Book Review

Bureaucracy and Democracy: Accountability and Performance, 3rd ed.

By William T. Gormley and Steven J. Balla

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REVIEW AUTHOR
Barbara Coyle McCabe
University of Texas–San Antonio

Bureaucracy and Democracy is neither a philosophical treatise on the role of unelected administrators in a democratic state nor a history of the bureaucratic idea from Weber to the present. It is a public policy text that directly addresses the bureaucracy’s role in each stage of the policy process, from formulation through implementation.

Public policy texts often concentrate heavily on legislatures, executives, and interest groups but touch on administrative agencies lightly. Bureaucracy and Democracy abandons this traditional formula to give students of public affairs a pragmatic yet theoretically driven account of the public bureaucracy as the point in which “some of society’s most fundamental decisions are made” (p. 6). Gormley and Balla further concentrate on what federal administrative agencies do to respond to the age-old problem of bureaucratic accountability as well as the more recent concern with demonstrable bureaucratic performance. In this scholarly assessment, the authors employ four theoretical lenses—bounded rationality, principal-agent theory, interest group mobilization, and network theory—to explain the actions of administrative agencies and demonstrate the ways in which a single theory casts light on some aspects of bureaucracies’ behavior but ignores others.

Bureaucracy and Democracy is an even-handed account that casts agencies as neither heroes nor villains. The focus on theory, accountability, and performance is used to explain much of the variation in what federal agencies do, how they go about their work, and why their processes, outcomes, and reputations differ.

The initial chapter places the bureaucracy in its policy-making context, considers the various forms of accountability, examines the connections between agency accountability and performance, and discusses recent efforts to gauge performance. Frequent examples demonstrate the application of these key standards. The next four chapters apply each theoretical framework in turn. Chapter two examines bureaucratic reasoning, using bounded rationality to explain how bureaucrats make decisions and how bureaucracies promote relatively consistent, reliable responses to policy implementation. The discussion touches on simplified problem solving (e.g., unbundling problems, standard operating procedures,
evidence-based analysis); bureaucratic motivation (e.g., incentives, empathy, commitment, representative bureaucracy, attitudes toward risk); and organizational cohesion (e.g., socialization, professionalism, expertise). Chapter three uses principal-agent theory and the concomitant issues of delegation, adverse selection, and moral hazard to assess the bureaucracy and its many “bosses”—the executive, legislative, and judicial branches in addition to the agency’s clientele. Chapter four considers the bureaucracy’s clients and employs interest group mobilization theories to assess the public’s access to and influence on agency policy-making. In Chapter five, policy implementation is viewed from the perspectives of network theory and the policy tools literature. Chapter six applies these theories as well as considerations of accountability and performance in systematic analyses of disaster management of four different cases: Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, the “bird flu,” and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The final chapter concludes with propositions that bring together key points from earlier chapters to suggest why some kinds of agencies or programs appear to perform better than others.

Each chapter is grounded on a strong review of the seminal and current literatures and illustrates salient points with contemporary examples. The focus on accountability and performance puts processes like rulemaking, budget meetings, measuring performance, or committee hearings in context as purposive efforts to assure agency accountability or evaluate agency performance. The result is a text that helps students understand why federal agencies behave as they do. Bureaucracy and Democracy also exemplifies the kind of systematic analysis, literature review, and use of theory to make sense of specific phenomena that many of us train our students to perform.

The focus on bureaucratic action makes Bureaucracy and Democracy a welcome addition to a graduate or advanced undergraduate policy or introduction to public affairs course. For students of policy from the disciplines of economics or political science, the text fills part of the gap in the operation of public agencies and theories of public organizations that are far too frequently left unfilled.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Barbara Coyle McCabe is an associate professor in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Texas–San Antonio, where she teaches policy, economics for public affairs, public budgeting and finance, and theories of public organizations. Her research, focused on urban governance and the intersections between politics and markets, has been published in this and other journals.