

# Governance of Public Sector Organizations: The Politics- administration Dichotomy Revisited

*Georgia Tsagdi*

*(Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece)*

**Abstract:** Since the very earliest research in the public sector field, the dichotomy politics and administration has been systematically studied by academic researchers. The principal-agent model prevails as the dominant theory of the political control of the bureaucracy literature while the bureaucratic responsiveness concept and the institutional politicization theory offer some further explanations. This article is focused on the intersection of the two spheres and builds on previous research around their dynamic contact. More specifically it tries to unveil modes and actors of political control and influence that is exercised over the bureaucratic body. Two key mechanism are examined: politically appointed personnel that is positioned in the highest echelons of management (a form of direct political control) and the informal influence that advisors and committees have over the bureaucracy.

**Key words:** public governance, autonomy, politics-administration dichotomy, political control and influence

**JEL codes:** H

## 1. Introduction

Since the very earliest research in the public sector field, the nature of the relationship between politics and administration has been a predominant question for academic researchers. According to the classical administrative theory bureaucrats should be the servants of politicians, a source of loyal support and assistance (Wilson, 1887; Maass & Radway 1949; Weber, 1968). In this sense the relationship between officials and politicians is an asymmetrical one as politicians are dependent on officials, but not necessarily the other way around. This traditional clear-cut dichotomy between the two spheres, politics and administration, as well as the notion of professionalism and political neutrality of public administrators (Kaufman, 1965; Hecl, 1975), are founded, on the need to ensure that the expertise and authority available in a bureaucracy is placed fully at the disposal of a democratically elected government (Page & Wright, 1999) and are still regarded as cornerstones of our western democracy (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002; Rhodes & Wanna, 2007; Joensuu & Niiranen, 2018). However, “the secret life” of practitioners and policymakers has always indicated that while there is much to be said for a formal separation of politics and administration as a normative ideal, in reality, a clear separation of the two, is difficult to sustain in practice, as politics is embedded in the public administrative life.

The academic world started to look upon this aspect of the politics-administration dichotomy more critically,

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Georgia Tsagdi, Ph.D. Candidate, Athens University of Economics and Business; research areas: public governance and politics administration. E-mail: [geotsagdi@aueb.gr](mailto:geotsagdi@aueb.gr).

in 1940 when Friedric, suggested that both politics and administration have an intertwined function in the formulation and execution of governmental policy. In addition, Pfeffer, in 1981, wrote about organizational politics as the study of power in action and along with Eisenhardt and Bourgeois in 1988 and Chohan & Jacobs most currently in 2016, suggested that political influence is necessary for organizations in order to survive and thrive. Other researchers, rejected the politics-administration dichotomy entirely (Rainey, 1990) or focused on how individuals' perceptions about politics in the organization also determine how much political the organizational environment is going to be (Ferris, Fedor, Chachere, & Pondy, 1989).

In total, even though proponents of the complementary nature of the two spheres, long supported that bureaucracies are highly responsive to political forces and vice versa (Porter, Allen & Angle, 1981, Kumar & Ghadially, 1989; Kumar & Ghadially, 1989; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Svara, 2001; Aldrich & Fiol 1994; Hillman et al., 1999; Frederickson & Smith, 2003; Moore, 1995; Svara & Brunet, 2003, Guo, Xu, Jacobs 2014, Okhmatovskiy, 2010, Grøn & Salomonse, 2019), researchers have always grappled with the issue of how much involvement of one sphere is warranted in the other.

From that perspective, the positive or negative organizational consequences of political influence in bureaucracies have been explored in only a limited fashion, with conflicting arguments and this has resulted in a waning interest in the research area. This lack of interest may be attributed to the plethora of competing theories that exist in the field or may be due to the difficulty researchers always had in defining, quantifying, and measuring bureaucratic accountability. The political control of bureaucracies is indeed a complex multidimensional construct, and one in desperate need of more precise insight and articulation by the academia.

## **2. Autonomy, Control and Interaction**

Ever since Max Weber's understanding of the relationship between politics and bureaucracy as a question of political control, binding together bureaucratic behaviour and performance to the preferences of the political principals of the administrative body has been a very traditional way of thinking about bureaucracy and politics. Yet, this traditional relationship is often disrupted by factors such as the autonomy and discretion that is awarded to bureaucrats and bureaucratic structures as a mean to achieve greater citizen satisfaction with public services (Lyons, Lowery & DeHoog 1992; Overman, 2017) by — inter alia — allowing for more tailored or a greater range of services or by preventing politicians from intervening in the day-to-day running of government agencies, meddling in administrative "technicalities" (Bozeman & Slusher 1984; Jørgensen, 1991; Flynn & Strehl, 1996; Maor, 1999; Wise, 2002; Osborne, 2006). Increasing the autonomy of bureaucrats can also be a strategy for politicians to hide behind administration when things go wrong (Hood, 2002). On the flip side, in cases where the professional competence of a bureaucrat is clearly limited, bureaucrats may opt to seek the support of political actors, in order to fulfil their role or overcome challenges, especially in a dispersed state apparatus (Hernes, 2005; Kirkhaug & Mikalsen, 2009, Kopecký, Mair & Spirova, 2012). Withal, being regarded as well connected, with an appropriate arm's-length relationship with politicians is considered a bureaucratic asset for any official, one that may even spur more professional autonomy or lead to increased hierarchical power and authority (Bass, 1990; Agranoff, 2006; Torfing & Ansell, 2017).

Taking into consideration the above, and in line with all the theorists of the complementary nature of the politics - administration relationship, focusing on the dynamic interaction of the two spheres, can help to illustrate how administrators handle their relationship with politicians, navigate "gray zones", and despite their purported

neutrality get involved in politics (Aberbach et al., 1981; Svava, 1999). The intersection of the two spheres characterized by continuous contacts, overlapping tasks and intervention in each other's area, *can serve to reassert the authority of bureaucrats and reassure politicians that delegated powers are exercised in accordance with the framework agreed on* (Daft & Lengel, 1986), thus becoming a relevant strategy for reconciling bureaucratic autonomy and political control. On the other hand, many times, when these two words converge whilst their objectives diverge, efforts of the political word to secure responsiveness and reduce the autonomy of the bureaucratic body, by monitoring for example more carefully through appointees, or strengthening hierarchical controls (McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast, 1987; Epstein & O'Halloran, 1999; Huber & Shipan, 2002) reduces incentives for bureaucrats to develop and use their expertise (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1999; Huber & Shipan, 2002; Gailmard & Patty, 2007), resulting in decreased organizational performance.

Howbeit, the notion of the intersection and active interaction of the two spheres, can many times offer more adequate explanations of differences in organizations' and organization members' behaviour, that other formal factors such the actual legal status of the organization do (Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1994; Bozeman, 1998).

### **3. Modes of Political Control and Influence**

Despite well-founded theories, such as the principal-agent model (Niskanen, 1971; Moe, 1984; Wood & Waterman, 1991; Huber & Shipan, 2002; Volden, 2002; Bendor & Meirowitz, 2004) the concept of the formal politicization of the bureaucracy (Rouban, 2003; Peters & Pierre, 2004) or the bureaucratic responsiveness idea (Tucker & Ziegler, 1980), all of them trying to assess how political influence and control is exercised over the bureaucratic body, it has been fairly difficult to pinpoint at the exact modes and actors of exercised political control. One notable difficulty is that observable political control or influence may occur when political actors have actually failed drawing up desirable policies (Aberbach, 1990; McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984). Or, that bureaucratic bodies often conform to the expectations of their political principals without taking observable actions (Weingast & Moran, 1983; McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984; McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast, 1989), thus rendering the measurement of political influence exceptionally difficult. Moreover, in the public sector it is not so straightforward what is a desirable result in absolute terms, encompassing in its measurement not only outputs but also outcomes. Hence, when trying to see how political principals do indeed control or influence the behaviour of their bureaucratic agents in a public organization, studies are usually limited to agencies with comparable and measurable outputs (Scholz & Wood, 1998; Snyder & Weingast, 2000; Bertelli & Grose, 2009). Finally, when trying to measure how political control and influence is exerted in a public organization one is confronted with the reluctance of respondents to disclosure information and their biases. However, few empirical studies have tried to do so, (Kirkhaug & Mikalsen, 2009), focusing mostly on the observed interactions between elected politicians and bureaucrats without empirically exploring other mechanisms, through which influence or control is put forth in a bureaucracy. And whilst there is a lack of any firm scholarly agreement on how these actors or modes of political control and influence work and their implications for bureaucracy, we can identify at least two important mechanisms of direct and indirect influence and political control.

#### **3.1 Direct Appointees**

This mechanism, stemming from the politicization and political steering theory is unequivocally policy oriented and is established by positioning politically appointed actors loyal to their political principal in the government apparatus, in superior or extended authority positions: General Secretaries, Presidents of the Boards

of Directors and Executive Directors. In that respect, the political appointees that are a formal part of the government decision-making body and take over control of particular functions, represent an instance of functional differentiation of the government. Through their formal and functional position, they exert political control primarily aimed on the civil service per se and may be considered as an extended form of direct political supervision of the bureaucracy. The higher the proportion of this kind of appointees within an organization the more politicized the organization will be. In this manner, politicization often becomes a means by which politicians can better navigate the bureaucratic environment, steer policy and marshmallow coalitions to support their agenda.

In the academic literature, a number of excellent works tries to describe how appointees in specific administrations did or did not influence administrative policy and performance in specific agencies and contexts (Hecl, 1977; Durant, 1992; Wood & Waterman, 1994; Harris & Milkis, 1996). A long tradition argues that political appointees drawn from outside the civil service bring much needed responsiveness to all stakeholders (Moe, 1985; Bok, 2003; Maranto, 1998, 2001, 2005) and an expanded knowledge of the policy world. Having a different relationship with their political constituents, direct political appointees are deemed to be more successful in implementing policy (Moe, 1985; Maranto, 1998, 2001, 2005). On the one hand, many theorists have argued that appointees are generally less familiar with the bureaucratic environment and its particularities and since public management is idiosyncratic, any corporate or political management experience that appointees have does not transfer well into the public sector (Lewis, 2007)

### **3.2 Advisors and Committees**

Here, political control is obtained in an indirect manner through more informal mechanisms, like advisory committees and ministerial advisors that through consultations, various deliberations and negotiations manage to direct bureaucratic actors towards their political preferences, revealed or not. This is again another form of functional politicization of the bureaucracy, that enhances bureaucracy's political responsiveness (Lewis, 2007). The power of this mechanism depends upon its ability to act unilaterally, since increasing the number of advisors and committees may decrease their influence, due to transaction costs resulting from the increased time and resources needed to influence bureaucratic behaviour through practices such as information gathering and dissemination or coalition building (Ogul & Rockman, 1990; Banks & Weingast, 1992; Cohen, Cuellar, & Weingast, 2006). Committees and advisors have scarce human and financial resources to commit to influencing agency policymaking so they may be less willing to respond when many actors are involved. By way of explanation, the incentive to free ride typically increases as the number of advisors and committees escalates (Gailmard, 2009) and this may affect their ability to influence policy. Another characteristic of this mechanism is that in order to be influential there has to be a prior clear political mandate on what is wanted from bureaucratic actors (Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; Bawn, 1995; Balla, 2000).

Despite the importance of both of these mechanisms examined, there is no empirical investigation in the literature of how and most importantly the degree to which these actors influence or control bureaucracy or whether appointees or advisors (or some combination of the two) is the best way for doing so.

## **4. Discussion and Future Research**

The article begins by trying to provide a more in-depth account of the traditional politics-administration dichotomy introducing a variable that intersects their relationship, i.e., the autonomy and discretion that is

awarded to bureaucrats and bureaucratic structures as a mean to achieve greater citizen satisfaction and organizational performance. To be effective the modern administrative state needs a corps of permanent, competent professionals. However, creating a corps of high skilled administrative officials, may render administrative officials more autonomous. Having a democratic government requires solving the conundrum of both establishing a competent government and reining in the autonomy that comes from making it competent. However, securing the political control of the bureaucracy can erode its competence and neutrality. On the other hand, institutional politicization can strengthen democratic control over policy by making the bureaucracy more responsive to politicians. There is always an important trade-off between efficiency or expertise and democratic accountability.

Thus, analysing this difficult problem through the examination and future operationalization of all agents regarding principal influence and control over the bureaucracy, we believe that we can offer important insights and a reconciling strategy for the harmonious co-existence of the two spheres in the context of their dynamic interaction. Both politics and administration have an intertwined function in the formulation and execution of governmental policy and there is a lot to be gained from forming an encompassing perspective, including all of the actors at the table — not just elected politicians and/or permanent bureaucrats.

On this note and trying to shed more light into the mechanisms of political control and influence exercised over the administrative body, we investigate two different categories of political control: a form of direct control, vested in politically appointed personnel that are positioned in the highest echelons of management and the informal influence that advisors and committees have over the bureaucratic body. We reckon, given the role played by the unelected bureaucracy in implementing policy that examining the ability of the elected branches to influence organizational behaviour is critically important. In the article, this is done by theorizing and linking to the literature but investigating empirically how these two types of control work in reality and within different national contexts and furthermore examining their organizational implications can be an important goal for future research. In addition, another key avenue of future research that can follow could try to identify the antecedents or the conditions generating different types of political control and influence.

Lastly, in order to understand how mechanisms of political control and influence are exerted over the bureaucratic body we should consider examining a broader range of social, institutional and political environmental factors. Closer interaction of the two spheres may also be interpreted as a rational response to the increasing complexity of the political, social and institutional environment of an organization. In situations where laws and regulations are ambiguous or there are substantial social pressures, bureaucrats may be inclined to consult and negotiate with their political counterparts in the organization, evoking their support in order to reach a decision. On the other hand, the amount of political control exerted over a public organization depends on the organization's power vis a vis its social and institutional environment. The less political powerful is an organization, less it will be able to resist social or other pressures.

According to Moore (1995) public sector organizations can no longer dominate their environment, or freely choose with whom they want to interact. Administrative efficiency is becoming increasingly a matter of flexible response to the environment. A matter of satisfying the demands of a wide variety of stakeholders like citizens, politicians, the media etc. Organizations that fail to carry out their duties to all relevant stakeholders or address adequately the interests of their social and political constituents are often denied political legitimacy and may be even forced out of existence (Gordy, 1993).

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Opening the black box of how political influence and control is exerted over the administrative body, we see that the notion of political influence and control detailed in many existing theoretical studies in the context of the politics-administration bureaucracy has limited scientific empirical progress. In this article we aspire to provide a more realistic picture of the power dynamic relationships that exist in a public organization and try to create a more comprehensive framework, building on the previous work of Kirkhaug & Mikalsen (2009), but introducing no- hierarchical actors that exist inside a public organization and influence its policy making. Answering “how political control and influence is exerted over the bureaucratic body?” has broad implications for governance. Despite the importance of the issue however, it is a question that is notoriously difficult to answer. In this article we advance the research by closely surveying two less researched mechanisms of control and influence: high-echelon political appointees and advisors, as well as committees.

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