

Public Administration in the Age of Trump

David Schultz
Co-Editor

The United States and the world enter a new era with the Donald Trump presidency. His election portends and culminates challenges and trends domestically in the United States and globally that have been building for 40 years. The era of Trump is not singularly about what is happening in one country but represents a wave that globally is linked to Brexit, the Syrian refugee crisis, and the capacity of governments to respond to governance issues that will affect all nations. Trump's election is about the crisis of contemporary public administration.

To understand why Trump's election cannot be viewed in isolation, one must first understand why he won. First, there are many reasons why Hillary Clinton lost; some are self-inflicted, others a consequence of bad timing and luck. Clinton was in the end a weak candidate. She was a poor public speaker, she lacked a clear rationale for why she wanted to be president, and she had a strategy that simply did not resonate with many voters, especially the white working class who voted for Trump. She never had a good explanation about her e-mails and the use of a private server or about her Wall Street speeches. She was someone that many voters did not feel passionate about, resulting in less of the Democratic Party base voting for her than the Republican Party voting for Trump. Clinton also was unable to capture the swing or undecided voters in large percentages, and these were the voters who broke decisively in the last few days for Trump.

But Clinton was also a victim of circumstances. Her greatest asset was her experience as a senator and secretary of state, but this hurt her in a year where being a Washington insider was a liability. She ran as the *status quo* candidate who would continue Barack Obama's policies, but the mood of the country was for change. She was also a victim of sexism, facing unique problems as a woman that no previous major party presidential candidate has had to deal with. There was the unfortunate luck of the cost increases under the Affordable Care Act (or Obamacare), and she also became the fifth victim in American presidential history to win the popular vote but lose the electoral vote.

But more deeply, global trends explain Trump's victory. These trends have been building since the 1970s. Late in that decade, global stagflation and economically poor performances across the world, but especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, ushered in Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan. Together, these leaders represented the emergence of neoliberal economic policies, both domestically and globally.

Neoliberalism is a political economic theory committed to the ideology of laissez-faire market fundamentalism that traces back to Adam Smith and David Ricardo (Plant, 2009). It includes a belief in comparative advantage, a minimalist state, and market freedom and is, as articulated in the 1990s and early 2000s, driven

by finance capital. At the state level, neoliberalism defines a theory of public administration. If neoliberalism includes a commitment to market fundamentalism, then that also means it is dedicated to a politics of limited government. This includes privatization, deregulation, and a scaling back of many traditional functions that capitalist and Communist states have performed since at least World War II.

As a theory of public administration, neoliberalism dictates specific roles for government officials. It means, in the case of privatization, that managers either become contract administrators who oversee previously performed state functions now being delivered by private actors, or they oversee the sale of state-run businesses to private entities. A neoliberal public administration theory commits managers to cutting regulations or making them more business friendly, crafting them in ways to encourage private capital accumulation. In the United States, one example of this is the 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, which deregulated banking. Finally, a neoliberal theory of public administration also facilitates antiunion rules and those that make it more difficult for individuals to secure welfare benefits from the state.

A neoliberal theory of public administration in the traditional capitalist West also elicits theories of management such as New Public Management and Reinventing Government (Schultz & Maranto, 1998). Both frameworks seek to import traditional private sector management theories that stress efficiency into the public sector. In former Communist countries, neoliberal ideology, especially during the transition period, emphasized shock therapy: rapid conversion from central planning to market economies that included privatization, dismantling price supports, and a rapid sell-off of state-owned industries (Åslund, 2007; Åslund, 2009).

But neoliberalism as a theory transcends the state, providing an international economic theory committed to free trade and globalism. Steger (2002) distinguishes between two aspects of

globalism. He describes globalization as a social process or material process, referring to a form of a means of production and attendant social relations that organize the forces of production (Steger, 2002, p. 13). He contrasts this to globalism, which is the dominant political ideology of the day that serves neoliberal interests. Globalism and neoliberalism are best understood through the lens of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's work; namely, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2005).

The neoliberal world that emerged in the early 1990s produced several benefits but also brought with it significant global restricting of economies. Free-trade agreements such as NAFTA hastened the migration of jobs away from countries such as the United States to Mexico, China, or elsewhere. Neoliberalism produced significant gaps between the rich and poor within countries and across the globe. There were clear winners and losers, and when the world economy crashed in 2008 it appeared that neoliberalism had lost. President Obama promised to fix these problems, but in the eyes of many in the United States, he failed.

Obama's economic recovery never reached down to help the working and middle classes. Many individuals voted for him for change, and it did not occur. In fact, over a 40-year period in the United States, from 1976 to 2016, both the Democratic and Republican Parties controlled the presidency for 20 years each, and Congress has also seen shifting party control. Many voters have found that neither party seems to address their concerns, and when Donald Trump came along, positioning himself as an outsider who would shake things up, his message resonated with many who felt left out and ignored.

Trump's victory represents a repudiation of both the U.S. government and public administration. It represents a vote of no confidence in the *status quo* means of governance, declaring that the government has not been representing

critical voices in society or delivering the goods to those who feel like they work hard but are kept down by unfair rules.

Trump's victory, thus, in many ways is both a break from the *status quo* and something new in that it expects a person with no government experience to fix the government. This belief says that only a nongovernmental person can save government. But his victory is also a continuation of the Thatcher-Reagan neoliberal policies that see government as bad and markets as good. Trump's win is born of both neoliberalism and its rejection, at least in the form practiced under Barack Obama and espoused by Hillary Clinton.

But Trump is not only a U.S. phenomenon, especially in light of the racial overtones that fueled his campaign. Economic and racial fears are on the rise worldwide and are driving a new nationalism. This is Brexit in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front in France, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. All represent what I have called the crisis of public administration theory (Schultz, 2011), but they also speak to a crisis of confidence in democracy.

In the last issue of *JPAE*, I described 10 policy challenges that public administration must confront, including global warming and economic inequality. It is unclear whether Trump or Trumpism will address them. Trump is now president and the question is what will he do? He made a lot of noise about building a fence along the U.S.-Mexican border, wanting to renegotiate trade deals, and of perhaps rethinking NATO and the U.S. relationship with Russia and Vladimir Putin. How much of this will or can he undertake?

Domestically, Trump has called for many changes, but it is unclear what he can do on his own. Historian Richard Neustadt once said that the power of the presidency is the power to persuade. Presidents are not generals, business

leaders, or monarchs and they cannot just order people around. They need to persuade others, including Congress, the bureaucracy, the states, the media, and the public if they want to succeed as presidents. Trump's narrow victory in a divided America means he will be limited in terms of whom he can persuade. His own Republican Party is divided, and it is not certain that Congress will grant him an easy path. Because Trump ran a campaign largely devoid of policy, he has no clear policy agenda.

In addition, presidents are constrained by a powerful bureaucracy, federalism, checks and balances, and separation of powers. At the end of the day, there will be no wall along the Mexican border, and mass deportations will not occur. Trump will make America a less kinder and gentler place, but the extremism that some worry about will not occur. U.S. political institutions are not that fragile, I hope.

In foreign policy, often the best predictor of what a new president will do is the previous president. There is far more continuity across presidential foreign policy than there is divergence. Obama made marginal changes from Bush. The foreign policy establishment is power and it transcends political parties. Trump may find he is more captured by this bureaucracy than he realizes.

Trump may try to force changes in trade deals but faces retaliation from China and the European Union, who will not passively sit by. The same is true of the World Trade Organization. Trump may think he knows Putin, but after he gets burned by him a couple of times Trump may turn on him. Trump wants to tear up the Iranian nuclear deal, but it is not clear what he has to replace it with and it is doubtful the rest of the world will go along. Unilateral action in Syria and against ISIS (or Daesh) is possible, but Trump seems not to have real alternatives. And even his talk about NATO and its alternatives may be more bluster than reality. It just does not seem feasible that the U.S. foreign and military policy establishment will let that

happen. Yes, perhaps a new global order needs to emerge, but the United States in 2017 is not in the same position to force this change as it was in 1946, or even at the end of the Cold War. In short, Trump may simply misunderstand or not appreciate how little power he has, or what the real issues are he needs to address.

So how does all this connect to *JPAAE* and public affairs? First, for our field to remain relevant we need to make the case for public administration and demonstrate a capacity to improve governance. Second, that means that public affairs teaching and scholarship must be relevant; we must engage the world and confront the challenges that undergird the forces that produced Trumpism in the United States and around the world. Third, this issue features six articles and a review essay that aim to improve our capacity to teach and train future public administrators. “I Can’t Believe I Haven’t Been Asked This Question Before: Bringing ‘Why Government?’ and ‘Which Government?’ to the Classroom,” by Michael Thom, directly confronts the most basic question Trumpism asks regarding the relevancy of government. Maite Careaga, Nadia Rubaii, and Santiago Leyva’s “Beyond the Case Method in Public Affairs Education: Unexpected Benefits of Student-Written Cases” demonstrates the power of students crafting their own problems they believe need to be solved. Christian L. Janousek’s “In Proximity to Professionalism: A Regional Analysis of Master of Public Administration Programs and Local Government Management” looks at the connection between academic programs and the communities they serve, while Brittany Haupt, Naim Kapucu, and Qian Hu raise questions about how these communities view our programs in “Core Competencies in Master of Public Administration Programs: Perspectives from Local Government Managers.” And Karl Nollenberger’s “On-Campus versus Hybrid Courses in a Master of Public Administration Program” and Billie Sandberg and Kevin Kecskes’s “Rubrics as a Foundation for Assessing Student Competencies: One Public Administration

Program’s Creative Exercise” focus on important pedagogical practices. Ashley E. Nickels’s review of the Salvatore Alaimo documentary *What Is Philanthropy?* completes this issue by looking at ways that NGOs can address some of the problems caused by the current governance crisis.

Trumpism is a challenge to public administration and affairs. But those of us who care about the capacity and role of government to improve everyone’s quality of life must be prepared to respond to that challenge. I hope what we publish in *JPAAE* can rise to that challenge.

— *David Schultz*

CO-EDITOR

Journal of Public Affairs Education

HAMLIN UNIVERSITY

dschultz@hamline.edu

ABOUT THE CO-EDITOR

David Schultz is professor of political science at Hamline University and professor at the Hamline and University of Minnesota Schools of Law. He is a three-time Fulbright Scholar and the author of more than 30 books and 100+ articles on various aspects of American politics, election law, and the media and politics. Schultz is regularly interviewed and quoted on these subjects in the local, national, and international media, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Economist*, and National Public Radio. His most recent book is *Presidential Swing States: Why Only Ten Matter* (Lexington Books, 2015).

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