

The concept of the administrative state: five problems and three suggestions

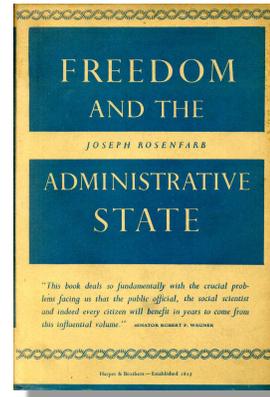
ALASDAIR ROBERTS
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
NECOPA NOVEMBER 2019
FULL PAPER: [BIT.LY/2P8QJ9Y](https://bit.ly/2P8QJ9Y)

Key points

- Confusions about a commonly used phrase:
 - Whose invention?
 - Timebound or timeless?
 - The whole or part of a state?
 - Essential to the field of public administration?
 - A uniquely American problem?
- Three suggestions:
 - Three distinct ideas that need separate phrases
 - Follow Waldo and take the concept less seriously
 - How to define the ambit of the field

Problem #1: Waldo's idea?

- Common belief: that Waldo invented the term, was the first to grapple with related issues
- Reality: Waldo's book was part of a wider literature
- Many writers discussed "the administrative state" between 1920s and 1940s
- Many others wrestled with the problem of bureaucracy without using the term



Joseph Rosenfarb's book was published six months before Waldo's.

3

P#2: Timebound or timeless?

- The concept first described a phenomenon of the West in the early/mid 20th century
- Some more recent usages:
 - Contemporary administrative state
 - 19th century administrative state
 - Ancient administrative states
 - Minimal administrative states
 - Third World administrative states
- A definitional shift? But then:
 - Redundancy: all states are administrative states
 - Still inherently problematic?

4

P#3: A type or part of a state?

- Initial conception: a *type* of state: one with a large, potentially dangerous bureaucracy
- States have “a monopoly of power”
- More recent usages:
 - A “sphere of government”
 - One of several “governing institutions”
 - “the agencies, people and processes of the executive establishment”
- Definitional shift: now describing *part* of a state

5

P#4: Essential to the field?

- Assumption that vitality of field of public administration depends on vitality of the administrative state
 - Role of founders of PA in building AS
 - AS as the domain of study
 - Continuing obligation to maintain health and defend legitimacy of AS
- But emergence of PA with AS might be coincidental
- Historians have studied PA without reference to AS
- We risk confusing ends and means

6

P#5: Just an American problem?

- The general problem of parochialism in American public administration
- Country references in JSTOR articles that mention administrative state three or more times:

WORDS	FREQUENCY
United States/American	2118
France/French	250
United Kingdom/British	155
China/Chinese	119
Iran/Iranian	70

- Of these articles, 92% contain one of these words: legitimate, legitimacy, Constitution, constitutional

7

Suggestion #1: different terms for different concepts

- Sometimes we are just talking about *the state*
 - Effectiveness, legitimacy, stability, adaptability
- Sometimes we are talking about *part of the state*
 - The administrative system*, administrative establishment, administrative estate, administrative capabilities, administrative capacities, administrative branch, administrative machinery
- Sometimes we are talking about a *historical phenomenon*
 - The initial conception of the administrative state

* Waldo's preferred term.

8

S#2: Take concept less seriously

- Many “conceptual lenses” proposed in 1940s
 - Welfare state, service state, regulatory state, garrison state, police state, surveillance state
- Each providing a useful but partial view of reality
- And dispensible when no longer useful
- Waldo himself:
 - Almost never used the concept*
 - Never defined the concept
 - Later questioned its usefulness
 - Also described the US as a “garrison state”

* Maybe just once, on page 179 of his 1948 book.

S#3: Defining the scope of the field

- Using clearer language
- Studying the administrative capacities* of states across history
- Recognizing that states take many forms, each with distinctive tensions or challenges
- And that the administrative state was just one of these forms, a “historical artifact” of the 20th century

* Or substitute your preferred alternative term.