01 / The Bureaucracy Between Truth and Politics

Topic : WORKSHOPS

Chair : Hanna Van Bentum (Leiden University)

Second Chair : Lars Dorren (Leiden University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Bureaucracies have recently regained attention in political theory and policy research as the part of the state apparatus that can push back against populist or autocratic movements (Heath, 2020; Leruth, 2024; Van Lit, 2026; Yesilkagit et al., 2024). This new role highlights already existing tensions in the way we think about the relationship between politics and bureaucracy, and the role concepts such as ‘truth’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘the political’ play in this relationship.

On the one hand, bureaucracies are expected to push back against certain political movements and ‘defend democracy’ against ‘anti-democratic backsliding’ (Norman & Beckman, 2024; Yesilkagit et al., 2024). They can supposedly ‘speak truth to power’ (Wildavsky, 1987) by providing technically sound and politically neutral responses to complex societal problems on the basis of the best evidence available, and by “putting independent science at the heart of [EU] policymaking” (The Joint Research Centre, n.d.). On the other hand, bureaucracies remain embedded within democratic systems that require contestation, representation, and political legitimacy, and bureaucrats are conventionally understood as implementers of the general will. This means that bureaucracies are also expected to be attentive of particular interests when they function in ‘horizontal networks’ (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004) where they treat other stakeholders such as citizen groups or private sector parties as relative equal partners. The policies they produce, which are said to have to be based on evidence produced by universities or government research agencies, also have to be sensitive to alternative perspectives and worldviews to avoid accusations of being too ‘technocratic’. Complicating this further, concepts such as ‘evidence’, ‘truth’ and ‘neutrality’ are themselves contested, with the result that bureaucracies have to explicitly or implicitly navigate ambiguities around their meaning (Pedersen, 2014; Posselt & Seitz, 2023).

Thus, bureaucracies are expected to simultaneously act as guardians of expertise and democratic stability while avoiding undue political influence, and at the same time engage directly with actors outside representative procedures. Tensions may emerge when bureaucrats are expected to reconcile these roles, that do not always fit together easily. What should bureaucrats do when scientific evidence conflicts with citizens’ experiences, or when the stakeholder they are interacting with does not share their epistemological principles? What if a piece of scientific evidence goes against political preferences?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Many of these tensions are irresolvable (see, for example, Dorren, 2026). This panel seeks examine the practical and interpretive processes through which bureaucratic actors navigate them regardless. Administrative structures establish distinctions between expertise and politics, neutrality and discretion, facts and values. Such distinctions function as meaning-making devices through which actors understand their roles. Yet these distinctions rarely remain stable in practice. Bureaucracies then, are spaces in which meanings attached to truth, expertise, and political responsibility are continuously (re-)interpreted. This panel invites papers that focus on administrative meaning-making practices under such epistemic tensions. Critical and interpretative approaches are especially suited to this endeavor, as they can foreground the complex nexus of meaning-making that shapes and is shaped by practices in contemporary bureaucracies.

We are particularly interested in the ways governmental actors beside the visible sphere of politics shape understandings of truth and politics; how administrative structures shape expectations regarding what bureaucrats are expected to do; and how truth claims become administratively actionable through (interpretive) practices. The panel welcomes conceptual, empirical, and normative contributions related, but not limited, to themes such as the production and interpretation of truth claims, bureaucratic identities, and the bureaucracy as a source and symbol of epistemic order. The objective of this panel is to build a network dedicated to understanding these types of meaning-making in bureaucracies amidst modern-day tensions.

Possible contributions may address questions such as:

- How do bureaucrats reconcile their role as experts with expectations of democratic accountability and citizen participation
- How are epistemologies reshaped when citizens become partners, co-producers, or challengers?
- How does evidence impact decision making in bureaucracies?
- How do bureaucracies navigate the tension between defending democratic stability and avoiding undue political influence?
- What role do power-relations play in determining whose knowledge, expertise, and perspectives are considered legitimate in bureaucratic decision-making?

Studying these questions will not only help us understand how modern states deal with the tensions that live inside them, it will also allow us to think of new ways in which the state relates to its broader environment. Recent phenomena such as the rise of populism and post-truth politics challenge established ways of thinking about bureaucracies and their relation to truth and politics. Existing research suggests that simply reinforcing current approaches through the introduction of more or higher quality evidence does not necessarily resolve the tensions between bureaucracies and their environment; instead, it may even intensify them (Dorren & Wolf, 2023; Wolf & Van Dooren, 2017). Whether this new reality is for better or worse can be debated, but these changes do call for new ways of understanding the role and place of bureaucracies in a changing world.

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