

L

Link Between Administration, Politics, and Bureaucracy



Israel Nyaburi Nyadera^{1,2} and Md Nazmul Islam²

¹University Of Macau, Macau, China

²Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Ankara, Turkey

Synonyms

[Administration](#); [Bureaucracy](#); [Governance](#); [Politics](#); [Politics and bureaucracy nexus](#); [Public administration](#)

Definition

Relationship between administration, politics, and bureaucracy: To examine how relations between public servants and political elites influence performance and affect administration in general. This is done by examining the nature and processes through which administrative structures and features are shaped within developed and developing countries. It examines how political players use their positions and instruments of power for personal gains or attempt to fulfil promises they made to their electoral base by influencing bureaucrats involved in policymaking and implementation. More often reforms have entailed making changes in the administrative structure of a particular country so as to overcome

challenges and promote efficiency. However, an unhealthy interaction between politicians and bureaucrats has lots of negative consequences on public service delivery.

Introduction

Structured system of managing public affairs has historical origins and remains significantly relevant to human societies. However, it gains prominences among industrialized countries which sought to establish hierarchical bureaucracy consisting of professionals to collaborate with political leadership in delivering quality public goods. This involved establishing and restructuring of administrative agencies, civil service, and public budgets in order to promote citizens' welfare and security and fulfil their demands (Kettle and Fesler 1991). Waldo (1948), Redford (1969), Marx (1957), Rohr (1986), and others were among the first scholars to develop the philosophical and theoretical tools of examining key aspects of administration, governance, bureaucracy, and public management. Nevertheless, significant changes experienced at the domestic and international levels have compelled scholars and practitioners to rethink the different dimensions in theoretical and practical application of public administration. More often, reforms have entailed making changes in the administrative structure of a particular country so as to overcome challenges and promote efficiency. New approaches like the

introduction of ideas such as good governance, new public management, and public private partnership, among others have been introduced with mixed results in various countries. On the other hand, interaction between politics and bureaucracy in administrative systems has shown unique trends among developing and developed societies and has sometimes had devastating results.

The nexus between politics and bureaucracy as well as administration and bureaucracy has thus attracted several academic scholarships over a number of years. Majority of these studies have sought to highlight ways in which scholars and practitioners can complement each other. Scholars have also sought to investigate the general relationship between politics and administration in the category of developed, developing, and least developed countries. Studies in political-administrative relationship among developed and developing countries have highlighted new developments especially on how and why administration, bureaucracy, and politics are core themes in the discussion part of public administration. Systematic comparative studies of bureaucracy, administration, and politics has evolved since the late 1800s. This is the time former American President Woodrow Wilson had sought to establish a boundary between political and administrative spheres (Rosenbloom 2008; Sager and Rosser 2009; Peters 2010; Overeem 2012). In his extended works, Wilson sought to classify the roles and responsibility of politicians and administrators especially in the process of policy formulation and implementation formulations and policy processes which ultimately subjected this discipline to further inquiries in academia (Demir and Nyhan 2008; Georgiou 2014).

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the relations between politics and bureaucracy and the resulting impact of administration in general. It aims to highlight how relations between bureaucrats and politicians might influence policymakers in developed and developing countries to formulate and implement the policies in any sphere of administration. It identifies that politicians and bureaucrats in a country may have similar goals of providing public services but may differ on the process and criteria of implementing these goals.

This is attributed to the diverging interests especially to the audience they seek to impress.

Nexus between Administration, Politics, and Bureaucracy

In theory, frequently defined roles and responsibilities of political executives and bureaucrats suggest that there should not be any tension between the two sets of authority. The former is supposed to formulate policies and the latter is tasked with implementing them. However, in reality, substantial tensions exist as a result of conflict of interest and overlapping roles. Power distribution and power distance between politicians and bureaucrats has over the years been identified as one of the key measures of determining the level of independence and autonomy public servants have from political elites. Similarly, policymaking, and its implementation, is often hazy and blurred. For centuries, the question of “who governs whom” has remained salient among many studies, most of which have fallen short of providing a substantial answer. In the earlier times, bureaucrats serving in kingdoms, monarchies, or empires obtained their privileges by being loyal to the king or whoever governed. This means that there was an obvious thin line between the King and the bureaucrats; thus the administrative system was highly shaped by the ruler’s discretion. In contemporary democracies, politicians derive their mandate and legitimacy to govern from the citizens either directly or indirectly while bureaucrats are guided by existing laws and legislations governing performance of public servants. This change has had an important impact on the manner in which politicians and bureaucrats relate. It has created fierce rivalry between democratically elected executives and government appointed or nominated officers.

Despite clear tensions, the place and importance of bureaucrats cannot be undermined. Existing literature suggest that although the contributions of bureaucrats may be dramatic and sometimes neglected, they nevertheless play a crucial role of information-providing, interact closely with political decision makers, and offer

advice to executives. The ability of bureaucrats to control the nature and amount of information policy makers receive makes bureaucrats enjoy significant leverage and influence on the policy outcome. Noteworthy, in the contemporary setting, this form of approach is likely to be more applicable in developed democracies and less important in existing populist and authoritarian regimes.

Similarly, the interface and interaction between administration and politics is always dependent on country's political culture and on political and administrative system (Onder and Nyadera 2019). Anglo-American administrative system tries to maintain a distinct line separating administration and politics. On the other hand, European countries, such as Germany, emphasize more on principles, rules, and procedure in the public sector management. Scandinavian and Nordic countries have adopted a more rational administrative system when it comes to policy formulations and agenda settings. Their administrative system is characterized by interconnecting administration and politics to achieve policy solutions. However, South Asia, particularly India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as well as most African countries are often intertwined and depending on the circumstances the executive wields more power and authority over the bureaucracy and will in many cases influence bureaucratic processes and decisions.

Max Weber in his early and mainstream writings begun to examine the relationship, similarities, and differences between administration, politics, and bureaucracy. This trend has continued to evolve and become more embedded in the study of public administration as scholars sought to establish the "scientific management school" (Gerth and Mills 1946). Some of the fundamental concerns for scholars included but not limited to questions of bureaucrats having undue influence on policy or state agents politicizing the bureaucracy. Even though the bureaucracy is at times considered to be overshadowed by the executive, Goodnow (1900, p. 5) opines that "[t]he administrative system has, however, as great influence in giving its tone to the general governmental system as has the form of government set forth in the

constitution." Both Weber and Wilson provide a distinct argument on the relations between administration and politics. Weber highlighted that the very "ideal types" of administration should be based on different dimensions such as logic or rationality (Gerth and Mills 1946). On the other hand, Wilson is a strong proponent of administrative systems with less political interference and hilly efficient. For Wilson, if bureaucrats were unchecked could result into "an offensive official class, – a distinct, semi-corporate body with sympathies divorced from those of a progressive, free-spirited people."

Scholars such as Simon (1976) emphasizes the importance of a well-established bureaucracy where he believes the factual element of political decisions lay. They believe bureaucrats may be vulnerable to personal goals and ambitions that they seek to achieve through the organizations they lead and therefore reject any external interference. Simon further observes that the importance of bureaucracies means that they have to be not only compliant but also neutral at all times. Finer (1941) gives a more skeptical view of the bureaucrats especially if their actions are regulated by internal mechanisms rather than external factors such as the judiciary or legislature. For Finer, allowing bureaucrats to self-check their action through internal methods is open for abuse.

Contextual Framework

To give the relationship between administration, politics, and bureaucracy a contextual design, this paper looks at two approaches. First is the principal-agent theory a theory that emerged in the field of economics in the mid-1970s and later adopted in public administration. The theory highlights the nature of engagements between the bureaucratic agent and the political principle. It is based on the assumption that the political principal is seeking the services of the bureaucratic agent, but in the process, the principle is doubtful of whether the agent share similar preferences or is willing to share all the information they possess. Aware of the agent's ability to influence and capacity to access information, the

principle is continuously seeking to develop measures to structure, monitor, and sanction the agent.

The second approach is the relationship between top bureaucrats and politicians. This approach has increasingly gained significant attention among scholars due to the growing trend of increased interaction between the two actors. Aberbach et al. (1981) argue that whenever top bureaucrats interact with politicians, a “creative dialogue” ensues which makes it difficult to identify who has an upper hand in influencing the other. They identify that politicians seem to be driven by in their approach while bureaucrats tend to be cautious and rely on facts in responding to the politicians. Studies that followed concluded that indeed top bureaucrats maintain a close relationship with the political elites whom they give advice and guidance in policymaking processes. Whether the politician or bureaucrat has an upper hand in influencing the final decision, it is important to acknowledge that both parties need to make concessions for the sake of smooth administrative outcomes.

Two important approaches of contextualizing the relationship between political and bureaucrats are autonomy and separation. The former refers to the “amount of freedom and extent of independence in which public servants can perform their duties without being influenced by political players. The former is used to refer to the ‘extent to which the bureaucracy is distinct from the political system’ (Dasandi and Esteve 2017). The manner in which countries adopt the principle of autonomy and separation differs from one country to another.

Links Between Administration, Politics, and Bureaucracy in Developed Countries

The common characteristics of the developed countries’ administration can be regarded as well-structured, advanced, and developed. Most industrial-based democracies such as Canada, Japan, UK and the USA fall under this category. In several indexes, developed countries enjoy higher standards of living as their citizens have access to higher income levels, better health care

system, very high literacy rate, as well as production and consuming of sophisticated and modern technologies. In terms of governance, these countries enjoy efficiencies, equality, and the rule of law for all citizens, which are some of the main indicators. In making and implementing public policies, developed countries have comparatively effective governance, management, bureaucratic, political, and administrative systems. In addition, developed countries’ public policies always depend on their society’s requirements and demands meaning increasingly adopting bottom-up policymaking processes. Usually, citizens of developed countries play a big role and are active participants in the process of governance, a role provided for and protected by their constitution. To understand the links and relations between administration, politics, and bureaucracy, it is important to classify the concepts, practices, and involvement of the administrative system in the developed countries. Dominant system of governance as well as the institutions has been applied in the developed countries to reach the high level of performance.

Historically, between 1650 and 1850, the West including European countries experienced three revolutions. These were: English Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution of 1776, and the French Revolution of 1789, which lead them to change and restructure their administrative systems and abolish the status quo in comparison to countries in the non-Western world (Jerisat 1997, p. 13). Political and economic realities demand different level of skills, commitment, and values to run the state and its administration. The changes that emerged with the liberal constitutional state after the collapse of absolute monarchies changed the government’s responsibility with emphasis on the protection of human rights and liberties and promoting Laissez faire system. The citizens became more involved in governance, the public sector begun to experience rapid reforms that emphasize on merit.

In the developed countries, political-bureaucratic relations are characterized by clear role separation between politicians and bureaucrats. Strong collaboration between the executive and bureaucrats in administrative processes can be

seen and while both parties may have some autonomy to take certain decisions, such privileges are guided by the law which creates strong political and bureaucratic institutions. In countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, UK, and the USA, there is a developed legislative and legal framework within the civil service that require public servants while creating a balance with the political players. Administrative process for the bureaucrats is dominated, recruited, and promoted based on the meritocracy. Most of the developed Western and democratic countries follow the Weberian model in their administrative system, and thus influence the relations between politics and administration in that manner (Hansen and Ejersbo 2002). Though in theory developed countries should be immune to negative interference of bureaucracy by political elites and vice versa, in reality, the opposite is true. More so with the increasing populism trends in some of these countries which has led to intimidation of public servants. Apart from direct and negative, which is arguably much lower in developed countries than in developing ones, there are other forms of interference that may be unintended or a consequence of the administrative structure. Noticeably, there are constant efforts and reforms aimed at increasing the degree of separation between political and administrative responsibility and accountability (Svara 2006).

Such reforms are often intended to increase the autonomy of the bureaucracy while at the same time ensuring that the needed cooperation between the two entities is achieved. An important distinction is that in the event a politician is appointed in the bureaucracy, he/she is required to adhere to the code of conduct strictly and remain impartial at all times. Some other salient features that characterize the links between administration, politics, and bureaucracy include integrated and collaborative system of power distribution, mostly to maintain the effective and efficient relations between bureaucracy and politics; this means that to achieve the desired outcomes, politicians and bureaucrats not only have to work closely but also adopt relevant technologies and administrative strategies to complement their efforts. Most of the administrative structures

in developed countries have embraced approaches from the private sector and also cooperate with non-state actors through initiatives such as public private partnership (PPP). These new systems not only reduce the tension between bureaucrats and politicians as several services are now being provided by private sector, it also brings on board a third actor who can break the deadlock in case agreements between the two are in jeopardy. Nonetheless emphasis is laid on ethics and accountability for both administrators and political elites when discharging their duties.

Among the developed societies, public administration and political actions are managed through a set of checks and balances that legalize the connections between the political and bureaucratic institutions in the country. Both the political elites and bureaucrats are not only required to act within the parameters of the law but also violations of the guiding principles are taken much more seriously. Different arms of government work in a well-choreographed manner which ensures accountability and sufficient monitoring of each actor's actions. These regulations also provide a defined avenue of engagement that is supposed to be respected by the politicians and public servants for the broader good of the country.

The trend of having distinct but collaborative relations between politicians and public administrators can be seen in Western but also many non-Western countries such as Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. These countries exercise a good balance between the political and bureaucratic elites. This can be attributed to the high level of autonomy the public sector enjoys in these countries. Clear demarcation of the roles and responsibilities often creates a phenomenon where public servants act as implementing agencies for the political executive. This should not be mistaken to mean subordination of the bureaucracy but rather a classical case of separation of roles. The objective is to reduce the possibility of overlapping functions between the two actors and increase speed and efficiency in decision making. The success of this kind of system depends heavily on the political neutrality of those working in the bureaucracy. This is because, most

democratic societies experience frequent change in governments, and therefore if public servants are inclined to certain political ideologies, then such frequent changes will lead to serious disunity in the public sector.

Links Between Administration, Politics, and Bureaucracy in Developing Countries

Administrative system in most developing countries reflects the model left behind by the colonial administration. Most recently, however, several countries have undertaken serious reforms to reshape their administrative structures. This has been influenced by a number of domestic factors such as the desire to fulfill government role in provision of services to the people and by external factors such as growing regional and international interactions as well as the impact of globalization. Similarly, conditions set by donor countries and agencies on developing countries have also sought to reshape the administrative characteristics of these countries and more importantly the relationship between public servants and politicians. However, some of these efforts are yet to yield the desired outcomes partly due to skepticism often associated with proposals and recommendations from external actors more so former colonial powers. Secondly, since most of the donor agent-driven reforms are based on integrating private sector practices in the public sectors (see ► [“New Public Management”](#)), the limited success is also associated with the simplistic approach that does not put into consideration the understanding and practice as well as limitations of the private in the developing countries. The impact of this has been little progress in the efforts to reduce the influence of politics and political elites in the bureaucracy.

One prominent feature of bureaucracy-politics relations in developing societies is patronage. While this is a feature that even developed countries have once experienced, it is the extent and slow progress in dealing with the perpetrators of such actions that raises concerns in developing countries that stands out. Upon independence,

most developing countries did not have an elaborate private sector that had the ability to employ many people. Combined with the euphoria that came with independence, the public sector became the leading employer as governments attempted to live up to the hopes and aspirations of their people during the struggle for independence. This made employment into the public sector a political tool used by the elites to reward their support base. In addition, at the core of the patronage problem is the lack of sufficient reforms in the civil service in order to introduce a merit-based recruitment and promotion system. This left the public service in developing countries blotted and with less qualified personnel which affected productivity and triggered a vicious cycle of poverty, underdevelopment, political patronage, and inefficiency. Developed countries on the other hand continue to benefit from reforms made in the civil service that not only allows some of the best and qualified individuals to engage in public service delivery, but also it allows for separation between politicians and bureaucrats.

The close link between the political elites and bureaucrats has led to serious economic and administrative problems. One of them is that it gives room to unchecked corruption which continues to be a crisis in developing countries. Even worse is that those responsible for loss of public resources either through theft or dubious projects that have no economic value do not take responsibility and are often recycled in various government departments. It is not surprising to find that the top 20 worst countries performing on the corruption index are from the developing countries which tend to lose more money than they borrow from donors for development. Corruption has turned most administrative units in developing countries inefficient and characterized by impunity. This is seen through deliberate actions by the politicians and bureaucrats who become barriers to administrative reforms.

The nature of relations between bureaucrats and politicians in developing countries is further shaped by other factors beyond the desire for efficiency and effectiveness. For example, resources and power that bureaucrats possess and can benefit politicians and vice versa

significantly influence their interaction. Financial, institutional, and informational resources shared between politicians and bureaucrats but useful for both encourages both parties to work closely. This can be seen with judiciary and prosecution officers who may delay corruption or abuse of office charges on politicians while politicians can facilitate speedy promotion for the bureaucrats. Such cooperation triggered by the desire to benefit from each other's resources negatively affects administrative roles of bureaucrats.

The second factor that influences bureaucracy-politics relations is representation. In theory, public servants are supposed to represent the view, goals, interests, and aspirations of the general public and remain neutral. However, in developing countries and some developed countries also, representation may have a different meaning. In this case, representation based on identity, be it ethnic, religious, racial, or clan representation, is a common trend among developing countries. Weak institutions and polarizing political processes have seen job opportunities in the public sector become a tool for promoting one's own support base and an important means of shaping attitudes and opinion of their support base at the same time strengthening control of the country's political and bureaucratic spheres. This has resulted not only into horizontal inequality but also catalyst of civil wars.

Third factor is career progression and recruitment into the civil service. According to Weber's ideal system of bureaucracy, recruitment and promotion of individuals must be based on merit. In the absence of merit-based recruitment, civil services are characterized by corrupt, unskilled, and incompetent bureaucrats who need the support of the political elites to remain in office thus eroding their independence. To curb this problem, developed systems have adopted entry exams as a means of recruiting public servants. This is useful in making civil service more prestigious, dominated by highly skilled people and autonomy in decision making. Performance becomes the basis of career progression as opposed to political and personal ties. It is worth noting that some developing countries have also begun implementing merit-based recruitment processes as well as

introduction of programs that improve the quality of public service personnel through in-service training.

The fourth factor influencing relations between bureaucrats and politicians in developing countries are interests, values, and motivation. While research on how self-motivation and interest to further public well-being has been studied among politicians, such traits are not only limited to political elites but can also be traced among bureaucrats. In some Asian countries, Confucius' principles such as benevolence, goodness, and order (hierarchy) are dominant, while in some Muslim majority countries, principles such as trustworthiness (*Amanah*), responsible (*Tanggungjawab*), sincerity (*Ikhlās*), dedication (*Dedikasi*), moderation (*Sederhana*), disciplined (*Berdisiplin*), collaborative (*Bekerjasama*), virtuous (*Berbudi Mulia*), and grateful (*Bersyukur*) are prominent in the bureaucracy, politics, and civil service. Of importance is how strong culture and desire towards bringing change and development in a country strengthen the relationship between political and public servants. There are also some relations and values that are strengthened through networks established at elite schools and universities whose graduates seem to dominate top administrative and political positions. Some of them develop similar ideology and mentality that can either foster cooperation or cause rivalry if the actors are from different backgrounds. In most developing countries, politics and bureaucracies are dominated by people from particular lineage or class which tends to shape their relations.

Conclusion

Previous studies on the relations between politics and bureaucracy relate and influence each other predominantly focusing on established democracies and developed countries. The nature of such relations in developing countries has often been ignored. Yet the interaction between these two entities is increasingly becoming an important aspect in understanding why some developing countries are struggling to take off and experience rapid and sustainable growth. Similarly, little

emphasis on developing countries' public administration trends has left analysis of the bloc on the lenses of developed countries yet there are several striking differences among them. This explains why the "best practices" approach floated by donor agencies is not often successful. This study presents a comparison on how political-administrative and bureaucratic relations are experienced in both developed and developing systems and countries. While the study has given a general analysis and not a case study of specific countries, it provides a basis for future research on country case and comparative studies.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Accountability, Politics, and Power](#)
- ▶ [Administrative Reform](#)
- ▶ [Bullying in Public Administration](#)
- ▶ [Bureaucracy and Efficiency](#)
- ▶ [Bureaucracy and Personality: Does Employee Ethnicity Matter?](#)
- ▶ [Bureaucracy and Politicians: Dynamics and Challenges](#)
- ▶ [Policy Formulation and Policy Implementation Dichotomy](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Administration](#)
- ▶ [Theories of Public Administration](#)

References

- Aberbach JD, Putnam RD, Bert AR (1981) *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA
- Dasandi N, Esteve M (2017) The politics–bureaucracy interface in developing countries. *Public Adm Dev* 37(4):231–245
- Demir T, Nyhan RC (2008) The politics administration dichotomy: an empirical search for correspondence between theory and practice. *Public Adm Rev* 68:81–96
- Georgiou I (2014) Seeing the Forest for the trees: an atlas of the politics–administration dichotomy. *Public Adm Rev* 74(2):156–175
- Gerth HH, Mills CW (1946) *From max weber: essays in sociology*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Finer H (1941) Administrative responsibility in democratic government. *Classics of Administrative Ethics* 5–26
- Hansen KM, Ejersbo N (2002) The relationship between politicians and administrators—a logic of disharmony. *Public Adm* 80(4):733–750
- Jerisat JE (1997) The global revolution in public management: driving themes, missing inks. *J Policy Anal Manage* 16(3):446–462
- Kettle D, Fesler J (1991) *The politics of administrative process*. Chatham House, Newark
- Marx MF (1957) *The administrative state*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Onder M, Nyadera IN (2019) The role of non-economic drivers in development planning: the case of South Korea and Turkey. *Int J Public Adm*:1–11. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01900692.2019.1628057>
- Overeem P (2012) *The politics administration dichotomy: towards a constitutional perspective*. Taylor and Francis, Boca Raton
- Peters BG (2010) *The politics of bureaucracy: an introduction to comparative public administration*, 6th edn. Routledge, London
- Redford E (1969) *Democracy and the administrative state*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Rohr J (1986) *To run a constitution: the legitimacy of the administrative state*. University Press of Kansas, London/Lawrence
- Rosenbloom D (2008) The politics–administration dichotomy in US historical context. *Public Adm Rev* 68(1): 57–60
- Sager F, Rosser C (2009) Weber, Wilson, and Hegel: Theories of modern bureaucracy. *Public Adm Rev* 69(6): 1136–1147
- Simon HA (1976 [1945]) *Administrative behaviour. A study of decision-making processes in administrative organization*. Free Press, New York
- Svara JH (2006) Introduction: politicians and administrators in the political process—a review of themes and issues in the literature. *Int J Public Adm* 29(12):953–976
- Waldo D (1948) *The administrative state*. Ronald Press Co, New York
- Wilson W (1887/1992) *The study of administration*. In: Shafritz JM, Hyde AC (eds) *Classics of public administration*. Brooks/Cole Publishing, Pacific Grove