Top Officials' Careers and the Relationship between Politics and Administration

Tobias Bach[1]

Abstract

This essay elaborates how the analysis of administrative careers – both as dependent and independent variables – can be leveraged to gain a more systematic understanding of the relationship between politics and administration. It highlights how the analysis of administrative careers can provide answers to pertinent questions about the relationship between politics and administration, including civil service politicization, politicians' motivations in patronage decisions, the interplay of organizational characteristics and top officials' careers, and performance effects of administrative careers. It also includes suggestions on how to move forward in terms of research methods and how the systematic analysis of administrative careers can strengthen the comparative analysis of the relationship between politics and administration.

Keywords:
Administrative careers, patronage, performance, politicization, senior civil servants, turnover

1. Introduction

In contemporary systems of government, any incoming minister will quickly realize that she must rely on bureaucrats to draft and implement policy (Bach and Wegrich 2020). They will usually possess more procedural expertise and policy knowledge than ministers, who come and go. In the language of principal-agent theory, politicians face a delegation problem, as they cannot be sure that bureaucrats share their policy preferences (Huber and Shipan 2006). However, different institutional responses to the delegation problem exist; ranging from merit bureaucracies with strong norms for being responsive to ministers (Christensen and Opstrup 2018) to

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1   Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Norway.

politicized bureaucracies where incoming governments routinely replace holdover bureaucrats (Page and Wright 1999). In general, though, the appointment of ideological allies who share politicians' policy preferences to administrative leadership positions (and the replacement of individuals who do not share those preferences) is considered a potentially powerful instrument for increasing political control over the bureaucracy. In addition, politicians may not only doubt the bureaucracy's political responsiveness, but also its capacity to adequately support the political leadership in designing and implementing its policy agenda. In such a context, the actual or perceived lack of professional capacity in the bureaucracy may serve as a motivation for patronage appointments.

Yet the influence of politicians on the appointment of top officials has been associated with several problems. Politicians may (mis) use their appointment powers to reward loyalists with doubtful qualifications for the job at hand (Grindle 2012; Kopecký et al. 2016). Research also demonstrates negative consequences of political appointments on administrative performance (Lewis 2008), the control of corruption (Dahlström and Lapuente 2017; Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2016) and the effective implementation of the government's agenda (Moynihan and Roberts 2010), amongst others. Those studies emphasize the advantages of a meritocratic bureaucracy, in which public officials are recruited based on professional qualifications rather than political loyalty. However, as briefly pointed out above, patronage appointments do not invariably lead to a lowering of professional qualifications among the administrative workforce but may take the form of "professional politicization" (Peters 2013) involving the recruitment of loyal and highly qualified individuals.

The aim of this essay is to elaborate how the analysis of administrative careers – both as dependent and independent variables – can be leveraged to gain a more systematic understanding of the relationship between politics and administration.[2] This approach includes the temporal connection between political and administrative careers, the personal background and professional qualifications of top officials, the motivations of politicians in influencing administrative appointments, and the effects of recruitment practices. The essay will primarily focus on top officials, by which I mean officials working at the top of the organizational hierarchy in ministries or in arm's-length agencies under the authority of a minister. These top officials may be political appointees in a legal sense, but they may also be career civil servants. This essay follows Panizza et al. (2019) who define patronage appointments as discretionary appointments in the administration by politicians, irrespective of whether those appointments are legal or illegal in nature.

To begin with, I would like to clarify what I mean by the careers of top officials. A career is the sequence of different professional positions a top official has had

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2   This essay is a revised and expanded version of a keynote delivered at the Trans-European Dialogue (TED) in Bratislava in February 2020.

in his or her working life, both before and after holding a position as a top official (see Veit 2020, for a more detailed discussion). When studying top officials' careers, we typically assume that individuals have acquired distinct kinds of skills depending on the kind of professional positions they have occupied. Those qualifications might be political in nature, for example in the case of a parliamentary mandate or a position as ministerial adviser, or they might be professional qualifications, such as work experience in a specific policy sector. An analytical focus on career paths also includes the duration of a person's employment as top official – how long an official stayed in his or her position – and it includes the timing of the employment, especially in relation to changes amongst political superiors. From a research-oriented perspective, top officials' careers can be considered a "multipurpose proxy" through which we can study various aspects of the relationship between politics and administration.[3]

This essay highlights how the analysis of administrative careers can provide answers to pertinent questions about the relationship between politics and administration, including civil service politicization, politicians' motivations in patronage decisions, the interplay of organizational characteristics and top officials' careers, and performance effects of administrative careers. The essay concludes with some reflections on how the analysis of administrative careers might be applied in comparative research on politico-administrative relations, both across countries and over time.

2. How much political influence on top official careers?

A claim often made in the literature is that political influence on the appointments of top officials has increased over the past decades (Aucoin 2012; Peters and Pierre 2004; Suleiman 2003). There is some empirical evidence to support this claim, for example in the literature about ministerial advisers who come and go with executive politicians (Hustedt et al. 2017). We know that this group of political aides has grown in many countries. However, when it comes to top officials, the empirical picture is less clear, and we are lacking high-quality data going back in time. A potential way to address this problem is to use retrospective expert surveys to assess how the numbers of political appointees have changed over time (Dahlström 2009). Yet there is a fair chance that expert assessments are increasingly inaccurate the further they go back in time.

In such a situation, career path information might be a more reliable measure of politicization trends. Let me illustrate this with some examples from the literature. Dahlström and Niklasson (2013) studied the party-political backgrounds of

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3   The study of administrative careers is also highly relevant for analyses of elite reproduction and the representativeness of administrative elites (Veit 2020). However, these themes are not covered in this essay.

Swedish agency heads. They show a decline in the proportion of agency heads with party-political backgrounds since the mid-2000s. Moreover, investigating a hypothesis about party differences in appointment practices, they show that socialist and conservative parties appoint agency heads with a political background to the same degree. Another example from the Scandinavian context is a paper by Christensen et al. (2014), who showed that the tenure of top officials in ministries and agencies in Denmark has become substantially shorter – from 12 years in the 1970s down to around 7 years in the 1990s. Although there does not seem to be any party-political flavour involved in ministers' decisions to remove top officials, ministers increasingly demand loyal support and political-tactical advice from their top officials.

Another promising approach to understanding the connection between political and administrative careers is to study how administrative turnover is connected to political turnover of different kinds (such as government and minister turnover). In Germany, where patronage appointments are commonplace for the two topmost administrative levels of the hierarchy in federal ministries, Ebinger et al. (2018) analyzed turnover rates among top officials after changes in government composition since the late 1960s, drawing on earlier studies and their own data. They show a trend towards increasing turnover among top officials after changes in government. Moreover, for the most recent governments, which display high degrees of party-political continuity, they show that even officials who are loyal to the party in power cannot be sure of keeping their jobs after an election. In line with Christensen et al. (2014), this suggests a growing importance of loyalty to the person of the minister rather than to the minister's party.

The analysis of the temporal connection between administrative and political turnover is a particularly promising approach to analyzing political influence on appointments for which politicians have no formal appointment powers. Dahlström and Holmgren (2019) show that agency-head turnover in Sweden is clearly connected to changes in the ideology of the government. This is quite surprising, given that agency heads in Sweden enjoy high levels of constitutional protection from politically motivated interference. Cooper (2020) analyzes the connection between political events (such as change in the governing party) and the turnover of permanent secretaries in the United Kingdom. He finds that changes in the governing party increase the risk of administrative turnover (whereas other events, such as a government re-election, do not increase the risk of administrative turnover). Moreover, comparing two periods (1949–1978 and 1979–2014), Cooper does not find a substantially increased risk of turnover in the second period. However, while not discussing this aspect at greater length, his analysis clearly demonstrates a temporal connection between political and administrative turnover in a highly meritocratic context, which merits further exploration.

The above-mentioned studies focus on political turnover at a governmental level. But moving to a more granular level, Staronova and Rybář (2020) study the

effects of ministerial alterations on turnover among leadership positions in Slovakia. These authors' analysis brings into question widespread assumptions about the idea that the dominant motivation for politicians' influence on administrative appointments is to ensure partisan allies. The authors demonstrate that the extent of administrative turnover does not differ between ministers coming into office after a change in governing party ("replacing ministers") and ministers replacing other ministers from the same party ("successive ministers"), which suggests that ministers possess individual power to replace top officials and hence shows a limited influence of political parties on such decisions.

Arguably, this selective review of the literature demonstrates that analyzing administrative careers is a fruitful approach for mapping long-term trends in politicization. Uncovering the temporal connection between political and administrative careers should also be considered a substantive and fundamental research question of its own. These examples also demonstrate that a career approach is relevant not only for countries with a tradition of patronage appointments but also for contexts which are widely considered as meritocratic.

3. Politicians' motivations for patronage appointments

The motivations of politicians in filling patronage positions is another important question concerning the relationship between politics and administration, a question which can be addressed by studying careers. An implicit assumption is often made that patronage appointments invariably lead to the recruitment of poorly qualified individuals. However, patronage is first and foremost a mode of recruitment, which may lead to different types of outcomes in terms of how politicians use their power to appoint (Grindle 2012). What are the criteria politicians use in filling top-level positions? How much importance do politicians attach to specific qualifications, and what are the trade-offs involved in those decisions? The study of career paths is one possible way to understand the nature of patronage decisions.

A great deal of the literature uses the party-political loyalty of top officials as a proxy measure for politicization or for the use of political criteria (rather than merit-based criteria) in appointment decisions (Peters and Pierre 2004). Typically, career-related indicators of party-political loyalty include elected political office, political adviser positions or positions within the party organization (Veit and Scholz 2016). However, when we think of decisions about whom to appoint to a top-level position, other aspects which may better be subsumed as merit-based criteria are likely to play an important role as well (Veit 2020). These include political management skills or "political craft" (Goetz 1997), which means knowing how political processes work and how to provide political-tactical advice. They also include sector-related expertise concerning the substantial mission of the organization (Lewis and Waterman 2013), and they may include managerial skills, such as leadership

skills from large organizations. Of course, the big question, then, is how we can find out how much importance politicians attach to those qualifications when they exercise discretion in appointment decisions.

A possible way is to look at the qualification profiles of incumbent top officials, which tells us something about average levels of different qualifications. However, this approach is substantially flawed; if we only study those individuals who have made it to top positions, we cannot know why they were selected in the first place. To address this problem, Bach and Veit (2018) studied appointments to the highest civil service position in Germany by applying a candidate pool research design. Such a research design implies the comparison of individuals who were appointed to the highest positions, with individuals holding positions from which the highest officials are typically recruited but who have never made it to the highest level or who may only do so later in their career. This is the so-called candidate pool. In the German context, recruitment to patronage positions primarily happens from inside the bureaucracy (Meyer-Sahling 2008), and this essentially means that the candidate pool consists of top officials inside federal ministries, along with agency heads.

The analysis by Bach and Veit (2018) showed that party-political criteria clearly trumped other selection criteria. This is indeed not very surprising, given what we know about the German context (see for example Derlien 2003). They also found that political management skills are highly valued by ministers, whereas managerial skills, such as those gained by having worked in different organizations, were clearly irrelevant in the appointment decision. So far, so normal. What is striking, however, was that less than 50 % of all top officials (those who eventually were selected) had a clearly discernible party-political loyalty. In other words, German ministers do not fully use their discretionary powers to fill top positions with partisan loyalists. This may be related to methodological problems (that is, the researchers were unable to identify a substantial number of officials as partisan loyalists), but an equally plausible interpretation would echo several of the above-mentioned studies, which point out individual ministers' demands and relationship with top officials as driving forces of administrative turnover. Indeed, while requiring information on partisan loyalty, similar research could be conducted in other countries, which would not require a candidate pool design.

To unveil politicians' motivations for patronage appointments, a promising way forward in research is to consider both merit-based and political appointment criteria. Hence, research which exclusively focuses on party-political loyalty will be unable to move beyond statements about (changes in) the degree of party politicization. A simplified version of politicians' motivations for patronage appointments distinguishes between the desire to control the bureaucracy and the desire to reward loyal supporters by providing them with jobs in the bureaucracy. As outlined above, politicians have strong incentives to appoint individuals sharing their policy preferences to top-level positions in the bureaucracy or to replace individuals who

do not share their policy preferences, who are considered poorly qualified, or who are not trusted for other reasons.

However, assuming that they are primarily motivated by exercising control over the bureaucracy, maximizing loyalty among top officials might be a counter-productive strategy, as top officials might lack important skills in realizing their political principals' policy objectives (Moynihan and Roberts 2010). The politicians' criteria for selecting top officials will therefore include a broader portfolio of qualifications, including political management and leadership skills (Bach and Veit 2018) and subject area expertise (Lewis and Waterman 2013). In contrast, if politicians recruit loyal top officials without relevant expertise to the task at hand, we have a strong indication that they primarily wish to reward loyal followers for their support for patronage reasons and are less motivated by achieving policy objectives (Hollibaugh et al. 2014). The combined analysis of different career-based characteristics of top officials hence allows for an approximation of politicians' motives in appointing top officials.

4. The way forward: organizational context and career effects

Finally, this essay sketches several research themes constituting potential fruitful areas for advancing our understanding of politico-administrative relations through the lens of top officials' careers: the relevance of organizational characteristics for patronage appointments; the effects of having top officials with different career backgrounds on individual decision-making and administrative performance; and finally some methodological reflections touching upon several substantive themes.

Most of the above-mentioned research makes an implicit assumption – it considers all organizations in which patronage appointments are being made to be similar. However, we know that some organizations are politically more relevant than others and that they vary in terms of the technical complexity of their tasks (Bach 2014; Pollitt 2006; Wilson 1989) or in terms of their corruption risk, which is typically connected to the administration of financial resources such as European Union funding or procurement activities. Hence, one would expect that having sector experts at the top is more important in some organizations than in others (think of public health authorities, for example) or that politicians are keener on staffing agencies central to their political agenda with partisan loyalists. These ideas have been developed and empirically tested in studies of political appointees in the US, especially by David Lewis and co-authors (Lewis 2008; Hollibaugh et al. 2014; Lewis and Waterman 2013).

Thus far, the analysis of within-country variation in politico-administrative relations has not been very prominent in research outside the US, with a few exceptions. Several studies combine cross-country analysis with organizational-level explanations, though without explicitly including administrative career data. In a

comparative study of party patronage, Kopecký et al. (2016) show that party patronage differs not only between countries but also between policy sectors and types of government organizations. Bach et al. (2020) show lower levels of political influence on appointments to leadership positions in arm's length agencies compared to ministries. In a cross-country study based on organizational and career data, Ennser-Jedenastik (2016) demonstrates a higher prevalence of party backgrounds among top officials in more formally independent regulatory agencies, suggesting that politicians use patronage powers to compensate for limited hierarchical influence on agency decisions. Finally, research on the accession of new member countries to the European Union suggests the emergence of "islands of excellence" in otherwise politicized central bureaucracies (Goetz 2001) – a hypothesis that remains to be tested empirically using career data of public officials.

A more explicit focus on within-country variation in politico-administrative relations can be found in studies of how administrative turnover is related to political turnover and organizational performance. For the United Kingdom, Petrovsky et al. (2017) find that relatively poorer performance increases the risk of turnover of agency chief executives but they find no significant effect of political change on administrative turnover. Likewise, political change in local governments in the United Kingdom has been shown to increase the risk of turnover of top officials under conditions of poor organizational performance (Boyne et al. 2010). For South Korea, Hong and Kim (2019) find that poor organizational performance and a mismatch in partisan loyalty increase top officials' risk of turnover following abrupt government change. This selective overview should be sufficient to illustrate that including organization-level factors in the study of top officials' careers has the potential to generate new insights into research on politico-administrative relations.

A second question that should be of major interest to scholars of politico-administrative relations relates to the effects of top officials' careers on individual decision-making and administrative performance more generally. This question is really the elephant in the room; much of the literature assumes rather than empirically tests that career backgrounds are consequential. This includes the assumption that appointing partisan loyalists increases political control over bureaucracy as well as the assumption that appointments on political rather than meritocratic grounds lead to poorer administrative performance. To be sure, there is a growing body of evidence about detrimental effects of political appointments – as opposed to career appointments – on effective policy implementation (Moynihan and Roberts 2010), on control of corruption (Dahlström and Lapuente 2017; Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2016) and on administrative performance (Lewis 2008). Yet this literature is only a starting point on a path towards investigating how administrative careers – such as top officials' backgrounds from the public sector, from the private sector or from party politics – influence individual decision-making and administrative performance.

This essay can only touch upon the surface of this line of inquiry. When it comes to career effects on individual decision-making, Adolph (2013) shows that government ideology is an important driver of appointments to central bank boards. Importantly, he finds that conservative and socialist governments have different preferences regarding officials' career backgrounds rather than simply selecting partisan loyalists. This is because career backgrounds affect board members' policy preferences, which is what ultimately matters for governments. In a recent study, Lapuente et al. (2020) show that senior officials with private sector experience hold stronger managerial values than officials without such experience, but they are as committed to typical public sector values as officials without substantial private sector experience. These studies provide relevant insights, yet when it comes to top officials, one may expect career effects not only at the individual level but also at the organizational level.

In terms of organizational performance, Petrovsky et al. (2015) propose that performance depends on the "fit" between the leader and the organization, which will generally be lower for private business outsiders than for public sector insiders. Likewise, Lewis (2008) suggests that public sector insiders have more subject area expertise and public management skills, which will result in higher levels of organizational performance. At the local level, Avellaneda (2009) shows that mayors' educational level and administrative experience are positively associated with municipal performance. Taking this line of inquiry a step further, it seems plausible to assume that differences in top officials' backgrounds do not simply result in higher or lower organizational performance but that leadership backgrounds – from the private sector, the public sector or party politics – has a differential effect on various dimensions of administrative performance. Overall, scholars should devote greater attention towards studying the effects of appointing different types of top officials, both in terms of how they are being appointed (discretionary vs. merit-based) and also in terms of their distinct career backgrounds, which are likely to affect administrative performance and, hence, the everyday lives of citizens.

Finally, while demonstrating the potential of leveraging career data to study the relationship between politics and administration, it also exposed some weaknesses of this methodological approach. For instance, a major challenge for research using career data to study patronage is the often implicit assumption that administrative turnover is involuntary. However, researchers using large-n designs often are unable to distinguish whether officials retired, whether they moved on to another position, or whether they were dismissed by their political superior (Dahlström and Holmgren 2019). To be sure, several researchers have suggested methodological remedies to this problem, either by focusing on turnover happening before reaching the formal age of retirement (Christensen et al. 2014) or by distinguishing between different exit types (Petrovsky et al. 2017). However, the fundamental problem of identifying the reason for turnover remains. A promising approach to address this weakness is to survey former office holders about the reasons for leaving their po-

sition as top officials. In a study based on semi-structured interviews, Rattus and Randma-Liiv (2019) find a substantial proportion of voluntary turnover among senior officials in Estonia which were driven by job insecurity and ambiguity regarding top official's roles. More generally, in order to move beyond descriptive accounts of politicization between or within countries, the combination of different types of methods and data, including surveys of present or former office holders (Askim et al. 2017; Rattus and Randma-Liiv 2019) and administrative data that is comparable across organizations (e.g. procurement, formal complaints) seems a promising way forward towards a richer understanding of the drivers and effects of patronage appointments.

5. Conclusion

The main message of this essay is that top officials' careers can serve as a multipurpose proxy for asking pertinent questions about the changing relationship between politics and administration, but careers are also a relevant topic of inquiry as such. The analyses of administrative careers allow researchers to empirically validate widespread claims about increasing levels of politicization of the civil service, and they potentially allow us to make systematic comparisons across countries, irrespective of whether these countries have meritocratic or politicized civil service systems. In particular, as a non-reactive research methodology, career analysis has the potential to overcome the limitations of existing approaches such as bureaucrat surveys (Bach et al. 2020) and expert surveys (Dahlström 2009) in tracking developments over time. An analysis of careers also allows us to assess politicians' motivations and how they deal with trade-offs when making patronage appointments. In combination with political turnover, organizational characteristics or individual and organizational behaviour, the analysis of administrative careers has the potential of generating rich explanations of the causes and effects of patronage appointments that are comparable across countries.

Let me conclude with a short reflection on the relevance of studying top officials' career paths in those "turbulent times" we are said to live in. There are strong indications of "democratic backsliding" across different parts of Europe and beyond. There is reason to believe that democratic backsliding implies changing relationships between politics and administration; that new career paths into central positions in the state apparatus are emerging; that politicians apply different selection criteria for top officials; and that political and administrative careers are becoming more closely linked. And while the empirical study of career paths is certainly not a silver bullet against the challenges of democratic backsliding, a systematic and continuous gathering of information on top officials' career paths could be a valuable contribution of our discipline to detecting and comparing changes in the ways our societies are being governed.

Acknowledgements

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