Bureaucracies and Policy Ideas

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Abstract

The notion of a clear separation between policymaking and implementation is difficult to sustain for policy bureaucracies in which public officials have 'policy work' as their main activity. A diverse body of scholarship indicates that bureaucrats may enjoy substantial levels of discretion in defining the nature of policy problems and elaborating on policy alternatives. This observation raises questions about the conditions under which bureaucratic policy ideas make their way into authoritative policy decisions, the nature of those policy ideas, and how bureaucratic policymaking has evolved. A main point is that bureaucratic policy ideas are developed in a political context, meaning that bureaucrats have to anticipate that political decision-makers will eventually have to endorse a policy proposal. The power relations between politicians and bureaucrats may, however, vary, and bureaucrats may gain the upper hand, which is likely if a bureaucracy is professionally homogenous and able to develop a coherent policy idea. Another perspective concerns the origins of policy ideas. There is limited evidence for individual-level explanations of policy ideas, according to which bureaucrats pursue exogenously defined preferences to maximise their own utility. A competing organisational perspective, which considers policy preferences as the result of organisational specialisation, the development of local rationalities, and the defence of organisational turf, stands out as a more plausible explanation for the origins of bureaucratic policy ideas. The policymaking role, and thereby the importance of bureaucratic policy ideas, is being challenged by the rise of ministerial advisors, agencification, and better regulation reforms. Those developments have the potential to change the substance of bureaucratic policy ideas, but they may also generate strategic behaviour, which should be of interest to scholars of the politics of bureaucracy.

Keywords: agencification, better regulation, bureaucratic politics, executive policymaking, ministerial advisers, policy preferences

Introduction

The role of bureaucrats in policymaking is a theme of long-standing academic interest. This theme has been approached from different analytical angles. Normative accounts underline the importance of keeping politics and administration separated, either fearing the rule of faceless but powerful bureaucrats or the permeation of public agencies by party politics (Sager & Rosser, 2009). From a democratic-constitutional point of view, the bureaucracy should not only be separated from politics but also should be considered an instrument for implementing the policy choices of elected politicians. From this perspective, policy ideas belong to the world of politics (political parties, interest groups, etc.) and not to the world of administrations. However, this conception of bureaucracies as politically neutral and efficient instruments of elected politicians is difficult to sustain empirically. A substantive body of research has demonstrated that bureaucrats working in 'policy bureaucracies' (Page & Jenkins, 2005), variously labelled ministries, departments, or central agencies, are strongly involved in the formulation of policy ideas, including the definition and exact delineation of policy problems and the design of policy alternatives to address those problems. This chapter follows Kingdon's (2014) understanding of policy ideas, which range from 'vague notions of future directions' to 'more specific proposals' (p. 116). What policy ideas have in common is that they are alternatives for how governments may choose to address societal problems that actually or potentially are on the governmental agenda (Kingdon, 2014, pp. 3-4).

The involvement of bureaucrats in executive policymaking raises several questions: How do bureaucrats get involved in policymaking; how much influence do they have on the substance of public policies; and what explanatory factors account for the variation in the roles and influence of bureaucrats on public policies? The next section addresses these

questions by sketching the roles of public officials or 'policy bureaucrats' (Page & Jenkins, 2005) in executive policymaking. The section starts by fleshing out the conceptual lenses on public officials' roles in executive policymaking and subsequently summarises the key empirical contributions to this body of scholarship. The relative influence of politicians and bureaucrats over policy is at the core of this literature.

Another major question regarding bureaucracies and policy ideas concerns the substance of policy ideas originating from policy bureaucracies. What can be said about the kinds of policy ideas that policy bureaucracies produce? For instance, bureaucracies are typically accused of failing to develop innovative policy ideas, yet such claims often fail to grasp the nature of bureaucratic policy ideas. The subsequent section distinguishes between two fundamental perspectives on bureaucratic policy ideas: an individual, actor-centred perspective, which looks at individual bureaucrats and their exogenously defined preferences as the driving forces of policy ideas; and an organisational perspective, highlighting the endogenous formation of preferences for distinct policy ideas in an organisational context. The latter perspective also underlines how conflict-ridden processes of coordination within and between bureaucratic organisations ('bureaucratic politics') shape the substance of bureaucratic policy ideas. A major lesson to be drawn from this literature is that executive policymaking should primarily be understood from an organisational, rather than an individual-level perspective.

Finally, whereas empirical analyses of executive policymaking primarily focus on the relationship and relative influence of policy bureaucrats and executive politicians, there is reason to believe that policy bureaucrats' roles and influence in executive policymaking are being challenged. The final section examines three key developments and how they affect bureaucratic policymaking: the increasing reliance of politicians on ministerial advisers, the

delegation of executive and regulatory tasks to semi-autonomous organisations ('agencification'), and the growing popularity of meta-regulation, such as regulatory impact assessments. The chapter's concluding section suggests several avenues for further research on bureaucratic policymaking.

The roles and influence of bureaucrats in policymaking

The study of policy bureaucracies' roles and influence in policymaking has the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats as its starting point. There is a substantial body of scholarship addressing the political control of bureaucracy, focusing on the causes and consequences of executive politicians' influence on personnel decisions ('politicisation') in bureaucracies (see Bach & Wegrich, 2020 for a summary of this literature). However, this literature is only marginally concerned with the substance of executive policymaking, that is, policy ideas. In contrast, the scholarship examining the roles and influence of policy bureaucrats is arguably less voluminous and less theoretically and methodologically integrated than the studies of political appointments and party patronage. A plausible explanation is that researching the 'machine room' of executive policymaking is fairly demanding in terms of gaining access to sometimes secretive bureaucrats, devoting a considerable amount of time, and selecting relevant cases that allow researchers to draw inferences on the relative importance of bureaucratic and political decision-makers (see Page, 2012, pp. 17-23 for further methodological reflections). This section inquires into what bureaucrats actually do in executive policymaking, how they interact with executive politicians, and to what extent public policies are based on policy ideas developed inside government bureaucracies.

Analytical models of politico-administrative relations

A natural starting point for this perspective is the seminal book by Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981), which develops a typology of politico-administrative relations and empirically investigates those relationships in a cross-national research design. Their famous four 'images' of political-administrative relations range from a complete separation of politics and administration to a 'pure hybrid' in which politicians and bureaucrats essentially perform similar roles in policymaking. The first image suggests that policy ideas originate from the political leadership, whereas bureaucrats are merely 'dotting the i's' and 'crossing the t's' of those policy ideas. This image of bureaucratic (and political) roles is empirically as unrealistic as the complete hybrid model (image four) in which bureaucrats perform the same roles as politicians. The complete separation of politics and administration, as described in Max Weber's (1997 [1922]) model of bureaucratic organisation, clearly refers to the implementation of public policy, but it is hardly justifiable in the case of bureaucrats working in ministries tasked with producing rather than implementing public policy. Likewise, different ways of recruitment and career incentives for politicians and career civil servants suggest that pure hybrid types are unlikely to emerge. Yet, as Aberbach et al. (1981) pointed out 40 years ago, pure hybrids may be found in the shape of ministerial advisers, who have become an integral part of many government bureaucracies around the world (see 'The changing context of executive policymaking' below).

The remaining images revolve around the distinct contribution of bureaucrats and politicians in the policymaking process (Aberbach et al., 1981). According to the second image, bureaucrats bring facts and technical expertise into decision-making and have a neutral stance towards special interests, whereas politicians clearly take sides, pursue distinct values and interests, and are concerned with the political success of policy alternatives. In terms of bureaucrats' roles in developing policy ideas, this image suggests that their role is

limited to ensuring the technical and legal feasibility of policy proposals. Finally, image three suggests that politicians 'articulate broad, diffuse interests of unorganized individuals' whereas bureaucrats 'articulate narrow, focused interests of organized clienteles' (Aberbach et al., 1981, p. 9). This focus on well-organised interest is primarily a result of the division of labour in policy bureaucracies, leading to selective attention to their areas of competence. The third image suggests that bureaucrats do indeed contribute policy ideas, yet those ideas are typically different in nature from those of politicians, and they typically originate from outside policy bureaucracies, for example from organized interest.

Another well-known typology of politico-administrative relations is that of Peters (1988), which focuses on the power relations between these groups of actors, rather than their distinct contributions to policymaking. This typology puts a stronger focus on the degree of conflict between politicians and bureaucrats and teases out explanations for conflictual, as opposed to consensual, relations. For the purpose of this chapter, the more interesting models are those highlighting the sources of conflict between politicians and bureaucrats over policy substance. That being said, studying when and how consensus between politicians and bureaucrats prevails may be just as important in understanding the role of bureaucracies in developing policy ideas.

The 'adversarial model' suggests that politicians and bureaucrats compete over influence on policies, and those conflicts may arise as a consequence of strongly embedded worldviews about appropriate policy instruments in bureaucracies (Peters, 1988), a political leadership perceived as weak in defending institutional interests (e.g. in budgetary negotiations) or in defending the ministry in struggles over policy substance ('t Hart & Wille, 2006), or an ideological mismatch between politicians and bureaucrats after a government turnover, which may be the result of deliberate party patronage or the self-selection of

ideologically like-minded bureaucrats (Dahlström & Holmgren, 2019). The adversarial model underlines that politicians and bureaucrats struggle over influence on some policies, although it considers politicians as the 'prime movers' (Peters, 1988, p. 160) in executive policymaking.

In contrast, the 'administrative state model' posits the bureaucratic dominance of policymaking, based on its superior technical expertise, knowledge of decision-making procedures, and long-term career horizons. This latter model considers executive politicians as mere bystanders of policymaking and echoes Max Weber's fear of the bureaucratisation of politics. More than the four images of Aberbach et al. (1981), the analytical models developed by Peters (1988) underline that the study of bureaucratic roles in policymaking touches upon the very nature of democratic governance and the question of whether bureaucratic policymaking is responsive to the policy preferences of democratically elected politicians.

Bureaucratic roles and influence in executive policymaking

A number of empirical studies—using both expert interviews and large-n surveys—have investigated the relationships of politicians and bureaucrats from a generic perspective. These studies focus on the role understandings, day-to-day activities, and interaction patterns between bureaucrats and politicians ('t Hart & Wille, 2006; Aberbach et al., 1981; T. Christensen & Lægreid, 2009). While providing important insights into politico-administrative relations, they are unable to fully grasp the dynamic and complex nature of executive policymaking. Moreover, with some exceptions, large-n empirical studies typically focus on the highest echelons of the public bureaucracy, potentially underestimating middle-level bureaucrats' policymaking roles (Page & Jenkins, 2005).

That being said, several studies have investigated the actual working of policy bureaucrats, both senior and junior, and their interactions with politicians in specific policymaking processes. A main challenge of doing this kind of research is related to 'the challenges associated with accessing and empirically observing the work [of] public bureaucracies' (Paquet, 2020, p. 4). Moreover, comparative research on policy roles and influence struggles with the selection of comparable cases, the differences in administrative systems, and the reliability of data collection by multiple researchers (Page, 2012).

The above-mentioned analytical models highlight the different roles and influence of bureaucrats in executive policymaking. Whereas empirical studies demonstrate the various roles and degrees of bureaucratic influence, a main takeaway is that executive politicians operate under conditions of high time pressure and information overload, which requires them to prioritise some policies and delegate others to the bureaucracy (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017). In the eyes of (senior) civil servants, effective ministers focus on a few flagship projects for their term in office ('t Hart & Wille, 2006). However, even in the prioritised areas, politicians depend on ministries as sources of policy ideas. In their analysis of middle-level policy bureaucrats in the United Kingdom, Page and Jenkins (2005) demonstrated that middle-level officials often have a substantial role in initiating and putting flesh to the bones of vague policy instructions by politicians. Their analysis suggests that bureaucratic influence is by no means limited to senior officials. Moreover, they forcefully argue that politicians are dependent on the bureaucracy's policy ideas:

> Policy bureaucracies are not simply subordinate organizations that merely do as they are told by their political masters. They cannot be, as the main part of their work is to create solutions to problems; if politicians knew how they wanted the problems solved

> sufficiently to give their administrative subordinates direct instructions, they would not need policy bureaucracies. (Page & Jenkins, 2005, p. vi)

Their rich study highlights, amongst others, that discerning politicians' preferences concerning a given policy idea is among the key challenges for policy bureaucrats. Therefore, policy bureaucrats will look for different types of 'clues' about what is likely to be acceptable to ministers, including knowledge of the general thrust of government policy, experience from interaction with ministers, consultation with stakeholders, and embedded departmental priorities (Page & Jenkins, 2005, pp. 127-136). Thus, when exercising discretion, which policy bureaucrats invariably do, they are well aware that ministers at some point will have to authorise a policy proposal. This 'shadow of hierarchy' (Scharpf, 1994) effectively constrains bureaucratic discretion, based on the continuous anticipation of politicians' preferences (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1975). Following up on this research, Page (2012) compared bureaucratic roles and influence in rulemaking in five countries and the European Commission. Amongst others, he found substantial variation in the degree of direct political control in bureaucratic policymaking. Thus, bureaucratic policymakers have discretion in shaping policy ideas, yet they are well aware of the political constraints on their policy work.

A potential problem of this type of research is the selection of cases on the dependent variable, that is, demonstrating that bureaucratic policy ideas prevailed in the policymaking process, without specifying the conditions for a lack of bureaucratic influence. That being said, such studies are valuable because they elucidate how bureaucrats' policy ideas impact public policy. In a case study of immigration policymaking, Paquet (2020) demonstrated how a team of policy bureaucrats developed a policy proposal based on a broad political mandate. The distinct contribution of the policy bureaucrats was related to the definition of the core problem the policy was supposed to address (which was essentially left blank by political

superiors), as well as the crafting of the policy in a continuous exchange with other parts of the government and researchers. Paquet (2020) describes this process as essentially a creative one, which bears little resemblance to the stereotypical images of bureaucrats as dull paper pushers. Moreover, she showed that the broad political mandate behind the policy was instrumental in resisting top-down pressure to rephrase the policy in line with the overall agenda of the government at later stages of the process. While this created frustration among the bureaucrats, who had to adjust the policy proposal, its core remained intact. This case illustrates how bureaucrats exercise discretion within a broad political mandate and that bureaucratic influence must be seen in conjunction with political support. In a single case study of a policymaking process in France, Bonnaud and Martinais (2013) showed that policy development consists of continuous interaction between politicians and policy bureaucrats. This research demonstrates that policy bureaucrats exercise discretion in developing policy alternatives, but they are well aware of their dependency on ensuring political support throughout the entire process.

Another approach assesses bureaucrats' influence on policy ideas with contrasting explanations. In a study of economic policy changes in Italy, Quaglia (2005) demonstrated how neoliberal economic ideas were promoted by public officials with a background in economics in the central bank and the ministry in charge of economic policy. She explains policy influence as a combination of a concentration of (often internationally educated) economists in these institutions, a near monopoly of technical knowledge, and (in the case of the central bank) a high degree of independence from politics as the breeding ground for influence on policy substance. She suggests that the combination of technical knowledge and a unique professional culture conveys credibility to bureaucratic policymakers (Quaglia, 2005). Importantly, this study also considers and dismisses competing explanations of policy change, which is an often-missing aspect of research design.

A further step in theorising the conditions for bureaucratic influence on policy ideas is the systematic international comparison of bureaucracies as potential driving forces behind policy change. For example, J. Christensen (2013) compared the strikingly different focus of tax policy in New Zealand, which was a trailblazer of neoliberal tax reform, and Ireland, which pursued a more conventional tax policy (see J. Christensen, 2017 for a similar analysis containing additional country cases). The main difference is related to the way economic expertise, and hence openness to neoliberal ideas of tax reform, is institutionalised in the two countries' policy bureaucracies, and more specifically the finance departments. Whereas New Zealand displays a high degree of economic specialisation and open competition for joining the civil service, Ireland is characterised by a closed civil service and a generalist orientation. Hence, economists in New Zealand had very clear ideas about what tax policy should look like, and they also adopted a proactive stance towards politicians in advocating those ideas. In contrast, Irish officials took a more passive approach in the design of tax policies and were, to a much greater degree, guided by politicians. A key argument is that 'clear policy ideas give officials the upper hand in the policymaking process by increasing their agenda-setting power' (J. Christensen, 2013, p. 570). More specifically, he argues that a coherent background in the training of bureaucrats provides them with coherent ideas and creates a source of identity which is different from a general belonging to the civil service. Moreover, he highlights that open recruitment systems (as opposed to closed systems) make bureaucracies more receptive to outside ideas, and they weaken the identification with the civil service but strengthen other kinds of identities. He also proposes an insightful distinction of the different roles of bureaucrats in executive policymaking, which might serve as a basis for future comparative research.

> Technical expertise can augment the policy influence of officials by increasing their *ability* to set the policy agenda (active role), to evaluate and counter the policy

> proposals of politicians (reactive role), and to warn politicians about deficiencies of existing policies (proactive role). (J. Christensen, 2013, p. 569)

The above-mentioned studies highlight several aspects that are worth pursuing in future studies of bureaucrats' policymaking roles. First, studies of bureaucratic policymaking need to move beyond merely considering top officials and their interactions with executive politicians. Second, there is a need for more systematic comparisons of bureaucratic influence in policymaking, both within and across countries, which also includes cases of limited bureaucratic influence and cases displaying consensus between politicians and bureaucrats. Finally, in terms of research methods, survey research, with its focus on individual-level explanations, clearly faces limitations in unveiling the complex nature of executive policymaking. As demonstrated above, bureaucratic policymaking is a collective endeavour which takes place in an organisational context, a factor which needs to be included in scholarly analyses. The following section further elaborates on individual- and organisational-level explanations for the substance of bureaucratic policy ideas.

The origins of policy ideas in executive policymaking

The previous section elaborated on the development of policy ideas as part of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats in executive policymaking. This section elaborates on the origins of policy ideas in executive policymaking and distinguishes between individual and organisational explanations for the origins of bureaucratic policy ideas. Individual-level explanations assume that bureaucrats' policy preferences (and hence their receptiveness to distinct policy ideas) are exogenous to policymaking processes, whereas organisational explanations suggest that bureaucratic preferences develop inside the machinery of government. The main argument made below is that policy ideas in

bureaucratic policymaking are best understood as originating from the organisational context of bureaucratic policymakers.

Individual-level explanations of policy ideas

A substantive body of literature addresses how the preferences of politicians and bureaucrats are assumed to diverge, leading to problems of adverse selection and moral hazard. The majority of this literature, however, focuses on bureaucrats' preferences, which are not related to the very substance of their work. The well-known budget maximising model of Niskanen (1971) suggests that bureaucrats aim at maximising their discretionary budgets. In contrast, according to Dunleavy's (1991) bureau-shaping model, senior bureaucrats will try to maximise genuinely interesting activities, such as policymaking and interaction with politicians, while avoiding problem-prone operational tasks. These are theories about bureaucrats' institutional interests, rather than substantial policy preferences.

There are, however, other studies suggesting that bureaucrats hold distinct preferences regarding policy substance. According to Downs (1967), bureaucrats are utility maximisers, and whereas some bureaucrats are motivated by typical career objectives (salaries and various perks, the 'climbers'), others are motivated by the achievement of some policy objective (the 'zealots' and 'advocates'). Thinking further along these lines, the latter type of bureaucrat will self-select into a branch of bureaucracy in which he or she can gain influence over policy. This scenario is addressed by Gailmard (2010), who argues that bureaucrats holding strong policy preferences are unlikely to become indifferent to those preferences once they enter the bureaucracy. This can create problems of political responsiveness, as bureaucrats' preferences are likely to clash with those of their political superiors. In such a view, bureaucrats' policy preferences drive the kinds of policy ideas they will endorse.

The literature proposes several explanations for the influence of individual factors on bureaucratic policy preferences. One is that bureaucrats' education shapes their policy preferences. The above-mentioned analysis of J. Christensen (2017) underlines this argument. That being said, the crucial factor was that officials with a similar background in economics were concentrated in the same organisation, which provided them with expertise, ideas, and a common identity, which they leveraged to shape the substance of tax policy. This suggests that individual educational background matters under specific organisational conditions, namely those of 'clusters' (Egeberg, 2012, p. 160) of bureaucrats with a similar educational background, which tilts towards an organisation-level explanation of policy preferences.

Another take on influence at the individual level is Adolph's (2013) study of central bankers' preferences. He found that central bankers' career paths, which represent a distinct pattern of socialisation, drive their substantial policy preferences. While located at the individual level of analysis, his argument builds upon the idea of professional socialisation in distinct organisational contexts (financial sector vs. government) in which individuals 'pick up knowledge and ideas about policy' (Adolph, 2013, p. 15). However, his theory also suggests that not only are central bankers' preferences shaped by socialisation in their career prior to entering a central bank, but also the prospects of returning to a career in a given sector create 'career incentives' (p. 15) to decide in line with potential future employers. He found that central bankers with a background in private banking hold more conservative policy preferences (that is, keeping inflation low) than those with a background in bureaucracy, who tend to have a more lenient approach to inflation.

Although located at the individual level of analysis, these approaches point towards explanations located at the organisational rather than the individual level. Along those lines, Egeberg (1995) argues that policy bureaucrats are likely to be indifferent about the policy

substance they work on. The connection between the self-interest of bureaucrats and the elaboration of policy options in substantive policymaking must therefore be considered as loose in the sense that the private interests (or utility) of policy bureaucrats will typically not be affected by the kinds of policy decisions they are working on. In a similar vein, Page (2012) suggests that bureaucrats are unlikely to 'have developed as children or young adults particularly strong preferences about most of the things they deal with prior to doing the job they do' (p. 160). Taken together, this research suggests that policy ideas developed by policy bureaucrats can hardly be explained as resulting from an individualistic, utility-maximising perspective.

Organisational-level explanations of policy ideas

The study of bureaucracy is the study of organisations. Formal organisational structure directs decision-makers' attention, defines their priorities, and shapes their perception of the world (Bach & Wegrich, 2019a; Egeberg, 2012). This line of reasoning is obviously very prominent in Simon's (1947) theory of administrative behaviour, which demonstrates that formal organisational structures are a means for overcoming the cognitive limitations of individuals by channelling their attention to selected aspects of a potentially infinite number of policy problems and solutions. In consequence, organisations develop local rationalities (or worldviews), which shape the search for and processing of information (Cyert & March, 1963). For policy bureaucracies, this implies that policy development will be shaped by the local rationalities of organisational units, such as policymaking departments. Moreover, bureaucratic policymaking is best characterised by the coordination of different units' local rationalities. The remainder of this section addresses the implications of local rationalities and bureaucratic coordination, respectively, for bureaucratic policy ideas.

In terms of bureaucratic policymaking, the idea of local rationalities is closely connected to what Peters (2018) describes as the existence of well-defined policy intentions, that is, ideas about what government should do. Importantly, such policy intentions are typically restricted to the unit's own area of responsibility and focused on adjusting existing policies, rather than proposing radically new policies. Aberbach et al. (1981) suggest that bureaucrats' orientation towards the status quo is related to their acceptance of a given division of labour within the government apparatus, as well as a given constellation of political players (e.g. interest groups) in their areas of responsibility. Indeed, their contact with organised interests, which provide feedback on the performance of existing policies, has been identified as an important source of policy ideas (Mayntz & Scharpf, 1975). The kind of policy ideas policymaking units develop will depend on the department they belong to, which comes with a distinct profile of organised interests. In a study of the EU Commission, the EU's executive body, Vestlund (2015) showed how moving a unit from one Directorate General (DG) to another (DGs are rough equivalents of national ministries) changed the unit's priorities in policy development and its interaction patterns with organised interests. The potential downside of close interactions with interest groups is that policymaking units may turn into uncritical advocates of those interests.

The status quo focus of policymaking units has several implications. Most importantly, bureaucratic policy ideas follow the existing structures of division of labour and scarcely span different sectors. In consequence, cross-cutting policy ideas are unlikely to emerge from the bureaucratic policymaking process, but require political initiatives and hierarchical modes of decision-making (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). The selective, sector-oriented view is not primarily to be considered a dysfunction, but rather an intended consequence of organisational design (Bach & Wegrich, 2019a). In executive policymaking, however, bureaucracies are facing a dilemma between the demands for innovative policy

ideas to address novel (and often cross-sectoral) problems and their orientation towards existing policies (Peters, 2018). Bureaucrats have often worked in the same unit for a long time (typically longer than their political superiors) and have gathered substantial knowledge about their area of competence, which therefore also constitutes a source of bureaucratic power. They are familiar with the existing options for adapting policies in their area of competence, as well as with the supporters and opponents of those options. Those ideas can be retrieved from the computer hard drive when a demand for policy change arises which has sufficient political support to overcome the potential opposition inside government (Gilad, Alon-Barkat, & Weiss, 2019).

The limitations of bureaucracies in producing innovative policy ideas is an important driving force for the emergence of novel approaches to policymaking, such as policy labs (Peters, 2020). However, different institutional designs for organising innovation come with their own distinct weaknesses. A potentially powerful instrument to bring about novel policy ideas is to change structural boundaries (e.g. by moving organisational units) or to create new organisations with distinct missions. These organisations have the potential to infuse policymaking with distinct policy ideas under the condition that they are part of conventional decision-making structures, rather than operating in insulation from other bureaucracies (Drezner, 2000). However, newly created organisations or units will also institutionalise over time and become committed to their distinct mission, which gradually will lose its innovative nature.

As outlined above, specialisation is invariably linked to coordination inside government. The downside of specialisation within organisations (or governments) is that organisations must coordinate the myriad of partial perspectives among multiple units. The dynamics of coordination and bureaucratic politics are therefore important drivers of

bureaucratic policymaking and the substance of bureaucratic policy ideas. The processing of policy ideas in government bureaucracies is driven by partial perspectives on a given problem or alternative. The kinds of decisions or policy proposals that result from the coordination of different policy views or local rationalities will therefore depend, in many ways, on the mode of coordination inside bureaucracies.

The seminal work by Scharpf (1994) distinguishes between hierarchical and horizontal coordination, each having distinct implications for policy substance. His main claim is that hierarchical modes of coordination suffer serious problems of information overload and limited capacities for conflict resolution. The bulk of decision-making, Scharpf argues, will typically happen horizontally, between units at a similar level of hierarchy. Here two scenarios are possible. The first one is positive coordination, which means joint decision-making in which different units simultaneously aim at finding policy alternatives to a given policy problem. While potentially a mode of decision-making that brings about innovative or novel policy ideas, the downside is that positive coordination is exceedingly complex, with a high number of alternatives being discussed simultaneously (Scharpf, 1994). This makes positive coordination the exception, rather than the rule, in bureaucratic policymaking. Moreover, this mode of decision-making presupposes a cooperative style of decision-making, which, however, bears the risk that the actors involved push for their preferred options and exploit the cooperative behaviour of others (Wegrich & Štimac, 2014).

The high transaction costs associated with positive coordination make negative coordination the most widespread mode of decision-making among units at the same hierarchical level. Negative coordination denotes a process wherein a single (policy) unit is responsible for developing a policy alternative and for defining the exact problem to be solved. The policy idea will hence reflect this unit's peculiar worldview. In a next step, other

units, whose remit touches upon the policy, are consulted, and they will primarily consider the negative consequences according to their distinct point of view. This mode of decision-making drastically reduces transaction costs, while it is biased towards the policy alternatives of the smallest common denominator type (Wegrich & Štimac, 2014). A key implication is that the specific view of the unit in charge of developing a policy alternative is likely to prevail in the process, as has been shown in policymaking inside the European Commission (Hartlapp, Metz, & Rauh, 2013). However, it is important to keep in mind that horizontal forms of coordination in policy bureaucracies take place in the 'shadow of hierarchy' (Scharpf, 1994), and that the problem-solving ability of horizontal coordination structures outside formal hierarchies is limited (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018).

The notion of coordination and different modes of coordination, which then result in distinct policy alternatives in bureaucratic policymaking, was until now presented from the perspective of efficient problem solving. A key point is that policymaking units are not passive bystanders in the policymaking process. In order to fulfil their distinct mission, which will always be partial related to the overall mission of a department, they will defend their distinct views of what constitutes a problem and what kinds of solutions are appropriate to solve the problem. This is the essence of a bureaucratic politics view of bureaucratic policymaking (Allison & Zelikow, 1999)—the idea that policy choices are the result of a bargaining process between different units within governments. The implication of such a view on bureaucratic policymaking is that those policy ideas 'winning' this conflictual process will prevail. As shown by Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh (2014), bureaucratic policymaking inside the same department tends to be dominated by the search for efficient problem solving, yet when conflicts between departments arise, the protection of organisational 'turf' (Wilson, 1989) becomes a dominating strategy. These decision-making

dynamics inside the machinery of government are essential for understanding the substance of policy ideas emerging from the bureaucracy.

The above paragraphs focused on the individual and organisational explanations of bureaucrats' preferences for specific policy ideas. This discussion deliberately excluded the agenda-setting perspective on the origins of policy ideas, which emphasises that policy ideas are typically generated over extended periods of time in policy communities comprising multiple types of actors, including policy bureaucrats (Kingdon, 2014). However, the perspectives outlined above highlight some fundamental mechanisms through which policy ideas coming from the outside, for example those being proposed by interest groups or think tanks, will be assessed and filtered by policy bureaucrats' conceptions of their merits.

The changing context of executive policymaking

Having addressed the influence of bureaucrats' policy ideas on executive policymaking, as well as provided individual and organisational explanations for the origins of bureaucratic policy ideas, this section highlights three developments, two of which—the rise of ministerial advisers and agencification—imply a diversification of the sources of policy ideas in executive policymaking, and one which challenges policy ideas originating from the bureaucracy, known as the better regulation agenda.

The rise of ministerial advisers

Many countries have witnessed a growth in the number of ministerial advisers. These are typically appointed on a discretionary basis by ministers and leave office together with their political superiors (Hustedt, Kolltveit, & Salomonsen, 2017). While early studies aimed at explaining the growth of advisers, mapping their professional backgrounds and exposing accountability problems, a growing number of studies are addressing the implications of

ministerial advisers in terms of their role in executive policymaking (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2017; Christiansen, Niklasson, & Öhberg, 2016; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; Gains & Stoker, 2011; Gouglas, Brans, & Jaspers, 2017; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2017; Maley, 2015; Öhberg, Munk Christiansen, & Niklasson, 2017). To begin with, in contrast to the stereotypical image of advisers primarily being media advisors ('spin doctors') or ministers' personal assistants ('bag carriers'), several studies suggest that policy work is a key component of many advisers' work (Askim et al., 2017; Gains & Stoker, 2011; Gouglas et al., 2017; Maley, 2015).

A first perspective suggests that ministerial advisers represent an alternative source of policy ideas. In that sense, advisers 'energise' (Aberbach et al., 1981) executive policymaking by developing other types of policy ideas than those put forward by bureaucrats, which are associated with a status quo bias (see above). Because they work directly with ministers, advisers can expose the latter to policy ideas originating from outside departments, for instance by keeping contacts with political parties or relevant stakeholders (Gains & Stoker, 2011). In relation to departments, advisers have been found to suggest (unpolished) policy ideas that are delegated to permanent bureaucrats for further elaboration. Maley (2015) found that ministerial advisers in Australia are constantly 'generating policy ideas [which] can create problems for departments' (p. 49), as they have unrealistic expectations about the degree and pace of policy change that is possible, as seen through the eyes of civil servants. There is limited research, however, on the actual substance of advisers' policy ideas and whether they differ from those generated by civil servants. The implicit expectation is that advisers provide 'partisan' advice, yet this assumption has yet to be tested empirically (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008).

Second, the role of advisers has been conceived of as adding an element of contestability to executive policymaking. Ministerial advisers enhance the capacity of political leadership by providing additional pair(s) of eyes to question and scrutinise policy proposals by officials, thus ensuring that bureaucratic policy proposals are of sufficient quality before they make it to a minister's desk (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). According to a survey among ministers in New Zealand, advisers are hired to facilitate a 'robust policy debate' in the sense that they contest initiatives from the civil service and may bring in additional views, also through external contacts or experience in the respective policy sector (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2014, p. 593). However, there is a thin line between scrutinising departmental policy proposals before they reach the minister and eventually are subjected to political scrutiny by opposition politicians, the media, interest groups, and citizens, and serving as a roadblock between the minister and the permanent bureaucracy, which is considered a problematic aspect of what ministerial advisers do.

This negatively connoted influence on bureaucratic policymaking has been labelled 'administrative politicization' (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). These authors distinguish between procedural politicisation, meaning that advisers effectively act as gatekeepers for executive politicians, and substantial politicisation, in which advisers attempt to influence the very content of policy proposals developed by civil servants. Both dimensions of administrative politicisation suggest that advisers and civil servants compete over policy substance, but they focus on different strategies for influencing the kind of policy substance that is presented to the political leadership. In a study covering Denmark and Sweden, Öhberg et al. (2017) found that advisers effectively serve as gatekeepers for bureaucrats' access to the minister, leading to a higher degree of competition in providing input into policymaking. However, the same study did not find any evidence for substantial politicisation in the sense of ministerial

advisers actively restricting the range of policy options to be considered by civil servants (Öhberg et al., 2017).

There are a number of caveats to be considered when studying the interactions between advisers and civil servants. For one, these two groups of actors are likely to hold different views on whether procedural interventions by advisers serve the function of ensuring the quality of policy proposals, or whether ministerial advisers are a threat to the neutral competence of the civil service (van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019). Moreover, Maley (2015) suggests that advisers not only serve as gatekeepers but also are considered instrumental by bureaucrats in bringing policy ideas to the attention of ministers, that is, they are also 'gate openers' for civil servants. In terms of research methods, survey-based studies, such as those by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) and Öhberg et al. (2017), face limitations in delineating the tipping point between the legitimate contestation of policy proposals and the problematic sidelining of the permanent bureaucracy. A potential way forward are qualitative studies (Page, 2012; van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019) or survey experiments (J. G. Christensen & Opstrup, 2018).

Third, ministerial advisers perform a variety of coordination functions in policymaking. Maley (2015) found that advisers in Australia serve important functions in coordinating policy packages cutting across several portfolios, with the aim of ensuring a consensus. In view of the typical selective perception and turf protective behaviours in bureaucratic organisations (see above), ministerial advisers might hence perform tasks that go against the grain of institutional incentives for career bureaucrats. In a similar vein, Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) suggest that ministerial advisers (in New Zealand) assume political coordination functions in coalition cabinets which lie outside the standard repertoire of what politically neutral civil servants are legitimately expected to do (see also Shaw & Eichbaum,

2014). In this sense, advisers may have a complementary function to administrative coordination in executive policymaking.

Although still in its infancy, research on advisers' roles in government coordination suggests that advisers are involved in the (political) coordination of decision-making, sometimes supplementing coordination by civil servants with party political coordination, whereas, in other contexts, advisers may have a stronger role in coordinating the administration, effectively insulating the permanent bureaucracy from cross-governmental coordination (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2017). All of this will depend on contextual differences, such as the degree to which government is more collective compared to a government with high degrees of autonomy for ministers.

The permanent bureaucracy has no monopoly over bureaucratic policymaking any more. There is clearly a need for a better empirical understanding of the interaction of ministerial advisers, civil servants, and politicians, the so-called 'executive triangle' (Wille, 2013), in policymaking. A potential way forward is to systematically compare decision-making dynamics in similar policy sectors across countries with different configurations of the executive triangle. A tentative hypothesis would be that issues which are high on the political agenda or those that are politically risky for the minister will get more attention by advisers than issues (or policy sectors) scoring low on these dimensions.

Agencification

Another major reform trend impacting on bureaucracies' functions in policymaking and the kinds of ideas being pursued is the agencification of national bureaucracies, which typically consists of the 'hiving off' of operational, service delivery functions from departments, the granting of decision-making autonomy (of different kinds), and the creation of an accountability regime based on performance contracting (Pollitt, Talbot, Caulfield, &

Smullen, 2004). While different versions of the agency idea exist, the overall thrust is to separate policy bureaucracies and operational units, which creates some distance between different kinds of organisations. There are different implications of such a trend towards more delegation to agencies in policymaking. The questions of how to control such semi-autonomous bodies and the actual patterns of control by ministries and politicians have been a major focus in the literature (Bach, 2018). In contrast, the implications of agencification for bureaucratic policymaking have attracted far less attention.

Agencification entails a structural separation between policy bureaucracies and executive agencies. This implies a certain disinterest on the side of policy bureaucrats in operational activities, which is most prominent in Dunleavy's bureau shaping model, which suggests that senior officials prefer policymaking activities and seek to avoid failure-prone and low status operational tasks (Dunleavy, 1991). A possible (and perhaps desired) implication of structurally separating the policymaking and operational functions is that operational matters, such as questions relating to the feasibility of policy proposals and the possible reactions of target populations, gain a more prominent role in policymaking (Verschuere & Bach, 2012). Another aspect of agencification is the idea that politicians deliberately choose to delegate authority to bureaucratic agents, which are assumed to produce superior policies based on technical expertise and long-term considerations (Gilardi, 2008). From such a perspective, agencification implies that politicians create a hierarchy of policy ideas, where they prefer to maintain control over some areas, whereas they are happy to delegate others to structurally separated organizations. However, serious doubts have been raised about the viability of removing important decisions out of the sphere of politics (Roberts, 2010).

In practice, the separation of policymaking and operational functions typically means that agency bureaucrats will be involved in policymaking processes at the discretion of the parent department (Bach, Niklasson, & Painter, 2012; Elder & Page, 1998). That being said, there are important cross-national differences, with parent departments exercising a strong gatekeeping role in some contexts (e.g. Germany), whereas agencies are part of an open policy consultation process in other contexts (e.g. in Norway or Sweden). Moreover, the degree of agency involvement will depend on multiple organisational and issue-specific factors, such as the department's need for agency expertise, agency capacity to engage in policy work, or the fit of a departmental policy proposal and the agency's own ideology, which might induce the department to keep an agency out of the policymaking process in case of a 'misfit' (Verschuere & Bach, 2012). Maggetti (2009) found that regulatory agencies are central actors in policymaking, but that formal independence does not automatically translate into higher agency influence.

Taken together, it would be too simplistic to assume that agencies in general assume strong policymaking roles and thereby challenge the policymaking role of ministerial bureaucracies. A noteworthy empirical observation is that agency officials do not necessarily seek to become involved in departmental policymaking, but rather prefer to stay at a distance from the heat of politics (Elder & Page, 1998). For the day-to-day work of agency officials, political considerations are substantially less important than for departmental officials (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009). That being said, the literature on regulatory agencies (e.g. Maggetti, 2009) suggests that these organisations may be in a position to compete with departmental bureaucrats over policy influence. To assess the validity of this claim, however, more comparative studies, including both regulatory and executive agencies, would be required. Moreover, this debate tends to implicitly assume that policymaking takes place in the shape of laws and regulations drafted in policymaking departments, while

underestimating other forms of policymaking, such as administrative rulemaking, which is a key focus of executive policymaking in the United States (Potter, 2017; Yackee, 2019). Finally, by creating a greater distance between policymaking and operational activities, agencification may imply that operational concerns and feedback from regulatees will play a less important role in policymaking (Peters, 2020). This raises the more general question of how concerns of feasibility and user perspectives make their way into bureaucratic policymaking.

In the context of the European Union (EU), national agencies' integration in transnational administrative networks and EU-level agencies has been found to increase agencies' policymaking roles, though in a different decision-making arena (Bach, Ruffing, & Yesilkagit, 2015). Their involvement in international networks provides agencies with access to both technical expertise as well as negotiation knowledge. Here, negotiation knowledge means that national agencies are in a unique position whereby they can shape decision-making at the EU level (e.g. when administrative networks are tasked with developing proposals for EU policies). In this position, national agencies might either disregard national ministries' preferences (and argue that those were not acceptable at the EU level) or block proposals by others, arguing that they would be unacceptable to their domestic political superiors (Ruffing, 2015). The empowerment effect of agencies' international involvement is also related to these agencies' access to information and best practices, as well as to the international networks providing a kind of 'legitimacy boost' for policy proposals emerging from those networks (Yesilkagit, 2011). This research shows that national agencies are empowered by EU legislation in their domestic positions and may leverage their international embeddedness to influence domestic policymaking, drawing on policy ideas originating from transnational administrative networks.

The better regulation agenda

A third major development has been the emergence of various reforms attempting to make the policymaking process itself more 'rational' by bringing specific implications of policy decisions to the attention of bureaucratic policymakers. This type of reform might be labelled 'meta-regulation' as it address the process of policymaking itself. The most well-known reforms of this type are regulatory impact assessments, cost-benefit analyses, and other instruments to increase the transparency of policymaking (Baldwin, 2010; Dudley & Wegrich, 2016; Lodge & Wegrich, 2012; Radaelli & Meuwese, 2009). The underlying rationale of those policies is to improve policy development, amongst others by making bureaucratic policymakers consider multiple alternatives, including the alternative of not regulating an issue at all (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2015).

The idea of better regulation can be traced back to the general policy analysis movement, and it gained a foothold in policy debates from the 1990s onwards. A key focus of better regulation is the idea that policymakers systematically (rather than incidentally) fail to consider the various implications of the policies under development. The overarching thrust is one of rationalising policymaking, and thereby correcting for the selective attention of decision-makers (Bach & Wegrich, 2019b), for instance by forcing bureaucratic policymakers to develop several courses of action or by considering the costs of complying with a policy for business.

How do better regulation policies affect the substance of bureaucratic policy ideas? These effects can be both intended and unintended. The main thrust of better regulation policies is to bring novel ideas into the policymaking process that sectoral policymakers are unlikely to consider otherwise. This toolbox includes the consultation with multiple stakeholders during the policy development process, the increased use of evidence in policy

design (e.g. by drawing on insights from experimental research), and the consideration of the regulative burden (compliance costs) for regulatees (Baldwin, 2010; Radaelli & Meuwese, 2009). In particular, these approaches to policymaking insert a novel type of bureaucratic actor into executive policymaking, the better regulation generalists (Jann & Wegrich, 2019). These generalists' policy ideas are likely to clash with sectoral specialists' policy ideas, which typically follow a turf-based logic of competence-seeking or policy-seeking, rather than being driven by a technocratic logic of efficient problem solving (Hartlapp et al., 2014). Hence, better regulation policies aim at inserting efficiency-based rationality into the political decision-making process.

Turning to unintended consequences, there is reason to believe that bureaucrats display strategic behaviour when faced with meta-regulation. The literature on agency rulemaking in the United States provides relevant insights into the nature of this kind of strategic behaviour. The U.S. rulemaking process has been described as a process involving 'a great deal of politics' (Yackee, 2019, p. 38), in which bureaucratic organisations display strategic behaviour concerning both the substance and the timing of decision-making. For instance, Potter (2017) showed how U.S. agencies 'slow roll' or 'fast track' the proposal of administrative rules, taking into consideration the expected opposition to a proposed rule by different potential veto players. Bureaucratic policymakers may also react strategically by developing unrealistic 'straw men' policy alternatives to formally comply with better regulation policies, forcing them to develop multiple policy alternatives (Bach & Wegrich, 2019b; Dudley & Wegrich, 2016). Moreover, better regulation may bias policy development towards policies whose impacts can be easily measured, which is a variant of the well-known 'gaming' behaviour of delivery organisations when faced with quantified performance goals (Bach & Wegrich, 2019b). However, complex policy problems may require ingenious combinations of different types of policy instruments, which do not easily lend themselves to

straightforward measurement (Baldwin, 2010). To summarise, better regulation may indeed lead to more 'rational' policy ideas, but the political nature of bureaucratic policymaking also poses important challenges to this endeavour.

The big question concerning better regulation is whether these kinds of policies have the potential for changing how bureaucrats develop policies and (at least partially) overcome strategic behaviour. Jann and Wegrich (2019) propose an organisational argument concerning the effect and the success prospects of meta-regulation in government. Those bureaucrats (generalists) tasked with promoting meta-policies, such as better regulation or impact assessments, face expert bureaucrats that have a stronger power basis in executive decision-making due to their ability to mobilise external support. The pursuit of 'non-policy specific general interest tasks' (p. 8), such as better regulation, will always depend on specialist units' contribution and cooperation, and specialists will always have superior expertise on policy issues relative to generalists, who are seeking to influence policymaking in different sectors simultaneously. Jann and Wegrich (2019) suggest that effective meta-regulation requires the mimicking of specialists' power basis by institutionalising units which are routinely consulted in policymaking, by establishing external support through (international) networks, and by generating a distinct expertise of their own. These conceptual insights provide a fruitful basis for empirical studies of the relationship between the degree of institutionalisation of meta-regulation and its effects on executive policymaking.

Conclusion

Policy bureaucracies are important sources of policy ideas. This chapter addressed the different roles of policy bureaucrats in executive policymaking, underlining that the substance of authoritative public policies often originates inside policy bureaucracies. Turning to specific explanations of bureaucratic policy ideas, the chapter argued that

organisational contexts are central for understanding the nature of bureaucratic policy ideas. Bureaucratic policymaking takes place in an organisational context, which is dominated by specialisation and selective perception, thus leading to policy ideas that are sectorally oriented (rather than cross-sectoral), oriented towards incremental changes of the status quo (rather than being 'innovative'), and defended against other ideas in case of conflict over policy alternatives and problem definitions. The chapter then sketched how bureaucratic policy ideas are being challenged by alternative sources of ideas within the government apparatus, as well as by the efforts aimed at reforming the very nature of bureaucratic policymaking.

The literature on bureaucratic policy ideas is not a very coherent one, which means that this chapter gleaned insights from a diverse array of scholarship. Much of the literature is concerned with questions of political control over bureaucracy and the relative influence of bureaucrats, politicians, and ministerial advisers, rather than the origins and nature of bureaucratic policy ideas. These questions will always be closely entangled, and there is limited benefit in taking the politics dimension out of the study of policy ideas. However, a more explicit research focus on the origins and nature of bureaucratic policy ideas has the potential to inform debates about questions of institutional design for addressing pressing policy problems. To illustrate, studies analysing the clustering of bureaucrats with distinct educational backgrounds, the effects of organisational reshuffling on bureaucratic policy ideas, whether ministerial advisers are a means of overcoming innovation deficits in the bureaucracy or are muffling bureaucratic policy ideas for political motivations, and whether better regulation reforms take specialised bureaucrats out of their comfort zones or lead to adaptive behaviours will provide important insights, which are both scholarly interesting and practically relevant. This research agenda might benefit from methodological innovations in the field, including the use of survey or laboratory experiments with bureaucrats and the

automated analysis of large amounts of text. However, many pertinent questions can also be addressed by diligent case study research of those occupying the machine rooms of government.

Further Readings

1. Bach, Niklasson, and Painter 2012
2. Eichbaum and Shaw 2008
3. Egeberg 1995
4. Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014
5. Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017
6. Jann and Wegrich 2019
7. Christensen 2017
8. Page 2012
9. Page and Jenkins 2005
10. Scharpf 1994

Cross-references

Policy advice; policy formulation; bureaucratic politics

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