

Bureaucracy and Democracy: Legibility, Tension, and Institutional Perspectives

This paper examines the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy, focusing on legibility, abstraction, and institutional perspectives. While bureaucracy supports democratic governance, tensions arise when abstraction imposes unequal costs, undermining democratic ideals. The discussion argues that Rational Choice Institutionalism best explains the role of bureaucracy compared to Historical, Social, or Discursive Institutionalism. The paper is divided into two sections: Section 1 explores bureaucracy's function and areas of tension, while Section 2 analyses its institutional foundations.

Section 1:

Section 1a: Outline the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy.

Bureaucracy serves as a supportive function to democracy through the process of legibility.

This concept of legibility stems from the work of Scott (1998) in *Seeing Like a State*. Scott's argument originates from the premise that "a human community is surely far too complicated and variable" (Scott, 1998, p. 22). Yet this complexity needs to be distilled for states to make effective decisions. The tension between the two realities stated above leads to the conclusion that "No administrative system is capable of representing any existing social community except through a heroic and greatly schematized process of abstraction and simplification." (Scott, 1998, p. 22). Hence, Scott postulates that the only way to overcome the tension is to produce an abstraction of reality (Scott, 1998, p. 13).

The process of abstraction has three main components. Firstly, abstraction requires purpose. Scott suggests "what the state wanted to know was still directly related to those purposes" (Scott, 1998, p. 52). Scientific forestry is highlighted as an example of the imposition of purpose, leading to "forest as a commodity" (Scott, 1998, p. 21).

Secondly, the bureaucracy standardises the measurement process. "Local practices of measurement and landholding were "illegible" to the state in their raw form" (Scott, 1998, p. 24) because they "reflected a great variety of purely local, not state, interests" (Scott, 1998, p. 24). Hence, these practices and customs must be "transformed or reduced to a convenient, if partly fictional, shorthand" (Scott, 1998, p. 24). Therefore, the bureaucracy's role is to apply categorisation of the entire reality to enable analysis.

Thirdly, the purpose also informs the "techniques and understanding adequate to these tasks" (Scott, 1998, p. 23). The purposes, measurement, and techniques would allow the state to observe, analyse, and simplify a human community. Therefore, making policy making more effective. Hence, expanding state capacity. The expansion in state capacity combined with democratic accountability in elections, would promote the public interest. Therefore, meeting the ideals of democracy.

To summarise, the state offers purposes. The bureaucracy internalises the purpose of the state to create abstractions. The three components of abstraction combine to create an environment where the complex human community is simplified. Thus, expanding the capacity of the state to exercise its will within a given territory. In this view, the bureaucracy serves a supportive function to democracy. This is where the bureaucracy assists the democratic governments to see and understand complex realities. Therefore, allowing governments to intervene in society in a way that promotes the public interest, under the assumption of democratic accountability.

Section 1b: Do these exist in tension with each other, or do they complement each other?

There are two ways that tension could exist between bureaucracy and democracy. Firstly, within the abstraction process. Secondly, through the costs associated with the abstraction system.

The process of abstraction can create tension between democracy and bureaucracy. For example, given a purpose, the categorisation process does not have to capture the most salient features of a population. In that case, the data subject to analysis does not fully reflect reality. Leading to a warped simplification. Therefore, interventions by the state using this analysis could lead to unintended consequences.

These unintended consequences are problematic because the source of this problem is in the bureaucracy - not the democratically elected government. Yet, it may be the government that pays the price for it through elections. Therefore, creating a tension between the true ideals of democracy and bureaucracy.

The problems with the abstraction process stems from the ambiguous nature of abstraction itself. In essence, there could be two ways to conceptualise abstraction. Firstly, a minimum level of abstraction could be required for effective policy making. In this line of argument, democracies will complement bureaucracy - if the bureaucracy meets the minimum level of abstraction required for certain purposes. Secondly, abstraction could be along a range of minimum and maximum. In this nature of abstraction, too little abstraction offers too many details, and too much abstraction does not produce enough detail on reality. Thus, the process of abstraction can be thought of as having a *golden range*. The *golden range* is where the level of abstraction is optimal relative to the purposes. Thus, policymaking would be effective if the level of abstraction is within the golden range. Therefore, allowing the conclusion that bureaucracy and democracy would be complementary. In the cases where

the abstraction process does not meet the minimum, or exceeds the maximum, the bureaucracy does not capture reality perfectly. Therefore, the supportive function of the bureaucracy is imperfect. Leading to inefficient or ineffective outcomes. Therefore, producing tension between democracy and bureaucracy.

In both cases, capturing abstraction to the correct level is paramount. Therefore, capturing salient features of reality. Therefore, enabling effective decision-making. Thus, enabling democracy because state intervention would not be stifled through an imperfect bureaucracy.

Secondly, tensions could arise because the abstraction system could be utilised to offer different costs to different groups of citizens. Therefore, violating the democratic ideal of equality of access. Thus, producing tension between democracy and bureaucracy.

Herd and Moynihan (2019), in *Administrative Burden* (2019) highlight types of costs within the abstraction system. The role of "information about public services (learning costs), comply with rules and requirements (compliance costs), and experience the stresses, loss of autonomy, or stigma that comes from such encounters (psychological costs)" (Herd and Moynihan, 2019, p. 2).

Herd and Moynihan (2019) cost model could be applied to the Windrush Scandal to suggest tension between bureaucracy and democracy. Davies in *Weaponizing Paperwork*;¹ The Windrush scandal argues that "countless British citizens of colour will have seen pictures of the vans, been asked for additional paperwork by landlords (perhaps more often than their white counterparts)" (Davies, 2018, para. 10). Hence, the weaponisation of the bureaucracy to artificially raise compliance costs for some citizens compared to others violates the

principle of equality for democracy. Therefore, policymaking created tension between the bureaucracy and democratic ideals.

However, there could be instances where this tension through costs imposed does not exist. Firstly, if the costs are all the same across all citizens, then the democratic ideal of equality of all citizens would be preserved. Therefore, one could argue that democracy and bureaucracy is complementary. Secondly, one could also argue that if learning costs are reduced, democratic accountability is enhanced. This argument exists because citizens can be well informed of public services. Therefore, allowing citizens to evaluate governments more effectively. Hence, strengthening democracy through reduction of learning costs.

Section 1c: Consider how we can evaluate them in relation to each other?

One way to evaluate them in relation to each other is by using metrics. These metrics could be used to evaluate the nature of the cost problem within the abstraction system and even fix it. In other words, "Numerical indicators of comparative performance based upon standardised data (metrics)" (Muller, 2018, para. 1) can be added to the bureaucratic process to align the bureaucracy with the government's desired goals. Moreover, metrics would require incentives for individuals to act (Muller, 2018, para. 1).

Metrics can address the mentioned challenge of costs within the abstraction system, forcing the bureaucracy to complement democracy. One could measure the waiting time for individuals to access helplines for bureaucrats. This metric addresses learning costs. Moreover, theoretically, policymakers should offer financial incentives to bureaucrats to

reduce the waiting time metrics. Therefore, the metric is attached to the problem of learning cost, and the bureaucracy can address it through incentives.

However, metrics do have their own issues. Some of the problems include "advancing short-term goals at the expense of long-range considerations" (Muller, 2018, para. 4), and "the expenditure of employee time by those tasked with compiling and processing." (Muller, 2018, para. 5). Thus, short-termism of goals and the cost of structuring and compliance can be consequential. Moreover, the metrics may not be able to solve the issue regarding the correct level of abstraction. This is because the metrics cannot capture intangible nature of abstraction.

Secondly, another method that could be used is the ability and incentives of civil servants to acquire knowledge. This could help to appraise the first problem stated in section 1.b of abstraction process. Alvesson (Alvesson et al., 2022) introduces the concept of Wilful Ignorance. Essentially, Wilful Ignorance contains the "processes of knowing and ignoring" (Alvesson et al., 2022, p. 841). Two sets of variables capture this process. Firstly, Will is about "making judgments about possible courses of action, including no action" (Alvesson et al., 2022, p. 843). Secondly, Ignorance captures the "potential knowability or obstacles involved"

(Alvesson et al., 2022, p. 844). Thus, Ignorance contains the constraints involved with knowing.

These definitions are then used to create a framework to evaluate the nature of an organisation, which is represented in Figure 1 below.

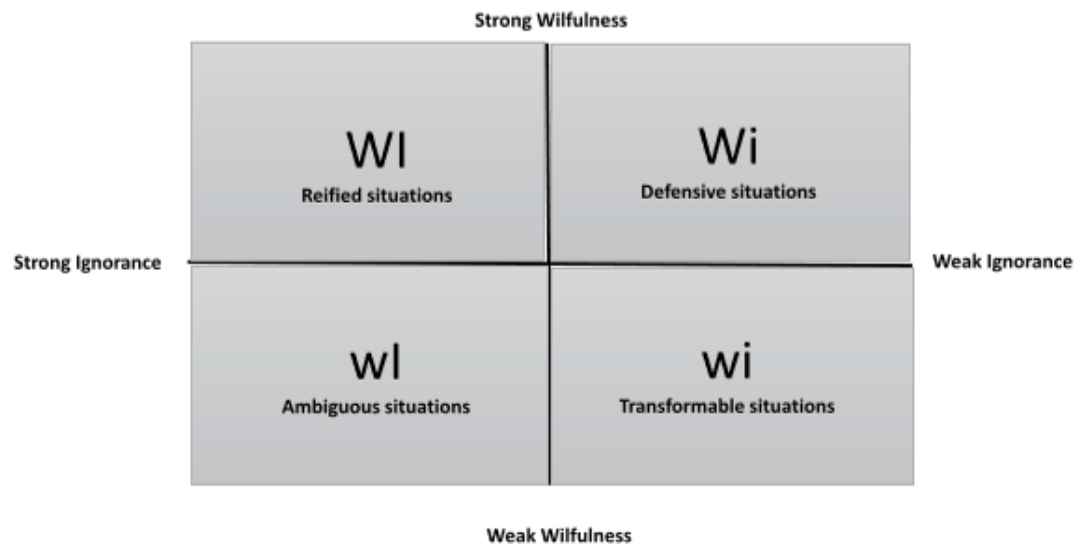


Figure 1: Wilful ignorance framework (Alvesson et al., 2022, p. 844)

The typology set out in Figure 1 can be used to appraise democracy relative to bureaucracy. Specifically, along the problem of the abstraction process stated in Section 1.b. The typology would allow one to see which situations would create or enhance the problem of abstraction process.

Weak Ignorance and Weak Wilfulness are the ideal scenarios to minimise the problems regarding the abstraction process. These are transformable situations. Weak Ignorance suggests that all the information needed for categorisation is accessible. Weak Wilfulness means that individuals want to know all the information. Thus, the incentive to learn and the ability to understand is very accessible. Thus, Weak Ignorance and Weak Wilfulness would allow bureaucracies to predict the correct level of abstraction. This conclusion would suggest

that problem regarding the nature of abstraction (golden range or minimum level) will be minimised. Therefore, enabling the simplifying of reality to encompass the most salient features of reality. This aids policy making. Therefore, reducing the tension between governments and bureaucracy.

An ambiguous situation is a minimally sufficient condition. This situation arises where there is strong Ignorance and Weak Wilfulness. Thus, the individuals in the bureaucracy know that there is inaccessible knowledge. Therefore, their analysis would highlight the gaps in their knowledge. This leads the government to make better decisions given the knowledge of unknowability of certain data points. Thus, aiding democracy from a policy making perspective.

Not just so, a reified situation is the worst outcome. This conclusion stems from knowledge being inaccessible, and bureaucrats are incentivised not to know. Therefore, the process of collecting information to inform policies fundamentally does not highlight the constraints of the data. Therefore, the analysis produced would not have the relevant information or even highlight the missing knowledge. Thus, degrading the process of abstraction, simplification, and policymaking.

Section 2

Which approach to institutions captures the topic of bureaucracy most effectively?

All three perspectives effectively capture the nature of bureaucracy. This paper will examine each in turn.

Firstly, the nature of bureaucracy can be captured by Rational Choice institutionalism.

Rational theory has three main components. The first is a "feasible set, i.e. the set of all courses of action which (are rationally believed to) satisfy various logical, physical, and

economic constraints." (Elster, 1986, p. 4). In the case of bureaucracy, this feasible set is all actions that could be pursued given all constraints. The second is "(a set of rational beliefs) about the causal structure of the situation" (Elster, 1986, p. 4). These rational beliefs enable the bureaucracy to see which outcomes are associated with which actions. The third is "a subjective ranking of feasible alternatives" (Elster, 1986, p. 4). This would mean all actions are ranked relative to whether the purpose will be met.

The Example of Cities can illustrate the rational nature of the bureaucracy. Scott highlights that the "new boulevards in northeastern Paris allowed troops to rush from the Courbevoie barracks to the Bastille and then to subdue the turbulent Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Many of the new rail lines and stations were located with similar strategic goals in mind" (Scott, 1998, p. 61).

The constraint of controlling insurrection led to the feasible set - areas that required "military control of these insurrectionary spaces" (Scott, 1998, p. 61). Moreover, a set of outcomes was attached to different types of ordering of avenues and boulevards. Finally, a subjective ranking of these orderings led to "insurrectionary quarters were demolished or broken up by new roads, public spaces " (Scott, 1998, p. 61). This decision was the best outcome to reduce the chances of insurrection, given the circumstances.

However, the argument that rational choice institutionalism effectively captures the nature of the bureaucracy has weaknesses. The view mainly assumes that there is one outcome that is prescribed by the weightings, leading to one correct answer. However, there could be a multiplicity of actions that lead to the same outcomes. Hence, this perspective would need to explain why some actions are pursued more than others.

Secondly, the sociological approach could also explain some aspects of bureaucracy.

Sociological Institutionalism incorporates social relationships into institutional structures.

This could help to explain why some outcomes are chosen when Rational Choice

Institutionalism produces multiple feasible possibilities. Therefore, Social Institutionalism could address the weakness of Rational Institutionalism.

Fundamentally, Granovetter (1985) suggest that economists tend to have an

"undersocialized conception of human action" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 483). This under

socialisation is where the "theoretical arguments disallow by hypothesis any impact of social structure and social relations on production, distribution, or consumption" (Granovetter,

1985, p. 483). Therefore, arguing Rational Choice Institutionalism to be divorced from social

aspects. Granovetter also argues against "the oversocialized conception" (Granovetter, 1985,

p. 487). This is where actors "adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy." (Granovetter, 1985, p. 487).

Therefore, arguing there to be too much emphasis on social effects within other fields. Thus,

Granovetter introduced a concept of embeddedness which avoids the under-socialisation and over-socialisation of humans (Granovetter, 1985, Abstract).

Embeddedness is when "most behaviour is embedded in networks of interpersonal

relations" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 504). Moreover, "social relations between firms are more

important" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 501). Thus, in a bureaucracy, one needs to scrutinise social relationships within and between organisations. These social relationships could help choose

outcomes when multiple actions fulfil the same purpose.

This paper can use the example of City structure within Paris to illustrate how Social

Institutionalism and Rational Choice Institutionalism can interact. The social relationships

within and across the bureaucracy to the state confined the feasible set to the use of force when deciding infrastructure. Employing the roads and rail network to reduce insurrection using economic prosperity was possible. Thus, this creates the argument that social relationships influenced the feasible set to only contain variables that enabled the use of force.

However, Granovetter explores the role of social embeddedness within Trust and Malfeasance, arguing that social embeddedness can create "order and disorder, honesty and malfeasance" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 502). Thus, this analysis also needs to account for when order and disorder take place. I.e. what clarifying conditions are necessary that tips embeddedness to order or chaos.

Bureaucracies can also be exemplified through Historical Institutionalism. Historical Institutionalism is where the nature of an institution is shaped by history. Thus, bureaucracies in the past could have privileged some forms of intervention over others. Eventually, these interventions become reinforced through norms, cultures, and practices, i.e., institutionalising these changes over time. A good example of this for bureaucracy is the imposition of a standard language. "Of all state simplifications, then, the imposition of a single, official language may be the most powerful, and it is the precondition of many other simplifications." (Scott, 1998, p. 72). The choosing of a standard language in the past has led to other simplifications being built on top of this policy. Eventually, this leads to a path-dependent outcome whereby the bureaucracy functions through a standard language today.

To conclude, this section has hoped to explore how Rational Choice Institutionalism, Sociological Institutionalism, and Historical Institutionalism could explain bureaucracies well. However, this paper believes that the best way to conceptualise the role of bureaucracies is

through Rational Choice Institutionalism. This conclusion stems from the confluence of two factors. The role of the bureaucracy is stated in section 1. a, and the role of time in creating conditions that challenge the purpose of the bureaucracy. Examples of the role of time in creating unique conditions include technological change, demographic changes, and changes to the land that bureaucracy administers.

Fundamentally, the bureaucracy's simplest role is to use the purposes entrusted by the state to produce legibility of a complex social reality. Therefore, the existence of a bureaucracy is tied to the minimum purpose of legibility. However, underlying conditions change over time. This change reduces the ability of the bureaucracy to offer legibility. Less legibility will mean that the existence of the bureaucracy will be questioned. Hence, the need for the bureaucracy declines. This paper only envisions the bureaucracy escaping this dilemma using the rational components. To scrutinise the feasible set, attach possible outcomes to the feasible set and weigh the outcomes. Therefore, this enables the bureaucracy to adapt to challenges faced by institutional change.

Not just so the sociological lens can be helpful to the rational functions to explain conditions where multiple actions could be pursued. But it cannot explain more of the reality of bureaucracy from a standalone perspective. Finally, Historical Institutionalism can offer a strong argument through the path-dependent outcome. Yet, across history, it is easy to envision a time when the bureaucracy has been obsolete – overpowering the role of a path-dependent outcome. Yet the bureaucracy still stands. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the bureaucracy should have evolved through rational decision-making. Consequently, it functions more effectively relative to its environment. Thus, the Rational perspective captures more of the bureaucracy compared to the other approaches.

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