Public administration scholars have long been fascinated by the ebb and flow of merit-based human resource management (HRM) systems in the public sector and their relationships to our democratic institutions. Robert J. McGrath’s article “The Rise and Fall of Radical Civil Service Reform in the U.S. States” advances an analysis of political and institutional dynamics that increase or decrease the probability of states adopting “radical civil service reform” (i.e., the diminution of protections for classified civil service employees). Using previous research findings concerning the continued advent of radical civil service reform since the landmark 1996 changes in Georgia, he tests various ideas about the impact of such drivers as divided government, strong activist governors, ideology, and economic health.

As a practitioner who lived through and even contributed at the federal level to alterations (and attempted alterations) of civil service HRM systems, including those elements that provide employee protections—which McGrath and others label as “merit”—I found several themes and characterizations in this research rather troubling, if not misguided. Simply put, McGrath and many of his predecessors seem to conflate HRM program decentralization and the imposition of at-will employment status. A key variable in the model McGrath uses is “whether a state had adopted radical civil service reform (as indicated by a significant decentralization of their HR system).” He notes that other researchers have identified “decentralization as an important underlying dimension of reform away from merit protection for civil servants.” Many civil
service reform efforts have indeed pursued changes to both employee protections and HRM systems for hiring, retention, pay, and so on. However, to equate decentralization with transitioning away from merit applies an overly narrow conceptualization of merit and invites a mistaken inference that decentralization and merit are inimical.

It has been said that the keystone of the merit system is safeguarding career personnel from political interference. However, using “merit” as though it connotes only employee protections robs it of its power for strengthening effective public management. The cursory histories provided in this and similar research tend to brush over the impact of requiring civil service employees to meet qualification standards. That concern for valuing competence led to the merit system requirements established for all of the states in the Social Security Act Amendments of 1939. The federal office responsible for helping states build their merit systems provided this view of merit in a December 1943 newsletter:

> Among the basic principles underlying sound merit-system administration are the following concepts: that all persons who can qualify for any class of position shall have an opportunity to compete, so that the best qualified may be appointed; that after an established trial period in the positions, those whose performance has been satisfactory shall have reasonable assurance of being retained, with opportunities for individual development and for promotion on the basis of quality of performance; and that the compensation plan shall be based on the general principle of equal pay for equal work, with an equitable entrance salary, an equitable maximum, and appropriate intervening steps to compensate for increased value resulting from long service and superior performance. Equality of treatment for all who believe they can qualify, through the impartial application of standards designed to fulfill these objectives, is the essence of a modern merit-system program.

The closest thing to employee protection conveyed therein is the “reasonable assurance of being retained on the basis of satisfactory performance.” Beyond that, with a few exceptions noted later, this early expression of merit system principles is broad enough to resonate today and to encompass multiple program configurations even within the same agency and certainly across agencies.

The drive for HRM decentralization has been a natural and inevitable consequence of major shifts that have had little to do with political or institutional issues. In the second half of the twentieth century, the rapid evolution of technology led to dramatic changes in the composition of America’s workforce and the design of work processes (for both public and private employers). In the public sector, the armies of clerks were gone, but the centralized HRM policies and practices that had kept their ranks staffed, trained, and orderly remained in place. In the wake of these changes, some agency-specific differences in policies for employment, compensation, and employee performance management proved critical for managing a qualified, professionalized civil service comprising higher-level jobs. Furthermore, changing public expectations for service delivery led to a reorientation of public program management’s focus from process to results. In pursuit of the latter, centralized HRM systems were proving less effective and more frustrating. Removing positions from the “classified” (i.e., protected) ranks was often pursued as much to gain access to hiring processes and pay schemes that better matched labor markets and work design as to make it easier to fire the people you had spent resources recruiting and training.

The 1943-era merit system principles—as well as those codified for the states in 1970 and the federal government in 1978—do occasionally chafe against twenty-first-century realities. For example, whereas posting a 1943 vacancy announcement in five local post offices may have satisfactorily offered “all . . . an opportunity to compete,” today’s Internet expands that audience to the cosmos, with sometimes impractical results. Likewise, whether “increased value” is a direct result of long service may be questionable in some work settings.

The nexus between eliminating employee protections and achieving system decentralization lies in the political realities of achieving civil service reform. Garnering political and public support for civil service legislation is always challenging. The political salability of making it easier to remove deadwood from the civil service rolls is undisputed. That political rhetoric netted President Jimmy Carter his 1978 Civil Service Reform Act. In the decades since, shifting to at-will employment in the states may have been an effective political means to the end of gaining an opportunity to adapt HRM programs to changing agency needs. However, adjusting those protections need not and should not forsake merit’s other broad benefits.

Future research into “radical civil service reform” would do well to use more meticulous language and operationalizations. “Merit” is—and should continue to be—alive and well.