Knowing personal job satisfaction is sublime. Its complexity rests on factors such as human emotion and mood, which seem to change for many individuals just as the seasons of the year. Simply stated, understanding job satisfaction is an elusive concept. Sometimes we can sense when someone else is experiencing job satisfaction; alas, we have difficulty measuring it. Enter three talented researchers—Vurain Tabvuma, Hong T. M. Bui, and Fabian Homberg—who have taken bold steps in shedding light on what continues to be a mysterious yet monumentally important topic: public sector job satisfaction.

Of course, there are complicated theories and modeling techniques that attempt to measure job satisfaction, such as value congruence modeling, theory of work adjustment, set point theory, adaptation theory, and work–life balance determinations that are used to underpin job satisfaction understanding. The conundrum of seizing factors that influence job satisfaction, and, by extension, worker productivity, remain just out of reach for those toiling in public offices and government substructures. Yet Tabvuma, Bui, and Homberg take a stab at uncovering what some may think is intuitive but is actually calculated.

The authors make a careful assessment of potential weaknesses concerning their research on job satisfaction, namely, a survey database sourced exclusively from the United Kingdom, self-reported responses, selection bias, and only annualized collection methods. The research is compelling, however, especially in light of similar contextual factors across countries. As such, the analysis could be applied to the United States as well.

The United States is currently operating with a divisive government combined with intense partisanship. In these instances, maybe it is political leaders who influence the elements of public sector job satisfaction. Tabvuma, Bui, and Homberg apparently would think otherwise, and even in the current U.S. political environment, I agree. However, as mentioned in graduate courses across the United States, the answer truly “depends.” It is contingent on the specific vocation of public service. For example, if a person’s job or agency is highly dependent on funding that requires partisan support (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency or the Department of Housing and Urban Development), it is not unreasonable to think that an adversarial partisan political leader’s decisions might spoil an individual’s job satisfaction.

An interesting example of the impact that political change has on public service job satisfaction is the U.S. military. The transformation of military service during the past 12 years provides a fruitful place to look. Early in the George W. Bush administration (2001–02), the Department of Defense (led by Donald Rumsfeld) was forced to seek innovative approaches to the business of national defense. After 9/11, the political winds shifted toward a footing of war—a war without the typical front-end diplomacy, robust coalition support, and clearly defined end states. Political change surely affected job satisfaction in that circumstance; however, it depended on specific vocations, employee purpose, and duty of the public service.

Another example might be found in the U.S. intelligence community’s recent operating environment, termed the “post-Snowden era.” When political powers alter the tactics, techniques, and procedures normally used by public service employees, their job satisfaction can be influenced. Think of the typical National Security Agency employee who was one day perceived as a national treasure and an asset, only to be thought of as a freedom-encroaching “big brother” enabler the next. The impact on job satisfaction is obvious—and that impact is inextricably connected to the political leadership and its decisions.

Finally, the recent U.S. conservative trend toward viewing government (and, by extension, public service) as part of the “problem” could influence how one views public service. As modern conservative political
thought presents, people are placed in two categories: “makers” or “takers.” If an influential political party views public service employees as “takers,” then societal second-guessing and criticality will certainly lead to changing perceptions of job satisfaction.

The deepest roots of public sector job satisfaction may be in the concept of adaptability. Can job satisfaction be as simple as a public servant’s ability to adapt? Clearly, organizational change in its many forms can create instability and decreased job satisfaction in the short term (as explained by Tabvuma, Bui, and Homberg), depending on an employee’s resilience and ability to adapt to new operational environments. Successful adaptation may permit job satisfaction rather than merely serving as the effect of political change. Admittedly, this is a Darwinist view of public sector job satisfaction dynamics; it is also a step in understanding that adaptation may be satisfaction itself.

The researchers have challenged conventional theories of public sector job satisfaction. The idea that political leaders have only a short-term impact on public sector job satisfaction is fascinating. The research also shows that genders react differently to public sector leadership change and exogenously driven dynamics. Finally, the impact of workplace reorganization on job satisfaction, spurred by political leadership changes, should be proactively managed to lessen declining job satisfaction.

We have all experienced the feeling of “job satisfaction” and likely thought it sublime, just as job dissatisfaction has left us hollow and wondering whether our services matter. As a result, understanding job satisfaction in the public sector is important, and Tabvuma, Bui, and Homberg have tapped into a potential fountainhead of research that allows for better understanding of its mysteries. We should all join the conversation and climb on the shoulders of these leading scholars. A public service workforce that is more satisfied with their jobs will likely lead to greater productivity and better workplace behaviors.