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Comparative Bureaucratic Politics

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Abstract

This article discusses one of the most important institutions in the modern world, namely public bureaucracies, from a comparative perspective. Bureaucratic organizations can be seen as a result of handling dilemmas along two critical dimensions. The first dimension concerns whether bureaucrats should be autonomous or, on the contrary, directly accountable to their political masters. The second dimension is about whether bureaucrats should always be guided by the letter of the law, strictly following established rules, or, on the contrary, guided by the principle of management, searching for the most efficient solution. We review the extensive recent research on the effects of different ways of organizing public bureaucracies along these two dimensions. Specifically, we look at three fundamental outcomes: economic development, corruption, and the quality of public services. We conclude by discussing the pros and cons of the four types of bureaucracies—legalistic (accountability and law), populist (accountability and management), Weberian (autonomy and law), and liberal (autonomy and management)—and how they relate to, but do not overlap with, the concept of administrative traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Bureaucracies are imperative for modern societies but are too often overlooked by social scientists. And until quite recently, bureaucracies tended to be studied by country specialists, working within different research traditions. For example, scholars have used formal models when studying the US administration, while case-study comparisons have been more common when analyzing administrations in Europe. Often, the underlying assumption has been that, unlike legislatures or political parties (for which there have been relatively unified theories for decades), public administrations were contextually bound to the specific national environment. Thus, for a long time, insights rarely crossed disciplinary and national borders.

Recent years have seen the emergence of a growing body of comparative research on public administration, inspired by the theoretical groundwork of what was known as the positive theory of institutions (Moe 1990) or the new political economy (Miller 1997) and by the efforts of comparativists within the field (Peters 2021). The new research explores a multitude of common themes, such as the causes and consequences of bureaucratic structures. And, today, when “modern governance is increasingly bureaucratic governance” (Doherty et al. 2019, p. 159), the theoretical tools required to understand this type of organization and its consequences are needed more than ever before.

This article reviews these recent efforts to analyze public administrations and suggests that the bureaucratic organizations can be seen as a balancing act between two pairs of contrasting principles: accountability versus autonomy (i.e., should bureaucrats follow direct orders from politicians or their own professional criteria?) and law versus management (i.e., should bureaucrats follow the letter of the law or implement the most efficient solution?). When the differences in analytic perspectives on bureaucracies are described with these dilemmas in mind, it is easier, we think, to see how conflicting assessments actually contribute to a common body of knowledge about the bureaucratic organization and its effects on surrounding societies.

The article is organized into six main parts. The following section starts by defining the bureaucratic organization and differentiating it from other ways of organizing an administration. It continues by briefly contextualizing the bureaucratic organization and introducing the two dilemmas arguably common to all types of administration. The three middle sections review recent research on the consequences of bureaucracies in three areas, namely economic development, corruption, and public services. These three outcomes are selected because they are highly contested in contemporary research: Bureaucracies are portrayed sometimes as part of the problem, sometimes as part of the solution. In these sections, we are particularly attentive to how the two dilemmas introduced earlier—accountability versus autonomy and law versus management—help us to understand current disagreements. The final section considers four combinations of these two bureaucratic dilemmas: legalistic (accountability and law), populist (accountability and management), Weberian (autonomy and law), and liberal (autonomy and management) bureaucracies.

BUREAUCRATIC DILEMMAS

A bureaucracy is a distinct organizational form of administration. According to the sociologist and pivotal scholar of bureaucracies Max Weber [(1921) 2013, p. 956], a bureaucracy in its purest form (a) has a jurisdiction defined in law or by administrative regulations; (b) has a hierarchical structure; (c) is managed through written and traceable directives; (d) is specialized; (e) requires a full-time occupation; and (f) is governed by general, known, and stable rules. Of equal importance, the bureaucracy shapes demands and expectations about its officials’ selection, training, remunerations, and careers.

The bureaucratic organization is, however, not the only form of public administration. As noted by Weber [1921 (2013)] in the early twentieth century, the bureaucratic organization has not been the rule but rather the exception in historical perspective. Typically, an administration has been a patrimonial organization, with the authority of the administration merely tied to the ruler of the day. In contrast, the authority of a bureaucratic organization is endogenous to its form. The organizational features give officials in the bureaucratic organization their authority, which is not tied to the current ruler.

Historically, public administrations were not very different from private firms. In Early Modern Europe, many countries developed a system of searching for talent similar to the private sector (Lundgren et al. 1975). Illustratively, the British Crown's top officials, such as the influential Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell in the time of Henry VIII, brought the most efficient servants from their personal households into government, very much like corporate executives taking their collaborators with them into a new position.

One important exception was China. From about 800 AD, public officials were recruited through the Chinese Civil Service Exam, which is not only the longest-continuing competence-based test but also the longest-running educational institution in history (Drechsler 2020). This competitive entry system was based on the Confucian philosophy that "it is more important to have virtuous people in government than to have a good system of laws" (Tan 2011, p. 470). In 1905, after more than a millennium in operation, the Civil Service Exam was abolished in the name of Westernization, paradoxically at a time when similar systems were introduced in the Western world (Bell 2015).

There were, however, forerunners on the European continent also. In France, Spain, and Prussia (the inspiration of Weber's ideal-type of bureaucracy), administrative bodies with some autonomy to recruit and promote civil servants were created during the centuries-long process of state building. Curiously, some of the most authoritarian European powers created autonomous administrations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In order to attract talented candidates to professions that required high asset-specific investments (e.g., public law, engineering, the military), even powerful kings deliberately limited their direct influence over staff policy, delegating decisions to independent corps of officials that developed highly regulated personnel systems (Lapiente 2007). Over time, these countries gave birth to what has been called the classic administrative model (Heady 1996) and closed civil service systems (Auer et al. 1996), characterized by competitive entry exams into a defined government agency, life tenure, and seniority. These systems are in sharp contrast to the open civil service systems of the Anglo-Saxon countries and the Netherlands.

The bureaucratic organizations that first saw the light of day in China and then reached Continental Europe came with particular sets of incentives for rulers, bureaucrats, and the people. These incentives and their consequences for democratic governance, political outputs, and societal outcomes have been the subject of vast literatures in sociology, economics, public administration, and political science. While we try to review this scholarship, in all its complexity, in the following sections of the article, we believe that the literature suggests that the bureaucratic organization can be thought of as an equilibrium of sorts. With a bureaucracy and the incentive structures that follow from it, the nature of legitimate interactions between politicians, bureaucrats, and the people is, to some extent, defined and stable. In this equilibrium, certain values are prioritized over others. For bureaucrats, for example, expertise is more important than loyalty; equity is more important than effectiveness.

To simplify even further, we think that it is useful to assume that the bureaucratic equilibrium is a way of handling two dilemmas. The first dilemma concerns, on the one hand, accountability and, on the other, autonomy. Our observation of this dilemma is not unique, as is obvious from the

classic debate between Finer (1936) and Friedrich (1940) in the mid-twentieth century. By “accountability,” we mean the extent to which the ruler can control individuals in the administration through recruitment and promotion practices and/or control entire organizational units, such as agencies, by, for example, unrestricted control of their budgets. By “autonomy,” we mean the extent to which recruitment and promotion practices follow professional norms, such as meritocracy, while organizational units have decision-making powers independent from the ruler and are not punished for using them even if decisions go against the interest of the ruler. While accountability is key for all rulers, a trade-off has to be made if, for example, administrative expertise is desirable. In the patrimonial administration, this trade-off is to the benefit of direct accountability to the ruler, while autonomy is of greater importance in bureaucracies.

The second dilemma—law versus management—concerns the tension between following rules and pursuing managerial principles (Hood 1991, Dunleavy et al. 2006) or between *Rechtsstaat* orientation and Public Interest orientation (Ongaro et al. 2018). By “law,” we mean that administrators mostly follow the principle of legality, with the jurisdictions of each unit typically defined in detailed regulations and with all major causes of action predefined in written documents, as characteristic of the Weberian ideal-type of administration (Peters 2021). By “management,” we refer to an administration that mostly follows managerial principles and thus is closer to the workings of a private firm. The process is of less importance and the outcome of more importance. While following legal rules might ensure impartiality to a larger extent, following managerial principles increases flexibility and might increase organizational efficiency. Illegality is certainly not tolerated in a management-oriented administration, but managerial objectives such as efficiency tend to take precedence over more legalistic principles (Pierre 2015).

The accountability–autonomy dilemma is central for students of administration from different research traditions. Consider, for example, theories of delegation, which have informed the literature on formal models of bureaucracy (Bendor et al. 2001, Gailmard & Patty 2012). The delegation literature, and underlying principal–agent theories, have indeed advanced the scholarship on the role of administration in American politics (Epstein & O’Halloran 1999) as well as from comparative perspectives (Huber & Shipan 2002). This research tradition is concerned with how politicians can at the same time secure control over the bureaucracy (Moe 1989) and incentivize bureaucrats to develop and use their expertise (Gailmard & Patty 2007). The former requires direct accountability; the latter, autonomy. An illustration of the dilemma is that the most obvious way of acquiring control over the administration follows from the ally principle (Bendor et al. 2001), which implies hiring loyal servants (Lewis 2008). This course of action does not incentivize bureaucrats to invest in technical competence (Lewis 2007) or to speak truth to power (Cooper 2018). In short, direct accountability might increase control but decrease competence as well as monitoring. Another example, from a different research tradition, can be taken from the comparative literature of bureaucracy. While this literature acknowledges that political appointments to the administration can establish control over administrative processes (Peters & Pierre 2004) and documents that partisan loyalty is indeed appreciated (Bach & Veit 2018), scholars have mostly been occupied with studying the perils of politicization (Kopecky et al. 2012).

A caveat is in order here. The core element of autonomy, meritocratic recruitment, has lately been criticized for creating a “tyranny” (Sandel 2020) or a “trap” (Markovits 2019), for both losers and winners of merit-based contests, and thus for the society at large. Likewise, in order to have a representative bureaucracy, which is positive for the quality of services (Bhavnani & Lee 2021), several administrations use instruments that could be seen as opposed to meritocracy (e.g., quotas for the employment of certain groups, recruitment targets). Nevertheless, both historical and contemporary evidence indicate that representative bureaucracy and meritocracy, empirically speaking, often go hand in hand. From its inception (Kingsley 1944), the concept

of representative bureaucracy was a reaction against the restricted social background of the UK Civil Service (Van Ryzin & Riccucci 2017). Consequently, “meritocracy became a useful tool with which to break the dominance of the traditional aristocracy in the administration” (Groeneveld & Van de Walle 2010, p. 242). And recent experimental studies indicate that civil servants’ hiring preferences—unlike private employees’, which curiously are more prone to ethnic discrimination—are consistent with meritocratic principles as well as passive representation and nondiscrimination (Jankowski et al. 2020).

The law–management dilemma has been of common concern for practitioners and scholars over the last five decades. The late 1960s and 1970s saw a growing academic critique against the bureaucratic organization for its inefficiencies (Buchanan 1968) and perverse incentives for budget growth (Niskanen 1971). Market enthusiasts, inspired by neoclassical economic theory, and the Public Choice School embraced a radical reform agenda implemented in different forms from the late 1970s onward (Hood 1991). At the same time, an outspoken political skepticism against bureaucracies took shape, most clearly articulated in President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s New Right political agenda. During the 1980s and 1990s, bureaucracies were reformed in many countries, in an effort supported by international organizations such as the World Bank (1991). The OECD also reinforced reform efforts, both in its 1991 report “Serving the Economy Better” (OECD 1991) and in another report in 1995, where it asked for “greater focus on results and increased value for money, devolution of authority and enhanced flexibility, strengthened accountability and control, a client- and service-orientation” (OECD 1995, p. 25). This wave of reform was later termed new public management (NPM) (Hood 1991). The idea was to replace the Weberian bureaucracy with results-oriented organizations, importing private sector practices to public bureaus and making them compete with nonstate actors. The NPM reforms broke with the classical bureaucratic organization in at least three ways: They disaggregated bureaucracies into smaller units, made these units into subjects of competition, and put greater emphasis on extrinsic motivation for bureaucrats (Dunleavy et al. 2006). These changes have led to the trends of agentification (Overman & van Thiel 2016), marketization (Gingrich 2011), and individual and performance-related compensation schemes for bureaucrats (Dahlström & Lapuente 2010). NPM became an important administrative model, even in polities heavily influenced by social democratic ideology such as the Nordic countries (Hood 1995).

The handling of the accountability–autonomy and law–management dilemmas affects political outputs as well as societal outcomes. The following three sections review research on the effects of different types of bureaucracies on three particular areas: economic development, corruption, and the quality of public services.

BUREAUCRACY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Does the bureaucratic organization grease the economy’s gears or is it sand among them? Are bureaucracies self-serving, power-seeking institutions, as depicted in Niskanen’s (1971) classical view of the budget-maximizing bureaucrat? Or, on the contrary, are they engines for promoting economic growth, as in the also archetypal views of the embedded (Evans 1995) or entrepreneurial (Mazzucato 2011) state? A review of the literature reveals that, beyond the superficial conflict between supporters and detractors of bureaucracies, the evidence points toward the beneficial consequences of holding the middle ground in the abovementioned two bureaucratic dilemmas.

Accountability versus Autonomy

A prevailing view in the literature is that the way in which bureaucrats are selected affects economic growth. Put simply, officials can be selected at-will by their political superiors or recruited through

merit-based, autonomous procedures. In the latter case, governments tend to implement growth-promoting policies. Several mechanisms, and evidence supporting them, have been proposed to explain the general correlation between autonomous bureaucracies and economic development.

A first suggestion is that bureaucrats who are independent from politicians constitute a balance against politicians' particularistic goals. Unlike written regulations, which can always be circumvented, bureaucrats are hard to sidestep since they can observe and adapt to the process. An autonomous bureaucracy therefore prevents politicians from implementing socially inefficient policies. The tension between creating an environment in the country that promotes economic growth and the narrower interests of the rulers is, according to North (1981, p. 25), the most prevalent conflict in the history of humankind, from the "ancient Egyptian dynasties through the slavery system of the Greek and Roman world to the medieval manor."

In modern democracies, we see how administrations staffed with at-will public employees overspend public resources on dubious public infrastructure projects such as the airports without flights or the highways without cars we saw in early twenty-first-century Spain (Dahlström & Lapuente 2017). When politicians are checked by autonomous bureaucrats who, for example, dare to raise their voices against the inefficiency of a public works project, public resources can be moved from wasteful to growth-promoting projects, such as well-planned public infrastructure. The opposite happens with politically appointed officials, who have incentives to supply biased public policy knowledge and tell their superiors what they want to hear. One such example is the calculations of inflation by Argentina's politicized national statistical agency *Indec*, which have been up to 15 percentage points lower than independent economists' estimations (Boräng et al. 2018).

A second mechanism has been called an "epistemic effect" (Nistotskaya & Cingolani 2016, p. 519) and suggests that an autonomous bureaucracy attracts better types than a politicized one. In particular, two characteristics of an autonomous bureaucracy, meritocratic recruitment and secure tenure, bring employees into government who are more competent and less short-sighted. Autonomous bureaucrats have longer time horizons than politicians, whose tenure is unstable. The predictable career ladder of autonomous civil servants gives them long-term rewards, both tangible and intangible (Horn 1995), and thus they tend to prioritize policies that promote long-term benefits for the economy (Evans & Rauch 1999). Autonomous bureaucrats, interacting with their colleagues for life-long periods, also discipline those who bend too much to politicians' or interest groups' short-sighted demands. Classical qualitative evidence in support of this view is presented in the country studies of Japan (Johnson 1982), Korea (Amsden 1989), and Taiwan (Wade 1990), or more generally in studies of the "Asian Tigers" (Evans 1995). Contemporary quantitative scholarship also provides evidence for this view. On the one hand, taking a long historical perspective, the positive effects of an autonomous bureaucracy may be relatively modest and concentrated in recent decades (Cornell et al. 2020). On the other, Nistotskaya & Cingolani (2016) show that where bureaucracies are more directly accountable to politicians, regulations are of lower quality. Moreover, they document the same pattern with regard to business regulation and indicate that direct political accountability of the bureaucracy correlates with lower rates of business entry. Micro-level data with detailed matched employer–employee information on Brazilian public employees over the period 1997–2014 indicate—via a regression discontinuity design in close electoral races—that political appointments lead to the selection of less competent individuals (Colonnelli et al. 2020).

One intriguing corollary of this literature is that the delegation of powers from politicians to bureaucrats may eventually benefit politicians, such as when a principal delegates to an agent whose preferences are known to be different from the principal's in order to avoid ex post temptations (Miller 2000). The ruler of the day may, for example, often be incentivized to prioritize short-term benefits from old technology, over long-term gains for society (Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). By tying their own hands, potentially opportunistic rulers may gain credibility,

and both qualitative historical (Lapiente 2007) and quantitative contemporary (Nistotskaya & Cingolani 2016) evidence supports this “credible commitment effect.”

For other scholars, it is not bureaucratic autonomy that triggers economy-enhancing policies but its opposite: the fact that bureaucrats are directly accountable to their political superiors. Anthropologists have long noted the economic advantages of patronage relations in government for the development of particular societies. Appointments based on friendship and kinship may have advantages at some stages of economic development, as they build long-term trust among the members of a community (Henrich 2020). Consequently, in opposition to the bureaucratic development states, one could also talk of “patrimonial developmental states” (Jiang 2018). The idea is that patronage creates informal groups within bureaucracies, and from organizational theory we know that the existence of these relational contracts, based on the actors’ expectations about their future interactions, is usually a solution to organizational problems (Baker et al. 2002).

Take Brazil, which underwent one of the most successful state-led industrializations of the second half of the twentieth century, as its economy grew at an outstanding 7% per year from 1945 to 1980 (Schneider 1992). It had a highly fragmented public administration with thousands of scattered agencies, almost 900 agencies to coordinate those agencies, and approximately 50,000 personal political appointments. Yet, patronage was not an obstacle but a facilitator for designing effective economic policies, as strong personal ties favored communication and coordination. It could thus be argued that, under certain conditions, “personalism can in fact enhance bureaucratic performance,” as Schneider (1992, p. 7) puts it.

Another example is contemporary China, which has the most successful economic history ever documented from 1980 onward. Instead of merit-based promotions relying on competitive exams, the patron–client relationships prevailing in many parts of the Chinese administration (Shih et al. 2012) can improve government performance because they offer a clear solution to the inherent principal–agent problem within all administrations (Jiang 2018). Personal interactions between patrons located in superior ranks of the bureaucracy and clients at lower levels help to extend the time horizons of all actors, inducing subordinates to exert higher levels of effort and superiors to be trustworthy. Indeed, those cities whose administrative leaders (i.e., the clients) are informally tied to the incumbent provincial leaders (i.e., the patrons) present significantly faster economic growth than cities lacking those patronage connections. Additionally, since personal links foster the loyalty of junior officials in the Chinese bureaucracy to their seniors, administrative superiors can select the most competent subordinates, thus avoiding the risk of being ousted (Jia et al. 2015). And, whether it is through patronage or the mechanisms of the Communist Party’s strategy of “Building a Harmonious Society,” local cadre officials have increasingly become more directly accountable to their superiors (Ahlers & Schubert 2018). This includes the “hold-to-account” (*wen-zhezhi*) system, which implies “immediate, public and harsh sanctions” (Mei & Pearson 2014, p. 76) against some officials as a way to deter others, or “killing a chicken to scare the monkeys” (p. 77).

Law versus Management

On the one hand, economic development requires a strictly law-abiding bureaucracy. The sudden rediscovery of this idea with the failure of development efforts in many postcommunist or transitional countries finally led many scholars to focus on the “institutional underpinnings of market economies” (Rodrik 2007) in general, and, in particular, on the need for bureaucracies that act in a stable, predictable, and rule-following way. A rule-bound administration offers investors and other economic agents a guarantee against arbitrariness and favoritism, a signal of respect for contracts, and the means for transparency (Rothstein 2011). Although these actors may see the bureaucracy as an obstacle, without it “every small business, every professional, would have to

anticipate that their market opportunities, their property rights, and the contracts they depend on were contingent on the political pressures their competitors brought to bear on political actors” (Miller 2000, p. 319). Bureaucratic rules thus prevent a devastating deterrence to entrepreneurial spirit in a society.

Evidence highlights the economic relevance of a rule-bound administration. A study of 172 regions in 18 EU countries found that regions (e.g., Northern Italy, Flanders, the Basque country) with perceived high levels of impartial administration had, first, systematically higher rates of small and medium-sized enterprises and, second, a more even pattern of territorial dispersion of those enterprises (Nistotskaya et al. 2015). That is, such businesses were not only concentrated in the country’s capital, next to the political power, as happens in countries like Romania or Bulgaria, where administrations are perceived as being partial and benefiting particular business interests.

On the other hand, the rigidity of law-obsessed bureaucracies may be very costly for the economy. Thus, next to the voices of those who support a Weberian bureaucracy, there are also those who propose a more Smithian one (i.e., the standard neoclassical view of government attributed to Adam Smith; Evans & Rauch 1999, p. 749). Huntington (1968, p. 386) notes that “in terms of economic growth, the only thing worse than a society with a rigid, overcentralized and dishonest bureaucracy is one with a rigid, overcentralized and honest bureaucracy.” And although there does not seem to be solid empirical support for the general view that market-friendly smaller government yields better economic results, the incorporation of NPM tools such as mission-driven and results-oriented agencies, instead of rule-driven and input-oriented agencies, can help to optimize the internal workings of government (De Vries & Nemec 2013).

The findings from these two opposing lines of thought can nevertheless be combined. And it seems that the best bureaucratic results can be achieved by combining Weberian characteristics (i.e., stability, predictability, and impartiality) with NPM-inspired market incentives (i.e., more concerned with outputs than inputs), as suggested by several overviews of the literature (Christensen & Læg Reid 2007, Pierre & Rothstein 2010).

BUREAUCRACY AND CORRUPTION

Corruption has deleterious effects on a society. Within bureaucracies, it increases administrative inefficiency (Ahlin & Bose 2007) and modifies the structure of public expenditure toward wasteful spending (De la Croix & Delavallade 2009). In addition, it fosters economic inequality (Gupta et al. 2002) and impedes economic growth, contracting foreign direct investment (Mathur & Singh 2013) and trade (Musila & Sigue 2010) and leading to a large overall decrease of GDP per capita. And such effects are not small. With an increase of one standard deviation in the international measurement of corruption, Gründler & Potrafke (2019) estimate the cumulative long-run decrease of GDP per capita at 17%. Curbing corruption should thus be a central objective of bureaucratic design. The question is, which type of administration is better equipped to fight corruption?

Accountability versus Autonomy

For over a century (Wilson 1887), an autonomous body of civil servants has been proclaimed as the most effective check against the “the dangerous impulses of elected officials” (Miller 2011, p. 489), sometimes called the “political moral hazard” (Miller & Whitford 2016, p. 47). In fact, Progressive Era civil service reformers targeted all at-will appointments and promoted protection for public employees from politicians’ interference as two fundamental measures to curb corruption (Rubin & Whitford 2008).

Anecdotal evidence points in the same direction, and, for instance, it has been noted that “there are probably fewer bribes among the two million federal bureaucrats than there are among

the 435 members of Congress” (Miller 2000, p. 316). Numerous systematic empirical studies have corroborated this. A review of 36 studies exploring the links between different features of civil service systems and corruption found that the meritocratic recruitment of civil servants was clearly associated with lower levels of corruption—unlike other variables, such as distinct pay structures and job stability (Meyer-Sahling et al. 2018). Micro-level evidence also indicates that merit-based promotions are conducive to lower acceptance of informal payments among health workers in Tanzania (Lindkvist 2014) and to lower levels of tolerance toward corruption among Korean civil servants (Kwon 2014).

Curiously, one of the bureaucratic features that is theoretically expected to reduce corruption, namely the existence of high public salaries (Becker & Stigler 1974), does not show an unequivocally robust effect on reducing corruption (Treisman 2000). A review of interdisciplinary research notes that civil service wages may be a necessary but insufficient condition for controlling corruption (Gans-Morse et al. 2018), and experimental evidence also indicates that the effect of wages is contingent on other factors, such as increased monitoring (Schulze & Frank 2003). Both historical (Kiser & Tong 1992) and contemporary (Fjeldstad 2005) evidence indeed indicates that salaries need to be complemented with other monitoring systems. However, if bureaucrats have low or even poverty-level wages, they may be more prone to accept or ask for bribes (Cornell & Sundell 2020).

But through which mechanism, if any, does an autonomous civil service deter corruption? Scholars tend to agree that meritocratic recruitment does not preclude misbehavior simply because of the higher technical capabilities of merit-selected civil servants alone, as these could be used to actually legalize corrupt exchanges (Jancsics & Jávör 2012).

Instead, repeated interactions between merit-recruited bureaucrats with tenure—who, in addition, generally have a high education level, which makes them more sensitive to damage to their reputation—in a given administrative body may help the development of ethical norms. In turn, merit-selected officials would be less prone to engage in corrupt activities than their at-will-selected counterparts (Rauch & Evans 2000). Bureaucrats inspired by an *esprit de corps* to obey the law may simply be more likely to prevent the bending of the law in response to informal pressures from entrenched business interests (Miller 2000).

Moreover, if public employees are recruited according to their merits and not their political connections, it is less likely that bureaucrats will develop relationships of loyalty and subordination toward their political superiors. Since merit-recruited bureaucrats and democratically chosen politicians respond to what James Madison (Federalist 51) would call different “modes of election,” both have incentives for mutual monitoring and control of each other’s activities. Meritocratic recruitment, thus, prevents not only political but also bureaucratic corruption. And it not only helps prevent corrupt exchanges but also facilitates their investigation, as both politicians and bureaucrats can more freely blow the whistle if they suspect the other is trying to push forward an illegal or even a dubiously legal action (Dahlström & Lapuente 2017).

In contrast to the abovementioned line of thought, it has been argued that bureaucratic autonomy incentivizes officials’ misbehavior, and thus one of the best anticorruption policies is to reduce bureaucratic discretion (Klitgaard 1988). Empirical evidence yields support for this prediction. For instance, a study of 25 postcommunist countries, using firm-level survey data, indicates that when local or street-level bureaucrats enjoy ample discretion to interpret regulatory norms in the process of their implementation, this may lead to increased corruption (Duvanova 2014).

Patronage may be a source of both vice and virtue. Political appointments can be used to enrich party members, entrench family dynasties, and encourage all sorts of abuses of public office, yet they may also curb corruption if the motivations of those who control patronage appointments—i.e., elected officials—are the right ones (Grindle 2013). Indeed, autonomous administrative bodies

with merit-recruited civil servants, particularly in authoritarian regimes, can take advantage of their privileged, unaccountable position to extract bribes (Lapiente 2007). In those cases, making bureaucrats more directly accountable to their political principals could help to curb corruption.

Law versus Management

One inconvenient argument increasingly present in the scholarly debate is that democratically enacted laws may foster rent seeking. There is “legal corruption” (Kaufmann & Vicente 2011), and a vast array of “unchecked opportunities for personal, factional, and party enrichment,” which cannot be “cured with more medicine,” i.e., democracy (Diamond 2007, p. 119). Rent seeking can only be remedied by a strong rule-based administration, such as is delivered by the bureaucratic organization (Pierre & Rothstein 2010). The most effective institutional tools to prevent the narrow pursuit of both elected and unelected officials’ self-interested goals are the rules associated with a Weberian bureaucracy: standard operating procedures, routines, and clearance (Miller 2000).

The abandonment of such a rule-following administration may lead to a decline in both ethical norms (Reichard 2003) and the organizational resources that allow public employees to resist pressure by politicians for “favors” (Calvot 2003, p. 86). Even if it may be unrealistic to think that rule-bound Weberian bureaucrats are “a Jesuit corps of ascetic zealots” (Hood 1995, p. 93), under certain circumstances managerial reforms may have replaced intrinsically motivated “knights” with “knaves” (Boruvka & Perry 2020, p. 577). This problem seems particularly acute in emerging economies. Absent a strong legal control system, marketization reforms in developing countries have, to a large extent, presented opportunities for corruption (Samaratunge et al. 2008). Consequently, some scholars call for a return to the classical Weberian bureaucratic organization (Pierre & Rothstein 2010).

Contrary to this, other scholars argue that the inherent characteristics of a legal rules-based bureaucracy may lead to higher levels of corruption. Bureaucratic regulations, which some see as a safeguard against favoritism (Miller 2000), are seen by others as granting a monopoly power to the civil servants who give authorization to, or inspect, business operations (Tanzi 1998). An excess of bureaucratic regulation may be exploited by civil servants to extract bribes (Shleifer & Vishny 1993). The red tape associated with lengthy bureaucratic procedures may lead to more corruption, because it forces economic agents to find extralegal means to circumvent those rules (Graeff & Mehlkop 2003) and thus incentivizes both bribe-taking and bribe-giving behaviors (Goel & Nelson 2010).

According to this view, the problem is not a large bureaucracy or big government but an administration burdened with too many administrative rules (Holcombe & Boudreaux 2015). The Ancient Roman thinker Tacitus noted that “the more corrupt the republic, the more numerous its laws” (quoted in Bacchus 2004, p. 643). Centuries later, the vicious cycle between high levels of regulation and corruption is documented in several studies (Aghion et al. 2010).

Consequently, an administration that follows managerial principles could, in theory, reduce corruption, because it encourages competition instead of a monopolistic organization with ample incentives to collect bribes (Osborne & Plastrik 1997). Moreover, managerial reforms cut bureaucratic red tape and impose quantitative performance indicators, making it more difficult for corrupt officials to deviate from their work objectives.

But solid empirical evidence in favor of managerial reform as a panacea for fighting corruption is lacking, and several scholars note that NPM can in itself create an “area of risk” (Doig 1997) or an “opportunity” (von Maravic & Reichard 2003) for corruption, maybe not deliberately but as one of several unintended consequences. However, as some defenders of managerial reform claim, one may need to distinguish between old public management (i.e., managerial discretion serving

the interest of machine-run governments) and new public management, which, thanks to its focus on good performance and accountability, is naturally inimical to corruption. Consequently, the fight against corruption may require more results-orientation, not less (Kelman 2003).

One of the core tenets of managerial reform—the emphasis on decentralization and competition among administrative units, in contrast to hierarchical centralization—has been theorized as a check against corruption (Shleifer & Vishny 1993) as it creates coordination problems for corrupt officials. But while some studies find a positive association between decentralization and lower corruption (Fiorino et al. 2015), others encounter a negative relationship (Olken & Barron 2009).

All in all, neither earlier (von Maravic & Reichard 2003) nor later (Gans-Morse et al. 2018) widely encompassing reviews have found conclusive evidence supporting the idea that a management-oriented approach fosters corruption more than a law-oriented one. This is thus a potentially relevant avenue for future research, particularly of an experimental nature: Do managerial reforms, such as pay-for-performance systems, trigger or preclude corrupt activities?

BUREAUCRACY AND PUBLIC SERVICES

How services are provided is important for politicians, bureaucrats, and the people. If services are delivered by organizations that are controlled directly by politicians, then politicians may use these services to reward their supporters and not to attain the common good. On the other hand, if politicians cannot adequately steer how services are provided, the bureaucratic organization might not implement reforms that are for the common good. The bureaucracy may in such instances become a powerhouse that is able to stop all reforms not in its own immediate interest. Moreover, if rules and routines, rather than effective service delivery, are put front and center, this might indeed guarantee equity; but without incentives to innovate, equity might come at the cost of quality.

Accountability versus Autonomy

Rulers cannot provide services directly but need to rely on administrators, whose autonomy has been seen as crucial for the aggregate historical performance of the state apparatus. The isolation of administrators from rulers' interference enhances government effectiveness (Lewis 2007, Dahlström & Lapuente 2017). Conversely, the political appointment of those administrators may lead to an oversupply of particularized goods that benefit the ruling party's core constituencies and to an underprovision of public services (Bertelli & Grose 2009, Dahlström et al. 2021).

Furthermore, since politicization replaces merit with personal or political loyalty, it deteriorates human resources management practices; when these are no longer seen as fair, performance worsens (Fuenzalida & Riccucci 2019). In politicized administrations, senior executives exhibit lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Kim et al. 2021), while in autonomous bureaucracies, officials present greater cohesion and commitment to the organization's mission (Carpenter 2001). Consequently, rather than making administrations more rigid, a high degree of autonomy “permits innovation, experimentation and risk taking” in the bureaucracy (Fukuyama 2013, p. 359). In addition, politicization increases turnover, which debilitates public organizations (Gallo & Lewis 2011). Individual-level data from the Colonial Office of the British Empire, which administered up to 20% of the world's land mass at its peak, indicate that politically appointed top officers raised 4% less annual revenue, gave more tax exemptions, and generally performed worse (Xu 2018).

However, particularly in developing countries, autonomous civil service systems may have their own agenda (Dasandi & Esteve 2017) and a “power rivaling that of the political establishment” (Grindle & Thomas 1991, p. 60). The autonomous bureaucratic elites may be conservative and

process oriented, opposing efficiency-enhancing reforms that could threaten their privileges and status (Hirschmann 1999). For instance, fearing that they would lose their responsibilities or would be compelled to comply with newly developed performance standards, autonomous bureaucrats in education may oppose reforms (Grindle 2004). Consequently, policy reform may sometimes require politicians putting loyalists into government. In contexts like Brazil, a system having political appointments instead of autonomous civil servants may increase public service delivery (Toral 2021), because it facilitates connections between bureaucrats and politicians, and, in turn, access to key information as well as material and immaterial resources. For Toral (2021, p. 1), “upward embeddedness”—that is, between bureaucrats and their political superiors—may yield better results than the embeddedness of autonomous bureaucrats with economic interests usually praised in the literature (Evans 1995). At the same time, in advanced democracies, such as the United States, it is precisely the increasing complexity of policy design that motivates the need for appointees loyal to the government (Aberbach & Rockman 2009).

In summary, even if political appointments may sometimes lead to lower service quality, at other times the political colonization of ineffective and rigid autonomous bureaucracies may be beneficial, especially if politicians recruit highly qualified professionals.

Law versus Management

The common assumption of the managerial reforms implemented worldwide since the late twentieth century is that the introduction of private sector practices would generally foster public service efficiency (Alford & Hughes 2008). In particular, managerialism is supposed to improve delivery through three mechanisms: incentives, competition, and disaggregation (Dunleavy et al. 2006).

First, NPM-inspired incentives may improve the workings of public administration because they replace low-powered incentives, such as the traditional flat salaries of bureaucracies, with high-powered incentives. Employees stimulated by performance-based payments are expected to work at their best (Moynihan 2008), and indeed pay-for-performance schemes for tax collectors in Pakistan have been found to unambiguously lead to increases in tax revenue (Khan et al. 2016). Moreover, numerous pieces of experimental evidence from randomized controlled trials provide additional support for the introduction of monetary rewards and penalties for civil servants (Pepinsky et al. 2017). But personnel systems based solely on incentives tend to backfire, as they destroy trust between superiors and subordinates within the organization, leading to overall lower levels of efficiency (Miller 1992). High-powered incentive systems may demotivate public employees because they focus on extrinsic goals, when many employees are actually moved by intrinsic values. Thus, a more fruitful way to motivate public employees may instead be to return to the promotion of some of those public values that are associated with the bureaucratic organization, such as equity and impartiality (Boruvka & Perry 2020): that is, more law and less management.

Second, a managerial administration may increase efficiency by contracting out and fostering competition among different service providers in quasi-markets. If, instead of being assigned to a school or hospital according to bureaucratic rules, parents and patients can choose the public- or private-owned facility they prefer, and if the formula by which money follows choice triggers quality-enhancing reforms and decreases the slack of monopolistic public providers (Le Grand 2009), then efficiency may be enhanced. Sound theoretical arguments have, however, been made against the standard view of what kind of effects on services should be expected from marketization reforms. The standard expectation is that marketization will at the same time both decrease costs and increase service quality. This is because in a market there is greater pressure to produce more effectively and make quality-improving innovations. However, many services, such as education

and health care, are hard to specify and therefore complicated to contract out (Brown et al. 2016). While parents and patients may recognize good education and care when they see it, it is too demanding both to specify it *ex ante* and to monitor it *ex post*. Contracts on such complex services are therefore, in theoretical terms, incomplete. And because of the incomplete nature of these contracts, the private providers are in fact often incentivized to put cost reductions before quality improvements, since they want to get contracts (often selected on price alone) and increase their profit margin (Hart et al. 1997). A return to a more law-based, rather than a managerial-based, administration could thus be beneficial for the provision of high-quality services.

Third, disaggregating ministerial departments from agencies should bring better public service delivery. This is expected because management of the new agencies would be more professional and business-oriented (Bach 2012) and also because agencies are better at involving stakeholders and citizens in policy implementation (MacCarthaigh & Boyle 2012). Empirical evidence is not clear, though. Some studies have found a negative effect of agencification on both output and efficiency in the public sector (Overman & van Thiel 2016), while others have found partly positive effects. An in-depth analysis of four large EU countries (France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom) identifies an improvement in what Cingolani & Fazekas (2020, p. 546) call “value for money” of 2.8% or €1.7 billion over a decade. Additionally, these benefits could increase further over time, as older agencies tend to perform even better than younger ones.

Summing up the numerous empirical studies, one can conclude that we need equilibrium between the aforementioned characteristics to increase the quality and efficiency of public services. The key may thus lie in administrative models that combine Weberian features with NPM-style market solutions (Christensen & Lægveid 2007). In this sense, good examples that combine both legal rules and management are the daycare and preschool systems in Sweden and Denmark (Pierre & Rothstein 2010). On the one hand, they are firmly rooted in the Weberian legal framework that guarantees equal access to all parents. On the other hand, they are paradigmatic examples of an NPM-inspired quasi-market for public services: Following the school vouchers model, parents choose from an ample array of state-owned and charter schools. The school principals, in the public as well as the private schools, enjoy wide discretion to manage human resources and to choose the pedagogical models of the schools.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature reviewed in this article indicates that the field is moving from case studies and small comparisons to large comparative studies, both across and within countries, with experimental evidence making an increasing contribution. These recent developments in the field allow us to observe the tensions between accountability and autonomy as well as between law and management in bureaucracies across the globe. The comparative turn of the field has also been more concerned with the relationship between bureaucratic design and outcomes such as economic development, corruption, and service quality.

The reviewed literature on how administrative systems are balanced in these two dimensions makes it possible for us to summarize types of bureaucracies in four equilibria represented in **Table 1**. Stated simply, bureaucracies can be legalistic, populist, Weberian, or liberal. These equilibria result from trade-offs that are hard to escape, and the choices made are contingent on contextual factors. Thus, it is difficult to argue that one model offers better performance under all circumstances. The research rather suggests that the cells should be seen as equilibria suited for a given set of historical, social, and political characteristics. We believe that the typology can be used as a tool for organizing our thinking around bureaucratic politics from a comparative perspective.

Table 1 Four types of bureaucracy

	Law	Management
Accountability	<u>Legalistic bureaucracy:</u> Politicization + <i>Rechtsstaat</i> Examples: Napoleonic administrations (France, Spain, Italy, Greece)	<u>Populistic bureaucracy:</u> Politicization + Public Interest Examples: Machine politics in nineteenth-century United States, transitional democracies in Latin America
Autonomy	<u>Weberian bureaucracy:</u> Professionalism + <i>Rechtsstaat</i> Examples: Continental Europe and Asia (Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore)	<u>Liberal bureaucracy:</u> Professionalism + Public Interest Examples: Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries

A legalistic bureaucracy is an administration that combines very strict rule-based procedures with a relatively high degree of politicization. It is characteristic of the countries belonging to the Napoleonic tradition, such as France, Spain, Italy, and Greece (Peters 2021), and largely their former colonies. The highly legalistic nature of these administrations is a response to historically high levels of political instability. Legal procedures, even if they meant a comparatively high level of red tape, guaranteed predictability and equality before the law for citizens and economic agents. They solved rulers' credible commitment deficits. In contrast to Northern European countries, those with legalistic bureaucracies prioritize the law over managerial principles (Ongaro et al. 2018). Yet, in order to make public administration responsive to politicians, these countries have created an ample layer of political appointees to steer the administration, exemplified by the extensive number of advisors and cabinets prevailing in the French and Spanish administrations. In summary, street-level bureaucrats follow stringent administrative rules while the senior civil service is directly accountable to its political masters. Recent comparative research on Brazil explains how this equilibrium helped economic development (Schneider 1992) and delivered relatively high service quality (Torral 2021), but the comparative perspective also exposes the drawbacks of this model (Dahlström & Lapuente 2017).

A populistic bureaucracy mixes a flexible administration, one that does not strictly follow standard administrative procedures, with a highly politicized one. It is characteristic of patronage systems, such as the machine politics of the Jacksonian era in the United States, which nowadays is experiencing a revival through the populist rhetoric of exalting the government of the "common man/person" (Peters & Pierre 2019). We see an increase in the politicization of the administration in several countries, from the United States (Rein 2018) to Hungary (Meyer-Shaling & Toth 2020), which is correlated with a deterioration of democratic rights as administrations become the executors of the ruling party's wishes. But at the same time, with less red tape, individuals or groups in the bureaucracy cannot take advantage of their position as much (Holcombe & Boudreaux 2015), and the ruling party is able to deliver goods and services without resistance from autonomous bureaucratic elites (Dasandi & Esteve 2017). Recent research has thus helped to explain both the pros and cons of this model.

A Weberian bureaucracy most closely resembles Max Weber's ideal: autonomous civil servants applying rules-based decisions. It is characteristic of Continental European countries that followed the inspirational Prussian model of Weber (Auer et al. 1996, Heady 1996), in which would-be bureaucrats are recruited via competitive exams and imbued with *esprit de corps* and public values, such as equality and impartiality. Influential comparative research has shown how this type of bureaucracy contributed to economic development (Evans & Rauch 1999) and entrepreneurship (Nistotskaya & Cingolani 2016), while recent research has questioned how large the effects on

economic development are in a broader sample and over longer time periods (Cornell et al. 2020). We have also discussed the relatively large body of research showing how autonomy, not the least in recruitment, drives down corruption (Rauch & Evans 2000) and competence (Lewis 2007) in government. And while the NPM reform agenda to a large extent was a critique against this sort of bureaucracy (Hood 1991), the jury still seems to be out concerning what type of administration actually improves service quality (Lapiente & Van de Walle 2020).

A liberal bureaucracy joins an autonomous, professional workforce with managerial, flexible principles. Street-level bureaucrats enjoy discretion to search for the most efficient solution instead of merely applying rules, yet they are not discretionally appointed by their political superiors but are recruited through open (and transparent) processes. Many countries belonging to this category, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, and Sweden, are generally at the top in almost all rankings of quality of government and control of corruption (Rothstein 2011). The reason may be that the high level of discretion granted to bureaucratic officials does not translate into opportunistic behavior, as both politicians and bureaucrats control each other, given that they are accountable to different groups: respectively, the ruling party and the bureaucrats' professional peers (Dahlström & Lapiente 2017).

Each of these four equilibria makes sense within the concrete historical conditions in which each administration is embedded. The bureaucratic politics often serves a purpose. The research reviewed has documented both the tensions between the poles on each dimension and the effects of the choices made in different contexts. Yet, even if there is no natural evolution, these models are not set in stone. Equilibria change as conditional factors change. Critical junctures may modify path dependencies. Therefore, even if the reviewed literature helps us to see that there is a certain juxtaposition between these four equilibria and certain administrative traditions (e.g., Napoleonic, Continental, Anglo-Saxon, Nordic), these conceptual classifications do not overlap. Bureaucracies within an Anglo-Saxon tradition may be liberal, as in contemporary New Zealand and the United Kingdom, but also populist, exemplified by the US machine-politics era and in the Trump administration's attempts to politicize federal agencies. Bureaucracies within a Napoleonic tradition can be legalistic, such as Spain's general administration of *Grand Corps*, but also liberal, such as the managerial agencies created in the country in recent decades (Parrado 2008). The field will benefit from future research comparing the effects of these modes of governance when facing different collective challenges.

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