



Into a New Regressive Era: Implications for Public Administration

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American politics periodically shifts from a progressive orientation toward social change to a regressive orientation. During progressive phases, governmental attention is focused on strengthening the social safety net, protecting minority and immigrant populations, and regulating private sector activities in finance, business, and the physical environment. During regressive phases, legislation and administrative actions are designed to weaken or reverse these measures. In this time of heightened awareness of race, religion, inequality, and environmental change, recent political events signal a widespread reaction to trends in contemporary society and a shift toward a deeply regressive phase in governance. The article examines characteristics of this shift and what it may mean for public administration.

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What is the precise moment, in the life of a country, when tyranny takes hold? It rarely happens in an instant; it arrives like twilight, and, at first, the eyes adjust Tyranny does not begin with violence; it begins with the first gesture of collaboration. Its most enduring crime is drawing decent men and women into its siege of the truth. — Evan Osnos (2016), “When Tyranny Takes Hold,” *The New Yorker*, December 2016

Post-truth is pre-fascism. — Timothy Snyder (2017), *On Tyranny*, p. 71

Important events and shifts in public perceptions of the role of government can significantly affect what public agencies do, how they are managed, and what it is like to work in them. The relationship between the American public sector and the surrounding political and economic systems at any point in time is grounded in a baseline of cultural wariness toward government administration that has its origins in the Founding Era (Stillman, 1991). Add to that, for example, an unpopular war, hostile action by a foreign power or terrorists, an economic recession, an election resulting in a change in ideology, or a movement to use market concepts to manage government, and conditions have been created that can shape what governments do and how they do it. In brief, the societal context matters for public organizations and professionals.

Knowledge of the role of public professionals in policymaking and implementation has long since moved beyond the traditional view of administrative discretion, expressed in the mid-twentieth century by Herman Finer (1941). In this view, public employees are expected to limit themselves to enacting the preferences of elected representatives, rather than making

independent judgments about their work. Over several decades, researchers have constructed a picture of governmental complexity and administrative discretion that recognizes the overlapping responsibilities of elected leaders and career professionals. This is a picture of interdependence rather than separation that also acknowledges unique role characteristics. Dwight Waldo (1980) captured the paradoxical nature of this interdependence in writing that “even a beginning student in Public Administration knows that there was once something called the politics–administration dichotomy, which has now been discarded” (p. 67). Nevertheless, “No problem is more central to public administration ... than the relationship of politics and administration” (p. 65).

As important as the working relationship between career public professionals and their political and economic milieu is to those directly involved, it is revealed as a rather fragile, micro-level matter when its equilibrium is upset by macro-level forces of social change. These forces can overwhelm professional practices, norms, and preferences, prompting practitioners and scholars to reevaluate their assumptions about the characteristics of the field. Recent decades are rich with events and ideas that have challenged seemingly settled understandings of the role of public administration in an advanced democracy. Some of the more visible and disruptive of these events and ideas in the national setting include: Ronald Reagan’s “government is the problem” approach to governing; the penetration of economic thought into the public sector, beginning with public choice in the 1980s and extending into New Public Management in the 1990s; ongoing racial unrest; the increase in socioeconomic inequality; severe economic recession; and growing xenophobia, fear of the other.

Disruptive events and ideas such as these challenge public administration to adapt to unfamiliar conditions while keeping intact a sense of service to the public interest or public welfare. To the extent this sense of service is diminished, “public administration loses its rich ethical aura and becomes, simply, governmental administration. Or more simply: administration. Or management” (Waldo, 1980, pp. 78–79).

Today, it appears that a major shift in society and government is underway that will present serious challenges to public administration and to the values and ethics of those who practice and study in the field. One conceptual lens for making sense of this shift is the contrast between alternating “regressive” and “progressive” eras in politics and governing. Several such eras have occurred in American history, each with unique characteristics that responded to specific political and economic circumstances of the times. The current shift into what may be called a “new regressive era” includes features of earlier periods, such as dislike of government, racial tension, and the xenophobia of ethnic nationalism, but it is also different in important ways. The purpose of this article is to examine some of those differences and to consider how the emerging era might affect the study and practice of public administration.

PERIODS OF REGRESSIVE AND PROGRESSIVE VALUES IN SOCIETY

Several times in American history, people have responded to what they perceived to be oppressive, unreasonable, or irrational conditions in society by organizing for reform, including using the public sector as a vehicle for social change. Historian Arthur Schlesinger (1986) suggested that, historically, public consciousness has shifted from periods of “private interest” to periods of “public purpose.” During periods of private interest, the emphasis is on privatization,

“materialism, hedonism, and the overriding quest for personal gratification” (p. 28). These are times of preparation for social change that exhibit “undercurrents of dissatisfaction, criticism, ferment, protest” (p. 28). In this setting, “problems neglected become acute, threaten to become unmanageable and demand remedy” (pp. 28–29), with the result that “people begin to seek meaning in life beyond themselves” (p. 29). Thus, a new period of reform begins, to be followed later by another “interlude of rest and recuperation” (p. 28).

Three historical eras that fit Schlesinger’s description of periods of public purpose can be singled out as especially important to the role of the public sector in American society. During the Progressive Era (1890–1920), the New Deal (1933–1941), and the Great Society (1964–1968), government and public administration changed dramatically in response to conditions in the preceding time periods. The Progressive Era represents a major point of transition in the role of the public sector in American society, as government became established as a viable and legitimate actor in restraining the excesses of the private market and protecting ordinary people and the physical environment from the more extreme actions of the wealthy and powerful.

By the end of the First World War in November 1918, the reform impulse was waning. In the 1920s (the “Roaring Twenties”), though some of the social and environmental conditions that worried Progressive Era reformers were still present, national attention turned toward rapid business growth, consumerism, and a fast-paced popular culture. The new Roosevelt administration took swift action in 1933 to stabilize the banking system, but the series of measures we think of as the New Deal, including large-scale federal jobs programs for unemployed workers, infrastructure construction, unemployment insurance, and Social Security, were developed two or three years later. By the time World War II superseded the concerns of the New Deal, government intervention during times of crisis in the private economy had become an accepted, if contested, part of American political culture.

Social conditions and reform were of secondary interest at best during the immediate postwar period. Important themes in national life during the late 1940s, the 1950s, and into the early 1960s were the Korean War, communism, and the Cold War and nuclear arms. As in the 1920s, consumerism and economic growth were of primary interest, this time fueled by the growth of the suburbs and the new advertising medium of television. The racism of the Jim Crow era was challenged by school desegregation, but full expression of the civil rights, women’s rights, and environmental movements would not appear until the 1960s.

In the 1960s, the public became aware of serious problems that remained from earlier eras or which had been created during the postwar economic boom. Racial injustice, environmental degradation, widespread poverty, and women’s demands for equal rights surfaced with a strength and urgency during the 1960s and into the 1970s that created social unrest and division. Add the disturbing experience of the Vietnam War, and this era was intensely challenging and disruptive for the public sector and its career professionals. President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and War on Poverty produced milestone legislation that pushed government into issues of social justice and inequality in ways that were new and unprecedented.

Writing at the end of the presidential administration of George W. Bush, Richard Box (2007, 2008) analyzed these alternating periods of private interest and public purpose, identifying societal values they appear to evoke and the effects they have on public administration. Because periods of rapid change and reform move society into new institutional arrangements and

behavioral practices, Box labeled the associated values “progressive.” In contrast, because the values exhibited during intervening periods are intended to return society to earlier understandings, they were called “regressive.” Though these labels carry some normative baggage in common use, at its heart this is a distinction between values associated with change and values associated with the status quo or conditions in existence at some earlier time.

Box noted that use “of the label *progressive* does not imply inevitable movement toward a better world; indeed, progressive values are often on the defensive, so it may be assumed that many people find that regressive values better fit their preferences and interests” (2007, p. 30). Moreover, the distinction between periods of regressive and progressive values is not crisp or dichotomous. Periods of change that show progressive values can include evidence of regressive values, resulting in a complex, mixed image of eras in which regressive or progressive values are emphasized. As an example, some Progressive Era reformers held regressive views of immigrants and people who were not of their ethnic background or social class, thinking of them as inherently inferior. Another example is the conduct of the Vietnam War during the administration of Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s, simultaneously with the implementation of key Great Society measures such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Wilderness Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

A set of five paired, opposed values was constructed, as shown below, to capture the contrast between broad societal characteristics present in regressive and progressive eras (Box, 2007, p. 29; 2008, p. 25). No claim was made that this set is definitive or exhaustive, and other analysts could offer different value sets. In addition, this was not intended as an inventory of specific causal events, trends, or political orientations during a particular period. Instead, it was offered as one way to describe the value-related characteristics of periods of private interest and public purpose. The value pairs express continua of value emphasis, not simple dichotomies, and mixtures of regressive and progressive values can be present at any specific cross-sectional point in time.

These value pairs were assembled toward the end of the presidential term of George W. Bush. They were informed by the characteristics of earlier periods of private interest and public purpose, and also by events occurring at the time, such as the destructive, destabilizing, and seemingly baseless war in Iraq; ideological denial of widely accepted realities, for example climate change or the failure of supply-side, trickle-down economics to deliver much except a growing federal deficit and debt; single-minded application of the criterion of economic efficiency to complex matters of public policy such as the social safety net; growing socioeconomic inequality; and hostility toward environmental protection and stewardship. The intervening years of the Obama administration could be described as exhibiting progressive values, though full development of a period of public purpose was hobbled by polarized politics and the absence of broad agreement on national problems in need of solution. The paired regressive and progressive values are shown in [Table 1](#).

The oppositional character of the value sets is apparent. Progressive values stress cooperation rather than aggression and confrontation, knowledge instead of ideology in decision-making, using economics as a tool rather than a goal, viewing significant economic inequality as a threat to social justice and democracy, and thinking of the earth as a sustainable home for humankind rather than a reservoir of resources to be extracted. Box wrote, “regressive values tend to be economic, and they are based on a masculinist ethic of individual self-maximization, aggression, competition, conflict, and efficiency” (2007, p. 29). The basis

TABLE 1
Paired Regressive and Progressive Values

<i>Regressive values</i>	<i>Progressive values</i>
Aggressiveness	Cooperation
Belief	Knowledge
Economics as end	Economics as means
Great inequality	Limited inequality
Earth as resource	Earth as home

of progressive values is “a humanist ethic of individual and social betterment in a context of cooperation, mutual benefit, and public interest” (p. 30).

This model of regressive and progressive values is, like Schlesinger’s periods of private interest and public purpose, a broad rather than detailed description, able to accommodate new material based on observation of current events and emerging trends. Indeed, current events and emerging trends are the focus of the next section, which offers a description of what appears to be a new era of regressive values.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW REGRESSIVE ERA

It is understatement to say that these are rapidly changing times in the American public sphere, filled with paradox, contradiction, and confusion. Although this article is about potential effects of current trends in society on public administration rather than the merits of ongoing political debates, some description of the specifics constituting these trends is unavoidable. Overall, the emerging era seems almost a caricature of the regressive values described by Box a decade ago, an extreme version that makes the revealed values difficult to minimize or ignore. The current situation contains themes that, while they have occurred in earlier times, are not part of the memory many younger people have of cultural dynamics in the United States; these themes deserve particular emphasis in a contemporary analysis.

Aggressiveness

We can use the regressive value from each of the five value pairs discussed above as a framework for analysis, beginning with aggressiveness, which is paired with cooperation. In the original formulation, aggressiveness in public affairs was, in significant part, a function of the militarization of society in support of foreign interventions. This is understandable, since at the time the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were at their peak. Today there are several elements of aggressiveness that merit additional attention. They include nativist ethnic nationalism and associated discrimination based on religion or immigrant status, police violence toward people of color and efforts to limit the voting access of African Americans, and misogyny in the form of acceptance of sexual abuse and renewed attempts to control women’s reproductive choices.

Race, women’s place in society, and fear of immigrants and specific groups are recurring themes in American history. Jim Crow segregation and the civil rights conflicts of the 1950s

and 1960s are parts of a decades-long struggle that continues today. Women did not begin to achieve full rights in employment, control of reproduction, and access to financial credit and property ownership until the 1960s and 1970s. Chinese immigration was barred in 1882 for fear of labor competition from people considered racially inferior, and the exclusion was not fully lifted until 1965 (Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, 2017). In 1917, 1921, and 1924, immigration laws were passed that limited the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa, and Asian nations, such as India. These limitations were grounded in fear of Bolshevik radicals and dislike of people believed to be physically and intellectually inferior (immigrationtounitedstates.org, 2015).

To these examples could be added treatment of Native Americans throughout American history, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and more. The point is that aggressive behavior toward people perceived as vulnerable, inferior, or the feared “other” is not new. It is especially salient today, given the rise of an ethnic nationalism that exhibits nativism, racism, fear of immigrants, and emphasis on machismo and displays of strength.

Belief

As a regressive value in public affairs, belief does not refer to everyday experience of the world, such as assuming that a fire company will respond if one calls 911. Instead, it refers to public perception of the causes and meaning of events based on unfounded opinion or ideological preference rather than knowledge. Looking back in history, we find that people who thought systematically about governing often did not have a high opinion of the judgment of ordinary citizens. In the Founding Era, many of the Federalists in favor of a new, stronger central government thought of the public as too emotional and irrational to take part directly in governing, so the new national government was designed with “filtering” mechanisms to keep them at arm’s length (Wood, 1969, pp. 471–518). In 1887, when Woodrow Wilson wrote about governing in his essay “The Study of Administration,” he referred to ordinary people “who go to their work early in the morning” as “rigidly unphilosophical” (Wilson, 1887/1997, p. 20). Wilson thought “a truth must become not only plain but also commonplace” (p. 20) before such people could see it, so a leader would have to “stir up” the public and then give them the appropriate belief to accept (p. 19).

It might be assumed that in the twenty-first century United States, with universal primary and secondary education and widespread access to higher education and information, the public would be well informed and inclined toward making judgments based on knowledge rather than belief. Paradoxically, the current balance between belief and knowledge in public affairs runs against that assumption, in an age of widespread acceptance of strange, even bizarre ideas (recently called “alternative facts” by one of the people in the presidential administration who has been involved in spreading them). Donald Trump, as candidate and as president, has used such ideas in an apparent attempt, often successful, to destabilize the concept of an identifiable reality.

For example, in large part because of Trump’s promotion of the “birther” myth, it was revealed in a 2016 poll that 72% of Republicans doubted that Barack Obama was born in the United States, 41% believed he is not a citizen, and 31% were unsure. In comparison, 8 in 10 Democrats believed Obama was born in the United States (Savransky, 2016). A poll taken

in 2015 found that 43% of Republicans believed that Barack Obama was a Muslim (Schroeder, 2015). Meanwhile, Trump, in his role as president of the United States, frequently invents untrue claims, such as a terrorist attack in Sweden that did not occur or the idea that Barack Obama is orchestrating the mass street protests against him. In addition, he often asserts “facts” that are obviously false, for example about the size of the crowd at his inauguration or the murder rate in the United States.

The extent to which the public accepts these false claims is uncertain, but the fact that the leader of the executive branch would make them says something disturbing about the prevalence of belief over knowledge in public affairs. Belief over knowledge is not, however, a phenomenon limited to the behavior of Donald Trump and his followers; it can be found in a variety of issue areas in public affairs and science. For example, more than a decade ago a majority of the population believed the ideological claim of a legitimate rationale for invading Iraq, and a 2014 poll revealed that 42% of Americans believe humans were created less than 10,000 years ago (Gallup, 2017). Public credulity and ignorance may not be a new story, but the recent behavior of a portion of the political right, and in particular people associated with Donald Trump, has dramatically increased the visibility of belief in contrast to knowledge. The purpose appears to be to undermine the concept of rationality, so that people cannot distinguish peculiar fantasies from verifiable facts.

Economics as End

The value of economics-as-end is emphasized in periods of private interest, while economics-as-means is characteristic of periods of public purpose. During periods of private interest, regulation of the behavior of private-sector actors is relaxed, resulting in practices that can disadvantage or endanger the public and which may contribute to recession or depression. During periods of public purpose, measures are implemented that restrain abusive business practices that damage workers, consumers, and the environment. In government, economics-as-end is associated with public choice economics and principal-agent theory. It includes cost minimization, outsourcing, privatization, monitoring and incentive systems, quantification of performance assessment, and cross-sectoral networks that decentralize policymaking and governance.

The issue is not whether economic efficiency is important and essential to the functioning of the public sector, because it demonstrably is. The issue is that when it is considered the primary purpose of public action, it crowds out important aspects of the public interest that can be served by economics used as a means rather than an end. These include attention to constitutional governance and institutions, open and transparent government, social justice and fairness, and citizen participation in discourse and deliberation on matters of public policy (Box, Marshall, Reed, & Reed, 2001). As Larry Terry put it in a critique of the public management orientation, “Values such as fairness, justice, representation, or participation are not on the radar screen” (Terry, 1998, p. 198). This is a question of balance, as it is with the other four regressive-progressive value pairs.

Today the balance in national politics is shifting toward the regressive value of economics-as-end. In recent decades, shifts such as this have significantly affected public administration at all levels of government. Though the influence of New Public Management has been waning, it

would not be surprising if a new regressive era brings with it intensification of a calculative, cost-oriented focus in public policy and administration.

Great Inequality

It has become a commonplace notion that economic inequality has grown rapidly in recent decades. The distribution of wealth today appears much as it did during the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century, resulting in frequent use of the term “new Gilded Age.” Currently, “in the U.S., 75.4% of all wealth is owned by the richest 10% of the people” (Zuesse, 2014), making the United States the most unequal of all advanced economies. Globally, eight rich individuals have as much wealth as the bottom half of the entire world’s population (Mullany, 2017).

There is considerable disagreement about whether this is a problem or simply how the modern economy works. Inequality at this level may represent a threat to a stable, democratic society, or it may signal solid and sustained economic growth. Either way, actions taken in the public sector can influence the extent of inequality. During periods in which regressive values are emphasized, common policy initiatives include cutting taxes for the wealthy, weakening the safety net (healthcare, pensions, food assistance, etc.) for the elderly and the poor, and cutting or eliminating the estate tax, a tax that makes it more difficult to pass great wealth from one generation to another.

Overall, the effect of such policies is to slow or reverse measures taken during periods of progressive values, especially the New Deal and the Great Society. This agenda is central to the policy discussions in Washington, DC, as the new regressive era begins, so it is reasonable to expect that the growth in economic inequality will accelerate in the next few years.

Earth as Resource

The public sector’s role in recognizing the physical environment as a sustainable place of human habitation began during the Progressive Era. Prior to that, from the perspective of government, the environment was largely a resource for the extraction of profit. Theodore Roosevelt was passionate about the environment, and during his terms as president (1901–1909) he was instrumental in creating the Bureau of Forestry (later the U.S. Forest Service), 51 bird refuges, dozens of protected natural areas, including the Grand Canyon, and 150 national forests. As one would expect, there was strong political resistance to these actions from the resource extraction industries and their friends in Congress.

The modern environmental movement formed in the mid-twentieth century over concerns about air and water pollution, the impact of pesticides, loss of unspoiled lands, and failure to account for the environmental impacts of development. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the federal role in environmental protection grew dramatically with the passage of landmark legislation in areas including wilderness preservation, clean air and water, environmental impact assessment, and formation of the Environmental Protection Agency (Kovarik, n.d.). Taken as a whole, these measures moved the balance further toward the progressive view of Earth as a sustainable home. The balance shifted again toward the regressive end of the continuum in the 1980s with the Reagan administration’s relatively hostile view toward environmental protection.

The current administration is aggressively pursuing an anti-environment agenda that includes defunding portions of the Environmental Protection Agency, denying climate change, and weakening or reversing federal environmental measures and regulations, such as vehicle fuel economy standards. This regressive agenda will likely have important impacts on the nation; it remains to be seen how and in what ways it affects state and local policymaking and administration.

Many features of the emerging regressive era described above are familiar from the history of earlier periods, especially those relating to economics and maximization of private interest. In two thematic areas, though, this new era is somewhat different. First, the specific characteristics of aggressiveness now on display, though common enough in American history, are unusually pronounced. It is generally known that nationalism, racism, and xenophobia are on the rise in Western nations, but the suddenness of its emergence and the intensity of its expression in U.S. politics are surprising. Second, the reality-bending character of the shift toward belief and away from knowledge presents a serious challenge to democratic processes and institutions. If public affairs becomes purely a matter of spectacle, performance, and appearances in the service of power, the norms of constitutional governance and public service might well change into something quite different.

THE NEW REGRESSIVE ERA AS “FASCISM LIGHT”?

The concept of alternating periods of regressive and progressive values in society describes the characteristics of each period but does not offer a systematic comparison of these characteristics to known ideologies or historical movements. The value construct is not in itself about politics, it is designed as an empirical categorization of revealed values. It also does not address the question of the extent to which broad trends in society are shaped by, or reflected in, the value orientation of a particular national government administration. That said, people often directly associate presidential administrations with societal values, and the connections are difficult to ignore. Examples include the progressive approaches taken by Theodore Roosevelt in dealing with the excesses of business, Franklin Roosevelt in reshaping the role of the federal government in stabilizing the economy, and Lyndon Johnson in reducing poverty.

In speculating about the potential effects of the emerging regressive era on public administration, the candidacy and early months of the presidency of Donald Trump deserve special attention. The political orientation of the Trump “movement” can be fairly characterized as “ethnic nationalism.” It uses a form of populist anti-elite sentiment to gain public support, it appeals to fears of danger and cultural disintegration, it is nativist (meaning that it intends to protect citizens from immigrants), it favors right-wing anti-government policies, and in personal style it is aggressive, combative, and authoritarian. Donald Trump’s behavior and expressed views during the presidential campaign prompted commentators and scholars to question whether he represents a type of fascism emerging in American politics. Actions taken in the early part of his administration (this article was written four months after the inauguration) related to immigrants and refugees, the media, the judiciary, people who oppose his policies, and so on, contribute to the salience of this question. It should also be noted that constitutional, judicial, and political constraints have acted to limit or modify administration actions in some of these areas, and they can be expected to do so in the future.

Serious authors realize that the term “fascism” is too often used in a casual, facile way. Nevertheless, if it is applicable in the current situation, the recent turn toward regressive politics might be different in kind from those experienced in earlier eras. Robert Paxton is frequently cited as a foundational author in the study of fascism. He described seven “mobilizing passions” of fascism, including these three: “The belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action against the group’s enemies, internal as well as external . . . Dread of the group’s decadence under the corrosive effect of individualistic and cosmopolitan liberalism,” and “Authority of natural leaders (always male) throughout society, culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s destiny” (Paxton, 1998, p. 6).

Paxton does not think it would be appropriate to label the situation in the United States as fascism, but he recognizes the presence of disturbing parallels (Goodman, 2016). Like Paxton, most authors are wary of declaring the Trump phenomenon a full-blown example of fascism, for a variety of reasons. These include: economic and political conditions in the contemporary United States are quite distinct from those of Europe following World War I; there is not at this time widespread violence on the part of Trump supporters; Trump advocates individualism instead of collective obligation and discipline; and there is not a serious and immediate threat to the existing governmental system.

At the same time, it should be noted that many analyses were written before the public was aware of the Trump campaign’s connections with the “alt-right,” before his candidacy appeared to inspire instances of abuse and bullying directed toward minorities, before the character of his attitude toward women was fully revealed, before he made statements about the illegitimacy of the election process and jailing his opponent, and, most particularly, before he took office.

Donald Trump has used each of the three mobilizing passions described above, appealing to workers who feel slighted by the economic and political systems, blaming liberals, minorities, Muslims, and immigrants for their perceived plight, claiming that he alone can fix the nation’s problems, and carrying out personal attacks on those who oppose him. Exaggerated masculinity is a central feature of the Trump persona, and Paxton wrote, “The macho restoration of a threatened patriarchy comes close to being a universal fascist value” (Paxton, 1998, p. 21).

Perhaps especially telling, in an interview Paxton said of Trump:

He’s touched the nerve with his style, which has fascist overtones, encouraging violence, attacking the internal enemy and so forth, saying that the system is rotten and it needs an outsider to fix it, which is a fascist kind of appeal—make Germany great, make America great. (Goodman, 2016)

This style is on display during Trump’s favorite public events, his rallies. Paxton described a notable historical parallel with Trump:

He’s very good at sensing the deep feelings of a crowd and playing them. This is another thing that sounds like Mussolini. Mussolini used to stand on the balcony and have exchanges with the thousands of people assembled in the streets below, and they would chant back and forth. (Goodman, 2016)

Based on his experiences with fascism in 1970s Italy, Gianni Riotta argued that the Trump phenomenon is not fascism. He wrote of Trump:

He is not about to dissolve the Democratic Party and banish the Clintons, Obama, Noam Chomsky, Michael Moore and Jimmy Fallon to exile on Randall’s Island. Americans will not

goose-step down Broadway; no screaming *squadracia* of middle-aged Trump fans will occupy Grand Central; Amazon will not be nationalized as a “strategic state asset.” (Riotta, 2016)

Though Riotta does not regard Trumpism as fascist, he thinks that mobilization of the disaffected and the exaggerated fear of terrorists and immigrants could disrupt American and European societies, so that “witch-hunts, racism, repression, and state surveillance may plague a democracy without morphing it into a fascist dictatorship” (Riotta, 2016).

On the other end of an “is it fascism?” continuum, Richard Steigmann-Gall (2016) suggested that not all instances of fascism must exhibit every characteristic of other fascisms. He described features of Trump’s behavior, such as lack of compromise, intransigence, racial fears, and sociocultural resentment, noting that they are found in “fascism’s historical electorate” and in the ranks of core Trump supporters. Steigmann-Gall thinks it would be “missing the forest for the trees” to expect Donald Trump to exhibit all of Paxton’s “passions” (Steigmann-Gall, 2016).

This more flexible approach to fascism fits with the theme of a 1995 essay by the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco. Eco acknowledged that the Nazi version of fascism was unique, but he wrote that “the fascist game can be played in many forms, and the name of the game does not change” (Eco, 1995). Indeed, Eco claimed, “one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist” (Eco, 1995). Eco acknowledged that fascism is a fuzzy concept, but nevertheless thought it possible to describe features of a typical “Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism” (Eco, 1995).

Included in Eco’s list of features of Ur-Fascism are some that seem particularly relevant to this discussion. One is that the political base for a fascist movement is a frustrated middle class, “suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups.” Another is adherence to a traditional past and rejection of contemporary thought, so that “The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-Fascism can be defined as *irrationalism*” (Eco, 1995). Additionally, Eco identified common characteristics of fascism, such as a strong leader, machismo, opposition to parliamentary government, use of false, misleading language, and fear of outsiders.

A historical view of note is Sinclair Lewis’ book *It Can’t Happen Here*, published in 1935. Concerned about the rise of fascism in Europe, Lewis wrote a fictional account of how American politics could take a similar turn. In Lewis’s fictional America of the 1930s, the leader appealed to the nationwide “League of Forgotten Men,” and during his presidential campaign uniformed “marching groups” were assembled and called the “Minute Men.” During a speech to the Minute Men, the leader made an appeal that sounds eerily familiar:

To you and you only I look for help to make America a proud, rich land again. You have been scorned. They thought you were the “lower classes.” They wouldn’t give you jobs Help me—help me to help you! Stand fast! Anybody tries to block you—give the swine the point of your bayonet! (Lewis, 1935/2014, pp. 136–137)

The policies of this imaginary American fascist state are built upon religious and racial purity, a distinct role for women, and eliminating opposition. The party’s statement on religion begins by guaranteeing religious freedom, but immediately turns to listing exceptions, including atheists, agnostics, Jews who will not “swear allegiance” to the New Testament, and people who

refuse to take the Pledge to the Flag. None of these people would “be permitted to hold any public office or to practice as a teacher, professor, lawyer, judge, or as a physician” (Lewis, 1935/2014, pp. 61–62).

Black citizens are explicitly assigned an inferior role in Lewis’s imaginary society, as they would be prohibited from voting, holding public office, practicing law or medicine, or teaching in any class above the grade of grammar school, and all their income above \$10,000 per year would be taxed at 100% (Lewis, 1935/2014, p. 63). Except for those employed in nursing and in beauty parlors, all women with jobs would return to “their incomparably sacred duties” as homemakers and mothers of Citizens of the Commonwealth (p. 63). Anyone advocating communism, socialism, or anarchism, or refusing to serve in the military during war would be tried for treason; Congress would become a purely advisory body to the president, and the Supreme Court would have no authority to review actions of the president or Congress (pp. 63–64).

The reservations of those who are hesitant to use the word “fascism” in connection with current public affairs in the United States deserve to be recognized and given significant weight. It can be argued that a word so burdened with emotional meaning should be avoided unless it offers something important to understanding what is happening today and what may happen tomorrow. That said, the historical parallels and the potential for unanticipated and disturbing future developments may justify using the term in some contexts, exactly because of the contribution to greater understanding. Robert Kagan may have been prescient in expressing concern about what could occur when Donald Trump has access to the powers of the presidency. In May 2016, he wrote, “our democracy will be in danger in a way that it has not been before. It will be fascism American-style.” This American style of fascism may “deserve a name of its own,” but whatever it is called, Kagan thinks “it will constitute a threat to our democratic institutions” (Kagan, 2016).

Ultimately, it may be asking too much of Trumpism to expect it to exhibit a coherent program one could logically call fascist or even fascism light. It may instead be a performance, a dramatic display to rally public support for a traditional right-wing agenda, and thus an artifact of a “mediatized public sphere in which politics in the substantive sense is giving way to the commodification of politics” (Gordon, 2016). In this view, themes such as racism, xenophobia, and misogyny found in the Trump movement reflect existing characteristics of the culture rather than the unique psychology and leadership style of an individual and his followers. Whether this unsettling prospect is preferable to movement-specific labels such as “ethnic nationalism” or “fascism” is open to question. It suggests that this and future time periods in which regressive values are ascendant may exhibit characteristics associated with an especially disagreeable ideology.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW REGRESSIVE ERA FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

It is impossible to know with any certainty how the emerging regressive era will affect public administration practice and theory—much can happen during a presidential term. Institutional constraints of constitutional interpretation and checks and balances can moderate executive branch initiatives, politics can change the course of events on a daily basis and through congressional and presidential elections, and there is the possibility of impeachment. Nevertheless, the evidence of past value transitions suggests that the impacts of the new regressive era could

be significant. During the Progressive Era, New Deal, and Great Society periods, changes in the role of government in society were dramatic and lasting. At the organizational level, knowledge of organization behavior, management of functions, measurement of performance, budgeting techniques, and more began from the relatively crude baseline present when Woodrow Wilson penned his essay in favor of systematic management. In each of these periods, the societal environment encouraged and reinforced innovation.

Public administration scholarship has also responded to alternating regressive and progressive periods. The “New Public Administration” of the 1960s and 1970s was inspired by the turbulence in society during that time, an era in which powerful social forces demanded progressive change. In focusing on social equity, New Public Administration represented a divergence from more common themes of constitutionalism and management in public administration writing. It may be argued that scholarship in public administration since that time has increasingly turned toward themes of measurement and quantification in the service of economic efficiency, though social equity has also received considerable attention in the literature (Frederickson, 2010).

During periods in which the political environment is regressive or progressive, effects on public organizations and the practice of public administration can be mixed. For example, the political attitude toward “bureaucrats” was negative during the Reagan years of the 1980s and the privatization/contracting-out movement was based on an ideological preference for shrinking government. Nevertheless, much was learned about management practice during this time, suggesting that regressive periods can contribute usefully to professional knowledge. For another example, the Clinton years in the 1990s could be characterized as somewhat progressive in political orientation, but economic thought often crowded out other values through the vehicle of New Public Management. At the same time, this focus produced advances in management techniques, such as performance measurement.

In four editions of *The Case for Bureaucracy*, beginning in 1983, Charles Goodsell documented the effects of national politics on public agencies and public professionals. In *The New Case for Bureaucracy* (Goodsell, 2015), he described the buffeting that agencies experienced from anti-government legislative initiatives during the Obama administration. The intent of the executive branch in the Obama years was progressive, but the political environment was so polarized that the overall effect on public administration was mixed and complex.

Given the complexity of the interaction between politics and administration, predictions about the future should be made with awareness of their considerable limitations. That said, the emerging regressive era has the potential for an unambiguous value orientation and significant regressive effects on public administration. Generalizing about this is difficult, because the work of public administration occurs at the national, state, and local levels of government, in many colleges and universities, in agencies with a variety of functional purposes, and across a wide range of occupational specializations and individual policy and value preferences. In addition, the effects of a regressive era on public administration will not be felt equally across the field, but will have greater impact on some organizations and public professionals than on others, and no impact on some.

Budgetary cutbacks and political repression of professional speech are familiar impacts on public administration during regressive periods. For example, the Trump administration is hostile to the Environmental Protection Agency, which has been a favorite target of Republican

administrations since the Reagan years. Deep budget cuts have been proposed and career professionals have been prohibited from communicating with the public in certain ways (Shelbourne, 2017). It will not be surprising if, in the next few years, there are serious instances of political interference in administrative affairs and inappropriate actions taken against public professionals in the EPA and other federal agencies. As of this writing, President Trump has fired FBI director James Comey, generating concern about direct political meddling in the professional conduct of a major unit of the federal government. Neoconservative columnist David Frum wrote that because Donald Trump is not inclined to respect the constitutional order, we should be ready to “honor civil servants who are fired or forced to resign because they defied improper orders” (Frum, 2017, p. 59).

There will no doubt be effects of the new era on professional practice related to regressive values; aggressiveness and belief can be used in illustration. Aggressiveness may include actions that target immigrants, religious groups, people of color, women, and gays. As an example, if the Justice Department stops intervening in cities to push reform of police practices related to minorities, incidents of police violence and racial profiling could increase, as might excessive use of fines and warrants by local governments to extract revenue from minority populations (Blessett & Box, 2016). With little or no federal resistance, state efforts to make voting more difficult for people of color may be increasingly successful. Enforcement of laws protecting women and gays against abuse may weaken, and police behavior during public protests may become less tolerant.

Abuse of administrative authority in relation to travelers has already occurred during the Trump administration, when people with valid entry papers were detained in airports by officers of U.S. Customs and Border Protection during implementation of an immigrant travel ban. Some of them were denied food, and even sleep, until they signed a form relinquishing their right to enter the United States, after which they were deported. Some of the deportations occurred after federal agents were made aware of federal court orders prohibiting them from doing so (Stern, 2017).

Effects of the new regressive era related to belief could also be serious. Even before the recent presidential campaign made misinformation, conspiracy theories, and false claims an everyday occurrence, it was a commonplace notion that the public was politically polarized and skeptical about government, especially the federal government. Now, knowledge, rationality, and facts are tarnished concepts in public discourse. Belief, even when grounded in clearly nonfactual material from social media and right-wing and alt-right media figures, today allows people to feel comfortable in voicing views that would not have been heard so openly only a short time ago.

There is no reason to think this phenomenon will be confined to policy and administration at the national level. It may well reach down into, for example, discussion of the science curriculum at a local school board meeting, a state wildlife agency’s planning process for dealing with climate change, or debate in a city council meeting over implementation of a nondiscrimination policy. In these and other settings, public professionals could feel the effects of a diminishing sphere of knowledge-based public understanding of issues and practices.

Not all impacts on public administration need be negative or troublesome. Scholars may respond to conditions in this new era with ideas that inspire reevaluation of the role of public administration in society. They may also document and elaborate on useful management innovations that are generated either because of or despite conditions in the broader society.

As public professionals feel the effects, positive or negative, of policy shifts and organizational changes created by political leaders enacting regressive values, they may develop variations on processes and techniques that become lasting additions to the management toolkit. Supported by the work of public professionals, progressive policy innovation will continue in local areas, as it did in past regressive eras. In 2005, when the Bush administration was in denial on climate change, Mayor Greg Nickels of Seattle created the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, in which cities could commit to reducing carbon emissions. By 2007, 500 cities had joined the effort (United States Conference of Mayors, 2017).

Though regressive values will be dominant in national discourse in the immediate future, the history of historical transitions between periods of regressive and progressive values suggests that countervailing actions, events, and trends will build toward another transition. This was evident even at the beginning of the new regressive era. The Women's March of January 21, 2017, was a response to the Trump agenda. Its size was beyond expectations, apparently the largest demonstration in American history, with an estimated 4.2 million participants in more than 600 cities nationwide. There were also an estimated 300,000 participants in more than 200 cities in other countries (Frostenson, 2017). It seems that many people are acutely aware of the characteristics of the new regressive era and plan to be active in countering its effects.

CONCLUSION

The political environment in the United States has entered a new era, one that brings together themes from earlier periods in creating a societal context unlike any in recent decades. The right-leaning ethnic nationalism of the Trump administration strongly emphasizes regressive values, presenting a challenge to the public sector as a whole and to people who practice and study public administration. Echoes of the fascism of the first half of the twentieth century make the current setting disturbing for those who care about constitutionalism and the institutions of the American democratic state. Perhaps most disturbing, almost one half of the American electorate approves of the values in evidence in today's politics.

It is impossible to predict specifically how this new era will unfold, given the many institutional, legal, leadership, and political factors that can shape events. It seems likely there will be cutbacks and significant reorientation of policy at the federal level; these changes could include attacks on the professionalism and independence of career practitioners. Administrative action in areas such as law enforcement and immigration may show increasing evidence of actions that could be considered inhumane, unethical, or unconstitutional. The quality and effectiveness of discourse on public policy at all levels of government may be damaged by a decline in rationality and linkage to factual conditions in the real world.

On the positive side, innovation in policy and administration may occur, particularly at the local level, that somewhat counterbalances the regressive orientation of the federal government. Public administration scholarship could respond with useful new thinking on institutions, management capacity, and citizen involvement in policymaking, inspired by the regressive orientation of the administration in power.

In this article, a five-item model of paired regressive and progressive values is used to describe alternating periods of value emphasis in American society and to argue that the nation has entered a new regressive era. Like any model, its specific content is a matter of judgment.

Readers might choose different value pairs, but this version is helpful in assessing the possible effects of the political environment on public administration. Many of the emerging regressive features of the new era represent matters of changes in policy choices that are to be expected in political transitions. Examples include the extent to which economic efficiency is the primary goal of government policy and administration and the degree of regulatory constraint the public sector exerts on private commercial practices.

Some features of the emerging era go beyond expected changes in policy emphasis, presenting the possibility of destabilizing effects on the constitutional order. This seems especially evident in the aggressiveness of ethnic nationalism and the use of irrational belief in political dialogue. To be candid, a continuous stream of falsehoods, conspiracy theories, insults, and outright lies coming from people in positions of national authority makes it difficult to achieve public agreement on what is real. Without such agreement, deliberation and action on public issues becomes meaningless, a matter of showmanship and empty assertion. In this environment, the public can be forgiven for wondering whether government leaders are cleverly manipulative, delusional, or both.

On a broadcast of the *PBS NewsHour* in March 2017, commentator Mark Shields told a story about the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. President Kennedy sent Dean Acheson, former secretary of state, to personally brief French president Charles de Gaulle on unfolding events. Acheson offered to show de Gaulle the classified photographic evidence of the missiles. De Gaulle declined, saying it was not necessary because all he needed was the word of the president of the United States. Shields expressed doubt that today's world leaders would be willing to trust Donald Trump in this way during a crisis. Instead, Shields could "see no reason" that leaders would say about President Trump, "All I need is the word of the president of the United States" (*PBS NewsHour*, 2017). Indeed; to the extent that the phenomenon of belief over knowledge spreads through public affairs, it will be a serious challenge for public administration in the new regressive era.

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