

Bureaucracies in Historical Political Economy

(Forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Historical Political Economy*,
edited by Jeffery A. Jenkins and Jared Rubin)

Jan P. Vogler, University of Konstanz (jan.vogler@uni-konstanz.de)

January 22, 2023

Abstract

Modern public bureaucracies are essential to the task of governing complex social systems. Thus, when industrialization significantly increased socioeconomic complexity, bureaucracies became an indispensable aspect of most polities. The institutional design of these administrative organizations not only shapes the prospects for economic growth, but it is also influenced by a variety of socioeconomic and political factors. Moreover, modern bureaucracies were central to global imperialism in the nineteenth century and industrialized interstate warfare in the twentieth century. All of these factors make bureaucracies a *fundamentally important* object of interest to the field of historical political economy. Therefore, in this chapter, I provide an overview of the historical development of modern bureaucracies and their impact on socioeconomic structures. After introducing these systems' key features, I discuss several prominent classification schemes that allow for further conceptual differentiation. Then, I examine the historical context in which modern bureaucracies emerged and the factors that influenced their organizational structures. Furthermore, I consider the effects that public administrative systems had on their environment throughout history, emphasizing their impact on economies, but also discussing society and politics as additional dimensions.

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Acknowledgments

Helpful comments were provided by Agnes Cornell, Claudiu Craciun, Carl Dahlström, John Deak, Anne Degrave, Iza Ding, Wolfgang Drechsler, Niklas Hänze, Friedrich Heinemann, Jeff Jenkins, Edgar Kiser, Mark Koyama, Joe Kratz, Victor Lapuente, Melissa Lee, Reo Matsuzaki, Dan Mattingly, Christopher Paik, Daniel Podratsky, Jos Raadschelders, Jared Rubin, Steffi Rueß, Fritz Sager, Yu Sasaki, Ryan Saylor, Luis Schenoni, Matthias Scheu, Charles Shipan, Peer Vries, David Waldner, Yuhua Wang, and Bernd Wunder. I also thank participants of virtual presentations at the University of Konstanz (which was a part of the public lecture series “The Historical Political Economy of Bureaucracy and State Building”) and MPSA’s annual conference.

The Relevance of Modern Bureaucracies

Since the emergence of modern public bureaucracies in the late eighteenth century, these administrative organizations have become indispensable to most polities. They are responsible for essential governmental tasks that help maintain (or achieve) social order and material prosperity, including policy implementation and the supply of public goods. The extent and properties of the latter not only affect states' prospects for economic growth (Evans and Rauch, 1999; Pierskalla et al., 2017) and development (Evans, 1995; Johnson, 1982; Vries, 2019), but also citizens' quality of life (Vogler, 2019a).

While executives and legislatures are the primary decision-making centers regarding countries' *broad* trajectories, no policy can take effect without implementation by the state apparatus (Geddes, 1994, 138; Ingraham, 1995, xxii). Furthermore, bureaucracies often have leeway regarding the concrete design of laws (Huber and Shipan, 2002); and variation in administrative performance affects societies every day (Vogler, 2019b).

Therefore, scholars of historical political economy (HPE) have examined the causes of bureaucratization and bureaucracies' impacts throughout history. Both historically and in the present, significant variation in bureaucratic institutions is observed (Dahlström and La-puente, 2017; Painter and Peters, 2010; Peters, 2021; Vogler, 2019c). The starkest differences in the performance of public administration existed between states that developed modern bureaucracies and those that retained traditional administrations.¹ Bureaucracies were also critical to major historical processes: (1) they shaped and were shaped by industrialization (Skowronek, 1982; Vogler, 2022b); (2) empires frequently implemented administrative systems in colonies (Eisenstadt, 1993; Mattingly, 2017); (3) states' military capacities often partly depended on efficient bureaucratic organization (Tilly, 1990);² and (4) governments' ability to promote economic growth has been closely tied to public services (cf. Baum and Lake, 2003; Besley and Persson, 2009).

The emergence of modern bureaucracies, which primarily took place in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was only *one* step in the overall development of modern states—a

¹I use the term “bureaucracy” to refer to *modern public bureaucracies*. Other kinds of systems are labeled “(public) administrations.” As elaborated upon later, some administrative systems may be classified as “proto-bureaucratic” if they partly meet the criteria of modern bureaucratic organization. Finally, the term “administrative state” is more commonly applied to *fully modern* bureaucracies and less commonly used when describing premodern forms of public administration.

²On the related topic of military (state) capacity, see also Hendrix (2010).

centuries-long process that began in the medieval period. “Modern states” are political entities led by a central government with an effective monopoly on violence within a defined territory. Their development began in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when England and France established central fiscal and judicial institutions (Strayer, 1970).³ In the early-modern period, states also created standing armies (Kennedy, 1988; Parrott, 2010; Tilly, 1990) and provided internal security and economic standards that reduced transaction costs (Olson, 1993; Spruyt, 1996).⁴ The creation of additional ministries and mutual international recognition were further key developments (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996, 72–73). Yet the emergence of modern bureaucracies only began in the late eighteenth century, initially only affected a few countries, and was most visible in the military domain (Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975; Hintze, 1975; Kennedy, 1988, 75–76; Mann, 1993, chaps. 11–13; Vries, 2002, 106–107).⁵

What Is a “Bureaucracy”?

Definition of Modern Public Bureaucracy

A “modern public bureaucracy” is an (internally hierarchical) administrative organization that is subordinated to the government⁶ and has the following features:

1. a strict separation of offices and officeholders (implying no private possession of offices);
2. recruitment procedures that emphasize relevant skills and ensure that officeholders have at least minimal competence (applicable to the vast majority of positions);
3. a written set of rules and regulations that establish standards for official conduct;
4. stable salaries (and salary progression) that are primarily—though not exclusively—determined by rank within the organization; and
5. administrators have only limited discretion in their work routines and bureaucratic

³On the importance of fiscal institutions, see Fischer and Lundgreen (1975, 458). Moreover, on the influence of the medieval church on state development, see Grzymala-Busse (2020).

⁴On the relevance of transaction costs, see also North (1990).

⁵For comparisons of early public administrations, see Vries (2002, 104–109), Fischer and Lundgreen (1975), Lapuente Gine (2006), and Finer (1997) (including subsequent volumes).

⁶This term mainly refers to executives, but legislatures often also have influence on bureaucratic operations and personnel.

operations primarily follow political goals⁷ or legal principles rather than goals of economic efficiency or service orientation.⁸

We may think of administrations that only partly meet criteria 1 to 4 as “proto-modern bureaucracies.”⁹

While the aforementioned features primarily refer to *internal* bureaucratic organization, an auxiliary *output* criterion¹⁰ may be that “modern” bureaucracies must be capable of addressing the fundamental service needs of industrialized (or postindustrial) societies or economies (including the provision of infrastructure, education, and healthcare) and of managing complex militaries and police forces.¹¹

Modern public bureaucracies gradually became the dominant form of administrative organization beginning in the 1850s, and this superiority lasted at least until the 1980s (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996; Silberman, 1993; Skowronek, 1982; Vogler, 2019c). Prior to 1850, only a few countries had adopted them (Mann, 1993, chap. 13; Vries, 2002, 106–107), and in the 1980s, bureaucracy was challenged by “new public management.”

Distinction from Other Forms of Public Administrative Organization

The first three characteristics just mentioned are key to distinguishing modern bureaucracies from *previous* forms of administration. Premodern administrations typically did not have a clear separation of office and officeholder. Instead, positions often were private property, inherited within families, given to powerful ecclesiastical representatives, or awarded based on personal or political loyalty (Ertman, 1997; Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975; Raadschelders

⁷For instance, such goals could be comprehensive public service access or the maintenance of an authoritarian regime.

⁸Several of these characteristics have similarities with Weber’s (1978) characterization of modern bureaucracies (Weber, 1978, 220–221, chap. 11). Nevertheless, as elaborated upon later, there are important differences between these two definitions. Furthermore, Painter and Peters (2010, 8) also make a similar distinction between political/legal goals and efficiency/effectiveness principles.

⁹Ertman also uses this term (e.g., 1997, 5–9). Moreover, for a minimalist definition of bureaucracy with broader historical applicability, see Crooks and Parsons (2016, 17–18).

¹⁰These criteria are not part of the “core definition” of modern bureaucracy because we may want to treat *outputs* both conceptually and empirically separately.

¹¹These forces are critical, respectively, to defending a state’s *external* sovereignty and maintaining its *internal* monopoly on violence.

and Rutgers, 1996).¹² These practices allowed for the abuse of offices and implied the absence of procedures that ensure officials' competence. Although recruitment in many modern bureaucracies was and is influenced by applicants' socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity, most of their hiring procedures do require a certain level of competence. Finally, in premodern administrations, standards of conduct were loose, often based on local custom, and violations were not systematically punished.

Moreover, the last two features discussed in the previous section distinguish bureaucracies from recent forms of public administration. Although bureaucracies still remain predominant, there has been a partial reorientation toward incentive-based payment schemes and the goal of economic efficiency (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).¹³

Comparison to Max Weber's Perspective

In some respects, my definition deviates from Max Weber's prominent characterization of bureaucracies. To Weber (1978, 220–221, chap. 11), several additional features distinguished the *ideal type* of modern bureaucracies from “patrimonial administration,” including (1) recruitment that is (primarily/exclusively) based on individuals' qualification, (2) strict career paths for all bureaucrats, (3) a complete separation from politics, and (4) clearly delineated and exclusive spheres of competence for officials and agencies.¹⁴

The problem with using a definition derived from Weber's work is that the vast majority of historical and contemporary administrations would not satisfy these criteria.¹⁵ To Weber, too, “ideal types” were *abstractions* of reality that cannot be fully observed in practice (Fry and Raadschelders, 2022, chap. 1; Sager and Rosser, 2021), which underscores the desirability of a definition that is applicable to (historical) real-world bureaucracies, such as the one developed in this chapter.

¹²Weber (1978) differentiates between “patrimonial” and “bureaucratic-legal” administration. Moreover, for a detailed analysis of the historical example of France, see Sasaki (2021).

¹³Political and efficiency goals are often contradictory. For instance, a political (equity) goal may be to supply public services even to remote villages and towns, but this practice could be considered too costly (“equity versus efficiency”).

¹⁴This is not an exhaustive list of the essential characteristics of modern bureaucracies according to Weber, but these are the criteria most clearly violated by numerous empirical cases. On Weber's perspective, see also Kiser and Schneider (1994, 188), Mann (1993, 444), and Sager and Rosser (2021).

¹⁵On this subject, see also Ang (2017).

East Asian Administrations and Modern Bureaucracy

It is possible to argue that several historical East Asian administrative systems (such as the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese administrations) represented the first modern bureaucracies (Drechsler, 2013; Drechsler, 2018; Fukuyama, 2011, 19–21, 113–114). Indeed, they partly resembled modern bureaucracies. However, some aspects of their organization make this classification difficult. First, while modern bureaucracies emphasize *practical* skills, these systems often asked applicants to master more abstract cultural/philosophical contents, which could require more than a decade of preparation (Ebrey, 2016, 42; Hong et al., 2021; Jiang and Kung, 2020; Painter and Peters, 2010, 27; Wang, 2022, chap. 7).¹⁶ Additionally, Bell (2016, 223–224) points out that Chinese administrators were generalists with broad political power, whereas modern bureaucrats are specialists with more limited discretion.

Moreover, recruitment and advancement within these administrations often strongly depended on candidates' social networks or family background (Hong et al., 2021; Jiang and Kung, 2020; Paik, 2014; Wang, 2022), and consideration for the Chinese civil service examination necessitated a recommendation from local elites, which introduced patronage into the system (Wang, 2022, chap. 3). The result was widespread corruption and abuses of power, and that the administration was “far less meritocratic than it appeared to be” (Vries, 2002, 107). Also, with respect to the discussed output criteria, the Chinese state may not qualify as its reach was limited (Ebrey, 2016, 47; Finer, 1997, 73–74; Vries, 2002, 109; Vries, 2015).¹⁷

In line with these observations, Raadschelders and Rutgers (1996) suggest that the first modern bureaucracies emerged in Europe, not China.¹⁸ However, because East Asian administrations already mostly satisfied the criteria of (1) formal separation of office and officeholder, (2) comprehensive and consistent regulations for conduct, and (3) stable salaries (e.g., Ebrey, 2016, 37–42, 46), we may categorize them as “proto-modern bureaucracies.”

¹⁶Importantly, there were also other, more practically oriented examinations. For details on Korean examinations, see Paik (2014, 439–441).

¹⁷This becomes evident in comparison with Japan (Vries, 2019).

¹⁸This also corresponds with Weber's perspective (Drechsler, 2020; Ebrey, 2016, 47; Schluchter, 2014; Weber, 1946; Weber and Gerth, 1951).

Types of Bureaucracies

Beyond the five discussed core features, bureaucracies exhibit substantial organizational variation. This has historically led to *fundamental* differences in (1) policy implementation effectiveness, (2) public service quality, and (3) state–citizen interactions. Thus, understanding these differences allows us to better evaluate the impact of bureaucracies on societies.

Organizational versus Professional Bureaucracies

Silberman (1993) primarily differentiates between two types: (1) *organizational* and (2) *professional* bureaucracies. The former place emphasis on coherent internal career paths and administrative hierarchies. Moreover, the training of civil servants takes place in the organization itself, which results in strong administrative cultures with a shared feeling of loyalty toward the organization. Examples are “Japan, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the Soviet Union” (Silberman, 1993, 12).

The main alternative is professional bureaucracies, which have looser recruitment and promotion systems. Training of bureaucrats often takes place outside of the organization and bureaucrats can introduce external skills through lateral entry. Consequently, these systems’ organizational cultures are less coherent, hierarchies are less pronounced, and career tracks are less stable. Examples include the “United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Switzerland” (Silberman, 1993, 14).

Bureaucracies with Integrated versus Separated Career Tracks

Dahlström and Lapuente (2017) develop four categories of bureaucracies along two dimensions. The first dimension of *open* versus *closed* bureaucracies is similar to Silberman’s categorization. Open systems have hiring practices similar to the private sector (including job interviews). Closed systems require applicants to take specialized examinations and provide special employment protections.

Importantly, Dahlström and Lapuente place greater emphasis on the second dimension: *integrated* versus *separated* career tracks for politicians and bureaucrats. In integrated systems, there is significant overlap in the careers of these groups. In separated systems, they have much sharper distinctions, which incentivizes them to monitor each other. Such mutual

Table 1: Typology by Dahlström and Lapuente

	Open Bureaucratic Systems	Closed Bureaucratic Systems
Integrated Career Tracks	Patronage system	Corporatist system
Separated Career Tracks	Managerial system	Autonomous system

elite monitoring has multiple beneficial consequences for governance, which includes fewer opportunities for corruption.

Four categories of bureaucracies emerge (Dahlström and Lapuente, 2017, 38) (see Table 1). The first type—open and integrated—is the “patronage bureaucratic system” (historical party machines in the United States, Western European public administrations prior to the nineteenth century, developing countries in the present day). The second type—closed and integrated—is labeled the “corporatist bureaucratic system” (France, Spain, Italy, and Japan). The third type of system—open and separated—is a “managerial bureaucratic system” (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Sweden). Finally, the fourth type—closed and separated—is labeled an “autonomous bureaucratic system” (Germany and South Korea).

Political Control and Meritocracy

Vogler (2019c, chap. 2) provides a typology focused on Europe and North America. He differentiates between two continuous dimensions: (1) the level of political control (through appointments and dismissals of *upper-level* bureaucrats¹⁹) and (2) the level of meritocracy in recruitment (the extent to which applicants’ qualifications matter²⁰). There is a complex interplay between these dimensions. While they are substantively different, they are not fully orthogonal.

Based on this typology, three kinds of systems are observed: Some systems, such as Italy’s, combine high levels of political control with low-meritocracy recruitment. On the other extreme, some systems, such as the Netherlands’, combine few political appointments

¹⁹Although administrative law and procedures are essential for the political control of bureaucracies (McCubbins et al., 1987), personnel appointments are possibly even more critical because they allow politicians to fill leading positions with loyalists (Lewis, 2010; Wood and Waterman, 1991), which has major implications for political outcomes and bureaucratic effectiveness (see Wood and Lewis, 2017), among others.

²⁰The effects of meritocratic recruitment on the efficiency and corruptibility of bureaucracies have been well documented (Dahlström et al., 2012; Evans and Rauch, 1999; Nistotskaya and Cingolani, 2016). Crucially, political appointments are only *one* way to undermine meritocracy (that applies mainly to bureaucrats in leading positions). In addition, many bureaucracies have socially selective recruitment, which also undermines meritocracy.

with high levels of meritocracy in recruitment. Finally, a third type of (hybrid) bureaucratic system, such as in the United States, combines high degrees of control at the upper levels with relatively high meritocratic recruitment standards.

Families of Administrative Traditions

Painter and Peters (2010) differentiate between nine *administrative traditions* that entail both organizational features and bureaucratic culture: (1) Anglo-American, (2) Napoleonic, (3) Germanic, (4) Scandinavian, (5) Latin American, (6) Postcolonial South Asian and African, (7) East Asian, (8) Soviet, and (9) Islamic. Since this chapter has already covered Western systems extensively, I provide brief illustrations of three non-Western traditions.²¹

Latin American administrations, especially in former Spanish colonies, were historically characterized by strict hierarchies and inflexibility. Therefore, once these states gained independence, they engaged in comprehensive administrative reforms. Yet the newly emerging formalism on the surface merely hid deeply entrenched patronage recruitment, corruption, and the imperfect implementation of regulations (Painter and Peters, 2010, 23–24).

In East Asia, many countries had administrations that reflected some of the principles of modern bureaucracies long before the arrival of European colonial powers, with Confucianism being an essential influence. Colonial powers then shaped these systems through imposed institutions, which led to a combination of traditional and imported principles (Painter and Peters, 2010, 25–27).

Finally, in Soviet systems, communist parties played a key role. Bureaucracies were either subordinated in hierarchical relationships or could even practically fuse with them. As a result, adherence to official ideology and uncritical deference to superiors were often key to bureaucrats' career success. Nevertheless, Soviet systems, like other modern bureaucracies, generally required at least minimal competence (Painter and Peters, 2010, 27–28).

²¹For a critical perspective on this categorization of administrative traditions, see Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot (2015, 432–435). Also, for an updated perspective on administrative traditions, see Peters (2021).

Additional Dimensions of Organizational Differentiation

Four further organizational distinctions of bureaucracies are noteworthy. First, [Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci \(2017\)](#) differentiate between low- and high-capacity bureaucracies.²² Low-capacity systems are organizationally unable to comprehensively deliver public services, which spurs demand for clientelistic exchange between voters and politicians. Also, [Huber and Shipan \(2002\)](#) show that administrative systems vary widely in the extent to which they allow for bureaucratic discretion in the implementation of laws, with some allowing for significant leeway, while others severely restrict bureaucrats.²³

Moreover, [Gingerich \(2013\)](#) and [Bersch et al. \(2017\)](#) highlight substantial interagency variation in organization and capacity, which underscores the utility of disaggregated analysis. Finally, the existence of another type of “hybrid” (proto-)bureaucratic system is discussed by [Brierley \(2021\)](#), who identifies a distinct combination of meritocratic recruitment for leading positions with patronage recruitment for lower positions.

The Historical Emergence of Bureaucracies

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Prussia and Austria created the first modern bureaucracies. Military defeats and unsustainable war-related expenditures were the main reason for the introduction of wide-ranging changes to these countries’ administrations, including (1) the separation of office and officeholder, (2) the introduction of salaries, (3) comprehensive rules, (4) protections from arbitrary dismissal, and (5) more rigorous recruitment procedures that ensured officeholders’ (minimal) competence ([Deak, 2015](#), esp. 9–17; [Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975](#), esp. 516; [Hochedlinger, 2003](#); [Judson, 2016](#); [Kann, 1974](#); [Kiser and Schneider, 1994](#); [Mann, 1993](#), chaps. 12–13; [Raphael, 2000](#), 53–61; [Unruh, 1977](#), 26–28; [Wunder, 1986](#), 21–22; [Vogler, 2019b](#); [Vogler, 2022a](#)).²⁴

While many European states had already developed (proto-)bureaucratic structures in

²²This distinction is more closely related to the quality of bureaucratic outputs than other classifications.

²³The character of delegation is also directly related to the important topic of “information asymmetries” between political principals and bureaucratic agents ([Bertelli, 2012](#); [Gailmard and Patty, 2012a](#); [Lewis, 2003](#); [McCubbins et al., 1987](#)). On the related topic of independent regulatory agencies, see also [Gilardi \(2009\)](#).

²⁴Importantly, the argument that Prussia previously already had a “bureaucratic” form of tax apparatus is rejected by [Kiser and Schneider \(1994\)](#), who provide a comprehensive overview of Prussian tax collection prior to 1794/1806. Furthermore, [Sasaki \(2021\)](#) provides an analysis of proto-bureaucratic institutions (in the form of “Intendancy”) in France prior to 1800.

the military domain before 1800 (Hintze, 1975; Mann, 1993, chaps. 11–12; Kennedy, 1988, 75–76), the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were crucial for the emergence of modern bureaucracies for four reasons (Carpenter, 2001; Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975; Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996; Silberman, 1993; Vogler, 2019c). First, bureaucracies (with all five institutional features discussed previously) became the dominant form of administrative organization among the great powers (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Vogler, 2019c).²⁵ Second, bureaucracies massively increased the degree of intervention in society and the supply of public services (Ansell and Lindvall, 2020; Mann, 1993, chaps. 13–14). Third (and partly as a consequence), their size and public spending on their activities grew *significantly* (Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975, esp. 462–463; Mitchell, 2022). Fourth, they became indispensable to imperialism (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Vogler, 2019b; Vogler, 2022c).

In this period, three trends caused the emergence of bureaucracies:

- **External military pressures.** Even before modern bureaucracies emerged, warfare was typically associated with a growth in the state’s (military) administrative apparatus and significant fiscal burdens (Besley and Persson, 2009; Hintze, 1975, esp. 201; Kennedy, 1988, esp. 70–72, 75–86; Mann, 1993, chaps. 11–12; Tilly, 1990; Vogler, 2022c). As observed in Prussia and Austria, such massive expenditures created pressure to reform the state apparatus with the goal of increasing its efficiency and competence (“rationalization”).
- **Increasing socioeconomic complexity.** Industrialization made economies and societies much more complex and increased the demand for public services, especially security, education, social insurance, and infrastructure (Ansell and Lindvall, 2020; Mann, 1993, chaps. 11–14; Potter and Vogler, 2021; Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996, 86; Saylor, 2014; Skowronek, 1982; Vogler, 2022b).²⁶ Thus, governments created more competent administrations capable of delivering these services. Furthermore, effective taxation of increasingly complex socioeconomic structures often also required additional bureaucratic capacity, with more substantial capacity increases in early industrializing states (see Beramendi et al., 2019).²⁷ (Importantly, the process described here—that is, bureaucratization due to increases in socioeconomic complexity—is not merely a historical phenomenon. As societies keep growing more complex, we also witness further growth of the administrative state.)

²⁵This also included Britain, an imperial state that not only imposed administrative systems on many colonies, but which has been an essential political-administrative model for numerous countries (Irigoin and Gafe, 2008, 173; Patapan et al., 2005).

²⁶For a similar argument that is applied to preindustrial Prussia, see Kiser and Schneider (1994, 200–201). Furthermore, for a critical perspective on this theory, see Higgs (1987, chap. 1).

²⁷On the general relevance of standardized or uniform tax systems for the rise of effective states in Europe, see Dincecco (2015).

- **Imperialism (and threat of imperial occupation).** Already before industrialization, large colonial administrations were created by imperial centers (see, e.g., [McClellan and Regourd, 2011](#)). When imperial expansion intensified in the nineteenth century ([Vogler, 2022c](#)), major powers introduced a variety of administrative institutions to colonies ([Buzan and Lawson, 2015](#), esp. 130–138).²⁸ In this process, imperial centers also improved the capacities of *domestic* bureaucracies to manage extensive overseas territories. (In this respect, however, [Cornell and Svensson \(2022\)](#) find only very limited evidence for the traditional claim that domestic British civil service reforms were inspired by the Indian Civil Service.) Additionally, similar to military competition, pressure resulting from a credible *threat* of imperial domination could result in administrative reforms in targeted polities, such as Japan or Siam ([Paik and Vechbanyongratana, 2019](#)). Japan later became an imperial power itself and imposed state building on others ([Kohli, 2004](#), chap. 1; [Matsuzaki, 2019](#); [Mattingly, 2017](#)).

Although these three factors explain the broader emergence of modern bureaucracies, they generally do not suffice to explain variation in bureaucratic organization, which is the subject of the next section.

Factors That Shaped Bureaucratic Institutions

While [Weber's \(1978\)](#) classical perspective—that economic development and social progress automatically lead to the establishment of modern bureaucracies—does not leave sufficient space to explain the significant institutional *variation* we observe across (historical) bureaucracies ([Mann, 1993](#), 359; [Vogler, 2019a](#), 100–101), a multitude of theories aim to explain this divergence.

First, with respect to politically autonomous countries, there are intense debates regarding *which* domestic factor shaped early bureaucracies. Candidates include (1) differences in socioeconomic development, (2) macro-political and macro-legal circumstances, (3) interest groups and parties,²⁹ and (4) sociocultural determinants. Second, with respect to countries under foreign rule, external factors had a decisive influence on bureaucratic organization.

Domestic Factors

In terms of socioeconomic developments, [Skowronek \(1982\)](#) suggests that industrialization and urbanization in nineteenth-century America necessitated a strong and centralized ad-

²⁸As the example of Poland shows, this also applied to Europe ([Vogler, 2019b](#)).

²⁹For an overview of how political parties shaped post-communist states, see [Grzymala-Busse \(2007\)](#).

ministrative state. As new social groups emerged and conflicts between them arose, the state needed the capacity to intervene. Such intervention was initially difficult because the United States did not yet have a modern bureaucracy. Instead, America’s patronage-ridden state was considered to be a (premodern) “spoils system” (Ingraham, 1995, 20–25; Shefter, 1994, chap. 3; Silberman, 1993, 243–249; Van Riper, 1958, chap. 3).³⁰

Moreover, Johnson and Libecap (1994) argue that significant growth of this administrative state contributed to the infeasibility of maintaining an inefficient patronage recruitment system. In 1883, Congress passed the Pendleton Act that brought America significantly closer to a modern bureaucracy by introducing merit recruitment for some bureaucrats (Hoogenboom, 1968; Theriault, 2003; Van Riper, 1958, chap. 5; Vogler, 2019c, 61–65). Protection from dismissal allowed those bureaucrats to develop domain-specific expertise, increasing the bureaucracy’s overall effectiveness (Gailmard and Patty, 2012b).³¹

Another contribution that considers the impact of socioeconomic development on the state is from Kurtz (2013) who suggests that the mobility of workers in Latin America was a key factor that influenced local elites’ ability to resist centralized state-building processes. Similarly, Garfias and Sellars (2021) argue that the weakening of elites as intermediaries following demographic collapse allowed for the strengthening of central bureaucratic institutions in colonial Mexico.³²

In terms of macro-political factors, Silberman (1993) posits that “uncertainty about leadership succession” in the nineteenth century was essential to bureaucratic development: In high-uncertainty settings, organizational bureaucracies reduced risks associated with governing and provided more stability. However, in low-uncertainty settings, political elites were not as dependent on administrations’ organizational coherence, which led to professional bureaucracies.

With respect to the American states, Ting et al. (2013) argue that incumbent governments that anticipated electoral defeat had incentives to insulate bureaucracies from political pressure (to protect their own appointees). Similarly, Ruhil and Camões (2003) find that po-

³⁰High politicization through patronage appointments is generally considered to weaken bureaucratic competence (Gallo and Lewis, 2012; Gilmour and Lewis, 2006; Hollibaugh et al., 2014; Lewis, 2009; Lewis, 2010; Wood and Lewis, 2017).

³¹However, initially only a *minority* of bureaucrats were recruited through the merit system. It took several more presidencies for merit recruitment to cover a majority of bureaucrats (Ingraham, 1995, chap. 3).

³²See also Garfias and Sellars (2022) in this volume.

litical competitiveness and the secret ballot influenced the adoption of merit recruitment. Alternatively, [Theriault \(2003\)](#) argues that general political pressure from constituents caused administrative reform.

Another macro-political argument comes from [Waldner \(1999\)](#), who emphasizes elite conflict and the inclusion of popular classes in determining bureaucratic structures in late-developing countries. In cases with significant intraelite conflicts, political leaders needed to build broader (cross-class) coalitions to achieve a stable administration. Thus, they created bureaucratic capacity for channeling resources into welfare measures, which resulted in more politicized administrations, designed to maintain economic interventionism.³³

An example of an interest-group perspective is [Vogler \(2019c, chap. 2\)](#), who suggests that three social groups were crucial for the institutional design of early bureaucracies. First, traditional elites sought to maintain a bureaucracy under the control of nondemocratic institutions and with socially selective recruitment. Second, the entrepreneurial and professional middle classes preferred a competent bureaucracy capable of delivering high-quality public services, which required meritocratic recruitment. Additionally, they sought to minimize political influence to shield the bureaucracy from landed-elite or working-class manipulation. Finally, the urban working class preferred broad access to public sector jobs, but its members lacked higher education, so they were against academic recruitment standards. With respect to political control, workers' representatives sought maximum control through democratic institutions. Given these diverging preferences, [Vogler](#) argues that these groups' relative political power was crucial to bureaucracies' institutional design.

[Carpenter \(2001\)](#) also embraces an interest-group perspective and finds that the early structures of American bureaucracy were heavily influenced by mid-level bureaucrats. Through substantial expertise, the construction of political networks, and an achievement-oriented administrative culture, those mid-level bureaucrats were sometimes able to establish their agencies as "autonomous" actors with the power to set political agendas.

In the postbellum American South, too, interest groups shaped bureaucracies. [Suryanarayan and White \(2021\)](#) find that coalitions of (White) elites weakened administrative capacity to prevent economic redistribution to former slaves. Further elite-centered arguments regarding the development of bureaucratic capacity (that emphasize conflicts among

³³[Soifer \(2015\)](#) makes a related argument about institutional capture, arguing that the involvement of local elites in Latin American bureaucracies often prevented effective state-building.

elites, however) have been made by [Beramendi et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Garfias \(2018\)](#).

In political economy, there are only a few sociocultural explanations for variation in bureaucracies. For example, in a literature survey, [Johnson and Koyama \(2017\)](#) find that existing human capital and ethnolinguistic fractionalization likely influence the development of state capacity.³⁴ Importantly, however, [Pardelli and Kustov \(2022\)](#) highlight the possibility of endogeneity in the relationship of ethnic demography and public goods provision through bureaucracies.

In addition to perspectives that rely on the analysis of a single factor, several “hybrid” frameworks combine multiple types of explanations. For instance, with a focus on US states, [Potter and Vogler \(2021\)](#) argue that, as socioeconomic systems became more complex, more diverse economic elites pushed for the creation of competent, professional, and *independent* bureaucracies. Bureaucratic independence meant an insurance mechanism against the possibility of other elites fundamentally changing administrative intervention in society.

Another hybrid theory is developed by [Saylor \(2014\)](#) who posits that historical commodity booms sometimes led to the expansion of bureaucratic capacity through increased demand for public goods provision. However, this effect depended on interest-group coalitions as some (political) actors found it in their interest to block state expansion.

Finally, [Soifer \(2015\)](#) provides a framework that combines several of the aforementioned factors, contending that the discrete choices of political leaders/elites (interest groups) matter most. But he also suggests that those choices are based on elites’ material circumstances—especially urbanization (socioeconomic development)—as well as ideology (a sociocultural determinant).

External Factors

As detailed earlier, military competition in Europe spurred administrative reforms, even prior to the emergence of modern bureaucracies ([Tilly, 1990](#)). Connecting to this perspective, [Centeno \(2002\)](#) argues that the relative *absence* of war in South America meant that states did not have strong incentives for centralization and bureaucratization.³⁵ Similarly, [Herbst \(2014\)](#) suggests that Africa’s geography combined with low population densities made the formation of territorial states unlikely; [Queralt \(2019\)](#) finds that participation in wars only

³⁴See also [Koyama \(2022\)](#) in this volume.

³⁵See also [Kurtz \(2013\)](#) and [Saylor \(2014\)](#).

strengthened states' fiscal capacity if it was financed through taxation, not loans. Thus, the self-reinforcing dynamics of war-making and administrative development were not realized in all world regions.

However, [Schenoni \(2021\)](#) argues that Latin American wars sometimes *did* shape state-building because defeat enabled peripheral elites (with the goal of replacing incumbents) to weaken the state apparatus, including the bureaucracy. Conversely, military victories allowed incumbent elites to strengthen their dominant position by consolidating the state.

Yet even *persistent* presence of external military pressure tells us little about historical *divergence* in bureaucratic institutions. An external factor that was more decisive in determining bureaucracies' *specific* institutional design was imperialism. The two most important imperial powers that sought to implement (aspects of) their administrative and legal systems in their colonies were France and Britain ([La Porta et al., 1997](#)). The French bureaucracy was highly regulated, with strict internal career paths and standardized examinations ([Silberman, 1993](#), chaps. 4–5). The British civil service also introduced competitive examinations in the nineteenth century, but access remained socially selective, and political control decreased over time ([Vogler, 2019c](#), 65–68).

Additionally, empires such as Austria, Prussia, and Russia occupied large parts of Central and (South)Eastern Europe, often implementing their own administrative institutions ([Becker et al., 2016](#)). Poland serves as a good example: Prussia and Austria imposed institutions that were close to modern bureaucracies. Russia, however, imposed a corrupt and inefficient administration. These stark differences in bureaucratic organization created fundamentally different equilibria of state–citizen interactions, which affected administrative performance and recruitment in the long run ([Vogler, 2019b](#)).

Moreover, Romania is a good case to illustrate the consequences of information asymmetries between imperial centers and local populations. When unable or unwilling to delegate tasks to local elites, empires often experienced difficulties with bureaucratic control. Combined with the underfinancing of administrations, local populations frequently found ways to resist against external bureaucratic institutions, which thwarted their effectiveness and simultaneously reduced the potential for long-term legacies ([Vogler, 2022a](#)).

Additionally, [Mattingly \(2017\)](#) finds that the historical state-building attempts by the Japanese occupiers of Northeastern China still have long-term effects on the capacity of bureaucracies in terms of public goods provision. He suggests that, although Japan ruled

through brutal and extractive methods, the effectiveness of their administrative institutions generated a variety of positive legacies in bureaucratic organization.

Mazzuca (2021) argues that the external factors that influenced state capacity-building varied over time and across world regions. While European states were historically formed due to war, state formation in Latin America took place as a result of international trade, which generally resulted in lower state capacity and authority.³⁶ Mazzuca then lays out three paths (“port-driven,” “lord-driven,” and “party-driven”) to different state types. Similarly, Buzan and Lawson (2015) suggest that creation of modern bureaucracies (as a key aspect of rational state-building processes) was part of a complex web of global developments in the long nineteenth century.

Finally, external cultural explanations for the character of bureaucratization remain underexplored. But there are noteworthy contributions: Gorski (2003) focuses on the emergence of modern states and attributes importance to Calvinism as a transnational cultural force. Also, Sager et al. (2018) suggest that the transnational dissemination of ideas regarding administrative reform historically affected bureaucracies.

Path Dependence in Bureaucratic Organization

An analytical perspective of path dependence is useful when analyzing bureaucracies because administrative organizations are known for exhibiting extremely high levels of organizational persistence (Carpenter, 2001; Gimpel’son, 2003; Richards, 2003; Silberman, 1993; Wunder, 1986). “Path dependence” refers to the disproportionate and lasting influence of institutional design at the moment of an organization’s creation, which we may consider a “critical juncture” (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007).³⁷

What are the theoretical reasons behind bureaucratic path dependence? Vogler (2019c, 43–46) identifies four factors:³⁸

1. Bureaucrats often form strong and coherent interest groups. In part because their skills are usually nontransferable to other professions and because they profit from

³⁶On the impact of trade (especially in terms of import substitution policies), on regime type and bureaucratic organization, see also O’Donnell (1973).

³⁷On path dependence, see also Cirone and Pepinsky (2022), Mahoney (2000), and Raadschelders (1998).

³⁸From Mahoney’s (2000) perspective, we may categorize the first factor as a “power” explanation and the second one as a “functional” or “utilitarian” explanation. Moreover, the fourth factor may be viewed as the equilibrium of a coordination game (cf. David, 1994).

organizational autonomy (low transparency), they often reject administrative reform (see [Asatryan et al., 2017](#); [Vogler, 2019c](#)).

2. Governments fundamentally depend on bureaucracies to implement policies, which incentivizes even revolutionary governments to leave the state apparatus intact to exercise political power.
3. Administrative culture is often highly persistent over time.
4. There can be self-reinforcing equilibria in state–citizen interactions, in which citizens’ expectations toward and views of bureaucracy are reinforced by the actual behavior of bureaucrats (see [Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci, 2017](#); [Vogler, 2019b](#)). For example, in contexts where corruption is common, the behavior of public officials and the expectations of citizens are typically aligned in a way that perpetuates corrupt practices ([Corbacho et al., 2016](#)).

Usually, at least one of these factors constitutes bureaucratic path dependence in any specific context. However, while fundamental structures rarely change, through multifaceted interactions with their environment, bureaucracies still change on the margins ([Vogler, 2019a](#)).

How Bureaucracies Historically Influenced Economies, Societies, and Politics

The effect of bureaucracies on economies and societies is manifold. On one hand, governments can use bureaucracies to provide public goods and implement growth-enhancing policies (cf. [Besley and Persson, 2009](#); [Hanson, 2014](#); [Kohli, 2004](#)). On the other hand, if elites pursue economically harmful policies, “effective” bureaucracies could be detrimental to growth ([Cornell et al., 2020](#); [Johnson and Koyama, 2017](#), 11). Bureaucracies also represent potential tools of repression, used by authoritarian governments to harm or even murder groups in society (cf. [Aaskoven and Nyrup, 2021](#); [Hilberg et al., 2019](#)).

Scholars of political economy have investigated in detail the historical effects of bureaucracies on development. For instance, [Johnson \(1982\)](#) examined the role of the Japanese central bureaucracy in coordinating the country’s economic policy and found that it was successful at implementing an aggressive export-oriented growth strategy. Furthermore, [Vries \(2015\);\(2019\)](#) details how historical administrative capacity was essential to British and Japanese development, respectively. Also, [Pierskalla et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Hough and Grier](#)

(2015) suggest that exposure to centralized and effective state authority (which is directly linked to administrative capacity) has positive effects on economic development.

Moreover, [Evans \(1995\)](#) suggests that public administrations historically achieved maximum economic growth when they were embedded in society (representing broad interests), but also autonomous (not captured by special interests). Similarly, [Evans and Rauch \(1999\)](#) find a positive effect on growth of meritocratic recruitment and bureaucratic career paths. They suggest that such “Weberian” institutions make bureaucrats less susceptible to corruption and promote an *esprit de corps* that improves bureaucratic performance and thus the quality of public goods.³⁹ However, the perspective that bureaucracies were key contributors to economic growth throughout history is challenged by [Cornell et al. \(2020\)](#) who find a positive but mostly insignificant effect.⁴⁰

With respect to the effects of imperial bureaucracies, [Lee and Schultz \(2012\)](#) compare indirect British rule with the imposition of French administrative institutions in Cameroon and find that the latter had negative effects on the quality of public goods. Moreover, while the Spanish colonial administration in the Americas did not meet all the criteria of modern bureaucracy, it did have multifaceted economic effects on colonies: [Irigoin and Grafe \(2008\)](#) argue that it had an important *redistributive* function. Based on a complex fiscal bargaining process between the crown, local officials, and elites, a system of fiscal redistribution emerged.

Although modern public bureaucracies are technically “subordinated” to the government, their performance can also have substantial effects on politics ([Yazaki, 2018](#)). Specifically, from the perspective of [Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci \(2017\)](#), a complex interactive equilibrium exists between political strategies and state capacity. Low-capacity bureaucratic systems amplify clientelistic political exchange as public services remain in poor condition.

Moreover, [Stasavage \(2020\)](#) argues that the capacity of premodern central administrations was essential to the prospects for democracy. Where central administrations were powerful, such as in China, rulers did not need the consent of the governed to collect taxes. This allowed authoritarian political structures to persist. Only in systems that had weak central administrative capacity did rulers need to govern with the consent of other societal actors, which laid the foundations for more collaborative forms of government.

The institutions of public bureaucracy may also have significant influence on other aspects

³⁹See also [Rauch \(1995\)](#).

⁴⁰Similarly, [Gjerløw et al. \(2021\)](#) challenge the argument that the sequence of building state capacity and democratization matters for development.

of state-building. For instance, [Charron et al. \(2012\)](#) suggest that preexisting administrative structures shaped the development of legal systems, arguing that administrations with more standardized forms of recruitment were historically more likely to represent a strong check on the ruler, which benefited the emergence of robust legal systems. Additionally, the bureaucratic (infrastructural) capacity of central versus regional political entities may have influenced whether countries adopted federalism ([Ziblatt, 2008](#)).

Furthermore, scholars have investigated the effects of public goods on the ability of citizens to engage with the state. For instance, [Zhang and Lee \(2020\)](#) find that increases in literacy (which are typically the result of more extensive public education) lead to improvements in state—society interactions. Specifically, [Zhang and Lee \(2020\)](#) observe that a decrease in transaction costs through easier access to state services improves the ability of citizens to interact with the bureaucracy and make use of existing laws and regulations.

On the flip side, authoritarian governments may use public administration to manipulate society through education (see [Paglayan, 2022](#)), propaganda, or repression. Even when they are unable to fundamentally alter citizens’ beliefs, exposure to the state apparatus can “inform” citizens about authoritarian elite preferences and shape their behavior (see [de Juan et al., 2021](#)).

Historical public administrations outside Europe, which generally did not qualify as *modern* bureaucracies, typically had a very uneven impact on societies due to the widespread delegation of tasks to agents (such as tax farmers) and the low state capacity in rural areas. For instance, both in the Ottoman Empire and in India, the state delegated tax collection to privately owned offices, which then constituted at most an *indirect* influence on society ([Vries, 2002](#), 104–109). Similarly, the practice of selling offices may have enabled unqualified or predatory individuals to take on high-level positions in the Spanish Empire, which led to dramatic cross-regional variation in socioeconomic outcomes ([Guardado, 2018](#)).

Yet the historical civil service exam of China’s proto-modern bureaucracy might still have a positive long-term effect on society because it instilled a “deep respect for learning” among local elites ([Chen et al., 2020](#), 2030–2031). Through cultural transmission, social capital, and educational institutions, this respect was handed down through several generations and manifests itself in contemporary educational outcomes across China ([Chen et al., 2020](#)).⁴¹

⁴¹Yet China’s experience with the civil service exam did not lead to an appreciation of “bureaucratism.” Instead, the Communist Party has rejected this concept ([Ding and Thompson-Brusstar, 2021](#)).

Conclusion

Modern public bureaucracies are central to both the task of governing and to major historical processes like imperialism, industrialization, and interstate warfare. Since the eighteenth century they have gradually become an indispensable part of most polities.

While existing studies have delivered crucial insights, enormous room for further contributions remains. Most importantly, we still have much to learn about historical administrations and (proto-)bureaucracies in Africa, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific region, which differ from Western ones in important respects (cf. [Pepinsky et al., 2017](#); [Slater, 2008](#); [Thies, 2007](#)). Also, in these regions, *precolonial* structures likely had a lasting effect, even if modern bureaucracies were introduced later (cf. [Wilfahrt, 2018](#)).

Furthermore, we know a great deal about the dynamics of principal-agent relationships between governments and bureaucracies ([Bertelli, 2012](#), chap. 2; [Gailmard and Patty, 2012a](#); [Lewis, 2003](#); [McCubbins et al., 1987](#); [Toral, 2022](#)), but we still need to explore them more extensively from a *historical* perspective. For instance, [Workman \(2015\)](#) and [Potter \(2019\)](#) highlight the rule-making power of bureaucrats, which could be extended to the period prior to the twentieth century. Similarly, [Lee's \(2020\)](#) insights regarding how foreign states can weaken domestic administrative structures and [Ding's \(2020\)](#) theory about “performative governance” could be applied to historical contexts. Finally, the relationship of bureaucracies and the territorial dimension of state-building and state effectiveness has recently found increased attention ([McDonnell, 2020](#); [Vogler, 2019b](#)), but this issue could be explored further, especially from a historical perspective (see [Braun and Kienitz, 2022](#)).

All in all, historical political economy has gained critical insights into bureaucracies. Yet this field is just at its inception. Many future studies will help us more comprehensively understand the origins, character, and impacts of bureaucracies throughout history.

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