

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez.

Lizzy: And I am Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich.

Lisa: And we are your hosts for Scholar Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month, we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers, without jargon.

Lizzy: I am very jealous of you and the conversation that you got to have because you spoke to one of my favorite experts that I really enjoy hearing their thoughts.

Lisa: I know you're a super fan and of course you're a super fan of all things having to do with government and public administration, and it doesn't sound as exciting as it actually is, but you know, we got to learn a lot about it.

Lizzy: I love things that don't sound exciting but are. A critical part of a conversation that if we understood better, if we used better, if it was more evident maybe in people's lives or public conversations, it could really unlock a higher level of living. I don't know if that's overstating what the possibilities for government, but for every policy problem I feel like that people feel, whether it's economics, social issues, the schools, healthcare, all these huge things that we have so many opinions on and that it could, you know, have plenty of room for improvement. At the heart of it, a lot of times is just how government works, how, like what doors are available for the public to walk through and get something from their government.

How different parts of government interact with each other, like whose job is actually doing what and, and how do they decide things together. And yeah, I understand why people don't naturally gravitate maybe towards talking about those things. But I think when you have experts who are really smart and particularly good at making those kinds of conversations that typically aren't accessible, more accessible, I think it's a real knowledge is power situation. I think people, uh, understand it and realize how it's important and maybe get a little bit more clued in to some of the things that are happening, especially in the government transitions that we're all looking forward to soon.

Lisa: Absolutely, and it's definitely important to make something that seems mundane into a hot topic so we can all understand it. And thankfully, we were able to do that because for this month's episode, I spoke with Donald Moynihan,

a professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and a leading expert in public administration and governance. He is the former president of the Association of Public Policy and Management and is frequently sought out by media outlets to comment on the upcoming Trump administration.

Here's our conversation.

Lisa: Hi, Professor Moynihan. Thanks for coming on No Jargon.

Don: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Lisa: Of course. I wanna start here with your background. What got you interested in studying government and bureaucracy?

Don: So I was always interested in this topic. I grew up in Ireland. I applied to college with an interest in public administration and my undergraduate degree was on that topic. So even from when I was relatively young, I was interested in the role that government played in society and ways in which government could be made to be more effective and responsive to citizens.

Lisa: Oh, absolutely. That's really interesting to hear. Let's talk a little bit about your background, especially as you frequently comment on the upcoming Trump administration. What does that mean? What do we have to look forward to? It seems that a big topic and a big change that might be coming our way is the idea of cutting government. Could you talk a little bit about why the idea of cutting government is popular and what it means for specific government programs?

Don: So I think people broadly are skeptical of government in the abstract. If you ask people what their opinion of government is, they're generally pretty negative. And then it makes sense if you ask them whether you think government should be smaller, people are generally supportive of that. If you ask them if they think their taxes should be lower, people are generally supportive of that. But that general story comes with a lot of specific caveats. If you ask people about particular public programs, they tend to be quite supportive of those programs. They're especially supportive of programs that they benefit from.

And so one way to think about this paradox, is that the least popular government agency, which is the IRS, is still in surveys more popular than government as a whole, right? So the IRS has about 41% of people that approve of it, whereas government as a whole has a slightly lower number. So I think there is a gap between people's, broad beliefs about government and this role in society than the actual specific services that people benefit from, which tends to be much more popular. In general, most of the areas of spending that tend to have relatively broad public support and mostly bipartisan support, there are some gaps here, but in general, if you look at things like military defense, Social Security, Medicare, there is very broad support for spending in those areas on a bipartisan basis. If you go down to assistance for the unemployed, there tends to be less support for that or overseas spending. But the areas where we spend most, at least at the federal level, tend to be the areas where there is lots of support, which is, basically our military and our social insurance and health programs.

Lisa: So the idea of cutting back on big government is mostly something having to do with the concern about cost, is what you're saying.

Don: I think it's mostly the inability of people to manage both their desire for lower taxes and maybe in a philosophical sense, a smaller government versus their actual lived experience of government, which is that they tend to like the services that they get and they don't want them to go away.

Lisa: You mentioned the IRS, so you have written that modernizing something like the IRS can actually save money without hurting services. Could you expand on what it means to modernize this part of the government?

Don: So the IRS performs one of our core functions, which is collecting revenue. You can't have a government without having money, and historically, the IRS has been underfunded from about 2010 to 2012. You start to see budget cuts to the IRS where it loses thousands of employees that don't get replaced. The size of its budget declines, there are fewer people to answer the phones if there's customer service issues. There are fewer people to process tax returns. There are also fewer auditors, which makes it less likely that people who are dodging taxes will be caught.

And so there's a very high return on investment for investing more in the IRS. it could be something like \$6 to \$10 for every dollar that's invested in additional spending. So when the IRS finally did get, some increased funding during the Biden administration, the argument for that was this would not just improve the quality of services that people receive, they'll get their taxes done more quickly.

They'll be more likely to be able to get someone on the phone. It'll also pay for itself because it'll be easier for the IRS to track down the people who are dodging their taxes. And in particular, it will be easier for the IRS to go after high-net-income tax dodgers who tend to be more sophisticated in creating fronts that would allow them to avoid paying their taxes. Without those additional resources, the IRS will both do less auditing and it will be more likely to direct its audit powers towards people with a lower and more simple income, which means it is less efficient at targeting higher-income tax dodgers.

Lisa: And you've also written quite a bit about other countries and maybe any lessons that we can take away from them as they have tried cost-cutting plans. Could you expand a bit maybe around how the UK can give us some of these lessons that we can take away from as far as cutting programs or slashing budgets?

Don: Yeah, certainly. So the United Kingdom, after the Great Recession, committed to this sort of ethos of austerity and a series of conservative governments sort of built their brand around cutting public services. This was pretty disastrous in the long run. If you look at the United Kingdom now, partly as a function of austerity, partly also because of Brexit, you see lower economic growth, reduced life expectancy, greater poverty and inequality. There are certain parts of the country where public services really were decimated. Libraries were closed; the expectation that police would actually turn up to local calls sort of disappeared. Eventually, you know, the public noticed that public services were disappearing.

I think the reason why the conservative government failed, there's a variety of reasons, but one is that people got tired of the politics of austerity. They kept hearing promises that things were gonna get better, but over a long period of time, that project of austerity has generally left the country worse off than it was before. And I think there is some research evidence to suggest that when you see the withdrawal of those public services, people respond by providing more political support to political movements.

So for example, there was a paper that was just published in the American Journal of Political Science that looked in the case of Italy when it went through its period of austerity. In localities where you saw local public services decline and disappear more intensely, you would subsequently see more support for far-right political candidates who would promise to fix these problems, but they would basically prey on the disillusionment that people felt when they felt like the government was no longer present and a viable, source of support in their community. If people don't see government in their lives, they don't see why

they should support government, they'll find other political parties who will offer answers to solve those problems, even if they don't actually deliver on those promises.

Lisa: Yeah, that makes sense. And you mentioned, project in the UK and it's hard not to think of 2025 and what we have to look forward to or pay attention to in the future. I wanna talk about the Department of Government Efficiency or DOGE 'cause it has very high-profile names attached to it, like Elon Musk, getting involved and it's getting a lot of attention. So what kind of influence could a group like this have on the way that government operates.

Don: So it's really difficult to tell at this point. There are a couple of things we do know about DOGE, the entity that Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy are running. So it's not really a department. The president cannot simply claim that the department exists. Only Congress can establish a department.

So it's, it's not really a department, it's not really inside government. And so there are some basic laws in place that if you're an outside federal advisory committee that you are supposed to follow. These include being transparent, having sort of balanced perspectives. And it doesn't appear to be that Musk and Ramaswamy are following those government rules, either.

So we don't really know what they're doing. There is some reporting that members of the committee are other billionaires that have political alliances with Elon Musk and Donald Trump, but it's incredibly vague. The other sort of, I think, troubling part of this, if you're not troubled by the sort of transparency part and the role of these outside billionaires in shaping government, is the pronouncements that they are making really feel like they are the result of just very little investigation into the nature of government problems.

And so, for example, Vivek Ramaswamy has talked about cutting half of federal employees and Elon Musk has talked about cutting \$2 trillion. If you look at the actual math and said what happens if you cut 75% of federal employees, that would amount to about \$270 billion in personnel costs. So that is obviously a fraction of the \$2 trillion that Musk claims he can save. So a very basic level, the sort of math doesn't really add up in the public statements that Musk and Ramaswamy are making. You can't engage in the scale of cuts that they're talking about without going after core social programs, health programs like Medicaid and Medicare or military spending, which again tend to be fairly popular.

What it does suggest to me is that, at its heart, there is probably some things they truly care about, and one is reducing regulation on large businesses. And the other is reducing taxes for people who are relatively wealthy. And in some respects, those are very traditional Republican goals. Like that you could have picked any Republican president from Nixon onwards, and if you said lower regulation and lower taxes, that would've matched pretty well with their agenda. So sorting out what is real versus what is hyperbole at this point is incredibly difficult.

Lisa: There was a lot of talk about these fake jobs in government as well when Musk was posting on X, previously known as Twitter. Could you maybe expand on whether there's any truth to having unnecessary bureaucracy within the United States government, or is there more of a misunderstanding about how the government actually works?

Don: So I think some basic facts here are really helpful. So, we have a bit over 2 million civilian federal employees. that's about the same as it was in the 1960s. So in just strict nominal terms, the number of employees hasn't really increased at the federal level. As a percentage of the population, it's actually gone down quite a bit. So it's the same number of employees, but they're doing a lot more and they're serving a much bigger population than they used to in the past. So the idea that we're overrun with federal bureaucrats doesn't make a lot of sense from that perspective.

Musk, as you mentioned, tweeted about one individual employee that he had seen a tweet about, that person saying so many fake jobs. And in this case, you know, this was someone who was working for the government on climate diversification. It's not really clear if Musk knew what he was talking about there. There's some suspicion that he heard diverse and he associated that with diversity and that's why he went after this individual. But the individual in question works for the US International Finance Corporation. She has degrees from MIT and Oxford. She works on sort of how do you diversify climate to deal with climate change. So how do you build more robust infrastructure and more robust crops to deal with climate change.

Part of what her office does is trying to expand number of suppliers of battery metals that electric vehicle companies like Tesla use. And so I think once you actually sort of poke into the details of the individuals or the broad categories of jobs that Musk is so angry about you realize, oh, actually these seem like pretty important jobs and it's maybe a good thing that the federal government has someone with degrees from Oxford and MIT trying to think about how to make the economy more robust in the face of climate change in in the future. That's

sort of a classic public goods thing that the private sector is not necessarily gonna do. And so I think it exemplifies a little bit of the lack of knowledge that Musk brings to the table as someone who is the head of this department of government efficiency.

Lisa: Yeah, and it seems like Musk's views are shared amongst people who either are followers of his or just a large part of the United States. So if people are skeptical about government and think it's bloated or inefficient, what is one thing you would say to them to help them see it in a different light?

Don: So I think some of the facts I mentioned before, government isn't really larger in terms of employees than it was in the past. The most expensive programs that it spends money on tend to be ones that people support, like the military, Veterans Affairs, Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare. And so the places where you might think about cutting, like, so people always wanna cut foreign aid. They're a relatively small part of the overall budget, and there's usually a pretty good rationale for why we spend money on foreign aid, which is that it's cheaper to engage in diplomacy than it is to engage in war. And so it's a more efficient way of exercising American influence across the world.

Lisa: I wanna talk a little bit about another big idea that is being floated around as far as something to look forward to in 2025, and it is bringing back Schedule F, the executive order Trump issued in 2020, which would let the president fire a lot of federal employees and replace them with political appointees. Could you talk a little bit about how that would work and maybe how it's worked in the past and how it's going to change the way government works?

Don: Sure, and for my money, this is maybe the biggest change in how the civil service system in America is gonna function since its creation. So, to roll the tape back to the 1880s, we established a civil service system. We've had that in place since then and it works pretty well. What this means is that most federal government employees cannot be fired for political reasons. They have to be fired for cause. That is to say, they've done something wrong, and some people think that makes it too hard to fire people. But there is a very good reason why we try to have some sort of firewall between personnel decisions and political favoritism, which is that we generally think more politicized bureaucracy is less effective.

And there is a good deal of research evidence for that, there's a lot of evidence that as governments become more politicized and politicized their civil service systems, they become less attractive for employees. They become less effective at doing their jobs. It's also fairly unpopular, so there have been surveys done by

the Partnership for Public Service that find that nine out of 10 people vote Republicans and Democrats say they prefer a non-partisan civil service versus a more politicized version of government. What happened at the end of Trump's first administration is that he became obsessed about loyalty, and it was loyalty from his own political appointees, but also from career civil servants that he in part blamed for his first impeachment. They were some of the few people who were willing to testify to Congress about his actions that led to that impeachment.

Schedule F was a proposal that was originally written by a staffer who joined the administration from the Heritage Foundation. And it basically said there is language and statute that says the president can take anyone who is holding a policy advisory role and turn them into political appointees. And I think it's important to understand that the intent of that language was never to create this massive cadre of political appointees. I think the intent was probably just to reflect that political appointees had these policy advisory roles.

But currently we have about 4,000 political appointees. Schedule F would allow the president to identify any career civil servant, reclassify them as a political appointee, and in doing so, remove their job protections, which means he could then fire them. So that moves us from a situation where we have about 4,000 political appointees to one where we potentially could have tens of thousands, 50,000 has been the most frequently cited number. It moves us into a new situation where civil servants can be involuntarily turned into political appointees, even though they don't want to be.

Trump did this at the end of his first administration, but he ran out of time to implement it. President Biden reversed the executive order that created Schedule F and Schedule F is the title of this type of political appointment. He also issued a rule that would make it more difficult for Trump to bring it back. But there's no doubt that Trump is very serious about bringing Schedule F back.

And certainly I think within six months he would have probably overturned that rule that the Biden administration created, and would use it to govern. And I think the central motivation here is that Trump really does have this deep antagonism towards the career bureaucracy and views Schedule F as sort of a hammer to force him to be loyal to him in the way that he believes they simply weren't in his first administration.

Lisa: Well, thank you for expanding on that. And um, given that we are talking about 2025 and this upcoming administration, are there any important takeaways from all that we know about how the government works currently,

the changes that are being proposed that you hope policymakers will keep in mind?

Don: We try to get some sort of insights into how this would work by looking either at other countries or American history. The research on this is fairly one-sided, which is that as you politicize systems, they just tend to become less effective. And that's for a variety of reasons. One is that politicization also leads to cronyism and corruption. So more resources get directed towards the president's supporters in less efficient ways, it leads to less transparency. So, more politicized systems tend to not be responsive to outside requests for information, for example, public requests for help for specific constituent services. And they also tend to be less effective in terms of performance.

And so one historical example is there was a paper that recently came out, the American Economic Review, that looked at the introduction of civil service systems in America and found that it improved the quality of post office service delivery, right? And so it was an incredibly detailed study that sort of pulled together amazing data from the 1880s and the 1890s to demonstrate this thing that I think most people who study government sort of already intuitively know, a more professional system, public services work better. One of the things that was really striking about that piece is that it looked, it tried to understand the mechanisms by which this performance improvement occurred. And the basic takeaway was that the civil service system introduced stability among personnel. And so you didn't have people being moved in and out of the bureaucracy every two years or every four years, and that allowed them to become better at their job. It allowed them to join the public sector with some degree of confidence that they were in it for the long haul and that they could sort of invest in becoming better at the core tasks that they were being asked to perform.

Lisa: Well, thank you so much for sharing that with us and for giving us some of your insights based on your expertise. We really appreciate you being with us here today.

Don: Thank you. My pleasure.

Lisa: And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Moynihan's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/no-jargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholar Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policymakers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy. The producers of our show are Wendy Chow and Dominic Doemer. Our audio engineer is Peter Linnane.

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