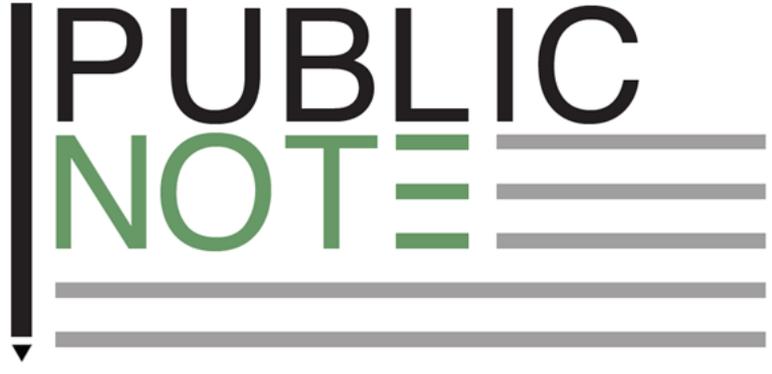


What do we talk about when we talk about neutrality? On the nature and popularity of the idea of a neutral administration



‘Why don’t they just listen to the facts?’ The ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ way of governing is often juxtaposed against political decision making. This is remarkable, since public administration research has problematized the notion of neutrality as opposed to political or value based for years. This article describes why the idea of true neutrality remains such a valued concept by drawing on over a year of observations in infrastructure policy processes. It concludes that neutrality is a popular concept because it satisfies people’s need for external validation in a way that suggests their position is correct beyond their own preferences.

Key words: neutrality, objectivity, politics-administration dichotomy.

Something odd is happening in the world of public administration research: science seems to have a different view of practice than practice does of itself. When public administration arose as a field in the late 1800's, it still shared with practice a perspective that there is a legislator who makes decisions and an administration that carries out these decisions (Weber, 1948, p. 215; Wilson, 1886, pp. 370-376). The legislator is usually some sort of democratically elected representative of the people, or a room filled with a multitude of those. They answer all questions that have to do with values: how high should our taxes be? How fast should we be allowed to drive on our highways? Should we close our borders? Should XTC be legalized? The administration, on the other hand, is filled with people that are not concerned with these value-laden questions. When the elected representatives of the people decide that the speed limit should be raised, they go change the signs. When the representatives decide that the borders should be closed, they go build a fence. The legislator's job is to make value decisions, which the administration should simply carry out as efficiently and effectively as possible. The classic distinction between politics and administration presupposes that values are what governs political decisions, whilst the administration decides based on what is efficient, rational or objectively best. What all these terms describing the administration have in common is that they reflect a belief in the possibility of executing political decisions in a value-neutral way. In this article, I will explore the popularity of the idea of a neutral and objective civil service by looking at three empirical studies on the topic. It seems that regardless of whether they actually believe it to be feasible, civil servants rehearse stories of objectivity and neutrality because it is what they aspire and are required to be.

Since the publication of Weber and Wilson's theories on administration, a vast amount of research has shown that shows that executing the legislator's decisions is not merely a matter of changing the signs or building that fence (Parsons, 2002; Richardson, 2002; Simon, 1976; Steenhuisen, 2009; Waldo, 1984; Wolf & van Dooren, 2017). Doing this as effectively and efficiently as possible is a noble aim, but efficient according to whose standards (Stone, 2012, pp. 78-79)? Norms such as 'efficient' or 'objective' can be an organizational aim, but are not moral positions with which one can decide on value trade-offs (van Weers, 1992). For example, one of the organizational aims of the Dutch railway service provider (NS) is likely to be to provide railway service in an efficient manner. The NS can choose to have trains run more often, providing higher service quality. However, running the trains more often will increase the burden on the train

tracks and the trains themselves, decreasing service reliability (Steenhuisen & van Eeten, 2008). It is not difficult to see how this trade-off between more frequent and more reliable service complicates what is to be interpreted as the most efficient timetable. Efficiency as an organizational goal can lead to the decision to employ more trains, but also to the opposite decision.

Much like efficiency, objectivity is also a value-dependent term. The term has a wide array of meanings. Objectivity can, for example, mean personal detachment, correctly following procedures or aligning one's judgement with 'evidence from all directions' (Douglas, 2009, p. 120). What can be considered 'objectively best' depends on the type of objectivity you are talking about. Furthermore, what is 'best' depends on one's values. To get back to the NS-example: your view on the best way to run a train service depends on whether you value reliability or frequency. Political decisions do not answer all value-questions apparent in a policy process. In fact, there is an 'inherent vagueness' to policy decisions that makes it so that civil servants will always have some discretion in implementing a policy (Richardson, 2002). Making value-related decisions is not an optional, but instead an integral aspect of the work of civil servants.

Civil servants – like any other type of person –are not 'neutral' in how they process information. They are likely to accept information that confirms with their attitudes, and reject or vigorously question information that opposes their attitudes (Dorren & Böhme, Forthcoming). So, what happens when you ask civil servants what values govern their work practice? This is one of the questions I set out to answer during approximately 1.5 years of ethnographic research in project management teams of large infrastructure projects in Flanders and the Netherlands.

When asked about the way they do their work, civil servants will tell you that they primarily want to make policies which are efficient and effective, as opposed to value laden policies (Dorren, 2017). It seems that the image of the civil servant that was present in the work of Wilson and Weber is still very much alive to the civil servant, even though public administration theorists have recognized this image is unachievable. When questioned further, civil servants do nuance their position. The idea of value-neutral policy is primarily mentioned when they are discussing their practice in general. When asked for specific examples in which they were able to act objectively or neutrally, civil servants recognize that there are hardly any situations in which they would say they are able to act in an objective fashion (Dorren, Forthcoming).

In fact, they start listing all sorts of factors inhibiting them from doing so. They are under time pressure, have limited budgets, and have to deal with a constantly changing context. Studies, they claim, are most likely to be used when they fit the ambitions of the decision makers. They try to be comprehensive and neutral in their decision making, but are primarily concerned with doing things, rather than thinking about how they are doing things.¹ Even though much of administrative practice is filled with meetings and likely involves a lot of thinking and talking, this thinking and talking does not seem to involve much reflection on what principles govern administrative decision making. Key mantras of the administration seem to be that ‘at some point, you just have to decide’ and ‘you can’t do nothing’ (Dorren, Forthcoming). Policy maker’s perception of their own practice seems to be different from that practice itself.

So, if it does not resemble practice, what explains the popularity of this narrative of the neutral administration? Part of the answer might lie in research on why people value the use of scientific studies in policy processes. Policy analysis is a complex practice, and very few people involved in policy processes understand how technical analyses actually work. However, they are still greatly valued for their apparent neutrality. It seems that people primarily value the fact that an analysis is not a person with values and interests. When an analysis turns out to involve a lot of estimates made by individual experts, people tend to question its neutrality. Similarly, when politicians interfere in a policy process, they make statements such as “I’m genuinely completely surprised by this suddenly appearing alternative. The government told us they wanted to handle things objectively, and now they suddenly add this alternative” (Dorren & Van Dooren, Forthcoming). Neutrality primarily seems to refer to personal disinvolvement. If an analysis points out a certain policy option as a ‘best’ solution, it does so in a neutral and objective way. If that analysis can be linked to a person – such as an individual analyst – the neutrality of the analysis is questioned.

In a similar vein, it makes sense for society to rehearse stories of the civil service as a neutral entity because personal values and beliefs are suspect. Non-values such

as objectivity, neutrality or efficiency are an attractive alternative to what administrations actually consist of: a group of individuals with individual, maybe even conflicting values. It makes sense that civil servants rehearse the Wilsonian story of the neutral civil service, because it contains the rules they are expected to follow. Because their own values are not supposed to influence their decisions, they discuss their work practice as actually being governed by the principles of neutrality, even though they themselves recognize that these principles hardly apply in practice.

There is research on managing value conflicts (such as Steenhuisen 2009), research that tells civil servants to act in the public interest (Svara, 2012), and research that tells them that they cannot do their work without making value decisions. However, this research does not tell civil servants how to deal with the fact that their idea of the public good, or their idea of what is effective and efficient, is just their conception of that concept. What consequences has the observation that civil servants cannot escape their own values in doing their work? Administrative scientists and philosophers have been successfully dismantling the idea of neutral administration, but apparently has not shown the civil servant where to go next.

Non-values such as objectivity, neutrality or efficiency are an attractive alternative to what administrations actually consist of: a group of individuals with individual, maybe even conflicting values.

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