Should we defend the administrative state?

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Key points

• Conservative efforts to “deconstruct the administrative state”
• Have led to an academic “defense of the administrative state”
• Problems:
  • Shifts and confusion in academic understanding of concept
  • Academic version has been domesticated, but the popular version has not
  • Political pitfalls of using a value-loaded concept
• Remedies:
  • Within academia: Adopt a broader vocabulary
  • In politics: different language to defend the public service
Origin of the concept

- Common belief: Waldo coined the term
- Reality: Waldo’s book was part of a wider debate in the 1930s and 1940s
- Meaning: a type of state dominated by bureaucracy
- Tied to fears about the expansion of government

Shifts in meaning within academia: Timelessness?

- Concept first described a historically specific type of state
- Some more recent usages:
  - Modern 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
  - Value loading: still inherently problematic?
Shifts in meaning within academia:
A type or part of a state?

• Initial conception: a type of state, with a bureaucratic “ruling class”
• More recent usages:
  • One “sphere of government”
  • One of several “governing institutions”
  • “the agencies, people and processes of the executive establishment” (Lewis)
• Definitional shift: now part of a state
• Implications for value-loading: the administrative state is always checked, even “besieged”

Shifts in meaning within academia:
Essential to the field?

• Before 1940s, scholars studied administrative systems, administrative machinery, administrative branch
• After 1940s, we often:
  • Define administrative state as the domain of study
  • Link vitality of field to vitality of administrative state
  • Perceive obligation to defend the administrative state
• Value-loading of concept is positive
  • “essential to civilized life”
• Has the administrative state become a mere synonym for the administrative branch?
Popular understanding of concept remains unchanged

• Analysis of 26,073 original tweets from 15,018 accounts between August 2016 and July 2019
• Coding of tweets:
  • In 2016, 34% critical of government, 1% positive; remainder unclear or neutral
  • In 2019, 45% critical, 16% positive
• Adjectives associated with concept are overwhelmingly negative:
  • Top 15: modern, sprawling, intrusive, massive, federal, choking, American, malignant, unelected, unaccountable, growing, aggressive, deep, Progressive, corrupt

Danger of using loaded words

• Frank Luntz:
  • “It’s not what you say, it’s what they hear.”
  • Advice to conservatives in 2005: talk about “Washington” rather than ”government”
• George Lakoff:
  • Words trigger mental frames
  • Progressives should avoid “the use of conservative language and the frames that the language activates.”
Remedy #1: More and better words

• Sometimes we are just talking about the state
  • Its political structure, functions and capabilities, strength and legitimacy
• Sometimes we are talking about the administrative apparatus of the state
  • Administrative system, administrative establishment, administrative estate, administrative capabilities, administrative capacities, administrative branch, administrative machinery
• Sometimes we are just talking about a historically specific form of state
  • Initial conception of the administrative state

Remedy #2: In politics, choose words carefully

• If we want do defend the public service, do so in those terms.