

Ellison, Brian A (June 1995). A conceptual framework for analyzing bureaucratic politics and autonomy. *American Review of Public Administration*, 25, 2. p.161 (22). SAGE

## **A conceptual framework for analyzing bureaucratic politics and autonomy.**

### **Abstract:**

Although many scholars recognize that bureaucracy plays a fundamental role in governing, few have systematically examined how agencies use their resources to achieve their goals. The conflicts inherent in the use of the term "bureaucratic power" to describe an agency's ability to accomplish its objectives is one reason for this deficiency. I suggest, based on the work of several scholars, that the concept of agency autonomy is a better mechanism for explaining bureaucratic behavior. In this paper, I develop a conceptual framework of bureaucratic politics and autonomy. The conceptual framework is composed of two independent variables--expertise and constituency support--plus two intervening variables--organizational vitality and leadership. I define the dependent variable, autonomy, and present indicators. Finally, I discuss each variable and propose hypotheses.

### **Introduction**

Although many scholars recognize that bureaucracy plays a fundamental role in governing, few have systematically examined how agencies use their resources to achieve their goals. The conflicts inherent in our use of the term "bureaucratic power" to describe an agency's ability to accomplish its objectives is one reason for this deficiency. I suggest, based on the work of several scholars, that the concept of agency autonomy is a better mechanism for explaining bureaucratic behavior. (1) And while agencies are motivated by many goals, such as accumulating resources and struggling for favorable legislation, this discussion on the concept of autonomy presents a useful juxtaposition to the power debate that has dominated theories of bureaucratic politics.

The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual framework of bureaucratic politics and autonomy that we can use to explain bureaucratic behavior. In the first part of this paper I will examine the problem of explaining bureaucratic behavior and argue that the concept of autonomy makes a more useful dependent variable than power. Next, in conjunction with a review of related scholarship, I present a conceptual framework of bureaucratic politics and autonomy and generate hypotheses. Finally, I briefly suggest some tests for this analytical approach.

## **Bureaucratic Power and Autonomy**

In *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Public Policy*, Francis Rourke (1984) provides scholars with a conceptual framework for analyzing the bureaucratic policy process based on two independent variables--expertise and constituency support--plus two intervening variables--leadership and organizational vitality. Rourke contends that all organizations, even those that perform simple routinized tasks, possess some degree of expertise and political prowess. Bureaucratic expertise is manifest in two important ways: (a.) through the ability to collect and control information, and (b.) through the types of professionals that dominate an agency. Political support, on the other hand, is most often derived from the clients an agency serves or important legislative and executive constituencies (Rourke, 1984, Chap. 3).

While all agencies possess expertise and political support, organizational vitality and leadership--the intervening variables--differentiate powerful and weak agencies (Rourke, 1984, Chap. 4). Organizational vitality refers to the level of energy, or enthusiasm, agencies exhibit for their missions. Agencies that have a single, dominant profession usually have a sense of direction and the motivation they need to accomplish their goals. The Army Corps of Engineers, for example, is dominated by engineers, and because engineers have similar backgrounds--in terms of training and indoctrination--they form a cohesive, developmentally oriented group (Clarke & McCool, 1985). Agency success is also associated with strong leaders who possess the ability to mobilize political support and to capitalize on their agency's expertise (Rourke, 1984, p. 91).

## **Bureaucratic Behavior and Power**

Rourke's conceptual framework explains bureaucratic behavior (or how agencies influence formal actors in policy) using power as the dependent variable. Thus, like other aggrandizement theorists (Clarke & McCool, 1985; Downs, 1967; Holden, 1966; Tullock, 1965), Rourke explains bureaucratic behavior in terms of the quest for more money, more people, more responsibility, and less accountability. These uses of the concept of power lead to the conclusion that it is the end of bureaucratic behavior, that the more power an agency can acquire, the more operational and managerial freedom it will have.

Two significant problems are created when scholars use this influence as a definition of bureaucratic power. First, because influence is messy, it is difficult to define or measure (Long, 1949). A regulatory agency, for example, can fine a business for failure to comply with regulations, or the agency can threaten to fine the business. Both the threat and the actual fine are forms of influence, but which is more powerful? In another case, an agency may pressure Congress or the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to see things their way, but other actors are also influencing Congress and the OMB; thus, it is impossible to determine winners and losers, in a contest for power, based on a single agency's influence on another (Isaak, 1985).

Second, Rourke's use of influence inhibits our ability to succinctly define the independent and dependent variables. An agency's relationship, for example, with its client is one of mutual influence, as is the agency's relationship with its oversight committee, the client's relationship with the oversight committee, etc. Whether scholars explain bureaucratic relationships with iron

triangles or issue networks, influence is always being applied in several directions (Heclo, 1978). This leaves Rourke using influence to explain influence.

This is not to say that influence, along with coercion, force, domination, etc., is not a form of power (Wartenberg, 1990). It is to say, however, that using influence creates many methodological problems and makes Rourke's conceptual framework awkward. Robert Dahl warned, "that the attempt to define power [and influence] could push into some messy epistemological problems that do not seem to have any generally accepted solution" (1957, p. 203). Many scholars, for example, fall into the trap of using power to describe a single individual, group, or organization, but power is a relational concept, not a characteristic of an individual or group. Power has meaning only when used to describe the relationship between two actors in a political situation (Wartenberg, 1990; Isaak, 1985; Burns, 1981).

Rourke does not specifically fall into this trap, but does fail to focus succinctly on either internal or external power relationships. Rourke's independent and intervening variables, for example, describe how power is generated within organizations. In any bureaucracy, labor is divided and different units or individuals perform specialized functions. Jeffrey Pfeffer notes that when specialization occurs: "it is inevitable that some tasks will come to be more important than others. Those persons and those units that have the responsibility for performing the more critical tasks in the organization have a natural advantage in developing and exercising power in the organization" (1981, p. x). This internal struggle for power, for instance, provides the organization with its vitality.

Another power dynamic is generated when an agency's leadership balances the demands of external actors, such as congressional committees and clientele, and internal groups. Once again, the independent and intervening variables in Rourke's framework account for this dynamic. But Rourke's dependent variable, bureaucratic power (or how agencies influence legislative and executive actors in the policy process) begs scholars to focus on external power relationships. It makes sense that organizations manage internal and external relationships to achieve their goals, but not if the primary goal is managing external relationships.

The problem with Rourke's conceptual framework is the dependent variable. Rourke does make an important contribution to our understanding of bureaucratic behavior by recognizing that power resources are interdependent. Leaders, for instance, must nurture expertise and political support to be effective. Rourke's conceptual framework fails, however, to accommodate motives. James MacGregor Burns contends that power is composed of both motives and resources and that "[l]acking either one, power collapses" (1981, p. 7). To Burns, power is the process, or the glue, that holds resources and motives together, as one agency competes with another. An agency with a multitude of resources at its disposal will be unable to exercise power without a reason, or motive, for action.

One way to accommodate motives in Rourke's framework is to adjust the conceptualization of the independent, intervening, and dependent variables. Rourke, for example, correctly examines the resources bureaucracies use--expertise, constituency support, organizational vitality, and leadership--to build a power base. Next, borrowing from Burns' description of the power dynamic, we can focus on motivation as the dependent variable. This gives us the ability to ask

questions such as: Why do agencies seek power? Do bureaucrats simply want larger pensions, bigger paychecks, and more job security? Are agencies self-serving? Do they genuinely attempt to implement public policy according to legislative intent? If the primary motivation for bureaucrats is larger pensions, for example, we can ask: how do bureaucrats use their resources to achieve larger pensions for their employees?

This new conceptualization presents a far more dynamic mechanism for explaining bureaucratic behavior and power. Instead of examining power as simply an output, inevitably confused with input, power becomes a process that explains how agencies use resources to satisfy motivations. Moreover, it is logical to assume that those organizations most capable of managing resources to satisfy motivations will also dominate the competition for limited public support (Burns, 1981).

### **Motivation and Autonomy**

This reconceptualization still leaves us with one fundamental problem: what motivates bureaucratic behavior? Are most agencies motivated, as the public asserts, by larger pensions, bigger paychecks, and more job security for their employees? Does rational self-interest explain bureaucratic behavior as Anthony Downs, for example, contends? In *Inside Bureaucracy*, Downs (1967) argues that bureaucrats satisfy their collective self-interest in two ways. First, agencies present a favorable image to the public in a continuous quest for expansion, i.e., more money, employees, and responsibilities. (2) At the same time, Downs argues, agencies work just as diligently to avoid accountability.

Clarke and McCool present a related argument in their analysis of seven federal agencies with important natural-resource management responsibilities. Using a combination of historical analysis, longitudinal studies of budgets and personnel, and survey data, the authors conclude that some agencies, like the U.S. Forest Service, are powerful because they could implement the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 in ways that support their missions. Others, like the Bureau of Reclamation, lack the political support enjoyed by the Forest Service because of a geographically restricted base of operations and are consequently less able to adapt to newer policy requirements (Clarke & McCool, 1985).

Both expansion and unaccountability, however, pose significant problems as primary motivations for bureaucratic behavior. With increased responsibilities comes increased legislative and interest group oversight. Agencies simply are not granted new responsibilities without expanding the number of public and political constituencies they must serve. Even the Environmental Protection Agency invites new interest groups to the table when they expand their regulatory activities. Next, agencies that avoid accountability are denying themselves an important source of power. The relationships between congressional committees, clients, and agencies not only help maintain accountability but, as Rourke argues, are also part of the power dynamic that allows bureaucracies to achieve their goals.

Rather than avoiding accountability or seeking to expand their resources, that bureaucracies work to achieve autonomy, argues James Q. Wilson. He suggests that "it is the desire for autonomy, and not for large budgets, new powers, or additional employees, that is the dominant motive of [bureaucracies]" (Wilson, 1978, p. 165). Wilson defines autonomy as undisputed

jurisdiction over specific policy arenas; highly autonomous agencies, therefore, "have few or no bureaucratic rivals and a minimum of political constraints imposed on them by superiors" (Wilson 1989, p. 182).

Agencies are composed of three groups--operators, managers, and executives--that focus on the agency's primary functions or critical tasks. Operators actually perform the critical tasks, managers coordinate the activities of the operators, and executives maintain the organization's resources and defend it against external challenges (Wilson, 1989, 1978).

Critical tasks are useful benchmarks of agency behavior because they are obstinate. In other words, while an organization may change or adapt to new environmental constraints, the fundamental tasks an agency performs tend to remain the same. Executives, for example, may have broad authority to set agency policy, reorganize, control the distribution of fiscal resources, etc., but do not have the power to change critical tasks. Can the Secretary of Defense, for example, change the military's critical task of providing national defense? Can a university president change the institutional orientation toward higher education? As Wilson notes: this fact helps explain why government reorganizations can occur so often without any discernible change in the way a governmental employee actually performs his or her work. Bureaus are reorganized, cabinet secretaries and agency heads come and go, new departments are created and merged, and yet, to the citizen-client, little seems to change" (Wilson, 1978, p. 12).

Mazmanian and Nienaber's (1979) examination of organizational change in the Army Corps of Engineers provides a good example of this phenomenon. These scholars developed four criteria to measure organizational change--stipulating new goals, pursuing reorganization, changing outputs, and the infusion of open decision making procedures--and found that the agency had been transformed. The Army Corps developed new environmental goals, it created new structures capable of meeting the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, it reported on its new environmentally oriented activities, and gave citizens a chance to participate in agency decisions. But, as the researchers noted, the Army Corps' critical task of developing and maintaining water resources did not change; at best, new projects, for example, were "delayed or modified" (Mazmanian & Nienaber, 1979, p. 184). This is not to say that the organization did not become more environmentally conscientious: it did. The motivation for the Army Corps' change, however, was not deep concern for snail darters and similar creatures, but the need to maintain its autonomy in a radically changing environment.

## **Summary**

Rourke provides us with a conceptual framework designed to explain bureaucratic behavior. The independent and intervening variables reflect a recognition that administrators use political and administrative resources to achieve agency goals. Rourke's dependent variable, bureaucratic power, was defined as the ability to influence formal actors in policy. Power poses two methodological problems, however: (a.) it is difficult to measure and define, and (b.) it muddles the differences between the independent and dependent variables. The shortcoming in Rourke's framework is its failure to accommodate motives. He provides us with a mechanism for analyzing how bureaucracies achieve their goals, but the dependent variable does not allow us to ask why.

Wilson contends that bureaucracies are primarily motivated by the desire for autonomy, defined as the maintenance of undisputed jurisdiction over specific policy arenas. An autonomous agency, Wilson contends, "has a supportive constituency base and a coherent set of tasks that can provide the basis for a strong and widely shared sense of mission" (Wilson, 1989, p. 195). An agency's ability to protect its critical tasks, to balance both external and internal demands, therefore, is the key to autonomy. In the following section, I present a specific framework for analyzing agency autonomy.

### **A Framework for Analyzing Bureaucratic Politics and Agency Autonomy**

This section introduces a conceptual framework that will allow scholars to systematically analyze how bureaucracies use their resources to achieve their goals (see Figure 1). The independent variables in the framework are expertise and constituency support. All bureaucracies, regardless of size, prestige, etc., possess these sources of bureaucratic power. These variables are labeled descriptive elements because we cannot determine an agency's effectiveness based on these defining characteristics alone.

[FIGURE 1 OMITTED]

We must also examine the roles that leaders and personnel assume in the larger political environment to differentiate powerful and weak bureaucracies. An agency, for example, endowed with expertise and constituency support will rarely be successful without a well-defined sense of mission and strong leadership. Moreover, because it is impossible to determine the exact amount of influence the independent and intervening variables have on one another, they are connected with arrows, pointing in both directions, that indicate reciprocal relationships. Expertise, for example, clearly influences organizational vitality, which is influenced by leadership, which is influenced by various constituencies, and back-and-forth, etc. As Rourke notes: "The factors that help to shape differentials in agency power can thus be sorted out, yet there is no easy way in which the effectiveness of one source of power can be weighted against another. No common unit of measurement makes such comparisons possible" (1984, p. 92). Finally, according to the analytical framework, the purpose of all this activity is the maintenance of autonomy, which is accomplished when agencies perform and protect their critical tasks.

### **Autonomy**

Nordlinger contends that "the autonomy of any social entity refers to the correspondence between its preferences and actions" (1981, p. 8). A totally autonomous actor, therefore, will seek to satisfy its policy preferences, regardless of external demands. Mumme and Moore (1990) define autonomy as an agency's policy-making activities, which are founded in its formal authority and informal external conditions. Specifically, Mumme and Moore contend that an agency's autonomy "rests on both legal and political elements of its organizational standing and behavior ..." (1990, p. 663).

The legal and political elements Mumme and Moore describe are two important types of autonomy. An agency's enabling statutes provide the framework for its decision-making authority, or its legal autonomy. The Reclamation Act of 1902, for example, created the U.S.

Reclamation Service and gave the agency the authority to develop water resources to promote irrigation. At the same time, the agency did not have the authority to make decisions regarding flood control or other water-related issues; thus, the Reclamation Service could assert its autonomy within a narrowly defined policy arena only. The agency's political autonomy, on the other hand, came from the public consensus surrounding its activities and the support it received from western congresspersons (Reisner, 1986).

Fiscal autonomy is also important. Most agencies are dependent on elected legislative and executive bodies for appropriations, but some generate their own revenues and control their own expenditures. The Los Angeles Board of Water Commissioners, for example, has a great deal of fiscal autonomy because it does not need approval from the city council or mayor for its expenditures. Instead, the agency's revenues are placed in a water fund, rather than Los Angeles's general fund, remaining primarily under the board's control (Kahrl, 1982).

In this article, autonomy is defined as an agency's ability to maintain undisputed jurisdiction over its specific policy arenas. An autonomous agency, then, has few bureaucratic rivals and political constraints. High levels of autonomy are accomplished when operators, managers, and executives perform and protect their critical tasks. Critical tasks achieve the agency's fundamental purposes and are highly resistant to change (Wilson, 1978, 1989).

Focusing on the behaviors that surround an agency's critical tasks over time can provide a unique mechanism for examining bureaucratic behavior. How, for example, has the agency reacted when changes in the political environment threatened its critical tasks? How are recruitment patterns, hierarchy, professionalism, and secrecy used to support the agency's critical tasks? How has the organization changed or developed? What actions has the agency's leadership taken to ensure autonomy and maintain its critical tasks?

When an agency's legal, political, or fiscal autonomy is threatened, we can observe three behaviors that relate to critical tasks and that are indicative of agency autonomy: (a.) avoiding control by elected officials, (b.) resisting predation by other agencies, and (c.) avoiding unwanted functions (Mumme & Moore, 1990; Wilson, 1978, 1989).

Agencies that are highly autonomous usually have few formal restrictions on their ability to make decisions about policies or budgets and work to keep it that way by avoiding control by elected officials. An autonomous agency could become politicized, or drawn more tightly into the grasp of elected officials, in a variety of ways. In Los Angeles, for example, elected officials could gain control of the Department of Water and Power by initiating and supporting charter amendments that would make the board an elected body or subject to removal by the mayor or city council. Or the water works fund could be eliminated, forcing the board to seek council approval for operational and capital expenditures through more traditional budgeting. Finally, the Department of Water and Power could be placed under the jurisdiction of state utility regulators. Each of these changes would make the board more subservient to direct political supervision.

Agencies will also resist predation by other agencies or refuse to give up programmatic responsibilities to other units of government. Mumme and Moore, for example, describe how the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, United States and Mexico,

successfully thwarted an attempt by the Bureau of Reclamation to assume its operational responsibilities, arguing that it had a "claim to a unique jurisdictional endowment and the performance of functions stipulated by the 1944 Water Treaty" (1990, p. 679).

Finally, agencies will avoid unwanted functions, especially those that may potentially detract from the ability to perform their critical tasks. J. Edgar Hoover did not want the Federal Bureau of Investigation involved in drug enforcement because it involved functions that violated the agency's "clean-cut, aboveboard, nonpartisan" image (Wilson, 1989, p. 108). In order for FBI agents to tackle the drug trade, they would have to go under-cover and mingle with known hoodlums and criminals. This covert activity increased the chances for corruption and scandal, a condition Hoover found simply unacceptable.

In another example of how agencies avoid unwanted functions, the Department of Agriculture has always considered itself to be in the farming, not the welfare, business. Since the inception of the food stamp program, the USDA has continuously sought to have the program transferred to Health, Education and Welfare, and later to Health and Human Services. As Wilson notes, "[w]hat made Food Stamps burdensome was not simply its cost, but its nature; it required Agriculture to perform tasks very different from those it was used to performing, and this was seen as a distraction ... (1989, p. 109).

The three indicators of autonomy are therefore defined as:

- (a.) Avoiding control by elected officials: implies any action an agency takes to thwart external attempts to change its political, legal, and fiscal autonomy.
- (b.) Resisting predation by other agencies: implies an unwillingness to share or give up programmatic responsibilities with other units of government.
- (c.) Avoiding unwanted functions: implies an unwillingness to accept new tasks that may detract or hinder the agency's ability to perform its critical tasks.

## **Expertise**

Bureaucratic expertise is built and maintained through specialization (the ability to break down complex problems into manageable tasks) and concentrated attention (the subsequent skills and knowledge that come with experience) (Rourke, 1984, pp. 16-17; Pfeffer, 1981). Technical obscurity also gives some groups within bureaucracies a decided advantage in policy. Lawyers, engineers, and scientists, for example, tend to exert more leverage on policy makers than other professionals because their opinions and findings are not easily challenged by laypersons (Rourke, 1984).

Bureaucratic expertise, therefore, is one resource agencies use to influence and create public policies that support or enhance their autonomy. Agencies funnel their expertise through (a.) the ability to collect and control information and to give advice, and (b.) the possession of a dominant profession (Clarke & McCool, 1985; Rourke, 1984). In the following sections, we examine each of these elements of bureaucratic expertise and generate hypotheses.



Information and advice. The ability to specialize and focus on public problems and programs give bureaucracies a "monopolistic or nearly monopolistic control" of the information essential to governing (Rourke, 1984, p. 18). When elected officials are confronted with complex policy problems, they may be highly dependent on bureaucrats for guidance. Bureaucracies collect information for a variety of purposes. The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), for example, neutrally collects and gathers information for Congress. Other agencies, like the Army Corps of Engineers and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, collect information to support and promote highly technical proposals or policies. Despite their differences, all agencies collect information and give advice that will enhance their autonomy. It is unlikely that the GAO would offer information to Congress that threatened its critical tasks, and because the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power is charged with water delivery, which necessarily implies constant expansion of existing supplies in a growing metropolitan area, it is unlikely that the agency would offer information to municipal water users that demonstrated the adequacy of current resources.

Bureaucratic control over information and advice gives agencies three potent sources of power: (a.) the ability to define or redefine issues through the interpretation of relevant information, (b.) the ability to restrict or enhance the flow of information, and (c.) the ability to use ambiguous information to support policy proposals in ways that laypersons cannot easily understand (Ingram, 1990; Nordlinger, 1981; Maass, 1951). In his classic study, Arthur Maass demonstrated how the Corps of Engineers was able to use information to redefine the issues relevant to water-development projects. While water development on the Kings River was clearly intended to provide reclamation benefits to farmers, the Corps was able to take the project away from the Farm Bureau by demonstrating the project's flood control benefits (Maass, 1951).

Moreover, agencies rarely keep their opponents fully informed in policy debates. Instead, they mete out information in ways that support their preferences (Ingram, 1990). Bureaucrats also often use ambiguous decision-making techniques, such as benefit/cost analysis, risk assessment, etc., to support positions with findings that the public does not understand (Ingram, 1990; Reisner & Bates, 1990).

The types of data an agency collects and how they are reported to participants in decision-making processes are the crucial components in this variable. Agencies collect data that help them identify environmental factors and monitor their progress in meeting program goals. The FBI, for example, before it can begin to plan law-enforcement strategies, must measure its environment by determining the incidences, types, and locations of crimes that are reported. They need demographic information on the population they serve, and they need to know criminals' individual characteristics. To measure progress, the FBI needs to know arrest and conviction rates, the amount of contraband recovered, property seized, etc.

The data and information the FBI collects are then used to give advice to decision makers and the general public. Advice takes on many forms but usually includes documents such as budgets, annual reports, educational materials, and perhaps presentations and congressional testimony.

Information and advice are crucial components in an agency's ability to maintain its autonomy. For a service agency, such as the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the data

collected on Los Angeles's water supply makes the department the primary repository of water-related information. Moreover, the types of advice the water department gives, in the form of annual reports, budgets, developmental plans, and rate studies, are often highly complex. Few city councilpersons, mayors, or even other water agencies and special districts have the organizational capacity to interpret and validate the water department's proposals. Thus I suggest the following hypothesis:

[H.sub.1]: The greater the agency's ability to support its policy proposals with technical information, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy. (3)

Possession of a dominant profession. Agencies with a well-defined sense of mission are usually dominated by a single profession. The Forest Service, for example, has been dominated by foresters since its inception, helping to keep the agency focused on specific tasks and objectives (Kaufman, 1960). In the Forest Service, or any other agency, professions are based on "a specialized body of knowledge, usually accompanied by a distinct mode of analysis by which existing knowledge is applied and additional knowledge discovered" (Culhane, 1981, p. 325). Moreover, professionals usually emerge from educational systems with standardized curriculums and are forced to seek entry through similar accreditation processes (Culhane, 1981, pp. 325-326). When agencies are dominated by a single profession, therefore, their like-minded personnel tend to define problems and solutions in similar ways, eliminating internal confusion and conflict.

The regulatory reform movement in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) demonstrates how competing professions within an agency can create conflict and confusion. During the late 1970s, EPA economists and Carter administration officials attempted to replace the old command-and-control approach to regulation with a system based on market incentives. Their proposals failed because the EPA's lawyers and scientists defined pollution problems and solutions differently. Lawyers, for instance, contended that a market approach would violate the due process protections of the Clean Air Act, and scientists opposed emissions trading on technical grounds because the command-and-control approach required polluters to use proven, rather than experimental, pollution abatement technologies (Cook, 1988). As Clarke and McCool note, "agencies that are interdisciplinary--a melting pot of professions--generally encounter greater difficulties in developing into a cohesive organization" (1985, p. 8).

Agencies dominated by experts are also given a great deal of autonomy in our society. Rourke notes, for example, that state universities and research agencies "are commonly conceded--by law or custom--a degree of administrative independence not allowed to other public agencies" (1984, p. 18). This is also true for agencies that perform highly technical functions for society, such as the military and the Army Corps of Engineers (Mumme & Moore, 1990; Clarke & McCool, 1985).

The possession of a dominant profession, however, can also be a liability. When the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and other federal environmental statutes passed in the early 1970s changed the political context for natural resource agencies, the dominant professionals in the Bureau of Reclamation were unable to adjust to the new restrictions on their decision making. Professionals within the Army Corps of Engineers, on the other hand, used

environmental impact assessment to maintain their dominant position in federal water development programming. For those agencies, therefore, that do possess a dominant profession, the ability to adapt to a changing political context is an important part of their success (Mumme & Moore, 1990; Clarke & McCool, 1985). I suggest the following hypothesis:

[H.sub.2]: The greater the control an agency's dominant professionals have over an agency's decision making procedures, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy.

### **Constituency support**

The participants in bureaucratic policy--agencies, legislators, executives, interest groups, clientele, and citizens--react to each other and often make decisions that are mutually reinforcing. While these actors may or may not focus their attention on the bureaucracy (interest groups, for example, may choose to lobby Congress), the agencies are the ones who actually deliver services, impose and enforce regulations, and distribute public benefits. Satisfying the demands of these diverse formal and informal groups, therefore, requires administrators to perform a diligent and sustained political balancing act (Moe, 1985).

Bureaucracies generate the support they need to perform their critical tasks through two sources of constituency support: political and public. Political constituencies are the formal governmental actors that interact with bureaucrats as they influence and create public policy, such as mayors, governors, legislatures, congressional committees, executive agencies at all levels of government, etc. Public constituencies, on the other hand, are the external entities that affect bureaucratic policy, such as the public, interest groups, clientele, etc.

Political support. Agencies always depend on legislative entities, such as city councils, state legislators, or Congress, for their most fundamental sources of support: formal statutes and appropriations. Agencies receive their formal authority to deliver services, regulate commerce, conduct research, etc., through authorization by the legislature in the form of laws (Rourke, 1984). Moreover, statutes determine the amount of discretion agencies can exercise during implementation. Agencies also depend on legislatures for appropriations or, in the case of many independent commissions and governmental corporations that generate their own revenues, for spending authority (Seidman & Gilmour, 1986).

Appropriations are rarely dependent on an agency's objective needs. Instead, more often than not, they revolve around the political relationships legislators have with their constituencies, interest groups, and other executive agencies (Fenno, 1966; Fiorina, 1977). Effective administrators, therefore, understand the importance of maintaining and developing the support of key legislators. Such cultivation, for example, can make it "possible for an administrative agency to establish a position of virtually complete autonomy in the executive branch" (Rourke, 1984, p. 72; see also Wilson 1978; Maass, 1951).

Still, many agencies must seek a middle ground of support between their executive and legislative constituencies. Executive support comes from two primary sources: (a.) elected executives and appointees, and (b.) other agencies at the same or different levels of government. While mayors, governors, and presidents have the power to control funding requests and draft

legislative proposals, effective governing in the United States requires coordination and cooperation between elected executives and government agencies. Bureaucracies provide elected officials with information, expertise, and favorable public opinion when government goods and services are delivered, and executives provide agencies with the means to perform their critical tasks and manage their political environments. Favorable public opinion is also generated when elected executives and agencies work together to manage crises (Rourke, 1984).

Agencies also seek support from other organizations in government. Although conflict between agencies is possible, especially when they compete to perform similar critical tasks, most bureaucracies are able to protect their turf and build support by working out their differences. Several compromises, for example, were negotiated between the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation over their "arrangement for developing water resources in the Missouri Valley area" (Rourke, 1984, p. 78). These agreements helped support their critical tasks, establish jurisdictions, and hinder the formation of other water-development agencies.

Moreover, a variety of factors such as fiscal federalism, more interstate compacts, and more local-federation interaction have encouraged cooperation among agencies that perform similar functions at different levels of government (Hanson, 1990; Glendening & Reeves, 1984; Reeves, 1981). This intergovernmental cooperation is especially evident among local, state, and federal water-development agencies. In California, for example, the Los Angeles Water Department, the California Department of Water Resources, and the Bureau of Reclamation have often consolidated their efforts to satisfy mutual water-development objectives (Kahrl, 1982).

Public organizations that cooperate with governments and other agencies have an advantage in the bureaucratic policy process. Both the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation work closely with elected officials and other water-development agencies to achieve their goals. These agencies are dependent on local initiative for support and direction. Moreover, local water-development agencies, such as the Los Angeles Water Department, need positive cooperation from elected officials and several federal and state agencies to construct projects like the Los Angeles Aqueduct (Kahrl, 1982). Thus I suggest the following hypothesis:

[H.sub.3]: The greater an agency's willingness to work with other governmental actors, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy.

Public support. Quite often agencies are able to use their informal sources of support--the public, their clientele, and interest groups--to achieve their policy objectives, maintain their autonomy, and dominate their legislative and executive supervisors (Rourke, 1984). While most bureaucracies operate in relative obscurity, successful administrators, "through the skillful use of publicity ... exploit every opportunity to catch the public eye with their achievements" (Rourke, 1984, p. 50; see also Rourke, 1961). Favorable public opinion, therefore, is an important source of support for most agencies. During the early stages of the issue attention cycle, for example, favorable opinion can help agencies build popularity and prestige as the public clamors for solutions to difficult problems (Downs, 1972).

Moreover, decline in issue attention does not necessarily mean a lack of support for specific programs. As Riley Dunlap noted, "a major factor in the decline in environmental concern in the

early 80s was the perception by the public that the government was taking care of environmental problems" (1989, p. 117). Thus when the Reagan administration reduced the Environmental Protection Agency's budget and staff, the public responded with a groundswell of support for the agency--ultimately producing a reversal of developmental initiatives (Dunlap, 1989).

Most agencies were created in response to the economic or political needs of specific groups in society. The clientele an agency serves, therefore, often provides its most important source of support, especially if the agency provides tangible economic or political benefits (Rourke, 1984). Farmers, for example, support the Department of Agriculture to maintain favorable import-export policies and subsidies. Ranchers hope to keep grazing fees low by supporting the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Women and minorities stand to gain vocationally through support of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Unfortunately, many agencies become so dependent on the political support their clients provide "that the group in time acquires a veto power over many of the agency's major decisions" (Rourke, 1984, p. 56). This phenomenon, known as agency capture, is especially evident when bureaucracies serve specific economic interests and are dependent on their clientele for information. For example, the Grazing Service, later the Bureau of Land Management, failed to effectively regulate livestock foraging on the public lands because it was caught in a quagmire of local economic interests, was dependent on ranchers for information, and was dominated by parochially minded representatives in Congress (Foss, 1960). On the other hand, agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service have been able to achieve conformity or strict adherence to policy objectives among rank-and-file employees through the institutionalization of professional norms and frequent transfers, inhibiting the ability of rangers to develop relationships with local groups interested in forest policy (Kaufman, 1960).

Ideally, in the interest of fairness and representativeness, agencies will occupy some middle ground between capture and conformity, maintaining close relationships with their primary clientele and still protecting the public's fiscal, economic, and environmental resources. To achieve this objective, agencies often use one interest group to stave off the demands of another (Culhane, 1981). The incorporation of a multiple-use mission, for example, in both the Forest Service and BLM gave each agency the ability to resist traditional clientele by including other interests, such as environmentalists, in policy debates. Hecló (1978) called these composites of tangential groups "issue networks." Issue networks differ from iron triangles because their membership is based on knowledge about policy issues rather than "some tangible stake in the decisions that an agency makes" (Rourke, 1991, p. 121). Although these groups may have little or no real effect on policy outcomes, their participation in decision making processes has clearly given agencies more leeway to make policies that satisfy a broader base of support (Reagan, 1987; Culhane, 1981).

Wise agencies, therefore, will allow a wide variety of competing groups to participate in their decision making, hoping to build consensus among participants in the policy arena before proposals are made public. Once consensus is achieved within the issue network, the agency is able to evoke public support by eliminating the confusion that often surrounds broad public debate over policy choices. Many times, for example, agencies balance the demands of their primary constituencies with the interests of competing groups by increasing the flow of

information between entities in the issue network through educational programs, public meetings and hearings, policy roundtables and task forces, and other extension services. Hypothesis 4 follows:

H4: The greater an agency's ability to build public support, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy.

### **Organizational Vitality**

Although all agencies possess some degree of expertise and constituency support, organizational vitality is one element that differentiates strong and weak organizations (Rourke, 1984). Bureaucrats can become experts, for example, at the most rudimentary tasks through simple redundancy and familiarity. Even the most obscure agencies must possess some source of constituency support; otherwise, they would receive no appropriations and would cease to exist. Only a few vital, energetic agencies, however, effectively muster the technical expertise and constituency support needed to get things done and maintain their autonomy. As much as anything else, these agencies perform roles that are in "accord with [society's] highest ranked values," while others are relegated to policy arenas that few citizens know about, or care about (Rourke, 1984, p. 103).

Some agencies are successful in obtaining resources because of their visibility and the salience of their tasks. The Department of Defense, for example, will always receive more public support than the U.S. General Accounting Office because national defense is a more visible public value than the evaluation of programmatic effectiveness. Likewise, the absolute dependence cities and farmers in the arid west have on agencies that deliver and develop water resources contributes to their organizational vitality.

An organization's vitality is dependent on a strong sense of esprit de corps, based on a service, rather than a regulatory, mandate (Rourke, 1984). Because this characteristic is closely related to expertise and constituency support, the following discussion may seem redundant. For the sake of clarity, however, it is important to briefly examine this component independently.

Esprit de corps. Although esprit de corps is an important component in agency success, it is difficult to quantify or measure. For the most part, agencies with a strong sense of esprit de corps "exude a sense of self-confidence in their relationships with others," have a reputation for success, and often provide benefits to groups with substantial political clout (Clarke & McCool, 1985, p. 8).

Most successful agencies serve a variety of interests within the sphere of their primary missions. The Corps of Engineers, for example, has been able to maintain its developmental relationships while expanding its clientele to include environmental groups (Mazmanian & Nienaber, 1979). As Culhane (1981) observed, the multiple-use mandates handed to the Forest Service and BLM have allowed them to act as mediators between the divergent demands of their public constituencies. Forest rangers, for example, often use the threats environmental interest groups pose to motivate harvesters to control slash.

Some agencies are energized by normative sources of support, such as favorable public opinion, while others are more dependent on the formal authority of government (Rourke, 1984); French & Raven, 1959). The Corps of Engineers serves the American penchant for development by providing technical and fiscal assistance that satisfies and supports parochial interests. Still, while the public supports environmental protection, the Environmental Protection Agency is more dependent on its coercive power than widespread, voluntary compliance with its regulations. Both the EPA and the Corps of Engineers perform functions that satisfy public values, but their authority is dependent on social and political mechanisms that create different organizations. As a service agency, therefore, the Corps of Engineers distributes benefits to the public, while the EPA, like other regulatory agencies, has "the essentially thankless task of restricting some economic, social, or political activity" (Clarke & McCool, 1985, p. 9).

Moreover, it is often difficult for regulatory agencies to measure their success, which has a direct impact on esprit de corps. Distributive agencies can point to specific benefits they have provided their constituencies--water projects constructed, permits granted, hydropower generated, etc.; regulatory agencies must convince the public that their programs have been effective. Given the highly complex tasks regulatory agencies perform, such as reducing pollution, increasing product safety, and maintaining fair employment practices, demonstrating success is not a simple endeavor (Clarke & McCool, 1985; Rourke, 1984).

Agencies with a high level of esprit de corps, therefore, usually perform services for influential clientele. The ability to provide benefits rather than control behavior is often translated into a positive sense of esprit de corps among an agency's personnel. Measures of esprit de corps would include agency attrition rates, salary comparisons, and professional reputation. Another way to measure esprit de corps within an agency is simply to ask its employees about their attitudes toward the organization and their jobs (Clarke & McCool, 1985).

H5: The higher the level of esprit de corps within an agency, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy.

## **Leadership**

Public administration theory that focuses on the role of leadership in agency behavior is dominated by two competing and contradictory visions. Some politicians, scholars, and citizens, for example, have a "preoccupation with entrepreneurship," believing that leaders, in the best spirit of business administration and management, should be proactive managers (Terry, 1990, p. 396). They expect leaders to shake things up, to take risks, to be innovative, and to radically transform their agency's "technical, political and cultural systems" (Terry, 1990, p. 398). Other scholars, however, contend that entrepreneurial leadership is overly romanticized and often seeks to replace traditional community values with illegitimate, quick fixes to complex public problems. Terry, for example, argues that leadership should be based on the concept of administrative conservatism, in which executives respect tradition, legitimate authority, and regime values (1990).

Although good leadership clearly depends on the character, ideological orientation, and ability of the person in charge, the most significant pressures leaders face come from actors beyond their

control within the bureaucratic decision making system. Leadership, Rourke contends, "is situational--dependent, that is, on factors in the environment other than the leader himself" (1984, p. 109). Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, leaders rarely have the ability to change an agency's internal or external environments. Moreover, leaders that lack a firm understanding of their agency's history and mission, its traditional clientele, and its crucial legislative and executive constituencies are often doomed to failure (Terry, 1990; Wilson, 1989; Will, 1983). The best leaders, therefore, facilitate the agency's critical tasks by conveying its internal needs to the external entities that control resources (Wilson, 1989).

Whether bureaucratic executives are elevated to their leadership positions through the civil service system or are appointed by elected officials, they must be considerate of both internal and external agency demands (Rourke, 1984). In the following sections, I briefly summarize these leadership orientations and generate hypotheses.

**Internal leadership.** Unlike the proponents of entrepreneurship, many scholars see important differences between management and leadership (Terry, 1990; Wilson, 1978, 1989; Rourke, 1984; Selznick, 1957). The tasks managers perform include: coordinating operators' efforts, funneling funds through operational and personnel channels, and making day-in and day-out administrative decisions. Leaders, on the other hand, are charged with two important functions: maintenance of the organization and maintenance of the executive (Wilson, 1978, 1989, p. 217). In maintaining the organization, leaders must ensure that the agency "obtains the essential resources--money, personnel, clients, goodwill, political support---necessary for it to prosper as well as survive" (Wilson, 1978, p. 163). To accomplish this task effectively, leaders must be aware of their agency's internal demands, be considerate of employee morale, and understand operational objectives (Rourke, 1984).

Internal leadership is accomplished in a variety of ways. Leaders, for example, use employee surveys to gather information critical to employee morale and conduct inservice education programs to communicate organizational objectives. They also meet employee needs through benefits, services, and assistance programs designed to enhance the relationship between the individual and the organization.

**H6:** The more responsive an agency's leadership is to the internal needs of agency employees, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy.

**External leadership.** To meet their internal demands, leaders must effectively communicate agency needs to external constituencies. The most important external function leaders provide is protecting the agency's critical tasks and maintaining its autonomy (Wilson, 1978, 1989). Because leaders interact with external constituencies, they, more than operators and managers, are in the best position to stave off attacks from other bureaucracies and governments.

Historically, our most effective leaders have been experts in their own right and "were also highly adept in using managerial strategies necessary either to advance their interests or to fend off adversaries within rival bureaucracies" (Rourke, 1984, p. 114). J. Edgar Hoover's expertise at administration of justice, for example, gave him the political clout to manipulate Congress, the Justice Department, and a host of agencies and public interest groups (Wilson, 1978). The first



director of the U.S. Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, was also among America's first professionally trained foresters (Fausold, 1961). Both of these leaders were able to use their expertise and management ability to protect their agencies' critical tasks and autonomy: Hoover kept the Federal Bureau of Investigation out of drug enforcement by encouraging formation of the Drug Enforcement Agency, and Pinchot used his influence to keep the Forest Service out of the Department of the Interior, avoiding fundamental, ideological conflict over the agency's conservation (wise-use) mission (Wilson, 1978; Fausold, 1961; Hays, 1959).

Successful leaders, therefore, are often experts in their own right and have a well-developed understanding of their agency's critical tasks. They understand how to communicate internal needs to rivals and allies in the external political environment and how to avoid new tasks that could impair the agency's ability to perform its mission. Many times, this objective is accomplished by using managerial strategies that place boundaries around their agency's arena of responsibility.

H7: The greater the ability of an agency's leadership to protect and defend the agency's proposals in negotiations with external policy actors, the more likely the agency will maintain its autonomy.

### **Directions for Future Research**

What about future applications of this analytical framework? Although Clarke and McCool (1985) and Mumme and Moore (1990) use adaptations of Rourke's framework to assess bureaucratic behavior in agencies with federal and international natural resource management responsibilities, studies could examine agency autonomy in other policy arenas. This research could also be expanded to examine agency autonomy in agencies at the state and local levels of government. My research has not revealed any such studies of agencies at other levels of government.

The framework could also be used to compare agency autonomy among several organizations. This approach would build on Clarke and McCool's discussion. These studies might also assess organizations from different levels of government that perform similar critical tasks, or, borrowing from Ackerman and Hassler's (1981) study of agency types, they could compare an agency that was founded during the progressive era with one that was constructed to ensure political accountability. Additionally, rather than using agencies as the unit of analysis, scholars of bureaucratic politics might assess the utility of this framework by examining autonomy at the program or bureau levels. Some agencies, for example, may have some programs that operate autonomously and others that do not.

Next, a study could quantitatively assess agency autonomy by developing an operational scheme that would allow objective measurement of the variables. Some of the independent and intervening variables would lend themselves nicely to this type of analysis. The possession of a dominant profession, for example, could be quantified by simply observing agency employee composition, comparing them to other agencies, or observing changes over time. Other variables, such as esprit de corps, would be more difficult to analyze quantitatively but could be assessed by measuring the perceptions of individuals associated with the organization.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. General Accounting Office.

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## Notes

(1) The distinction between individual and organizational motives has been an evasive subject of study in public administration for some time. James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, for example,

postulated that because individuals will always choose to maximize their self-interests, "institutions and legal constraints should be developed which will order the pursuit of private gain in such a way as to make it consistent with ... [organization] objectives" (1962, p. 27). The underlying assumption here is that individual interests are often at odds with organizational interests and should therefore be curtailed. Empirical studies have both supported (B. Buchanan, 1974) and undermined (Vroom, 1964) this view. Vincent Ostrom, on the other hand, contends that organizations are simply "decision-making arrangements" that make differences between individual and organizational behaviors indistinguishable (1974, p. 3). Because this article seeks to provide a mechanism for examining bureaucratic behavior, which results collectively from choices made by agency members in reaction to external political constraints and pressures, I will accept Ostrom's postulate.

(2) For similar discussions on bureaucratic imperialism see Holden (1966) and Tullock (1965).

(3) Maintaining autonomy means that the agency's political, legal, and fiscal autonomy was not altered.

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