



A year after the outbreak of COVID-19, the virus remained a major threat. People still lined up for testing, including at this New York City health clinic.

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THE FOUNDATIONS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Politics, Performance, and Accountability

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand that policy is almost always meaningless—except as it takes shape in public administration
- Understand the three intertwined foundations and historical roots of public administration: politics, performance, and accountability
- Connect the themes of public administration with the COVID-19 pandemic
- Explore the connection between the three themes of public administration and historical crises in American politics
- Examine the central role of accountability in the administrative process

Public administration, at its core, is straightforward: how best to translate the decisions of policymakers into effective results. As we will see in this book, that process can often prove very complicated, but this issue of *performance* lies at the very heart of public administration.

But public administration is about much, much more than that. The road from policy decisions to policy execution leaves public administrators with enormous discretion. Just how strictly do highway patrol officers enforce the speed limit? When and where do public works managers patch potholes? How strongly do university presidents pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion? What options do military commanders put before the president when the president decides to act against terrorists? Just how should the Census Bureau count the nation's residents every ten years—decisions that dictate everything from the number of congressional districts in each state to the allocation of federal money?

In short, public administration is inevitably about *politics*. Public administration is about who gets what, when, and how, as Harold D. Lasswell defined politics in 1936. Public administration brings it to life.¹

This power, however, often infuriates policymakers. In a democracy, they are elected by the people and, having been elected, they want to get things done. Policymakers are always hyper-conscious of how little time they have. As political scientist Paul Light put it, they “come in saying, ‘We’ve got an agenda; we’ve got four years, maybe eight, so we can’t wait for action.’”² But administrators do not always march to the beat of that drum. In 2017, for example, President Donald Trump warned about “the steady creep of government bureaucracy that drains the vitality and wealth of the people.”³ He regularly complained about an entrenched “deep state” inside the bureaucracy that, he complained, too often blocked what he wanted to do and how fast he wanted to do it. Then, when President Joe Biden took office, he wanted to unwind much of what Trump sought—and to do so quickly.

And that raises the third big issue of the book: **accountability**, the responsibility of unelected officials to follow the policies of elected officials—and ultimately to be responsible to the people. How can government best combine the power of bureaucracy to deal with the inevitable political battles, promote good performance, and hold administrators accountable?

There is nothing new about these debates. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan got big laughs when he claimed “the 10 most dangerous words in the English language are, ‘Hi, I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.’”⁴ Chief executives have always wanted to reorganize the bureaucracy to make it more responsive. And, when it comes to the “deep state,” there is no better example of the risks than the assassination of the Roman emperor Caligula by his own Praetorian Guard in the year 41. The soldiers hired to protect him—the innermost power of the Roman bureaucracy—turned on the emperor when they no longer trusted his rule.

All of this, of course, sits in the background of constant criticisms about public administration. The most common complaint about government organizations is that they are “so bureaucratic.” There is the inescapable grievance about bureaucratic waste, fraud, and abuse. Scott Mautz, a specialist on employee engagement, wrote, “Bureaucracy leads to non-value-added time suck activities.”⁵ Students have sometimes told me that they are leery about seeking government careers because they fear that, once inside, they would not have much impact.

So public administration is caught in a whirlwind of contradictions. It can be both clumsy but super-powerful. It threatens democracy but is too complacent. We expect it to be technically excellent, but we fear its power. Public administration is all of these things, and it rests in a swirl of paradoxes. At its core, it is about performance, politics, and accountability.

These three concepts, in turn, define the lasting themes of public administration. Together, they chart the basic themes for our exploration of *the politics of the administrative process*. We cannot have democracy without public administration, because without public administration we would have no way of bringing the decisions of democracy to life. The very power of public administration, however, presents enduring challenges to democracy.

The issues of the administrative state are eternal ones. Both the ancient Greeks and Romans worried about how to create enough administrative power to govern without making administrators so powerful that they could not be controlled. The famous **Magna Carta**, which provided the foundation for modern government in 1215, was an effort by English nobles to rein in the power of King John. The gradual evolution of European parliaments from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance was an effort to set the balance between popular rule and the power of kings. The American Revolution grew from a bold statement about the rights of people and the need to hold government’s power accountable. Similar threads run through the role of governments in China. The terms of art have deep roots. In 1948, famed public administration scholar Dwight Waldo wrote *The Administrative State*, a dissertation turned into a book notable not only for laying the foundation for the modern study of the field but also because it built on a study of political philosophy.⁶ The issues of the “deep state” are thus much more than a snapshot into fierce political battles. They grow from complex historical foundations with roots intertwined into puzzles of politics and philosophy. As debates about the human experience go, these are about as important as they come.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND COVID-19

These core issues—performance, politics, and accountability—have come alive in the ongoing battle against COVID-19, which not only was the biggest public administration crisis of the twenty-first century but also surfaced some of the biggest cross-pressures on the administrative system.

That battle began back in 2020, when a patient in Washington State who had just returned from a trip to Wuhan, China, was diagnosed with the mysterious new disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation's premier public health organization, said, "It's unclear how easily this virus is spreading between people."⁷ Scientists quickly answered that question. COVID-19 was shorthand for a virus first discovered a few weeks earlier in Wuhan, SARS-CoV-2, or "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2." Since it broke out in December 2019, it became COVID-19. By early February 2020, the United States joined other countries in creating a travel ban to try to halt the spread of the disease. But COVID-19 outsmarted every effort to stop it. On March 13, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, and governors began instituting stay-at-home orders.

COVID-19, it turned out, spread rapidly from person to person through airborne droplets. It ravaged whole families, like the Fuscus in New Jersey—seven family members caught the virus and four of them died.⁸ In New York, hospitals were overwhelmed, and some had to place refrigerated trucks outside as makeshift morgues. The NCAA canceled March Madness, and many communities shut down restaurants, bars, and other places where people might meet and spread the virus. Colleges and universities shut down in-person classes, and most switched to online teaching. That, in fact, might well have been the biggest revolution in college teaching in centuries, and it happened in just two weeks.

The Federal Strategy

Government at all levels struggled to respond to the crisis. Just how tough should local governments be in shutting down? There was, after all, a difficult trade-off between local businesses as the engine of their economies and the need to stop the virus from spreading. And what about wearing masks? In February 2020, Surgeon General Jerome Adams tweeted that wearing masks wouldn't stop the virus. "Seriously people—STOP BUYING MASKS!" he tweeted. "They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus, but if healthcare providers can't get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!" CDC echoed that advice for months. Except for Americans working in health care, the agency said that people should not make the effort to find and wear masks. "Facemasks may be in short supply and they should be saved for caregivers."⁹

Two months later, however, CDC switched its message and urged everyone over the age of two to wear a mask. The back-and-forth over masking undermined the agency's credibility, and the public wasn't quite sure what to do. The Trump administration, mindful of the approaching 2020 presidential election, downplayed the virus and deflected most of the responsibility for dealing with it to state and local governments. "People are tired of Covid," the president said in a call with his campaign staff. "I have the biggest rallies I've ever had. And we have Covid. People are saying: 'Whatever. Just leave us alone.' They're tired of it." He attacked the nation's chief infectious disease expert, Anthony Fauci, who headed that unit at the National Institutes of Health. Trump said, "People are tired of hearing Fauci and these idiots, all these idiots who got it wrong."¹⁰

Meanwhile, CDC botched its initial effort to provide tests for the virus. Rather than adopting the test kit that the World Health Organization had developed, CDC decided to create

its own. But the agency's kits were faulty and had to be recalled. That further undermined CDC's credibility, a shock to an agency widely viewed as the world's leading collection of public health experts. In 2022, CDC Director Rochelle P. Walensky frankly admitted CDC's problems. In fact, Walensky said, CDC behaved too much like an academic institution, churning out "data for publication" instead of "data for action." In fact, she said, "For 75 years, CDC and public health have been preparing for COVID-19, and in our big moment, our performance did not reliably meet expectations."¹¹ CDC's academic culture produced first-rate research over the years. But when it came to producing clear, consistent, plain-English guidance during the COVID outbreak, it failed the test.

New York Times writer German Lopez concluded that the root cause was "a reluctance to communicate the truth clearly and directly. The resulting lack of clarity made it harder for Americans to act on expert advice. But it also damaged public trust."¹² Trust in CDC dropped significantly.

COVID-19 in the States and Cities

That left most of the responsibility for fighting COVID-19 with the nation's state and local governments. Washington State took aggressive action to shut down the economy, as did New York State. But in Texas, Governor Greg Abbott took what the *Texas Tribune* called a "hands-off approach."¹³ How the American people experienced COVID-19 depended largely on where they lived.

The same was true of the vaccines. Borrowing on the *Star Trek* franchise, the Trump administration launched "Operation Warp Speed" to produce an immunization for COVID-19. Experts warned that the process could take a long time. Peter Hoetz, dean at Baylor University's National School of Tropical Medicine, said, "A year to 18 months would be absolutely unprecedented."¹⁴ After all, the previous record for creating a new vaccine—for mumps—was four years. But thanks to previous research funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, aggressive work by private vaccine manufacturers, and a large infusion of federal cash, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the first vaccines in December 2020, just ten months after the outbreak of COVID in the United States.

Even though it was moving quickly, Trump was very unhappy with the speed of the operation. In an August 2020 tweet, he complained, "Obviously, they are hoping to delay the answer until after November 3rd. Must focus on speed, and saving lives!"¹⁵ But the release of the vaccine in such a short period of time was a truly historic accomplishment—and a remarkable partnership between government private drug companies.

The distribution of the vaccines, along with the management of the testing process and collection of data on the spread of the disease, fell to the states. The states historically have had the primary public health responsibility, and they in turn have traditionally delegated much of the operational responsibility to county public health agencies, about three thousand in all. Some states set up mega-vaccination clinics. West Virginia initially relied on a network of private pharmacies.

As the vaccination campaign advanced, counties gradually decentralized the effort to smaller vaccination clinics and pharmacy chains like Walmart, CVS, and Walgreens. Some

states, like Vermont, pushed very hard to vaccinate their citizens. Others took a lighter approach. The result: the rate of individuals who were fully vaccinated ranged from more than two-thirds in states like Rhode Island (86 percent), Vermont (84 percent), and Massachusetts (82 percent) to around half in states like Mississippi (53 percent) and Alabama and Wyoming (tied with 52 percent).¹⁶ In Vermont, the death rate was 118 per 100,000 persons. In Mississippi, it was nearly four times higher, at 436 per 100,000 persons.¹⁷ The inescapable conclusion was this: the attack of the pandemic varied enormously around the country.¹⁸

COVID-19 and Public Administration

The battle against the disease-of-the-century was, at its core, a study in public administration. After all, the policy was clear: stop it, and protect people from its recurrence. Everything else hinged on public administration.

For example, CDC's struggles with masks and testing were examples of how to translate the findings of the agency's scientists into actions for the people. The actions of the state and local governments were attempts—often highly varied—to translate national policies and the supremely important assets of vaccines into results. These were questions of *performance*.

Then there were the ongoing battles between President Trump and some members of his administration, CDC scientists, and the work of some state and local governments both on elevating the importance of the virus and aggressively pursuing the strategies for containing it. These were questions of *politics*. Indeed, three British analysts concluded that “Trump’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic ensured that he lost, rather than was defeated in, the 2020 election.”¹⁹

Finally, there was the ongoing battle between Trump and officials in his own administration, who he was convinced were deliberately stonewalling the approval and production of the vaccines to deny him an important win over COVID-19 before the 2020 presidential election. On the other hand, administration scientists feared that Trump’s pressure might lead to the release of vaccines that had not been sufficiently tested. These were issues of *accountability* and, especially, the question of whether accountability depended on personal loyalty to the leader (an issue that bit Caligula) or on the scientific integrity of public administrators. We’ll explore these tough issues later in the book.

Woven into the puzzles of performance, politics, and accountability were important questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In fact, COVID-19 interconnected with these three issues through the public administration of the COVID-19 response. In the first months of the pandemic, the virus hit Hispanics, Black people, and some Native American tribes the hardest. All of these groups suffered a higher death rate than white Americans. The reasons why are complex. In part, this is because these three groups have less access to quality health care than whites. They tended to work more in jobs that could not be accomplished remotely, ranging from bus drivers to restaurant servers. They more frequently depended on public transportation, where they were more exposed to the virus. In part, this is because state and local governments struggled in the outreach to these communities, especially for vaccines.²⁰ And the federal Indian Health Service did not provide all Native American tribes with the resources needed to ensure an adequate vaccination campaign.²¹

In short, if one wants to understand the nation's response to COVID-19, it's important to view it through the lens of public administration. In part, that's a story of coordination among government agencies. In part, it's the enduring tension in the United States of **federalism** and the relations among the federal, state, and local governments. And in part, it's the complexity of the relationships between government and the private and the nonprofit sectors of society, which often join to implement public programs. Without private drug manufacturers the country would not have had vaccines, and without private pharmacies the country would not have developed its effective vaccine distribution system.

There are important lessons to be learned here. No longer can any single government agency manage a program on which the people depend. That, rather, is the puzzle of coordination that lies at the heart of public administration. And if we want to understand the government's efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion, we need to look at the lens of public administration through which these efforts flow.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Public administration is important, therefore, because it's how we translate our ideals into results. Policymakers, of course, spend endless hours debating new ideas, battling over which ones to support, and enacting them into law. But amid all of these fights, one reality is most important: *public policies only gain their meaning in the ways public administrators implement them.* We might have the most ambitious plans in the world, but none matter—at all—unless our ambitions produce results.

Consider something as simple as turning on the water tap. All of us do it multiple times every day. We take it for granted that the water will be there when we want it and that it will be safe when we drink it. We rarely stop to think, when we travel around the United States, whether we take a chance when we drink from the faucet in a hotel room, even though we know it often tastes and smells different in different cities. Who has the best water? The experts at the Berkeley Springs International Water Tasting Competition in West Virginia hold a regular competition, what they call the “Olympics of Water,” with judges swirling water in wine glasses and judging appearance, aroma, mouth feel, and aftertaste. The best municipal water in the world, they concluded, came from Montpelier, Ohio, in 2022, followed by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.²² In Austin, Texas, however, residents faced notices to boil water three times from 2018 to 2022, in a stark reminder of how fragile the system we take for granted can be.

When Fiji Water launched an advertising campaign saying, “The label says Fiji because it's not bottled in Cleveland,” the city decided it wasn't going to put up with that attack on its reputation. City officials ran tests on water from both sources and found that Fiji water had 6.3 micrograms of arsenic per liter. The level in Cleveland's water? Zero.²³ Bottled water is the most popular beverage in the United States, more than coffee, beer, and wine—and twice as popular as tap water.

There is perhaps nothing we take for granted more than the safety of the water we drink, whether it comes out of the tap from municipal water supplies or from a fancy bottle. That's

because public policy is clear: the water we drink ought to be pure and plentiful. That doesn't always turn out to be the case, however. These are among the many reasons why public administration is so important.

Is Private Administration Better Than Public?

What is better, tap water or water from one of the many private bottling companies? Sometimes that's a false choice. A close look at the labels of some bottled waters shows that it comes from the tap. But the basic choice—public versus private administration—points to one of the biggest debates about *public* administration. Government's critics often complain that government is inherently inefficient, and that the really important work ought to be given to private companies, where market competition will promote the most efficiency.

In a 2013 comment about government, Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates complained, "You don't run a business like this." Government, he said, was on "a non-optimal path," and that "a business that is maximizing its output would proceed along a different path."²⁴

This is precisely what Michigan Governor Rich Snyder promised when he took office in 2010. Snyder was such a rising star that insiders openly discussed him as a possible vice presidential running mate in 2012 for Republican nominee Mitt Romney. By 2016, however, critics suggested his hashtag ought instead to be #onedonedude. Under Snyder's administration, the city of Flint switched its water supply from the city of Detroit to the Flint River. The change, his analysts concluded, would save taxpayers millions of dollars—and that was what "running government like a business would mean." Almost immediately, however, Flint residents began complaining that their water smelled, tasted, and looked funny. Even worse, nine people died from Legionnaires' disease, which investigators suspected was connected to the water switch. The lead poisoned thousands of children—for life. Tens of thousands of citizens resorted to bottled water for drinking, cooking, and even bathing. "We were an experiment in their philosophy of government," explained State Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich, a Democrat and tough critic of Governor Snyder. "But unfortunately, it failed."²⁵

The water from the Flint River, as it turned out, was far more corrosive than the water the city had been getting from Detroit. The Flint water ate away at the pipes carrying it, which in turn caused higher levels of lead and coliform bacteria. The state could have added anticorrosion chemicals to the water, but officials initially concluded it wasn't necessary. In the end, the plan to save taxpayers money ended up costing far more tax dollars and led to far greater misery than officials had ever imagined. In an early 2016 interview, a reporter speaking to Snyder noted that critics had "called this [his] Katrina," referring to the failed governmental response to the 2005 monster hurricane that devastated New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast. He told a reporter, "It's a disaster."²⁶

But Snyder then went on to criticize just about everyone. "This was a failure of government at all levels. Local, state, and federal officials—we all failed the families of Flint," he told a congressional hearing in Washington, D.C., on March 17, 2016. He blamed the state's Department of Environmental Quality and argued that "bureaucrats created a culture that valued technical competence over common sense—and the result was that lead was leaching into residents' water." Snyder then singled out the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), stating that

“Inefficient, ineffective and unaccountable bureaucrats at the EPA allowed this disaster to continue unnecessarily.” Flint resident Nakiya Wakes went to that hearing to try to get answers but left without the accountability she sought. But, at the least, she did get to take a shower in uncontaminated water—and she could drink water right out of the tap during her visit to Washington.²⁷

Not only did the “running government like a business” strategy fail in this case, it also created a vast public health disaster for the city’s residents. The crisis set off a wave of finger-pointing, with Democrats blaming a Republican governor and Republicans blaming the EPA and the Democrats in the Obama administration. The state government blamed local authorities, and all of them complained about the feds. Left with undrinkable water and poisoned children, the residents of Flint, 57 percent of whom were Black, wondered why their government had failed them.

Here was an echo of the big issues. Critics complained that the government had performed badly. Snyder countered that the problems were the product of other governmental bodies, which had proven unaccountable. And analysts across the board pointed to big political battles that shaped Flint’s water system. The big themes of public administration—performance, politics, and accountability—are both universal and inescapable.

The capstone to the story underlines just how important these themes are. In 2020, tests showed that, in most of the city’s homes, the lead level was far below safety standards for drinking water. But the city’s residents lined up to get bottled water. They just didn’t trust the city’s water system, despite what the science said. As Jim Ananich, former leader of the Democrats in the state senate and a lifelong resident of Flint, put it, “The anger, the lack of trust, it’s all justified.” Following the initial crisis, charges of kickbacks in the repair process, and charges against state officials, residents simply didn’t believe that the water was safe.²⁸ Many children had lead in their bodies that could not be removed. And many Flint residents simply no longer trusted their government.

This case reinforces the biggest challenge facing American government as it heads into the second quarter of the twenty-first century: the profound distrust Americans have for their political institutions. Two distinguished scholars of the political system, Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, contended not only that the system was broken but also that *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*, as the title of their 2012 book described it.²⁹ Presidential candidates have squabbled over who’s to blame, and Congress has found itself tied in knots, unable to get much of anything done. But nothing is more fundamental to the distrust of government than the concern that too much of government just doesn’t work well, that Americans believe they are overpaying for programs that underdeliver.

Bureaucracy is the centerpiece of that distrust. Nothing is more important to understanding the relationship between citizens and their government than understanding how government delivers what it promises. Nothing is more important to the future of American democracy than ensuring that programs work for citizens. At its very core, that is the story of the politics of the administrative process.

The Problem of Trust in Government

Although distrust hit a boiling point in the United States in recent decades, there is nothing really new about the problem. Our founders, after all, used distrust of King George III as the foundation for a revolution. Their aspirations for the new country could not have

been higher—and their view of the king could scarcely have been lower. The Declaration of Independence has soaring, inspirational words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Stop and think: the revolutionaries who founded our government wanted to protect their liberty—and they wanted a government that would protect their right to pursue happiness. When was the last time you thought about “happiness” and “government” in the same sentence? Then there’s our basic framework, captured in the Constitution. It starts with a foundation in “We the People” and pledges justice, domestic tranquility, defense, the general welfare—and “the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Yet every recent presidential campaign has swirled around charges that the rich and powerful have captured the system, steering the government to enrich itself at the expense of we the people.

We’re the “posterity,” living and walking today, but we’re often not feeling especially happy about our government, and the revolutionary DNA is still in our body politic. Nevertheless, we battle over whether to shrink government to cut taxes or to expand public programs. We deliberately vote opposing parties into office and then complain about gridlock. But that doesn’t stop much of the rest of the world from admiring our commitment to freedom and the society our government has built. In fact, we are often a puzzle to people in other parts of the world, who admire our government and are amazed that we don’t appreciate the system of government we have. Those who look at us carefully from a distance understand what we often overlook: both our progress and our battles flow from our uneasy relationship with government, from our simultaneous efforts to empower and control it, and from our ceaseless struggles to figure out how to secure justice, defense, and the general welfare while seeking tranquility and happiness. The politics of the administrative process is the struggle to balance our lofty expectations for government with our deep distrust of its power.

It’s one thing to argue the case for justice, but it’s another to make our state prisons secure without abusing inmates. It’s one thing to argue for domestic tranquility, but it’s another to determine how much force local police should use in stopping those they believe might have committed a crime. It’s one thing to promise to defend the country from terrorists, but it’s another to find just the right balance of weapons to protect the country without bankrupting it and undermining our freedoms. It’s one thing to advance the general welfare, but it’s quite another to debate which citizens whose homes are destroyed by a hurricane should get federal aid.

And how many times should we pay to rebuild the same property? One study found that we’ve paid to rebuild 2,109 properties at least ten times. One Louisiana home has gotten flood insurance payments forty times.³⁰ It’s our answer to the basic administrative questions, on the front lines of government, that define what our government really is and what values we protect. No matter how bold or simple our policies, no matter how powerful our rhetoric, nothing in government has any meaning until we administer it.

Understanding the Public’s Demands on Government

The COVID-19 and the Flint water crises both capture the essence of modern government: “we the people” identify problems that we expect the government will solve to promote the general

welfare. How does it do so? Government, on behalf of us all, sets goals and then creates complex organizations to meet those goals. The COVID-19 and Flint crises also capture a fundamental challenge: does government have what it takes to do what its citizens expect?

These challenges are huge, so the story can sometimes be depressing. But this book is built on optimism, out of an enduring belief that government can get smarter, serve citizens better, and support the fundamentals of American democracy on which the country depends. To a degree often not appreciated, government depends on *public administration* as the connection between those who make policy and the citizens who expect results. So let's return to the big themes in public administration, this time in more detail.

The first theme is *politics*. Many people often see administration as the business of the detail, which can't possibly be interesting. In reality, because no decision—especially no political decision—has any value except in the way it's implemented, public administration inevitably shapes and is shaped by politics. *Politics (and, therefore, public administration) is about the choices among values*, including which values get emphasis and which don't. That is the very fabric of public administration. Which neighborhoods get extra police protection? Who gets the speedy line through airport screening? When it snows, which highways are plowed first—and which see plows last? Each of these is a matter of detail richly wrapped in politics, and all administrative acts have political meaning. Indeed, the story of Flint's water crisis, at its core, is a political tale.

The second theme is *performance*. Public administration exists to get things done. How well does it work? How long does it take to respond to a house fire or report of a mugging? Do Social Security recipients get their checks on time and in the right amounts? Do state prisons keep prisoners inside, protecting citizens outside without abusing inmates inside? We expect public administration to work well, delivering effectiveness (high-quality goods and services) and efficiency (goods and services at the lowest cost to taxpayers).

The third theme is *accountability*. The prospect of a powerful bureaucracy out of control rightly terrifies citizens. The fear of a despotic government, after all, drove colonial Americans to revolt against the king. It brought down the Nixon administration in 1974. Worries that Obamacare would unleash a powerful, out-of-control bureaucracy helped propel Donald Trump into the White House in 2016; the failure to engage COVID-19 helped propel him out of it. Accountability is a *relationship*. It is about *answerability to whom, for what*. When we debate whether public administration is accountable, we are asking to whom individual administrators must answer (legislative bodies like the city council, state legislature, and congressional committees, as well as administrative superiors up the chain of command) and for what activities they must answer (including the value judgments they make and the performance they demonstrate).

These three themes shape the big debates about public administration, because they frame the fundamental debate about the *power* of government. What government does is about politics—and political decisions take their meaning in the ways public administrators carry them out. Government's power centers on public administration.

These themes also capture the inevitable trade-offs at the core of government power. Steps to increase accountability, including more rules to restrict administrators' power, can reduce efficiency by multiplying red tape. Streamlining government to make it more efficient can risk

making administrators less accountable. At every stage, these basic questions frame the size and role of government, and there's nothing more fundamental to politics than that.

Public administration is about everything that's important about government, and everything that's important about government touches on or flows through public administration. Those twists and turns are often hidden, and the issues can be subtle. But if we care about government—especially if we care about making government work better—we need to pay very careful attention to the politics of the administrative process. And that's the mission of this book.

It's not especially surprising to discover that officials use government power to advance political purposes—or that administrative actions like snow plowing have political consequences. This is an echo of a great scene in the movie *Casablanca*, which might well be (at least in my opinion) the best film of all time. Police Captain Louis Renault loves Casablanca's nightlife but the Nazis who occupy the city expect him to enforce public order, in the way they want it done. When the Nazis insist he crack down on his friend Rick's casino, Renault picks an ironic pretense. "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here!" he tells everyone—just before his favorite roulette dealer hands him his own winnings. We should be no more shocked to discover that politics surrounds the exercise of public power through public administration.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

These tensions and trade-offs run throughout American history. We might not like politics or government much, but we like bureaucracy even less. Our founders rebelled against King George III, but the prime complaints were against his administrators. The Boston Tea Party was a public act of rebellion against the king's tax collectors. (For a small historical tidbit, check the modern heritage of colonial brewer Sam Adams, who was a ringleader of the Tea Party and whose name lives on today.) The Declaration of Independence specifically condemns King George III, saying, "He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance."

Determining the role of administrators in the new constitutional system, however, proved difficult. No one wanted to recreate the tyranny against which the founders had rebelled, but a weak government risked inviting invasion and conquest. The founders famously and delicately balanced government's power through the legislative, judicial, and executive powers. They finessed the tough question about how to exercise those powers, especially the administrative powers. Article II of the Constitution vests "the executive power" in the president, but the definition of executive power is fuzzy and the founders carefully balanced the exercise of this power through the powers given to the other two branches. Trying to define executive power further risked fracturing the fragile coalition that brought the new country together. What they left out couldn't draw political fire, and they left to future leaders how to administer the nation they worked so hard to create.

There is profound irony here. The founders were determined to prevent a recurrence of the abuse of power that prompted the revolution, but when they had the chance to define the power of the new government, they sidestepped the question. From its first moments, American public

administration was grounded in politics—the political battle against the king, followed by the delicate political balance to get the Constitution ratified. The political issues about public administration colored George Washington’s two presidential terms, as John Adams and other Federalists battled with Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican colleagues about how far the government’s power should go. Defining the nature of executive power produced the first big divisions in the new nation, fueled a feud that cost the life of the former secretary of the Treasury in a duel, and fed the creation of political parties with very different views on how that power ought to be exercised.

The story is so gripping, in fact, that it led to a hit Broadway musical, *Hamilton*. And, in a further echo of the early battles, we are now facing a fundamental debate about whether the Constitution created a “unitary executive,” where the president has sole power over the executive branch.³¹ Trump and many of his supporters embraced this theory, in fact.³² Madison’s Constitution, of course, separated the federal government’s powers and gave Congress the power to pass laws, so both the structure of the executive branch and the programs it administers. The fundamental question of who runs—and who should be accountable for—the executive branch still generates fundamental conflicts.

The struggles change with the times, but the basic issues are as old as the United States: creating an administration strong enough to do the public’s work but accountable enough to prevent the tyranny that the nation’s founders sought to guard against. That leads us to the more detailed examination of the puzzle of *accountability* in Chapter 2.

CASE 1.1: PREPARING FOR THE NEXT PANDEMIC

One of the most important but least-explored lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic is the central role that counties play in public health. They are the operational center of our war against the virus, but that role has often been hidden behind the veil of what scholars have called America’s “forgotten governments.”³³

It’s easy to think of well-known governors, from Maryland’s Larry Hogan to Florida’s Ron DeSantis. And mayors get tons of publicity beyond the cities they lead, like Eric Garcetti in Los Angeles and Eric Adams in New York City. It’s hard, though, for even careful watchers of American government and politics to suggest the names of county officials who have any kind of profile beyond their jurisdiction’s borders.

Despite the outsized public face of feds like Anthony Fauci, who guided the nation’s response to COVID-19, the policy function of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the regulatory power of the Food and Drug Administration, public health has always primarily been a state function. The states delegate the frontline role to the counties, but that job has gotten little attention.

Peculiar Beasts

Part of the reason for that is that counties, by any measure, are peculiar animals. As of 2017 there were 3,031 of them, according to the most recent count by the Census Bureau.³⁴ Texas is the champ, with 254 counties. Delaware and Hawaii each have 3 counties. Georgia,

with about one-tenth the population of California, has almost three times as many counties. Connecticut is something of an outlier: since 1960 its counties have existed only as geographical regions, with no duties or functions.

New York is one city that encompasses five counties, matching its five boroughs. In the city of Los Angeles, mayors have complained about how weak their power is, while Los Angeles County is far larger and encompasses more than twice as many people: each of its five county supervisors represents more people than the U.S. senators of a dozen states.

And then there's Philadelphia, where the city and county boundaries are the same and the county has no government of its own. When the city brought back the COVID-19 mask mandate and then quickly reversed itself, it was Philadelphia acting as a county. And when New York City haggled over its own mask mandate, it was the city acting on behalf of all five counties.

Add one more ingredient to this bizarre mélange. California set a statewide mask mandate, but in practice it varied across the state—by county. In Orange County, always stubbornly conservative, there was some question about whether county officials ever enforced it.

It's not surprising, therefore, to discover that county boards and commissions have a partisan tilt and that this tilt has affected policy. In 1990, these governing bodies were about evenly balanced between Republicans and Democrats, but since then Republicans have gained an edge, moving the boards toward a more conservative stance particularly when it comes to taxation and spending. On the other hand, as Justin de Benedictis-Kessner of Boston University and Christopher Warshaw of George Washington University found, electing a Democrat to a county board not only tilts it more liberal but also boosts an average county's spending by 5 percent.³⁵

These cross-pressures collided on the front lines of public health during the pandemic. Combine the important but often invisible role of public health in the United States, look at the counties where the frontline public health work happens, add the conservative-leaning (and often antimasking) decision-making by many county boards, and stir in the tremendous stress of navigating through the pandemic.

The result: in a CDC survey published in 2021 more than half of all public health workers reported symptoms of mental health conditions including depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. One in eight local public health workers had received threats during the pandemic. One-fourth felt bullied or harassed.³⁶

And in the first year and a half of the pandemic, half of the states reined in the power of their public health departments. One in five American counties lost the leader of their local public health agency.

The counties and their public health officials have been the foundation of the nation's response to COVID-19. They were the prime local data-gatherers and the principal feeders of the information to CDC. After the initial frantic scramble to set up vaccination clinics, the counties became the local coordinators for the shots, from giant Cook County encompassing Chicago to tiny Garfield County in Colorado.

When local politics got white-hot and pressures grew to avoid damaging local economies, however, elected officials pushed public health experts to the sidelines. That, in turn, weakened the nation's response to COVID-19. "It's been a bit of an uncoordinated disaster," explained Lori Tremmel Freeman, the CEO of the National Association of County and City Health Officials.³⁷ It was hard for public health officials to enforce the position many governors had staked out, which, she said, "basically villainizes" the local officials. And because many of the local public health experts had been frozen out of the policy discussions, she

explained, “it’s really hard to be a partner in that work when you haven’t been allowed into the group that informed the decision.”

Century-Old Lessons

We know, of course, that future pandemics are sure to come our way. And from a scientific standpoint, at least, we know what should be done. As David M. Morens and Jeffrey K. Taubenberger wrote in the *American Journal of Public Health*, “We appear to stand at the threshold of discoveries that will one day save millions of lives if, or rather when, another highly fatal influenza pandemic emerges.” In fact, they observed, “we have substantial knowledge about pandemic risk management, including standard public health measures to protect individuals, and more effective cooperation between medicine and public health.”³⁸

Morens and Taubenberger published that article in 2018, before COVID-19 started its awful campaign, and they based their analysis on lessons learned from the “mother of all pandemics” a century before. When the next pandemic did emerge, we began the grim march that so far has cost a million lives just in the United States, largely because we struggled to follow the lessons they outlined.

The U.S., in fact, has suffered far more from COVID-19 than many other countries with stronger national strategies, like Japan and South Korea, as well as three countries with federal systems like the American one: Australia, Canada, and Germany.

When the next pandemic strikes, we know what to do, both from the lessons of the 1918 outbreak and from the experiences of other countries with COVID-19. For America, the lessons begin with rediscovering the bedrock role of counties in public health—and providing them with air cover when the tough decisions needed to tamp down pandemics create the fierce blowback that has eroded our frontline defenses over the last two years. Given what’s happened in the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s hard to be optimistic. But America isn’t incapable of learning from its mistakes. We don’t, however, need to make learning so hard.

Questions to Consider

1. Who is the administrator of your county? What role did that official play during COVID-19?
2. What are the advantages of administrative decentralization, to the counties, for issues like COVID-19?
3. Do you think that the country would have been more successful in fighting COVID-19 if more of the responsibility for the battle would have been more centralized? Why or why not?

Note: This case originally appeared in *Governing* magazine (May 2022).

KEY CONCEPTS

accountability
Federalism
Magna Carta

FOR FURTHER READING

Howard, Philip K. *Not Accountable: Rethinking the Constitutionality of Public Employee Unions*. Garden City, N.Y.: Rodin Books.

Kaufman, Herbert. "Emerging Conflicts in the Doctrines of Public Administration." *Political Science Review* 50, no. 4 (December 1950): 1057-1073.

Skowronek, Stephen, John A. Dearborn, and Desmond King. *Phantoms of a Beleaguered Republic: The Deep State and The Unitary Executive*, rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

For cutting-edge insights into public administration, see www.napawash.org.

Daily stories and analysis of public administration issues at the federal level can be found at www.govexec.com.

For public administration at the state and local levels of government, see www.governing.com.

Thoughtful commentaries on public administration, especially at the state and local levels, can be found in a blog written by Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene, at <https://www.greenebarrett.com/home>.