

Attempts of Fully Controlling Bureaucracy: Quae Merito?

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Abstract

The performance of government bureaucrats profoundly impacts the daily lives of citizens, with their unseen decisions affecting, *inter alia*, the safety of society, public education standards, and working conditions. Still, scholars dispute the power of bureaucrats, and whether and how it should be controlled. Some contend that bureaucratic activity must be firmly controlled since bureaucrats are expected to shirk their responsibilities. Contrarily, others postulate that a trust-based system would be better-suited as bureaucrats subscribe to values related to public interest, professional norms, and organisational loyalty. This article conducts a review of relevant literature on ‘top-down’ and ‘trust-based’ control mechanisms in order to recommend suitable approaches for controlling bureaucratic activity, considering the factors which affect the nature of their work. It is shown that a trust-based model is appropriate as it results in an equilibrium being achieved, with discretion utilised as a tool for implementation, whilst bureaucratic activity is monitored and controlled in a less intrusive and demotivating manner. While command-and-control methods produce better results in cases where short-term cost control and productivity are in question, this approach is unsustainable in the long-run due to inherently faulty assumptions about bureaucratic motivation. This article also recognises that multiple mechanisms of control might be necessary, depending on what is appropriate according to political judgements on contexts and organisational goals. Bureaucrats are accountable in different ways, at several levels and to varying degrees, so the mechanisms used to monitor and control them should reflect this reality.

Keywords: public management; bureaucratic control; bureaucratic motivation; agency theory; trust-based networks; qualitative literature review

1. Introduction

The age of the Weberian bureaucracy, consisting of impersonality, rational-legal authority,

hierarchy, clear formal communication, and specialisation, has been succeeded by the new public management era. This era introduced performance monitoring and market mechanisms into the public sector, entailing an increase in ‘top-down’ control. However, bottom-up theorists have continued studying the power within and the networks of bureaucracies, which resulted in new understandings of governance emerging that recognise the ‘interplay of policy and action and the range of forces shaping action within bureaucracies, as well as more relational accountability’ (Gilson, 2015, p391). This is exemplified in Moore’s (1995) work on public value in the U.S., which has opened up the floor for discussion on the nature of public value and related leadership strategies, including methods of bureaucratic control.

The performance of government bureaucrats profoundly impacts the daily lives of citizens, with their unseen decisions affecting, *inter alia*, the safety of society, public education standards, and working conditions. Yet, the debate on the power of bureaucrats, and whether and how to control it persists. Inspired by agency theory and/or public choice theory, some scholars argue that bureaucratic activity should be monitored and shaped closely through the use of systems, such as the command-and-control model. A core reason for this argument is that bureaucrats are expected to shirk their responsibilities (i.e. engage in ‘activities other than those related to the work position, or to work against policies and programs that the individual and organisation is expected to deliver’) due to their increasing discretion (largely discussed by Pierre and Peters, 2017) or other sources of power (e.g. information asymmetry; see Niskanen, 1971). On the other hand, some scholars (e.g., Elmore 1979) posit that a trust-based system would be better-suited as bureaucrats subscribe to values related to organisational loyalty, professional norms and the public interest. Nonetheless, there is agreement that bureaucratic activity should be monitored and shaped to a certain extent.

This article takes the latter position and argues that full control of the bureaucracy is neither attainable nor desirable. Given this article’s scope, it considers the bureaucracy as a whole unit, rather than assessing its individual levels (e.g. street-level versus top-level). Despite the variation of bureaucratic tasks and power at each level, supervisory forces similarly affect how each bureaucrat operates. Thus, several factors influencing bureaucratic behaviour and compliance are discussed to understand the most suitable measures for control.

The article begins by highlighting the nature of different bureaucrats, i.e. the types of bureaucrats operating within the political system, and the environment within which they operate. In light of this, it considers the underlying need to control bureaucratic activity. It then addresses some misconceptions of bureaucrats within agency theory, before examining the command-and-control model as a form of fully controlling the bureaucracy and arguing against its use. Next, the article delves into the trust-based network system as an alternative method of control that capitalises upon bureaucratic discretion. Finally, a brief conclusion is drawn.

2. Method

A wide range of literature was consulted, covering topics from agency theory (Elmore, 1979; Pierre and Peters, 2017) to street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1969a; 1971b; 1989c). This array of literature and theory is used to identify the varying approaches utilised by principals to

control and monitor the activity of their agents, i.e. bureaucrats, and establish a theoretically-informed recommendation, according to which bureaucratic discretion can be capitalised upon by principals, rather than there being an unnecessary and harmful ‘tight leash’ on bureaucrats. In this sense, theory is not used as an accurate representation of reality given two aspects that affect goal alignment and need for control – 1) the different levels (e.g. street-level or mid-level) on which bureaucrats actually operate within public organisations, and 2) each corresponding principal (e.g. political officials or middle managers) having its own expectations of its agents’ functions and performance. Rather, the value of theory is its utility as a problem-solving device given that it directs attention to the various approaches that principals can use to influence and control the behaviour of their agents, as well as the contexts to which they are best suited.

3. Need for Control

Policy-making and delivery are easily viewed in terms of principal-agent relations. Citizens are principals to their politician agents, while politicians are principals to bureaucrat agents, and bureaucratic superiors are principals to their bureaucratic subordinate agents (Moe, 1984). This article is particularly concerned with the second stage, in which politicians are the principals for bureaucrats and policy consistency is key. This stage offers a simple reinterpretation of organisational control and accountability.

3.1 Nature of Bureaucrats

Within this article, the term ‘bureaucrat’ refers to public managers – those who manage people and/or programs which ‘serve the public’ (Feldman and Khademain, 2007, p305) – and their subordinates, such as street-level bureaucrats, who are ‘public workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work’ (Lipsky, 1980c, p3). Discretion is defined by Lipsky (1980c) as the ‘extent of freedom a worker can exercise in a specific context ...’. It is a result of the nature of bureaucratic work and agency theory, occurring ‘whenever the effective limits on [the public official’s] power leave him free to make a choice among possible courses of action and inaction’ (Gilson, 2015, p386). For instance, policymakers create standardised solutions, ‘developed at great distance from the problem’ (Elmore, 1979, p610). These are unreliable for bureaucratic use since distanced policymakers cannot foresee conditions faced by bureaucrats, thereby demanding a certain level of discretion for the adaptation of broad policy to specific circumstances.

Moreover, bureaucrats can be broadly categorised into two types – ‘knaves’ or ‘knights’ (Le Grand, 2003) – which fosters better understanding of their motivations. While a ‘knave’ is a bureaucrat whose principal aim is to advance their self-interests (self-serving), a ‘knight’ is a bureaucrat motivated to help others without motive of a private reward (other-serving), even if it might be detrimental to their own interest. The motivations of bureaucrats influence how they react to different attempts to control their activity, which this article later discusses. It is recognised that it is not possible to correctly gauge a bureaucrat’s motivation using the ‘knave’ or ‘knight’ dichotomy *ab initio* in every case as actions may be misinterpreted. This is offered by this article as a reason for carefully determining how bureaucrats should be

controlled and monitored and will be further elaborated upon throughout it.

3.2 Impact of Bureaucratic Activity

Given the discretion held by bureaucrats, it is inevitable that their actions will affect how policy is implemented compared to its initial purpose. Today, bureaucrats contribute significantly to not only policy implementation, by determining what and how services are distributed to citizens, but even the formulation of legislation. For example, political leaders and policy-makers have learnt that bureaucrats have ‘sage advice’ to offer on policy measures and utilise their expertise; likewise, many measures originate in administrative agencies (Kaufman, 1981, p4). Further, despite their ‘individual dilemmas’, bureaucrats operate in a complex ‘web’ of relationships – a horizontal dimension with colleagues or ‘peers’ in ‘neighbor’ organisations; a vertical dimension with public managers and individual citizens; and in term of the whole system, their politically appointed superiors (Hupe and Hill, 2007).

Unfortunately, one consequence is the possible shirking of bureaucrats (particularly, self-serving ‘knaves’), whether in the form of resistance or divergence, which potentially decreases the effectiveness of policy implementation, since bureaucratic commitment is necessary for achieving policy goals (Tummers and Bekkers, 2014). The rapport and quality of interactions between bureaucrats and citizens may also be altered (e.g. bureaucrats stereotyping or disregarding client needs; see Hill and Hupe 2009), inevitably affecting the output legitimacy of government.

Albeit, what might seem to be intentional shirking could be a (other-serving ‘knight’) bureaucrat’s attempt to make policy more meaningful by using discretion. For instance, the means at their disposal for implementation might seem ineffective for their clients (citizens) (May and Winter, 2009). In addition, bureaucrats use discretion to cultivate defence mechanisms to manage environmental conditions, including limited resources, which can create systematic errors (e.g. Lipsky’s (1969a) discussion on police patrol and race).

Consequently, while it is in the public interest to control bureaucratic activity, due to the differing motivations amongst bureaucrats, a balance must be struck between controlling potential and actual abuses of power and facilitating the fruitful use of discretion.

4. Misconceptions Within Agency Theory

Before assessing approaches of full control, such as the command-and-control model, this section highlights why the primary reasons for employing such a model originate from flawed reasoning – the assumption of agency theory that bureaucrats will shirk their duties due to opposing interests with policymakers (developed through institutionalisation and external politics) and discretion being a threat to democracy (Elmore, 1979; Dan Wood and Waterman, 1991). The theory advances that the relationship between elected leaders and unelected bureaucrats is strictly hierarchical, and that discretion, though expected, must be controlled by several mechanisms (selection, monitoring, routinisation) which bolster supervisors against the bureaucrats (Elmore, 1979, p609).

Yet, there is a noteworthy discrepancy between what these theories advance and what

empirical studies suggest – that bureaucrats have ‘intrinsic motivation’, such as values related to professional norms and loyalty, which developed through socialisation into organisational culture (Pierre and Peters, 2017, p157). They are therefore more likely to follow orders from supervisors than to shirk, and this is true for several reasons.

Firstly, there is some degree of self-selection whereby persons with a predisposition towards bureaucratic work will enter such a career. Since bureaucrats are promoted to senior rank based on performance and career record, those understanding the hierarchical structure are not likely to ‘shirk’ (Pierre and Peters, 2017, p160).

Furthermore, through training and socialisation into their organisational culture, bureaucrats develop ‘intrinsic motivation’ and become aware of their expected role. Bureaucrats begin to identify with the organisation and, in doing so, work towards its goals, rather than out of self-interest, and ‘more readily engage in cooperative, altruistic, and spontaneous unrewarded behaviors’ (Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson, 1997).

Moreover, agency theory disregards the sequential interaction between supervisors and bureaucrats which discourages bureaucrats from shirking in order to preserve trust and prevent sanctions. Through this interaction and observation by principals, over time, an understanding and a tacit agreement between principals and agents are formed regarding their responsibilities, value and assets, and other relevant qualities. Similarly, agency theory overlooks the collaboration between distinct institutional levels of administration, for instance that between bureaucrats and other societal actors engaged in service delivery and collaborative governance (Pierre and Peters, p161).

Lastly, public service motivation studies, which focus on the motives of bureaucrats, show significant evidence that there is little reason for bureaucrats to undermine their own values since financial rewards represent a small proportion of their motivation. Customarily, public sector employees do not subscribe to the utility-maximising, self-interested philosophy central to agency theory.

5. Full Control

Given these misconceptions, policymakers often attempt to fully control the bureaucracy through methods such as command-and-control systems. Such systems assume hierarchical links and perfect compliance, once objective and elaborate steps to achieve the policy goal have been established by supervisors. This is otherwise known as the ‘noble lie’, i.e. that policymakers control the processes – organisational, political, and technological – influencing implementation (Elmore, 1979) as is explored in this article. In addition, motivation is considered as irrelevant for bureaucrats who are viewed as pawns that merely carry out instructions which emanate from supervisors (Le Grand, 2003, p49). Non-compliance merely begs *ex-post* punishment. An example of a command-and-control mechanism is police-patrol oversight, which entails centralised, active and direct monitoring of bureaucratic activity through numerous means, including reading documents and conducting field observations or auditing (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984, p166).

It is still recognised that when short-term cost control and productivity are in question, the control-oriented approach produces better results. However, this approach is unsustainable in the long-term due to the inherently faulty assumptions about the motivation of bureaucrats.

5.1 Unattainability

The central issue of this model is that, in practice, supervisors are unable to fully control or monitor bureaucrats' actions and knowledge. They cannot reliably determine the values, beliefs, abilities, or knowledge of bureaucrats (adverse selection), or whether bureaucratic activity shares their interest (moral hazard) (Brehm and Gates, 1997, p25). In addition, bureaucratic discretion is inevitable due to the nature of their work as agents for supervisors – their principals – as earlier discussed. This model assumes that 'the closer one is to the source of the policy, the greater is one's authority and influence' and that complex systems can respond to issues once 'clear lines of authority and control' have been established (Elmore, 1979, p605). However, it fails to consider that policymakers describe their objectives vaguely as they cannot anticipate every event faced by bureaucrats. For example, the encounters of a social worker with assistance seekers are too complex for policymakers to regulate from a distance with standardised solutions, especially considering co-production between bureaucrats and clients (see Hupe and Hill, 2007; Elmore, 1979; Kaufman, 1981). Resultantly, full control is unfeasible since bureaucratic discretion is required so that bureaucrats can adapt broad policies to specific unforeseen conditions and execute effective policy delivery.

Further, supervisors are not the only parties which exercise control over bureaucrats, given their place in a 'web' of relationships with horizontal and vertical links as aforementioned. Firstly, bureaucrats are the primary managers of themselves. While supervisors can induce compliance with monitoring or sanctioning, initial compliance depends more on bureaucrats' qualities (Brehm and Gates, 1997, p44). Bureaucrats shirk or work dependent upon their nature and perceptions of the policy, such as its meaningfulness or effectiveness for citizens' needs, as discussed in section 3.2. For example, a 'knave' is likely to comply with policies that seemingly increase their income or job security.

Bureaucrats' actions are also influenced by those of their colleagues. Brehm and Gates (1997, p195) found that when police officers had frequent contact amongst themselves, there was greater 'conformity in the patterns of working and shirking'. Similarly, resistance by bureaucrats may not only occur on the individual level, but involve collective action (Gofen, 2013). The network shared by bureaucrats allows for learning from colleagues and discovering their thoughts and reactions to policy. According to Gofen's (2013) research, bureaucrats claim that 'knowing that others had the same thoughts' encouraged them to begin or continue with their own shirking.

Likewise, bureaucratic action is influenced by their relationship with citizens, more so than by their supervisors. Bureaucrats are more likely to comply with policy when stimulated by a request from clients than that from supervisors. For instance, social workers view their clients as 'the most influential group of actors' regarding their work ethic. Even when considering a bureaucratic group normally insulated from the public – public utility commissioners – increased citizen activity led to the view that citizens have greater influence than more active

political supervisors (e.g. legislatures or governors; see Brehm and Gates, p176-9).

Thus, full control of the bureaucracy remains unattainable. The nature of bureaucratic work inevitably requires that some control be forgone by the principal to enable effective policy delivery. In addition, the task environment involves several sources of influence and control alongside their principals, particularly colleagues and clients.

5.2 Undesirability

Just as full control of the bureaucracy is unattainable, so too is it undesirable. Control can be counterproductive. Close monitoring and interventions, including target setting, can lead to passive resistance, threshold effects, general dissatisfaction, ‘compliance without conviction’, and slow-downs (see Gilson, 2015), especially when there is a lack of necessity for such tight control. It is directly demotivating, especially to ‘knight’ bureaucrats being treated as pawns, since it undermines their pro-organisational behaviour. This can ultimately lead to them becoming ‘knaves’ to game the system, or other unintended consequences, such as bureaucratic resistance. These repercussions then affect policy implementation and, in turn, the public interest. It may also impact the quality of interactions between bureaucrats and citizens (e.g. bureaucrats stereotyping or disregarding client needs; see Hill and Hupe, 2009), damaging the output legitimacy of government (Tummers and Bekkers, 2014).

H.G. Barkema (1995) concluded that ‘the closer the degree of personal supervision, the greater was the (negative) impact on work effort’ (See Le Grand, 2003). Brehm and Gates (1997) go further, finding that the level of necessary control and supervision over bureaucrats depends on each bureaucrat’s predisposition and capacity. When the bureaucrat already operates on a level close to that expected by supervisors, or when they are ‘relatively unresponsive’ to supervision, or even when the ‘value of the policy in question is low to the supervisor’, then it is best to not devote much, if any, time to supervision. Instead, supervisors should devote most of their energy towards bureaucrats that respond to supervision, or to sanctioning ‘knaves’ and shirkers when ‘the marginal utility of eliminating sabotage is greater than the marginal costs of additional supervision,’ in order for control to be truly effective. Therefore, full control of the bureaucracy is undesirable, as it can lead to inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Further, attempts to fully control bureaucracy fail to consider the capitalisation of discretion as a tool to improve the effectiveness of policies for citizens. A tightly structured hierarchy requires more checks to ensure compliance, which then leads to more diversion and delay, and ultimately greater bureaucratic dependence on superiors for guidance and lower reliance on bureaucratic expertise and individual judgement (Elmore, 1979, p608). Similarly, policymakers cannot predict every element of situations faced by bureaucrats, nor do they have the expertise to do so, and instead describe their aims ambiguously as previously discussed.

Thus, bureaucratic discretion is necessary for bureaucrats to adopt broad policies to meet their clients’ needs in unanticipated situations, rendering full control undesirable. Given the differences between types of bureaucrats, which have consequences on the ‘degree of

uniformity' of performance, and the nature of their tasks and functions, bureaucratic discretion allows for effective implementation in diverse cases. For instance, the most effective way to manage delivery of 'an explicitly defined cash benefit', e.g. child benefits, is quite distinct from that of organising refuse collection, which also differs from functional ways to manage the activities of teachers (see Hupe and Hill, 2007, p284).

6. Alternative Methods

Contrasting a command-and-control approach, a network system based on trust and discretion, such as that found in Scandinavian countries, should be established to monitor and shape bureaucratic activity in order to capitalise upon discretion and prevent demotivated bureaucrats. This method focuses on the lowest level, i.e., where 'administrative actions intersect private choices', the definition of the behavior that created the problem to be solved, and the identification of those best to handle (Elmore, 1979, p604). During policy design, policymakers consider those involved in its implementation and possible policy effects on citizens (Gilson, 2015, p399) and treat discretion as a tool for improving implementation. Unlike command-and-control, bureaucrats are assumed to be 'knights', concerned with the needs and wants of their clients and general public interest. They are socialised into an 'esprit de corps', holding a value system focused on political neutrality, organisational loyalty and professional norms (Pierre and Peters, 2017, p163). Thus, they are simply granted resources and trusted to allocate them efficiently and comply with policy decisions (Le Grand, 2003, p49). This does not mean that control of the bureaucracy is absent. Rather, control is exercised *ex-ante* through policy design and budget allocations to ensure that policy preferences are clear enough so that bureaucrats' actions align with them.

However, reliance upon trust in this manner still generates issues, and the system will break down if providers of public services are actually 'knaves', as there would be no mechanisms preventing them from serving their own interests through their activities. Equally, even if a bureaucrat is a 'knight', their interests must align with those of the policymakers regarding what constitutes public interest (Le Grand, 2003, p50); yet, there is no guarantee of this. For example, a doctor's principal concern might be the welfare of his patients, while a parliamentarian's concern would be all citizens within his constituency. Therefore, if a doctor gives priority to his own patients (as a 'knight' would), then patients with more serious needs elsewhere would be neglected – running against the aim of a policy-maker or specific policy (Le Grand, 2003, p50).

Nevertheless, possible challenges could be countered with limited *ex-ante* mechanisms. With a trust-based system comprised of less intrusive mechanisms of management, especially *ex-post*, a much-needed equilibrium between controlling the bureaucracy and preventing their inefficiency and demotivation would be achieved. For instance, periodic rotations can disturb the insulation of departmental bureaucrats (Huber and Shipan, 2002, p29), while in-depth performance assessments are only exercised when performance might be below satisfactory levels or public funds have been misused (Pierre and Peters, 2017, p163).

Furthermore, contrasting police-patrol oversight, fire-alarm and 'smoke detector' oversights are less centralized and intrusive as they involve less active and immediate interference.

Bureaucratic activity would not be constantly investigated for violations of policy goals. Instead, a system of rules and practices is established, allowing citizens and organised interest groups to access and examine administrative decisions, and seek remedies in the event of a violation (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984, p166). Specifically, in the event of a fire-alarm, a political superordinate often addresses the issue for the citizen or interest group. Smoke detectors are even more decentralised than fire-alarms, since supervisors or other political superordinates do not play a role (Brehm and Gates, 1997, p175). Rather, the citizen or interest group directly addresses the issue through the bureaucracy. As bureaucrat-client relationships are a stimulus for bureaucratic accountability (Gilson, 2015, p398; Hill and Hupe, 2009, p402), this can prove more effective.

Similarly, this system recognises the ‘web’ of relationships in which bureaucrats function, and therefore the levels on which they are accountable, including the vertical (supervisors) and horizontal (colleagues within their own organisation and external organisations) levels. Accordingly, it facilitates and supports inter-agency coordination and the creation of public value, as bureaucrats are accountable to not only policymakers, but each other and the public, i.e. the authorising environment (Moore, 1995).

Moreover, instead of strict controls, more supportive mechanisms can be created, including training and other resources related to job performance needs, with the assistance of interest groups, academics, and professional organisations (Lipsky, 1971b, p400; Gilson, 2015, p398). This way, bureaucratic activity can be shaped by supervisors without scrutinisation. Within the bureaucracy itself, organisational culture and conversation shape and control bureaucratic activity. This is due to bureaucratic activity being shaped by the rules and procedures within an organisation, which are passed on through socialisation and emphasised by colleagues and supervisors (Gilson, 2015, p394). For example, reflective practice with colleagues and supervisors, in which activity is reviewed and knowledge is shared, allows for co-production and participatory forms of accountability, and can be combined with oversight. Likewise, over time, principals have the opportunity to observe the activities of their subordinates through their interaction and review the mechanisms in place to establish more suitable ones for monitoring and controlling said activities in the future.

7. Conclusion

While it is agreed that it is in the public interest for the activity of public managers and employees to be monitored and shaped, placing a ‘tight leash’ on public managers and employees is not a successful method to do so. If short-term cost and productivity are issues at hand, a control-oriented approach produces better results. However, this approach is not sustainable for the long-term due to its inherently faulty assumptions about bureaucratic motivation. This article has addressed these misconceptions and shown that some degree of control must be forgone by principals due to the inevitability of bureaucratic discretion as a result of the nature and task environment of bureaucrats. It has also clarified that it is not possible for principals to have exclusive control over bureaucratic activity since there are additional sources of control and influence, including colleagues and citizens.

Within a ‘command-and-control’ system, bureaucrats’ motivation is negatively affected,

which leads to, inter alia, passive resistance of bureaucrats, threshold effects, general dissatisfaction, ‘compliance without convictions, and slow-downs. Ultimately, such bureaucratic behaviour produces ineffective implementation of policies, and inefficient services being delivered to citizens. This has consequences for the interactions between bureaucrats and citizens, inevitably affecting ‘output legitimacy’ of the government.

Instead, this article concludes a trust-based network model is appropriate, which results in an equilibrium being achieved; that is, it allows for discretion to be utilised as a tool for implementation, whilst similarly enabling bureaucratic activity to be monitored and shaped in a less intrusive and demotivating manner, e.g. using fire-alarm oversight or ex-ante methods.

It is also recognised that, in practice, multiple mechanisms of control might be necessary, depending on what is appropriate according to political judgements on contexts and goals. Bureaucrats are accountable in different ways, at several levels and to varying degrees, so the mechanisms used to monitor and control them should reflect this reality. For analytical purposes, there is the reasonable predisposition to assume away many of these variations. Still, it is necessary for future work to systematically take into account these factors to strengthen explanations of bureaucratic behaviour. In light of this, there is room in the discussion for more suggestions on alternative forms of monitoring and controlling to be made.

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