P05 / Populism and Bureaucracy – Institutional and Ideological Dynamics in Governance

Topic : POLICY, POLITICS AND POLITICAL REGIME

Chair : Kutsal Yesilkagit (Leiden University)

Second Chair : B. Guy Peters (University of Pittsburgh)

Third Chair : Jon Pierre (Dept of Political Science, University of Gothenburg)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General Objective

This panel examines the multifaceted interaction between populist movements and bureaucratic institutions, focusing on how institutional structures and populist ideologies jointly shape this relationship. While populism often challenges bureaucratic stability, the impact of populism varies significantly based on both the ideological leanings of the movement (right-wing, left-wing, or otherwise) and the specific political-institutional frameworks—such as federal versus unitary, presidential versus parliamentary systems, and centralised versus decentralised administrative structures.

By investigating how populist movements with distinct ideological aims interact with various institutional settings, the panel seeks to understand how these combined factors influence bureaucratic integrity, adaptability, and resistance. This dual approach will clarify the conditions under which populist movements either reshape or reinforce bureaucratic norms and practices across different national contexts.

Research Question

The central research question guiding this panel is:

How do the combined effects of institutional configurations and ideological orientations of populist movements influence the interaction between populism and bureaucracy, and what implications do these dynamics hold for governance and administrative resilience?

Key sub-questions include:

- How do federal and unitary systems affect the pathways through which populist movements, depending on their ideological orientations, interact with and challenge bureaucratic institutions?

- In what ways do presidential and parliamentary regimes influence the strategies used by left- and right-wing populists in their engagements with bureaucracies?

- How does administrative centralisation or decentralisation mediate the influence of ideologically varied populist movements on the stability and adaptability of bureaucratic institutions?

- How do party system structures (single-party vs. multi-party) impact populist engagement with bureaucracy, and do these effects differ between left- and right-wing populists?

Justification of Scientific Relevance

The recent global surge in populism has highlighted the vulnerability of bureaucratic institutions to political disruption, yet the role of ideological and institutional factors in shaping this vulnerability remains under-explored. Right-wing populists often seek to minimize bureaucratic intervention, emphasizing deregulation and nationalism, while left-wing populists may advocate for reforms aimed at promoting social equity through bureaucracy. However, these ideological aims are conditioned by the specific institutional settings in which populists operate, influencing whether they can bypass, reshape, or co-opt bureaucratic structures to align with their agendas.

This panel brings a comparative perspective to this under-researched area, examining how the interplay between institutional structures and ideological orientations affects the populism-bureaucracy relationship. By integrating ideological and institutional factors, this panel aims to identify patterns that explain the resilience or susceptibility of bureaucracies to populist influence. The findings are pertinent for both scholars and policymakers, offering insights on how institutional design can either buffer or amplify the effects of ideologically varied populist movements.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite scholars to submit empirical, theoretical, or methodological papers that explore the interaction between populism and bureaucracy through a dual focus on ideological orientation and institutional context. Papers may address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Case studies on how ideologically distinct populist movements have attempted to challenge or co-opt bureaucratic institutions within different institutional structures.

- Comparative analyses of bureaucratic resilience in countries with varying institutional configurations (e.g., federal vs. unitary, presidential vs. parliamentary) and the contrasting approaches of left- and right-wing populists within these frameworks.

- Theoretical or empirical explorations of how left-wing populist governance, often advocating social equity reforms, impacts bureaucracy differently than right-wing populist agendas, which may emphasise deregulation and nationalism.

- Studies on how multi-party and two-party systems shape the influence of ideologically distinct populist movements on bureaucratic institutions.

- Investigations into how centralised versus decentralised bureaucratic structures respond to the pressures of both left- and right-wing populist movements, with regional case studies on populist influence in local versus national governance.

We welcome submissions from diverse fields, including public administration, political science, public policy, and comparative politics, that offer new insights into how the combined forces of institutional design and ideological orientation shape bureaucratic governance in populist contexts.

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Session 1

Friday, July 4th 08:00 to 10:00 (D3)

Populism and Bureaucracy in Italy During the Meloni Government (2022-2024)

Fabrizio Di Mascio (Università di Torino)

Anna Malandrino (Università di Torino)

Alessandro Natalini (University Parthenope)

This paper explores the evolving dynamics of public service bargains in Italy under the Meloni government (2022–2024), the first explicitly right-wing government in the country's republican history. Using a historical-institutionalist approach, the study examines how populist political strategies—emphasizing political loyalty over competence—have
transformed the interaction between political leadership and bureaucracy. We address the panel's central research question by analyzing how the Meloni government's ideological orientation, combined with Italy's Napoleonic administrative tradition, influenced political control mechanisms and eroded bureaucratic autonomy. The findings
highlight that institutional configurations, such as entrenched legalism, facilitated incremental changes in public service bargains.
These changes were achieved through the strategic conversion of rules initially designed to enhance technical expertise, redirecting them to entrench political loyalty instead.

Our analysis engages with the panel's sub-questions by detailing how ministerial reorganizations and appointment practices were leveraged to consolidate political control, examining how these strategies unfolded in Italy's parliamentary regime. Methodologically, the research combines archival analysis with process tracing, offering insights into the
long-term effects of populist governance on administrative adaptability. The findings contribute to broader debates on the implications of populism for governance, with particular attention to the structural and ideological constraints shaping the resilience of
bureaucratic institutions under populist rule.

(Virtual) Balancing distance and connectedness: policy advisory bodies in a context of science resistance

Alyt Damstra (University of Amsterdam)

The relation between policy advisory bodies and national governments is characterized by a delicate balance between autonomy and control (Verschuere, 2007; Hegger 2017). For policy advisory bodies that work at arm's length, this balancing act is illustrated by the somewhat contrived descriptions of their position, such as 'embedded autonomy' or 'bounded freedom' (Bressers, 2022). In order to effectively provide the national government with advise, both sollicited and unsollicited, these semiautonomous governmental bodies must operate autonomously but also need to organise a certain level of connectedness with policymakers and politicians (Wesseling & Hoppe, 2020).

In this paper, I argue that the dual task of keeping a distance and organizing connectedness has become more challenging due to two broad developments that contribute to a context of science resistance. First, the transformation of the information environment has deprived scientific expertise from its self-evident authority (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In a context of abundant supply and changing curated flows (Thorson & Wells, 2016), scientific expertise and journalistic products have lost ground to more entertaining and

personalized content. The rise of alternative media and social media platforms has fueled the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Levendusky, 2018). Characterized by antisystemness (Holt, 2018), these accounts frequently question the integrity of scientists. Second, the past decades witnessed the global rise of populist movements. In West-European countries, this rise has prominently been driven by populism at the (radical) right end of the political spectrum (see popu-list.org). Populism depicts society as divided between the people (pure) versus the elite (corrupt), and assumes that politics is about popular sovereignty at any cost (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Populism tends to crititize traditional epistemic authorities. Experts, as part of the elite, are typically accused of being politically biased, which undermines the scientific legitimacy of the knowledge they produce (Ruzza & Trenz, 2022). Together, these developments have gradually altered the force field in which policy advisory bodies operate.

This paper explores the implications of this changing context for the dual task of keeping a distance and organizing connectedness for policy advisory bodies. More specifically, I look at two policy advisory bodies in the Netherlands: The Advisory Council on Migration (Adviesraad Migratie) and The Netherlands Scientific Climate Council (Wetenschappelijke Klimaatraad). Both councils translate (scientific) expertise into policy advise related to issue domains that are highly politicized. The current far right government, with the populist Freedom Party being the largest party in government, has thus far shown limited receptivity to external advise or expertise. This is illustrated by the far-reaching asylum policy proposals that the government presented in 2024 without consulting the Advisory Council on Migration.

To obtain a better understanding of this dimension of the populism-bureaucracy relationship, I conduct interviews with council members and staff working for both advisory bodies. Questions pertain to the organization of both independence and connectedness, the challenges that science resistance presents for both ends and what is needed for these organizations to maintain their function in the future.

Regulating Truth: The Role of Bureaucracy in Populist Control Over Digital Speech

Yashas P R (Christ University)

anurag mehra (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

PRERNA YADAV (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

This paper examines how multi-party systems shape populist engagement with bureaucracy, comparing the distinct pathways through which India’s right-wing populist government and Brazil’s left-wing populist government institutionalize ideological control through fake news regulation. While both operate within multi-party political environments, their approaches to embedding ideology into bureaucracy differ based on their political strategies and state structures.

In India, the BJP-led right-wing populist government has utilized its electoral dominance and executive centralization to reshape digital governance through bureaucratic restructuring. The IT Rules 2021 grant the executive direct oversight of content moderation, allowing bureaucratic agencies to enforce state-aligned narratives while maintaining the appearance of regulatory neutrality. This model reflects a top-down engagement, where bureaucracy is instrumentalized to consolidate centralized control over digital spaces.In contrast, Brazil’s left-wing populist government under Lula operates in a highly fragmented multi-party system, requiring a coalition-based bureaucratic approach. The Fake News Bill (PL 2630/2020) embeds misinformation regulation within judicial and independent regulatory bodies. By leveraging institutional legitimacy through judicial activism and bureaucratic oversight councils, Brazil’s left-wing populists embed ideological influence within procedural mechanisms, ensuring regulatory control while avoiding overt political centralization.

This study employs process tracing to analyze how these fake news laws developed, were framed, and possible institutionalization in both countries. By reconstructing the sequence of legislative debates, government justification and media narratives. It identifies the plausible strategic embedding of ideological narratives into regulatory frameworks. Despite ideological differences, both models reinforce populist legitimacy by leveraging bureaucratic authority to control digital information flows while maintaining the appearance of democratic oversight. These findings suggest that populism's relationship with bureaucracy is less about ideology and more about structural power consolidation, where the institutional context determines whether control is centralized or diffused through regulatory networks.

Party Institutionalization and Ministers’ Cabinet Careers in Presidential Democracies

Dong Lee (Sungkyunkwan University)

How does the institutionalization of parties affect presidential cabinet management? The comparative

literature on party organizations in presidential democracies suggests that there is a trade-off between political support and technical competence in choosing political insiders versus outsiders as ministers. Yet, how this trade-off can vary according to party institutionalization is much less understood. In this article, we argue that institutionalized parties pose greater challenges but offer more opportunities to presidential cabinet management. As parties surrounding presidents become more institutionalized, presidents feel greater pressure to accommodate their demands, but they also create a sizable pool of talent within organizations. Our analysis of original data on more than 1,500 ministers' cabinet careers in Asia shows that the more institutionalized parties become, the more likely political insiders are retained in and the less likely they exit from cabinets than political outsiders. This finding suggests that presidential cabinets are managed by a different set of rules according to the levels of party institutionalization.