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Frontline Bureaucrat



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Synonyms

[Administrative training](#); [Bottom-up approach](#); [Bureaucracy](#); [Discretionary power](#); [Field-level practice](#); [Local governance](#); [New governance](#); [Policy implementation](#); [Policy networks](#); [Politicization](#); [Public administration](#); [Public officials](#); [Public participation](#); [Public policymaking](#); [Street-level bureaucrat](#)

Definition

Frontline bureaucrats work daily in the field with the wider public in service delivery. According to recent transformations in policymaking processes, frontline bureaucrats are increasingly required to interact with a wide range of social and economic agents.

Introduction: Political and Administrative Powers

Bureaucratic organizations were set up within the political-administrative and legal framework of

the nineteenth century to prevent civil society from arbitrary political actions. The central premise of the Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy was the establishment of standardized codes of behavior and legal rights for public officials with lifelong careers, in contrast to elected officials who are democratically and cyclically mandated to provide political directives. The autonomy of bureaucracy was, thus, conceived as a key feature that could be used to separate powers between elected and public officials. However, the rationalization of administrative work has been criticized for having brought ineffective influence over the ways bureaucrats relate each other. Where bureaucratic formalism provides a greater level of control for political representatives to exert power over public officials, there exists a basic tension between the hierarchical downward flow existing in bureaucracies and the unequal accumulation of political and technical expertise.

Convergences and divergences between political and administrative powers have characterized the ways democratic states have designed and performed public actions. In summary, while citizens were addressed as mere “beneficiaries” of the state after the Second World War, the shift towards a more customer-oriented conception of citizens from 1980s onwards led to the reconfiguration of public administrations under new like-market values (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). The externalization of public services was fostered through new public-private partnerships between the state and economic agents while both

managerialism and political loyalty was promoted for top-level public officials. New forms of “politicization” of the top-level officials, however, questioned key values of neutrality in public administration.

As De Montricher (2008) defines it, politicization concerns the “appropriation of public agencies by a specific political coalition or the strengthening of the top level of an administration to implement the commitments of the electoral campaign.” (ibid., 296). Even though several public officials have always been legitimately involved in politics, although stay clear of party politics on occasion, Peters and Pierre (2004) acknowledge the emerging politicization of public officials in two forms. The first is top-down and involves an increased level of control exerted by governments over bureaucrats, in an attempt to ensure that the behavior of public officials is compatible with the political preferences that exist under new public managerial reforms. The second is bottom-up and regards the spontaneous increase of political activity of public officials.

Bottom-up forms of politicization recall the long-standing debate on the identities of bureaucrats and the multiple relations that they can establish with both policymaking and the political system. Accordingly, the idea that political input should be merely operationalized by public officials through policy implementation is incorrect. Considering policy implementation as not simply “putting policy into action,” Hudson and Lowe (2009) argue that bottom-up approaches to policymaking shed light on how political actions are conducted and reciprocally generate new input. The shift from clear-cut definitions of political and policy powers in policymaking, towards the (re)placement of the policy process within the wider realm of political action, has contributed to the reconsidering policy implementers as key contributors of democratic governance.

Increasingly, the coordination with new policy agents has inevitably become the new battleground of policy implementation. The interaction between public officials and the plurality of agents, interests, goals, and strategies invited to influence decision-making, has considerably broadened policy networks. At the end of the 1990s, scholars and international organizations

celebrated a new generation of network-based and multilevel governance aimed at empowering emerging policy networks and ensuring higher degrees of transparency and accountability from governments (Rhodes 1996). New types of skill are becoming critical for public officials, namely, social skills, business management, and language skills. Notably, the new public service model proposed by Denhardt and Denhardt (2007) provided a case in point on the need to pass from mere concerns about policy design performance and attainability, towards new skills and forms of interaction among agents “making” policies, including citizens. In contrast with both standard bureaucratic ideals and new managerialist reforms, citizen-centered reforms have become decisive for the deployment of administrative functions (Bryson et al. 2014).

Who Are the Frontline Bureaucrats?

In the last few decades, different forms of politicization have had different impacts on public officials according to their level in public administrations. Beyond visions of top-level officials as “long-hands” of political directives, or lower level officials as mere “executors,” contemporary democratic governance requires empirical knowledge on the distribution of power within public administration. Most frequently, civil service is structured in administrative units (departments, divisions, etc.) where public officials’ roles respond to the hierarchy, comprising top, middle, and lower levels. Public officials at all levels can diversely deploy back-office and frontline functions, although it is more frequent to see public officials at the lower levels of the administrative chain working in the frontline. The creation of extended networks of decision-making and, on occasion, the implementation of policymaking processes with the participation of civil society, corroborates that the fact that top, middle, and street level officials are often mandated to work in both back-office and frontline positions is a key factor (Rhodes 1996).

Policymaking processes that reshape the borders of power of decision-making require public officials to perform frontline functions that

scholars have explored by considering a wide range of factors. Focusing on the degrees of administrative accountability in policy implementation has led Lipsky (1980) to identify risks in the use of discretionary powers by “street-level” bureaucrats which will eventually undermine the legitimacy of policy actions. Along the same lines, Hupe and Hill (2007) argue that frontline bureaucrats should be accountable both internally (with political, administrative, and other professional agents) and externally (with social and economic agents) to prevent the uncontrolled use of discretionary powers.

On the contrary, Bovens and Zouridis (2002) advocate that street-level bureaucrats may help to lessen the effect of bureaucratic impediments so that tailored procedures can be implemented which will, in turn, increase administrative accountability. In this vein, the interaction with lay citizens and the gathering of local knowledge have been seen as strategic for success in policymaking. From a UK-based research, Durose (2009) argues that frontline bureaucrats may hold “entrepreneurial” skills that will allow them to carry out administrative work with marginalized groups of local communities. Civic entrepreneurialism reflects the nature of local governance actions that necessarily represent contested sites for policies, and frontline workers are required to use their local knowledge and know-how to provide public administration with the necessary information for effective service delivery. The variability of policy action in the field means that the imperative for action of frontline bureaucrats is also aimed at accommodating some degrees of disorder in local governance. In the same vein, Lowndes (2005) argues that frontline bureaucrats can be understood as “institutional entrepreneurs,” who help improve service delivery in local governance by sharing, borrowing, and remembering daily practices with local communities in the “muddle and mess” of governance. Accordingly, the need for a new “civic enterprise culture” in civil service should originate in the frontline to meet the needs of changing environments.

Despite acknowledging the key role played by frontline bureaucrats in democratic governance, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2006) found

that street-level workers rarely describe themselves as policymakers, decision-makers, or even government workers. By seeing their work as intimately linked to their activities with citizens and other street-level workers, the authors approach them as “citizen agents” (ibid.). These findings corroborate what Denhardt and Denhardt (2007) advocate as the current extension required by public officials in democratic civil service. Accordingly, public officials should help other citizens to negotiate priorities by reducing centralized decision-making. The reframing of frontline functions, in addition, also implies acknowledging that local knowledge is always filtered by frontline bureaucrats’ subjective interpretations, requiring adequate tools of analysis and understanding in this field of study.

As Peters and Pierre (2007) state “there is an empirical question about the relative power position of civil servants in reformed administrative arrangements under governance regimes. Also, even if the civil service remains a source of steering and control, we need to remind ourselves that this to some extent is less a control that comes from public office in a narrow sense and more a matter of control that is derived from an ability to coordinate and engage other actors. [. . .] Law and legal controls will to some extent have been de-emphasized so that the discretion of the street level bureaucrat, or the “street level negotiator” will be enhanced” (ibid., 238).

Frontline Bureaucrats and Beyond

Multiple forms of politicization of public officials and increasing place-based engagement in frontline work should be understood within the reorganization of roles in current public administrations. The extensive use of performance indicators introduced with new public managerial reforms has often contrasted with the fair articulation among public officials, and rather reinforced the separation between top and lower levels (Peters and Pierre 2004; Page 2007). While, in some cases, solidarity within civil service is likely to be downsized by these measures, new forms of recruitment in the public sector has further contributed to transforming the

organizational setting of public officials. The plurality of administrative figures that, today, deploy frontline functions has grown exponentially. Frontline bureaucrats, more often than not, collaborate with a new wave of short-term contracted collaborators, experts, as well as temporary employees and agencies assumed by public authorities to deliver public services.

Against this backdrop, an up-to-date approach to the role of frontline bureaucrats is seeking to make sense of the emerging and unclear set of experts and practitioners required to deliver public services via different forms of contract with public administrations. The recruitment of managers from outside the career system and the use of external agents to implement public policies means that public decision-making is being conducted, on occasion, by people who are not socialized into the career values of the public service. While scholarly debate has dealt with the complex system of public and private experts influencing policy implementation in a wide variety of fields, common is the postpositivist view on current patterns of governance, which have developed new sophisticated mechanisms of networking and raised new questions about the multifaceted definitions of expertise in policymaking.

Frontline bureaucrats are currently required to be the mediators of new collaborative settings, where the creation of new knowledge relies on the participatory dialogue between different forms of expertise, knowledge, and interests. Frontline bureaucrats operate within differing perspectives of public agents because policymaking processes themselves have embraced new modalities of interaction with social and economic agents. The ways through which frontline bureaucrats and workers are deploying functions attached to those described above, or those who are collaborating with private agents that deploy the abovementioned functions, reinforce the need for further research.

Conclusion

Frontline bureaucrats are the primary implementers and interpreters of public services that can reciprocally feed new policy cycles. The day-to-day contact with social and economic agents allows them to reveal problems arising in the field in connection with public administration. Accordingly, further research should address emerging configurations of frontline bureaucrats in both standard and collaborative settings. Whether frontline bureaucrats rely on either long-career employment in the public administration or short-term contracts should be taken into consideration. Beyond shedding light on the varying combinations of structures, recruitment, and promotion policies, research should contribute to understanding how current frontline strategies substantively work with social agents and relate with governments. In particular, the research needs to look at which strategies are being adopted to engage a wide variety of social agents, some with more expertise in the official political game, and some others who are more concerned with the everyday making of and problem solving linked to concrete policy problems.

The identification of the variable functions deployed by frontline bureaucrats should further provide insights for practical training and help, on occasion, to overcome reluctance in engaging with citizens who lack a specialized knowledge of administrative procedures and to ensure effective advancement of public service. As stated by Cornwall (2001), "Field-level workers whose work often involved telling people what to do, or enforcing rules, were suddenly cast in an entirely different role: for some this unleashed their creativity and energy, transforming their practice. Yet old habits die hard. [...] Training courses proved to have other uses: providing new opportunities for horizontal and vertical linkages within institutions and across sectors, bringing managers and bureaucrats into direct contact with the people

whom their decisions affect, and giving confidence and voice to lower level workers” (ibid., 46).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Administrative Discretion in Participatory Processes](#)
- ▶ [Administrative Reform](#)
- ▶ [Bureaucracy and Service Delivery](#)
- ▶ [Bureaucratic Influence in Policy Formulation](#)
- ▶ [Citizen-Administration Relationship](#)
- ▶ [Networks of Governance](#)
- ▶ [NGOs and Governance](#)
- ▶ [Policy Networks as a Form of Governance](#)
- ▶ [Politicization of Bureaucracy](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Administration](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Public Policy](#)
- ▶ [Public Sector Collaboration and Social Policy](#)
- ▶ [Public Value: Bureaucrats Versus Politicians](#)
- ▶ [Reforms and Governance](#)
- ▶ [Street-Level Bureaucracy](#)

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