Repositioning American Public Administration? Citizen Estrangement, Administrative Reform, and the Disarticulated State

Levels of citizen estrangement from government in the United States have risen rather consistently since the late 1960s and have reached all-time highs in recent years. Evidence is accumulating in political science research to suggest that public administrative theory may have contributed to this trend since the Progressive Era in the early 1900s. The authors develop this thesis by arguing that administrative theory in the United States has persistently portrayed public managers as “bridge builders” who link an expertise-challenged citizenry to government in ways that emphasize bureaucratic over democratic administration. Moreover, despite claims of yet another “new” paradigmatic shift for the field, collaborative governance scholarship to date exhibits similar tendencies. To support this argument, the authors assess the common citizen-marginalizing tendencies of three sets of administrative reforms in American public administration: the progressive, associationalist, and polycentric heritages. They offer counterarguments to this thesis and call for critical self-reflection by the field and a more empirically robust research agenda on this topic.

As World War II wound to an end, Paul Appleby asked, “how can [the United States] be a complex society and yet be a democratic society?” (1945, 118). Since the early Progressive Era, the answer to this question from the public administration community had overwhelmingly been to create public agencies staffed with public interest–oriented expertise and held accountable by bureaucratic process controls and congressional oversight. Public managers would make decisions that citizens would have made themselves had they comparable expertise, in the process fusing bureaucracy with democracy. But, like others of his generation, Appleby worried that the administrative state’s emphasis on legal-technical rationality, bureaucratization, and professionalization would increasingly marginalize citizens from their government, evoking images of Weber’s diletanttes facing an expert bureaucracy.

Today, the same problematic arises with even greater urgency amid the complexity of contemporary “wicked” policy problems (Rittel and Webber 1973). These are problems that respect no political or jurisdictional boundaries, require multidisciplinary solutions informed by the judgments of trained professionals, and have no widely accepted definitions or solutions. Moreover, the rise over the past three decades of what is variously called the hollow (Milward and Provan 2000), third-party (Kettl 2002), facilitative (Newland 2003), disarticulated (Frederickson and Smith 2003), neoadministrative (Durant 2000), compensatory (Eisner 2000), or submerged (Mettler 2011) state to meet these challenges has made deliberative processes even more daunting, opaque, and confusing to citizens. And although today’s social media and networking offer the potential for enhancing transparency and participation of citizens in government (Cooper 2011), the darker centralization, privacy, and control possibilities of that technology also raise profound concerns (Fountain 2001; Haque 2001; Haque and Spicer 1997). Collectively, these have reawakened Appleby’s concerns by reflecting early progressives’ faith in public managers as bridge builders fusing “true” efficiency with “true” democracy (Waldo 1984, 133).

Frederickson and Smith exhibit this faith as they outline the logic and implications of what they call a theory of “administration conjunction” that better aligns with the rise of networked governance in America. Rminiscent of Progressive Era reformers, they write,

[U]nderlying [administration] conjunctions are professional concepts of the public interest and an obligation among public servants to represent an inchoate public outside of a particular jurisdiction. The end result is not just coordination among the various units of the disarticulated state, but the reappearance of the meaningful representation that has leaked steadily from elected offices as jurisdictional borders become less relevant to policy problems. . . .

Thus, citizens may get their interest represented
Certainly, the accomplishments of expertise-based public agencies in addressing many of America’s formidable policy challenges are undeniable (Light 2002). Nor can one minimize the need for expertise in addressing these challenges or the extent to which citizens find themselves intellectually challenged by them. Equally incontestable is that many citizens lack the interest, will, or time to devote to the understanding of these policy challenges. Still, democracy depends on the existence of a “politically engaged and empowered citizenry” (Wolin 2008, 233). Moreover, history shows that expertise is not necessarily linked to good judgment, ethics, or wisdom; it can be self-regarding rather than public regarding; and it can be myopic in vision (Adams and Balfour 2009). Indeed, such was the overriding concern of what has been called the “traditionalist school” in public administration, with scholars such as Paul Appleby, John Gaus, Pendleton Herring, Charles Hyneman, Frederick Mosher, Emmette Redford, and Dwight Waldo stressing a focus on how public administration does or does not help sustain democratic polities (Kirlin 1996, 418).

How much public managers have played a role in either citizen satisfaction with or estrangement from government is currently unknown, given the paucity of public administration scholarship on this topic and despite the role of institutions in “stability and change in political life” (March and Olsen 1989, 16). Yet political scientists have linked the design of administrative structures, policies, and procedures with citizens’ negative perceptions of themselves and their sense of political efficacy (Cook 1996; Ingram and Smith 1993; Ingram, Schneider, and deLeon 2007; Mettler 1998, 2011; Pierson 2004; Skocpol 2003; Soss, Hacker, and Mettler 2007; Soss and Schram 2006; Stone 2012). These negative perceptions, in turn, have been shown to reduce the propensity of citizens to pay attention to government, value what it does for them, participate in the political process, and be mobilizable for political action.

Were the networked governance paradigm and the scholarship analyzing it focused on the potential impact of the disarticulated state on citizen estrangement, we, too, might be optimistic about the bridge-building role of public managers within them. But with few exceptions, scant evidence exists that this is occurring on a sufficient scale or that it is a focus of public administration scholarship. Nor is prior research on citizen participation in government encouraging given the largely negative reaction of public managers to it (see, among others, Cooper 2011; Musso et al. 2011). We might also be more sanguine if administration conjunction theory did not embrace three elements of the Progressive Era reform agenda that have marginalized citizen participation in the past. These are claims for the necessity of shifting power to the executive branch, of centering the field on managerialism (scientism and technicism) rather than governance, and of centering the role of citizens in agency deliberations.

In Tocqueville’s (2002) terms, the scholarly and practical focus of public administration remains on bureaucratic administration rather than democratic administration. The former emphasizes a policy-challenged public in need of and passively accepting bureaucratic guidance, whereas the latter envisions an educable public capable of meaningful participation in policy deliberations, with experts having no unique claim to dominating that process (Ostrom 2008). Thus, despite the participatory images prompted by terms such as “partnerships,” “collaborative governance,” and “networks,” little new or meaningfully participatory exists in them for citizens, as opposed to agency “bridge-building” experts.

Nor is this surprising. The formidable and protean forces creating a path-dependency effect on research and practice in the field are well known, grounded as it was at its inception in modernist principles (Adams 1992; for an extension of this argument to contemporary times, see Durant 2009). This entailed the field’s embrace of management, experts, and the scientific method as rationalizing and executive-centered forces. It was an embrace that was financially supported by and modeled on private industry as a means to bring efficiency and social order to turbulent times in the early twentieth century. Since then, the recurring modernist tendency to turn political questions into technical questions (Wolin 2008) further affords agency professionals information and power asymmetries over citizens and their elected representatives (Adams 1992). In a vicious circle, these experts then frame subsequent issues as technical rather than political in nature, thus creating amplifying effects that further marginalize citizens.

Therefore, we argue that the persistence of bridge-building roles stressing bureaucratic rather than democratic administration in public administrative theory and practice may, at worst, contribute to and, at best, do little to reduce a rising tide of citizen distrust and estrangement from government in the networked state (Fournier and Quinton 2012). To support our argument, we track how the bridge-building role is consonant with high modernist tendencies and thus has its roots in the citizen-marginalizing tendencies of bureaucratic administration, which has historically dominated intellectual thinking and administrative practice in the field (see esp. Adams 1992). This occurs despite claims of “newness” for this role and the ebbs and flows in rhetorical emphasis on neutrally competent governance over time (Kaufman 1956). We conclude by joining others in urging critical self-reflection by the field on its contribution to the shrinking of public space in America (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007; King and Stivers 1998; Kirlin 1996; Nabatchi 2010; Stivers 2008), but with a specific research focus on discerning the contributions—positive or negative—over time of public administrative theory and administrative reform to citizen estrangement.

**Administrative Reform, Civic Participation, and the High Modernist Problematic**

Cultural theorist James Scott (1998) has written of the foibles and continuing dangers of “high modernism” to governance generally. Put most simply, high modernism is the effort to use science and abstract theory to order and regularize an inherently uncertain and chaotic social world. Of particular interest to us, Scott notes high modernism’s tendency to “prostrate [a] civil society” (1998, 88–89). Relatively, Hood identifies the consistency of three rhetorical
narratives offered by administrative reformers pushing the high modernist agenda: (1) traditional ways are now outmoded, and a clear break with them is needed and under way; (2) movement to a new paradigm is “unavoidable and irreversible”; and (3) the reforms are “broadly beneficent and to be welcomed” (1998, 196).

Combining Scott’s and Hood’s insights aptly characterizes the history of public administrative reform movements in America, as well as the public administrative theory associated with them. Indeed, modernism was the intellectual crucible within which the self-conscious study and practice of public administration was inspired and ever since dominated (Adams 1992). Moreover, the field’s overwhelming embrace of high modernist tenets at its inception led it to take an instrumental (means-ends) focus at the agency level. This was a focus in which the separation of politics and administration effectively marginalized concerns about law and citizenship, placing them in tow instead to the “how to” of identifying and applying organizational principles to save democracy from political machines.

Granted, ever since the Progressive Era, concerns about citizen participation and estrangement from government have also spawned cries for administrative reform from portions of the public administration scholarly and practitioner communities, especially when the excesses of other reform initiatives were apparent (Kaufman 1956). Yet they have routinely disappointed, partly because all reforms are layered atop each other without replacing their predecessors, creating a halfway, halting, and patchworked administrative system (Skowronek 1982). Adams (1992) analogizes this phenomenon to what the art world calls “pentimento.” Like the original images that bleed through when artists paint over earlier canvases, old technocratic images of public administration that disconnect or marginalize citizens from agency deliberations bleed through each “new” iteration of public administration thought and practice.

Nor can we minimize the continuing instrumental focus of high modernism as a reason for the field’s persistent marginalization of citizens in deliberative processes. All of these participatory efforts “suffered from a lack of resources for their implementation, and administrators’ logical response was to comply at the minimally required level so as not to drain resources otherwise allocated for the operation of their programs . . . to do just enough to comply with the legal mandates but not enough to make them work well” (Cooper 2011, 242).

And although scattered successes occurred (Berry, Portney, and Thompson 1993; Thomas 1986), one cannot take much comfort when considerable evidence suggests “that these efforts [were] not effective . . . some because of poor planning or execution . . . [and others because] administrative systems that are based upon expertise and professionalism leave little room for participatory processes” (King, Felty, and Suseh 1998, 317; also see deLeon 1992; Fischer 1993; Forester 1989; White and McSwain 1993).

With few exceptions, and despite its promise for enhancing meaningful citizen participation in agency deliberative processes, research on e-government, information technology (IT), and social media initiatives is also discouraging (see, among others, Haque 2001; Musso et al. 2011; but see Cooper 2011 for more positive experiences). For example, the most common use of e-government has involved information sharing and service transactions rather than collaboration (Brainard and McNutt 2010; Bryer and Zavattaro 2011). Moreover, most IT applications have focused on monitoring the status quo to make it run better. And because the quantitative measures used in IT systems simplify real-world complexity, they can narrow policy makers’ focus to policy problems that are quantifiable and for which data are available, thus diverting attention from issues and solutions that may deserve equal or more attention. Relatedly, social media can limit citizen input solely to those with network access, in the process marginalizing disadvantaged citizens and privileging better-off and organized interests.

Given the vital role that nonprofits play in today’s networked governance, recent research indicating that their traditional role in civic education is diminishing is also quite worrisome. Some see the professionalization of nonprofits, as well as the “logic of business” and the rise of “checkbook” participation within them, as effectively decoupling them from local commitments, their traditional missions, and their historical role of mass political education and mobilization (Clemens and Guthrie 2010; Skocpol 2003; Smith and Lipsky 1993). In addition, although mixed evidence exists that philanthropic funding to nonprofits can advance responsiveness to public values (LeRoux 2009), others see “philanthropic paternalism” (Salamon 1996) making nonprofits more responsive to donors than to their clients.

To illustrate the persistent role of public administration scholarship and administrative reform efforts in emphasizing bureaucratic over democratic administration and their link to the marginalization of citizens in deliberative processes, synopses of key intellectual and reform developments in the United States since the early 1900s follow. These cannot capture the variety of perspectives that make up what we call the progressive, associationalist, and polycentric reform heritages in public administration. However, they can convey the consistent marginalization of democratic administration in these major traditions as they create administrative structures and processes that can befuddle citizen comprehension and input, let alone give citizens a role in agency deliberations.

The Progressive Reform Heritage in Analytical Perspective

As noted, the dominant preference of early twentieth-century Progressive Era reformers was to build a strong, executive-centered, rationality-based administrative state in which policy making was depoliticized to the maximum extent possible. This model took root first in local governments (e.g., the municipal research bureaus) and then diffused to the state and federal government levels (a pattern followed ever since). As Waldo (1984) summarized it, Progressivism stressed the modernist faith in expert administration informed by pragmatism (attained through hierarchy), utilitarianism (the greatest good for the greatest number), and positivism (the use...
of measurement). Their mantra might be summarized as “facts, research, and measurement” (Waldo 1984, 57).

Amid these perceptions, the progressive agenda was founded on decidedly non-majoritarian principles that are readily identified with high modernist logic in the wake of “outmoded traditional ways”: the politics–administration dichotomy, efficiency as the ultimate value of governance, the marginalization of law in favor of rulemaking (thus maximizing administrative discretion), centralization, and faith in the self-regulation of professionals in bureaucracy (Moran 2003). Moreover, as noted, these reforms were framed as “broadly beneficent and to be welcomed” (Hood 1998, 196): rather than undermine constitutional values, progressive reforms were necessary to save the Constitution and democracy in light of modernity’s challenges. Even as stern a critic of the field’s early development as Waldo (1984) conceded that many of the founders interpreted efficiency more broadly as “social efficiency,” seeing it as the means for diminishing social problems and realizing democratic values (see also Lynn 2001).

The progressives’ “search for order” (Wiebe 1967) was driven by arguments that an increasingly complex and turbulent socio-economic and technological environment necessitated fundamental administrative reform. Specifically, the Madisonian system—with its separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism—could not deal with the domestic and international challenges facing early twentieth-century America. Merriam (2008) referred to the system as “hide-and-go-seek” government, understood only by corrupt political machines and their corporate patrons. Added Goodnow, the inordinate “fear of political tyranny . . . [had] led to the adoption of the theories of checks and balances and of the separation of powers” that were “unnatural” in living organic systems (1916, 41). This synthesis took place best in the executive branch, led at the federal level by the president and buffered from political passions because “bureaucratic thought pared all of these [complex public policy questions] back to their human components and subdivided them into recognizable, everyday problems” (Wiebe 1967, 146).

Added Cleveland in 1913, “mak[ing] agency administrators more efficient was synonymous with asking how to make them more responsive” (Schachter 2010, 83). Indeed, progressives saw business competition as inherently inefficient, sought cooperation and coordination among firms as a means to eliminate inefficiency, and placed their faith in the ability of technocrats trained in the scientific method in government and private enterprise to achieve the nation’s civic republican ends of community building (Alchon 1985; Hofstadter 1989). For most progressives, even the law was a table pathologies of bureaucracy (Merton 1957). These included the inherent tendency for administrative rulemaking to be overinclusive and sometimes arbitrary in the face of uncertainty, inflexibility, and one-size-fits-all proclivities. And as they became more complex, even efforts to make them more responsive to citizen needs further marginalized them from administrative processes. Partially on these grounds, scholars such as Charles Hyneman and William Willoughby in the 1930s challenged executive centralization as a principle of organization, while David Lilienthal and Ordway Tead carried this idea even further in the 1940s, arguing that the advancement of democracy ought to be a primary rather than an incidental purpose of public administration (Waldb 1984; more recently, this banner has been carried by what is known as the constitutional school of public administration—see Rohr 1986). But their arguments could not deflect the major interest of the field away from its instrumental focus on bureaucratic rather than democratic administration.

As the administrative state grew in size and discretionary power during the remainder of the twentieth century, these tendencies to marginalize unorganized interests expanded in the face of the inevitable pathologies of bureaucracy (Merton 1957). These included the inherent tendency for administrative rulemaking to be overinclusive and sometimes arbitrary in the face of uncertainty, inflexibility, and one-size-fits-all proclivities. And as they became more complex, even efforts to make them more responsive to citizen needs further marginalized them from administrative processes. Partially on these grounds, scholars such as Charles Hyneman and William Willoughby in the 1930s challenged executive centralization as a principle of organization, while David Lilienthal and Ordway Tead carried this idea even further in the 1940s, arguing that the advancement of democracy ought to be a primary rather than an incidental purpose of public administration (Waldb 1984; more recently, this banner has been carried by what is known as the constitutional school of public administration—see Rohr 1986). But their arguments could not deflect the major interest of the field away from its instrumental focus on bureaucratic rather than democratic administration.

Meanwhile, the “procedural republic” (Sandel 1984) formalized by Congress in the aftermath of the otherwise beneficial Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 created more fragmentation and judicialization of rulemaking and adjudicatory processes. And these only marginalized unorganized interests and average citizens even more from direct participation in administrative deliberations. These tendencies became most pronounced with the advent of the “new social regulation” in the 1960s and 1970s (Lilley and Miller 1977). The regulatory aims of the early progressive reformers and their New Deal heirs (e.g., the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Reserve, and the Securities and Exchange Commission) were to create agencies that, in practice, both regulated and promoted the development of single industries. In contrast, new social regulatory agencies (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and
the Consumer Protection Agency) were designed solely to promote health, safety, environment, and antidiscrimination across industries and all types of employees and customers. As Stewart argues, “Faced with the necessity of regulating very large numbers of firms, agencies shifted from case-by-case adjudication to adoption of highly specific regulations of general application” (1988, 107). In turn, the “large numbers of firms and industries affected, and the conflicts of interests among them, made negotiated solutions more difficult” and displaced “political decision-making mechanisms by bureaucratic and technocratic ones” that further marginalized unorganized interests (108).

Spawned partially in the aftermath of all of this were two significant intellectual movements in public administration: the New Public Administration (NPA) and the Blacksburg Manifesto. Both called for paradigmatic shifts in the field, identified traditional management-based approaches as outmoded and inequitable, urged widespread adoption of new ways of thinking about the public service, and promised beneficent outcomes. But, like the early progressives, both movements advocated a reconceptualization of public managers as direct representatives of the unorganized and policy-and promised beneficent outcomes. But, like the early progressive-cal issues were emphasized.

Conceived amid the social turmoil of the late 1960s, the model predisposition of NPA proponents was to describe public agencies as awash simultaneously in scientism, technicism, and narrow professional and interest group politics and as handmaidens of an oppressive status quo. For its part, the Blacksburg Manifesto (Frederickson and Chandler 1984; Marini 1971; Wamsley et al. 1990) arose from the “bureaucracy-bashing” rhetoric of the Ronald Reagan administration, assaults during that era on the capacity of agencies to perform the mounting statutory duties heaped upon them, and an erosion among citizens of an appreciation for the stewardship role in governance questions were marginalized, while means-ends technical issues were emphasized.

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Policy advocacy was for elected officials, not public managers who were without constitutional legitimacy to act in this manner.

Similarly critiqued as misguided, if not dangerous to the republic (Wamsley et al. 1990, 313), was the perceived license that “agency theory” (“a combination of expertise, experience, and commitment to the public interest”) seemed to grant public servants in determining what constituted the public interest (Wamsley et al. 1990, 311). Many noted public administrationists supported the manifesto’s call to refound public administration, but others challenged the idea. Kaufman, for example, challenged its flawed premises: “the Manifesto treats bureaucrats as members of a separate branch of government coordinate with the elected branches . . . [and who] are entitled to pursue their own visions of the public interest” (as summarized in Wamsley et al. 1990, 314). Also critiqued were the manifesto’s idealized versions of neutral public managers (they were really part of subsystems that blinded them to broader interests), “overstated” constitutional grounding for their representative role, and potentially “destructive” implications for the “structural foundation of the Republic” (as summarized in Wamsley et al. 1990, 311).

Attacking the constitutional legitimacy argument directly, Blacksburg proponents discerned in The Federalist Papers a direct advocacy role in governance for public managers and noted how the U.S. Constitution separated legitimacy to make policy from holding elected office (e.g., citing the largely appointed judiciary). Wamsley and Wolf (1996) subsequently responded further to earlier critiques and emphasized public managers’ responsibility to foster the democratic administration envisioned by traditionalists. Managers were to understand that they were in reflexive relationships with citizens, relationships that cast upon them roles as “sense makers” for citizens amid the complexity, turbulence, and discontinuities of the postmodern era. What was undeniable, however, was the manifesto’s executive-centered link to the early progressive movement, as was the inability of either the NPA or the Blacksburg tenets to displace bureaucratic administration as the central paradigm of public administrative theory and practice.

The Conservative Response: The Associationalist Reform Heritage in Analytical Perspective

The second reform heritage with links to the original “bureaucrats as bridge builders” of the early Progressive Era reformers comes from a decidedly more conservative political perspective, what has been
called the “associationalist” movement in America (Hawley 1974). Consistent with high modernist worldviews, the so-called forgotten progressives promoting associationalism shared their contemporaries’ diagnosis of the social ferment confronting society in the early twentieth century. They also saw that ferment as requiring an inevitable and irreversible paradigmatic shift that would be beneficial in bringing about social peace and allowing democracy to survive. Moreover, like mainstream progressives, associationalists grounded their reform prescriptions in scientism and technicism, saw the elimination of waste and enhancement of efficiency as redounding to societies’ benefit, and envisioned a role for the state in advancing these initiatives. These made it difficult for unorganized and lay citizens to be part of deliberative democracy.

Where they differed drastically from mainstream progressives was in their fear of enhancing the power of either the state or the market. In terms of the former, they worried about the effects on individual initiative of the bureaucratically driven, state-centered planning advocated by most progressives of the day. But they also feared the social distress and loss of civic republican that unfettered free markets would afford. For them, an “associative state” was needed that could empower “scientific rationalization and social engineering without sacrificing the energy and creativity inherent in individual effort, ‘grassroots’ involvement, and private enterprise” (Hawley 1974, 117). The role of federal agencies (and the executive branch at all levels of government) was solely to “stimulate the private sector to organize and govern itself” in the public interest (Clements 2000, 128; emphasis added).

As the public leader of this movement, Herbert Hoover put associationalism to work as U.S. secretary of commerce in the 1920s. He afforded a Taylorite “Waste in Industry” 10-point program for simplification, standardization, and scientific research, and he convened nearly 1,200 efficiency conferences on the elimination of waste in industrial design, production, and distribution alone. These efficiency conferences were held in cooperation with 900 trade associations and 7,000 firms in various industries (Wilson 1975). Commerce’s analyses on both domestic and foreign market issues also were tailored and distributed to more than 19,000 firms, as well as to trade associations. Marginalized in the process, however, was the impact of unorganized citizen interests and nonexperts in the closed deliberative governance processes of the expanding associative state (Clements 2000). And despite putting rhetorical distance between themselves and Hoover’s associationalist model in the wake of the Great Depression, New Deal reformers of the 1930s actually incorporated elements of it into their expansion of the administrative state (Hart 1998; see Durant 2009 for a fuller account of these developments).

Also helping foster the momentum of this form of bureaucratic (as opposed to democratic) administration was a significantly less appreciated administrative reform effort materializing at the Harvard Graduate School of Business (Scott 1992). Much like early progressives, and informed by an unabashed admiration for Hoover’s associationalism, the aim of creating a scientifically informed managerial state developed among an elite, interdisciplinary collection of scholars and business intellectuals (e.g., Chester Barnard, Robert Merton, and Elton Mayo) associated with Harvard. Led by the school’s new dean, Wallace Donham, members of this “Harvard Circle” also saw social science as the Archimedean point of leverage in their search for order amid the chaos of the Great Depression. Where the members of the Harvard Circle differed from early progressive reformers, however, was in their competing associationalist views of whom the governing elites should be and in their belief in a business-led rather than a government-led system of governance.

Their view was that a technocratic elite spanning the public and private sectors should lead society—a private–public partnership capable of “bridging” the imperative of expertise with democracy while avoiding socialism and laissez-faire extremes. Homans, for example, argued that the “governmental elite includes not only those holding the higher posts in the administration [i.e., in government] but also . . . the powerful financiers, industrialists” in society (Scott 1992, 22; emphasis added). The way to “ordered freedom” was to have voluntary private efforts coordinated by a cross-sectoral managerial elite applying managerial expertise, social science research (on the shop floor, within organizations, and across industries), and a strong ethical and moral sense (Scott 1992, 18). Once again, nonmajoritarian institutions would “save” democracy by wielding objective scientific knowledge and representing the true interests of citizens were they more knowledgeable.

Even after New Deal critiques of associationalism arose again in the late 1930s, World War II brought about its rekindling. As Eisner argues, “state capacity was expanded by appending the capacities of private-sector associations on to the state” (2000, 12). Writes Hart, in the “shadow of the welfare state and the warfare state, the associative state has survived” and “advocacy [has occurred] on its behalf in virtually every Administration” (Republican or Democratic) since Roosevelt’s (1994, 30). In its wake, a “system of government-supervised self-regulation” developed and took on oligopolistic tendencies, with such protean constitutive effects as “reducing the number of competitors, favoring the best organized competitors, specializing politics around agencies, [and] ultimately limiting participation to channels provided by pre-existing groups” (Eisner 2000, 355).

These developments were further amplified during the Cold War as Hoover’s associationalism characterized the implementation structures created, with larger corporations defining many of the policy objectives and instruments involved and creating a powerful political economy favoring their interests when the Cold War ended (Hart 1998). These efforts only further increased the opacity of government to ordinary citizens and advantaged well-organized and legally and technically savvy interest groups. And within these policy subsystems, recent research on agency rulemaking by Golden (1998) and Yackee and Yackee (2006) has found a substantial and continuing business interest bias. Likewise, survey data from studies conducted by Furlong and Kerwin (2005) suggest that businesses, and the trade associations that represent businesses and professions, were (and are) involved in rulemaking more often than other groups. Although others have found that influence varies across stages of the regulatory process, this research nonetheless shows the marginalization of unorganized citizen interests, with bureaucratic as opposed to democratic administration continuing to prevail (Kraft and Kamieniecki 2007).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a persistent drift also occurred to expand the use of public–private hybrid organizations as part of
administrative reforms (e.g., the now discredited Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac mortgage brokers) (Koppell 2003). What is more, reformers even created hybrids to regulate other hybrid organizations in ways consonant with Hoover’s aim to shape a “new kind of governmental agency, one that sought not to regulate . . . but to make private groups more statesmanlike and hence better able to cope with modern conditions and problems” (Hawley 1981, 3). These citizen-marginalizing trends in Congress paved the way for the self-regulatory preoccupation by its members that led to the 2007–8 financial crisis and its aftermath (see Durant 2011; Roberts 2010). As Roberts (2010) explains, the 1990s saw a two-track “logic of discipline” take root that was reminiscent of the politics–administration dichotomy as nations shifted financial authority to finance ministers and technocrats. Former vice chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Alan Blinder, even argued that the country would be better off if more policy decisions were taken out of the “political thicker” and placed with “unelected technocrats” (Roberts 2010, 47).

Valuing executive-centered government, for instance, made little sense in a Madisonian system calibrated to prevent a concentration of power in any branch of government

The Polycentric Heritage in Analytical Perspective

Frederickson defines the “disarticulated state” as the product of the contemporary “disjunction between political jurisdiction and public management . . . the weakening of this bond ‘disarticulates’ the traditional centralized link between government and the agents of public service provision” (Frederickson et al. 2012, 235). Again consistent with high modernist perspectives, he argues that a fundamental fragmentation of institutions has occurred, a fragmentation characterized by “lateral and interinstitutional relationships in administration, a decreasing importance of political boundaries, and a decline in political sovereignty” (235). Thus, “governance” promises to become the new paradigm of public administration. Just as progressives and associationalists argued for their causes, Frederickson contends that this is not a bad thing. Public administration is “repositioning itself” by “articulating a new political science of making the fragmented and disarticulated state work,” a field focused less on conflict than on “cooperation, networking, and institution building and maintenance” (235). Consistent with his earlier perspective in the NPA, he again worries about the impact of governance changes on democratic values and sees public managers as actual or potential bridge builders rectifying the situation (for an excellent review of Frederickson’s concerns about citizenship and democratic values, see Perry and Radin 2012).

Frederickson’s description of the disarticulated state comports to a degree and in certain aspects with what Polanyi (1951) called “polycentricity”: “a social system of many decision centers having limited and autonomous prerogatives and operating under an overarching set of rules” (Aliaga and Tarko 2012, 237). Polycentricity has a rich, varied, and sometimes controversial heritage in public administration. As noted, the progressive and associationalist reform heritage envisioned a “visible hand” of managerial elites as a “social system” designed to coordinate and bring “order” to society. In contrast, a competing market-oriented version of polycentricity arose in the late 1960s that posited an “invisible hand” at work coordinating societal action. Ostrom (1977) argued that the U.S. Madisonian system of separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism was wisely premised on polycentricity, a premise decidedly at odds with public administration’s primary historical focus on executive-centered, expertise-based, bureaucratic administration.

Thus, for Ostrom, progressive prescriptions to eliminate decentralization, structural overlap, and duplication of effort were not to be dismissed as wasteful but rather embraced as the polycentric access points for citizens and their elected representatives to affect policy making. Indeed, he argued that this disconnect between the majority of the field’s founders and the republic’s constitutional founders provoked an intellectual crisis in public administration, one demanding a refounding of the field. Valuing executive-centered government, for instance, made little sense in a Madisonian system calibrated to prevent a concentration of power in any branch of government. Besides chiding the field’s intellectual founders for embracing European political theory, with its presumption that power must be concentrated for effective governance, Ostrom joined Simon (1947) and Waldo (1984) in dismissing the proverbs of the administrative orthodoxy that buttressed bureaucratic administration.

However, unlike Simon, who offered prescriptions for a decision-focused science of public administration within the field’s still-dominant focus on monocratic instrumental bureaucratic structures, Ostrom argued that no single form of organization was appropriate for all circumstances. The scope of the problems addressed, as well as economics of scale, should determine the type of organizational structure needed (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012). Relatedly, jurisdictional responsibility for policy making and administration should be delegated to the lowest level of government capable of handling the problem. Thus, Ostrom not only directly challenged the field’s historical resistance to overlap and duplication (i.e., to polycentricity), but also presaged contemporary new governance concerns that existing political boundaries were incommensurate with the nature of problems (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012).

Borrowing from Tocqueville, Ostrom used the term “democratic administration” to describe his polycentric prescription for refounding public administration. However, it was soon hijacked by public choice economists in ways that Ostrom himself later criticized. Nonetheless, he did originally stress involvement of citizens mostly as rationally self-interested consumers of public services. They would either use vouchers for services or shop around the marketplace and choose what “basket” of services offered by different jurisdictions best suited their tastes. But by according citizens a negligible role in agency deliberations, democratic administration implicitly left policy deliberations to a decidedly downsized cadre of bridge-building experts than progressives envisioned. Nor, unlike Blackburg Manifesto proponents, did democratic administration envision an independent public interest—aside from what consumer choices produced.

Despite its populist-sounding rhetoric, democratic administration was immediately criticized for, among other things, equating citizenship solely with choices about consumption of government
services (Golembiewski 1977). Later, it drew attacks for the lack of empirical evidence supporting its underlying market ideation (Frederickson et al. 2012). Still, by the 1980s, the world of practice had moved directly into somewhat of the polycentric state that Ostrom envisioned. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, Kirlin (1996) identified coordination issues that Frederickson and Smith (2003) would later call "conjunctive administration" as one of the "big" research questions facing the field. Most notable in this regard were the polycentric administrative prescriptions of the New Public Management (NPM) and new governance movements.

As with their predecessors, both of these "new" administrative theories claimed that contextual changes made administrative reforms necessary, inevitable, and beneficial. Most pressing were the obsolescence of a purported "industrial age-based" bureaucratic model in the face of the wicked policy problems noted earlier, generational shifts in work expectations, and the information age. Unlike progressives and associationalists, but not unlike Ostrom and his followers, NPM proponents deemphasized the policy-making role of professional managers in either the public or private sector. Still, in the contemporary equivalent of the progressives' politics/policy-administration dichotomy, they preferred administrative systems enabling elected officials to decide policy ends and administrators to figure out how to realize them. Unlike progressives, but consistent with associationalist thinking, they also envisioned a downsized agency workforce unengaged with the direct delivery of goods, services, and opportunities to citizens. Instead, administrative staff were to help create, manage, and monitor contracts, grants, and partnerships.

In contrast, those advocating or identifying a new governance paradigm were more split in assessing the role of and impact on citizens of public–private–nonprofit networks. For some, networked governance was not a way to meet the challenges of wicked problems but merely a pragmatic response to fiscal stress, downward pressures on the visible size of government from economic globalization, and attitudinal shifts away from the positive state philosophy of the progressives (see Durant 2000). They were similarly split over the possibility of civic deliberation. Some argued that wicked problems required both citizen involvement in deliberative processes and the more informed, synthesizing, and public interest-oriented thinking of agency experts. In this, they shared the minority views in mainstream public administration thinking expressed in the early Progressive Era by Mary Parker Follett, the postmodernist premises of the Blacksburg scholars, the citizen-centered governance advocates of the 1960s and today, and contemporary views of critical theorists and social constructivists (Fischer 2009).

In contrast, and as reflected in administration conjunction theory noted earlier, others identified with new governance models emphasizing the bridge-building capacities of managers in networks. Public managers would do no less than stop the "decline of sovereignty, the decreasing importance of jurisdictional borders, and a general institutional fragmentation" in America (Frederickson and Smith 2003, 222). They would do so because politicians tend not to be rewarded electorally for addressing cross-jurisdictional problems, while public managers see interdependency everywhere in their functional areas. Hence, the importance of administrators as interjurisdictional bridge builders, problem solvers, and representatives of less well-attuned elected officials and citizens. Although political jurisdictions still matter, public managers must become the "pedestrian bridges" that alone "constitute a strong and capable network for coordination and cooperation" (224).

But like the progressive and associationalist perspectives, the rhetoric of conjunctive administrative theory to date shows more of a commitment to bureaucratic administration than to democratic administration: "Citizens may get their interests represented in decisions that impact their lives," write Frederickson and Smith, "only on the bridges of administration conjunction" (2003, 224). Conceding that this might mean that expressed citizen wishes and needs would be conveyed by career executives to political actors, precisely how those wishes are discerned and whether and how citizens are given meaningful opportunities to be part of policy deliberations are unclear. At worst, this means that experts reflect the interests that citizens would have if they shared technocrats' knowledge. And when proponents of a theory of administration conjunction use terms such as "professional concepts of the public interest" and point to an "inchoate public," the only real change seemingly involves horizontal networks replacing vertical networks of bureaucrats representing citizen needs rather than nurturing citizenship and civic involvement within them.

Nor is it encouraging when a search of the literature on networked governance exhibits a tendency to focus on interagency collaboration, as well as among organized interests such as nonprofits, business groups, and government. Some normative discussion of the benefits of citizen engagement exists (e.g., Farazmand 2009; Neshkova and Guo 2011), but little actual research focuses on the connection between collaborative efforts and citizen engagement in deliberative processes (but see Bryer and Cooper 2012 for a justification of this focus rather than on direct citizen participation). As Bingham and O'Leary contend, "we do not know about how citizens connect with, participate in, and influence networks" (2006, 164). Relatedly, little research addresses whether increased engagement through collaboration trickles "out" to the general public or instead creates new walls between the politically active and the community at large.

Weber (2009) does find that the advantage of community collaborative approaches is that elected and agency officials shift from irritation with community views to asking for input. But even in these instances, administrators must still decide if they are going to be responsive to collaborators or to broader populations (Bryer 2007). Collaborative governance may simply increase access for existing interests rather than society as a whole and may lead to greater service inequality (O'Toole and Meier 2004). Prior research also suggests that local collaborations often exclude national and statewide advocacy groups (who represent broader citizen access to agency decision making), allowing for more influence by business interests (Leach 2006; Neshkova and Guo 2011). As Moynihan and his colleagues (2011) argue, networked governance can undermine democratic values when dominated by private sector partners with different motives and fewer constraints than their public sector counterparts.

Likewise, O’Leary and Bingham (2009) find that as the networks they studied addressed complicated issues, they disenfranchised...
those who did not support network decisions. Returning to non-profits, Suarez (2011) finds that professionalized nonprofits in collaborative networks use fewer volunteers and have less community representation on their boards, thereby amplifying the disconnection between citizens, nonprofits, and governments. And although there is some evidence that collaborative processes stressing civic deliberation increase citizen perceptions of government legitimacy (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2011; Leach 2006), others speculate that widespread citizen participation in agency decision making could weaken the legitimacy of representative government (e.g., Jing and Savas 2009; Kim 2010). Regardless, the marginalization of the study of democratic as opposed to bureaucratic administration is evident and troublesome for a field that has historically been concerned with reconciling bureaucracy and democracy (Rosenbloom 2010).

A Bridge Still Too Far?
Commenting on the state of civic deliberation in the United States in 1959, C. Wright Mills wrote that Americans know they are “liv[ing] in a time of big decisions; they [also] know that they are not making any” (6). The durability of this situation in the United States has more recently led some to conclude that we are in a “post-democracy” era (Crouch 2004). We have argued that the fault lies at least partially in the high modernist tendency for proponents of administrative reform and large segments of mainstream public administration scholarship to privilege bureaucratic expertise and marginalize the deliberative role of unorganized interests and citizens in agency deliberations. Moreover, the paradigmatic shifts seen by some for the field today promise more of the same.

This is not to say that public administration scholarship has been insensitive to democratic values. Even as trenchant a critic of the field’s early development as Waldo (1984) conceded that efficiency had broader democratic and constitutional meaning than economists today hold when using that concept. If anything, important segments of contemporary public administration scholarship have joined traditionalists in raising concerns and identifying means for improving civic deliberation (for recent summaries of this literature, see Bryson et al. 2012; Cooper, Bryer, and Meek 2006). But while no contemporary scholar is indifferent to democratic values and fails to embrace them, the bridge-building model of experts representing citizens nonetheless still dominates research and practice. Nor will successful efforts to demonstrate a public service ethic among public managers reduce our concerns because this ethic is no substitute for a commitment to civic deliberation in a democracy.

Other reasons for growing citizen estrangement from government since the early 1970s certainly exist. These include elevated expectations following World War II, anger in the wake of Watergate and the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, stagnant wages for the middle class, anger over episodes of government incompetence, the polarizing effects of the “permanent campaign,” the destabilizing effects of economic globalization on local communities, and resentment over political scandals (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). However, prior research on the effects of administrative structures, policies, and procedures shows that they can diminish citizen perceptions of self-worth, political efficacy, and the potential for political mobilization. Thus, the possibility that administrative theories and reforms can marginalize citizens and have these untoward effects makes this relationship worthy of considerably more research attention than it has attracted in the past.

We hasten to add that we do not dismiss the possibility that it is really more professional bureaucratic administration that is needed to assuage citizen estrangement from government. For example, perceptions that a lack of regulatory expertise was responsible for the 2007–8 financial crisis or shoddy agency responses during and after Hurricane Katrina certainly provoked citizen distrust of government. But this possibility should not be perceived as a rival hypothesis to our own, as the two are not mutually exclusive. Our concern is with the nature of the capacity afforded: does it promote bureaucratic or democratic administration? (For a perspective arguing that the two may be mutually exclusive, see Bryer and Cooper 2012.)

Thus, we hope that this article will give administrative reform proponents, scholars, and practitioners pause to consider in their prescriptions, research agendas, and practice how these developments are affecting not only substantive governance outcomes but also citizens’ sense of political efficacy, self-worth, and perceptions of the legitimacy of this nation’s institutions. To some extent, this agenda would not be a “new” focus for public administration but a return to the concerns of public administration traditionalists about discerning how public administrative theory, research, and practice might sustain a democratic political amid complexity. Democratic administration would be seen as a primary focus of public administration research and practice rather than an incidental purpose of the field standing in the shadow of instrumental rationality.

It would also vary in focus from contemporary research on the tools of citizen participation and civic deliberation that is now concerned with the implementation structures for effective citizen involvement in agency decision making (Musso et al. 2011). We envision a research agenda supplementing that work but focused specifically on empirically identifying the contributions of public administrative theory and administrative reform movements to either increasing citizen estrangement from government or reducing it. As Tead wrote in 1942, “Self-government and good government are not opposed realities, but when intelligently conceived, are two aspects of the same
reality” (cited in Waldo 1984, 151). Such a focus is just as timely, important, and long overdue in contemporary public administration research, administrative reform movements, and day-to-day practice in the United States.

References


