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Wilson Response

An effective government should focus on the issues at hand rather than the politics that often confront them on a daily basis. Woodrow Wilson believed that politics should be kept out of the business of the administration of government in order to be more efficient and effective, and this is a sentiment that I personally agree with. The nature of politics often divides the public on issues that could be, without interference of political rhetoric, much more cut and dry than they appear. Often, issues examined by government employees are agreed upon, but the methods to achieving the desired outcome becomes cloaked by the politics surrounding the issue.

A recent example to examine is the current situation in Ukraine where Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, has decided to intervene in the semi-autonomous city of Crimea. While nearly everyone in the United States government agrees this is a dangerous and aggressive act by Putin, Republicans in the House and Senate are continually questioning Barack Obama's leadership on the issue. This is a very large example of a problem that underlies the "red tape" view of bureaucracy. Whether or not you agree with President Obama's personal politics, questioning the Commander-in-Chief during a military crisis with the world's second most powerful nation undermines the President's image on an international level. Even if you believe the President to be in a weak position of authority, questioning his perseverance for political gain furthers the view of him as a weak leader.

Again, this is a very large-scale example of how politics can undermine the administration of government and policy. It also begins to answer the question of whether or not

a dichotomous politics-administration system of government is feasible in the 21st century.

Television pundits during the election repeatedly remind us that the United States seems to be the most polarized it ever was in terms of political ideology, and there is only a very narrow set of people who are ultimately viewed as “independent” (whatever that might mean). This means that politicians are much more likely to engage in political rhetoric to score points with their base, which is extremely important in times of polarization. Media dramatization also adds to this polarization by forcing issues down people’s throats with little thought or real dialogue, simply offering the viewpoint of the two parties and ending the conversation (or offering the viewpoint of only one party).

I think it’s extremely interesting to examine Wilson’s view of government especially considering he later becomes President of the United States. We often accept the status quo of government without examining the larger faults with a system, and I’ve always sort of accepted the political nature of governing in the United States. Wilson offers a different perspective, one that I think should be examined in the classroom.

Former politicians being appointed to head agencies can be both a good and bad idea. The clear benefit is that you’re appointing someone who has experience dealing with the bureaucratic system the U.S. government operates. A veteran politician is often much more likely to know how to navigate the rough waters of bureaucracy than even the most skilled administrators. The biggest downside, however, is that government agencies suffer political attacks if they’re lead by political leaders (think Kerry, Clinton leading the State Department). In order to gain political points, mistakes are going to be chalked up to poor leadership at the top of the bureaucracy even if a low-level employee is ultimately to be blamed.

The polarization that exists in America, in addition to media dramatization, makes it difficult for political-free administration of government happen. The higher you go in government, the less likely you are to see a dichotomous system. Local governments and agencies are much more likely to be dichotomous than the federal government is going to be. We seem to be moving in such a direction that the gap between administration and politics is blurring, making it more difficult to be effective and efficient. This issue is on display front and center in American politics with the Do Nothing Congress.

Questions:

1. In what way could we achieve a dichotomous system of governing that separates administration and politics? What sorts of change would have to happen at a societal level?
2. Can a system of government where there is no distinction between government administration and politics be effective?