

POLITICS AND THE BUREAUCRACY

POLICYMAKING IN THE FOURTH BRANCH OF GOVERNMENT

FOURTH EDITION

KENNETH J. MEIER

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PREFACE

Bureaucracy has never been a popular institution in the United States, but for the last few decades it has come under continual siege. Presidents, interest groups, members of Congress, and the public at large have blamed their problems on bureaucracy. At the same time the bureaucracy serves as the political scapegoat in the United States, the expectations for and demands on bureaucracy continue to escalate. The reinventing government movement has institutionalized the demand for higher performance with fewer resources. Contracting out has become the latest panacea designed to cure bureaucracy.

This book addresses two audiences. First, it serves as an introduction to politics and the bureaucracy. Bureaucracy, just as the president, Congress, or the Supreme Court, is a political institution. It must build political support for its actions, and it uses that political support to interact with the other political institutions to make public policy. Bureaucracy is the least visible of all our political institutions, so a separate book is often necessary to introduce students to the intricacies of bureaucratic politics in the United States.

Second, the book is designed to serve as a reference for scholars. I have made a serious effort to include cutting edge research on bureaucracy within each of the chapters. This task has become more difficult. When the first edition was published in 1979, fewer than a dozen empirical scholars of bureaucracy and public policy were publishing research. The 1980s saw an explosion of research on bureaucracy. A large and growing group of scholars have focused their work on the political role of bureaucracy. At the present, it is one of the most dynamic fields in political science. Much of this work is cited in the bibliography.

The book's general structure remains the same, but I have rewritten and updated virtually all parts of the book. New examples have been used in place of old ones. Significant changes have taken place in several chapters. Chapter 3 has again grown. What was an empirical theory with only case study support in 1979 has become an empirical theory with solid multivariate research. Much material on state and local bureaucracy has also been added. Chapter 5, for the first time, was not restructured. The public's expectations of bureaucracy are complex and contradictory; we need to understand how bureaucracies deal with such expectations.

Chapter 6 continues to expand. The growth area in public administration has been political control of the bureaucracy. There is, I think, no longer any question that other political institutions can control the bureaucracy if they wish to do so. The new question has become, can they control the bureaucracy without doing it serious harm?

Chapter 7 also has undergone additional changes. The discussion of administrative ethics was expanded. Studies of administrative ethics have blossomed. My own reading suggests that we now pay more attention to ethics than at any time since the original work of Paul Appleby. Chapter 7 also contains an expanded discussion of public choice as a control on bureaucracy. My personal bias is that public choice is a normative theory of bureaucracy, and I have treated it as such. I have included other public choice research only where the research examined real data. I had originally planned to drop Chapter 8 and propose a radical alteration of the political system, but, in the end, that was a different book and I have made only incremental changes.

Over the course of three editions, I have benefited from the comments and critiques of several colleagues. The first edition was read and critiqued by David Brady, Scott Harris, Jeremy Plant, Chuck Jones, and John Wanat. Detailed reviews of the first edition by David Lowery, Bill Browne, Eric Herzik, Tom Lauth, Larry Hill, and Harry Holloway formed the basis for the second edition. Helpful comments on that edition were also provided by Jim Campbell, Frank Thompson, and Pat Ingraham. The second edition was reviewed by Larry Hill, David Kozak, David Lowery, and John Wanat for the transition to the third edition. I would like to thank the following reviewers of the third edition for their suggestions: Brian P. Janiskee, California State University at San Bernardino; John J. Hindera, Texas Tech University; and S.K. Schneider, University of South Carolina. Joe Cooper provided me admirable instruction on the legislative veto and on why my position is wrong. Larry Hill and Paul Sabatier have greatly influenced my thinking on bureaucracy, especially about using the book as a showcase for research. Jim Anderson always reads each edition carefully and sends me a list of the mistakes that I have made. Numerous conversations with Dan Wood and George Krause have sharpened my thinking about bureaucracy. I would like to thank all these individuals, and to show my appreciation, Paul Sabatier has agreed to buy them all beer at the next convention. George Waller, Alesha Doan, Warren Eller, Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha, and Scott Robinson all provided research assistance to update the fourth edition. The standard statement about all the remaining errors in the book being the responsibility of Paul Sabatier holds.

College Station, TX
December 1998



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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BUREAUCRACY AND POLITICS

The United States was founded on a philosophy of limited government. That government which governed least was assumed to govern best. The core functions of a limited government—collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, and dispensing justice to the contractually and criminally aggrieved—are now only minor aspects of modern government. The eclipse of limited government by “positive” government has added functions to the nation-state totally foreign to nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century governments. In the past three decades the national government has taken responsibility for protecting the environment, solving the problems of the homeless, regulating the health and safety of the nation’s workforce, curing AIDS and other dangerous diseases, and protecting society from the ill effects of drug abuse. Even radical conservatives in the twenty-first century demand a larger government to ban abortions, permit prayer in schools, and root out pornography.

The growth of positive government has exacerbated another trend—the growth in the major instrument of positive government, bureaucracy.¹ Each new government function has spawned a corresponding bureaucracy to administer that function. With the advent of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, the Department of Health and Human Services grew from a budget of \$5 billion in 1963 to \$770 billion in 1998 (including Social Security). To coordinate the nation’s energy policies in the wake of the Arab oil embargo, the Office of Emergency Preparedness was dusted off and charged with energy responsibilities. When this small office appeared inadequate, the Federal Energy Office (FEO) was created in the executive office of the president. Even the FEO pales in comparison to its son, the Federal Energy Administration, and its grandson, the Department of Energy. Although the federal government abandoned most of its energy policies in the 1980s, the Department of Energy continued to survive. Concern for workers’ health and safety gave rise to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), and the needs of consumers were entrusted to the

¹ This book uses the term “bureaucracy” to refer to government organizations and “bureaucrat” to refer to government employees. Both terms are used in a neutral way to describe specific organizations or individuals. The reader should not infer anything pejorative from their use.

Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Other examples in the recent past are far too numerous to mention.

When faced with acute crises, chronic problems, or even apathy, the positive state responds; and the response usually includes a bureaucracy. Even under President Ronald Reagan, a vigorous public advocate of less government, the elaborate bureaucratic structure of the positive state remained intact. Although the Reagan administration created few new agencies, it did not eliminate any old ones.² Under Reagan the total number of federal government employees actually grew from 2,821,000 in 1981 to 3,065,000 in 1989, and the federal budget breached \$1 trillion for the first time.

Only under President Bill Clinton with Vice President Al Gore's initiative on reinventing government did the size of the federal government decline. Total federal employees dropped from 3.128 million in 1990 to 2.765 million by March 1998. The reduction, however, was essentially blue smoke and mirrors. It was achieved by simply contracting out functions to private organizations, organizations often staffed by former federal employees. Republican members of Congress also made some token efforts in this direction in the mid-1990s when they abolished a few minor agencies, the most notable being the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Recent events notwithstanding bureaucracy has grown both in size and the quantity of resources it consumes and also in a qualitative sense. Few aspects of a citizen's life are immune from the tentacles of government bureaucracy. Today's citizens awake in the morning to breakfasts of bacon and eggs, both certified as fit for consumption by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (although the Department of Health and Human Services would urge you to eat a breakfast lower in cholesterol). Breakfast is rudely interrupted by a phone call; the cost of phone service is determined by a state regulatory commission. When our citizens drive to work, their cars' emissions are controlled by a catalytic converter mandated by the Environmental Protection Agency. The cars have seat belts, padded dashboards, collapsible steering columns, and perhaps air bags required by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. When our citizens stop for gasoline, they pay a price that is partly determined by energy policies (or a lack thereof) administered by the Department of Energy. To take their minds off the numerous bureaucracies regulating their lives, the bureaucratic citizens turn on their radios. Each radio station is licensed by the Federal Communications Commission, and all advertising is subject to the rules and regulations of the Federal Trade Commission. When our citizens arrive at work (say, at a bureaucracy such as a university), they enter a handicapped accessible building (required by federal law) in a building built with federal funds to report to jobs financed in large part by the Department of Education.³

Although our hypothetical citizens have been awake only a few hours, at least nine federal, state, and local bureaucracies have touched their lives. The normal citizen in

² The Civil Aeronautics Board was abolished, but that was scheduled under President Carter. The termination of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in 1982 had been planned under Carter. The Community Services Administration was eliminated under Reagan, but by the time of its elimination the CSA had few actual programs.

³ My students are fond of noting that all this contact with bureaucracy so early in the day will produce a painful headache. The remedy, of course, is two headache tablets regulated by the Food and Drug Administration.