

Policy Feedback and the Politics of Administration

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Abstract

This article surveys the policy feedback framework developed in political science and clarifies its implications for public administration. A feedback perspective encourages us to ask how policy implementation transforms the webs of political relations that constitute governance. Administrators play a key role in shaping the political conditions of bureaucratic performance and the organization of power in the broader polity. At the same time, this perspective underscores that policies are more than just objects of administrative action. Policies are political forces in their own right that can alter key components of administration itself, including phenomena such as organizational capacity, structures, routines, authorities, motivations and cultures. These sorts of administrative themes have seen little attention in policy feedback research, just as the political effects of policies have been overlooked in public administration studies. Bridging these perspectives offers a basis for exciting new agendas and advances in public administration research.

What is the relationship between administration and politics? Few questions in the study of bureaucracy are as vexed and enduring. Many scholars sidestep it, opting to remain silent on politics and, thus, drain it from their accounts of administration. Yet it is rare today to find explicit Wilsonian claims that the two exist in separate spheres. Indeed, the dialogue between administrative and political analysis has grown decidedly richer in recent years. Scholars increasingly recognize that bureaucracies must serve many political masters at once (Derthick 1990). Political interests design bureaucratic structures to advance political goals (Moe 1989). Administrators are politically situated in governing networks (Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000) and are often called upon to bring stakeholders together in participatory processes (Feldman and Khademian 2007).

In this essay, we aim to deepen this dialogue by introducing students of administration to the concept of policy feedback and elaborating its implications for the field. Policy is typically studied as an outcome of politics. Feedback research complements this view with its opposite, asking how “new policies create new politics” (Schattschneider 1935). Conceiving the relationship between policy and politics as an ongoing interplay, researchers analyze how each shapes the other over time (Soss, Hacker, and Mettler 2007).

As with any effort to import a concept, ours requires some bridging assumptions. The administrative significance of the claim that “policies shape politics” depends on how one conceives policies and politics, respectively.

First, we assume that a policy is more than the letter of the law: It includes administrative practices of translation and implementation. If one accepts this assumption, then the claim “policy shapes politics” implies the subclaim: administration

shapes politics. This assertion directs scholars to study, not just how political forces impinge on administration, but also how administrative organizations act on and transform political relations. The political effects of policy implementation, in this view, can matter for a society at least as much as the social and economic impacts that scholars typically study. At the same time, because political forces affect administration, a feedback perspective suggests an evolving transaction of the two: Bureaucracies are not only creatures but also creators of the political forces that impinge on them.

Second, we assume that administrative organizations are, in their own right, sites of politics. They are other things as well, of course. But they are political insofar as they entail phenomena such as power relations, authority structures, ideological commitments, rights and obligations, and decisions regarding “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell 1936). If one accepts this idea, then the claim that “policy shapes politics” implies the subclaim: “policy shapes administration”. This assertion directs scholars to study, not just how administrators transform policy, but also how policies shape administrative organizations. Most studies in the field treat administrators as *agents* who use their discretion to reshape policy *objects*. Feedback scholarship suggests a more dialogic relationship. As organizations implement a policy, they transform it and are themselves transformed. Administrators shape policy outcomes, but policies also have the power to disrupt and reconfigure administration. They can restructure authorities, alter routines, redistribute resources, and reframe culture, identity, and motivation.

Our essay proceeds in four stages. The first defines policy feedback and outlines its implications for political analysis. The second clarifies how administration matters for the broader polity and operates to transform political relations and environments. The

third describes how public policies operate as active forces in the ordering of administration. The fourth section presents a more concrete discussion of how policies influence administration by exploring the effects of welfare reform in three areas: organizational culture, worker discretion, and personnel motivation.

What is Policy Feedback?

Policy feedback denotes the potential for policies to transform politics and, as a result, influence future courses of policy development. Political scientists have long acknowledged that policies can have political repercussions. For example, conventional models of democratic politics – from pluralist models of group grievances (Dahl 1971) to rational-choice models of retrospective voting (Fiorina 1981) to systems models in which citizens respond to policy outputs (Easton 1957) – entail dynamics of public accountability in some form. Yet policies in these sorts of analyses are rarely studied as more than *objects* of political approval or disapproval. Political actors respond to policies after enactment just as they would have before passage: They take action or do not, they reward or punish public officials, and so on because, *for reasons that are exogenous to the policy itself*, they approve or disapprove of particular governmental actions.

In contemporary political science, the concept of policy feedback suggests that policies can transform the political landscape in ways that are far more fundamental and varied. Policies, in this view, are not just political objects; they are political forces that reconfigure the underlying terms of power, reposition actors in political relations, and reshape political actors' identities, understandings, interests, and preferences. Indeed, to explain policy outcomes, this approach suggests, one must often look to the political

dynamics set in motion by policy actions at earlier points in time.

Recent scholarship in this area builds on a variety of intellectual foundations. In an early landmark, Schattschneider (1935) argued that new policies reconfigure the terms of pressure group conflict. Lowi (1964) suggested that terms of political interaction depend on whether the policy at issue is distributive, redistributive, or regulatory. Wilson (1973) theorized that patterns of political engagement depend on the ways that policies distribute costs and benefits. Contemplating the welfare state, Marshall (1964) argued that policies institutionalize social rights in ways that transform civil and political rights, while Piven and Cloward (1971) argued that welfare policies function as tools for pacifying political unrest, shoring up political legitimacy, and setting the terms of power relations between labor and capital. Lipsky (1980) suggested that experiences of street-level bureaucracy influence citizens' political beliefs and orientations, and Edelman (1977) argued that administrative categories and divisions could structure political cognitions in mass publics.

Beginning in the early 1990s, scholars began to connect these themes and develop policy feedback as a distinctive approach to political analysis. To understand what emerged, it is helpful to conceptualize the literature along two dimensions. The first distinguishes between effects on political elites and mass publics (Pierson 1993). Focusing on elites, institutionalist scholars emphasized how new policies affect the positions, capacities, and beliefs of actors in interest groups and at various levels of the state (Skocpol 1992; Pierson 1994; Thelen 2004). Even minor policy changes, they demonstrated, can set "path dependent" processes in motion that constrain political possibilities and future policy development (Pierson 2000; Mahoney 2006). Policies

establish templates for governance that officials learn to use reflexively, even when alternatives are available (Heclo 1974). They shape institutional capacities in ways that raise or lower the difficulty of pursuing new initiatives (Skocpol 1992). As organized interests adapt to new policies, they often grow dependent on them and become invested in their continuation (Hacker 2002). In these and other ways, policies can reshape the assumptions, positions, interests, identities, and capacities of elite actors in the state, surrounding issue networks, and interest-group systems.

At the mass level, feedback research has explored how policies “make citizens” and influence publics (Mettler and Soss 2004). As Campbell (2012, 336) summarizes, policies shape patterns of citizen participation by “affecting levels of politically relevant resources, affecting feelings of political engagement such as political efficacy and political interest, and affecting the likelihood of political mobilization by interest groups and other political entrepreneurs.” Policies convey cues to the public about civic standing, group deservingness, and the nature of social problems (Schneider and Ingram 1997; Soss and Schram 2007). As the G.I. Bill provided educational benefits to military veterans, for example, it cultivated political beliefs, identities, and skills that bolstered civic engagement (Mettler 2005). By contrast, experiences with criminal justice and paternalist welfare policies contribute to negative views of government and political marginalization (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Weaver and Lerman 2010).

Along a second dimension, feedback scholarship can be seen as encompassing both causal and constructivist approaches to explanation. For many, it represents a causal proposition in efforts to explain political outcomes and policy trajectories. In feedback research, as Pierson (1993) explains, “effect becomes cause.” Through the political

dynamics they set in motion, earlier policy outcomes play a causal role in constraining or promoting later policy developments. They operate as state-crafted institutions that structure political interaction and have both intended and unintended causal effects on political actors (Pierson 2006).

A second strand of argument stresses more constructivist and relational themes. Here, feedback scholars build on participatory-democratic arguments that citizens – both as individuals and collectives – are constructed through experiences with political institutions and relations (Dewey 1927; Pateman 1970). Many also draw on the work of Edelman (1964, 1977), who theorized governmental actions as moves in an ongoing political transaction. Policies, Edelman argued, can threaten or reassure, cultivate beliefs, and evoke mass arousal or quiescence – not so much as a causal effect but rather as one statement elicits a response in an ongoing dialogue. Schneider and Ingram’s (1997) theory of “target populations” can be seen as a prominent inheritor of this tradition. Feedback scholarship in this vein analyzes how policies fit into ongoing political transactions and construct objects and subjects of governance.

Across these differences, feedback scholarship offers a coherent prescription for political analysis: Public policy must be analyzed as a political outcome *and* as a force that influences political actors, organizes political understandings, and structures political relations. “The same political process that assembles [public policy] is, in turn, reshaped by its own products” (Soss 1999: 377).

In political analysis, the concept of policy feedback poses a direct challenge to systems theories that treat citizen demands as inputs and public policies as outputs (Easton 1957). In policy analysis, it is equally hard to square with models that envision

“the policy process” as a linear series of stages (Bardach 1977). In normative political theory, it complicates efforts to use “responsiveness to citizens” as a yardstick for evaluating representative-democratic systems (Disch 2013). In the sections that follow, we explore its implications for the study of public administration.

Policy Implementation Matters for the Polity

Implementation is often a pivotal moment in the interplay of politics and policy – a moment with significant consequences for the polity as a whole. Yet students of administration rarely study it from this perspective. In the field today, two conceptions of politics prevail instead.

The first locates administration at the receiving end of politics. Political forces, in this view, create bureaucracies and act on them as they implement policy. “Governance can be delineated as a hierarchy of relationships” that moves from politics to management to administrative performance (Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000, 239). “Responding to citizen and stakeholder interests,” “enacting coalitions” design bureaucracies to “stack the deck” in their favor (Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000, 137-38). Political principals impose agendas on administrators at unpredictable intervals, based on limited understandings of bureaucratic capacities, cultures, and operations (Derthick 1990; Light 2007; Moynihan and Lavertu 2012). They strive, often with mixed results, to oversee and control multi-sided networks of implementing organizations (Meier and O’Toole 2006). Principal-agent models provide the most formal rendering of this perspective, but its logic is deployed widely in the field (Waterman and Meier 1998).

The second identifies politics as a terrain that administrators navigate in their

efforts to achieve goals. Thus, agency directors are forced to think about how to serve “multiple masters” at once (Derthick 1990). The polity is an “authorizing environment” that public managers must approach creatively if they hope to secure legitimacy and support for their visions of the public good (Moore 1995). Active efforts to engage stakeholders and acquire political support are seen today as central to effective public management (Moynihan and Hawes 2012). Thus, politics is not only a force that shapes bureaucracy; it is also an obstacle course that administrators must traverse to achieve their goals.

The concept of policy feedback does not deny these insights. It incorporates them in an analysis of how administration fits into, and matters for, the broader interchange of politics and policy in a society. To develop this kind of analysis, scholars must specify, first, how policies shape the political environment for administration and, second, how administration of a policy can transform broader relations in the polity.

Policy implementation can reorganize power relations in a society, redefine terms of political conflict, mobilize or pacify constituencies, and convey cues about group deservingness. Administrative categories can divide one social group from another and frame perceptions of societal problems. As policies are put into practice, they can produce new social identities and political interests, or establish new configurations of rights and obligations. Bureaucratic encounters can teach citizens lessons about the state, mark them in politically consequential ways, alter their political capacities, and reposition them in relation to other citizens and dominant institutions. Through these and other processes, bureaucracies shape their own political environments and alter the broader organization and functioning of the polity.

As students of administration have left these dynamics unattended, scholars in other fields have pointed the way toward promising avenues of research. Their efforts provide a foundation for exciting new agendas in the field of public administration.

Feedback research suggests, for example, that more attention should be paid to the political consequences of administrative divisions and categories. Census categories, for instance, have repeatedly redefined racial distinctions in the United States, often with profound consequences for political identities, solidarities, and interests (Yanow 2002; Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch 2012). Out of the continuous process of aging, the Social Security Administration delineated, and thereby produced, “seniors” as a distinct social and political group (Campbell 2003). Military, welfare, and immigration agencies specified “the homosexual” as a knowable and governable political subject (Canaday 2009). These and related cases underscore how administrative categories can become embedded in normative assumptions, functioning as seemingly natural “principles of vision and division” that organize perception, choice, and action (Bourdieu 1999).

Structural divisions in the administrative state can be equally consequential. More egalitarian and universal welfare institutions, for example, promote political trust and solidarity, social capital, and broader coalitions of public support (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005; Svallfors 2007). In the U.S., by contrast, administrative divisions – for example, between Social Security and means-tested welfare – encourage bifurcated “deserving vs. undeserving” public understandings, isolate poor families as a vulnerable group with few coalition partners, and facilitate racial framings of social policy conflicts (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

A feedback perspective also highlights how policy implementation can generate

powerful new political interests. Civil War pensions stimulated the growth of new veterans organizations that pressed for expanded benefits (Skocpol 1992). Similarly, modern welfare states have created administrative constituencies that act today as powerful defenders of their programs, often inhibiting reform efforts (Pierson 1994). In the U.S., the Social Security Administration anchored a political process that gave rise to powerful advocacy groups, such as AARP (Campbell 2003; Béland 2010). The American Farm Bureau, a dominant agricultural interest group since the New Deal, arose as a direct result of publicly funded cooperative extension services (Olson 1965). Such cases underscore that studies of how administrators engage stakeholders can be significantly enriched by attention to how administrative actions produce stakeholders.

Feedback research also suggests how organized interests and bureaucracies can develop through relations of reciprocal empowerment. On one side, administrative agencies mobilize collaborators and constituents as allies to bolster their effectiveness and advance their agendas. The Social Security Administration is often cited as an example (Béland 2010), and recent research suggests that the U.S. Department of Education benefited from a similar dynamic as it implemented Title IX (Sharrow 2013).

On the other side, political groups may enjoy reciprocal benefits as the administrative agency becomes a political resource empowering the group and generating terms of political conflict more favorable to its interests. As bureaucracies disseminate policy-relevant analyses, they alter political distributions of knowledge and expertise. As they make rules and acquire capacities, they become tools that interests can deploy against their opponents in the “organized combat” of politics (Hacker and Pierson 2011). These and other mutual political benefits are rarely addressed in studies of collaborative

governance, or even bureaucratic capture. They encourage scholars to study the complex reciprocal ways that administrative influence and capacity can be related to an interest group's power to defeat its opponents.

In addition to affecting a group's ability to get what it what it wants, administrative arrangements can change what a group wants in the first place. Jacob Hacker (2002), for example, explains that public pension implementation took root before pension plans became a common employment benefit. Responding to this administrative "fact on the ground," employers designed their private plans to take advantage of Social Security's potential to absorb business costs. In the process, they developed interests in supporting the Social Security Administration and its programs. By contrast, private healthcare plans emerged earlier than public programs. Thus, state officials were forced to adapt in ways that "created an expensive, fragmented system of health care finance and delivery that undercut the constituency for reform while raising the political and budgetary costs of policy change, eventually pressing reformers to focus on residual populations left out of private coverage" (Hacker 2002: 278).

Building on these insights into group preferences and powers, policy feedback research also encourages scholars to ask how administrative changes may influence state preferences and powers. The corrupt administration of civil war pensions, for example, weakened support for expansions of the welfare state and created presumptions of waste, fraud, and abuse that have plagued social welfare administrators for generations (Skocpol 1992). More generally, administrative efforts to impose categories, compile social data, and organize social and physical environments can alter the "legibility" of landscapes for state intervention (Scott 1998). In the process, they define parameters for the state's

“power to” serve the citizenry as well as for its “powers over” the citizenry, understood in both coercive and productive forms. From this perspective, the field of public administration encompasses the study of how administrative effects define possibilities for state action and set terms of power relations linking state and society.

Market interventions are particularly important as modes of state intervention that define patterns of citizen standing, opportunity, and power. Social policies in the mid-twentieth century, for example, ameliorated the negative effects of market forces in ways that shored up and, in some ways, deepened racial and gender inequalities (Katznelson 2005; Mettler 1998). A particularly stark example is provided by the Federal Housing Authority’s promotion of “redlining,” which structured mortgage-banking behavior in ways that exacerbated race-based segregation in neighborhoods and schools (Freund 2007). This development, in turn, played a key role in “race-making” itself, altering the meanings, practices, and powers associated with racial classifications (Hayward 2013).

As this example suggests, feedback research encourages scholars to pay particular attention to administrative effects on citizens and citizenship. “Mass feedback” effects have been reviewed extensively elsewhere (e.g., Mettler and Soss 2004; Campbell 2012). Yet few scholars have pursued their implications for the field of public administration.

Policy feedback research contests the conventional treatment of citizen interests, preferences, and attitudes as exogenous “inputs” in governance. Under German unification, for example, the extension of West German administrative arrangements moved the welfare-state preferences of former East Germans closer to those of former West Germans over time (Svallfors 2010). Likewise, when administrative institutions equalize social risk and decouple benefits from the labor market, they foster broader

coalitions of support for social protections by making individual-level exposure to risk a less potent determinant of policy preferences (Gingrich and Ansell 2012).

These sorts of diffuse effects on mass publics, however, have been studied less often than effects that arise from citizens' direct experiences of policy implementation. Few scholars would disagree that administrative activities in areas such as immigration and education function to shape the composition and characteristics of the citizenry. Such effects are often intended, and are central to the substantive focus of administration. Feedback research suggests that civic effects, intended or not, emerge in a variety of ways from a broader range of administrative locales. As Campbell (2012, 341) explains: "routines, organizational cultures, and structures... convey messages to clients about their worth and determine whether they will be treated fairly or arbitrarily. These program interactions spill over into the political realm, as client experiences at the hands of program officials become the clients' indicator of their place in society and government."

Administrative encounters are more than a sidebar to democratic citizenship. "Experiences in these settings bring practical meaning to abstract political concepts such as rights and obligations, power and authority, voice and civic standing" (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011, 284). In their interactions with frontline administrators, citizens have unusually direct, personal encounters with agents of the state, on issues that matter greatly to them (Soss 2000). Their encounters are political in many respects and, to anticipate the theme of our following section, are structured in significant ways by public policies (Soss 2000). The point highlighted by feedback researchers is that the effects of bureaucratic experiences "spill over" to affect citizens' broader political lives.

Democracies appear well served, for example, by administrative arrangements

that convey respect, embrace values of procedural justice, and reinforce the individual's standing as a full and equal citizen. Administrative experiences of the G.I. Bill, for example, were marked by fairness and ease of accessibility and promoted civic engagement by enhancing veterans' political capacities, conveying full civic status, building a "reciprocal" sense of civic commitment, and supplying positive experiences of government (Mettler 2005). Positive effects have also been documented in Social Security programs for seniors and people with disabilities (Campbell 2003; Soss 2000). Even in means-tested programs for the poor, evidence suggests that fair, participatory administration can foster higher levels of political efficacy and engagement (Soss 2000; Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010).

Encounters with intrusive administration, by contrast, can diminish civic and political trust (Kumlin 2004). When citizens experience administration as unresponsive – e.g., because of long wait times, procedural barriers, or denials of opportunities to express their needs – they tend to infer that government as a whole is unresponsive (Soss 2000). Directive and supervisory administration appears to have especially negative consequences. Experiences with criminal justice administration have significant negative effects on beliefs about government and levels of civic and political engagement (Weaver and Lerman 2010). Administrative encounters with paternalist welfare programs have similarly negative effects (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Soss 1999, 2000).

In sum, administrative operations can matter greatly for the scope, meaning, and practice of democratic citizenship. Feedback researchers have shone a light on these effects but have rarely pursued their implications for the study of administration. Some recent works have begun to fill the void, asking, for example, how experiences of "red

tape” may affect citizens’ political beliefs and behaviors (Moynihan and Herd 2010) and how performance measures might incorporate civic and political effects (Wichowsky and Moynihan 2008). As a field, however, public administration continues to devote little attention to the ways citizens are positioned and shaped by policy implementation.

In pursuing these questions, students of administration should bear in mind that the kinds of effects described above are variable outcomes of contingent processes. Policy implementation can empower a constituency (e.g., Campbell 2003), marginalize it (Soss 2000), or have no observable effect at all (Patashnik and Zelizer 2013). Major changes to welfare administration have shifted public attitudes in some cases (Svallfors 2010) but have also failed to generate attitudinal change in some cases where expectations of feedback effects were high (Soss and Schram 2007). New administrative categories may fail to achieve cultural resonance and political institutionalization (Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch 2012). More generally, policy implementation may fail to generate feedbacks due to design flaws, poor timing, or inadequate or conflicting institutional supports (Patashnik and Zelizer 2013). Indeed, administrators may play a key role in *stifling* feedback effects, just as they may play a part in their production.

To note these various possibilities is to underscore how much work there is to do. For scholars of administration, the policy feedback concept is an invitation to clarify the conditions under which administrative organizations transform political landscapes – for themselves, for stakeholders and political principals, for organized interests and citizens, for citizenship and democracy as a whole.

Policies Matter for Public Administration

Why do administrative arrangements come into being and persist, and what explains the timing and direction of change when it occurs? There are many answers to these questions. The field is filled with explanations for why organizations settle into routines, acquire durable structures, and develop resilient internal cultures (Burns and Stalker 1961; Schein 1991; Reger et al. 1994). External events can force change, as can the internal dynamics of bureaucratic routines and relations (Feldman and Pentland 2003). Political interests may seek administrative reform as a goal in its own right or as a strategy to advance political agendas (Moe 1989). The list could go on. For our purposes, the key point is that students of administration have largely ignored the role of policy in this process. In bureaucracies as elsewhere, public policies can set processes in motion that reinforce, disrupt, or reorder political relations. Policy is a political force with important consequences for commonly studied administrative phenomena – from administrative capacity, structures, routines, and authority relations to public service motivations and organizational cultures.

To make this point is to sound a dissonant note in the prevailing chorus of administrative scholarship, which typically treats policy as an object of administrative action. Studies of rulemaking and street-level bureaucracy, for example, emphasize how administrators interpret and mold ambiguous policies according to their own interests and needs (Kerwin and Furlong 2010; Brodtkin 2012). Principal-agent theories stress the potential for bureaucrats to implement policies in ways that deviate from principals' wishes (Waterman and Meier 1998). Across a range of theories, the logic of bureaucratic agents acting on policy objects has become so accepted as to be an article of faith.

Policies *are* objects of action, in administration as in the rest of the polity. A feedback perspective calls on scholars not to reject this insight but to complement it with its reverse. If politics and policy shape each other in a reciprocal relationship, and if administrative organizations are sites of political action, then the study of administration today is distorted by a one-sided focus. The fruitful investigation of how administrators shape policy has blinkered researchers to the ways that bureaucracies are remade by the policies they administer.

Because policies shape the political environments on which bureaucracies depend, the preceding section suggests a variety of ways policies matter for administration. In what follows, we turn to the internal life of administrative organizations. To bring some coherence to the discussion, we focus intentionally, though not exclusively, on “poverty governance” in the United States (i.e., welfare and criminal justice policy, see Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Because studies of poverty governance have documented a variety of administrative effects that have not been explored elsewhere, this case provides a helpful basis for clarifying the contributions of a policy feedback approach.

It is helpful to begin with policies that explicitly aim to alter administration. Because they are familiar to administrative scholars, they provide a bridge to our broader argument. Just as feedback researchers have studied how officials sometimes intentionally use policies to reshape the political landscape (e.g., welfare reform in 1996, see Soss and Schram 2007), administrative scholars have analyzed “public management policies” as explicit instruments of administrative reform (Barzelay 2001). The policies that created the Department of Homeland Security, for example, imposed a new frame of reference for bureaucratic action, reorganized authority relations, redistributed resources,

and significantly altered the status and influence of some administrative actors (such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, see Roberts 2013).

As explicit, intentional efforts to restructure bureaucracy, public management policies easily capture the attention of public administration scholars. When it comes to policy's capacity to shape administration, however, they are only the tip of the iceberg. Most prosaically, the form, resources and mission of an agency will usually be articulated in the legislation that creates it, whose goal is to achieve a specific policy end. The design of a new policy will have both immediate and long-term implications for the capacities of administration and the resources at hand. As Skocpol (1992: 58) explains in her study of civil war pensions, efforts to "implement new policies using new or existing administrative arrangements... transform or expand the capacities of the state. They therefore change the administrative possibilities for official initiatives in the future, and affect later prospects for policy implementation."

Just as policies can build bureaucratic capacities, they can also undermine them by setting "negative feedback effects" in motion (Weaver 2010). As evidenced by the long, sorrowful history of racial desegregation in American schools, new policies can mobilize powerful opponents of implementation (Hochschild and Scovronick 2004). A contemporary example of this backlash dynamic can be seen in recent efforts to reform regulation of the financial sector. As the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 moved toward implementation, financial interests and their supporters mobilized to weaken the agencies charged with administering the law. Leveraging influence in Congress and elsewhere, they forced delays and rewrites of administrative rules, sued agencies, and blocked personnel appointments. The net effect

has been to hamstring these agencies, reducing their autonomy and capacity in ways that extend beyond the specific policy in question (Rivlin 2013).

In some cases, policy changes drive major shifts in administration by creating mismatches between goals and capacities. Consider the rise of privatization, contracting, and network governance. Administrative scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to this development, and have done much to clarify its significance. Most work in the field, however, treats this trend as a *fait accompli* and focuses narrowly on its operations and results. A feedback perspective underscores that this restructuring of the administrative state did not arise from a single decision on the merits of networks or private providers. Rather, it emerged piecemeal through a wide range of policy actions, many of which did not focus on administration in an explicit manner and, in fact, were driven by private actors as profit-making strategies (Morgan and Campbell 2011).

In the criminal justice arena, for example, legislators passed policies from the 1970s onward that drove incarceration rates skyward. Even with large investments in prison construction, states simply lacked the administrative capacities needed to house and monitor exploding correctional populations. Privatization and contracting emerged largely as an administrative coping tactic driven by more aggressive policies of correctional control (Wacquant 2009). The migration of correctional authority to private organizations, in turn, created pressures to elaborate modes of performance management designed to extend administrative accountability beyond public, hierarchical bureaucracies (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). The results transformed the field of correctional administration, restructuring it as a network of public and private institutions operating under a common performance-centered umbrella. Parallel patterns of

delegation in Medicare profited and empowered non-state actors that now lobby to expand public spending while seeking to limit public accountability and oversight (Morgan and Campbell 2011).

Welfare reform in 1996 did not create the same pressures because it actively reduced administrative caseloads. Instead, federal policy created new opportunities for states to outsource and encouraged this shift through financial incentives that allowed states to retain unused portions of block grants. State officials now had material reasons to look for low-cost providers – providers whose budgetary prices could be contractually fixed and who could be incentivized to generate savings by moving individuals off the welfare rolls. Thus, policy change promoted a reorganization of welfare administration around outsourcing, contracting, and performance management. In the process, it shifted welfare administration away from state-citizen interactions (organized by a framework of public entitlement) toward a “business model” of exchange between private clients and private providers (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Ridzi 2010).

New policies, in this sense, can be powerful forces of administrative change. Indeed, they can function as a stimulus for organizational adaptation in a variety of ways. Policy upheavals create windows of opportunity for reformers inside bureaucracies, just as they do in the broader polity (Kingdon 2002). The demands of a new policy can shake up administrative routines and expose an organization’s unstated mode of “sensemaking” as a particular, contestable frame of action (Weick 1995). Structural change may be dictated by a policy, as when a new reporting provision forces an agency to establish a new measurement and evaluation office. Or less visibly, new policies may create incentives and resources for managers to reorganize operations in particular ways. Policy

change can empower some organizational units at the expense of others, and alter the status and authority of bureaucratic actors. At the frontlines, new policies can change the tasks that street-level workers perform, the incentives they face, the motivations they experience, and the fields of supervision they must navigate to do their work.

At the same time, a feedback perspective highlights how bureaucracies may adapt more slowly to the policies they put into practice. Reflecting on social psychology, Gordon Allport (1954, 470) once wrote that “as [the individual] *does* something, he becomes something.” The same may be said of administrative organizations. In ways both large and small, bureaucracies may slowly mold their culture, routines, and authority relations around the exigencies of a particular policy.

A public bureaucracy is foremost an organization charged with getting a particular policy job done. It would be strange if administrators did not strive to organize themselves so as to effectively meet the distinctive policy challenges they confront. As daily experiences reveal mismatches between policy-specific responsibilities and administrative operations, they function as a prod for managerial strategies and push personnel to adapt in incremental but consequential ways.

Administrative organizations change for many reasons. Thus, policy shocks and gradual pressures to align operations with policy responsibilities must be analyzed alongside a host of other events and interventions that help explain trajectories of development. The more basic point is this: In seeking to understand why, when, and how bureaucracies change – and what bureaucracies become – scholars should pay more than passing attention to the policy basis of what they do.

The flipside of change, of course, is persistence. A feedback perspective suggests

the importance of asking how policy continuity may promote administrative stability. As bureaucracies develop policy-consonant operations, administrators invest in these arrangements and come to rely on them as bedrocks for their work strategies and expectations of others. The results are often salutary. Stability has been found to improve performance (Meier and O' Toole 2006) and organizations that settle into policy-consonant routines often become more consistent, effective, and efficient in implementing a particular policy. Yet these same feedback dynamics may have less advantageous consequences when bureaucracies are confronted with new challenges.

Feedback scholarship emphasizes the potential for actors and organizations to adapt to policies in ways that make desirable changes harder to achieve (Pierson 1993, 608). Cultures and routines that develop because they work well for one policy can become ingrained and later contribute to failure in the face of new responsibilities (Derthick 1990). If the procedures imposed by policies operate to silence client voices, they may deprive organizations of valuable input about where changes are needed pressures to carry out reforms (Soss 2000). As administrators develop commitments to a policy-specific regime, they may come to see needed reforms as “desirable in the abstract” but too disruptive – or contrary to “who we are and what we do” – to pursue in practice. Just as policies produce invested defenders of the status quo in the polity (Hacker 2002), so too can they create powerful actors in bureaucracies who resist change as a threat to their personal or departmental interests. These and related dynamics can lead to “path dependencies” and, in extreme cases, can function to “lock in” particular modes of administration.

In some cases, invested administrative actors may work to extend and deepen the

terms of the status quo. Page (2011), for example, explains how the growth of administrative capacities needed to implement mass incarceration empowered the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA). As it became a dominant player, the CCPOA leveraged its position to promote even tougher criminal justice policies, more prisons and prisoners, and more correctional officers. But such investments may backfire, and inadvertently create pressures for more radical change when the status quo fails to meet emerging challenges (Daugbjerg 2003; Hacker 2004).

Little is known about why feedback effects work to inhibit administrative change in some cases while promoting it in others. Bureaucracies do sometimes adapt to sharp shifts in policy with great success, even when policy changes cannot be easily assimilated into pre-existing organizational cultures and routines. Thus, a feedback perspective exposes an important but seldom studied plotline within the larger narrative of administrative development. To understand it, one must ask how policies intersect with other forces to shape bureaucracies at Time 1, how policies contribute to administrative stability and evolution over time, and how the legacies of these processes matter for administrative responses to new policies at Time 2.

Illustrative Applications

Administrative scholars can make good use of the policy feedback concept by applying it to specific sites of inquiry in the field. In so doing, administrative scholars will also advance the broader study of policy feedback by grounding it in more sophisticated accounts of specific, consequential dimensions of administrative life. Although a full inventory cannot be presented here, the possibilities can be illustrated by

brief illustrations of how policies shape administration in three areas: organizational culture, worker discretion, and personnel motivation.

Organizational Culture: Organizational cultures frame interpretations, identities, and actions. They supply meanings for objects, languages, and other administrative artifacts, and define what is appropriate to think, feel, and do in specific situations. Leading accounts suggest organizational cultures are fabricated out of elements taken from broader societal cultures, and develop through the lessons administrators learn as they solve problems related to internal integration and survival in external environments (Schein 1991; Yanow 1996). Once established, they are difficult to change (Schein 1991) and may serve to stymie or advance policy change and shape the ways administrators interpret policy and put it into practice (Kaufman 1981; Khademian 2002). Yet little attention has been given to the ways organizational culture may be influenced by public policies.

Organizational cultures are sustained in relation to concrete administrative conditions that can be dislodged by policy change – such as formal guidelines for action, the tasks and roles assigned to workers, how employees are grouped, whom they serve, how they must interact with clients. New policies can also destabilize taken-for-granted worldviews, challenge embedded beliefs, and force reassessments of professional identities. If an organization's experience of a policy shock is traumatic or triumphant enough, it can produce durable cultural beliefs about what works, what threatens and reassures, and “who we are, what we do, and why”.

Feedback scholars in the constructivist tradition emphasize how policies convey expressive cues (Edelman 1977), supply rationales for governmental action (Schneider

and Ingram 1997), and shape the “mentalities of rule” that underwrite “regimes of practice” (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). As the understandings embedded in a new policy intersect with an organizational culture, shifts may occur in each. As Yanow (1996) explains, policies take on meanings as they are translated through administrative objects, languages and acts, and also impart meanings to administrative objects, languages, and acts. To understand organizational cultures, then, one must pay some attention to their ongoing interplay with policy frames, cues, and rationales.

One approach to studying these dynamics is to examine how administrators’ attitudes shift with policy differences across jurisdictions. In a recent study, for example, Lerman and Page (2012, 505) find that “the particular policy environment in which [corrections officers] and their institutions are embedded... shapes their views [of the purposes of imprisonment and how punitive prisons should be], and this varies substantially across states.” Similar insights can be gained by studying the consequences of significant policy reforms. In the lead-up to welfare reform in 1996, for example, reformers argued that welfare agency cultures were “fundamentally flawed” (Winston et al. 2002) and attributed many problems of the poor to bureaucrats’ permissive, paper-processing mentalities (Mead 1992). By design, new policies conveyed new assumptions about the purpose of welfare implementation, the role of case managers, and standards of bureaucratic success.

An extensive literature documents the cultural changes that ensued. New performance discourses became dominant features of administrative life, organizing mentalities of bureaucratic action around quantified results rather than service processes (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). The policy mantras of “work first” and “self-

sufficiency” reframed activities that previously had been understood through the lens of poverty alleviation (Morgen 2001). New languages reframed administrative artifacts in market terms. Managers now described their operations as part of the “welfare industry” and touted the “business model” as an improvement on “old school” social-service ideals (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Caseworkers were recast as career counselors, and clients as candidates (as in job candidates). Many of these developments were accelerated by policies that promoted privatization and, thus, turned for-profit firms into the literal sites of administration (Dias and Maynard Moody 2007).

A number of studies suggest that street-level workers embraced the new culture. Beckerman and Fontana (2001, 42) conclude, for example, that “a cultural shift has occurred at the frontline of welfare reform,” transforming the self-identities of welfare case managers from “eligibility technicians” to “people changing” agents. Ridzi (2004, 34) reports that local managers drew on ascendant welfare discourses and “widely held ideological perspectives” to promote staff allegiance to changes in organizational culture. Finding what he terms “widespread ideological buy-in among staff,” Ridzi (2004, 43-44) concludes that policy change “successfully forged a [new] workplace culture.”

Other scholars find more complex and conflicted effects on organizational culture. Morgen (2001), for example, reports that while new policy rationales “have trickled down to individual workers, there to be reinforced by extensive agency socialization and training, workers still make sense of the agency's mission in ways that are partially marked by their own experiences and values.” Dias and Maynard Moody (2007) find considerable disillusionment – and tendencies toward exit – among workers who prioritize social-work identities and helping values. Soss, Fording, and Schram

(2011, 200, 203) argue that policy change generated a vast “project of renaming and reframing,” established new “regulative norms for public interaction,” and allowed case managers to “derive important [new] aspects of professional identity.” Welfare reform, they conclude, “transformed the organizational culture of governance” (2011, 205). Yet they also argue (2011, 201, 205) that the interaction of welfare reform and pre-existing worker commitments produced a “culture of profound ambivalence” with deep tensions in its “matrix of meanings and priorities”:

Many of the case managers we interviewed were deeply conflicted about the business model, extolling it one moment and lamenting it the next.... Beneath the dominant ethos of the business model runs a potent counterdiscourse rooted in experiences with clients’ lives and values of social service and caregiving.... [Reform] has not imposed a seamless governing mentality on frontline workers. It has produced an organizational culture in which case manager identities and commitments are shifting and contested. Case managers do not ‘buy in’ to the neoliberal agenda, internalizing it as a hegemonic ideology and enacting it as their own free will.... They experience it [for good and ill] as an organizing reality (2011, 201, 202, 204).

Although there are important variations across this literature, relevant studies largely agree that new welfare policies operated as active forces that changed organizational cultures and, thus, had substantial, observable effects on administration. In the process, they pushed poor people’s civic and cultural experiences of welfare farther from the normative experiences of citizens in full standing (Soss and Schram 2008). Unlike Social Security administrators, street-level workers in welfare programs are now immersed in a culture of gatekeeping and people-changing, where minimal benefits are leveraged to make marginalized workers more available and attractive to employers.

Worker Discretion: The concept of discretion has been central to scholarly accounts of how bureaucrats transform policy (Lipsky 1980). To understand what a

policy is and does, one must look to the ways it is shaped through uses of discretion. A feedback perspective reconceives this relationship as a two-way street.

Actors at all levels of administration use their discretion in ways that remake policy and help explain policy effects. A policy, however, is not a *tabula rasa* that implementing actors can write on in any way they like. Policies define parameters for discretionary action; they structure decisions and frame choice sets. They supply rationales and incentives that can make some administrative decisions more “thinkable” or desirable than others.

In these and other ways, welfare reform transformed discretion in street-level organizations. As policy change shifted the focus of welfare implementation, it altered the scope and bias of administrative discretion as well as the power relations that shape discretionary action. In many cases, actors found that the scope of their discretion broadened considerably. At the same time, they found that the new regime gave them leeway on some matters more than others and structured and incentivized their decisions to promote particular paths of action (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Caseworkers acquired new forms of discretion in assessing needs, allocating services, and enforcing program requirements (Brodkin 1997, 2012). Recast in a more directive and supervisory role, they possessed new powers over clients – especially disciplinary powers related to surveillance, penalty, and the ability mandate participation in “people-changing” activities (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

At the same time, though, welfare reform imposed new structural and managerial constraints on frontline discretion. Caseworkers found they were given less time to spend with clients and had fewer tools and resources to improve their lot. New policies dictating

required activities for clients (and demanding documentation) left caseworkers with fewer options for going “off-script” based on clients’ particular needs. As one case manager explained to Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011: 237-8):

This program is structured [like] a cookie cutter approach to people who are individuals [who] have different needs, who have different barriers, and they’re forcing us to put them in the same type of process. Even though they’ve implemented all these new quote-unquote programs, they’re cookie cutter programs. You’re requiring everyone to come in and do the same thing and follow the same process from beginning to end.

At the same time, new measurement systems dictated by welfare reform made caseworkers’ uses of discretion more legible to managers and, thus, open to supervisory control. In addition, managers acquired new tools for shaping work conditions and disciplining employee performance. As a result, they gained the upper hand in relations with caseworkers, and became better able to observe, constrain, and shape their uses of discretion (Brodkin 2012). Dias and Maynard Moody (2007: 303) report: “despite their personal impetus, line staff were constrained by the management’s guidelines. When queried on how much flexibility they had to design individual programs for their clients, caseworkers responded, ‘Not much. I mean the [manager’s] guidelines are very specific. [The management] give us you know what THEY want to do.’”

A closer look at managers, however, reveals that their enhanced efforts at control were far less than autonomous choices made on an open field of supervisory discretion. By establishing performance benchmarks focused on work participation and placement, federal policymakers defined the goals of implementation and terms of its evaluation (Brodkin 2011). State and local officials, who were “freed” to make a broader array of policy choices after reform, did so under strong pressures to achieve the federally mandated goals that determined their future funding (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Welfare program managers occupied a similar position: Their new opportunities for decision-making were structured and incentivized by the need to meet performance goals set by policymakers above. Their efforts to monitor and control frontline workers were directed by federal policy priorities and motivated by new performance-based rewards and penalties. Managerial discretion, like caseworker discretion, became broader under welfare reform but also more carefully monitored, structured, and incentivized. Responding to the policy forces impinging on them, managers acted to ensure that frontline workers were aware of performance targets and the close monitoring of their individual numbers.

To say that new policies organized and shaped discretion, however, is not to say that they precluded administrative gaming and subversion. Welfare providers hired their own clients to artificially raise performance scores, classified client activities in dubious but performance-enhancing ways, and regulated program entries and exits to boost performance at the expense of service provision (Dias and Maynard Moody 2007; Soss, Fording and Schram 2011). Through these and other behaviors, they used their discretion to serve their own firms' financial interests at the expense of helping clients and achieving stated policy goals.

These sorts of bureaucratic responses are a staple of the literature on performance systems (Heinrich and Marschke 2011). Typically, administrative gaming and subversion are thought of as unanticipated and undesirable *effects on* policy. From a feedback perspective, they may be reframed as policy effects on administration in their own right. In some cases, administrative gaming and subversion may resemble other forms of backlash and resistance that scholars describe as “negative policy feedback” (Weaver

2010). In other cases, they may be “rationally perverse” responses to the structures, pressures, and incentives created by the policy itself (Soss, Fording and Schram 2011). Whether they are anticipated by policymakers or not, both dynamics are more than just “unanticipated consequences”. They are administrative consequences of policy that merit theoretical and empirical attention as feedback effects.

Personnel Motivation: The field of public administration has recently experienced a renaissance of interest in the motivational bases of bureaucratic action. Particular interest has focused on public service motivation (PSM), understood as “an individual’s orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society” (Perry and Hondeghem 2008, vii). Studies suggest that PSM and other administrative motivations can derive from a variety of sources and become more or less salient for personnel depending on prevailing frames and contextual conditions. In particular, motivations can be shaped by organizational factors and depend on the fit between organizational and individual values (Bellé 2013; Moynihan and Pandey 2007). Policies, we suggest, play an underappreciated role in this process.

Consistent with motivational theories emphasizing fit between the organization and individual, a recent cross-national study finds that motivation to help others is positively related to job satisfaction only when workers believe they work for an organization that is making a positive difference for society (Kjeldsen and Andersen 2013). Crucially, the authors find that the patterning of this dynamic depends significantly on policy context: more generous welfare regimes strengthen the relationships.

As this example suggests, policies can establish critical “background conditions” for administrative motivation. Under what conditions should we expect a “desire to help others” to become more salient to administrators? When are public servants likely to see themselves as working for an institution that advances pro-social ends? From a feedback perspective, one might suggest: when they work in a society or community where policies are designed to provide extensive help to others and benefit society as a whole, and when they are asked to implement policies that express pro-social rationales.

In more proximate ways, we should expect policies to effect motivations to the extent that they influence the organizational structures, routines, and cultures in which administrators are embedded. When policies alter the conditions of work, and the values an organization represents, changes in motivation are likely to follow. Studies of “crowding-out” effects, for example, indicate that altruistic or intrinsic desires can be displaced when administrators shift to a work setting that fails to value and encourage these motivations (Langbein 2010; Weibel, Rost and Osterloh 2010). Accordingly, as policies emphasize extrinsic rewards and performance targets, they may undermine other motivational bases of public service (Moynihan 2010).

Welfare reform again offers a telling case. Evidence suggests that new policies changed organizational environments in ways that sapped frontline workers of their desire to help others. Not surprisingly, many workers reported a diminished sense that their work had a positive impact. Dias and Maynard Moody (2007, 2007), for example, recount that “frontline staff were hired for their devotion to client-centered service – they were social workers by either training and/or orientation – yet at WorkOpts they were

being asked to forgo their training and ethics for an economic model that they maintain did not benefit them or their clients.”

Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011, 222) report that case managers developed a deeply “conflicted perspective” at the intersection of performance-based motivational systems and “their desires to provide a humane and supportive resource for clients.” As one caseworker explained, “The way we’re able to [stay in business and] help people is by making our [performance] measurements.... So the more we make those measurements... the more we can help candidates. But the more we focus on [measures], the less we’re focusing on the candidates. So it’s a catch-22.”

For some workers, the welfare agency became a painful representation of the contradictions between pro-social service aspirations and performance-centered, disciplinary public policy. One caseworker interviewed by Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011, 203) burst into tears as she vented her frustration: “The policymakers need to come and sit in our chairs for a while and see. Do they even understand the welfare program? There has to be another way.... There should always be a system to help people. I always hoped there would be because [pauses, sobs].”

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, interest in policy feedback has helped revive the study of public policy in political science. Indeed, research on feedback effects is now increasingly common throughout the social sciences. Public administration, however, remains a land apart. Students of policy feedback have paid limited attention to administrative particulars, while most administrative scholars have ignored feedback effects altogether. On both sides of the divide, scholars have deprived themselves of

intellectual resources and squandered significant opportunities for intellectual growth.

Administration is more than just a creature of politics, and it does more than just proceed in a political environment. It is, in its own right, a significant force in the ordering of political relations. As bureaucracies implement policies, they transform the political landscapes on which they operate. In ways that are seldom appreciated, their activities influence the vitality of democracy, the meaning of citizenship, and the organization of political life. The concept of policy feedback opens up new avenues for theoretical and empirical scholarship, anchored by the recognition that administration is a critical moment in the ongoing interplay of policy and politics.

Some may be unsettled by a conceptual framework that puts so much analytic emphasis on reciprocal, ongoing relationships. Policy feedback, some may worry, takes us into a dizzying space where the recursive relations of policy and politics become too complex to model and all explanatory factors become endogenous. This concern is easily overstated. First, it is widely accepted that changing economic and social conditions can prompt policy actions that, in turn, affect these same conditions. A feedback perspective merely suggests that scholars must approach political conditions in ways that parallel the (frequently successful) analytic strategies applied to these domains. Second, many of the examples cited in this essay provide clear demonstrations of how scholars have succeeded in testing policy-feedback propositions as causal relations embedded in longer-term reciprocal processes. Third, while a feedback approach suggests extra reasons to be skeptical of causal claims based on cross-sectional analyses, administrative scholars can employ an assortment of methodological tools to build evidence that causal relations run in a particular direction, in a particular way, at a particular time. Researchers can use

longitudinal data to construct pre- and post-observations related to policy exposure or change. Incremental differences in policy levels can be analyzed for expected “dosage” effects. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs can be used to establish a policy’s political effects – just as they are now used to establish social and economic effects. Field research can trace causal processes, specify mechanisms, and evaluate the plausibility of claims linking policies to political effects. Historical analyses can trace how directions of influence shift over time, and statistical analyses can draw on a host of techniques for parsing the balance and direction of potentially reciprocal relationships. None of these techniques is novel, and all can be fruitfully applied to address the empirical phenomena highlighted by a policy feedback agenda.

The challenges are worth taking on, not only because they are consequential realities of administrative life, but also because the policy feedback concept offers a fresh perspective on a host of old and venerable questions in the study of administration. In a field where analysis is typically organized around what bureaucrats do to public policies (or use public policies to do), the call to study how policies shape bureaucracies is an invitation to see the administrative world turned upside down. It reveals new possibilities for explaining dynamics of administrative development, with the potential to contribute greatly to our understandings of organizational stability and change. It offers a distinctive vantage point for thinking about the sources and significance of phenomena such as organizational culture, worker discretion, and personnel motivation.

In the study of public administration as elsewhere, policy feedbacks will inevitably matter more in some cases than others. For many research questions, the concept will prove superfluous. The recent growth of policy feedback scholarship,

however, represents an important provocation to the field. The time has come to revisit the idea that policies are objects of administrative action and little more. As bureaucracies transform policies, they are themselves transformed. As bureaucracies implement policies, they remake conditions of political possibility and reorder the polity itself.

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