

## Introduction

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# 1

## Introduction

*Christine Neuhold and Sophie Vanhoonacker*

### **The rationale for this book**

The relationship between civil servants and politics is a delicate one (Weber 1922), and it is well known that the formal dichotomy between the political and administrative branch is to a certain extent artificial. While some early thinkers about bureaucracy – such as Wilson in the late 1880s – departed from the assumption that ‘politics’ could be clearly distinguished from ‘administration’ (Wilson 1887), later scholars argued that reality was more complex. They emphasised that in day-to-day policymaking civil servants are under continuous political pressure and that politics also plays an important role at the administrative level (Long 1949; Simon et al 1950). In the early 1970s scholars of bureaucratic politics developed an explicit ‘bureaucratic’ politics interpretation of policymaking (Allison 1971).<sup>1</sup>

More recently the ‘New Public Management turn’ in public administration has again put the debate on politico-administrative relations in the centre of the scholarly debate. The managerialist approach was triggered by the expectation that a more strict separation of politics and administration would give rise to more effective policymaking. From the academic literature we however know that this did not always happen (Peters and Pierre 2004; Van Thiel, Chapter 6, in this volume). The increased autonomy of administrations under the guidance of public managers has been countered by new attempts and strategies of political leaders to intervene in bureaucratic appointments and day-to-day public policymaking more broadly, triggering renewed concern about politicisation.

Today’s society brings further challenges to this complex relationship between bureaucrats and political players. On the one hand the

growing role of knowledge and expertise in the policymaking process has strengthened the position of the civil service and increased their potential to exert influence on the content, scope and execution of policies formally decided upon by democratically elected politicians (Huber 2000). At the same time there is the above-mentioned tendency of increased involvement of politicians with the civil service, also in countries that traditionally have attached high importance to the neutrality of policy experts (Peters and Pierre 2004; van der Meer and Dijkstra 2011). Furthermore the emergence of supranational and international bureaucracies as key players in processes of governance raises new challenges for the interaction between civil servants and politicians and our understanding of this intricate relationship (Curtin and Egeberg 2008).

Against this background, this edited volume examines the changing relations between civil servants in the political arena in Europe in the last two decades, with a special focus on politicisation. It opts for a broad definition of politicisation, defining it as 'the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention promotion and disciplining of members of the public service' (see Peters, Chapter 2 in this volume). Although this does not include political patronage systems in which elected politicians distribute public jobs to loyal supporters, it is sufficiently broad to encompass many different forms and guises of politicisation in various European countries. In order to get a better understanding of the particular characteristics of politico-administrative relations, Peters, further disaggregates this broad definition into six different categories as to how the interaction between the two levels is implemented (see Table 1.1). Amongst other processes he refers to direct political intervention in the nomination of civil servants, the nomination of highly professional loyalists, the use of additional controlling structures such as cabinets and even the influence of the social sector on the nomination of career civil servants. The categories both encompass forms where politicisation is a conscious choice by politicians as well where it results from structural features of the political system. He furthermore emphasises the need to look beyond formal rules and relations to also examine the daily practice of interaction between civil servants and their political masters (Chapter 2, in this volume).

Starting from the above categorisation, the central question guiding the contributions in this volume is the extent to which politicisation of the public service plays a role in today's political process of policymaking and which formal and informal patterns of political

Table 1.1 Different categories of politicisation (Peters 2013)

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Direct politicisation	This relates to the direct attempts to have political loyalists occupy positions.
Professional politicisation	This concerns public officials who are political loyalists but at the same time are also professionals and are the products of a professional career system.
Redundant politicisation	This refers to redundant structures created by a government to monitor the actions of the career employees. Examples include ministerial <i>cabinets</i> and special advisors.
Anticipatory politicisation	This refers to a situation whereby civil servants on their own initiative choose to leave their positions when there is a change of government.
Dual politicisation	This refers to a situation where besides the political executive the President or parliament also attempts to control the bureaucracy by placing their own nominees in positions of power with the aim to exercise control over policy.
Social politicisation	This alludes to the (indirect) influence of social actors (such as industry and trade unions) over the career path of civil servants.

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involvement can be distinguished across countries. The question is raised, whether there is – as many practitioners have claimed – a growing tendency of political leaders to intervene in the realm of the public administration and to steer the work of civil servants in their preferred direction (Verhey, Chapter 3 in this volume). If so, has the delicate balance between the two levels been put under pressure as a result? The question is of interest not only because it may shed a light on the efficiency and effectiveness of political systems but also on their democratic legitimacy.

In this context Member States of the European Union have been selected as case studies. While all chapters pay attention to the historical roots and long-term national traditions with regard to political-administrative relations, the main focus is on the period going from the late 1980s to today. This is the period in which New Public Management (NPM), with its emphasis on greater cost-efficiency and good governance, has been prevalent as a model for administration in many European countries and concurrently a period in which major administrative reorganisations have been taking place. It is also the

time where the roles of European supranational bureaucracies have been considerably strengthened as a result of new integration initiatives in the frame of the Single European Act (1987) and the Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon Treaties (1993–2010).

The choice for particular countries has been motivated by their different degrees of politicisation, with the UK and Germany at the opposite side of the spectrum. Other selected countries ranging between these extremes are the Netherlands, France, Hungary and Slovakia. The country studies also go beyond the traditional typologies in order to see whether the past classifications actually hold true in the practical political process or have been subject to transformation and change. The above-mentioned typology of six forms of politicisation developed by Peters (ranging from direct politicisation to social politicisation) guided the respective authors as a conceptual framework in the quest to identify the specific characteristics of their cases and allowed for a comparative approach (see Chapter 2). In addition to the country studies, the volume pays special attention to the supranational bureaucracies of the European Union itself playing a key role in the EU's day-to-day decision-making process. The focus is on the European Commission 'as a new distinctive executive centre at the European level' (Curtin and Egeberg 2008) and the European Parliament, who since the 1990s has developed into a fully fledged co-legislator in a wide range of policy fields. The emergence of these European-level bureaucracies raises new analytical challenges for the study of politico-administrative relations. A central question in this context is the extent to which concepts stemming from the analysis of national bureaucratic systems are applicable to the EU (Hooghe 2001).

## **Organisation of this volume**

Taking into account the above-mentioned research focus, the volume is divided into three parts. Part I, the more general part, presents a definition of politicisation and cross-cutting themes related to the relations between civil servants and politicians. The second one presents a number of case studies on political-administrative relations in a selected number of EU Member States, illustrating how different forms of politicisation play out in the practical political process. In the third part special attention is given to the emergence of supranational bureaucracies and the challenges this poses for politico-administrative relations.

Guy B. Peters opens the first section by discussing alternative conceptualisations of the term *politicisation*. He relates these to the

different political settings in which they occur and thus provides the conceptual framework for the volume. Chapter 2 moreover considers the empirical and normative consequences of politicisation. It does not only point to the risks of politicisation for undermining the professionalism of the civil service but also to possible benefits through its creation of increased links between the state and society. Luc Verhey follows by examining how the relationship between civil servants and politicians has been subject to transformation and how this has given rise to tensions. Verhey then goes into their possible causes and how they can be reduced. He pleads for a further clarification of the fundamentally different roles of civil servants and politicians and advocates that both groups give each other enough room that they can effectively fulfil their responsibilities. While emphasising the desirability of the political neutrality of civil servants, he also sees it as imperative that they are sufficiently sensitive to the political environment in which they operate. Geoffrey Hunt in turn focuses on how politicisation affects mechanisms for civil servants to report corruption and misconduct. Following a general exposition of whistle-blowing in the public sector, the author examines in more detail the role of recent legislation in the UK as it impinges on the disclosure of government-held information. It is argued that whistle-blowing is an essential feature of democracy and is intimately connected with democratic issues of human rights, freedom of information, and freedom of expression. Specific cases of whistle-blowing civil servants are used as illustrations.

Diana Woodhouse opens the section of case studies on political-bureaucratic relations by probing into this phenomenon in the UK, a country with a long history of the political neutrality of the civil service but recently heavily influenced by the ideas of New Public Management (NPM). She looks into how NPM and other reforms have impacted upon two key constitutional principles of individual ministerial responsibility and core civil service values such as integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. She shows an emerging difference between political and public accountability: while today civil servants are still not directly accountable to parliament, they are increasingly expected to be so to the public. She illustrates how the lack of consensus about whom is accountable for what has given rise to increased tensions in politico-administrative relations. She furthermore examines the core civil service values and comes to the conclusion that as a result of the introduction of new Codes, these values have been preserved and – at least on paper – have even been strengthened. This however does not

exclude that over time the way the core values are concretely implemented may change.

Frank Baron presents a 'double' case study on political-administrative relations in France by respectively studying the French executive and the parliament. He shows how, due to distinctive requirements and roles, the relationship between politicians and civil servants is organised differently in these two bodies. In the case of the government, there is the need to reconcile the responsiveness to changing political demands with the principles of neutrality and continuity of the public service. This has led to an important role of ministerial cabinets in French government. By appointing experienced senior civil servants who are politically loyal, a minister ensures that his political priorities are translated into new initiatives and laws. At the same time the cabinets allow the underlying civil service to remain neutral and detached from the mayhem of the day.

In the case of the parliament, the administration fulfils an important role as provider of expertise both in parliamentary committees as well as in plenary sessions. This requires an independent position which is guaranteed by the fact that French parliamentary officials accede to the parliamentary public service through an anonymous exam, the so-called '*concours*' and through the semi-automatic character of their promotion, meaning that the influence of the political level on their career is limited.

Sandra van Thiel focuses on the impact of NPM on the Dutch civil service. Traditionally the Dutch civil service had to operate in a system that expected bureaucrats to be neutral: there was no spoils system, ministers had very few (personal) political advisors, there was no administrative elite and appointments were said to be based solely on merit. The consensualist nature of the Dutch political system furthermore implied that civil servants had to work with politicians from different party backgrounds at the same time (because of coalition cabinets) leaving no room for their personal opinions. The rise of managerialism (NPM) in the 1980s meant that there were even more incentives to encourage neutrality. Senior civil servants became public managers who 'ran' the government in a business-like manner. As a result, managerial skills became the dominant criterion in appointments. Moreover, appointment procedures were professionalised and made more transparent, leaving less room for politicisation. According to the (scarce) literature on this topic, political motives for appointments of top civil servants are therefore non-existent in the Netherlands. In fact, examples are given of ministers who – purposely – appoint civil servants with a different

party background, fitting with the consensualist tradition. Van Thiel explores to which extent these claims and expectations are indeed true. Based on more than 50 elite interviews, data are presented that support parts of the claims illustrated but also show that politicisation of the top civil service is a well-known feature. The contribution of the rise of managerialism to a more neutral civil service is contested; while senior civil servants are expected to behave more like public managers, there are also indications that they have become more political.

Katarína Staroňová and Gyorgy Gajdushek then go on to examine civil service reforms in Slovakia and Hungary. Following the collapse of Communism, it is illustrated how civil service reforms in Central Eastern European countries have brought in various tools aimed to increase professionalisation and depoliticise civil service. The two countries have undertaken different trajectories of reforms: an incremental change of regime in Hungary and a more radical and abrupt approach – mainly under pressure from the EU – in Slovakia. While there have been some policy successes and institutional improvements, these achievements have proven to be *ad hoc*, depending on individuals rather than on a solidly performing system. Thus, the overall reform outcome, an unpoliticised professional civil service recruited and remunerated on merit system, has not been achieved satisfactorily. The authors illustrate that regardless of the particular reform modus chosen, politicisation of the civil service still remains due to the dynamics of transition.

Ulrich Battis examines politico-administrative relations in Germany. The chapter starts by reviewing the political rights and activities of civil servants in different eras of German history, among them the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic, emphasising how changes of the German state had different impacts on officialdom and how some of these features still linger on in today's bureaucratic system. It furthermore gives an overview of the most relevant principles of German civil servants law; including the neutrality of the civil service system, the civil servants' duty of loyalty to the constitution and the duty of moderation and restraint when expressing political opinions. Battis shows how despite the constitutional principle of neutrality, Germany has a long tradition of patronage as well as of political bureaucracy. While patronage is seen as problematic, because of unfair preferences, the appointment of political loyalists who are at the same time products of the career system is considered to be positive. Sensitive to the political priorities of the government, they fulfil an important bridging function between the neutral civil service and society at large.



Michael Bauer and Jörn Ege start off the section on supranational bureaucracies by looking into the European Commission after the 'Kinnock reforms'. The authors analyse the relationship between the Commission's bureaucrats and European-level politicians – i.e. the college of Commissioners and European Parliament – by taking into due consideration the particularities of the EU system in general and of the Commission as a supranational administration in particular. Data about role perceptions of Commission officials from the EUCIQ (European Commission in Question) project as well as data about Commission's new personnel policy after the Kinnock reforms serve as the empirical basis for their observations. While political ideology and nationality does not seem to play an important role in the daily work of Commission civil servants, this does not mean that they are not responsive to the political requirements of their job.

Christine Neuhold and Iulian Romanyshyn shift the focus of the interplay of bureaucrats and their political masters to the European Parliament (EP). Even if, according to staff regulations, officials are supposed to be politically neutral and remain independent from any national influence, it is inevitable that in a multi-national Parliament where various categories of staff, with different lines of reporting and different loyalties, working together on a daily basis, political influence is bound to play a role. This is in part illustrated by the role administrative staff play in the Conciliation Committee, which is a forum that is convened in order to resolve legislative disputes between the EP and the Council of Ministers.

The concluding chapter brings together the main insights from the cases; it confronts the findings from the various chapters and examines whether there is indeed sufficient evidence to support the often heard claim of general politicisation in today's public policymaking. It furthermore identifies some of the principal external and internal factors that impact upon politico-administrative relations and probes into the consequences for more normative questions such as accountability.

## Note

1. For an overview of the debate of issues of delegation of civil servants in parliamentary democracies (see Huber 2000).

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