicts profoundly with the assumption that prevailed at the start of this century, that all countries were converging on a common strategy for governing – a single model of good governance – that emphasized free-market capitalism, democracy and open borders (Fukuyama 1992; Mandelbaum 2002, 4–5).

A second implication of this approach to grand politics is that strategy is unstable, and thus that the institutional apparatus of government must constantly be redesigned. Strategy is unstable because successive rulers within a country will have differing views about priorities, because circumstances change, and because uncertainties dissipate or intensify. If strategy changes, it follows that the institutional architecture of the state – which is the expression of strategy – must also change. New institutions must be built and old ones must be demolished as strategic requirements evolve. As Donald Schön once observed, states “are in a continuing process of transformation” (Schon 1973, 30).

This may also seem obvious, but again there is a conflict with prevailing assumptions about the study of government (Roberts 2019). Many scholars, such as those working in the field of American Political Development, have tended to emphasize the “stickiness” of institutions – that is, the extent to which institutions persist over time. Other scholars have emphasized the importance for leaders of providing assurance that institutions *will* endure – that is, demonstrating “commitment” to institutions so that they are fully “consolidated.” By contrast, we are assuming here that institutions change substantially over the long run – and that leaders may be ambivalent about making strong commitments to particular institutional designs precisely because they are aware that governing strategy is fragile and institutions will eventually need adjustment.

A third implication of this approach to grand politics recognizes the importance of the processes by which high-level strategic choices are made. There is no standardized formula for governing that can be imported from abroad, and there are no “founding principles” that can be extracted from the history of a country and applied today without

modification. Rather, leaders must constantly engage in difficult and consequential calculations about priorities and the broad lines of national policy. Therefore, we should pay close attention to methods of top-level planning and decision-making. From the 1930s through to the 1970s, this was an important subject for scholars in public administration. But interest in top-level decision-making has waned over the last thirty years. This is another unfortunate result of the emphasis on middle-level problems that typifies the public management movement (Roberts 2019, 6).

### **Why Grand Politics Matters Now**

The pressure on leaders to think carefully about strategy is always present, but not always with equal intensity. There are moments when public affairs appear to be proceeding well and careful thinking about strategy does not seem necessary. The most recent moment in which this was true was the start of this millennium. President Clinton observed in 2000: “Never before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress with so little internal crisis and so few external threats” (Clinton 2000). It is not coincidental that this was also the high point of confidence in a governing strategy that emphasized democracy, free markets and open borders. In 2002, President George W. Bush called this the “single sustainable formula for national success” (Executive Office of the President 2002, iv).

In retrospect, we can see that the moment described by Clinton was very unusual. The following two decades have been characterized by convulsions. Leaders in the United States and other countries have been compelled to deal with major shocks – the terrorist attacks of 2001–2005, the global financial crisis of 2007–2009, the pandemic of 2020 – as well as slower moving trends, such as the rise of China, climate change, rising inequality, and population aging. Over these twenty years, we have seen a collapse of faith in Bush’s “single sustainable formula” for governing. Even in the United States, leaders have adopted policies that would have been unthinkable under Bush’s formula: they have nationalized private enterprises, tightened regulation, closed borders, issued commands to industry, provided massive “stimulus” payments to businesses and individuals, retreated from trade negotiations, and incurred unprecedented peacetime

deficits. Politics has become more contentious as leaders and voters have searched for some new formula – that is, a new strategy for governing – that is better suited to the realities of the last two decades (Roberts 2020b).

The turbulence of recent years is not unusual. On the contrary, a long view of history suggests that turbulence like this is to be expected most of the time. During turbulent periods, grand politics is especially important. In these times, leaders are laser-focused on the question of how governing strategies should be adapted. Specialists in public administration have a direct interest in understanding how this process of strategic adaptation is unfolding, because it will necessarily be followed by changes at the middle and micro-levels of government. Laws will be passed, agencies will be created or overhauled, and understandings about the relationship between government officials and ordinary people will be revised. If specialists in public administration do not try to understand the dynamics of grand politics or speculate about how strategy may be adjusted, then they will be caught flat-footed, constantly trying to keep up with unexpected changes. And they will miss out on the opportunity to provide advice to leaders about the administrative feasibility of proposed changes in the overall strategy.

Fortunately, there is growing recognition within the public administration field of the need to pay attention to grand politics. This is typically expressed as a concern for “big trends” or “big questions” in public administration (Roberts 2019, pp. 8–9). In the same vein, the U.S. National Academy of Public Administration recently launched an investigation into the “grand challenges of public administration,” aimed at anticipating “what government must do over the next decade and how it should do it” (National Academy of Public Administration 2018).

What specialists in public administration must do now is develop a repertoire of methods for exploring the relationship between grand politics and public administration. We must improve our skill in describing how leaders interpret circumstances and design strategies in response to those circumstances, and also in explaining how leaders translate strategies into plans for administrative reform. Our research will need to emphasize top-level problems of planning and

decision-making more than has been the tendency in recent decades, especially in American scholarship.

Scholars in public administration should also be encouraged to engage in informed speculation about how grand politics may evolve in the future. Today, informed speculation does not count as “real” scholarship. But we pay a price for this unwillingness to think about the future. As I have noted, specialists in public administration are more likely to be blind-sided by events, and will be less able to give advice about how administrative capabilities should be adapted to meet new challenges. Of course, not all of our work should be speculative. But there is a place for well-crafted work that anticipates how circumstances will evolve and how leaders will amend their strategies in response.

There is no necessary conflict between the study of grand politics and research at the middle- and micro-levels of public administration. We are not confronted with an either/or choice. The field is big enough to accommodate diverse approaches to scholarship. Moreover, the approaches complement one another (Roberts 2020a). Just as a pianist must know how to play the whole keyboard, all specialists in public administration should have some familiarity with modes of inquiry at different levels of analysis, from street-level interactions to the dynamics of grand politics.

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**Alasdair Roberts** is a professor of public policy and political science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and director of its School of Public Policy. He is also a Fellow of the U.S. National Academy of Public Administration. His most recent books are *Strategies for Governing: Reinventing Public Administration for a Dangerous Century* (2019) and *Can Government Do Anything Right?* (2018). His website is <http://www.aroberts.us> (email: [asroberts@umass.edu](mailto:asroberts@umass.edu)).