Symposium Article

Bureaucracy and the Failure of Politics: Challenges to Democratic Governance

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Abstract

Bureaucratic reforms worldwide seek to improve the quality of governance. In this article, we argue that the major governance failures are political, not bureaucratic, and the first step to better governance is to recognize the underlying political causes. Using illustrations from throughout the world, we contend that political institutions fail to provide clear policy goals, rarely allocate adequate resources to deal with the scope of the problems, and do not allow the bureaucracy sufficient autonomy in implementation. Rational bureaucratic responses to these problems, in turn, create additional governance problems that could have been avoided if political institutions perform their primary functions.

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Introduction

As scholars of public administration, we are used to hearing that the problem with government is bureaucracy; bureaucracy is inefficient, ineffective, abusive of citizens, and associated with a wide range of other maladies. Worldwide, we have engaged in a decades-long effort to rein in the bureaucracy under a variety of guises. The New Public Management approach sought to make government more like business either by transferring functions to the private sector or by streamlining the bloated government bureaucracy and holding it to the criterion of serving citizens as customers (Christensen & Lægreid, 2002; Hood, 1995). In many democracies, the New Public Management and Reinventing Government were only extensions of the previous Reagan and Thatcher era revolutions or Zero-Base Budgeting, which were followed by subsequent "reforms" culminating in the Tea Party quest for zero government. Populist revolts have further created greater pressure to enact simple reforms to deal with complex problems.

The enterprise of bureaucratic reform in our view is misguided and fails to see the real problems of governance. With the reduction in government capacity over the last several decades, the key issue in governance is sustainability—the achievement and endurance of success. Contrary to the dominant popular narrative, many cases of governance success exist in this world (Compton & 't Hart, 2019). Governments do many things rather well. Why is it that such successful responses to real problems are so rarely achieved and sustained? In the many waves of reform, we have sacrificed the ability of the government to solve problems. This essay will present two arguments—first, that our failures of governance are failures of politics, not failures of bureaucracy, and, second, that the failures of politics interact with essential characteristics of bureaucracy that will generate a series of predictable pathologies of governance. These pathologies reflect rational bureaucratic responses to the failure of politics (Compton & Meier, 2017). As a result, the pathologies cannot be successfully solved via bureaucratic reform but only via reforms that address politics as well as bureaucracy.

Politics and Administration

The starting point for any discussion of politics and administration should be the classic work by Frank Goodnow (1900), *Politics and Administration*, a book that is widely cited but rarely read. Goodnow is frequently misinterpreted

to advocate a separation of politics from administration, but in fact he argues not for a separation, but a symbiosis. The functions are not separable; both need to be performed for effective governance. As Goodnow (1900) himself states about politics and administration,

> That is, while the two primary functions of government are susceptible of differentiation, the organs of government to which the discharge of these functions is intrusted [*sic*] cannot be clearly defined. It is impossible to assign each of these functions to separate authority. (p. 16)

The political function is to resolve conflict, take the cacophony of interests and voices, and generate a policy. The administrative or bureaucratic function is to further generate policy via the implementation process. There are times when political branches engage in administration, and there are times when bureaucracies establish policy. The functions often intertwine within an institution. It is important that both functions be performed for effective policy, otherwise, as concluded by Goodnow (1900), "Lack of harmony between the law and its execution results in political paralysis. A rule of conduct, i.e. an expression of the state will practically amount to nothing if it is not executed" (p. 23).

In a provocative essay arguing the case for more bureaucracy and less democracy, Meier (1997) proposed what he termed the first normative principle of bureaucracy. Paraphrased, he contended that bureaucracies are optimal policy instruments for a variety of problems and they can perform well or best when given clear goals, political support for these goals, adequate resources, and the autonomy to devise solutions based on expertise. These givens are, of course, what the political system and the political function are designed to provide. Effective bureaucracies (and effective governance), therefore, require an effective political process.

A casual observation of contemporary political systems provides substantial evidence that politics has failed to consistently provide the prerequisites for maximal bureaucratic effectiveness. Using the example of the United States, rather than resolving conflict, the political system lurches from crisis to crisis and exacerbates conflict in a quest for political advantage in the next cycle of elections.[1] We see periodic shutdowns of the federal government, the failure to adopt a federal budget coincident with its own fiscal year, tax policies that rely on faith for a budget balance, and at least 70 reputed attempts by the House of Representatives to repeal the Affordable Care Act (Riotta, 2017). Nor does the U.S. political system generate clear goals for government policies. Extensive work by Hal Rainey and colleagues (Chun & Rainey, 2005; Rainey, 1993) indicates that government agencies are frequently tasked with unclear, ambiguous, and, at times, conflicting goals (e.g., the U.S. Postal

Service must provide universal service without running deficits, but cannot set prices). On the question of adequate resources, the chronic budget crises and emergency appropriations have left many programs underfunded forcing clients to engage in queuing processes that can undercut effective services (e.g., the Veterans Affairs [VA] hospitals in 2014). Finally, several cases suggest that bureaucratic agencies are not granted sufficient autonomy to best use their expertise. The military services are frequently required to accept weapon systems that they would prefer not to have (M. Cox, 2015), and federal family planning programs are saddled with a requirement for abstinence-only approaches to sex education despite the negative consequences of such policies (Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008; Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2012).[2]

In democratic contexts with different institutional arrangements, electoral rules, and political incentives, the governance process can prove more capable of resolving conflict (i.e., Lijphart, 1984), but pathologies nevertheless persist. The United States is not unique in this regard. Although non-majoritarian or consensus-based systems may excel at representing plural interests and quickly passing responsive legislation, they can also generate political volatility, frequent cabinet/ministry reorganizations, and are still bound to the electorate's willingness to pay. Centralized and contentious politics in France, coupled with a public health administration deprived of capacity and legitimacy, led to a public crisis when HIV contamination of the blood supply for transfusions was discovered. An innovative and speedy response was needed to intervene in the transfusion management system, but the bureaucracy was unable to adequately act (Bovens et al., 2001). The United Kingdom's National Health System (NHS) struggled to modernize and centralize record keeping, a task widely supported by stakeholders. When the NHS predictably failed to meet installation deadlines, which were both politically determined and unreasonable, the delays were publicized and political support waned (Robertson et al., 2010). The European Union (EU) also consistently falls short in coordinating supranational policy. Implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy is challenged by contradictory legislative goals and discretionary political decisions which fail to incorporate scientific advice into policy, leaving the Community Fisheries Control Agency unable to prevent declining fish stocks (Khalilian, Froese, Proelss, & Requate, 2010). The dysfunctions inherent in politics have generated unreasonable demands, insufficient resources, or inadequate autonomy to achieve successful outcomes in these examples. Bureaucratic effectiveness in such circumstances is difficult and laudable, given the political constraints imposed on implementing organizations.

Latin America's multiparty presidentialism also imposes a number of obstacles to good governance. Ames (1987) shows how political actors in the region deploy public expenditures as a tool of presidential survival, using the budget to reward or penalize different groups and regions—and therefore impeding the ability of the public administration to get things done. Similarly, administrations across the continent regard bureaucratic posts not only as the spoils for patronage appointments (Grindle, 2012) but as necessary tools to forge cabinet coalitions to govern (Praça, Freitas, & Hoepers, 2011). In turn, high rates of bureaucratic turnover, especially if caused by political appointment, affect policy implementation negatively (Cornell, 2014). Insufficient resources and a lack of autonomy also characterize Latin American bureaucracies. While repressive authoritarian regimes retrenched spending on health and education (Huber, Mustillo, & Stephens, 2008) democratic regimes often fail to provide sufficient resources to public agencies (e.g., Alcañiz, 2016; Repetto, 2000). And although some bureaucracies have achieved a degree of autonomy from politicians (Eaton, 2003; Nunes, 2015), a great many others continue to face interference from their political principals (Batista da Silva, 2011; Ferraro, 2008), impeding bureaucrats' abilities to implement and regulate policy.

The problems of Western democracies are not unique in this regard. Bureaucracies across the African continent are widely known to be crippled by political roadblocks—even in the midst of more recent waves of democratization (Szeftel, 1998). For example, Togo in the late 1990s began to politicize policymaking such that expertise was hardly valued (Hyden, Court, & Mease, 2003). Although former colonies of Great Britain often fare better on scores of governance and implementation in Africa, compared with other regions more broadly, Africa lags far behind (Haque, 1997). Indeed, scarce resources and often high levels of conflict create a bureaucracy even more dependent on political patronage (Szeftel, 2000) and unable to build the expertise necessary to deal with pressing problems.

Nor are Asian countries an exception. The National Assembly of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) often forces a delay in approving budget deals and government reorganization plans, and this political barrier makes it difficult for bureaucracy to timely implement policies. The Indian National Congress has been involved with a series of corruption allegations over the years that often paralyze government.

The meta-policy of many governments appears to ignore the issue of sustainability and emphasize downsizing and collaborative governance. This is apparent in the widespread restructuring of bureaucratic organizations by contracting to the private sector, using non-profit organizations for service delivery, transferring the responsibility of government programs to subnational governments, or simply not delivering services at all (Compton &

Meier, 2017). Contracting to the private sector ignores the basic principal-agent problem of implementation by organizations interested in minimizing costs rather than delivering services (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011) and the historical problem of corruption that plagues many government–private partnerships (e.g., U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], for-profit universities; see Anderson & Taggart, 2016). Substituting nonprofits for private firms merely changes the conflict from one about costs to one about values given the strong values component associated with many nonprofits (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011). Even in the 21st century, devolving to subnational governments can be problematic when these governments remain opposed to the programs and their objectives,[3] or simply lack the capacity to act (sub-Saharan Africa; emergency management in the United States). Recent work on bureaucratic capacity in Africa suggests that while many developing countries are able to improve basic health outcomes, others lack the capacity to do so, and some were starting off in far worse positions. Indeed, a unique mixture of disparate colonial legacies, ethnic fractionalization, and violent conflict can have important impacts on the quality of public administration, which in turn moderates any programs designed to improve outcomes (Wimpy, Jackson, & Meier, 2017).

The Consequences of Political Failure

Even when politics fail at the very top, bureaucracies are still asked to do their jobs (e.g., when the president of South Korea was impeached in 2017, its bureaucracy still functioned). By knowing a set of bureaucratic characteristics that are widely shared, one can predict how bureaucracies will respond when faced with various political failures. These characteristics include the values held by the bureaucracy, bureaucracy as an adaptable system, and bureaucracies as facilitators of administrative conjunction. The bureaucracies' responses are clearly rational given their situation, but the responses can create a set of pathologies that detrimentally affect policy. While the public and the media view these ills as bureaucratic pathologies, they are in reality bureaucratic symptoms of political failure. Evolution in the institutional design of bureaucracy in the past century reflects a dynamic adaptation to persistent political failures and their challenges to successful governance (Compton & Meier, 2017).

Bureaucratic Values

The legacy of Max Weber is a view of bureaucracy as neutral and technical; values other than neutrality have no role in bureaucracy. This academic

perspective of bureaucracy is often viewed as a political ideal, although in many cases, political officials contend that the bureaucratic value is sloth which then results in inefficiency, waste, and delay. In reality, the myth of the value free, amoral bureaucrat is just that—a myth. Government bureaucracies are also political institutions, and government bureaucrats hold a wide range of values (Clinton & Lewis, 2008). People who work for government generally believe that government can solve some of society's problems and that sacrifices are therefore worth making. We call this public service motivation (Crewson, 1997; Houston, 2000; Perry & Wise, 1990). Numerous scholars have shown this empirically. In a study of 38 countries, Vandenabeele and Van de Walle (2008) find that the average public service motivation score was higher for public employees compared with private sector employees, suggesting near universality of public service motivation. This is supported by country-level or regional studies from across the globe, including Europe (e.g., Vandenabeele, Scheepers, & Hondeghem, 2006), Latin America (Snyder & Osland, 1996), the Middle East (Gould-Williams, Ahmed, Mohammed, & Bottomley, 2015), and a host of non-Western states, especially Southeast Asia (Van der Wal, 2015).

Bureaucracies are technically oriented; they employ large numbers of scientists, physicians, attorneys, economists, and other highly educated career professionals. This orientation means that bureaucrats also have professional values—the combination of learning and other factors that indicate how problems can be solved (Eisner, 1991; Mosher, 1968; Plumlee, 1981; Teodoro, 2011). Government bureaucrats have a myriad of other values—they are national citizens, men, women, minorities, advocates of strong defense, supporters of environmental protection, critics of government waste, and so on.[4] Bureaucratic values are important because all bureaucracies have discretion despite political efforts to either wish it away or restrict it. Bureaucratic values, in turn, can have a beneficial impact on public services, as without them, policy would likely be implemented without sympathy or enthusiasm (Thompson, 2007).

Bureaucratic Adaptability

Bureaucracies are adaptable institutions. Given the image of bureaucracies as rule-bound and rigid organizations, one might not generally think of bureaucracies as adaptive, but bureaucracies are open systems that need to respond to their environments or force the environment to respond to them. The U.S. Postal Service of today looks nothing like the U.S. Post Office of the 1920s with its savings bank functions (see Carpenter, 2001) or even the Postal Service of 1970 with its emphasis on first class mail, and clearly the postal service of

2030, if there is one, will look different from today's version. Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood (2004) stress the adaptability of bureaucracy in their study on city government and what they call the "adapted city." Among other things, they document the evolution of city manager governments and mayor council systems to a hybrid form that combines elements of both and, in the process, change the nature of both politics and administration.

How organizations change and adapt is influenced by bureaucratic values. No bureaucracy is completely monolithic, and all will be composed of bureaucrats with different perspectives on how policy issues should be addressed. These bureaucrats will reflect their values whenever opportunities arise, such as electoral changes or environmental crises. As an illustration, differences in how industries should be regulated and how much regulation should be withdrawn relative to using market forces was debated within a variety of U.S. government agencies well before Presidents Carter and Reagan pushed their deregulation agendas (Eisner, 1991).

Administrative Conjunction

Bureaucracies engage in what Frederickson (1999) calls "administrative conjunction," the creation of voluntary agreements to enhance the ability to deliver services. These agreements or networks are frequently established to provide for mutual assistance in case tasks become larger than a single entity can handle (e.g., agreements among urban fire departments). Administrative conjunction in this case deals with what are rare events, the Black swans of public administration. Because no jurisdiction funds bureaucracies sufficiently to be able to handle all contingencies, there is always some risk that service delivery will need to wait or not be performed at all. Administrative conjunction allows the coverage of these rare events without massive increases in costs.

Administrative conjunction is the voluntary side of mandated networks for the implementation of public policy. In some policy areas, problems cut across the jurisdictions of agencies, do not conform to government boundaries, or require skills that bureaucracies do not possess (e.g., water use policies, the delivery of health services, and so on; this is especially the case with the use of international non-governmental organizations in sub-Saharan Africa). In such cases, networks of organizations and individuals are mandated or develop as a practical matter in implementation, with the bureaucracy charged with coordinating rather than compelling (see Agranoff & McGuire, 2004; O'Toole, 1997).

To these basic three principles, let us add one basic assumption, that bureaucracies are rational. The assumption of bureaucratic rationality is clearly more defendable than the assumption that individuals are rational in

the classic definition of rationality as the analysis of means to achieve a specified set of ends. Bureaucracies are designed to be rational entities (Weber, 1946); they focus on goals and seek to restrict elements of a process that will not lead to a given end. Bureaucracy, in many ways, is an effort to extend the ability of individuals to act rationally (Simon, 1947) by increasing analytical capacity and taking advantage of specialization. Bureaucracies, in turn, create incentives for individuals within the organization to act rationally (Barnard, 1938; Downs, 1967). Combining the assumption of bureaucratic rationality with the principles that bureaucracies have values, are adaptable systems, and engage in collaboration, one can derive a set of propositions that have both normative implications and are subject to empirical testing.

The First Normative Principle of Bureaucratic Design

As asserted above, the best policy results occur when other political institutions give a bureaucracy clear goals, sufficient resources, and autonomy so that the benefits of professionalization and near decomposable systems come into play. This first normative principle of bureaucratic design is based on the competitive advantages of the various political institutions (bureaucracies, legislatures, elected executives, courts). Bureaucracies are institutions designed to build expertise either via the incorporation of professionals as part of merit system processes, as a result of specialization, or with their extended time frame. Because bureaucracies can become very large (particularly relative to other policy institutions), they have the ability to apply the principle of near decomposable systems (Simon & Ando, 1961). Large problems can be broken down into their component parts, and individual parts can be assigned to different units to deal with, allowing them to specialize in certain types of problems. As the component parts of the problem are solved, the bureaucracy rebuilds the elements into an overall solution. Because bureaucracies are designed to be relatively permanent institutions, they also have long time-frames and can incrementally chip away at problems gaining more knowledge in the process as they work to solutions. This suggests that bureaucracies learn over time (March, 1991).

The net result of these characteristics is that bureaucracies are comparatively advantaged over political institutions to implement policy given the longer time horizon, their relative permanence, and their ability to breakdown problems into their component parts. At the same time, bureaucracies are not good at resolving conflict, particularly conflict over program objectives (see below). Neither are bureaucracies especially good at the representation function despite the extensive literature on representative bureaucracy.

Under specific situations (see Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002), bureaucracies can effectively represent some groups on some issues, but, as a general characterization, bureaucracies seek to squeeze out the representation of values that do not directly relate to the organizational mission.

The competitive advantages of bureaucracy are not limited to the United States, and may be even more dramatic in countries with stronger bureaucracies. East Asian bureaucracies, for example, have a long tradition as merit-based institutions under Confucian culture and play a major role as a policy institution.[5] The Korean bureaucracy has substantial effects on the policy process based on its expertise, although the National Assembly has legislative power vested by the constitution.[6] The success rate of congressional bills (39.6%), for instance, is almost half of the success rate of government bills (73.5%) in the 19th National Assembly of South Korea (2012-2016) (National Assembly Total Information System, 2018). Japan also has a strong central bureaucracy even with its parliamentary cabinet system, and its bureaucracy has played a significant role in planning and implementing major policies. Japanese bureaucratic agencies first draft most policies and laws that go before the national parliament (Pempel, 1992). In both the Korean and Japanese cases, bureaucratic expertise and capacity are crucial in determining their influence over policies.

The institutional advantages of legislatures are their ability to represent multiple views and to resolve conflict. Although bureaucracies under certain circumstances can perform both of these functions, they are not designed to do so and thus, are relatively less effective at it. At the same time, legislatures do not perform a variety of other functions well. Legislatures can only develop moderate levels of expertise despite the effort to institutionalize via full-time positions and extensive legislative staff. Democratic assemblies are deliberative bodies and, as a result, are not designed to operate quickly. Moreover, they are incentivized by shorter time horizons, with a focus on the next election rather than the design or implementation of long-term public policies (e.g., Alesina & Tabellini, 2007).

In some cases, institutional design exacerbates these limits. In Latin America, the legislature's inability to implement long-term policies is more acute, as legislative re-election rates are much lower than in the United States or re-election is expressly prohibited, like in Costa Rica and (until 2015) Mexico.[7] Moreover, unlike the United States, Latin American legislatures are often "reactive" powers subservient to the executive (G. W. Cox & Morgenstern, 2001). In combination, these strengths and weaknesses indicate that legislatures have a comparative advantage in representation and the resolution of political conflict, but they will not be good at the implementation of public policy.

Popularly elected chief executives have become more bureaucratized over time with support staff and specialized units. An elected chief executive is designed to be able to take quick, focused action on a problem, preferably so a one-time problem that can be resolved. Elected chief executives, particularly in presidential systems but including a few cases of directly elected prime ministers (e.g., Israel 1996-2001), have three inherent limitations. First, they are essentially set up as a rival to legislatures, and thus, there is a competition between the two for credit claiming and an unwillingness to work together. Lacking pure parliamentarism's formal rules for government formation, Latin America's extreme multi-party and presidential systems complicate governance by producing minority governments and legislative gridlock (Negretto, 2006).

Second, elected executives also have short time-frames dictated by their electoral cycle and, in recent years, by the even shorter legislative electoral cycle. The fixed term length and winner-takes-all nature of presidentialism (Linz, 1990) create a limited time horizon for policy under democratic presidentialism, as changes in presidencies are often associated with changes in policy priorities—or even presidents' attitudes toward the bureaucracy. In 1960s Colombia, the reformist goals of Liberal President Alberto Lleras Camargo's technocratic "manager state" (*estado gerente*) were undermined by his Conservative successor Guillermo León Valencia, whose policy decisions undercut his own advisors, frustrated bureaucrats, and showed little aptitude for management (Karl, 2017, pp. 137-138).

Third, elected chief executives are not good at implementation. The absence of expertise, the short time-frames, and the focus on inter-institutional politics detracts from the ability to enmesh oneself into the details of implementation on a continuous basis. The best one can hope for are periodic efforts to reform an implementation process if that process becomes dysfunctional.

Throughout the world, courts and policymakers alike are aware that judicial decisions on cases regarding social and economic rights can have significant policy and budgetary consequences. Courts, in nations with independent judiciaries, need to be considered in the discussion of competitive advantages because they are frequently used to implement policy either though legal trials (e.g., antitrust policy in the United States, social policy in Brazil [Lima Lopes, 2006] and Colombia [Uprimny, 2006], and water regulation in Colombia [López-Murcia, 2013]) or via direct implementation with specialized units (workers' compensation insurance in the United States). The courts' advantage is procedural due process, the ability to provide full hearing rights to all parties (or at least those that can afford legal representation). Courts are not designed for speed; in fact, the concern with procedures pushes

considerations of timeliness off the court agenda. Court systems, despite the norm of precedent, coexist in parallel or overlapping jurisdictions and, therefore, have problems with consistency in application, and even in cases with specialized courts (e.g., U.S. Tax Court), the requirement of legal training mitigates any efforts to create expertise. Outside the United States, a lack of judicial independence and impartiality may limit the power of constitutional review and diminish the ability of judiciaries to assume and play an effective role in the creation of social policy (Courtis, 2006).

The first normative principle of bureaucracy, therefore, is simply the admonition to use bureaucracy's competitive advantages as a policymaking institution. When problems are complex (i.e., need expertise) and require longer time-frames to solve, bureaucracies are the best equipped institution that exists. In such circumstances, bureaucracies can perform well if they have clear goals, political support for achieving those goals, and autonomy in the use of resources. Such a principle works because when expectations are clear, they reinforce the bureaucratic values that exist (i.e., career-oriented professionalization and policy orientation) and eliminate the need for bureaucracies to exploit information asymmetry (such as hiding slack resources or misreporting data).

Because optimal situations where bureaucracies are given clear goals, ample resources, and autonomy rarely exist, the current policy system generates a series of problems. Although these are generally viewed as bureaucratic problems, the following section will argue that they are simply a reflection of political realities and bureaucracies seeking to make the best of a less-than-optimal solution. The problems of bureaucracy are in reality problems of politics in the governance system.

Political Failure and Bureaucratic Pathologies

Given the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various political institutions (including bureaucracy), when the political system fails, it creates serious challenges for bureaucracy and governance in general. Institutional incentives create policy failures in legislatures, courts, and executives, and because of its role in policy implementation, bureaucracy must operate despite the challenges these failures pose. Bureaucracy has agency and will respond rationally and predictably to such challenges. Because they are associated with suboptimal outcomes, these predictable responses are diagnosed as pathologies, but these bureaucratic "pathologies" are merely rational responses to a failed political process. Such pathologies are likely to be worse where mechanisms of political control and political influence on bureaucracy are stronger.

Bureaucracies Seek to Respond to Political Institutions

Government agencies in a democracy are open systems, and their characteristics make them highly dependent on the environment. Ignoring the wishes of other political institutions is a high-risk strategy and unlikely for two reasons. First, government bureaucracies cannot usually generate their own resources and must rely on elected officials to supply these resources or authorize their extraction from citizens.[8] Second, among the values of bureaucrats in the United States and many other countries are a commitment to democratic norms which enhances the legitimacy of the decisions by other political institutions. Rarely do bureaucracies participate in political coups.[9] Indeed, even the technocrats of the so-called "bureaucratic authoritarian" dictatorships of 1960s and 1970s Latin America depended on the military to gain power (O'Donnell, 1988). The strong central bureaucracies in East Asian countries rely on legislative officials to approve budgets or pass bills, and bureaucracies are held accountable by the legislative branch (e.g., South Korea, Japan, etc.), although the degree of commitment to democratic norms may differ from that of Western democratic countries.

In the U.S. case, the classic essay by Norton Long (1949) demonstrates that such responsiveness is inherent in the structural design of the political system. The American system fragments political power via the separation of powers at the national level and further fragments it via a federal system that divides power between the national and subnational governments. According to Long, this fragmentation means that bureaucracies are rarely given sufficient power and autonomy to effectively implement policy and, therefore, must develop their own sources of such power. The multiple sources of political power, what agency theorists call the "multiple principals problem," complicate this process in three ways.

First, legislative and executive entities often make different demands. If one adds in the demands of the court system and interest groups, there are multiple institutions claiming to represent the will of the people. Second, federalism, decentralization, or supranational organizations multiply these demands. A school district, for example, is subject to political and policy demands from the elected school board, the state education agency and state political actors who provide both resources and constraints, and the federal government via federal regulations on access, testing, and other matters. Bureaucracies within EU member states must respond to the preferences of both national and EU political institutions, often producing a contested implementation process (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009). Add to this now a third complication: the goals of political sovereigns change over time. Elections replace one set of leaders with another; politicians change their minds about

what might be an effective policy; or implementation reveals limits or even flaws in current policy. To elected officials, the long term is until the next election.

Faced with these competing and contradictory demands, a government bureaucracy needs to respond carefully within the basic regime values and legitimate functions of the other actors and, if possible, consistent with its own values. Bureaucracies would like credible commitments, that is, clear goals and ample resources, but will generally not get them. As a result, bureaucracies are rational to respond slowly to make sure priorities do not change and that any resources allocated are not wasted.

The responsiveness of bureaucracies to political sovereigns and the failure of politics creates two bureaucratic pathologies. First, multiple principals in a fragmented political system means multiple and conflicting goals, thus generating the problem of goal ambiguity. Second, multiple demands from actors with the ability to withhold resources or to levy constraints on the agency means that bureaucracies need to respond to all the demands and, as a result, the agency's resources are spread too thinly for effective policy. Both pathologies are violations of the first principle of bureaucracy—clear goals and ample resources. As long as they are beholden to political entities with plural interests and electoral (or party) accountability, bureaucracies will be asked to do too much with too little. When the executive branch and legislative branch are separated, this becomes even more problematic.

From the highly fragmented contexts of local governance in federal democracies to the highly centralized political environments of dictatorships, the problem of multiple principals never disappears. Davis (2006) shows how Mexico's democratic transition created an environment of partisan competition that, combined with decentralization of the state and fragmentation of its coercive and administrative apparatus, exacerbated intrastate and bureaucratic conflict in that country. Yet, bureaucracies in highly centralized and authoritarian states are still beholden to both politicians and citizens. Indeed, it was the lack of state responsiveness and perceived corruption under the corporatist rule of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Revolutionary Institutional Party, PRI) that paved the way for Mexico's eventual democratization (Wiarda & Guajardo, 1988).

Multiple principal problems also arise in the centralized and unified Asian democracies. Even a strong central bureaucracy in South Korea, for example, has to respond to the president and Congress simultaneously. While the president exercises control over the bureaucracy in a hierarchical institutional context, the National Assembly has broad powers to inspect the work of the bureaucracy under the constitution. Competing and contradictory demands from the president and Congress often generate the

problems of goal ambiguity and waste of administrative resources for the Korean bureaucracy. This pathology gets worse under divided government or electoral change.

All Bureaucracies Have Two Masters

In rare occasions, the electoral branches of government resolve conflict and provide clear goals, but that does not necessarily solve the multiple principals problem. Even with political consensus, every bureaucracy has two masters —political sovereigns and agency clientele.[10] In the best of all possible worlds, the preferences of political sovereigns and clientele match up perfectly. In reality, that rarely happens. The interests of clientele are generally narrower than the interests of political sovereigns. Clientele are less concerned about trade-offs and more concerned about gaining group or individual benefits. The conflict between sovereigns and clientele is complicated by the fact that clientele almost never have uniform policy preferences. Corn farmers are interested in higher prices and thus are strong supporters of such policies as tax credits for ethanol use as a fuel whereas hog and cattle ranchers who can use corn as an animal feed see such policies as raising their costs of production and thus reducing demand for their products. In cases where the clientele are regulated, it is quite logical for some clientele to seek that regulation to provide competitive advantages (e.g., conflict among generic and proprietary drug companies, conflict among financial institutions over possible products, etc.).

Both clientele and political sovereigns have resources that bureaucracies need. Political sovereigns control budgets and legislation and can use these to punish the agency (or simply do so via hearings and oversight with the implied threat of legislation or budgets). Clientele can provide political support for the agency, and a cooperative clientele can enhance agency productivity. Because clientele have longer attention spans and are specialized in their demands, they are often a more reliable resource for the public bureaucracy.

In theory, politics could solve the tension between political sovereigns and clientele, but in practice, it often does not. This conflict creates bureaucratic pathologies whether the bureaucracy tries to respond to both groups or favors one over the other. Responding to both sovereigns and clientele generates goal conflict with its inherent problems. Being overly responsive to political sovereigns risks incoherent policies that shift with the political winds. Greater responsiveness to clientele has the potential to create iron triangles and generate a threat to democratic governance. Corporatist institutions, network governance, or consensus-oriented norms may ensure a forum exists to pursue compromise and agreement among all stakeholders, but it is by no means

a straightforward, transparent, quick, or guaranteed outcome. In all cases, by appeasing multiple actors, bureaucrats must compromise their professional judgment and subordinate them to the demands of politics.

The problem of patron–client relationships between political rulers and bureaucrats is best illustrated by its long tradition in Africa and Latin America (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Grindle, 2012). Indeed, the notion of "neopatrimonalism" is found throughout the current literature on African politics (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994; Pitcher, Moran, & Johnston, 2009). Despite outward appearances, these systems often have adverse effects on policy delivery and bureaucratic corruption (Cammack, 2007; Wiarda & Guajardo, 1988). Such systems develop in part because bureaucracies lack the professional expertise to serve as a counter weight to political pressures.

In East and Southeast Asia, patronage networks are related to the development of capitalism and often indicate interactions between bureaucracies and private business (Bach, 2011; Yoshihara, 1988). Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now METI, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry) had strong connections with *zaibatsu* (large business conglomerates) who had significant influence over Japanese economic policies. The collusion enabled the capitalists to reap enormous benefits from economic bureaucrats by obtaining monopoly rights, licenses, and government financial subsidies (Yoshihara, 1988). Similarly, the patronage network between bureaucrats and *chaebol* (large industrial conglomerates) in South Korea granted preferential status to these companies. Capitalist development and the persistence of patronage and corruption are also found in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Bach, 2011). Malaysia, for example, has been struggling to pursue its national interests in a systemic way due to its own captured officials producing a rent-seeking form of intervention (Searle, 1999).

Bureaucracies Maximize Slack Resources

Faced with political failure that threatens resources, professional autonomy, or the generation of conflicting or ambiguous goals, bureaucracies will rationally seek to sustain capacity. Capacity translates to slack resources that can be reallocated to deal with pressing problems and designing solutions that make more effective use of resources. Maximizing slack allows a bureaucracy to respond to political demands and policy problems.

Maximizing slack resources needs to be contrasted with the public choice claim that bureaucracies seek to maximize budgets (see Niskanen, 1971). Maximizing budgets may not be an optimal strategy because political institutions do not provide agencies with funds without requirements to do things.

The costs associated with additional funds imply that bureaucracies will not seek those that might generate fewer discretionary resources rather than more. Partially funded mandates can bring more costs than benefits. The state of Texas offers free college tuition to resident veterans, for example, but does not provide full funding to this program. Alternatively, the funds might require the agency to do something that is inconsistent with the agency's values or its expertise (e.g., assigning wetlands protection to the Army Corps of Engineers, Mazmanian & Lee, 1975, or bringing the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] into the war on drugs, Meier, 1994). Similar problems occur frequently in Latin America, especially with the armed forces after the Cold War. The military needs a raison d'être as it rarely engages in war. As a result, budgets are partially predicated on the military getting other things done such as using the armed forces to police violent shantytowns, as in Brazil (Londoño & Darlington, 2018), or engaging in a range of social development tasks, as militaries do across the region (Pion-Berlin, 2016).

Maximizing slack resources generates a trade-off between delivering services and bureaucratic capacity. The bureaucratic pathology, then, is that the ability to add to capacity via organizational slack generates short-term inefficiencies in program delivery. Because the other political institutions see slack as waste and inefficiency, they will generally penalize such agencies further creating one of the paradoxes of New Public Management: If bureaucracy can do more with less, why cannot they do everything with nothing?

Bureaucracies Maximize Performance Indicators Not Results

Recent decades have seen a massive increase in the use of performance indicators (see Arndt & Oman, 2006; Gingerich, 2013; James, 2010; Jilke, Meuleman, & Van de Walle, 2015). The United Kingdom, for example, adopted the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) from 2002 to 2009 to assess the performance of local authorities and the delivery of public services. International organizations also have developed cross-national performance indicators on government capacity and the quality of governance (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD]) as well as efficient financial allocations and productivity growth (e.g., World Bank, IMF, African Development Bank). This management reform grew out of the New Public Management efforts and the thinking that political sovereigns could make the bureaucracy more efficient by creating objective standards for agency performance and then basing budgets or other rewards on that performance. Although some public organizations long had performance standards (e.g., employment agencies, rehabilitation services), such systems

became virtually universal in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries in K-12 education, health care, elderly care, and welfare.

The basic problem with performance standards is determining exactly what government bureaucracies do. Do schools produce test scores or educated children? In some areas such as the timely processing of routine activities (unemployment compensation benefits, issuing retirement checks), specific tasks can be defined and monitored well. In other areas such as education, there is substantial debate on what educational institutions are trying to achieve and how to measure that achievement. Although test scores are frequently used, many critics think the goals should be to increase the potential for future education, student well-being (particularly in Europe, Anderson, 2005), effective democratic citizens, and other broader, more ambitious outcomes.

If bureaucracies are rewarded for meeting performance criteria, and if given an objective standard, one can expect that the bureaucracy will seek to maximize performance on that standard. Outcomes that can be measured will then take precedence over outcomes that are difficult to measure, resulting in possible goal displacement (Blau, 1955). In extreme cases with a great deal of political pressure, organizations might feel compelled to cheat and fabricate numbers (e.g., body counts in Vietnam, the 2014 U.S. Veteran's Administration hospital scandal) or find other ways to generate positive results (e.g., police departments not recording reports of sexual assaults; in Latin America, see Budds & McGranahan, 2003; Gilbert, 1990). The bureaucratic pathology of goal displacement or the more extreme case of organizational cheating can be linked directly to an absence of resources when faced with difficult tasks (see Bohte & Meier, 2000). The north-eastern Chinese province of Liaoning, for example, fabricated its economic data from 2011 to 2014 when it failed to meet financial performance targets such as GDP growth and fixed asset investment ("A Big Chinese Province Admits Faking Its Economic Data," 2017). Under a great deal of pressure from the Communist Party of China to accelerate performance, the local bureaucracy might have convinced itself that massaging data could be a way to deal with this political pressure.

Bureaucracies Maximize Outputs Not Efficiency

A political system creates incentives for bureaucracies to seek either effectiveness or efficiency. The fragmented nature of the political system with its unclear goals and limited resources means that a rational bureaucracy will find it easier to defend actions leading to effectiveness than those targeting efficiency. An efficiency logic would have bureaucracy spending resources

on a program until the marginal costs are equal to the marginal benefits under the assumption that almost all programs are subject to diminishing marginal returns. When marginal costs equal marginal benefits, excess revenues should be shifted to programs that have greater benefit-to-cost ratios.

This theoretical economic view that supports efficiency should be contrasted with the incentives that bureaucracies face in the real policy world. As an illustration, assume that a wealthy school district has revenues of US$20,000 per student. Assume also that given decreasing marginal returns, the optimum benefit-to-cost ratio is to spend US$15,000 per student and achieve a 90% pass rate on standardized performance tests. Would a rational bureaucrat (superintendent) limit spending to US$15,000 for a 90% pass rate or spend all US$20,000 even if inefficient to achieve a 95% pass rate? The school district's political sovereigns, the school board, the parents, and the state oversight agencies would clearly be happier with the 95% pass rate, and the higher pass rate would also generate better future employment opportunities for the superintendent.

Another illustration of the trade-off between efficiency and effectiveness could be road pavement construction in developing countries. Assume that given decreasing marginal returns, the optimum benefit-to-cost ratio might be to spend US$200,000 per lane mile and complete rebuilding of 80% of the roads in a city. Even if it costs US$300,000 per lane mile to rebuild 90% of the roads, bureaucrats may want to spend the additional budget on this construction because political sovereigns would be much happier with a 90% completion rate. If politicians use the results for election campaigns, the political pressure for the higher completion rate would be even greater.

Rational bureaucracies, therefore, have incentives to maximize outputs, not efficiency. The pathology is that what is rational for an individual bureaucracy is not rational and maybe inefficient for the governance system as a whole. To the extent that political actors misallocate resources to programs, bureaucracies will facilitate the process by seeking to maximize outputs.

Bureaucracies Prefer to Buffer Not Exploit

Ideally bureaucracies would innovate when innovation provides higher payoffs and buffer or try to dampen environmental problems when that strategy provides better payoffs. In some cases, a bureaucracy theoretically can do both; for example, faced with a budget cut, managers might opt to use the crisis as a way to make a set of hard decisions that reposition the agency to be more effective. The incentives created by the failure of politics, however, place a premium on buffering rather than trying to exploit environmental opportunities.

Government bureaucracies face environments that are increasingly turbulent as both politics and the policy context change rapidly. Much of the turbulence in environments is temporary fluctuations rather than a long-term change. In such circumstances, a rational bureaucracy will respond but in a slower, more measured way. This is especially the case with political change given the rapid changes in political priorities.

Innovations call attention to the bureaucracy and add additional risk in an environment that might already be hostile to the organization. In this regard, buffering might be akin to operating a hedge fund. If you buy a stock and the market collapses, you lose everything. If you sell a stock short at the same time you buy a stock and the market collapses, you are protected from some losses by the short sale. Mistakes by bureaucracies can generate political attention and potential political punishments. Trying something and failing is guaranteed to bring scrutiny from political sovereigns; buffering, on the contrary, is far less likely to draw attention. Deficient national innovative capacity in Latin America arising from low investment in human capital and scientific infrastructure, for example, led to a weak ability to take advantage of technological advances abroad (Mahoney, 2002). The bureaucratic pathology of lack of innovation, therefore, can be linked to the failure of politics to provide clear support (ample resources and autonomy) for agency action.

The tendency of bureaucracy to prefer buffering to exploiting is especially pronounced for systems with centralized bureaucracies with strong job security. A centralized system is likely to increase bureaucrats' risk averse behavior by making bureaucrats more concerned with reactions from higher-ups and taking more time to secure managerial approval, whereas a decentralized structure is more likely to encourage bureaucrats to take risk and pursuit innovation (Feeney & DeHart-Davis, 2009; Osborne & Plastrik, 1997). This has been conspicuously illustrated in the centralized and hierarchical Japanese bureaucracy, which has long tried to minimize risk rather than seeking innovation (Curtis, 1999). Strong job security and a fixed salary based on seniority in the Korean civil service also intensify bureaucrats' tendency to be risk-averse and mitigate environmental impacts.

Networks Are Not Just for Delivering Programs

Electoral institutions frequently craft policy implementation networks whereby government agencies interact with nonprofit organizations, private sector organizations, and other government agencies to deal with a policy problem. Such networks are frequently constructed (see Hall & O'Toole, 2000, 2004; O'Toole, 1997) because problems are complex and span the boundaries of governments or agencies and require the cooperation of large

numbers of individuals. At times, these networks are given only general goals, and the network needs to both devise a policy and implement this policy. In addition to these networks imposed by electoral institutions, bureaucracies create their own networks to share resources or to engage clientele in coproduction.

Regardless of the source of these networks, the fragmentation of political power generally will mean limited authority for the agency in operating such networks. As a result, agencies need to entice members of the network to support programs and activities. This means that agencies will see networks as much as opportunities to build their own power bases in addition to being either a designated or a preferred method of policy implementation. Because government agencies play a role in crafting these networks, they will clearly attempt to build them to reinforce the agency's goals and objectives. Strategic use of networks can be seen in the such areas as the Tennessee Valley Authority (Selznick, 1949), agricultural policy (Coleman, Skogstad, & Atkinson, 1996), family planning (McFarlane & Meier, 2001), and health care (Peterson, 1993) in the United States, as well as AIDS policy in Brazil (Rich, 2013), labor inspection in Argentina (Amengual, 2014), and transnational nuclear science and technology networks (Alcañiz, 2010, 2016).[11] The ironic potential bureaucratic pathology of networks is that implementation systems designed to include broad collections of interests in practice can generate the equivalent of iron triangles that can operate independently of the political branches of government. In short, networks created to foster democracy can, in fact, limit democratic control (Freeman, 1965).

Conclusion

In this essay, we present contemporary problems of governance as emanating from the failures of the political system. Goodnow (1900) forcefully argued that effective governance required a symbiotic relationship between politics and administration; unless both functions were performed well, governance would be ineffective. In contemporary democracies, the causes of political pathologies show no signs of waning. Increasingly, contentious ideological clashes in democracies either will prevent any policy action from being taken or perpetuate mercurial policy priorities. When policies are adopted, they are frequently ill-designed with ambiguous and contradictory goals. Avoiding the painful process of providing adequate resources to operate programs appears to be common practice. And these problems are exacerbated by political micromanagement via riders, unfunded mandates, or continual oversight.

This essay further documented seven contemporary bureaucratic pathologies, and argued that each has its roots in political failures. Bureaucracies rationally respond to the incentives and structures established by the political system, which in turn creates results that are clearly suboptimal. The logic suggests that it is no longer possible to fix contemporary governance problems solely with additional bureaucratic reforms. The bureaucracy appears to respond quite well to the chaos generated by political failures with predictable and problematic results.

The solution is not additional bureaucratic reforms, but rather investing in political reforms or reforms that deal with both bureaucracy and the political system. Some institutional systems are inherently more equipped to translate contentious political demands into successful governance outcomes, but pathologies nevertheless emerge. The field of public administration can play a role in this process by returning its classical roots. In the early 20th century, public administration focused on governance and not just bureaucratic reforms. Public administration addressed how to structure political systems (city manager governance, the Brownlow Commission, debates over federalism). How politics and administration come together for effective—dare we say *successful*—governance should be a central question of contemporary public administration.

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Notes

1. It is unclear whether elections can resolve conflict at the present time given the gerrymandered nature of the House of Representatives and a Supreme Court that endorses free speech only when it involves the use of campaign funds.

2. Clear goals do not necessarily mean detailed goals so it is possible to have clear policy goals and still grant substantial autonomy to a bureaucratic agency to attain that goal.
3. The state of Texas, for example, in 2013 opted to eliminate some maternal health programs rather than allow them to be implemented via Planned Parenthood (Stevenson, Flores-Vazquez, Allgeyer, Schenkkan, & Potter, 2016).
4. Even being a bureaucrat entails some values, often stronger ones in reichstadt bureaucracies.
5. The civil service in East Asia (e.g., South Korea) attracts the brightest students because government jobs are considered very prestigious despite the lower pay than the private sector (Im, Campbell, & Cha, 2011); this enhances government human capacity.
6. In addition to bureaucratic expertise, the history of the bureaucracy-led economic growth in South Korea also contributes to bureaucracy playing a major role as a policy institution to solve social problems.
7. As of 2019, U.S. state legislators face some type of term limits in 15 states (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, and South Dakota).
8. A government agency that is funded via users' fees or has the ability to generate its own resources (e.g., the Federal Reserve) gains some freedom from control by elected officials, but such freedom rests on the legal authorization by elected officials.
9. Powell and Thyne's (2011) exhaustive classification of more than 450 global coups between 1950 and 2010 does not include single instance of a civilian bureaucracy-led overthrow.
10. Or has three masters if one counts what are called "shadow principals," members of the bureaucrat's profession that are a source of reputation and both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Adolph, 2013; Teodoro, 2011).
11. There is also a vast literature on networks in other countries including comparative studies (see Kriesi, Adam, & Jochum, 2006; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992).

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