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EXECUTIVE POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

EXECUTIVE POLITICS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Edited by MARTIN LODGE
and KAI WEGRICH



Executive Politics in Times of Crisis

Edited by

Martin Lodge

*Professor of Political Science and Public Policy,
Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

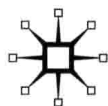
and

Kai Wegrich

*Professor of Public Policy and Administration,
Hertie School of Governance, Berlin, Germany*



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Executive Politics in Times of Crisis

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Notes on Contributors

Philippe Bezes is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique and at the Centre d'études et de recherches de sciences administratives et politiques, University of Paris II, France.

Arjen Boin is Professor of Public Governance and Crisis Management, Utrecht School of Governance, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Julia Fleischer is Research Fellow at the German Research Institute for Public Administration Speyer, Germany.

Sharon Gilad is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and in the Federman School of Public Policy, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

Nilima Gulrajani is Lecturer in Public Administration and Development in the Departments of Government and International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

Thurid Hustedt is Fellow in Political Science, Administration and Organization at the University of Potsdam, Germany.

Will Jennings is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Southampton, UK.

Philipp Krause is a visiting scholar at the University of Maryland, USA, and a Consultant at the World Bank. He is completing a PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

David E. Lewis is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University, USA.

Martin Lodge is Professor in Political Science and Public Policy in the Department of Government and the Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

Will Lowe is Senior Researcher at the Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung (MZES) at Mannheim University, Germany.

Felicity Matthews is Lecturer in Public Policy in the Department of Politics, University of York, UK.

Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling is Associate Professor of European Politics at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, UK.

Salvador Parrado is Professor in Political Science and Public Administration, Department of Political Science and Administration, Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNED), Madrid, Spain.

Paul 't Hart is Professor of Public Administration at the Utrecht School of Governance, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Christian van Stolk is Research Leader on the Evaluation and Performance Audit team, RAND Europe.

Kai Wegrich is Professor of Public Policy and Administration, Hertie School of Governance, Berlin, Germany.

Kutsal Yesilkagit is Associate Professor at the Utrecht School of Governance, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands.

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1

Introduction: Executive Politics in Times of Crisis

Martin Lodge and Kai Wegrich

Who gets what, when and how – this question defines the central concern of political science in general, and of public policy and administration in particular.¹ Why are particular issues on the agenda? How do political ‘masters’ interact with their bureaucratic ‘servants’? How is the delivery of public services designed and operated? How are rules drafted, monitored and enforced – and by whom? How do diversified systems of governing seek to achieve cooperation? What drives institutional design, and what are the implications of performance management and ‘pay for performance’ systems for responsiveness, competence and productivity in public services?

This catalogue of perennial questions is at the heart of this book. However, this book is not just about reconsidering these questions. This book seeks to introduce a different perspective to these questions – one that emphasizes the importance of *executive politics*. The term *executive politics* has gained widespread currency in recent years, although mostly in the context of US political science. The term combines an interest in the politics of bureaucracy (Carpenter 2001, Lewis 2008, Wood and Waterman 1994) with an interest in the politics of the executive branch, especially the role of political leadership (i.e. the Presidency) (Moe and Howell 1999), and an interest in the ways in which coalitions are made and broken (Laver and Shepsle 1996). In the European context, executive politics brings together those scholars interested in comparative public administration (i.e. in the relationship between politics and administration as well as questions of administrative design) and those interested in comparative government (i.e. in the composition of political executive institutions).

A focus on *executive politics* stresses the importance of the political factor in the research of administrative (or managerial) phenomena.

It emphasizes the importance and considerable potential of political science-oriented research to enhance an advanced understanding of and interest in the administrative factor (or the execution factor, Dunsire 1978). Such interest might include the administrative prerequisites that enable any policy decision to take effect; it might also include issues of organization within the political process (such as issues of legislative or party organization) and the way administrative reform policies are being introduced and managed.

The rationale for considering executive politics during *times of crisis* is partly driven by the contemporary context of financial crisis and subsequent sovereign debt crises in much of the Western world. Such contexts of crisis are said to represent the hour of the executive, when political and bureaucratic careers are made and finished. The financial crisis challenged the capacities of contemporary executive politicians to deal with volatile financial markets, international contagion effects and dissatisfied and mobilized electorates. Furthermore, the financial crisis also challenged the dominance of particular administrative doctrines that had characterized thinking about executive politics, for example in institutional design and regulatory strategies. Demographic change (i.e. ageing societies) and climate change added to this sense of crisis. Both were said to require responses to developing long-term trends (one being more certain than the other) which were seen to contradict more short-term political considerations, especially at a time of budget cuts and stagnant economies.

This combination of financial, climate-related and demographic challenges already poses considerable doubts regarding the capacity of executives. However, the rationale for the *Times of Crisis* sub-title is partly also an intellectual one. On the one hand, the past decade has seen considerable challenges to traditional understandings of national executive politics. For example, academic debates about the spread and application of administrative reform templates (Christensen and Lægreid 2008, Dunleavy et al. 2006, Lodge and Gill 2011, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011), about the widespread impression that traditional understandings between politics and administration had come undone (Suleiman 2003) and about whether governing complex social systems was possible under conditions of extensive internationalization, outsourcing and social fragmentation continued. On the other hand, the sense of an intellectual crisis was informed by the perception that political science at large was increasingly disinterested in addressing the administrative factor, while the literature on public administration was accused of failing to sufficiently acknowledge the importance of politics.

By developing key themes that characterize executive politics, the contributions to this volume emphasize the importance of the political in administration and the significance of the administrative in the political. This volume neither intends to provide for a new framework or theory of politics and bureaucracy/administration nor seeks to present a unified methodology for the study of particular phenomena. Rather, it projects executive politics as a commitment to the systematic (and social scientific) study of a field of related political phenomena. This introductory chapter sets out the context that shapes the executive politics field. It locates executive politics within existing debates and explores key themes and questions of enquiry of both the executive politics agenda and the individual contributions in the volume.

Executive politics – The word and the field

Executive politics builds on a considerable intellectual legacy. We define executive politics as a field of study that is interested in the politics of political-administrative relations and the role of governmental organization in the formulation and execution of political programmes. Such a wide-ranging definition includes the formal and informal rules and conventions that characterize the relationship between elected and non-elected public officials, aspects of institutional design (of organizations and rules), the operation or execution of these design choices and the study of the consequences of these choices in terms of outputs and outcomes (including issues of compliance). Executive politics is therefore not just about the executive branch or about a state-centric focus. It takes into consideration diverse governing arrangements that shape policy (such as polycentric, network and regulatory space-influenced analysis).

As a field of study, executive politics builds on two distinct research traditions. One tradition is the field of *comparative government*. This particular field is interested in the executive branch, and in particular in the exercise of political leadership. Classic concerns have focused on the power of prime ministers, presidents and chancellors within particular institutional contexts. Standard interests, for example, have related to the 'presidentialization' of the role of prime ministers in parliamentary democracies (Poguntke and Webb 2005) and the way in which 'core executives' co-ordinate (or not) decisions (Rhodes 1995, Smith 1999). Elsewhere, an interest in the politics of bureaucracy has focused on the power of presidents to control bureaucracy, often in competition with legislative actors.

The other tradition is the field of *comparative public administration* (including the more recent interest in *public management*). A core interest here has been in the organization of the executive government, in particular the machinery of government. This includes considerable attention to the rise and fall of administrative reform ideas and doctrines, such as 'New Public Management' (NPM) or the more recent 'post-NPM'. Apart from diagnosing cross-national reform trends, much attention has been paid to explaining cross-national variation. Furthermore, considerable attention has been paid to the design of particular administrative bodies, such as regulatory agencies, and to the way in which different states seek to control public services (see Hood et al. 2004).

As noted, executive politics builds on these two traditions and their overlapping concerns. Three particular areas of overlapping interest can be identified:

- (i) *The politics-administration relationship*. One of the core traditional interests in political science has been the relationship between politics and administration. As the work by Aberbach and colleagues (and subsequent work) has shown (1981), there are no straightforward distinctions between the political and the administrative (despite continuing differences in terms of legitimization). National political systems generate different patterns of politics and administration. However, the interdependency of politics and administration means that activities are closely connected. Of course, differences in terms of recruitment and legitimization exist (as diagnosed by Max Weber) and are enshrined in rules (such as the Germanic differentiation between political *politische Beamte* and supposedly non-political, neutral *Fachbeamte*). Elsewhere, boundaries between political and public servant spheres might be said to be blurred, such as in Japan where senior civil servants sometimes enter party politics. The *Public Service Bargains* perspective has highlighted the formal and informal institutions that shape strategic interactions between politicians, bureaucrats and the wider political system (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, Hood and Lodge 2006). How issues of reward, competency and loyalty are formalized and understood is of fundamental political significance, especially in terms of the various administrative reform initiatives that have been associated with NPM and post-NPM.² Indeed, decades of reforms are said to have led to the rediscovery of bureaucracy (Olsen 2006), defined as a set of rules and a distinct organizational setting apart from the private sector.

- (ii) *The politics of the executive and the bureaucracy.* Among the key contributions to the politics of bureaucracy are textbooks by Guy Peters (now in the sixth edition, 2009) and Edward Page (1992). The latter in particular highlighted how political constitutional rules (e.g. electoral systems, allocation of responsibilities between levels of government, interest-group universe and suchlike) shape institutional varieties of politics-administration relationships. Similarly, the historical growth of administrative organization within national political systems points to distinct political patterns, driven by emerging states' increasing centralization and their need to organize and administer tax collection and the military (Mayntz 1985: 17–32; see also Silberman (1993), who pointed to diverse path dependencies generated through key choices during so-called critical junctures, especially regarding the recruitment of senior public servants). The notion of credible commitment has similarly shaped ideas regarding institutional design, especially in relation to delegation to regulatory agencies (Levy and Spiller 1994). Here, the focus has been on addressing time inconsistency problems caused by distinct political system characteristics (i.e. the risk of governments seeking to reverse an earlier decision at a future point in time). Furthermore, the literature on control over bureaucracy has developed along various tracks, ranging from an interest in police patrols, fire alarms and deck-stacking devices to a concern with different control modes on the lines of grid-group cultural theory (Hood 1996, 1998) and an interest in national patterns (Page and Wright 1999, 2007). Similarly, the proliferation of regulatory agencies across the globe has raised issues of tensions between a new type of administrative autonomy and accountability and (political) control. Finally, the literature on the 'core executive' (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, Rhodes 1995) has pointed to the relational and fluid power that characterizes the politics 'at the top', which cannot be accounted for by static variants of 'prime ministerial government', 'cabinet government' and 'departmentalism'. Instead, core executive studies focus on co-ordination, the way in which exchange relationships are characterized by locational structural power, and the way in which a 'core executive' approach can be developed comparatively. Similarly, the work on coalition formation and breakdown offers a number of (mostly heuristic) insights into political strategies (Laver and Shepsle 1996).
- (iii) *The politics of governance and policy.* One further core interest in executive politics is in how governments seek to influence the behaviour of society (through steering) and in how public services

are designed and operated. Studies are interested in the utilization of different types of policy instruments, as well as in the dynamics within particular domains and fields, such as budgetary, regulatory and welfare state politics. Especially, the emergence of the word governance has had considerable implications for executive politics. On the one hand, the interest in non-hierarchical modes of governing has shifted attention away from traditional bureaucratic and political exercises of power towards mediation and power-sharing (although such practices go back to at least the Treaty of Westphalia, see Lehmbruch (1998)). On the other hand, a growing interest in the tactics of government has been linked to wider discussions regarding the capabilities of the state to steer societal actors (especially in the context of the so-called hollow state). Debates regarding steering, in turn, relate to the study of different modes of governance (such as 'hierarchy, markets and association') and how collaboration can be orchestrated as a way to regulate or deliver public services and other economic activities.

These three interrelated fields are by no means meant to be an exclusive or exhaustive set of executive politics-related interests. They link concerns that have been at the heart of the literature in a number of sub-fields in political science, ranging from comparative politics to public policy and administration to the contemporary interest in public management. Nevertheless, there has been a growing perception that the fields of general political science and those of public administration, policy and management have been drifting apart. For example, one prominent (US-based) observer, Kenneth Meier, noted that the longstanding interrelated interest in political science and public administration was at risk of becoming extinct (Meier 2007, see also Jones 2003). Political science is arguably mostly interested in the study of the responsiveness of electoral institutions, whether this relates to electoral and legislative behaviour and the way in which electoral institutions interact with (or seek to control) other, usually non-electoral/majoritarian institutions. The lack of interest in the administrative factor might be said to lie in the emphasis within political science towards measurability and replicable observability. Such kind of research orientation is facilitated by the measurement of roll-call votes, electoral surveys and suchlike, but such research methodologies may have greater difficulties in dealing with the intricate implicit assumptions that underpin the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats at all levels.