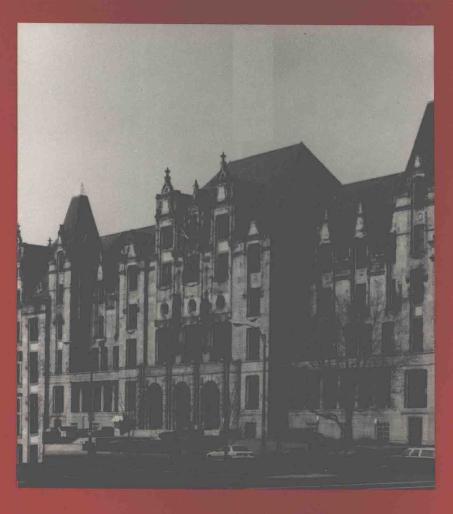# Holding Bureaucrats Accountable

POLITICIANS AND PROFESSIONALS IN ST. LOUIS

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Preface

Discerning the influence of elected officials on career professionals in urban administration became a focus of research for me several years ago. After reading many articles and books that assumed bureaucratic autonomy and official impotence, I began to question the widespread applicability of this proposition. Although nobly argued by my mentors and friends Jack Knott and Gary Miller, I came to doubt whether mayors and council members would be equally powerless in various settings. Could not the structure of government or political culture affect administrative autonomy and the triumph of expertise? My arrival in St. Louis coincided with my ability to begin this research.

St. Louis itself provided the ideal locale for this research. It had a structure and culture that could impede autonomy. And St. Louisans were very cooperative with this researcher, giving generously of their time and information. I am grateful to all those I interviewed. Special thanks go to Dan McGuire who so often helped a newcomer understand St. Louis political history and who pointed the way to many sources of valuable information. He always answered that "one last question." The congeniality of St. Louis residents, interview subjects or not, helped me find a home as well as an interesting project.

Holding Bureaucrats Accountable

Contents

Tables and Figures

1

Achieving Accountability in Local Government

A Dubious Pursuit

It is commonplace these days to assume that public bureaucracies are not very responsive. In fact, the popular conception of bureaucracy—red tape, inflexibility, rules—too often can be the reality. Obtaining a driver's license, tracing a lost social security check, or reporting a malfunctioning traffic signal can be very difficult exercises. These occasional frustrations with bureaucracy often are the daily lot of elected officials, especially those who want to begin to target services, reorient priorities, or implement new methods or new programs.

Both the products and the shortcomings of governmental bureaucracy are most immediately perceived at the local level. Elected officials (as well as citizens) are able to gauge the conditions of streets, police response time, and the frequency of garbage pickup. However, even though the municipal product is often more tangible and more readily at hand, the ability to control or shape it is not necessarily more attainable than at other levels of government. The literature (summarized well by Knott and Miller, 1987) often portrays municipal bureaus as autonomous fiefdoms.

Bureaucratic fiefdoms are administrative entities that cannot be held accountable through the normal mechanisms of representative democracy. Rather, in bureaus dominated by specialists (such as engineers, law enforcement officers, or medical personnel), career experts make the important policy decisions using their own professional criteria. They eschew any input, even in nontechnical areas, from all nonexperts, including the elected officials to whom they are responsible.

This work will examine only municipal administration, although the problem of bureaucratic autonomy confronts all levels of government. Recent presidents, for example, often have not been able to influence the performance of some of their own cabinet departments (Allison, 1971:86; Neustadt, 1980:19; Seidman, 1986:78–82). At the federal and sometimes the state level, the supportive actions of powerful interest

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groups or clientele and legislative committees strengthen a bureau's impenetrability (Lowi, 1979; Ripley and Franklin, 1987; Rourke, 1984: 58–61). These "sub-governments" or "iron triangles" generally do not appear at the local level because a great deal of urban administration deals with housekeeping functions (police, streets, etc.). Nonetheless, at all levels of government, specialists are able to determine the nature of governmental activity while elected leaders and those they represent seem unable to affect this dominion of experts.

There is yet one important question to answer: If attention is focused on municipal government, will bureaucratic fiefdoms be present in all municipal settings? The extant literature, as will be shown, indicates that such is the case. But there is still room for some doubt. After all, cities vary greatly in terms of their governmental structure and the method of representation they employ. In addition, cities may have very different political histories and, concomitantly, different political cultures. For example, the bifurcation between reformed and unreformed cities represents significant representational and cultural differences. It is conceivable that these factors may affect the ability of elected officials to hold bureaus accountable. Also, career professionals employed by local government seldom receive assistance from powerful special interests in their bid for autonomy. The nature of the tasks they perform militates against this. This lack of outside support could make local professional bureaus more susceptible to political direction than those at the national level.

In order to more fully anchor this research question in the field of urban politics and administration, the following elements will be examined at greater length in the remainder of this chapter: the development of municipal bureaus and local professional power, the nature of autonomy, the meaning of accountability, and specific factors that may impede accountability. This examination should foster some concern about the presence of bureaucratic fiefdoms and about their pervasiveness. The principal purpose of this research is to shed light on those factors—political, structural, institutional—that either inhibit or encourage the unchecked power of expertise.

The Development of Municipal Bureaus

A century ago, public administration in America's largest cities was rudimentary at best. Tasks were fairly simple and party workers carried

out those tasks. Fiscal control was nonexistent; few cities prepared budgets or accurately reconciled accounts. The services that residents received were minimal. Political machines were to be found in almost every large American city, maintained in power by the votes of recent immigrants. These machines often were corrupt. Many urban politicians engaged in "honest graft," namely, their use of advance knowledge of public projects for their own enrichment. Kickbacks, bribery, and the de facto licensing of vice also were associated with urban machines.

The Progressive reform movement, which exerted its greatest influence from approximately 1900 to 1915, responded to the evils of machine politics by advocating efficient governmental administration based on sound principles. The Progressives were especially strong and effective at the local level. They blamed the machine's corruption and incompetence on the partisan nature of political life and felt that a continuance of machine rule would stymie the growth of industry and commerce. Reformers looked to science to find the proper principles on which to structure efficient, neutral, and ethical administration. Burgeoning corporations served as organizational models for the transformation of local government (Hays, 1970). The reformers, largely native-born and middle or upper-middle class, also sought to replace immigrant city workers with professionals much like themselves (Hofstadter, 1955:142–45; Hays, 1984:65; Schiesl, 1977:149–52).

With partisan politics as the enemy, Progressives wanted to remove anything of a political nature from the administrative sphere. These reformers saw a clear distinction between politics and administration. As Woodrow Wilson wrote in 1887, "The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; . . . It is part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are a part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product" (18). Other Progressives joined Wilson in believing that public administration could and should be based on set principles and that it was mechanistic in nature. They wanted the legislature to be the policymaking body that would set the framework for administrative action. Then, administrators, as a matter of course, would carry out their tasks in the prescribed manner.

Reformers felt strongly that government needed "businesslike," apolitical management. Nonpartisan experts became essential to the provision of such administration. Reformers felt that public policy "mainly involved technical problems." Thus, "only those with formal training could manage the business of the city" (Schiesl, 1977:4). The

new experts would base their decisions on scientific standards instead of political needs. The possibility of creating such standards was taken as a given.

While the Progressive reform movement was giving modern American bureaucracy its basic structure and norms, modern professions and professionals also were gaining ascendancy. Nascent professions (where frequently the functions were old but the status new), such as law and medicine, sought to establish the legal boundaries of their practice and alone to determine who was fit to be called a lawyer or doctor (Knott and Miller, 1987:59–64). The public sector quickly adopted these formal demarcations based on expertise. Reformers already had organized bureaus according to the principle of specialization and they greatly valued knowledge and the scientific method. Hence, public professionalism was a complement to the Taylorist scientific approach to work (Knott and Miller, 1987:55–74). For example, public personnel administrators accumulated the necessary expertise to determine and implement the "one best way" to classify positions and to examine and rank job applicants.

Mosher described the "continuing drive" of each group of public professionals "to elevate its stature and strengthen its public image as a profession" (1982:118). The principal means of obtaining recognition of this status was the same in private and public sectors: "the establishment of clear and (where possible) expanding boundaries of work within which members of the profession have *exclusive* prerogatives to operate" (118).

The activity of Progressive reformers changed the face of administration in American cities, whether cities adopted all the permutations Progressives favored or not. Reformers brought a great deal of pressure to bear, particularly at the municipal level. For the first time, almost all local governments established formal rules, regulations, and operating procedures. Cities began to formulate budgets, and many also started to use competitive bidding in the awarding of contracts. These new techniques helped to minimize some of the opportunity for "honest graft." Local governments divided work among specialized departments, and technical qualifications became the important criterion for hiring and promotions. Although patronage never died out completely, professional civil servants came to dominate most urban bureaucracies.

Many cities reformed their political structure by adopting nonpartisan at-large elections for council, and many also chose the council-manager form of government. Under this new form, modeled after the business

corporation, the council served as a board of directors and selected a professional manager to administer city affairs. However, even in those cities that maintained an unreformed structure—mayor-council, partisan elections, and a council selected from wards—Progressive reform still had a discernible impact. All cities began to exhibit the fragmentation that also has been a legacy of Progressive reform. Progressives favored the delegation of authority to independent, nonpolitical commissions set apart from the line agencies. For example, St. Louis maintained most of its traditional unreformed electoral structure for much of this century but created innumerable independent boards and commissions after 1900. This widespread fragmentation lessened the ability of any city's highest executive, mayor or manager, to control all administrative activity. In turn, control was hampered further by the growing inclination of regular city departments to insulate themselves from outside interference.

Progressives expected administrators to remain accountable to elected officials. How that accountability was to be maintained was never made clear. Wilson saw a distinction between how to perform a task and which task to perform (1987:19). The first was the bureaucrat's prerogative and the second the elected official's. Yet, Wilson did not make clear how this distinction was to be maintained. He saw "public opinion" as the "authoritative critic" that would be able to distinguish but also felt that too much attention from that quarter would be "meddlesome." Unable to readily discern a solution, he called for additional "administrative study" of the problem (21).

The depoliticization of administration fostered by the Progressive agenda circumscribed executive authority and hampered legislative oversight. The selection of specially trained experts to staff the expanding bureaucracy laid the seeds for the growth of a countervailing power. As the Progressives retreated into the history books, the question of accountability began to surface with increasing frequency.

The Insularity of Public Bureaus

Public bureaus, like other complex organizations, seek autonomy in order to achieve their goal of survival (found by many scholars to be their principal goal). According to Thompson, organizations strive to protect their core technologies from outside environmental influences (1967:22–23). Thus, they frequently use a number of strategies to

achieve control over the external elements central to attainment of their goals. These strategies may include co-optation, enlargement of the bureau's area of operation, and attempts to enhance the bureau's reputation and prestige (Thompson, 1967:32–38). Public organizations frequently resist external interference with internal activity although they remain dependent on their external environment for sustenance and support. In fact, as noted earlier, bureaus sometimes use elements of the environment (e.g., interest groups or clientele) to support their autonomy from nominal superiors.

According to Downs, as bureaus and their employees age, their prime interest becomes the maintenance of their "present level of power, income, and prestige" (Downs, 1967:96) and they "tend to be biased against any change in the status quo" (97). This basic bias against change increases the desire for autonomy.

A bureau's wish for self-protection and its resistance to change in operating methods leads to what Downs calls "extreme jurisdictional sensitivity" (215). This sensitivity is greater when a recognized body of professionals dominates a particular bureau: "When the organization incorporates larger numbers of professionals, the tendency is for them to insist that decision premises be set only by professionals, and this generates potential for conflict" (Thompson, 1967:134). Expertise strengthens the natural penchant for exclusivity in thought and action present in all organizations.

Defining a Professional in the Employ of Government

Defining exactly who are to be called professionals is not an easy task. Drawing on the ideas of Wilensky (1964:138) and Larson (1977:208), it appears that a profession must have an area of exclusive jurisdiction, a knowledge base, formal training, and a set of professional norms or ethics. Both writers also link professionalism with work autonomy. Larson adds the idea that professionals are licensed. Caplow (1954:110), Mintzberg (1979:358), and Larson (1977:208) all stress the concept of collegial control. A professional's merit only can be judged by a fellow professional. A distinction also is made between "coprofessionals and laymen in every working situation" (Caplow, 1954:131). Professionals continually fight to preserve their special status based on their claims of expertise, and they band together in organizations or professional associations to help achieve this end.

Wilensky claims that there are no more than thirty or forty fully professionalized occupations (1964:141). Some scholars, in fact, have difficulty in applying the title of professional to many governmental occupations. A number of governmental occupations do not require the same formal or university training as that needed for careers in law or medicine. Also, occupations such as police officer do not exist outside government.

Mintzberg addresses the dilemma of the professional in government by creating a new category: "professional bureaucracy" (1979:348–49). His category is broad enough to include teachers and caseworkers, as well as police officers, fire fighters, and various other craft-based occupations. Each of these employee groups band together to establish control over the work environment by seeking "collective control over the administrative decisions that affect them . . . to hire colleagues, to promote them, and to distribute resources" (358). Therefore, "professional bureaucrats," like the more traditional professionals, seek autonomy in the conduct of their work and resent the intrusion of nonprofessional direction from any source, including elected officials.

Wilensky feels that there is an inevitable clash between complex organizations and professionalism (1964:146). In a complex organization, a nonprofessional may have to evaluate a professional's work. However, the "service expert" with specialized training and ties to an outside group has the "motive and strength to resist the demands of the employing organization" (151).

The municipal professional bureaus to be discussed in this work fit Mintzberg's definition of "professional bureaucracy" and the bureaucrats in question fall within Wilensky's "service expert" category.

The drive for professional autonomy in public organizations certainly has been compatible with the Progressive reform culture that denigrated politics while upholding neutral competence. Tensions quickly arose between professional bureaucrats and politicians, tensions that have endured until the present time. Attempts by elected officials to control bureau activities have remained especially "problematic for experts when (control) is imposed by actors who do not understand the specialized technology of the policy area" (Gruber, 1987:164).

Professionals have continued to look on political actors with disfavor, viewing them as "amateurs at best and criminals at worst" (Mosher, 1982:118). To thwart "political interference," public professionals have continued to stress their unique expertise in a certain policy and/or technical area. In fact, public professionals, not surprisingly, often have ex-

hibited greater loyalty to their profession than to their bureau. Their prior professional training and/or professional associations also significantly affected their on-the-job behavior (Simon, Smithburg, and Thompson, 1950:77).

The Question of Accountability

"Where is the accountability?" asked an angry senator during the Iran-Contra hearings. Why does it matter whether government bureaucrats are accountable to elected officials or whether they rely solely on expertise in decision making? Linder stated simply that "within a democratic system, agencies are accountable to the public, through their elected representatives, for the responsible exercise of power" (1978:181). The guiding idea was that there should be some way that bureaus could be held to account. Although government bureaus always have a great deal of latitude in policymaking and implementation, there ought to be a mechanism to make them responsive to changing popular sentiments, at least as reflected periodically at the ballot box. As Stone mentioned, "Elections can serve as regularizing channels for reconciling as well as representing competing demands for change and action" by government (1981:166).

Pitkin aptly noted that political questions contain values as well as facts. Where questions involve values, she wrote, "We are not content to leave matters to the expert" (1972:212). Representatives of the people should decide. In urban settings, direct action by certain groups or individuals has resulted occasionally in modified governmental behavior. Nonetheless, the actions of elected officials would offer the best hope of redirecting the programs bureaus administer or of rechanneling existing resources.

A century ago, Wilson cautioned that administrators had to be held accountable in a way that was not meddlesome. He did not have the solution then, and as yet no one has discovered an easy one. Frankly, the principal question has remained how to ensure accountability at all. After all, "professional bureaucracies" have continued to seek autonomy and to decry political intervention, sometimes with outside support.

As a standard for judging whether there is any accountability in a municipal setting, two key areas will be emphasized in this work. Eulau and Karps (1978) refer to them as "policy responsiveness" and "service