



Where theory and practice meet: Good government, merit-based civil service, and HRM courses

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ABSTRACT

MPA programs are the only place where public sector human resource management (HRM) is taught. When HRM is not among the list of required courses, programs forgo their responsibility to teach the next generation of public servants why merit-based civil service is crucial to a functioning democracy. The danger of ignorance is reflected in an Executive Order issued in 2020 that would have removed job protections from thousands of federal civil servants. While the Order was rescinded in 2021, it has many advocates and remains on the agenda. This is a wake-up call to MPA programs to require students to learn why job protections are the bedrock of good government, a bedrock as foundational as a free press and more foundational than budgeting skills. However, 97% of MPA programs require a budgeting course but only 72% require an HRM course. If theory and practice meet in MPA classrooms, then HRM has to be there.



KEYWORDS

Civil service; human resource management; politics and administration; Schedule F

The less people know about what it takes to maintain a functioning state, the more they are seduced by the “government-should-run-like-business” perspective where loyalty to the CEO overrides loyalty to the mission. The apogee of that argument arrived in 2020 when the Trump administration issued Executive Order 13957. It would have converted federal workers with job protections to at-will employment status, affecting from 50,000 to “hundreds of thousands” of influential civil servants (Brewer et al., 2022, p. 687). The incoming Biden administration swiftly rescinded the order but there remain forceful advocates who are keeping it on the shelf, ready to move the initiative forward again. At the heart of the initiative is instating partisan loyalty.

From the CEO perspective, converting civil servants to at-will employees brings the bureaucracy under control. But loading a department with political loyalists dooms democracy. It is like overloading a truck, releasing its brake at the top of the hill, and watching it hurtle downward. Political neutrality of the civil service provides the braking mechanism; in its absence, the trip downhill does not end well. For well-founded reasons, the prevailing view since the latter 1800s in the U.S., and earlier in England (Eaton, 1880), has been that government employees who are selected according to merit are preferable to employees selected according to political fealty.

Across public administration as a field of study, the focus of both research and education shifts as knowledge evolves, needs develop, and interests re-focus (see Farrell et al., 2022; Haruna, 2022; MacDonald, 2021; McDonald et al., 2022). However, the most enduring

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issues remain the same: how to govern and how to maintain and nurture a democracy. MPA programs are where public sector human resource management (HRM) is taught and it is the only place it is taught. These courses are natural pastures for the study of how to recruit, staff, train, compensate, and develop those who will work for government. An essential lesson that permeates all of the human resource functions is how to maneuver in a fishbowl of partisan politics while simultaneously staying at arms length from it. The democratic theory underpinning MPA education meets the practice of public administration in human resource management, in the very person of the public administrator.

The argument

In this article, we elaborate on the above argument to make the case that public personnel administration is foundational to democratic governance and it belongs in the core of the MPA curriculum. Notwithstanding, HRM courses have been squeezed out to make room for other content, as Kettl observes (2015, p. 423):

In the 1960s, every self-respecting school of public affairs had courses on the role of human capital in government. . . . But as the public policy schools arose, courses on the public service were pushed to the side as the big-strategy questions of implementation and the leadership-based questions of public management gained prominence. Then implementation and public management fought for oxygen as the even larger issues of policy design elbowed out the questions of how to produce results.

Insofar as HRM content is cut from required courses, academic programs forsake their responsibility to equip the next generation of public servants with the ability to articulate *Why* and *How* merit-based civil service systems are crucial to a functioning democracy.

MPA curricula are both the messenger and trainer in a culture where understanding of government institutions is weak. In an analysis described later, we learned that only 72% include an HRM course in their core curriculum (see Appendix). In contrast, 97% require a budgeting course. Which is more important to good government: knowing how to budget or knowing how to staff budget offices with competent officials? Our answer is that budgeting skills are essential, AND having the right people with the right skills in charge of the budgeting office is just as important. While the analysis is discussed in more detail later in this article, our punchline is this: Over one quarter of all accredited MPA programs fail their responsibility to teach the importance of merit-based civil service in a functioning democracy. Where democratic theory meets public administration practice is in the person of the public service practitioner, and fully one in four MPA programs have lost sight of that.

How did this come to be? When the obvious works well, it gets taken for granted. Such is the case with merit-based employment and job protections. To the extent that business principles and competencies are featured in MPA curricula, such that running government like a business seems not only reasonable but desirable, students miss the connection between democratic principles and civil service protections. When MPA graduates cannot explain why merit-based employment is essential for democracy, how can we expect business leaders and politicians to understand? It is not an exaggeration to say that the MPA classroom is the last bulwark for protecting civil service.

Past is prologue

The spoils system introduced in the U.S. by President Andrew Jackson was referred to by contemporaries in the British civil service as “the American system” and was marked by “a mercenary political class, an oligarchy of stipendiaries” that constituted “the mortal peril of republics” (Eaton, 1880, v). At the time, the U.S. was the laughing stock of its European peers (Eaton, 1880). In fact, when attempts to dislodge patronage were ongoing in the run-up to passage of the 1883 Pendleton Act, the American civil service system was derisively referred to as the “snivel service” (Godkin, 1882). As Van Riper (1958) described in his classic history of the U.S. civil service, this coincided with machine politics, personal political selfishness, and a tacit alliance of politics and economics.

Fast forward through 19th century reforms. The Pendleton Act compelled merit system employment in federal government. The Act ensured that a cadre of government workers would remain in their jobs regardless of which party was in power. What is now taken for granted – employment based on knowledge, skills, and abilities – was a progressive idea when implemented a century and a half ago. Borrowing heavily from British civil service, it is a strategy designed to diminish partisan loyalty and to open employment opportunities to those who are capable of doing the work, regardless of their partisan leanings, gender, ethnicity, or identity.

As the federal government’s civil service system led the way, states and municipalities followed suit. For example, in 1884, New York became the first state to adopt a civil service system for state workers. Massachusetts became the second state when it started a merit system in 1885. In the decades that followed, other states and cities followed suit, adopting merit-based civil service systems spurred by the requirement in a 1939 amendment to the Social Security Act that required jurisdictions to replace their patronage systems with formal merit systems if they wished to receive federal grants (Ting et al., 2013). The purpose of the amendment was to ensure that federal dollars would be managed well.

While the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978 modified some of the Pendleton Act’s provisions, the main principles remained in place. For more than a century, the smooth functioning and inherent common sense of merit principles in civil service led to widespread complacency. The centrality of personnel administration to a sound democracy came to be seen as a given rather than a precious jewel. And now comes an era when the jewel – a politically-neutral civil service – is under attack.

The discussion proceeds as follows. First, the 2020 Executive Order, also colloquially referred to as Schedule F, is explained. The issues that arise from such an initiative are then connected to public administration theory as it pertains to human resource management and how this nexus telescopes into democratic theory and economic theory. These themes point to the conclusion that a democratic republic with a capitalist economy cannot survive in the absence of merit-based employment and job protections. We then present the analysis of NASPAA-accredited MPA programs in the United States, which reveals that 28% of them do not require an HRM course. This confirms our fear that too many MPA graduates are ill-equipped to defend a politically neutral civil service and fall prey to those who advocate for removal of job protections. First, we turn to the initiative currently knocking down the door: Schedule F.

The Schedule F initiative and what it portends

Executive Order 13957 and the class of employees, Schedule F, it intended to create, came closer to politicizing the federal civil service than any other initiative to date. As stated in section 4 of the Order, those positions of a “confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character not normally subject to change as a result of a Presidential transition” were to be categorized in the newly created Schedule F for federal employees (see section 4 of Executive Order 13957).

Jacksonian spoils redux

Executive Order 13957, issued October 21, 2020 and rescinded by President Biden in 2021, takes exception with the fact that career employees hold influential policy-making positions. The Order asserts that “agencies should have a greater degree of appointment flexibility with respect to these employees than is afforded by the existing competitive service process” (Executive Order 13957, section 1, paragraph 4). In other words, it claims that execution of the law requires that the President have employment control over policy professionals. To enact implementation, the order required agency heads to identify positions covered by job protections that are of a “policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character” and that are “not normally subject to change as a result of a Presidential transition” (White House, 2020). The result of such an order was to remove job protections from positions of influence in federal agencies, making way for political loyalty.

Many, if not most, elected executives take umbrage with the slow-moving steadiness of a bureaucracy that keeps the ship of state afloat. Career officials, abiding by administrative law, provide continuity and predictability. Their allegiance to the state rather than to partisan whim stymies elected officials’ ability to short-circuit process and quickly exert their will. The strength of this consistency guards against rapid changes of direction after each election. Elected executives realize that, once elected, they find themselves in a rapidly moving river of day-to-day governance, its current already well established. By the time they can bring the bureaucracy to heel, their term in office expires. The value of this, of course, is that it provides durability and predictability to government action, as was noticeable during the tumultuous final years of the Nixon administration and during the chaos of the Trump years.

Public administration theory and the civil service

Democratic theory and good government are transformed into action by public service professionals. Whether police officers, caseworkers, budget analysts, or policy experts, Americans expect public servants to use the power of the state in a transparent manner consistent with constitutional values. Whether called bureaucrats, public servants, or policy workers, public service professionals are the hands and feet of government and the nerve endings of public policy (Zavattaro & Guy, 2022). To repeat Charles Goodsell’s wisdom, government cannot know what it is doing without competent public administration (Goodsell, 2019, p. 873).

While no single bureaucrat holds the power and influence of a mayor or governor or President, collectively the bureaucracy controls what gets done, the rules by which it gets

done, when it gets done, and how outcomes are measured. The bureaucrats plan and deliver services, represent the state, and embody the interface between the governed and the governors. This is the rapidly moving river of day-to-day governance that many mayors, governors, and Presidents fail to appreciate until they have won election and are in office. As candidates, these prospective executives were the center of attention at political rallies, but once in office, they are one branch of three over which political power is separated and checkmated by design. Running a constitution requires attention to three dimensions: public management, public law, and public policy/politics. It is civil servants that breathe life into each of these, as described in the paragraphs that follow.

Public management

While elected officials stand in the spotlight and hold the microphones, bureaucrats deliver the goods. This is why debates about government's HRM systems are hotly contested. Disputes are about more than the mechanics of hiring processes and compensation packages; they are about to whom loyalty lies and whose priorities matter. The threat of removing job protections is an attempt to politicize federal civil service in ways not seen since the Jacksonian spoils period produced such performance failures that President Lincoln's ability to keep the government functioning during the Civil War was almost crippled. At the war's conclusion, reconstruction required massive efforts on the part of the civil service but after decades of spoils, too many federal workers lacked the skills necessary to implement reconstruction programs. It would be another twenty years before the Pendleton Act would pass. The lesson from this dark period is that a well-functioning, well-staffed bureaucracy is an essential component of good governance.

Civil servants – those who are selected to work for government on the basis of knowledge, skills, and abilities, rather than political patronage – are the “business end” of government. Civil servants implement policy, design programs to fulfill legislative intent, establish rules for how public programs will operate, and work hand-in-glove with non-profits and business to deliver services. They maintain balance and predictability despite partisan political swings. In fact, it is fair to say they are the guardians of the State, maintaining equilibrium regardless of how tumultuous the political environment is.

Expectations of the public service workforce are many and include both performance standards and democratic standards. Beyond required job skills, public servants are expected to personify public integrity and to perform their jobs from a position of partisan neutrality. They are to be representative of the constituencies served and their actions are subject to public scrutiny. Processes are expected to ensure fairness, organizational justice, and equity. These expectations create the context within which the pursuit of public purposes takes place. Federal employees take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution, not to an individual politician. The corollary is true in most states.

Law

Merit system principles are codified in federal law in Title 5 of the U.S. Code and similar principles obtain in states and large municipalities. They guide the work of personnel administrators and the processes through which job openings are posted, applicants are

screened and selected, and performance is appraised and compensated. They are summarized here (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2016):

- (1) Employee selection is competitive and is based on knowledge, skills, and ability.
- (2) Job applicants and employees must be treated equitably with proper regard for their privacy and constitutional rights.
- (3) Employees must receive equal pay for work of equal value.
- (4) High standards of conduct are expected and concern for the public interest is foremost.
- (5) The workforce is to be guided by norms of efficiency and effectiveness.
- (6) Employees are to be retained based on their performance; inadequate performance is to be dealt with fairly and decisively.
- (7) Training should focus on both individual and organizational performance.
- (8) Employees are to be protected from favoritism, political coercion, and arbitrary actions.
- (9) Employees are to be protected against reprisal for whistleblowing.

Beyond these principles are prohibitions against discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, handicapping condition, marital status, or political affiliation; also codified in federal law.

Policy/Politics

The connection between the performance of civil servants and elected officials is tightly linked. During both the ill-fated Nixon administration as well as the chaos of the Trump years, the bureaucracy held systems together that, had the electeds had total control, would have ground to a halt or veered off the road. Subtext to the Constitution's provisions for the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government is the unstated assumption that the administrative machinery necessary for each branch to fulfill its purposes will exist. While not spelled out in the republic's infancy, administrative machinery has evolved and expanded to meet the needs of a geographically and demographically diverse nation.

If there is a ship of state, merit system civil servants run the engine room. The work of governing is continuous and without regard for election cycles. Administrative systems contain a force and momentum all their own and it is the civil service who ensure this continuity. While the power to steer the ship of state is divided into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, the bureaucracy interfaces with all three. Using rule-making to shape legislatively mandated programs, and responding to hierarchical authority of the executive, civil servants prevent the ship of state from capsizing when unwitting officials attempt sharp turns that experienced administrators know from experience are not sustainable.

Those who implement and manage public services make those who hold elected positions look capable or, conversely, incompetent. The bureaucracy is its own power source and that is not a bad thing. Voters assess the quality of work produced by bureaucrats and use it to make judgments about the competence of elected officials. Using their perceptions as data, they retrospectively vote for or against the incumbent based on the information (Bertelli, 2021). Thus exists accountability.

Merit-based employment, coupled with job protections that make political cycles less important than public performance, keeps the ship of state on an even keel. This is why D. Moynihan (2022) is adamant that no country can become a world power without a capable civil service. Democratic statecraft requires all dimensions of public administration – management, law, and politics/policy. Whether in the role of regulator, educator, enforcer, innovator, or deliverer, civil servants perform duties that are essential for democracy to thrive.

The value of human effort can be explained at a theoretic level in regard to democracy and in regard to economic principles. Using democratic theory and economic theory, discussion now turns to how an impartial civil service – the buffer between the economy and politicians – is the structure that reaps social benefits of a competitive economy while curbing the social costs of inequalities arising from it.

Requisites of democracy

Robert Dahl articulates six elements of democracy and five conditions instrumental for establishing democratic institutions. Elements of democracy at the scale of a pluralist nation state – elements of polyarchy – include the presence of (Dahl, 1998/2020, p. 85):

- (1) Elected officials
- (2) Free, fair, and frequent elections
- (3) Freedom of expression
- (4) Alternative sources of information
- (5) Associational autonomy
- (6) Inclusive citizenship

With respect to the first element, democracy, at any scale greater than a small group of people who could govern themselves via direct participation, is created by citizens electing officials to represent them. These must be free, fair, and frequent elections, which is the second element. Without frequent opportunities for voters to express their preferences, the extent to which elections are free and fair is undermined. Freedom of expression, the third element, is necessary for individuals and citizens to voice their preferences both within and outside the voting booth. Access to alternative sources of information, the fourth element, is the presence of a free press or at least alternative sources of information than one operated by the state. The fifth element of democracy is the ability to assemble freely. The sixth democratic institution has eluded American society for most of its history: Inclusive citizenship. Arguably, inclusive citizenship in the United States has only obtained since the Voting Rights Act in 1965 ensured the rights of African Americans to vote, but it is under threat today as that Act's intent is eroded.

These six democratic institutions presuppose five conditions, three of which are *fundamental* to the formation of democratic institutions, and two further conditions are *favorable* for the development of institutions such as fair elections, a free press, and freedom to assemble (Dahl, *On Democracy*, 1998/2020). The first three conditions necessary for the development of democratic institutions include control over police powers, a democratic “zeitgeist,” and the absence of foreign intervention that might undermine the political culture. Two additional conditions *favorable to* democracy are the presence of a market

economy and a roughly equitable distribution of social and political power throughout society. A “roughly equitable distribution” does not suggest that *equality* must characterize democratic societies, but rather, there must be an absence of concentrated social and political capital. The dispersion of social and political capital throughout society results in cultural pluralism, or at least some diversity such that there is cultural heterogeneity. These five conditions—three essential and two favorable – underlying the development of democratic institutions are discussed in further detail below, along with their implications for administration.

With respect to control over police powers, a necessary condition for the development of democracy is that elected representatives control the power to coerce and detain. In other words, police and military enforce the laws passed by the people’s representatives and not an unelected body, as in the case of military coups. As long as the military and police are enforcing the laws of the people, it can be assumed that police power is employed in the execution of the public good. The second condition – a spirit of democracy and a belief in democratic culture – is developed over time and multiple generations. A democratic spirit is one that is transmitted from one generation to the next, where subsequent generations are accustomed to the norm that power should not be concentrated in individuals or elite groups, which underpins the idea of equality. The third necessary condition for democracy is the absence of foreign interference in a country’s culture that would interrupt the development of a spirit of democracy. People must possess the agency and autonomy from foreign influence needed to develop democratic institutions of their own. Two additional favorable conditions for democracy include the presence of a regulated market economy, and relatedly, a society characterized by many types of groups. Dahl refers to this last condition as “weak subcultural pluralism” (Dahl, 1998/2020, p. 147).

Economic implications

The two additional conditions for democracy extend the second condition – democratic zeitgeist – to the economy and economic decision making by individuals. That is, just as political power is distributed throughout a culture, so should economic power and cultural characteristics be generally distributed throughout a society. At least there should be no great concentrations of economic power or cultural/demographic characteristics. There should be a sense of identity that supersedes the “us” of national identity; cultural pluralism is not divisive enough to eclipse a collective identity at the national level.

Dahl mentions the racial caste system created in the United States by slavery and continued through Jim Crow laws and current-day race-based inequality that tips the scales against minoritized people (“Two Americas”). Dahl notes that the racial caste system has not prevented the United States from developing a robust democracy, nor has the presence of castes in India prevented that country from developing democratic political institutions. Economic inequality in both the U.S. and India threaten democracy. However, democracy is not as robust and resilient as it could be in either country due to the skewed distributions of material resources that create substantial classes of “haves” and “have nots.” Inequality undermines democracy.

Dahl explains how the presence of a market economy at once fosters a democratic society while also threatening it due to the emergence of economic inequality arising from unregulated market operations. On one hand, democracy is fostered by providing citizens

with the everyday practice of voicing their preferences through their economic decision-making. In this way, democracy is supported by the presence of a market economy because incentives for agentic behavior are embedded in market exchanges. Agentic behavior translates to equitable political exchanges, which underpin democratic institutions. Market capitalism favors the development of democracy due to its social and political consequences. It creates a large middle stratum of property owners who seek education, autonomy, personal freedom, property rights, the rule of law, and participation in government (Dahl, 1998/2020, p. 168). In this way, the political pluralism of the second condition listed above is extended to cover economic activity of individuals.

Administrative institutions are necessary to regulate the market economy to curb its unequal tendencies. A regulated market economy creates the conditions favorable to developing and sustaining democracy, where regulations curb the inequities arising from capitalism. The challenge is to strike the right balance between regulations and economic competition such that the size of government and the functions of the economy elicit optimal characteristics of pluralism and competition in each. Government is the most accessible and effective actor for intervening in a market economy in order to alter an otherwise harmful outcome (Dahl, 1998/2020). The civil service establishes this buffer between elected officials and the power of the market economy. In the absence of a layer of administration between elected officials and economic resources, elected officials would try to gain control over the economy to increase their power. This is how an independent civil service “provides a bulwark against authoritarian control” (D. Moynihan, 2022, p. 37).

The optimal point where the benefits of market competition are realized without exacerbating inequality is discovered by continually monitoring outcomes. The size of government administration corresponds to the degree to which the economy is controlled: “A market-capitalist economy avoids the need for a powerful, even authoritarian” political regime (Dahl, 1998/2020, p. 168). A robust regulatory apparatus curbs the controlling tendencies of elected officials. How much economic inequality is tolerated before citizens agitate for bureaucratic intervention? How extensive and far-reaching of a regulatory apparatus is tolerated before citizens agitate for less government administration? Each society figures out the answers to these questions by monitoring outcomes and responding to them.

Administrative intervention regulates the economy and addresses market failures: Either to promote economic activity that confers social benefits, such as requiring and subsidizing elementary and secondary education, or prohibiting economic activity that exacts social costs, such as punishing crime and penalizing pollution. Intervention either curbs activities with negative social impacts like crime and pollution or fosters activities with positive impacts like education and mass transit, which the market either fails to provide or fails to provide in quantities considered sufficient.

Without administratively-imposed penalties, the market economy produces too much crime and pollution, which result in negative social impacts. The positive impacts of compulsory education also include nurturing democracy by improving citizens’ capacities to engage intelligently in political life (Dahl, 1998/2020, p. 187). In other words, a decentralized economy and engaged, autonomous economic actors create and sustain democratic institutions. The requisite administrative mechanism must be free from political influence because the independence of at least two institutions – the courts and the bureaucracy – is crucial to the rule of law (Newbold, 2011; see also Rockman, 2019,

1559). An impartial civil service – the buffer of administration between the economy and politicians – is the organizational structure that reaps the social benefits of a competitive economy while curbing the social costs of inequalities arising from it.

Why it matters

The Schedule F initiative, along with related arguments that crop up intermittently, intends to eliminate an impartial civil service. MPA graduates should be armed with the ability to explain why merit-based employment interferes with the bureaucracy's ability to regulate the market economy. Democracy will fail when Presidential administrations control the levers of the economy and thereby gain access to the considerable resources of the American economy. Galbraith (2009, p. xix) anticipated this in his observation that the effort to control the civil service amounts to “the systematic undermining of public protections for the benefit of private clients . . . what we see is not, in fact, a principled conservative's drive to minimize the state. It is a predator's drive to divert public resources to clients and friends.” For example, former President Trump made disparaging remarks about the chair of the Federal Reserve System as Trump “was making clear that he wanted the Fed to keep the stock market soaring and make the economy grow faster in preparation for the 2020 election” (Goodsell, 2019, p. 875). He tried to appoint unqualified political allies to the Board of Governors, as well. Had Trump's appointments been made, the president would have had insider information on monetary policy and economic conditions and strategies that are structured to be independent of politics.

The problem here is that a centrally-planned economy puts economic resources at the disposal of political rulers, leading to the aphorism that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Schedule F was an attempt to eliminate the bulwark of administration between the President and the resources of the American economy, manifesting Dahl's observation that “centrally-planned economies have always been closely associated with authoritarian regimes” (1998/2020, p. 169).

Bureaucracy, ideally, provides a store of expertise that assists the people's elected representatives. But to govern a state well requires incorruptibility, resistance to the enormous temptations of power, and dedication to the public good rather than oneself. Rockman observes that “Nixon's ‘administrative presidency’ was perhaps the first truly concerted effort in modern times to bring the bureaucracy to heel, initially by ignoring it and then later by obtrusively overseeing and directing it” (2019, p. 1569). Reminiscent of this dynamic, Moynihan notes that in recent years, “the Republican Party and its donors see civil servants as antagonistic to their interests, a resource to be brought to heel” (2021, p. 175). From this perspective, bureaucratic neutrality is suspect: “A public service that claims the capacity to serve past governments, current governments, and future holders of power is not likely to be viewed by populists as a reliable partner, since that stand indicates a lack of appreciation of the populist's signature claim to have discovered the authentic voice of the people” (Stoker, 2021, p. 247).

Misunderstanding the purpose of the bureaucracy originates in the projections of the politician who mistakes politics for governance. To the populist, bureaucratic and democratic institutions are in the way, impeding the populist/autocrat from articulating the will of the people. Attributing their own motivation to others, the populist/autocrat does not believe neutrality to be possible – of *course* everyone else is out to benefit themselves – so

a bureaucracy that claims to serve political administrations regardless of party or without self-serving motivations is immediately suspect.

In the 21st century, anti-democratic regimes have arisen in several countries as populist movements: The United States under Trump, Brexit backers in the UK, and recent movements in Italy, Hungary, and Brazil. This populist turn is not limited to political and economic activities; it extends to administration and governance practices as well. As Stoker (2021) notes, there is no reason to assume that populists will leave the backstage processes of governance alone. Indeed, controlling the backstage processes of governance grants the populist regime access to economic resources, given the important role of government in regulating the economy.

The threat of a politicized civil service

A fully-implemented Schedule F would have given the president control over the bureaucracy with the instruments of power tilted toward him and his party. Visions of what Schedule F could have brought about – and what could happen still – should remind public administration scholars and practitioners to heed the threat. Without a competent administrative state whose mission is to pursue public purposes rather than partisan interests, the ship of state loses its direction and takes on water.

The threat of a future administration or Congress reinstating Schedule F remains high (Brewer et al., 2022, p. 700). A century spent building an expert, experienced, politically neutral federal civil service could be reversed by the stroke of a pen and the nation would soon repeat the error of the spoils period. What would result is the mass clientelism that anti-democratic regimes expect as their personal resource to employ once they win office. This is why expertise is a resource to be cultivated and must be protected from overt politicization (D. P. Moynihan, 2021, p. 176).

Incentive systems embedded into the market economy provide the conditions to foster and sustain democracy. Experience and history demonstrate that an unregulated market economy results in unequal distributions of resources and power: “Markets tend to work best for those with money” (Marks, 2020, p. 210). Government institutions, then, are needed to correct for the market failures arising from an unregulated economy. In complex societies a substitute for the coordination and control provided by markets is necessary in order to avoid economic chaos. And this is where the necessity for an administrative layer that regulates the market economy becomes essential: It prevents the autocrat from controlling economic resources for the purpose of consolidating power.

Survey of MPA programs

To assess the extent to which public personnel administration remains central to the MPA curriculum – or not – we reviewed the curriculum for every fifth American educational institution listed in the online 2022–2023 roster of programs accredited by NASPAA. We focused strictly on MPA degree programs. The NASPAA roster lists institutions in alphabetical order, rendering a systematic selection process free from biases that might impact program characteristics such as size and age. This selection process resulted in 36 educational institutions, which are listed in the Appendix. This represents 20% of NASPAA-accredited American MPA programs.

Upon inspection of their public information, we find ten (28%) do not feature HRM content in a standalone course in the MPA curriculum. Core curricula in such programs cover topics including leadership and ethics, but HRM is not its own course. In contrast, only one program (3%) fails to require a course on public budgeting in the core curriculum. Teaching public personnel administration is as foundational to public administration practice as budgeting, and, we argue, as fundamental to democratic governance. As it stands, MPA students receiving a steady diet of neoliberal ideology allow ideas such as Schedule F to gain credibility in the absence of the brakes of administrative neutrality that curb an elected official's worst tendencies.

Democracy and merit-based civil service rely on each other. As was obvious during the spoils period of the 19th century, good government demands a depoliticized civil service that is loyal to the Constitution, rather than to a partisan political leader. MPA programs are where public sector HRM is taught – and they are the *only* place where it is taught. When curricula are scrubbed and HRM is made an elective, academic programs abrogate their responsibility to teach the next generation of public servants about why merit-based civil service systems are imperative for a democracy to thrive. MPA curricula are both the messenger and trainer in a culture where understanding of government institutions is weak.

Conclusion

When the obvious works well, it is tempting to take it for granted. Such is the case with merit-based employment and job protection in federal service. It is incumbent on public administration educators to translate what they know into instruction for public administration students. When MPA graduates cannot explain why merit-based employment is essential for democracy, how can we expect those not trained in public administration to understand? It is not exaggeration to say that the MPA classroom is the last bulwark for protecting civil service; the last opportunity to install and instill the brakes of administrative neutrality.

In this essay, we endeavored to explain why merit-based employment in government is foundational to a functioning democracy. Using the Schedule F initiative as an example of the pushback a politically neutral bureaucracy is getting, we argue that it undermines democratic governance. We then demonstrated how public administration theory pertains to human resource management and how merit principles nurture democracy and a sound economy. To accentuate the drift away from public sector HRM that has occurred in MPA education, we analyze accredited programs and found only 72% require the course. This stands in contrast to 97% that require a budgeting course.

It is imperative that public administration education engage the issue of a politically neutral civil service. The subject must be wrapped in the context of democratic theory and put at the center of the table for all to see. This protects employees from the swings of partisan ideology and political whimsy. Organizational intelligence requires it. Representativeness requires it. Continuity requires it. Public performance requires it. And as this argument demonstrates, the health of the economy and democracy depends on it.

Human resource management in public service lies at the intersection of politics, management, and law. Those who assume that loyalty to the CEO is all that is required, whether working in business or government, fail to comprehend the difference between for-profit objectives and governing objectives. Public administration theory enters the picture

because the issue joins democratic theory and economic outcomes with public administration praxis: Where theory and practice meet is in the HRM classroom.

In this essay we traced the development of merit-based employment, explained its effects, and grounded the argument with democratic theory and economic theory. Rather than standing by and watching a federal workforce race for the exits, MPA programs have an opportunity to exert their knowledge and use their voice to yell “fire.” There is already smoke in the theater.

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Appendix. List of MPA Programs Examined for their MPA Core Curriculum Content*

Institution	Standalone Course on HRM in Core	Standalone Course on Budgeting in Core	Notes
University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa	Y	Y	
University of Arkansas, Little Rock	Y	Y	
California State University, Fresno	Y	Y	
California State University, Stanislaus	Y	Y	
University of La Verne	N	Y	
University of Connecticut	Y	Y	
Florida Gulf Coast University	Y	Y	
University of North Florida	Y	Y	
Georgia College & State University	Y	Y	
University of Georgia	Y	Y	
DePaul University	Y	Y	
University of Illinois at Chicago	N	Y	
Kansas State University	Y	Y	
Morehead State University	N	Y	
Grambling State University	Y	Y	
University of Baltimore	N	N	Budgeting & HRM are among courses in which students choose 2 of 3
University of Massachusetts at Boston	Y	Y	
Wayne State University	Y	Y	
Mississippi State University	Y	Y	
University of Nebraska at Omaha	N	Y	
Seton Hall University	Y	Y	
Columbia University	N	Y	
Marist College	N	Y	
University at Albany, SUNY	Y	Y	
North Carolina Central University	Y	Y	
University of North Carolina, Wilmington	Y	Y	
Kent State University	Y	Y	
University of Central Oklahoma	Y	Y	
Penn State Harrisburg	Y	Y	
College of Charleston	Y	Y	
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga	Y	Y	
Texas Tech University	N	Y	
University of Texas at San Antonio	N	Y	
University of Utah	Y	Y	
Virginia Commonwealth University	Y	Y	
West Virginia University	N	Y	

*Method.

a Selection criteria: Every fifth institution listed in the 2022–2023 roster of programs accredited by NASPAA in the United States that offers an MPA degree.

b Exclusions: All of the above-listed programs are MPA programs. In one case, the fifth institution listed was not an MPA program. In that case, the next-listed institution was substituted so that only MPA programs were included in the comparison group.

c Information source: Each program's website was accessed and information was taken from its list of required courses.