P35 / Negotiating Loyalties. Civil servants between legality and majority rule.

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

Chair : Marylou HAMM (Université Rennes I)

Second Chair : Céleste Bonnamy (Sciences Po Lille)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel examines the tensions that run through civil servants' loyalties across levels of governance, from local and national administrations to international organisations and European Union institutions. To what does a civil servant owe loyalty: the constitution or the majority? Over the past decade, this question has acquired renewed salience with the multiplication of cases of democratic backsliding in countries such as the United States, Hungary, Argentina, Brazil, or Italy (Guedes-Neto & Peters 2025). Extreme parties have gained ground in France and Germany, as well as in the European Parliament, while disputes have also emerged over specific decisions or policy areas, such as relations with Russia or Israel. The panel examines the consequences, for bureaucrats, of stances perceived as conflicting with core liberal-democratic values. Its puzzle lies in the civil service status, which combines obligations of neutrality, loyalty and responsibility with rights to freedom of opinion and expression. Put differently, it concerns how civil servants reconcile two foundational principles, majority rule and the rule of law, in the day-to-day work of government (Bischoff, 2022). The empirical question thus becomes: when, and by whom, is bureaucratic resistance deemed justified, and how is it enacted (Bauer, 2024)?

The panel addresses the following empirical questions. How do staff draw the boundary between appropriate professional conduct and political engagement? Which repertoires of voice, from the spectacular to the discreet, do they mobilise when they disagree with an institutional position, or with the absence of one? How do these repertoires vary according to agents' positions, careers and trajectories? How are the norms of neutrality, loyalty and responsibility appropriated, contested and renegotiated in everyday practice, and with what effects on individuals, collectives and institutions? How is the role of civil servant invested, stretched or redefined at critical junctures?

Particular, though not exclusive, attention will be paid to IOs and EU institutions. These face mounting 'populist' pressure (Clark & Carnegie, 2026), depend on member states while being grounded in international law, and are accused of double standards, for instance over Ukraine and Palestine (Oleart & Roch, 2025). Their staff work amid tensions between depoliticising frames, which cast issues in legal or technical terms (Louis & Maertens, 2021), and politicising frames, which foreground what is politically at stake (Voltolini, 2020). Yet little is known about how agents experience and manage these tensions in their daily work. Research remains scarce and fragmented across international relations and EU studies, whereas public administration scholarship has developed a rich body of work on these issues in recent years (Yesilkagit, Bauer, Peters & Pierre, 2024).

The panel brings together empirical studies grounded in fieldwork, such as ethnography, interviews or archival research, conducted at local, national, European or international levels, or in comparative perspective. It particularly welcomes in-depth case studies of specific political controversies, as well as research on trade unions and on newer issue-based staff collectives as forms of mobilisation. The stakes are both theoretical and practical: how civil service duties are defined, how loyalty is interpreted, and how both are reconciled with freedom of expression at work.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite paper proposals examining how public servants define, politicise and enact their loyalties when taking a stand. Contributions on international organisations and European Union institutions, where research remains scarce, are particularly welcome. We encourage proposals in the following areas, including those that combine several of them:

Empirical studies of staff politicization: We welcome empirically grounded papers, whether qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods. Approaches such as discourse analysis and frame analysis are especially encouraged, to show how staff label, justify or contest their own positions and those of their institution. Genealogies and comparisons of mobilizations: Papers may trace the history of staff mobilizations or

compare movements across institutions, sectors, levels of governance or periods. Both traditional forms of collective action, such as trade unions, and newer issue-based groups are of interest.
Social movement perspectives: We invite analyses of networks and alliances, within and beyond the institution, as well as partnerships with academic or other institutional actors. How do staff build resources, legitimacy and support?
Socio-legal perspectives on staff regulations: Contributions may examine how provisions on neutrality, loyalty, responsibility and freedom of expression are interpreted, invoked and contested, by staff, management and courts alike.
Institutional reception: How do administrations and hierarchies treat these mobilizations, whether by tolerating, channeling, sanctioning or ignoring them? Papers on the effects of such responses on staff practices are welcome.
Proposals should clearly state their empirical material, theoretical framing and contribution to the panel's questions. Early-career researchers are warmly encouraged to submit.

References (order of appearence in the call):

Guedes-Neto, João V., et B. Guy Peters. 2025. Bureaucratic Resistance in Times of Democratic Backsliding. Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Core. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009437479.

Bischoff, Carina Saxlund. 2023. « Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Balancing the Duties of Political Responsiveness and Legality in the Civil Service ». Public Administration 101 (4): 1481?502. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12898.

Bauer, Michael W. 2024. « Administrative Responses to Democratic Backsliding: When Is Bureaucratic Resistance Justified? » Regulation & Governance 18 (4): 1104?17. https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12567.

Carnegie, Allison, et Richard Clark. 2026. Global governance under fire: how international organizations resist the populist wave. 1st éd. Princeton studies in international history and politics. Princeton University Press.

Oleart, Alvaro, et Juan Roch. 2025. « The Colonial Imaginary of ‘Europe’ in the EU’s Asymmetrical Response to the Russian and Israeli Aggressions: Ukraine as a Member of the ‘Family’ Whilst ‘Othering’ Palestine ». JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 63 (6): 1685?709. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13719.

Louis, Marieke, et Lucile Maertens. 2021. Why International Organizations Hate Politics: Depoliticizing the World. Édité par Marieke Louis. Global Institutions. Taylor & Francis Routledge.

Voltolini, Benedetta. 2020. « Ontological Crises, Framing and the (de)Politicisation of EU Foreign Policy: The Case of EU-Israel Relations ». Journal of European Integration 42 (5): 751?66. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1792463.

Yesilkagit, Kutsal, Michael Bauer, B. Guy Peters, et Jon Pierre. 2024. « The Guardian State: Strengthening the Public Service against Democratic Backsliding ». Public Administration Review 84 (3): 414?25. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13808.