

EDU REKHA INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCE



Journal Homepage: <https://edurekhapublisher.com/erijalss/>

Volume- 2 Issue – 3 (May-June) 2026

ISSN: 3107-5169 (Online)

Frequency: Bimonthly



PAGES: 53-58

ARTICLE TITLE:



Several Reflections on the Interdependence Between Politics and Administration

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ARTICLE HISTORY

RECEIVED

06-06-2026

ACCEPTED

11-06-2026

PUBLISHED

16-06-2026

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Security Sciences



Abstract

Administration and politics have complex faces. They are internally intricate and change over time. Regardless of this, at every moment they remain connected to the state, its political system, and the citizen. Politics has also another dimension that complicates the analysis of its relationship with administration: its partisan nature. This is a multifaceted issue, hence the title—"several reflections." We commonly refer to Aristotle and Montesquieu and their (subjective and objective) tripartite division of power, as well as the assertion that administration operates within the limits of the law and in execution of the law. Yet everyday practice shows that this does not hold. One cannot separate the executive or judicial branches from the legislative branch, since the first is defined as acting within and in execution of the law, and the second as adjudicating on the basis of the constitution and statutes. They are therefore functionally linked to the legislative power.

In this text, I aim to identify sensitive elements of the connection between administration and politics, including partisan politics. I also seek to point out the permanent elements of the political system that are not always consistent with the intentions of its creators.

Keywords: administration, politics, partisanship, civil servants, law, electoral law, proportional allocation of mandates.

Introduction

In practice, it is easiest to state that one may conduct politics poorly while administering the affairs of the state well. It is equally easy to say that one may conduct politics well but administer poorly. It seems that the best answer—regardless of the academic discipline we represent—is that the difference lies in the fact that administration satisfies social needs, whereas politics does not¹.

One may like or dislike administration, but it is impossible to live without it. Our life in the state begins with it—the birth certificate—and ends with it—the death certificate. Along the way, there are many other administrative acts, including the secondary school leaving certificate, a driver's license, a university diploma, a marriage certificate, a child's birth certificate, and the death certificates of loved ones. Along the way, there are also many other documents that only the administration can issue. This determines its significance as a structure and the importance of the work—and responsibility—of the officials employed within it, for whom handling our individual, sometimes sensitive needs is a routine activity. All the more so because administrative decisions are territorially and functionally assigned. As a consequence, a specific matter can be handled only in a specific place².

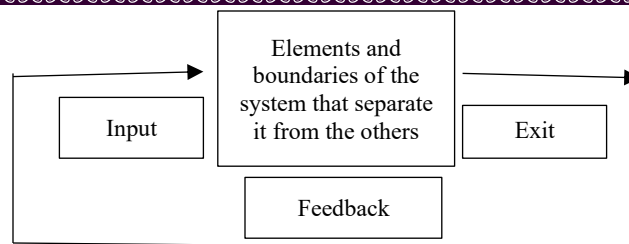
Areas of Interest of Academic Disciplines in Research on the Relationship Between Administration and Politics

Sociological Context of Research³

This is an exceptionally difficult issue. Administration is a social phenomenon. When studying administration, one should distinguish its objective features, indicating which of them remain stable over time. However, just as our expectations change, administration constantly evolves. In the past, no one analyzed it in this context. Managing slaves or collecting taxes was not associated with administration but with serving the ruler. One may go further—should sociology define administration, or should it describe it by identifying the elements that distinguish it from other phenomena? It seems that the sociological approach is so broad that it is impossible to construct a single, uniform definition of administration.

A useful approach may be the application of a systemic model: when we describe what administration as a system is not, we analyze how the environment influences its functioning, what the system does with the incoming stimuli, and how it responds to the environment—the so-called feedback loop, which again affects the system (see Table 1).

Table No. 1 A model of the systemic method in research



Source: Developed on the basis of: <https://metodologiasapiens.com/pl/metodos/metodo-sistemico/>, Downloaded 7.06.2024.

Legal Context of Research

In general, public administration is established to shape external social relations, that is, the relations between the citizen and the state. If so, the point of reference for the legal analysis of administrative functioning is the adequacy of its actions to the binding legal provisions. Every action may therefore be subjected to judicial review conducted in the context of its compliance with the law, rather than its conformity with the political goals of the ruling political party (or parties). This issue is important for two reasons. By design, the administration was meant to serve primarily the state, not the changing political teams. Another element requiring separate analysis is the politicization and partisanship of the administration. It was supposed to constitute a so-called systemic memory, meaning that governments change, but the administration endures. This does not, however, imply a lack of subordination of the administration to changing political superiors. Such subordination has always existed. The question concerns its scope.

Theoretically, the administration should be an expert in the substantive and procedural law it applies. The administration acts within the limits of the law and in execution of the law, but the law itself is nothing more than the result of a consensus reached within the parliamentary majority, and its content may change with the formation of a new majority; its content and procedures are not given once and for all. Moreover, the law cannot foresee all individual situations, and it must therefore contain a certain degree of discretion in decision-making in individual, non-standard cases⁴. This gives rise to a dilemma regarding how general or how detailed the law should be. It is difficult to draw a clear boundary. The fact remains that the generality of the law strengthens the position of the executive branch and the discretionary nature of its decisions when creating implementing regulations, and thus reinforces the partisanship of administrative actions. It is also true that such an approach stabilizes the law at the statutory level, which in this situation does not require frequent amendments. It also enables a flexible approach to meeting the individual needs of citizens.

¹ G. Rydlewski, *Modernizacja administracji. Studium polityk administracyjnych w Polsce*, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warszawa 2015, p.17 and seq.

² Read more: J. Jeżewski, *Polityka administracyjna. Zagadnienia podstawowe*, [in:] J.Boć (ed.), *Administracja publiczna*, Kolonia Limited, Wrocław 2002.

³ I used the division indicated by J. Boć i A. Błaś, *Pojęcia*, [in:] Ibidem, p. 7 and seq.

⁴ This is pointed out by both K.W.Kumaniecki, *Akt administracyjny. Studya nad istotą aktu administracyjnego z uwzględnieniem zasadniczego orzecznictwa Austriackiego Trybunału Administracyjnego*, Nakładem autora z Drukarni Związkowej Kraków 1913, p. 8, on the other hand, as well as F. Longchamps, *Założenia nauki administracji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 1994, s. 48 and seq.

Draft legal acts are created by partisan ministries⁵. While in a system with a majoritarian distribution of mandates the matter is transparent—because the winner takes all—the practice becomes more complicated in systems with proportional representation. There, forming a majority coalition usually requires an agreement between several parties⁶. Such an agreement may be concluded before the elections, as in the case of the arrangement between Law and Justice (PiS) and Sovereign Poland (they did not run as a coalition, but only shared places on the electoral list), or after the elections. In each case, the main subject of negotiation is the division of ministries. Draft laws are prepared by ministerial administrations, and since the appointment of a minister is the result of inter-party negotiations conducted to form a parliamentary majority capable of governing, the legislative proposals - and especially implementing acts—reflect the interests of individual parties⁷.

Very often, a given matter is regulated by several uncoordinated acts. In situations of doubt, and for their own safety, officials ask their superiors for guidance on which act should be applied. The administration is a hierarchical structure. At its head is always a politically appointed person (a minister) who issues a political interpretation of the binding legal provisions. In other words, the administration acts within the limits of the law and in execution of the law, but it is the politician who indicates what applies and what should be used. The administration therefore operates on the basis of a political interpretation of the law.

Opting for highly detailed legislation also has its drawbacks. On the one hand, it limits the discretion of the administration; on the other, it means that if a matter is not regulated by law, it is treated as non-existent, and therefore there is no basis for addressing it.

Regardless of this, formalization includes defining the external actions of the administration, determining its relationship to internal goals, specifying its internal structure and relations between units, and defining the rules of functioning of its elements in the form of legal acts. Administration is always subject to legal regulation. This does not change the fact that within the Aristotelian-Montesquieu tripartite division of powers, the administration and its actions are always politicized.

Political Science Context

Probably the broadest one, as it encompasses everything that is not defined in law but appears in the practice of political life. Several issues can be pointed out as examples. First, the analysis of pre-election behaviour, including explanations of the philosophy behind creating electoral programmes and planning the staffing of administrative positions by particular parties or coalitions. As a

continuation of this point, the principles of dismissing and appointing officials in situations where this is not regulated by law. The appointment of a minister is regulated, but the appointment of a clerk depends on the internal regulations of the ministry (the administrative structure). That is the second issue. Third, the methods and types of influence that may be exerted on public bodies and their employees in areas not regulated by universally binding law. Fourth, the substantive influence on actions taken by the administration. Fifth, the areas in which adopted decisions may be transformed. Sixth, the freedom to accelerate or delay political decisions. Seventh, the order and pace of implementing reforms.

Regardless of the discipline, all descriptions of administration refer to five issues, although with different emphases. These are:

1. **The subject of action**, indicating the state; the effects of action are always attributed to the state.
2. **The purpose of action**, indicating the satisfaction of social needs.
3. **The object of action**, indicating the set of individual needs arising from social coexistence (not individually reported or demanded needs, but those that are common to everyone at any moment).
4. **The method of action**, indicating activity through subordinate bodies.
5. **The addressee of action**, indicating the citizen.

The description of administration has also evolved in the history of Polish scholarship⁸. Based on interwar research, Stanisław Kasznica wrote that administration is the part of the state's activity that remains after eliminating law-making and adjudication⁹. During the socialist period, research on administration was unwelcome, as it amounted to studying power. Today, the dominant approach is that administration is a system of entities with managerial and organisational competences in relation to subordinate entities and society. This is important because administration—already mentioned—regulates external relations (state–citizen), but due to its hierarchical structure, it also regulates internal relations, that is, within itself. Consequently, in practical terms, we have three approaches to understanding administration.

The first is reducing administration to the **administrative structure**, meaning a set of various units linked to bodies that possess competences defined by statutes. The position of administration at a given level in the entire system depends on the constitutional position

⁵ By the way: With a proportional system of distribution of seats, the filling of departments, and consequently administrative positions, is the result of a coalition agreement.

⁶ There are exceptions. In Poland, this happened for the first time in more than twenty years since the political transformation, when a right-wing coalition led by Law and Justice came to power.

⁷ It is worth noting that as a rule (except for cases from Germany) so-called frugal coalitions are formed. That is, the party that wants to win or the winning party chooses weak partners who will ensure an increase in support (if the coalition is formed before the elections) or a minimal exceeding of the size necessary to obtain a majority.

⁸ J.Boć, T.Kuta, *Prawo administracyjne. Zagadnienia ogólne*, PWN, Warszawa 1984, p. 12 and seq.; J.Boć, A.Błaś, *Pojęcia...*, op.cit., p. 21 and seq.; E. Ochendowski, *Prawo administracyjne, część ogólna*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Organizacji i Kierownictwa, Stowarzyszenie Wyższej Użyteczności „Dom Organizatora”, Toruń 2000, p. 55 and seq.

⁹ More: S. Kasznica, *Polskie prawo administracyjne. Pojęcia i instytucje zasadnicze*, Księgarnia Akademicka. Spółdzielnia z odp.udz., Poznań 1946.

of the body to which it is attached, as well as on the competences granted, and subsequently on the tasks and scope of activity.

The second is reducing administration to a **type of activity** aimed at carrying out public tasks, performed by the state or by local governments that form part of its executive authority. When both the state and local government perform it, we speak of public administration; when only the state does, of governmental administration; and when only local government does, of local government administration. This division is important because certain matters fall within the tasks and scope of both governmental and local administration, even though their administrative structures differ in competences. The duplication of tasks and scope should not be understood in simplified terms as centralisation of power. Some areas of state activity are close to the citizen and should therefore fall within the competence of local government, but due to the costs involved, local government cannot bear them within its budget. Environmental protection and river purification are examples. For success, treatment plants must be built along the entire course of a river, not just in one municipality. These are costly investments, and the benefits are not visible within a single generation. Local government must take care of this, but coordination and support from state administration are essential.

The third is reducing administration to a **group of people employed** in the organisational structures of the state (or local government) on the basis of election, appointment, nomination, or employment contract, who satisfy social needs.

Two issues are the subject of separate consideration. First—whether the form of employment is appropriate for a given position¹⁰. Without going into deeper analysis, filling a position through election means that the person holding it primarily thinks about re-election. They therefore undertake tasks that are propagandistically attractive and avoid unpopular but necessary matters. If the number of terms is limited, during the last one they focus on finding a future position. Employment based on appointment, due to the instability of status, forces political “loyalty”. Again, the public good is not the priority, but the personal interest of the administrative official, who will do anything not to be dismissed overnight. Employment based on nomination is ideal for an administrative employee, who—depending on the ministry—can be dismissed only in strictly defined legal circumstances. Here we enter the second issue—remuneration. One may do nothing and simply ensure not to violate the legally defined grounds for dismissal. Niccolò Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, in chapters XIII (“On Auxiliary, Mixed, and Native Troops”) and XIV (“What a Prince Should Do Regarding Military Affairs”), concluded that if one wants another to be loyal, one must give them enough so that they do not need to seek support elsewhere¹¹. In other words—before

attempting cooperation with others, they should consider whether it is worth losing what they already have.

Even these brief reflections show that administration is permanently linked with politics, and politics is interested in exercising power over administration. Joseph Stalin openly wrote that those who hold power in the state are those who control the administration¹². A separate, though not marginal, issue is the imperfection of the Polish language. In English-speaking dictionaries there are three terms: *politics* and *policy*, which share the adjective *political*¹³. *Politics* covers actions related to organised and intentional efforts to gain power and pursue general—practically party—goals. From this perspective, the political connection between politics and administration is fully understandable. However, there is a second word—*policy*—covering any practical aspects of governing. These may include issues such as healthcare or education. This resembles management rather than exercising authority over entrusted assets. From this perspective, administration may, but does not have to be, and should not be politicised in the sense of *politics*. In Polish, everything is reduced to one word—*polityka* in all its forms.

It is worth considering the contemporary difficulties (and their causes) in separating administration from politics and politics from partisanship. The simplest distinction is that politics is the choice of values, while partisanship is activity in favour of the particular interests of a specific political group (or groups). In my view, several phenomena should be noted.

First—administration always operates within the pragmatics of implementing systemic solutions established by specific political groups. Political (party) approaches delimit both formal and real approaches to the issues under consideration. In the consciousness of each of us, including political elites, certain behaviours and habits in evaluating their activity are deeply rooted. For example, ministerial administration is expected to support the minister in his or her activity. During socialism, this was more transparent. It was openly stated that there were two apparatuses of power: the party apparatus (leading) and the state apparatus (executive)¹⁴.

In general, we have four types of administration: **public administration**, consisting of governmental and local government administration, and **state administration**, which does not fall within either governmental or local government administration. This includes—for example—the administration of the President’s Office, the National Broadcasting Council, the Ombudsman’s Office, and the National Council of the Judiciary¹⁵ (Table 2).

¹⁰ J.Boć, Struktury, [in:] J.Boć (ed.), *Administracja publiczna...*, op.cit, p. 164 and seq.

¹¹ <https://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/machiavelli-traktat-o-ksieciu.pdf>. Downloaded 01.06.2025.

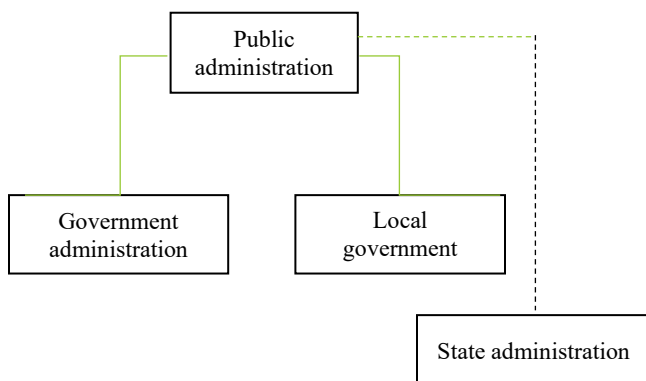
¹² More: J. Stalin, *Dzieła*, t. 5 p. 12, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1950.

¹³ D.Robertson, *Dictionary of Politics*, Penguin Books 1986, ; *Oxford Learners Wordfinder Dictionary*, Hugh Trappes-Lomax, Oxford University Press, 1997; *Angielsko-polski i polsko angielski glosariusz terminów i pojęć używanych w europejskich programach współpracy*

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¹⁴ Speech of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party opening the 7th Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, www.bibliotekacyfrowa.eu/content. Downloaded 29.05.2024.

¹⁵ L.Garlicki, *Prawo konstytucyjne. Zarys wykładu*, Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2021, pp. 313-354.

Table No. 2. Types of administration

Source: Own study based on the applicable legislation.

The broadest concept is **public administration**. It encompasses all types of administration. Its essence is determined by the *object* (the pursuit of the public interest on the basis of statutes), the *subject* (various bodies and structures), and its *functions*. However, when we undertake an analysis of these forms of administration, we must remember that when we emphasize the object and the activity, we in fact enter the sphere of administrative law, whereas when we focus on the subject, we enter the sphere of administrative science.

Its first component — **government administration**¹⁶— consists of central and territorial bodies, offices, and institutions. The structure is complex, because within territorial administration we have general administration — the voivode — as well as consolidated and non-consolidated administration (Table No. 3).

Table No. 3 Government administration

Government central administration	Government Administration	Field
Government and Chancellery of the Prime Minister	Government Administration-Voivode	General
Ministries	Government Administration	Combined
Central offices	Non-integrated government administration	
State organizational units		

Source: Own study based on acts.

The second component is local government administration¹⁷. It operates at all three levels of the state's administrative and territorial division, that is, in the commune, county, and voivodeship. In the commune and county, it is independent and autonomous; in the

voivodeship, it must cooperate with the government administration. Local government administration may act independently, but the state supervises its activities from the standpoint of legality. This supervision is exercised by the Prime Minister, voivodes, and—regarding financial matters—by the Regional Chambers of Auditors.

Local government administration performs three types of tasks:

Own tasks, i.e., those assigned to it by law. These are tasks that local governments carry out using their own resources, on their own responsibility, and in their own name. Here, another sensitivity arises. Due to the equality of all citizens, the legislator has created a uniform catalogue of tasks to be carried out by local governments at each level of the administrative and territorial division. In this context, the solution is fully justified, because everyone has the same needs. The issue, however, is that communes, counties, and voivodeships do not possess the same material capacity, so the implementation of the full range of tasks requires borrowing from partisan ministries or partisan voivodes. Party politics enters local governments, and the anticipated decentralization turns into recentralization.

Commissioned tasks, i.e., tasks that belong to government administration but, for the sake of implementation efficiency, have been assigned to local governments along with the obligation that they be financed from the state budget (population censuses, elections, referendums, etc.).

Entrusted tasks. This is an interesting category that appears in the Act on County Self-Government. They are similar to commissioned tasks, but they do not include the requirement to provide funds for their implementation.

Conclusion

By definition, the administration was meant to serve the state first and foremost, not the changing political teams. It was supposed to constitute the so-called system memory, in the sense that governments change, but the administration continues. This does not mean that the administration is not subordinated to changing political leaders. Such subordination has always existed. The question concerns its scope.

Theoretically, the administration should be an expert in the substantive and procedural law it applies. The administration acts within the limits of the law and in execution of the law, but the law itself is nothing more than the result of a consensus reached within the parliamentary majority, and its content may change with the formation of a new majority; its content and procedures are not given once and for all.

In many countries, a proportional system of seat distribution is used, which means that the winner usually has to seek coalition partners to govern, although it may happen that other parties quickly form their

¹⁶ Ustawa z dnia 4 września 1997 r. o działach administracji rządowej, Dz.U. 1997, nr 141, poz. 943; tj. www.isap.sejm.gov.pl, Downloaded 02.06.2024 (Act of 4 September 1997 on Government Administration Departments, “Journal of Laws” of 1997, No. 141, item 943, www.isap.sejm.gov.pl, downloaded 6 June 2026.)

¹⁷ Ustawa o samorządzie gminnym z dnia 8 marca 1990 r., tekst jednolity: Dz.U.2026,662, www.isap.sejm.gov.pl, pobrano 6 czerwca 2026 r. (Act on Municipal Self-Government of 8 March 1990, consolidated text: “Journal of Laws”, 2026,662,

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own coalition, ignoring the winner and thus the will of the people. The parties have only one bargaining chip at their disposal: the staffing of ministries and state-owned companies. These, in turn, become partisan, just like the drafts of laws and implementing acts they produce. A single issue may be regulated by several implementing acts issued by various partisan ministries. In such a situation, the official is obliged to apply the provisions indicated by his or her superior. The administration, as well as the entire state, begins to operate on the basis of a political interpretation of the law.

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