

Bureaucratic Politics: Blindspots and Opportunities in Political Science

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Abstract

Bureaucracy is everywhere. Unelected bureaucrats are a key link between government and citizens, between policy and implementation. The profession has taken notice. Bureaucratic politics constitutes a growing share of research in political science. But the way bureaucracy is studied varies widely, opening theoretical and empirical blindspots, as well as opportunities for innovation. Scholars of American politics tend to focus on bureaucratic policymaking at the national level, while Comparativists often home in on local implementation by street-level bureaucrats. Data availability and professional incentives have reinforced these subfield-specific blindspots over time. We highlight these divides in three prominent research areas: the selection and retention of bureaucratic personnel, oversight of bureaucratic activities, and opportunities for influence by actors external to the bureaucracy. Our survey reveals ways scholars from both the American and Comparative traditions can learn from one another.

Across the globe, publicly-funded bureaucrats administer government programs and provide public services. Bureaucrats in “street-level” positions have daily interactions with citizens. Less visible, but equally important, are bureaucrats who engage in administrative work, designing and implementing policies. The fact that service delivery and policymaking are tasks universal to all polities ensures that questions related to the functioning of public bureaucracies are relevant across geographic, political, and economic contexts. While context can shape the dynamics of bureaucratic politics, fundamental questions are common across all settings. How are bureaucrats selected, retained, and deployed—and with what consequences? How are bureaucrats overseen, and by whom? When and how do external actors influence bureaucratic behavior?

In this review, we take stock of the last two decades of political science research on the bureaucracy. We focus on articles published in mainstream political science journals. We start by documenting significant growth in the absolute and relative number of bureaucracy articles published in some of the discipline’s “flagship” journals. This growth reflects advances in data collection and availability, along with a growing recognition within the discipline that the behavior of non-elected state agents is at the core of politics.

However, the growth of research on bureaucratic politics is hindered by significant divides—in theories, concepts, methods, and evidence—across political science subfields. In this review, we focus on the divide between American and Comparative politics—although similar or even larger gaps can be found with other fields like public administration (Bertelli et al. 2020), economics (Besley et al. 2022) or anthropology (Lea 2021). Building on our systematic review of articles in “top” journals, we document differences across subfields. We argue that the growth of separate bureaucracy literatures and scholarly communities is a significant obstacle to the field’s progress.

Our review uncovers blindspots in the study of bureaucracy that we argue are driven by (at least) two factors. First, researchers’ ability to access data varies. As simple a fact as this is, it needs to be accounted for as researchers attempt to evaluate general theories. While data availability is difficult to remedy, we highlight the types of data being used by researchers across various settings with the aim to inspire future data collection. Second, some blindspots result from within-subfield path dependency. This dependency is reinforced by professional incentives that prioritize certain questions and methods within subfield. For instance, reliance by journal editors on peer reviewers that are largely within-subfield tends to encourage research that meets established subfield parameters and may (unintentionally) discourage innovation. We point to areas where, in principle, it is possible for either Americanist or Comparative scholars to conduct research, but where, largely as a result of subfield tradition, such opportunities have been overlooked.

With this review, we seek to narrow the gap between American and Comparative studies of bureaucratic politics. We do so first by articulating the differences in focus, method, and data across subfields, which then reveal opportunities for innovation. Our focus is on three particularly important and promising areas of bureaucratic politics: personnel, oversight, and external influence. By juxtaposing and contrasting recent research from the two subfields in these three arenas, we aim to foster a more productive research agenda on bureaucracies everywhere.

BUREAUCRACY TRENDS, 2000-2022

We began our query by assembling data on journal articles published in three general-interest journals: the American Political Science Review (APSR), the American Journal of Political Science (AJPS), and the Journal of Politics (JOP). These journals are often considered the “top three” in political science; therefore, focusing on them yields insights into the types of bureaucracy research that has been undertaken and rewarded in the discipline. Importantly, scholars of both American and Comparative politics regularly publish in all three venues. Articles were classified as relevant when bureaucratic inputs or outputs were the primary independent or dependent variable. This yielded 122 articles.

Inventory of Bureaucracy Studies

Our inventory of 122 bureaucracy articles published between 2000 and 2022 in the APSR, AJPS, and JOP can be accessed at shorturl.at/jmNW4, or by contacting the authors.

We coded articles for geographic coverage (i.e., countries studied), the level of bureaucracy (i.e., central, regional, or local agencies), and methods used (i.e., formal theory, regression, interviews, experiment). Classifications for the latter two variables were not mutually exclusive. An article could investigate multiple levels of bureaucracy and use several types of analysis. Purely theoretical articles and those covering international bureaucracies (e.g., the World Bank or the European Commission) were coded as “Other.”

Figure 1

Trends in the study of bureaucratic politics, 2000-2022. Left: Share of total articles focused on the bureaucracy, Right: Total number of articles.

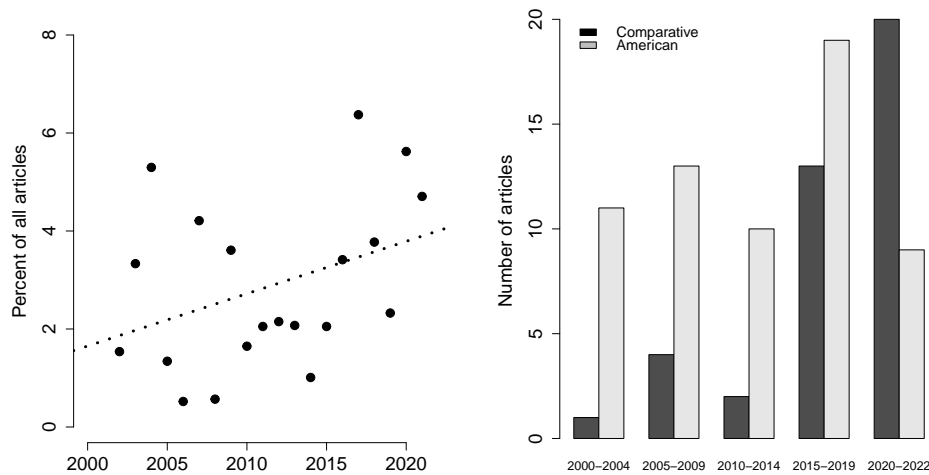


Figure 1 shows the first thing of note: the relative and absolute increase in the number of all articles that focus on the bureaucracy. Table 1 presents our inventory in detail. The majority of articles focus on the United States (51%). However, over the last twenty years, there has been a significant decline in the study of the U.S. within the bureaucracy literature, as shown in the right panel of Figure 1. While at the turn of the millennium about 73% of articles focused on the US, this figure dropped to 21% twenty years later. Beyond the US ($n = 62$), the remaining literature is fragmented geographically. India ($n = 6$) is the next most studied case, followed by China, Russia and Indonesia ($n = 3$, each). Perhaps surprising is the low number of European cases within these journals, given the ready availability of administrative data in these contexts.

Table 1 Comparison of American and Comparative literature

Field	N	Level of analysis			Methodological approach			
		Central	Regional	Local	Regression	Model	Experiment	Interviews
Comparative	40	0.26	0.29	0.66	0.98	0.08	0.18	0.30
American	62	0.63	0.14	0.36	0.86	0.19	0.07	0.08
Other	20	0	0	0	0.2	0.85	0.05	0.05

Notes: The “Other” category refers to articles that do not center on a particular country (e.g., articles with formal models or a focus on international bureaucracies). Articles that include the U.S. case among others were coded as “Comparative”.

American and Comparative politics literatures differ in the typical the level of government studied. The Americanist literature tends to focus on bureaucrats in the central government (63%), while comparative scholars typically use data from local agencies (66%). This may be a result of the availability of data across different settings. In developing countries, it may be easier for scholars to collect data from regional or local agencies, relative to the central bureaucracy.

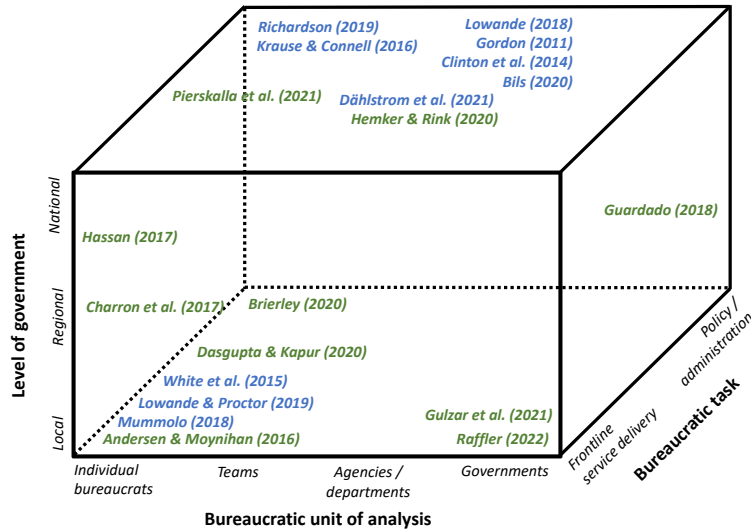
These differences in subject implicate the kind bureaucratic behavior studied. Typically, American and Comparative studies adopt different units of analysis. American politics scholars tend to leverage variation across agencies, whereas Comparative politics studies rely on variation across individual bureaucrats. Accordingly, studies in Comparative politics typically consider frontline service providers teaching, doctoring, or policing, while American politics articles often focus on policy-setting or other central administrative tasks like regulation. All in all, the modal American politics article studies national-level agencies performing central, policy-setting tasks. In contrast, the modal Comparative politics article focuses on local-level bureaucrats delivering services. It is useful to place each study along these three continua, as illustrated in Figure 2. Clearly, some cubics of this research typology are largely unexplored, like services delivered by national governments, or policy administration across regions or states.

Methodologically, the vast majority of articles in both subfields use quantitative data and some form of regression analysis (79%). As discussed below, the data scholars work with have become increasingly impressive in terms of the richness or sheer quantity of data obtained. An obvious feature of the study of American bureaucracy is the use of formal models. Indeed, articles that solely present a formal model are confined to the U.S. case. Within the U.S. literature, about 20% of articles include a formal model. Comparativists are much more likely than Americanists to include information from interviews, with about 30% of articles referring to interviews compared to 8%.

Within quantitative work, scholars pay more attention to causal inference. This includes

Figure 2

A three-dimensional typology of bureaucratic politics research



Note: Figure shows selected bureaucratic politics studies from Comparative (green) and American (blue) subfields.

the creative use of regression discontinuities (e.g., Gulzar and Pasquale 2017, Mummolo 2018). Comparativists are more likely to use experiments compared to Americanists (17% vs. 9%). Comparativists have deployed a range of experimental methods, including field (Slough and Fariss 2021, Hemker and Rink 2017), natural (Bhavnani and Lee 2018), lab (Duell and Landa 2021), and survey (Martin and Raffler 2021, Brierley 2020). The experimental bureaucracy literature in the U.S. almost exclusively reports results from audit experiments covering a range of bureaucrats, including election officials (White, Nathan and Faller 2015, Porter and Rogowski 2018), housing officers (Einstein and Glick 2017) and marriage-license officials (Lowande and Proctor 2020).

In the sections below we review the recent bureaucratic politics literature on three key issues – selection, oversight, and influence – where learning across subfields seems especially promising.

PERSONNEL POLITICS

Personnel politics refers to guiding research questions about the selection and retention of bureaucrats, and the implications of both for government performance. Patronage, in particular, is central to both the Comparative and American literatures, even if some differences in word usage make the connections unclear. It is often of most interest to scholars when persons are selected for political reasons. The variety of “political reasons” creates disjunctures across research programs. In the U.S. context, the political reasoning mostly involves selecting bureaucrats with policy preferences similar to the principal, or what is sometimes (confusingly) called the “loyalty” of the official to the person who hired them. In

Comparative studies, the political reasoning is usually about the distribution of government jobs to partisans, or what is sometimes known as a “spoils system.”

This terminology partly reflects institutional differences and history. After civil service reforms in the U.S. that began in the 19th century, the national-level positions that remain subject to patronage number in the several thousand. These are high-level bureaucrats, among whom a small subset is approved by the upper chamber of the legislature. Studies on the U.S. typically focus on these high-level positions—particularly the policy preferences of these individuals, and the selection process itself—all of which is animated by the possibility of divided party control of government. For example, Krause and O’Connell (2016) develop a latent measure of loyalty based on party identification, campaign contributions, work history for the party, and other factors. They show that, over time, U.S. presidents rely less on partisan heuristics as a means of selecting high-level officials. Bonica, Chen and Johnson (2015) argue that legislative checks on patronage selection leads to the appointment of extremists in the highest level positions, which do not require legislative approval. Relatedly, Kinane (2021) shows that joint approval of appointments by a legislative body may incentivize U.S. presidents to leave positions vacant or acting, rather than accede to a less “loyal” appointee. Though many countries have appointees in important policy-making roles, high-level positions remain understudied outside of the U.S. Instead, most Comparative work tends to focus on lower-level bureaucratic positions, and the subsequent performance-related effects of leaving hiring up to principals.

Political patronage:
Government officials whose selection is made at the discretion of a political actor.

The collection of employment records at scale has allowed scholars to evaluate standard predictions about political patronage and its effects. Plainly put: it exists, and it is widespread. Whether it is federal civil servants in Germany (Bach and Veit 2018), municipal employees in Brazil (Colonnelli, Prem and Teso 2020), or teachers in Indonesia (Pierskalla and Sacks 2020), all seem to be subject to politically-motivated selection, aimed mostly at benefiting the ruling party.

Rather than treating patronage as a dichotomous institution, recent work highlights important differences in the extent and the manners in which patronage penetrates different bureaucracies. A case in point is Colonnelli, Prem and Teso (2020), who find evidence of hiring based on political patronage even in positions gated by merit examinations in Brazil, though the evidence is less stark for positions without exams. Brierley (2021) finds evidence that patronage considerations influence appointments to entry-level, but not high-level positions in local bureaucracies in Ghana. Sigman (2022) argues that the distribution of patronage jobs depends on the level of party institutionalization, particularly in the African context where political elites seek to extract state resources for campaigns. Recent studies have also highlighted variation along the electoral calendar. For example, Pierskalla and Sacks (2020) find that elections lead to increases in the hiring of contract teachers, but not civil service ones. In turn, Toral (2022*b*) finds electoral cycles in the hiring of both temporary and civil service employees, in a pattern consistent with circumvention of “anti-corruption” laws that prevent spending and hiring around elections. The most similar research on the U.S. context is, not surprisingly, historical. Calais-Haase and Rogowski (2021), for example, focus on executive branch personnel and show differences in turnover rates between salaried and non-salaried officials. They demonstrate that, after civil service reform, turnover was higher for individuals in lower-ranked positions.

Subfield differences also permeate studies of how personnel impact performance. In the U.S. context, questions about the (politically neutral) performance implications of personnel often go unasked. Most studies of the subsequent behavior of high-level officials are,

in effect, studies of political control of policymaking—which we review in a subsequent section. For research focused on personnel selection based on preference similarity, the appropriate “performance” benchmark is whether the official achieves the principal’s preferred outcomes. There are exceptions. For example, Gallo and Lewis (2012) find that program managers selected via patronage had lower performance ratings than their non-patronage counterparts. Additionally, Spenkuch, Teso and Xu (2021) show that politically misaligned procurement officers and superiors are associated with cost-overruns in federal contracts.

The rarity of this kind of study is partly a consequence of the level of analysis. When studies of selection focus on high level administrators, their performance is defined by their jobs. But their jobs are diverse—collecting taxes, managing public lands, maintaining nuclear arsenals, approving vaccines, running hospitals, or responding to tornadoes, to name a few. That generates a difficult measurement problem.

More tractable, however, is identifying a particular type of bureaucrat and linking selection to an outcome most would agree constitutes performance. This is what most Comparative politics research does. For example, Akhtari, Moreira and Trucco (2022) show that teacher turnover as a result of political forces drives school test scores lower. Another example is Barbosa and Ferreira (2019), who argue that the hiring of politically-connected workers crowds out the employment of unaffiliated teachers and doctors, with downstream effects on schooling and mortality rates. Relatedly, Toral (2022*c*) finds evidence that health worker turnover after elections impacts the provision of healthcare in Brazil. Toral (2022*a*) also shows local schools with appointed directors who lose their connections to the local government see declines in service delivery. Xu (2018) argues that colonial governors in the British empire appointed via patronage (rather than open recruitment) tended to collect less tax revenue. Along similar lines, the sale of provincial governorships by the Spanish Crown in Peru may have reduced the health and welfare of residences decades into the future (Guardado 2018).

Focusing on lower-level officials and service delivery involves its own trade-offs. With some notable exceptions the links between measures of politically motivated hiring and performance outcomes are often circumstantial. The hiring implications of patronage are measured at the individual level, but performance outcomes often are not. Sometimes, this even means studies examine the system-level impact of patronage versus merit rules, rather than the behavior of individuals slotted within those systems. The greater the conceptual distance between the individual and the outcome, the greater the questions about what, precisely drives the performance penalty or reward. Not surprisingly, there are lively, ongoing debates about the mechanisms that create performance bonuses for patronage-based hiring. They may be because of mutual trust between principal and agent (e.g., Jiang 2018), ease for applying sanctions and rewards (Toral 2022*a*), distributive favoritism (Jiang and Zhang 2020), or career concerns (Rivera 2020). In each case, however, indirect links between performance metrics and bureaucrat selection pose a challenge for adjudicating between these mechanisms.

In contexts where bureaucrats are selected for political reasons, patronage can be thought of as another solution to the problems of bureaucratic oversight because it reduces the distance between bureaucrats and politicians. Patronage may reduce the need for monitoring because political appointees have a direct stake in the political survival of the incumbent. This dynamic has long been thought to govern the selection of high-level appointees in the U.S. (Lewis 2008). Leveraging survey experiments with local government employees in Argentina, Oliveros (2021) finds that government supporters in the bureau-

cracy provide political services because they expect their jobs to be tied to the electoral fate of the incumbent. If governments know that they can rely on some bureaucrats' self-interest to get what they want, they can strategically assign aligned bureaucrats to key posts in the administration. This is precisely what Hassan (2017) finds in her study of the security apparatus in Kenya. Of course, the gains of patronage for bureaucratic oversight may be welfare-reducing for citizens when politicians use patronage to extract rents.

Scholarship on personnel also considers career trajectories, with many papers investigating the effects of political turnover on job retention or promotion. Research patterns in these studies are often reversed: the outcomes are individual-level retention or dismissal questions, whereas the independent variables are broader political forces like changes in party control of government. Here, the collection of records has shown career incentives often reproduce, *de facto* patterns of political dismissal, even though they are most often *de jure* prohibited. In Sweden, Dahlström and Holmgren (2019) find that executives with fixed-terms were still more likely to depart following changes in party control of government. Kim and Hong (2019) identifies a similar pattern in South Korea for chief executives of state-owned enterprises. In the U.S., Bolton, De Figueiredo and Lewis (2021) show that career senior executives in the U.S. with views likely divergent from the incoming president were more likely to leave government. Again, though disparate in their institutional context, they point to similar theoretical arguments made about the determinants of turnover. Gailmard and Patty (2013) argue that the contraction of policymaking discretion reduces the attractiveness public service. Similarly, Cameron and de Figueiredo (2020) show that policymaking interventions by superiors reduce subordinates' incentives for working hard or remaining in their post—extreme zealots willing to wait for the next election excepted. This reasoning is supported by surveys of public bureaucrats who report intentions to leave government at higher rates when they see their influence or job security diminish (e.g., Bertelli and Lewis 2013, Oliveros and Schuster 2018, Richardson 2019). Even absent formal mechanisms for political interference in staffing, politics informs the composition of bureaucracies via voluntary, individual-level incentives.

In any area of research this active and innovative, answers to central questions are likely to develop unevenly. But in research on personnel politics over the previous decade, we think the availability of data and researchers' professional incentives are nurturing obvious disjunctures. In the U.S., in general, the preoccupation with national-level bureaucrats comes at the exclusion of studies on state and local governments. The professional returns to studying a handful of states—or even a single state—are known to be lower, all else equal. A similar point could be made about the approach of selecting a single type of bureaucrat with a politically neutral performance metric. It is no accident that exceptions to these tendencies are mostly found in the booming study of local law enforcement (e.g., Ba et al. 2021), where the public salience of policing has driven up the professional rewards for studying it. These anomalies aside, this means researchers essentially ignore a state-level public sector workforce that both outnumbers the federal workforce more than two to one, and also contains state governments comparable or larger than some of the single-country studies we have mentioned. The value of such a shift, in our view, is that it holds promise in addressing many of the blindspots already referenced. Performance is difficult to compare across high-level officials. There is also little institutional variation in selection mechanisms. Progress could be made on both fronts with the kind of lower-level, service-delivery oriented study common elsewhere.

Its parochial focus on high-level, federal officials aside, research on the U.S. also offers

lessons for the Comparative literature. Its narrower focus on the upper echelons of the bureaucracy is justified by their relative importance for designing and implementing policies. Comparative research lies at the other extreme, often focusing on “street-level” officials in service delivery roles. The measurement of patronage in Comparative studies is typically coarse and subject to data availability. Most often, politically-motivated selection is proxied—and problematically so—with partisan alignment. More importantly, the central focus on service delivery seems to have generated puzzling findings about the circumstances under which patronage is helpful or hurtful. Notably, one of the leading explanations for a performance bonus to patronage is the reduction of monitoring costs implied by aligned preferences, and that the officials for whom this is the case are typically higher-level and in policymaking roles. As work on the U.S. has argued, these are exactly the kind of officials for whom we would expect principals to benefit from aligned preferences. In examining the selection of upper-level officials, it is common for U.S. research to think of ideology and valence (or effectiveness) as distinct, separable dimensions of policy. Clarity about which of these dimensions matters for performance by bureaucrat type may be useful for future studies.

OVERSIGHT

Once bureaucrats are selected and deployed, how, how much, and by whom they are monitored is a key determinant of public sector performance. Research questions on oversight contrast the actions of bureaucrats with the interests of politicians, a relationship typically modeled as a principal-agent problem. But the subfield pathologies previously identified also persist in this body of research. In the US context, oversight research focuses on politicians’ attempts to contain drift in bureaucratic policy decisions. In contrast, Comparative studies typically emphasize attempts to minimize moral hazard (e.g., corruption, absenteeism) and improve service delivery. Across subfields, the main policy tools studied are investments in monitoring and constraints on bureaucratic autonomy.

The US focus on national-level agencies means that, in addition to the president, the relevant oversight actors are often collective bodies, such as Congress or congressional committees. American politics researchers have thus considered how the number of oversight actors affects outcomes. Scholars studying so-called “political control” have found that oversight operates more effectively when there is a clearer oversight structure. For example, congressional influence over federal agencies (relative to the White House) decreases as more committees are involved (Clinton, Lewis and Selin 2014), and agencies are more likely to comply with statutory deadlines under unified government (Bertelli and Doherty 2019). Using a formal model, Bills (2020) shows that unless agencies have divergent policy preferences, Congress achieves better outcomes by consolidating authority in a single agency.

Comparative research also investigates the structure of oversight institutions, but with the now-familiar focus on local agencies. For example, Gulzar and Pasquale (2017) study oversight by state-level politicians in India and find that policy implementation improves when bureaucrats are overseen by one as opposed to multiple politicians. Single-principal oversight may improve bureaucratic effectiveness by facilitating control and credit claiming, thereby incentivizing politicians to invest in monitoring. Similarly, Dasgupta and Kapur (2020) find that geographical congruence between politicians’ and bureaucrats’ districts leads politicians to increase bureaucratic resources and capacity.

In addition to institutional structure, the ideological alignment of bureaucrats and their overseers is a central concern in Americanist research on the bureaucracy. The foundational prediction is that increasing ideological distance between a principal and its agents invites greater monitoring and oversight. With respect to Congress, this principle is most often evaluated in terms of the design of statutes (Huber and Shipan 2002)—which can grant more or less leeway to agencies—and oversight hearings (McGrath 2013). Building on this principle, scholars have gone on to demonstrate many other—often informal—ways that Congress engages in bureaucratic oversight. For instance, Bolton (2022) shows that congressional committee reports serve as additional, non-statutory instructions to agencies and that the stringency of these reports increases in the presence of ideological conflict. Likewise, ideology is thought to motivate much of presidential oversight.

Increasingly scholars of American politics question the dominance of ideology as the primary driver of oversight. For instance, Lowande (2018) collects private letters from members of Congress to agencies and finds that ideological (dis)agreement has negligible impact on politicians’ behavior. Bolton, Potter and Thrower (2016) show that, although ideology is important to presidential review of regulations, the president’s ability to control the centralized review process is diminished when the reviewing office faces capacity constraints. Still other research suggests that ideological misalignment may not just motivate principals, but also agents. Potter (2019) argues that ideological conflict with principals may motivate bureaucrats to engage in “procedural politicking,” or strategic maneuvers that leverage bureaucrats’ procedural knowledge and make it more difficult for principals to engage in oversight. Another “strategic” tactic agencies can adopt involves implementing statutes in a way that assuages contemporaneous political coalitions (Acs 2016).

Investigating the role of ideology on oversight relationships presents an opportunity for Comparativists, where there are few studies that consider alignment. The lack of research in this area in part stems from the absence of certain institutional features, such as divided government, as well as the limited role of ideology in some low- and middle-income contexts. However, Comparativists can also expand the concept of “preference divergence” beyond ideology, to consider, for example, divergences in policy implementation that stem from bureaucrats’ ethnic, religious, or gender identities (Pierskalla et al. 2021, Purohit 2021, Bozcaga 2020).

Beyond formal institutions and alignment, principals’ ability to monitor bureaucrats is another key driver of oversight. Scholars have started to challenge the assumption (common in American and Comparative) that principals have the required expertise and incentives to monitor—itself a costly activity. In U.S. states, low capacity among legislators (who often occupy this position as a part-time, low-pay job) has led to expanded participation by bureaucrats in the legislative process (Boushey and McGrath 2017), even in the creation of statutes that delineate bureaucratic authority (Kroeger 2022). Bureaucratic accountability in the administration of the US Social Security program has been shown to depend on the capacity of oversight agents at the state and federal levels (Drolc and Keiser 2021). A promising avenue to improve bureaucratic accountability is thus to train politicians. In a field experiment in Uganda, Raffler (2022) found that local politicians who received training about their mandate and rights, as well as financial information about the bureaucracy they oversaw, increased their monitoring and their efforts at improving public service delivery.

Expanding or contracting bureaucratic autonomy is another key lever of oversight. Recent research has shown how constraining bureaucratic autonomy may contract bureaucratic performance, since it can depress gains from bureaucratic expertise and dampen workers’

creativity and morale. For instance, Patty and Turner (2021) draw on a formal model to demonstrate that the existence of ex post review can lead some bureaucrats to make “pathological” (i.e., intentionally uninformed) policy choices. Experiments in the education sector in high-income countries have found gains from increases in school principal autonomy. In New York City more principal autonomy led to better student test scores (Wang and Yeung 2019), whereas in Denmark it led to more investments in bureaucratic expertise (Andersen and Moynihan 2016). Even in low-income settings, where Fukuyama (2013) theorized that performance would benefit from lower levels of autonomy, some studies have found gains from increasing it. For example, in the national civil services of both Ghana (Rasul, Rogger and Williams 2021) and Nigeria (Rasul and Rogger 2018), project completion rates are positively associated with increases in staff autonomy and discretion. In Pakistan, procurement officers who were given more autonomy improved their performance (Bandiera et al. 2021).

Future research should build on Fukuyama (2013) to further theorize and test the conditions under which bureaucratic autonomy can improve performance. One reason bureaucratic autonomy may have been found to improve outcomes in developing-country contexts is that bureaucrat capacity is not as homogeneously low as often assumed. Instead, bureaucracies are often characterized by “pockets” of high capacity, either across agencies or across different types of jobs (Bersch, Praça and Taylor 2017, McDonnell 2017). Furthermore, in such contexts, granting bureaucrats greater autonomy can protect them from potential abuses of oversight from politicians that stem from weak vertical and horizontal accountability (Brierley 2020). To foster learning, both Americanists and Comparativists should consider how political institutions, agency-level characteristics (e.g., sector or legal mandate), or individual bureaucrats’ features (such as selection mode or level of human capital) mediate the relationship between bureaucratic autonomy and performance.

The focus on local agencies within the Comparative literature ensures an important blindspot is oversight by national-level politicians. Scholars of U.S. politics have made significant progress in opening the black box of oversight and uncovering a wide range of formal and informal means through which politicians hold the bureaucracy accountable—beyond passing legislation or holding public hearings. This literature suggests that even informal and private means of oversight can sometimes be effective at controlling the bureaucracy (Ritchie and You 2019). Comparative scholars would be well-served to consider how top-down oversight—of both a formal and informal nature—influences bureaucratic behavior. Looking ahead, American politics scholars should seriously consider the role of the courts as overseers. The distinctive focus on Congress and the president means that the courts’ role as bureaucratic monitor has been regularly ignored, despite its obvious importance (but see Potter 2019, Wiseman and Wright 2020).

EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

Beyond oversight by politicians, bureaucrats are also influenced by external actors: businesses, non-governmental organizations, and international donors. Scholars often search for evidence of external influence in two areas: bureaucratic lobbying and public procurement. Lobbying the bureaucracy can take many forms, but—as we explain below—the vast majority of research on bureaucratic lobbying focuses on rulemaking, a process wherein bureaucrats have considerable power to set policy. Control over procurement also puts significant power in the hands of bureaucrats because of the scale of public money involved, with pro-

Procurement:

government purchase of goods and services from the private-sector or state-owned enterprises.

Rulemaking: the administrative process by which bureaucrats create legally binding policies, often by issuing an advance notice and offering an opportunity for public comment.

curement estimated to constitute 15 percent of global gross domestic product (World Bank 2021).

Like other areas of bureaucratic politics, American and Comparative research on external influences diverges in its focus. Again, this divergence is partly guided by the availability of data and partly by subfield path dependencies. Considering data availability, in the US the considerable attention devoted to biases that arise in the US rulemaking process owes in part to administrative data that are “astonishingly complete” (Carpenter et al. 2020, 425). In contrast, the study of procurement is similar across subfields, a development attributable to the widespread adoption of electronic procurement auctions across countries.

While interest groups can lobby the legislature before a law is passed, research on bureaucratic lobbying centers on rulemaking, where bureaucrats set key parameters that guide implementation after a law is passed. Rules can have tremendous social and financial consequences; accordingly, civil society organizations and private companies vie to influence bureaucratic decisions in this venue. In the US, a rich literature explores the groups that participate in rulemaking and the conditions under which this form of lobbying is effective. Early research designs associated changes in rules with public comments submitted by groups, revealing a pattern whereby industry groups participate more frequently than less well-heeled interests and agencies are biased in favor of making changes requested by these powerful interests (e.g., Kerwin and Furlong 2018, Yackee and Yackee 2006). However, under the right conditions more marginalized groups can also secure policy returns in rulemaking (Dwidar 2022). Recent scholarship has built on the earlier foundation to address the selection associated with studying comments received. Using a formal model, Libgober (2020*b*) shows that regulators anticipate groups’ concerns and that this strategic behavior suggests that existing empirical results are observationally equivalent with several potential mechanisms of regulatory bias. Meanwhile, Gordon and Rashin (2021) identify all potential stakeholders associated with a Medicare payment rule and demonstrate that anticipated losses—rather than potential gains—motivate participation decisions.

Importantly, studies on bureaucratic lobbying in the US are in conversation one another, a development made possible by the ready availability of rulemaking texts and their associated public comments from the *Federal Register*, [Regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov), and other government websites. This conversation has spurred research into related questions, such as how interest groups divvy up their bureaucratic lobbying resources. For example, using a formal model and data on lobbying associated with financial rules, You (2017) shows that larger firms are more likely to lobby Congress *ex ante*, whereas smaller firms are more likely to lobby agencies directly in the *ex post* stage. Also focusing on financial rules, Libgober (2020*a*) evaluates firm stock prices and shows that meetings with the agency are more valuable to firms than submitting public comments. Finally, relying on a survey of interest groups, Yackee (2020) demonstrates that firms believe their lobbying influence is less effective over agency rulemaking than over agency guidance documents, which are a less transparent form of agency policymaking.

In contrast to the American politics literature, there is significantly less work on bureaucratic lobbying in Comparative contexts. The exception to this rule are studies of lobbying in the EU, where research has delved deep into lobbying trends (e.g., Klüver, Mahoney and Oppen 2015). In other contexts, however, the lack of a cohesive and deep body of work presents an opportunity. In some cases, the research gap owes to the relative lack of structured venues for interaction (e.g., no established rulemaking process) and, in others, to the inability to systematically observe exchanges between interest groups and firms and

bureaucrats. This means that scholars may need to develop entrepreneurial ways to observe the influence of informal networks and mechanisms.

One area where research is relatively comparable across country settings is public procurement, an activity that is universal to bureaucracies, and an area where private firms have strong incentives to influence outcomes. Electronic procurement data is widely available in many countries. For example, the US and Italy have rich and readily available procurement data, resulting in a notable research focus on these two countries. When available, these data can typically be accessed at the individual contract level, and can be aggregated to higher units, including municipalities, agencies, and even the country level. Electronic procurement records are also available in a handful of developing countries (e.g., Colombia).

Influence in procurement is often considered to be a more objective way to measure corruption or manipulation than traditional perception-based measures (Fazekas, Tóth and King 2016, Fazekas and Kocsis 2020, Ferwerda, Deleanu and Unger 2017). Procurement manipulation is typically measured in terms of deviations from standard competition and protocols, including shortening the advertising period (Charron et al. 2017, Fazekas and Tóth 2016), tailoring eligibility criteria (Fazekas and Tóth 2016), restricting bids (Dahlström, Fazekas and Lewis 2021, Fazekas, Ferrali and Wachs 2022), manipulating the evaluation criteria (Charron et al. 2017, Fazekas and Tóth 2016), renegotiating budgets (Gulzar, Rueda and Ruiz 2021), modifying contracts (Fazekas and Tóth 2016, Fazekas, Ferrali and Wachs 2022), and overpaying vendors (Ruiz 2021).

The availability of fine-grained procurement data has allowed scholars to study both the *mechanisms* by which firms and interest groups attempt to influence procurement decisions and the *political conditions* that give rise to less competitive and more corrupt procurement practices. For example, one prominent mechanism is campaign donations; studies show that campaign donors see better returns in procurement outcomes than non-donors in numerous countries including Brazil (Boas, Hidalgo and Richardson 2014), Colombia (Gulzar, Rueda and Ruiz 2021, Ruiz 2021), the Czech Republic (Titl and Geys 2019), and the United States (Fazekas, Ferrali and Wachs 2022, Witko 2011). Turning to political conditions, scholars have uncovered a relationship between non-competitive procurement practices and a host of largely undesirable structural conditions, including: low political competition in Sweden (Broms, Dahlström and Fazekas 2019) and Italy (Coviello and Gagliarducci 2017), limited ex ante transparency in the procurement system in Italy (Coviello and Mariniello 2014) and in EU member countries (Bauhr et al. 2020), less insulated and more politicized agencies in the United States (Dahlström, Fazekas and Lewis 2021, Gordon 2011, Krause and Zarit 2022), and reduced merit protections in European regions (Charron et al. 2017).

Procurement can also be used to gauge bureaucratic performance. Focusing on cost overruns and contract delays, scholars emphasize how poor contract performance is precipitated by ideologically misaligned bureaucrats (Spenkuch, Teso and Xu 2021) and reduced agency competence (Decarolis et al. 2020) in the US, lower quality governance in European Union countries (Chong, Klien and Saussier 2016), and inefficiencies in supervising courts in Italian regions (Coviello et al. 2018).

In the developing world, the general lack of systematic procurement data has pushed scholars to find other ways to study this topic. This has led to insights into ways procurement politics may differ in particular country contexts. For instance, Brierley (2020) combines interviews, audio and list experiments to study one form of procurement corruption, kickbacks, in the context of Ghanaian local governments. She finds that in districts

where political overseers can punish bureaucrats by transferring them—a feature that is not present in all countries—corruption is more likely to occur. IO spending related to development aid also provides another opportunity to study procurement politics. Dávid-Barrett et al. (2020) use World Bank-funded aid projects to study procurement-related corruption in more than 100 countries receiving development aid, finding that procurement reforms were more effective in lower capacity countries. And Heinzl (2021) shows that IOs that employ home country staff actually see an improvement in the effectiveness of their aid-related procurement projects.

Path dependency in the American and Comparative subfields has shaped the direction that research on external influences has taken, but these dependencies should not be considered determinative for future work. In terms of lobbying, for example, scholars of American politics might do well to move beyond rulemaking and consider other venues for influence-peddling, such as the revolving door in and out of the bureaucracy (Lee and You 2022) and the federal guidance process (Yackee 2020), as well as other ways lobbying may occur, such as when legislators lobby bureaucracies (Ritchie and You 2019). And in countries where bureaucratic lobbying has been less studied, the opportunities are considerable. For instance, the revolving door exists in many places—beyond the US—and its effects ought to be studied (e.g., Peci, de Menezes Santos and Pino Oliveira de Araujo 2022). Additionally, many countries have public participation systems akin to the US’s notice-and-comment rule-making process that could be mined. Studying China, for instance, Kornreich (2019) finds central bureaucrats surprisingly responsive to comments from street-level implementers.

Although research on public procurement is more unified across subfields, there remain considerable opportunities for advancement. The transparency and stringency of procurement rules are central features of extant research, and scholars would do well to focus on the political influences shaping the formation of these rules in the first place (Dávid-Barrett and Fazekas 2020) and the downstream consequences of changes to procurement rules (Bosio et al. 2022). Additionally, the fine-grained nature of procurement data allow scholars to screen for potential corruption risks (Gallego, Rivero and Martínez 2021), as well as answer questions about how purchasing shifts in response to distributive politics concerns. Finally, scholars have noted that, in the US at least, the turn toward using procurement to obtain government services has crowded out bureaucrats (e.g., DiIulio 2014, Verkuil 2017), although the political ramifications of this development are not well understood.

CONCLUSION

Within political science, the study of bureaucracy is fragmented. Scholars of American and Comparative politics ask different questions, study different levels and types of bureaucracy, and apply divergent research approaches. Broadly generalizing, Americanists tend to focus on policymaking by national level bureaucrats, relying on large-N quantitative studies and, often, formal models too. Meanwhile, Comparativist work centers on implementation decisions by street-level bureaucrats, frequently applying survey and experimental methods.

Though they are sometimes driven by institutional differences across country contexts, in our view, these differences are as much a function of research incentives and path dependency within subfields. The research divides we have identified have compounded over time, fueled by professional incentives that encourage conversations and research presentations within subfield. Professional networks are organized by subfield, rather than thematically. Convention leads journal editors to select peer reviewers from within, rather than across,

subfields. Accordingly, researchers often have little incentives to read—let alone cite—research from the other subfield, regardless of its relevance. This point will be clear for anyone who reads the inventory of articles we collected for this review, even those selected for publication in “general interest” journals.

Of course, past need not dictate future. Our review has demonstrated an increasing appetite for understanding bureaucratic politics in the discipline. This is an opportunity. Within each research area herein reviewed, there are clear openings to apply the approaches of one subfield to another. Yet, at the same time the field of bureaucratic politics faces a classic collective action problem. Each scholar’s research would be improved by engaging with scholarship from the “other side.” In our view, studies of bureaucratic politics should be informed at every stage by perspectives across subfield. Researchers would circulate research designs and collaborate, and journal editors would solicit reviewers, with a focus on expertise in bureaucratic politics, rather than any specific country context.

But that vision is moot without slower change in the underlying professional networks in the study of bureaucratic politics. Suppose, for example, a journal mandated representation of each subfield during peer review. At this point, the most likely outcome is that the subfield blindspots we have identified in this review—the different terms of reference, and subfield-specific yardsticks for what is “important” or “significant”—would lengthen the process or lead to worse outcomes. Moreover, this also means no individual researcher has an incentive to encourage cross-subfield review through their own citation practices.

There are, however, individual steps that are incentive compatible. First, we view the contents of this review as an outline of subfield cleavages that can aid scholars if they are invited to review studies of bureaucracy outside of their subfield. In short, we hope this information will be useful to reviewers and lead to higher quality evaluation of manuscripts. Second, we recommend scholars that host conferences and organize panels do so in terms of topics, rather than regions. If our analysis is right, a panel focused on “bureaucratic personnel selection,” rather than bureaucratic personnel in the US or the Global South will both foster more interesting dialogue and do more to promote methodological innovations. The problems that vex bureaucratic governance remain far too common across the world to be treated as separate and unique.

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