

Week 1

Week 1: The Basic Problem of *American Public Administration*

Americans did not invent public administration. By the nineteenth century, many European countries had already developed large government bureaucracies and American government operations remained small by comparison. In fact, Europeans who visited the United States often commented on the sense of “statelessness” here: that is, there was far less of a presence of government, especially the national government, than in Europe. This did not mean that there was no government. At the local level, in particular, government played a very important role in the daily lives of Americans, though not by means of large bureaucracies. Popularly elected local representatives, organized by political parties, were the most important and influential government actors during the nineteenth century. How they interacted with their constituents and supporters, how they used the power they were given (for good and for ill), and how they conducted the affairs of city governments provided the essential backdrop the development of public administration in the United States. The theory, philosophy, and techniques of public administration in the United States thus occurred in a peculiarly American context, and the purpose of the readings and videos this week is to give you a sense of that context.

I suggest you begin by watching the film clip (Video 1) of Boss William Marcy Tweed. As you will learn, Tweed rose through the ranks of the Democratic Party organization in Manhattan – called Tammany Hall – to become “boss,” which meant that he was the most influential figure in the most important political machine in New York City. A political machine is an organization associated with a political party, the purpose of which is to exchange government resources (such as jobs, contracts, or other public expenditures) for votes. Working through ward bosses (machine representatives within electoral districts and neighborhoods), the machine provided resources to voters to build political loyalty; at election time, ward bosses would then turn to those voters to whom they had given a job or a handout with the expectation that they would vote for the right candidates. The machine did not often have a great deal of resources to hand out (city budgets were limited in the nineteenth century), so much of its support for the poor was often symbolic, but in very poor neighborhoods even a little bit of attention could build voter loyalty. The film makes clear, however, that the machine was just as interested in enriching itself. The bosses were corrupt: they received kickbacks from contractors (Tweed’s courthouse is the most famous example of this), hired their cronies (political supporters and operatives) for government jobs, and used government purchases to channel money into their own pockets. The administration of government, in other words, was a tool of the political system, and the leaders of that system were as interested in serving themselves as they were the citizens of the city, even though they did provide some voters with services they wanted. Indeed, bosses like Tweed survived as long as they did precisely because they were adept at getting things done: they paved streets, created parks, extended water and sewer lines, built docks and bridges, and provided a rudimentary form of welfare for some of their constituents. However, they did so at a very high

price, since part of the expenditure for such projects was channeled into the hands of the profit-seeking politicians and those who received services were expected to vote the bosses back into office.

Although the Tweed Ring was overthrown, Tammany Hall persisted well into the twentieth century, as did the practices of the political machine. Even when the machine was not so well organized, using government for personal gain remained. The reading for this week, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, shows how these practices constituted a practical philosophy of governance in the hands of characters like George Washington Plunkitt, Tammany leader of the 15th Assembly District in Manhattan. As you read the book, ask yourself how Plunkitt views the relationship between the political process (getting elected, connecting to the voters) and what we would now call the administrative process (delivering services, managing government). What does he mean by honest and dishonest graft? Why is he so against civil service? What does he think of the citizens and in what sense is he responsive to the people who live in his district? From his perspective, what are the responsibilities of elected representatives and what is the proper role of government?

Notice that Plunkitt engages in several activities that today have been outlawed (in most places). He uses his foreknowledge (insider information) of government projects (building parks and roads, for example) to purchase property and thus enrich himself when the government buys that land for those projects. He does his best to make sure that Tammany men are appointed to administrative positions as a reward for their political support and activities. He holds several offices at one time. And he directs contracts toward businesses that then reward him for steering those contracts his way.

He is able to maintain his position, in spite of what we now consider ethical (and legal) violations, because he is closely connected to the residents of his district. Look at his references to the people, especially the poor, who live in the Fifteenth District. If we believe him, he knows them very well and understands their needs. He considers himself a friend to the poor. The final chapter of the book gives an interesting view of just how busy his days are tending to his constituents' concerns: responding to potential voters in need and making sure the neighbors know just how generous Tammany is. You can imagine, however, that Tammany is more likely to distribute services to places where it feels it can reliably get votes, and lack of loyalty at election time was likely to mean lack of services thereafter. Distribution of services is not intended to solve great urban problems or to fulfill some publicly defined minimum standard of living; they are intended to create a political bond to be used at election time. As Plunkitt emphasizes, the Tammany man who is providing all those services is "playing politics all the time," for a vote is really nothing more than a "marketable commodity." If there are "no votes" in something (such as delivering a service to some constituent, area, or business), Plunkitt has no interest in it.

Here, then, is the basic problem from which American public administration arose. Tammany's approach to the administration of government is responsive, in a limited sense, but it is also corrupt. The alternative, to put the government in the hands of trained civil servants, might make it less corrupt and more efficient (though bureaucrats can be corrupt too), but it also might make it less responsive, and thus less democratic. What we want from government, therefore, is responsiveness without corruption, and efficiency without unresponsiveness. Almost every aspect of the story that you will get from the Henry textbook is an attempt to address some part of this challenge: responsiveness without corruption; efficiency without unresponsiveness; some match between democracy and bureaucracy which gives us the good things (responsiveness, efficiency) associated with both and without the bad things (corruption, unresponsiveness).

To give you a sense where the argument is taking us, view Videos 2 and 3 which give you a sense of what local governments are doing nowadays to be both responsive and efficient. You do not see politicians in these videos. Instead, you witness professional public servants devoted to the efficient delivery of services (recycling, permitting) to "consumers" instead of voters. The political affiliation of the customers is irrelevant and the tone of the entire enterprise is one of friendly, helpful, nonpartisan, business-like efficiency.

How we have made this transition and the problems and debates that accompanied the process are the subjects of this course. The Henry text will be difficult and confusing at times because public administration is a controversial subject, in spite of its apparent banality, and because it draws on a variety of other disciplines to help define and achieve its objectives. I will therefore briefly introduce the main themes of each chapter of the book and provide conceptual guideposts to aid your understanding of the problems Henry presents. Each lecture will also have a chapter outline and a list of key concepts. There will be many of these, so remember to keep the big picture in mind: how can we reconcile bureaucracy and democracy to get both efficiency and responsiveness?