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Comparative Analysis of Public Administration: The United States and Mexico

Introduction

Distinct historical, cultural, and societal expectations have shaped Public Administration in both the United States and Mexico. While both countries contain public administration as a means to facilitate governance, they differ significantly about the roles and expectations of public sector employees, their historical evolution of public administration, and the influence of culture and how it shaped their governance, respectively. This paper explores the aspects in a comparative framework to better understand public administration in both regions.

To begin, H. George Frederickson highlights that public administration “has always been the efficient, economical, and coordinated management of services,” and posits that the new public administration “adds social equity to the classic objectives and rationale” (Shafritz et al., 2016). Historically speaking, the founding fathers of the United States set up the highest law in the U.S. Constitution, which outlines the rights of the people and rules for how the country should run, however, there is no mention of how to implement the rules (Beaumaster, 2024). It was not until Woodrow Wilson's 1887 essay, *The Study of Administration*, that established public administration as a distinct academic discipline and laid the foundation for the modern field in the United States (Shafritz et al., 2016). Wilson argued that politics and administration should be distinct—elected officials make policy decisions, while trained administrators implement them efficiently. Wilson also advocated for efficiency, and organization in government operations. On the other hand, the Mexican Constitution of 1917, enacted by the Constituent Congress of Queretaro after the Mexican Revolution explicitly defines the duties, responsibilities and structure of public administration, shaping the role of government institutions at the federal, state, and municipal levels (González, L., 2018). Article 90 of the Mexican Constitution explicitly outlines the organization of the Federal Public Administration, categorizing it into centralized entities. Additionally, Article 115 grants municipalities autonomy, making them responsible for local public administration. Furthermore, the Constitution of 1917 also embeds social responsibility into public administration. Research by Pérez (2022) underscores how these articles shaped Mexico's bureaucratic institutions, aligning public administration with social equity and economic justice. The state's dominant approach reflects progressive ideals, making public administration a tool for social transformation rather than mere governance (Fernández, 2017).

Expectations about the role of public and/or nonprofit employees in society

In the United States, public and nonprofit employees play a crucial role in upholding the values of democracy, public service, and civic engagement. As facilitators of democracy, they ensure that government institutions function effectively, uphold the rule of law, and maintain public trust. Their role extends beyond merely implementing policies; they actively engage with communities, advocate for citizen needs, and contribute to the development of inclusive and participatory governance. The public administration system in the U.S. operates on the principles of meritocracy, meaning that hiring, promotions, and job performance evaluations are based on qualifications, experience, and demonstrated competencies rather than political affiliations or favoritism. This system, largely influenced by the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883,

ensures that public sector employees are professionals who adhere to ethical standards and efficiency-driven practices. The nonprofit sector plays a complementary and often indispensable role in policy implementation, social service delivery, and public advocacy. Nonprofit organizations frequently address gaps in government services, particularly in areas such as healthcare, education, and poverty.

Mexico's public administration has historically operated under a centralized governance model, where the federal government holds significant power over decision-making, resource distribution, and policy implementation. Unlike the decentralized and merit-based approach emphasized in the United States, Mexico's bureaucracy has traditionally been characterized by hierarchical structures and a strong executive branch, particularly during the Institutional Revolutionary Party era (1929–2000). Public employees have often been perceived not only as civil servants but also as representatives of state authority, responsible for enforcing government policies and maintaining political stability. This top-down approach has historically limited local autonomy and slowed the development of participatory governance at the municipal and state levels. Over the past few decades, significant reforms have been introduced to enhance transparency, reduce corruption, and improve bureaucratic efficiency.

Historical events that have shaped the environment of public administration

The historical development of public administration in the United States is deeply rooted in the nation's founding principles of democracy, federalism, and limited government. From its inception, the U.S. government was designed to balance power among federal, state, and local authorities, ensuring a system of checks and balances to prevent administrative overreach. However, as the country grew in complexity, so did the need for a more structured and professional public administration system to manage public affairs effectively. One of the most significant milestones in U.S. public administration was the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883. Before its enactment, the federal government operated under the spoils system, in which political loyalty determined government employment rather than merit or qualifications. This practice led to widespread corruption, inefficiency, and favoritism in public service appointments. The assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881, carried out by a disgruntled office seeker, served as a catalyst for reform. The Pendleton Act introduced merit-based hiring, requiring competitive exams for government positions and establishing the U.S. Civil Service Commission to oversee the process. This reform significantly reduced political patronage and laid the foundation for a professional, nonpartisan bureaucracy, which remains a core principle of U.S. public administration today. In the decades that followed, public administration in the U.S. continued to evolve, with subsequent reforms emphasizing accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.

Mexico's public administration system has been deeply influenced by its historical experiences of colonial rule, revolution, and centralized governance. These factors have shaped the country's bureaucratic structure, governance models, and institutional frameworks, setting Mexico on a distinct trajectory compared to other nations, such as the United States. During Spanish colonial rule (1521–1821), Mexico's administrative system was structured under a highly centralized and hierarchical model, with power concentrated in the hands of Spanish viceroys and colonial officials appointed by the Spanish Crown. The colonial government functioned through a rigid bureaucratic system, emphasizing control over local populations, resource extraction, and the enforcement of royal decrees. This system fostered a culture of top-down governance, patronage, and limited local autonomy, which continued to influence Mexico's public administration long after independence in 1821. The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) marked a turning point in the country's political and administrative development. The result was the Constitution of 1917, which established a stronger

role for the state in regulating the economy, redistributing land, and providing social welfare. This period saw the creation of institutions aimed at addressing economic disparity, labor rights, and social justice, including early forms of social security, public education, and agrarian reform programs.

Cultural features that have shaped the environment of public administration

In the United States, public administration is deeply rooted in cultural principles such as individualism, pragmatism, and a strong emphasis on the rule of law. These values shape the way government institutions function, how public servants carry out their duties, and how citizens engage with governance structures. The United States has a long tradition of individualism, which emphasizes personal responsibility, self-reliance, and limited government intervention. The U.S. public administration system is also highly pragmatic, focusing on problem-solving, innovation, and measurable outcomes. A defining characteristic of public administration in the United States is its commitment to the rule of law. This principle ensures that government officials and public servants are bound by clear legal frameworks, codes of conduct, and ethical guidelines, reducing the risk of arbitrary decision-making. There is a strong emphasis on checks and balances, ensuring that power is not concentrated in any single institution or individual.

Mexico's public administration is deeply shaped by cultural values that emphasize personal relationships, hierarchy, and collectivism. Unlike the United States system, which strongly emphasizes individualism and impersonal bureaucratic procedures, Mexico's governance structure reflects long-standing traditions of social interconnectedness, loyalty, and centralized authority. These cultural dimensions influence decision-making, governance effectiveness, and administrative challenges, shaping both the strengths and weaknesses of the public sector. One of the most defining cultural traits in Mexico's public administration is "personalismo" a concept that prioritizes personal relationships and trust over formal institutional processes. In practice, this means decision-making is often influenced by interpersonal connections, where who you know can be just as important as what you know.

This dynamic can be beneficial in local governance, where strong community ties and personal relationships facilitate cooperation between public administrators and citizens. However, it also creates challenges, as favoritism can undermine merit-based hiring and policy implementation. Unlike the individualistic culture of the United States, Mexico's public administration reflects a more collectivist orientation, where the well-being of the community or group is often prioritized over individual goals.

Conclusion

While the United States and Mexico share fundamental governance goals—such as promoting democracy, ensuring public service delivery, and maintaining institutional stability—their approaches to public administration are shaped by distinct historical trajectories, societal expectations, and cultural influences. These differences stem from the way each country has developed its political institutions, administrative systems, and mechanisms of public accountability over time. Understanding these differences provides valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and administrators seeking to enhance governance structures in both nations. By analyzing best practices, reform strategies, and institutional challenges, both the U.S. and Mexico can learn from each other's experiences to develop more responsive, accountable, and effective public administration systems.

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