

Bureaucracy and Service Delivery*

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Abstract

This essay reviews the literature on the politics of bureaucracy in the developing world, with a focus on service delivery and bureaucratic performance. We survey classic topics and themes such as the developmental state, principal-agent relations, and the efficient grease hypothesis, and link them to new research findings in political science, sociology, and economics. We identify the concept of *embeddedness* as an important yet still underexplored framework that cuts across disciplines and which may be used to understand bureaucratic performance and service delivery. Looking forward, we outline a framework for conceptualizing bureaucratic action by exploiting variation across time, space, task, and client, and identify promising areas for further research on the bureaucrat-citizen encounter in developing countries.

KEYWORDS: embeddedness, civil servants, street-level bureaucrats, developmental state, principal-agent relations

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1 Introduction

Scholars of comparative politics have made impressive strides in understanding political institutions, voting, and political participation in developing countries. But most of politics is not electoral politics, and the vast majority of experiences that citizens have with the state are not electoral in nature. The face of politics for most citizens, instead, is a bureaucrat. The interactions between citizens and bureaucrats—both the nature of the interaction itself, and the results of that interactions—have consequences for mass political behavior, trust in government, state legitimacy, and also for the functioning of bureaucracies themselves.

Despite the importance of bureaucratic politics and the citizen-bureaucrat encounter in developing countries, most work studying these issues comes from the disciplines of public administration, sociology, and economics. The political science literature that would examine these themes—the political economy of development—has tended to ignore the bureaucracy itself, and instead studied conflict and elections, or focused on macrostructural variables like the quality of property rights, geographic endowments, and the developmental state. The theoretical literature on bureaucracies from *within* political science focuses on principal-agent problems and is pitched at the types of problems and institutional environments that are characteristic of advanced industrial countries. A rich literature on citizen-bureaucrat interactions spells out their consequences for legitimacy, behavior, and citizenship, but focuses overwhelmingly on the American and European experiences ([Goodsell 1981](#), [Mettler 1998](#), [Kumlin & Rothstein 2005](#)).

This review outlines a set of problems, questions, and puzzles in the study of the bureaucracy in developing countries, focusing in particular on the politics of service delivery as the key instance of citizen-state interactions. We pay special attention to “street-level bureaucrats” ([Lipsky 1980](#)) in order to motivate our broader conclusion that conceptualizing bureaucracy and service delivery requires attention both to what is being administered and at what level of administration. Moreover, frontline service delivery has become a central

plank in the global development agenda in the past thirty years, as can be seen through the proliferation of social protection, decentralized service delivery, and related programs. This means that understanding the bureaucracy tasked with frontline service delivery is increasingly important for understanding the bureaucracy as a whole. A renewed focus on bureaucracy and service delivery can show how political science is relevant for development policymaking by conceiving of bureaucrats as political agents whose actions have political effects. The study of the bureaucracy in developing countries can also provide new insights into important questions that have long occupied comparative politics, such as the determinants of democratic performance, development, statebuilding, institutional design, and the possibility of programmatic politics in new democracies.

We begin by reviewing existing literature on bureaucratic performance, focusing on the two most prominent areas of research on the bureaucracy: the developmental state and principal-agent models. While both important and useful, neither approach has sufficiently explored bureaucratic politics and the determinants of effective service delivery in developing countries. Developmental state arguments largely ignore the delivery of health care and education and focus on national-level policymaking and coordination. Principal-agent approaches in turn, while often studying civil servants in the health or education sector, often narrowly cast bureaucratic politics as an internal management problem, while ignoring the wider context of citizen-bureaucrat interactions. To further interrogate these shortcomings, we discuss in Section 3 the role of street-level bureaucrats and the concept of embeddedness as central to understanding most accounts of bureaucratic efficacy in developing country contexts. This discussion highlights that, in order to understand bureaucratic performance, we need additional research that carefully considers the specific administrative and political context in which bureaucrats operate. To further this goal, we conclude by offering a framework for conceptualizing bureaucratic action that explores variation by time, space, task, and client. We also discuss a variety of methodological approaches that could be deployed fruitfully to improve our understanding of bureaucratic politics in the developing world.

2 State of the Art on the Politics of the Bureaucracy

2.1 Weber and Wilson

Two figures who occupy a central position in modern work on bureaucracies are Max Weber and James Q. Wilson. Weber's *Economy and Society* (1978) characterizes many of the quintessential features of the ideal-typical bureaucracy: esteem, professionalization, hierarchical organization, task routinization, and the impersonalization of bureaucratic authority. Although Weber considered professional bureaucracies to be essential for modern states, he also recognized that state bureaucracies were political creations with internal politics. Wilson's *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (1991) embeds bureaucracies in their political context, explaining why bureaucracies are so often characterized by red tape and inefficiencies that markets and firms would never tolerate. In his words, "government bureaucracies are more bureaucratic than industrial ones in large part because we—the people and our political representatives—insist that they be" (133). Relevant contemporary literatures that expand upon Weber's and Wilson's insights about bureaucracies and their internal and external politics include the developmental state, good governance, and principal-agent relationships.

2.2 The Developmental State and Quality of Government

The introduction of a relatively professional, meritocratic and efficient administrative structure was a critical factor in the rapid development of East Asia, including Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan (Amsden 1989, Johnson 1982, Wade 1990). Although the exact role the state played in guiding the economy varied across these states, the two distinguishing features of East Asia's developmental bureaucracies were meritocratic recruitment of knowledgeable bureaucrats with network ties to the business community, and the overall coherence of the bureaucracy (Evans 1995).

Networks, often informal, are crucial to bureaucratic coherence and identity and go beyond what meritocracy alone could provide. Although state institutions rely on networks to hire civil servants, meritocratic hiring criteria break patronage links that would otherwise produce incompetent or captured bureaucrats. By maintaining autonomous and close network ties with industrial elites ([Evans 1995](#)), bureaucratic elites could effectively select industries in which to invest, subsidize, and/or protect from competition.

Chalmers Johnson's classic *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982) explicates the developmental state argument using the example of Japan's successful economic model. The presence of a meritocratic and capable bureaucracy enables a "plan-rational" development model that can support economic growth over the long run because the bureaucracy enables coordination among policymakers and the private sector, lumpy investments with uncertain payoffs, and course changes when initial results prove unsatisfying. State institutions helped to obtain the needed capital investment for industry. Bureaucrats rewarded firms that performed well and sanctioned firms that did not meet strict performance standards (see also [Amsden 1989](#)). Although Johnson does not invoke Weber as the foundation for his conception of the bureaucracy, his understanding of the bureaucracy is essentially Weberian (see [Weber 1978](#), especially Ch. 11).

One body of research emerging from Johnson's analysis of Japan has focused on the politics of bureaucratic development to explain how effective and capacious developmental states emerge and how Weberian bureaucracies facilitate development. [Evans \(1995\)](#) finds that effective developmentalist bureaucracies balance autonomy and "embeddedness," enabling them to learn from and collaborate with public and private partners without being captured by their administrative subjects.

Cross-national statistical work has found that a simple measure of "Weberian-ness" predicts economic performance in a sample of developing countries ([Evans & Rauch 1999](#)). Conversely, the absence of a rational legal bureaucracy hinders development ([Evans 1989](#), [Roth 1968](#)). The origins of capable, developmental states are to be found in a political

environment of vulnerability, paired with a lack of economic resources that forces political leaders to invest in state structures that facilitate the delivery of essential public goods and services and economic growth (Doner et al. 2005).¹

The contributors to Woo-Cummings (1999) examine the politics and economics of developmental states, continually returning to the role of bureaucrats and state structures. Kohli (2004) considers structure of political competition to drive bureaucracy and performance, and ties this ultimately to the varieties of colonial experience. These works share several common refrains: (1) all bureaucracies are political, (2) efficacious bureaucracies are never completely insulated from society, but (3) such bureaucracies do not become “mere tools” either of politicians or of private interests. Ineffective bureaucracies, on the other hand, come in many forms—unprofessional bureaucracies cannot carry out their tasks because bureaucrats do not know how, weak bureaucracies are subject to capture by private interests, and predatory bureaucracies consume the seeds of development before they germinate. Subsequent work has measured different bureaucratic characteristics including career stability, professionalization, salary scales, *esprit de corps*, and has used these variables to explain corruption (Dahlströhm et al. 2011) and development (Cingolani et al. 2015).

More recent research in this tradition has focused less on bureaucratic characteristics and more generally on the quality of government—understood as the quality of institutions regulating government selection and replacement, the capacity to formulate and implement sound policy, and the protection of institutions that govern economic and social interactions (Kaufman 2005). Measurement is a central challenge in such research because of the general difficulty of separating indicators of, for example, bureaucratic efficiency from the effects it is supposed to predict (see Kurtz & Schrank 2007). A deeper problem is that bureaucratic structures are both endogenous and highly correlated with other potential political sources

¹This represents a natural link to the related literature on European state-building (Tilly 1985), which has been fruitfully employed to understand the presence (or lack) of strong states in Latin America or Africa (Thies 2005, Herbst 2000).

of economic performance. Identifying the causal effects of bureaucracies—even assuming away the problem of measuring their characteristics—is a hard problem.

Both the developmental state literature and the quality of governance literatures are characterized by a focus on macro-level measures and outcomes. The unit of analysis, typically, is the state. A focus on national bureaucracies is sensible for understanding complex state structures and their effects, specifically because bureaucracies are features of national politics. Case analyses such as [Evans \(1995\)](#) allow for a closer investigation of particular policy choices, and highlight the complexities of bureaucracies in action, but still tend to target national policies and organized public and private interests, with only indirect effects on most citizens. The typical encounter of citizens with a bureaucracy, and the wider context of this interaction, therefore goes unanalyzed. Moreover, while work on the developmental state is useful for understanding the development on national capacity in macroeconomic and industrial policymaking, it rarely engages challenges of service delivery in, e.g., health care or education in the developing world. As such, it only captures one, albeit important, facet of bureaucratic politics and performance.

2.3 Principal-Agent Problems

Quite distinct from the developmental state literature, another large literature addresses the internal operation of bureaucracies and their interaction with elected political officials. In particular, Weber’s view of the bureaucracy as a hierarchical organization with top-down delegation (and monitoring) of tasks to subject matter experts has proven amenable to theoretical investigations within a principal-agent framework. In political science and economics this has become the dominant theoretical lens to understand bureaucracies (for a review, see [Gailmard & Patty 2012](#)).

Classic principal-agent accounts capture the hierarchical interaction between a principal and an agent, e.g., between an elected official and a whole bureaucracy or between a su-

pervisor and a frontline civil servant. In this interaction the principal delegates a task to the agent, who in turn decides how much actual effort to exert. This type of interaction can give rise to agency problems—divergence between the principal’s intended goals and the agent’s actions—via moral hazard and adverse selection (Dixit 2002). The basis of agency problems is the assumption that the agent has a preference schedule that differs from the principal (if they were identical, then the agent would act exactly as the principal desires). This assumption underlies most of the literature that we review here, although later in this section, we entertain the possibility that the agent may intrinsically wish to implement the principal’s policy.

Research on American politics has used the principal agent framework to fruitfully interrogate the interplay between elected principals and bureaucratic agencies (e.g. Whitford 2005, Snyder & Weingast 2000, Moe 1984), illuminating, e.g., the determinants of delegation to independent, discretionary agencies (Huber & Shipan 2002). This work on delegation of crucial policymaking tasks to politically independent agencies has also played a major role in our understanding of central-banking in the developed and developing world (e.g., Adolph 2013, Keefer & Stasavage 2003). But what does this principal-agent perspective tell us about frontline service delivery in developing countries? Principal-agent theories too have become the theoretical bedrock for understanding the poor performance and high absenteeism rates of civil servants tasked with service delivery in developing countries (Duflo et al. 2012, Chaudhury et al. 2006). A large literature on corruption in the public sector also relies heavily on the theoretical scaffolding of the principal-agent framework (Svensson 2005). The principal-agent framework has also been used to offer potential solutions: the design, monitoring, and sanctioning of incentive-compatible contracts that allows principals to induce high effort in agents (Dixit 2002). For example, performance pay contracts can allow principals to induce increased effort by frontline civil servants, like teachers and health care workers. Such incentive schemes, as well as other screening tools, can also be used to affect the recruitment of individuals into the civil service to limit adverse selection problems.

Efforts to limit corruption by civil servants also focus on civil service wages and monitoring technologies employed by principals (e.g., [Olken & Pande 2012](#)).

Increasingly, randomized controlled field trials have been employed to test the effectiveness of performance pay and monitoring schemes in developing countries' public sectors (for a review of performance pay studies, see [Hasnain et al. 2014](#)). Explicit monetary reward and penalty schemes for civil servants can, under very specific conditions, reduce absenteeism, increase effort, and limit corruption (e.g. [Duflo et al. 2012](#), [Olken 2006; 2007](#)). For example, a field experiment by [Khan et al. \(2016\)](#), studying tax inspectors in Pakistan, finds that high-powered financial incentives clearly increased revenue, without decreasing tax payer satisfaction.²

An alternative to explicit performance pay and increased monitoring, rotations and re-assignments of civil servants can also be used to manage principal-agent problems. Rotation places different agents in the same environment, which facilitates monitoring by helping principals distinguish between outcomes due to the nature of the environment and those due to the actions of particular agents. For example, in a private firms setting [Hertzberg et al. \(2010\)](#) find that loan officers were induced to provide more accurate reports due to rotations. States also use rotation to improve efficiency in challenging environments. In premodern Europe, the central government rotated the most effective tax collectors to areas in which collection was inefficient ([Kiser & Kane 2001](#)). Rotation can also be used to limit informal ties between bureaucrats and their clients, decreasing corruption, increasing civil servants' dependence on the bureaucracy, and aligning the interests of civil servants with those of their principals. As [Stovel & Savage \(2006\)](#) note, though, rotation is only effective for tasks that do not require strong relationships between employees and clients and employee knowledge of the local context. In fact, while rotation might be a useful tool for managing principal-agent problems, little is known empirically about the effects of rotation on the

²Interestingly, large parts of the revenue gains come from a small set of tax payers. They also find some evidence of an increase in bribes to compensate bureaucrats for foregone incentive rewards.

quality of service delivery in the civil service more generally.

Designing successful incentive schemes and management practices is challenging due to the multidimensional nature of many public service tasks. [Dixit \(2002\)](#) argues that public agencies face a multiplicity of principal-agent problems and challenges of multi-tasking, which complicates simple insights from standard principal-agent models. For example, multi-tasking—the requirement of civil servants to perform a number of distinct tasks—generates a host of additional incentive problems and complicates moral hazard and adverse selection still further. Principals might only be able to effectively measure one of the many tasks, inducing agents to neglect the other dimensions of their job (e.g., teaching to the test; [Holmstrom & Milgrom 1991](#)). Similarly, [Kiewiet & McCubbins \(1991\)](#) argue that ‘collective principals’ generate additional agency losses because of disagreements among principals about the tasks of the bureaucracy. [Hammond & Knott \(1996\)](#) demonstrate that multiple principals can lead to agency losses even with perfect information about the bureaucracy’s objectives and actions. The general result from this literature is that multiple principals inhibit monitoring and increase agency slack.

These theoretical concerns have been corroborated by empirical studies. For example, in a detailed study of Nigeria’s civil service, [Rasul & Rogger \(2015\)](#) provide evidence that increased autonomy correlates with higher productivity of bureaucrats, while increased monitoring lowers output by bureaucrats. They show this lack of success in active management by supervisors is due to poor targeting of incentives and multi-tasking problems. Similarly, [Gulzar & Pasquale \(forthcoming\)](#) study a setting with multiple principals in India. Using data on India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, they show that locations where local bureaucrats are accountable to a single politician perform better.

Research in behavioral economics, sociology, and public administration also suggests problems with explicit monetary reward and monitoring schemes to induce performance in frontline civil servants. In contrast to sparse principal-agent models that assume different preference schedules between principal and agent, this type of work often emphasizes the

esprit de corps or the *intrinsic motivation* of public servants as crucial bureaucratic characteristics that affect overall productivity (Perry & Hondegheim 2008). Intrinsic motivation or a strong organizational culture of efficiency and hard work operate as safeguards against shirking (Grindle 1997). Such organizational cultures were held, in the literature cited above, to be characteristic of public bureaucracies in developmental states.³ In general, there is little work that traces the institutions and organizational structures that help to generate *esprit de corps* within bureaucracies.⁴

This perspective suggests that public-minded bureaucratic agents want to deliver services and do not have to be made accountable via explicit, formalized monitoring and incentive schemes. In fact, introducing pecuniary rewards that violate existing organizational norms might demoralize current civil servants and deter intrinsically motivated people from entering the civil service in the first place (Keefer & Banuri 2013). Some studies though suggest that high public sector wages and attractive career opportunities attract high quality applicants (Dal Bó et al. 2013) and that intrinsic motivation of civil servants amplifies the positive effects of increased monitoring (Callen et al. 2015). To complicate matters further, work on corruption has also suggested that corrupt bureaucracies might attract bureaucrats who are primarily interested in rent-seeking opportunities (Cowley & Smith 2013). Laboratory experiments suggest that job seekers with aspirations for the civil service exhibit a greater likelihood to cheat in experimental games and reveal a preference for corruption (Banerjee et al. 2015).

Theoretical work by Gailmard & Patty (2007) suggests that in order to recruit ‘zealots’ (i.e., publicly minded and intrinsically motivated individuals) into the civil service, civil

³See, however, Ramseyer & Rosenbluth (1993) for a contrary view rooted in principal-agent theory.

⁴One recent exception from the U.S. is Carpenter (2001), which explores how Progressive-era American bureaucracies created “reputations for innovation, service, and moral protection that were embedded in multiple networks” (32). Carpenter’s argument begins with the efficacy of the bureaucracy and explores how this supports bureaucratic autonomy, rather than illuminating the origins of the norms within the bureaucracy.

service wages must be below market wages to ensure that only zealots remain in the civil service. This condition is quite unlikely to hold in most developing country contexts ([Finan et al. 2015](#)), and a common refrain is that state agencies are populated by incompetent and uncaring bureaucrats for whom the civil service is a safe and relatively lucrative career. Thus merit and promotion procedures—even if they replicated those of Western bureaucracies—are unlikely to produce a civil service populated by those intrinsically motivated to serve the public. Career backgrounds and career aspirations can also affect civil servants’ policy preferences and decisions. Using data from central banks from across the developed and developing world, [Adolph \(2013\)](#) finds that central bankers with different career trajectories choose predictably different monetary policies.

A more recent set of studies has also investigated the effect of electoral competition on monitoring, delegation, bureaucratic fragmentation, and bureaucratic performance. Electoral competition should improve bureaucrats’ performance. Voters hold their representatives accountable via elections, which in turn encourages politicians to monitor bureaucrats to ensure that they provide public goods and services. In a study of the Nigerian civil service, [Rogger \(2014\)](#) finds that electoral competition leads politicians to delegate public goods provision to more capable bureaucrats, improving overall services provision. Evidence from Pakistan also indicates that electoral competition is crucial for making politicians hold civil servants accountable ([Callen et al. 2014](#)). Doctor absenteeism is substantially lower in electorally competitive districts, higher for doctors that are personally connected to politicians. They also find that interference with the sanctioning of health workers is higher in less competitive areas, and that the use of smartphones for monitoring health workers’ assigned visits to health care centers is only effective in competitive areas.

Although competition may increase politicians’ incentives to monitor bureaucrats, politicians who face less electoral competition and thus enjoy longer tenures might be able to incentivize bureaucrats by offering future rewards. Looking at bureaucrats in India, [Nath \(2014\)](#) finds that re-election concerns do not have a meaningful effect on the monitoring ef-

forts of politicians. Instead, politicians with long tenures are able to provide better dynamic contracts that incentivize effort by local bureaucrats. In Pakistan, [Gulzar \(2015\)](#) documents the perverse incentives between ruling party incumbents and civil servants. Ruling party politicians that win close elections are willing to tolerate shirking of civil servants, in exchange for their political support. This suggests that if politicians can leverage their control over patronage opportunities and protect civil servants, bureaucratic service delivery will suffer despite the presence of elections. Relatedly, [Iyer & Mani \(2011\)](#) show, using data from India, that politicians prefer control over productivity, leading to assignments that mismatch skilled bureaucrats with less important tasks. This incentivizes junior bureaucrats to invest in loyalty instead of skills. In the case of Russia, the relative success of its public health initiatives to reduce alcohol consumption, tobacco use and traffic fatalities is due, in part, to the strong and clear signals Putin and his inner circle sent to the police about which rules to enforce on the ground, such as writing fines for smoking in illegal places ([Brooke & Gans-Morse 2016](#)).

Monitoring does not have to be done by elected officials or high-level bureaucrats, but can be outsourced to relevant constituents (i.e., citizens or businesses). [Banks & Weingast \(1992\)](#) note that constituents perform an important monitoring function for politicians, but that “agencies designed to serve unorganized groups allow bureaucrats to extract too much of the gains from policymaking at the expense of both politicians and their constituents, and hence politicians fail to create them because they are not worth the costs” (512). This is particularly likely to characterize frontline service delivery in developing countries, for the poor and marginalized are classic examples of unorganized interest groups. Although Banks and Weingast argue that bureaucracies that serve unorganized interests should not exist, their argument implies that when they do exist, they are unlikely to be effectively sanctioned, and subject to high agency loss.

In fact, donor organizations have invested significant resources in interventions designed to mitigate the information constraints which they assume are hampering monitoring and

service provision. The conventional wisdom is that information about the quality of government services and politician performance will help the poor to demand greater accountability from service providers and/or politicians and will lead to welfare improvements. The focus of these interventions has been on information about public spending, especially in health and education, corruption, and legislator performance. The results of these interventions, however, have been mixed (This literature has been the subject of several literature reviews including [Kosack & Fung \(2014\)](#)).

Moreover and related to these mixed empirical findings, Banks and Weingast’s argument presumes that (1) politicians actually consider their responsibilities to ensure efficient bureaucratic function, and (2) that politicians are accountable to voters. If politicians can respond to citizen monitoring with direct constituency service, then this would bypass the bureaucratic function—the solution to a bureaucratic failure is not reform of the bureaucracy, but rather sidelining it. But if voters can imperfectly monitor politicians, then there is a nested, two-level principal-agent relationship: bureaucrats are the agents of politicians, who are in turn the agents of the mass public.

Viewed through this lens, the requirements for a “McNollgast-style” ([McCubbins et al. 1987](#)) solution to the problem of bureaucratic performance—where administrative procedures can preserve the preferences of the legislature—are particularly unlikely to generate incentives for efficient and efficacious bureaucratic performance in most developing country contexts. Frontline service delivery problems will be particularly acute: unorganized constituents must monitor bureaucrats on behalf of politicians who may not have incentives to respond to citizen demands, and who may not look to bureaucratic reform as the solution to bureaucratic underperformance anyway. We would not be surprised to find that frontline service delivery is poor under such conditions.

While principal-agent models offer powerful insights, they also narrowly cast our understanding of bureaucratic processes as a form of internal management. The Procrustean dominance of the principal-agent model may limit the types of questions we ask when it

comes to the internal dynamics of bureaucracies, and more importantly, the interaction of bureaucratic agents with politicians, citizens, and businesses. For example, while studies of corruption have benefited from principal-agent models for understanding the behavior of corrupt agents, [Callen et al. \(2014\)](#) also point out that corruption in the public sector is often embedded in larger clientelistic machine politics, whose dynamics are not captured solely with narrow principal-agent models. [Cruz & Keefer \(2015\)](#) demonstrate that good bureaucratic performance emerges not from accountability to voters or citizens, but rather from programmatic parties that allow politicians to resist the sorts of clientelist practices that undermine bureaucratic effectiveness. [Persson et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that corruption in general is not a principal-agent problem, but rather a collective action problem.

As discussed in the preceding two sections, developmental state and principal-agent models offer useful insights for the study of bureaucracies, but they also come with inherent disadvantages when it comes to understanding the on-the-ground delivery of public services in the developing world. Developmental state arguments focus too narrowly on national-level macro policymaking. Principal-agent models have a lot to offer for understanding the incentives and management of frontline civil servants, but often focus too narrowly on explicit monitoring and reward schemes. More generally, both principal-agent and developmental state approaches have not sufficiently explored variations in the forms of social embeddedness in which frontline bureaucratic agents operate. We explore the issue of bureaucratic embeddedness in depth with the example of street-level bureaucrats.

3 Embeddedness and Street-Level Bureaucracies

Street-level bureaucrats are the public service workers—including teachers, police officers, social workers, public lawyers and nurses—who interact directly with citizens and who implement policy on the ground. Given the nature of street-level bureaucracies, they represent a useful case to interrogate the bureaucratic politics of service delivery in the developing world.

Like all civil servants, street-level bureaucrats enjoy discretion in policy implementation, but street-level bureaucrats are distinct from others because they are the final step in the chain of policy implementation. Weber recognized that by nature bureaucracies have a large amount of unregulated social and political power. Due to the nature of their job, bureaucrats must make decisions on the spot and exercise discretion in identifying the beneficiaries for services and resources, the method by which services are distributed and by choosing how and when to enforce government policies (Lipsky 1980). The discretion of frontline providers in decision-making allows them to become de facto policy-makers through the implementation process (Lipsky 1980). In controlling the implementation of policies, frontline providers directly influence the quality of life for many citizens. They determine which children are educated and how, who receives life saving medication or an identity card, who is fined or arrested for violating a law or regulation, and how much taxes are paid and by whom.

Street level bureaucrats face a different type of workplace environment than other types of officials: they have to deal with clients' personal reactions to their decisions (Lipsky 1980, 9). Frontline service providers face unique pressures and dilemmas including inadequate resources and often unclear policy goals and performance measures. Further, there is a continual tug of war between the street-level bureaucrat's desire for autonomy and his or her supervisors' desire for surveillance and control. Commonly, there is an uneasy if not hostile relationship with clients on whom the street-level bureaucrats can impose substantial punishment. Above all, there is the bedrock problem of whether to seek uniformity of treatment in dealing with clients or whether, as best as possible, to tailor services and punishments to the particular needs and problems of citizens or clients.

While training for frontline service providers is important in equipping them with the skills to confront these and other pressures and to fulfill their tasks, very few studies look at its effects. A randomized experiment on police in Rajasthan found that the provision of training on professional (i.e., investigation and methods) and soft skills (i.e., communication and mediation) improved victim satisfaction with the police (Banerjee et al. 2014). A

literature review on community health workers who are selected, trained and work in the communities from which they come and who are not necessarily members of the civil service, finds that improved training, continuous support and supervision tends to improve performance and increase community members' use of the health workers (Lehmann & Sanders 2007). Yet, the ambiguous role of community health workers within the broader health care system and civil service can limit the training they receive and the scope of the services they are able to provide, which weakens communities' confidence in the health workers' efficacy.

3.1 Embeddedness on the Front Lines

The focus of Evans (1995) and much of the developmental state literature is on a small number of civil servants in core ministries involved in planning and policy and monitoring the rest of the state and their linkages to powerful business interests. Until relatively recently, the East Asian developmental states did not deliver substantial social services or transfers to its populations.⁵ Given the growth of public service delivery across developing states, our focus is on the frontline bureaucrats who ultimately deliver these services, their links with community members and the factors that enable for effective service delivery ranging from health, education, public utilities, agricultural and social services to land administration, identity cards and marriage certificates (Tsai 2007, Tandler & Freeheim 1994, Ricks 2016).

Granovetter (1985) used the concept of embeddedness to refer to the social relationships that influence an individual's economic decisions. We use the concept to refer to the social relationships that influence civil servants' actions. Building on Granovetter's insights into the benefits of embeddedness for economic behavior, this literature suggests that street level bureaucrats who are embedded in the communities in which they serve produce better policy outcomes. The concept is particularly relevant to frontline bureaucrats by nature of their

⁵One indicator of the relative smallness of the developmental state is Government Final Consumption Expenditure, which between 1970 and 1995 was notably lower as a percent of GDP in Japan, South Korea, and Singapore than in the United States, United Kingdom, or Australia, according to the World Development Indicators.

frequent interaction with clients. Embeddedness reduces bureaucrats' costs of information gathering and information sharing. Providers who are embedded in the communities they serve are likely to have a better sense of their needs and can target their efforts at fulfilling those needs. In a study of water user associations in Indonesia, [Ricks \(2016\)](#) finds that the frequency of contact between state officials and the beneficiaries, or farmer groups, is much more important for the success of the group than training programs. Regular interaction between irrigation officials and farmers reduced the transaction costs for information sharing. Through the frequent exchange of knowledge, the irrigation officials were able to convince farmers of the usefulness of the water user groups. Training programs that were not accompanied by other interactions between the officials and farmers were counterproductive as farmers saw these one-off training events as only serving the officials' rather than their needs.

A novel study by [Bhavnani & Lee \(2015\)](#) exploits the quasi-random assignment of bureaucrats in India to document the value of local connections for the performance of the civil service. They find that a civil servant's education level, a proxy for their skills, does not have an effect on their productivity, but bureaucrats who have established ties to their assigned communities are able to provide a higher level of public goods.

A different dimension of embeddedness pertains to the connections and environment civil servants operate within the bureaucracy itself. This includes the importance of workplace diversity for creative problem solving capacity ([Lazear 1999](#), [Shore et al. 2009](#)). [Rasul & Rogger \(2015\)](#) consider the effects of ethnic diversity in a bureaucracy for public service productivity. Extracting information on the success of 4,700 distinct projects in Nigeria's civil service, they document a positive relationship between team diversity and project completion rates. Others document the conflict that emerges when different ethnic groups compete for scarce public sector jobs ([Brown 1999](#)).

Embeddedness also enables providers to frame their messages and perform their tasks in culturally appropriate ways which will increase the likelihood that recipients adopt their

providers' recommendations and decisions. This is certainly true for health care workers who are trying to persuade community members to adopt certain behaviors, such as giving birth in health facilities rather than with traditional birth attendants, immunizing their children, and feeding children more nutritious meals. Much of the literature addressing this topic comes from field as diverse as public health (e.g., [Kelly et al. 1991](#)), network analysis (e.g., [Burt 1999](#)), and marketing (e.g., [Chan & Misra 1990](#)). More research is needed in political science on the role opinion leaders play in helping frontline providers to accomplish culturally sensitive tasks.

Relatedly, repeated and positive interactions between providers and beneficiaries are likely to generate views of the provider as trustworthy. Community members are more likely to adopt the messages of those who they view as trustworthy. For example, frontline health care workers in Caerá, Brazil earned the trust of their clients by maintaining strong social ties to their communities, repeatedly visiting households and helping mothers with household tasks, which went beyond their formal responsibilities. After repeated visits to households, the health care workers were able to talk to families about sensitive health issues, such as breastfeeding and better hygiene or nutrition, and the clients were responsive to their messages. Knowing that community members viewed them as trustworthy motivated the health agents to expend effort beyond what was required in their assignments ([Tendler & Freeheim 1994](#)).

Related to challenges of monitoring, embedded frontline workers may face direct community pressure that will prevent them from shirking and help to ensure that they are accountable for public goods and services. In parts of China, local solidarity groups with high moral standing in the community established and enforced unofficial norms and rules by which bureaucrats and state officials were expected to abide. Through these groups, communities are able to hold local officials directly accountable even when in the absence of formal accountability institutions ([Tsai 2007](#)). In most cases, community members will only exert social pressure on agents if they are aware of agents' obligations and their rights

as citizens, which is consistent with the literature on the role of asymmetric information in principal-agent relationships (Besley 2006). In anticipating this problem, the state government in Caerá, Brazil empowered the public—including rejected civil service applicants—to monitor civil servants. The state invested in public information campaigns that educated citizens about the need to respect the civil service but also their obligation to monitor civil servants, the obligations of service providers, and the steps they should take in response to infractions (Tendler & Freeheim 1994).

3.2 Embeddedness, Corruption, and Clientelism

The same social networks that can put pressure on civil servants and elected officials to provide the goods and services to which they are entitled can also demand favors from civil servants (see Kiser & Sacks 2009). In many contexts, civil servants participate in what outsiders perceive as corruption but might be viewed locally as reciprocal obligations of kinship and community solidarity (Granovetter 2007). In some cases, when civil servants receive salary raises, as part of overall civil service reform, they receive an increase in demands from their kin networks, which may lead the civil servants to take bribes to compensate for the higher expenses (Fjeldstad 2005).

Related to corruption and embeddedness in community networks, in many developing countries clientelism and patronage are also often pervasive (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007) and used for political, social, and economic control. Clientelism is an inherent feature of most civil service hiring in the developing world (Grindle 2012). Politicians in clientelistic systems need access to state resources at all levels to sustain long-term clientelistic exchange and finance vote and turnout buying during election times (Stokes 2005, Nichter 2008). Control of the bureaucracy is also needed to sustain high-level multi-group coalitions via, e.g. cabinet appointments (Arriola 2013). This becomes particularly relevant in, e.g., post-conflict settings, in which the need to rebuild state capacity and provide essential services is

competing with the need to sustain fragile political bargains via extensive patronage hiring into the civil service.

Public sector jobs are one of the most common and important currencies within clientelist networks (Penfold-Becerra 2007). Using their access to state resources, politicians exploit their control over the civil service to offer patronage jobs and promotions to political supporters in order to win elections (Golden 2003) and deliver benefits to their co-ethnics (Frank & Rainer 2012).

As a result, embeddedness in clientelistic networks represents a form of social ties that makes civil servants essential cogs in an, albeit flawed, accountability mechanism between voters and politicians. The question, though, is whether this type of embeddedness is beneficial or detrimental for service delivery? The classic literature on clientelism argues that patronage politics diverts important resources away from public goods and services delivery (Hicken 2011, Keefer 2007). Service delivery that is conditioned by a political rationale and controlled by opaque clientelistic machines runs counter to a modern understanding of a neutral and effective civil service. Moreover, the practice of allocating civil service appointments to maintain clientelistic machines and ethnic alliances often leads to the unsustainable increase in the state's wage bill. Following Zambia's independence, President Kuanda maintained support for a fragile UNIP and state by allocating appointments to state offices to political leaders representing Zambia's ethnic factions (Bratton 1992). From 1963 to 1968, the number of Zambian central government employees increased from 1,357 to 7,509 (Szeftel 1982, 6). In Senegal, the use of the bureaucracy for rent-seeking and particularistic interests paralyzed the Senegalese state in terms of its ability to implement programmatic economic policies (Boone 1990, 352). While increasing the representative nature of a state's bureaucracies increases the state's wage bill, it can also mitigate conflict among groups who feel excluded from the bureaucracy and the many benefits public sector employment offers, including access to rents, patronage, stable employment and discretion in enforcing laws like taxation and applying force through the police (Esman 1999, Wimmer 1997).

At the same time, clientelistic embeddedness might offer advantages that have gone unrecognized in the literature thus far. For example, clientelistic exchange works best with poorer voters ([Weitz-Shapiro 2012](#)). This implies that actual benefits are being delivered to very poor members of society, even if with a political bias.

“Effective” clientelism means effective delivery of targeted benefits, and likely requires a modicum of state capacity. It could be that standard welfare services in democracies are captured by the middle class and do not cater to poorer citizens ([Ross 2006](#)). Similarly, [Grindle \(2012\)](#) argues that many civil service reforms start in particular ministries or departments and require the personal control of reform-minded officials in order to create new and effective units. Influential clientelistic networks can generate opportunities for reform that eventually transforms the whole bureaucracy. [Grindle \(2012\)](#) also points out that modern ideals of a neutral, rule-based, and face-less bureaucracy often fails to deliver essential services and cater to the needs of vulnerable populations, precisely because civil servants can hide behind regulations and procedures, are insulated from societal pressures, and have little leeway to adapt to local conditions. Especially in the context of developing countries it remains unclear whether formal, *de jure* reforms of the civil service, that institute meritocratic hiring and are meant to limit the role of clientelism, can work. Such reforms potentially sever a functioning accountability mechanism—albeit one that violates Western norm of democratic accountability. Work by [Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock \(Andrews et al. 2013, Pritchett et al. 2013\)](#) similarly argues that many reforms meant to improve state capacity are mere ‘isomorphic mimicry’ that do not improve functional capacity. By mindlessly trying to create a bureaucracy that looks like Weber’s image of the Prussian state, many developing country governments (and international donors) merely hide dysfunctional structures. Instead, they argue, room should be given for civil servants to engage in experimentation, leveraging of local information, and adaption of practices—all of which are tied to some form of social embeddedness of frontline bureaucrats.

The tensions reviewed in this section recall the debate about the “efficient grease” hy-

pothesis (Kaufmann & Wei 2000), part of a broader debate about the role of corruption and development usefully reviewed by Bardhan (1997). Although this debate probably can never be resolved, our review of frontline service delivery suggests that rather than prescribing a single institutional form, political scientists might instead concentrate on exploring which factors explain civil servant effectiveness.

3.3 Consequences of the Interaction of Civil Servants and Citizens

Many citizens encounter government primarily through their interactions with frontline service providers. Street level bureaucrats provide individuals with information about government's goals and how it works, its responsiveness, and how it values their particular social group (Soss 2005). Beyond corruption, a fairly large literature documents the frustrating, arbitrary nature and often, pernicious, interactions between citizens and frontline service providers (e.g., Gupta 2012, Auyero 2011). Gupta (2012), for example, documents how Indian bureaucrats tasked with identifying beneficiaries of old age pensions guess potential beneficiaries' ages rather than rely on objective criterion like birth certificates which are often non-existent. In many contexts, police are the source of citizens' fear rather than protection (Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2015). Studies from China document labor dispute plaintiff's negative evaluations of the legal systems in terms of its fairness and effectiveness (Gallagher 2006) and the resistance of villagers to excessive and often illegal fees and levies, as well as brutal tax collection methods (Bernstein & L`u" 2003, O'Brien & Li 1995).

Whether positive or negative, citizens evaluate government based in part on their interaction with frontline providers (Lipsky 1980). The interaction between citizens and civil servants shape citizens' willingness to voice grievances about the particular program, their perceptions of political efficacy, their willingness to participate in civic engagement and political action, and ultimately, and their compliance with rules and regulations (Soss 2005, Tyler 1990, Levi et al. 2009). Based on an analysis of survey data from Chicago, Tyler (1990)

finds that citizens' decisions about whether to obey legal rules is based more on the perceived fairness of the way police officers and judges make decisions than on the favorability or fairness of the outcome. For many, to be respected and heard is actually more important than winning a case (Tyler 1990, 149-150).

The literature on the political consequences of citizen-bureaucrat interactions outside of the U.S. and Europe is still in its infancy, although recent work has begun to explore such phenomena. For example, using Afrobarometer data, Levi et al. (2009) find citizens' judgments of the fairness in government procedures and decisions appear to correlate with their beliefs regarding taxation. Other work asks whether non-state actor provision of services affects citizens' beliefs about their government's performance and legitimacy. When citizens think that foreign actors such as donors and international NGOs are involved in service delivery, they are more likely to credit their government for helping to leverage the aid and, in turn, more likely to view their government more positively (Sacks 2012, Dietrich & Winters 2015). Future work will draw on the concepts and theories of existing scholarship (Goodsell 1981, Mettler 1998, Kumlin & Rothstein 2005) while adding the unique insights from the developing country context.

4 Conclusion: New Directions for Old Questions

The performance of national bureaucracies in sustaining national economic performance and implementing national policy has long been central to understanding political development. But as our review has illustrated, bureaucracies are not monolithic institutions. The ways that citizens, firms, and constituents interact with bureaucracies vary, with implications for understanding both how bureaucracies function and their political and economic effects. We conclude this essay, then, by outlining a framework through which to capture these effects by disaggregating bureaucracies across time, space, task, and client. Understanding different forms of embeddedness across these different dimensions is critical for understanding

variation and change in bureaucratic performance and citizens' evaluation thereof.

Variation in bureaucracies across time can reflect both changes in external environment or changes in internal organization. Examples of changes in the external environment may include global technological developments that create new regulatory needs (i.e. internet regulation), international economic integration that reduces bureaucrats' scope for effective intervention, or the very process of economic development itself. Changes in internal organization may include reforms that target bureaucratic organizational structures or political realignments that merge, split, or redirect existing bureaucracies. Internal and external drivers of bureaucratic change may interact, with unexpected results.

Spatial variation in bureaucracies emerges from the observation that all national bureaucracies are hierarchical organizations whose regional or local structures may vary. For example, local offices of a bureaucracy may vary in staff numbers, or staff qualifications. Alternatively, the same bureaucratic function may be more or less difficult to carry out depending on the local context. For example, regional offices of a bureaucracy tasked with frontline service delivery may have larger case loads in communities with greater service needs. In the former case, bureaucracies vary spatially because their own structures vary; in the latter cases, bureaucracies vary spatially because the local context in which the same bureaucratic structure operates varies. In either case, this variation may lead to spatial differences in bureaucratic performance, or how citizens interact with bureaucracies.

Bureaucracies also vary according to the tasks that they carry out. Among bureaucracies that have face-to-face interactions with citizens, we can distinguish, for example, among those that award licenses and permissions, those that provide services, and those that create infrastructure. License- and permission-granting bureaucracies should generate relatively more opportunities for bribery, corruption, and holdup than will service-providing bureaucracies, although informal fee-for-service arrangements may exist in the latter as well. Infrastructure-creating bureaucracies create opportunities for corruption during procurement and contracting that are invisible to the beneficiaries of that infrastructure. Embeddedness

for frontline service workers in local communities may be more beneficial for task effectiveness than would be embeddedness of licensing officials in the firms that they regulate.

Finally, bureaucratic politics varies in the kinds of clients with whom bureaucrats interact. Some bureaucracies interact directly with individual citizens: granting licenses or delivering health services, for example. Among those, some bureaucracies interact primarily with poor, disadvantaged, or marginalized population. Other bureaucracies' main interactions may be with firms, trade groups, and other bureaucracies. Within the same bureaucratic institution, there are a variety of kinds of clients: trade ministries interact horizontally with ministries (finance, labor, planning), and vertically with both trade associations and individual firms.

A final consideration is that national factors may condition each of these kinds of variation. Frontline service delivery in a geographically compact developing nation may exhibit far less spatial variation than does frontline service delivery in an archipelagic nation such as the Philippines or in a geographically diverse country such as Cameroon or Brazil. Bureaucratic tasks may vary more in certain contexts than in others: a ministry of finance or a taxation authority in a unitary state is more likely to have uniform regulatory codes than in a federal system. Accountability rules and bureaucrat-politician linkages also vary across countries, as do the types of tasks delegated to particular bureaucracies and institutions. As a result, drawing inference about bureaucratic policies from cross-national comparisons—the preoccupation of much of the classic literature on bureaucracies and the developmental state—may be less productive than drawing inferences that exploit variation within countries.

Conceptualizing variation in bureaucratic politics across time, space, task, and client helps to illuminate what aspects of bureaucracies are being captured in existing work. It also reveals that a single reform or policy change may result in changes across various dimensions at the same time, with attendant consequences for how to interpret the consequences. For example, a retasking of a health ministry to provide mosquito nets to underserved communities involves a change in both task and client. Deconcentrating planning from national to regional offices induces spatial variation while potentially changing bureaucratic clients as

well. Some central questions that political scientists are well positioned to answer include

1. Does bureaucrats' embeddedness have different consequences across tasks and clients?
2. If monitoring is not possible, then what (if anything) sustains good bureaucratic performance?
3. For what kinds of tasks, and at what level of administration, is bureaucratic discretion desirable?
4. How does bureaucratic performance shape citizenship, and does this vary across tasks, clients, or bureaucracies? Do personal or impersonal citizen interactions have different effects?
5. What tasks, conditions, or organizational structures facilitate cooperation with citizens?
6. How do conditions for bureaucratic effectiveness vary across national or regional context?

Disaggregating bureaucracies and exploring variation will require political scientists to leverage research designs that have been underutilized in the study of bureaucracies to date. Classic work on bureaucracies relied on historical case studies, cross-case comparisons, and cross-country regression analysis. Today, there are opportunities for creative research designs that include, but also go beyond, current trends towards causal identification. Naturally, large-scale field experiments will become increasingly viable for the study of bureaucratic performance, as governments and donors become more willing to systematically evaluate civil service reform programs (for some current examples see [Finan et al. 2015](#)). Likely of larger importance is the wealth of administrative data, collected by bureaucracies themselves, that can shed light on the politics of bureaucratic performance. Bureaucracies, by their very nature, are data producing institutions. They often collect systematic data on bureaucrats

themselves, documenting their work history, their assignments, performance evaluations, salaries, and promotions. Bureaucracies also keep track of other inputs in the bureaucratic production functions: agency budgets and procurement are increasingly tracked digitally. Moreover, some bureaucracies also document core outputs—e.g., number and type of health services provided. Last, bureaucracies’ main output—text—has been the focus of several qualitative, including ethnographic, studies ([Hetherington 2011](#), [Gupta 2012](#), [Hull 2012a;b](#)). Modern text processing methods may allow for the quantitative analyses of bureaucratic documents and produce novel insights about bureaucratic politics.

Such data can be used for rich, micro-level studies of bureaucratic politics, although negotiating access to this internal information will remain a crucial challenge for social scientists. Increasingly, data produced by bureaucracies themselves can be validated and complemented by external data. Low-cost cell phone surveys can be used to elicit civil servants and citizens attitudes about bureaucratic performance, while modern information technology has also allowed citizens to better document corruption and failures in service delivery.

We believe accessing this potential wealth of data, combined with increased attention to design-based inference, will produce a number of useful insights for the study of bureaucracies. At the same time, we also advocate the return to classic qualitative methods in the study of bureaucracies. Serious ethnographies of bureaucrats, life histories, and qualitative explorations of social networks can shed light on the role of embeddedness, the values and self-understandings of bureaucrats, and the micro-logic of bureaucratic action ([Oldenburg 1987](#), [Marcesse 2016](#)). Such work can provide the necessary grounding for broader, quantitative investigations; it can also reveal what is missing from quantitative analyses, including helping to understand the production of data itself.

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