The Politics of Bureaucracy: A Continuing Saga

B. Guy Peters[1]

The interaction of politicians and bureaucrats remains a crucial aspect for governance. Although these interactions have existed in some form or another for as long as there has been government, they have continued to evolve and to respond to changing circumstances in the political and policymaking environment. As well as evolving over time, these relationships differ across countries and can provide important comparative insights into the ways in which governance is carried out in different national settings.

Despite the numerous changes in the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats a number of questions remain central to understanding their interactions. These are questions relevant for both the real world of governance and the academic study of the public sector. We still need to understand how political leadership works with administrative experience and expertise to provide governance. We still need to understand how advice and evidence is used when making policy. And perhaps most importantly we still need to understand how to hold both politicians and bureaucrats to account for their actions.

Just as the reality of the interactions between politicians and administrators has been changing, so too have the approaches used by academics. The traditional, formal-legal conception was that politicians made policy and bureaucrats carried it out, and there was an unbridgeable gulf between the sets of actors. Changing theoretical perspectives and empirical research demonstrated that these actors were not separated in an extreme manner, and indeed there were many individuals who played the role of hybrids and "amphibians" (Aberbach et al. 1981). And likewise there are a variety of patterns of interaction that may occur between the two sets of actors, which may be more or less functional for providing governance (Peters 1987), and there may also be implicit or explicit bargains among the actors (Hood and Lodge 2006).

Given this long history of interaction between politicians and bureaucrats, and the academic study of those interactions, is there anything new to say? The

---

1   University of Pittsburgh, USA.

answer to that question is to some extent equivocal, and much of what has gone on in the past continues to the present and will probably continue to the future. But I would still tend to answer the question in the affirmative, arguing that a number of factors involved in these interactions have indeed changed, and in some cases changed significantly. In addition, the academic study of these relationships continues to add new ideas and methodologies for understanding better how these actors interact to produce governance.

Political change driving administrative changes

Much of the change that is occurring in the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats is being driven by change in the political environment. The stable patterns of interactions among these members of the "core executive" of government have been upset by several related changes in the way in which politicians tend to regard their civil servants. While, as noted above, the traditional conception of a stark separation of the competencies and the careers of civil servants and politicians was becoming more a useful myth for both parties, the spread of populism and other forms of "democratic backsliding" have altered these relationships (Bauer et al. forthcoming).

In the contemporary populist era of governance there tends to be a stark separation between political leaders and their civil servants. The assumption by many, if not most of those political leaders, is that the bureaucrats are members of the "Deep State" that seeks to maintain its own power in the face of the will of "the people". That will of the people is assumed to be manifested through elected populist politicians. While even when there were conflicts between politicians and bureaucrats in previous decades, they were still "different players on the same team". However, today politicians and bureaucrats are often on different teams with different goals.

Alternatives for Dealing with the Civil Service

At the same time that political leaders want to reduce the power of the bureaucracy over governance, they are faced with the reality that they may need the skills of the permanent members of the executive branch in order to govern effectively. Despite that need for expertise, the political leaders in some countries, including some in the Visegrád Four countries, have sidelined their civil servants in favor of political appointees and cronies (Peters 2020). The same has been true in the United States, Brazil and to a lesser extent in some West European countries. The civil servants may remain in place but if so are largely ignored by the political leaders.

In some instances political leaders have attempted to coopt the members of the bureaucracy into being part of the populist regime. Members of the civil service have spent their careers working to provide governance to their society, and may not want to cease performing those tasks because of the election of a political leader

with whom they do not agree. They also feel they have a responsibility to provide governance in the public interest. These civil servants may therefore be willing to work with the populist government, at least up to a point. There may be points beyond which civil servants' loyalty to country and the constitution must take precedence, but until those points are reached they will work with the government.

In still other situations civil servants have been willing to create competition with the political class and their appointees for control over policy. That competition between politicians and bureaucrats may not be overt, but will still be important for determining the shape of policies to be adopted by government, as well as the style of governing. Given that many populist governments have limited experience in the public sector, the civil service may have a good chance of being effective in that competition.[2]

Although the growth of populist style governance is a highly visible aspect of change in the environment of the civil service, there has been a general increase in the polarization of political parties and governance more generally. One manifestation of this has been the "presidentialization" of parliamentary political systems. Prime ministers have tended to draw control over government to themselves, even from their ministerial colleagues (Poguntke and Webb 2007; Savoie 2008), demanding greater loyalty from public servants in the process. The same process has affected the individual ministers who also want control over their civil servants, as opposed to "frank and fearless advice".

Both the growing power of populist movements and the general increase of political polarization within government and society have been contributing to an increased level of politicization of civil servants and an increased use of patronage. The concept of a neutral, expert civil service is now less acceptable to political leaders, and a variety of methods are being used to reduce the autonomy and independence of the civil service to ensure the loyalty of civil servants, even in countries with long histories of civil-service independence.

The emphasis on political loyalty and adherence to the policy ideas of the government of the day is especially interesting in an era of (presumably) "evidence-based policymaking" (Cairney 2016). The increased availability of evidence about policy both within individual countries and across countries should make the contemporary period one of applying expertise to solve policy problems. But expertise has become politicized, and only those experts who support the policy ideas of the incumbent government are likely to have any influence. Rather than policy being evidence-based, evidence is being policy- (and politically) based, and policy choices may be more likely to reflect ideology than to reflect available empirical evidence.

---

2   The vying for the primary role in defining policy toward COVID-19 between the Trump White House and various experts from the National Institutes of Health and the Center for Disease Control serves as an example of this competition.

Paradoxes of contemporary public administration

We often expect developments in the public sector to occur in a predictable and linear manner. That expectation is often dashed by reality, and contrary and conflicting developments may occur, even in well-organized political systems. These conflicting or paradoxical developments are most likely to occur at times, such as that of the rising influence of populist politics, when there is a serious external shock to the governance system. The above discussion of evidence-based policymaking is one of several paradoxes that appear to arise in contemporary public administration. These paradoxes are more apparent in some countries than in others, but they are nonetheless real manifestations of changes in the ways in which governance is being conducted. The first paradox then is that expertise is more readily available than in the past, and more democratized, but there is less demand for its use. Political leaders are very happy to use their intuition, or to take advice that confirms their own ideological perspective, rather than to attempt to use the advice that is readily available.[3]

A second and related paradox in contemporary public administration is that the attempts of political leaders, many with little experience in the public sector, to exert control over their public bureaucracies is likely to engender a good deal of conflict within public organizations. But those same political leaders are often intolerant of conflict and any questioning of their own ideas. The assumption is that the internal opposition will reflect an attempt of the "deep state" to maintain its control over policy, or at a minimum an attempt of the civil service to maintain a comfortable status quo.

A third and perhaps less obvious paradox is that while individual countries and the world are confronted with a host of wicked problems – notably climate change – the responses from governments may be very tame. Due to the relative lack of preparation for governing of populist governments, and their unwillingness to use the expertise available within the civil service, developing forceful and creative solutions will be difficult. This is all the more so given that any real solutions to problems such as climate change will involve upsetting existing patterns of life for "the people" who are the presumed beneficiaries of populist governments.

Studying the relationship of bureaucrats and politicians

While many of the substantive questions about politicians and bureaucrats remain unchanged, or largely unchanged, the development of the social sciences is providing us alternative ways of investigating these relationships. And we may want

---

3   In the academic community, the increasing study of policy advice (see Pelgrims 2005) also stands in contrast with the declining use of that advice in many countries – including the advanced democracies.

to think about reviving some older methodologies for examining how these two crucial sets of actors interact in the process of governance. Several of the articles contained in this special issue demonstrate how far we have come in collecting information about the individuals occupying positions in public bureaucracies and the structures of these bureaucracies, but we do not yet know enough about the actual interactions of politicians and bureaucrats.

Much of what we know about the behavior of civil servants and politicians in policymaking has been gleaned from interview studies. Beginning with Aberbach et al. (1981; see also Lee and Raadschelders 2008) there is a rich body of evidence about what these actors think about their roles in governing and their attitudes toward one another. This cognitive and evaluative information provides important insights into the words of these actors, but does not tell us much about what choices they may actually make as they perform their tasks.

One way to begin understanding the behavior of the actors in these interactions is through experiments, whether survey or laboratory (see Christensen and Opstrup 2018). For example, I have mentioned the populist surge in many countries and its possible influence on the interactions of politicians and bureaucrats. But how much are civil servants willing to maintain their assumed behaviors of following the directives of the political leadership when that leadership may be advocating programs and practices that undermine democracy?

If we utilize Brehm and Gates' (2002) argument that bureaucrats have three options in their jobs – working, shirking and sabotage – then those bureaucrats may choose not to comply with orders that they consider undemocratic or perhaps illegal. To assess the willingness of bureaucrats to shirk or sabotage Guedes-Neto and Peters (forthcoming) have conducted survey experiments in Brazil, providing respondents different scenarios and a list experiment.[4] The general finding is that bureaucrats appear willing to abandon the Weberian or Wilsonian mode of behavior if they consider the behavior of political leaders to be fundamental illegal or to be undermining democracy.

Of course, the findings of a survey experiment do not mean that these public administrators would behave this way when faced with a real choice on the job. But we have some inklings of the possibilities of such behavior. In addition, we could develop laboratory experiments that examined behaviors of this sort or examine other aspects of the interactions of politicians and bureaucrats (Blom-Hansen et al. 2015). These could be used to test a variety of hypotheses about the role of party, the importance of expert information, and other aspects of behavior involving these two sets of actors.

---

4   Similar research on the willingness of civil servants to shirk or sabotage is now being done with public administrators in the United States.

A second methodological approach that could bear fruit for the understanding of relationships between public servants and politicians is the use of Q methodology, and other mechanisms for identifying cognitive structures (Brown 1996). The basic idea of Q is to have respondents sort a series of statements about a subject based on their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. If designed well there will be few statements with which a respondent will agree or disagree strongly, and a larger number about which they are neutral or almost neutral. These sortings of statements by participants are used to identify their underlying thoughts about the topic in question.

To some extent Q methodology gives information similar to that from interview-based studies, such as Aberbach et al. (1981), but also goes somewhat further in identifying the underlying orientations of the actors toward their tasks, and potentially toward one another (see Jeffares and Skelcher 2011). In addition, one of the purposes of Q methodology is to find dimensions of agreement among participants in the analysis. If this can be done for politicians and bureaucrats then we may understand better the foundations for conflict and cooperation between these actors.

Finally, although we do have a large amount of survey evidence about the ways in which civil servants and politicians interact, and we have a good deal of anecdotal evidence from memoirs and interviews of the actors (usually after their retirement) we have little direct observation of the interactions. In particular, it would be useful to examine the ways in which dyads of one civil servant and one politician work together. This direct interaction of political power and bureaucratic expertise is perhaps the most important nexus in governing.[5] There are a number of explicit and implicit hypotheses about those interactions, and it would be useful to test some of those hypotheses more directly than has been done in the past. But given that any "sample" of respondents would be largely self-selected, the ability to make any generalizations about how politicians and bureaucrats interact will be limited.

Gaining access to be able to do this type of research is, of course, extremely difficult. That said, there are good examples of research on public administration and political science where the researcher did have that sort of access. Perhaps the most famous is Robert Dahl's study of governing New Haven (Dahl 1961), but Herbert Kaufman (1981) also observed the ways in which bureau heads in Washington did their jobs on a daily basis. Even if direct access is impossible, other methods such as diaries and frequent interviews may be adequate surrogate methods. I do not want to minimize the difficulties of this type of research, especially in an era in which political leaders appear to distrust both their civil servants and academics, but the pay-offs would be immense were it to be tried.

---

5   For some governments the political leader may depend more on an entourage of officials rather than a single one, but the logic of mapping these relationships remains the same (see Eymeri-Douzans et al. 2015).

Conclusions

Both the reality of the politics of bureaucracy and the study of that reality represent both continuity and change. While the same might be said of many aspects of governance, the simultaneous presence of stable issues and changing circumstances may be especially apparent when studying how bureaucrats and politicians interact in the process of governance. This short paper has focused more on the changes and the importance of political context for defining what occurs in governance in the core executives of governments.

Although many of the questions remain the same, we can consider potentially more powerful ways of studying the politics of bureaucracy. Much of the emphasis in public administration and the other social sciences over the past several decades has been on quantitative methods, and that research has certainly helped understand patterns of recruitment and relationships better. But there are also qualitative methods that can not only demonstrate patterns of relationships among variables but also provide more insight into the meaning of those patterns. Despite the efforts of many scholars in advancing this area of research, there remains a great deal to learn about how bureaucrats and politicians play their political and policy games.

References

Aberbach, J. D., R. D. Putnam and B. A. Rockman. 1981. *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bauer, M. W., B. G. Peters, J. Pierre, K. Yesilkagit and S. Becker. 2021. *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blom-Hansen, J., R. Morton and S. Serritzlew. 2015. "Experiments in Public Management Research." *International Public Management Journal* 18, 151–170.

Brehm, J. and S. Gates. 2002. *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public*. 4th edn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Brown, S. R. 1996. "Q Methodology and Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 6, 561–567.

Cairney, P. 2016. *The Politics of Evidence-Based Policymaking*. London: Macmillan.

Christensen, J. G. and N. Opstrup. 2018. "Bureaucratic Dilemmas: Civil Servants between Political Responsiveness and Normative Constraints." *Governance* 31, 481–498.

Dahl, R. A. 1961. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eymeri-Douzans, J.-M., X. Bioy and S. Mouton. 2015. *Le règne des entourages: Cabinets et conseillers de l'executif.* Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.

Guedes-Neto, J. and B. G. Peters. 2021. "Working, Shirking or Sabotage in Times of Democratic Backsliding: An Experimental Study in Brazil." In M. W. Bauer, B. G. Peters, J. Pierre, K. Yesilkagit and S. Becker (eds). *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hood, C. and M. Lodge. 2006. *The Politics of Public Service Bargains: Reward, Competency, Loyalty and Blame.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jeffares, S. and C. Skelcher. 2011. "Democratic Subjectivities in Network Governance: A Q Methodology Study of English and Dutch Public Managers." *Public Administration, 89*(4), pp. 1253–1273.

Kaufman, H. 1981. *The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs.* Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Lee, K, H. and J. C. N. Raadschelders. 2008. "Political-Administrative Relations: Impact of and Puzzles in Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981." *Governance* 21, 419–438.

Pelgrims, C. 2005. "Personal Advisors of Ministers: More than Personal Loyal Agents." In G. Peters, G. Sootla and B. Connaughton (eds). *Politico-Administrative Dilemma: Traditional Problems and New Solutions.* Bratislava: NISPAcee Press, pp. 69–90.

Peters, B. G. 1987. "Bureaucrats and Politicians in the Politics of Policymaking." In J. E. Lane (ed.). *Bureaucracy and Public Choice.* London: Sage.

Peters, B. G. 2020. "Politicians and Bureaucrats in Central and Eastern Europe: Governance with Increased Politicisation." In S. Mazur and P. Kopycinski (eds). *Public Administration in Central Europe.* London: Macmillan, pp 93–105.

Poguntke, T. and P. Webb (eds). 2007. *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Savoie, D. J. 2008. *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.