

How powerful are public bureaucrats as voters?

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Abstract

Empirical evidence is collected and discussed regarding the influence of public bureaucrats on government sector outcome in their capacity as consumer-voters. It is necessary to isolate the specific effect of working in the public sector (compared to other occupations) on voting participation and on the probability to support an increase in the public budget. For a balanced evaluation of public bureaucrats' power, other forms of their influencing the government sector outcome need to be taken into account.

1. Introduction

The behavior of public bureaucracy is analyzed in Public Choice mainly with regard to the *demand* for goods and services exerted by the members of the bureaucracy in their capacity as consumer-voters.¹ The median voter model is used to analyze to what extent bureaucrats can influence the outcome of referenda and elections in their own favor through their voting behavior.² This may well be the case because, in addition to benefiting from the public supply of goods and services as consumers, as do all voters, they also benefit from the provision itself as this may result in increased prestige and higher salaries for them. They therefore show a preference – *ceteris paribus* – for higher public expenditure in their voting decisions. It should be noted that this approach looks at bureaucrats as individual decision-makers and not as forming a pressure group. It is moreover assumed that they have voting power far in excess of their numbers. Because the problems of public affairs are their daily fare, their costs of information and political participation are relatively low and they may be much more likely to participate in all types of political

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activities, particularly in voting, giving them additional weight on the demand side of the political process (Bush and Denzau, 1977; Borchering, Bush and Spann, 1977).

Voting outcome may be strongly affected by both the *preference* and the *voting participation* of public bureaucrats. If bureaucrats have the same preferences as the rest of the population, a difference in voting participation will not affect the results of referenda and elections. If, however, their preferences differ from those of the other voters, greater vote participation by the bureaucrats will increase the weight of their preferences in the political process relative to that of the rest of the population.

One would think that participation is easy to measure, but no serious attempts have been made to find out whether they actually do vote more. Rather this has been assumed as a piece of 'conventional wisdom.' As Gramlich (1980: 18) correctly notes, however,

In fact, this conventional wisdom is based on incredibly sparse empirical estimates. Most economists writing on the subject cite a study done of Austin, Texas voters in a 1933 municipal election. . . . These estimates . . . are plausible but it could still be viewed as stretching things to base so much theory on an obscure 47-year-old journal article.

This study alluded to is by R. C. Martin (1933). It is indeed the *only* one mentioned by Bush and Denzau, and by Borchering, Bush and Spann, except for a passing reference by Bush and Denzau to a study by Dupeux (1952) referring to voting in the French département of Loire-et-Cher at the beginning of the Third Republic in 1871. Other writers dealing with the voting power of bureaucrats do not even go so far but simply confess, as Musgrave does (1980: 27), that they are 'not aware of current statistics on voting participation by public as against private employees.' Musgrave therefore *assumes*, without giving any reason, that bureaucrats have the same participation rate as 'generally applicable to members of trade unions,' 80%.

The goals of this paper are: (1) To show that there *is* considerable evidence for greater voting participation on the part of members of the public bureaucracy as compared to the rest of the electorate. Thus given the differences in preferences, the bureaucrats' greater participation gives them more influence in the voting process (Section 2). (2) To show that vote participation depends on many different factors, such as income and education, which have to be carefully isolated in order to capture the differential influence of being employed in the public sector (Section 3). (3) To discuss that bureaucrats' influence on voting outcomes also depends on their specific preferences (Section 4). (4) To suggest that beyond the analysis of public bureaucrats as voters it is essential to consider other forms and ways of wielding power (Section 5).

2. Historical evidence of voting participation

There is an abundance of historical election studies showing the bureaucrats' voting participation rate available in addition to Martin's (or rather, Dupeux's) evidence. For the United States, for example, there is the work by Arneson and Eells (1950) on voting in a typical Ohio community in the 1924 and 1928 presidential elections. The participation rate of public employees was 88.1% in 1924 and 75.2% in 1928 compared to overall voting rates of 64.3% and 62.2% respectively.

Still more evidence is available for European public employees' voting rates at the local, state and national levels, including breakdowns by groups of public officials. In particular, the voting participation of teachers is often given separately. Much of this empirical evidence is collected in Tingsten's *Political Behavior: Studies in Election Statistics* of 1937. The data collected for various countries, periods, and governmental levels indicate that public bureaucrats' voting participation is considerably higher than that of the rest of the population. Table 1 gives an example for the Swiss Canton Basel-Stadt and 1911.

Table 1. Public employees' voting participation in Basel-Stadt, 1911 (elections to city and cantonal parliament) (in percent)

Employed by the federal government	65.2
Employed by the canton of Basel-Stadt	84.5
Among which:	
Teachers	88.2
Officials	87.8
Clerks	79.2
Skilled workers	68.8
Unskilled workers	57.7
Public employees taken together	74.6
Whole electorate	69.2

Source: Tingsten (1937: 121 and 124).

These data are of particular interest because the public employees are broken down into groups and according to whether they work for the canton or the federal government. In Basel-Stadt the canton and city are practically identical; the statistics thus also refer to the local level. Public employees participated by about 6 percentage points more than the electorate as a whole. There is a very large difference (almost 20 percentage points) between people employed by the federal government and the canton (city). This is not implausible from a theoretical point of view: Public employees have a much greater stake at the local level, and therefore participate more.

There is also much more recent evidence available on bureaucrats' voting behavior. On the basis of a 1978 survey with a random sample of more than 2,000 Michigan voters regarding a state government tax limitation referendum,³ Gramlich (1980) reaches the conclusion that voting participation of employees in the public sector was 67.8%, while only 60.9% for those not employed in the public sector. The overall voter participation rate was 62.4%, thanks to public employment making up 25.8% of the electorate. Using these figures, the share of public bureaucrats in the total voting population may be calculated to be 27.9%. Thus, those in public employment are overrepresented by 2.1 percentage points as compared to their share in the total electorate population.

The amount of overrepresentation can also be measured for general elections. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 95) have computed a vote participation of public bureaucrats of 83% for the United States congressional election of 1972, compared to an overall participation rate of 65% (based on a survey of about 100,000 people conducted by the Census Bureau). Taking the nationwide share of publicly employed voters as 18%,⁴ vote participation of nonbureaucrats is 61%. The share of public bureaucrats in the total voting population is 23%, i.e. they were overrepresented by 5 percentage points.⁵

There is thus considerable evidence for greater than average vote participation by public bureaucrats, and it should be possible to empirically test whether public employees in their role as voters have a disproportionate amount of influence on the outcome of collective decisions.

3. Is bureaucrats' turnout really different after all?

The evidence presented so far clearly indicates that public employees have a markedly higher participation rate in elections than the electorate as a whole. It would, however, be premature to conclude that this arises solely because they are employed in the public bureaucracy. It may be partly or even totally due to other factors, for instance because they usually have a higher social position, higher income and more education than the rest of the population.⁶ All these factors may be positively related to the higher participation we can observe. If it is true that the effect is due solely to these latter factors, a movement of employment from the public to the private sector would have no effect on voting outcomes. In order to test this hypothesis empirically, we have to look at the *partial* influence of working in the public as compared to the private sector while keeping such factors as education, income and sex constant. The kind of evidence discussed and presented up to now can serve as a rough indication only; it is not a clear test of the theories. Fortunately there is a recent study on congressional and senate elections (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980) which does this. As the dependent variable (the probability

that an individual will participate or not) is constrained between 0% and 100%, a multi-variate probit or a logit specification of the estimation equation is appropriate.

The study concludes that the partial effect of being employed in the government sector is sizeable, and that the effect will vary depending on the individual's social position (defined by years of education). The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Public employees' voting participation in national elections; by level of government. United States, 1974

Partial effect of a multi-variate probit estimate

Social position (years of education)	Increase in voting participation of public employees over private employees, in percentage points		
	Teachers and federal public employees	State public employees	Local public employees
0-8 (grammar school)	5	14	18
9-12 (high school)	5	13	17
1-3 (college)	4	12	16
4 (college)	5	12	16
5+ (college)	4	10	11
Overall partial effect	5	13	17

Source: Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980: 101).

According to this table, for example, a local public sector employee who only finished grammar school had an 18 percentage point higher participation rate than private sector employees with the same amount of education. The estimation results show that teachers and federal public employees only vote by about 5 percentage points more than do private employees with the corresponding level of education. With state, and even more with local public employees, the difference is much greater: State public employees have a 13 percentage point and local public employees a 17 percentage point higher turnout than do private employees with otherwise the same characteristics. The effect is again more pronounced for the less educated, but their vote participation is still markedly higher (by about 10 percentage points). This analysis, which makes a serious effort to keep influences such as education, income, age and sex constant, and to thus isolate the 'pure' effect of moving from the private to the public sector (or in the reverse direction), comes to the conclusion that bureaucrats do indeed vote more than do employees in the private sector. For the United States at the beginning of the 1970s, this

bureaucratic vote participation effect may roughly be set at about 10 percentage points for elections at the national level. The specific effect depends on the bureaucrat's social position (education) and whether he or she is employed by a local or state, or by the federal government.

4. Are there specific preferences of bureaucrats?

The results obtained so far that public bureaucrats do participate more does not necessarily mean that they influence the outcome of the political process. This is the case only if it is found that their preferences differ from those of the rest of the population. With regard to this question there is preliminary evidence only.

A study by Rubinfeld (1977) with a sample of 408 inhabitants of a Detroit suburb finds that local public school teachers have *ceteris paribus* a stronger preference for additional local school expenditures than nonteachers. The probability of voting for additional local school expenditures and therewith for a higher property tax is explained by such variables as sex, marital status, number of children in the local public schools, income, tax price, and – our main interest – employment as a teacher in the public sector. The result suggests that *ceteris paribus* public school teachers were more likely to vote yes as compared to people having the same nonoccupational attributes. The same result (strong preferences by public school teachers for *ceteris paribus* higher school expenditures) was also found when the survey was repeated with another sample of 430 inhabitants of the same municipality.

A somewhat different approach to measuring the specific preferences of those working in the public sector is adopted in the survey of Michigan voters concerning state government tax limitations (Courant, Gramlich and Rubinfeld, 1980). In which way and to what extent the individual would like to see state government expenditures changed was asked. The extent to which there was a wish for positive or negative expenditure changes was explained by a number of variables such as education, number of children, income, marginal tax burden, religion, race, political party, and employment in the public or private sector. The results also suggest that the employees of the state government sector *ceteris paribus* are more favorably disposed towards public sector activities than are voters employed in the private sphere. This comes out especially strongly if one groups federal government employees together with private sector employees, which is appropriate from the point of view of the question asked here. The difference between the preferences of the members of the two sectors is, however, quite small: If employees in the private sector (and those federally employed) want on the average a reduction in state expenditures of 4.6%, those employed in the state public sector want on the average 3.7%. Thus even the members of the state public sector want a

decrease, albeit a small one (Courant, Gramlich and Rubinfeld, 1980: Table 3). A similarly small difference between public and private sector employees is found in a study of the same authors dealing with wishes for changes in local public expenditures in the context of a referendum on local public expenditure limitation.⁷

5. Towards a wider framework

Our analysis has shown that there are two *dimensions* which have to be taken into account when considering the bureaucrats' role as voters: (1) Both vote participation and specific preferences determine bureaucrats' voting power, (2) both influences must be studied by isolating the differential effect of being employed in the public sector.

The voting power aspect of public bureaucracy is important. The crucial question, however, is how important are the different participation rates and preferences in quantitative terms when compared to *other* possible forms of influence which can be exercised by bureaucrats. A utility-maximizing bureaucrat will compare the costs and benefits of various forms of participation. The vote participation observed is also a function of the relative net benefits and relative prices of these other participatory forms. Neglecting this indirect price effect may lead to a serious distortion of the estimates. Public bureaucrats have the following options available to them to influence government sector outcomes:

- (1) Direct influence in the *preparatory phase* for collective decisions (in particular budget and referenda proposals). One aspect of this has been discussed in the framework of agenda control, concentrating on the question of to what extent bureaucrats can propose public expenditure referenda that go beyond the median voter's wishes, but which will nevertheless be accepted by a majority of the voters due to a lack of better alternatives.⁸ Influencing this phase of the collective decision-making process involves virtually no costs because it corresponds exactly to the official tasks of the bureaucracy. The benefits are obvious.
- (2) In the *phase of legislation* public bureaucrats can make their influence felt by becoming a member of parliament. This opportunity exists in many countries and is exploited to a considerable extent. For instance, in the Federal Republic of Germany's previous Bundestag (federal parliament) over 46% of the members were public employees. Bureaucrats even hold a majority of the seats in five out of eleven German federal states. The situation is similar for Switzerland where, for example, in the canton of Basel-Stadt over 42% of the members of parliament were public employees (1976-1980) (Frey and Weck, 1979). It is easy to explain why it is

even advantageous to the bureaucrats if they sit in parliament: During both the campaign and while they are in parliament, they as a rule receive time off from their regular duties, continue to be paid their usual income, and are likely to be promoted in their capacity as public officials (Benke, 1975).

- (3) An often large influence on the concrete government sector outcome is exerted at the *implementing* phase. Public bureaucracy has a discretionary leeway in putting into action the laws promulgated by parliament. Moreover, only part of bureaucratic activity is based *directly* on legal statutes, such that they have to some extent a law-making function.
- (4) Public employees in many countries are traditionally particularly well organized in unions and other interest groups, which allows them to exert labor market as well as political power. As an example consider again the case of the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1974 nearly 66% of the bureaucrats belonged to a public sector trade union, whereas in the private sector only 46% of the workers and 22.4% of the other employees belonged to a union (Zapf, 1978: 899). In the United States the degree of unionization of public employees is at a low level, but it has increased very rapidly over the last few years (for evidence see Spizman, 1980). This collective form of exercising political power makes it possible for them to threaten to use the public sector vote for or against a particular proposition or party. If public bureaucrats are prohibited to go on strike they find other means to make their demands felt, e.g. to work 'according to rules.'

In contrast to these ways of influencing political outcomes, uncoordinated demonstrations and similar activities have a rather unfavorable benefit-cost ratio for individual bureaucrats.⁹ Individual bureaucrats are limited somewhat in their actions as in most countries they are required by law to show a special allegiance to the state. They therefore may have to fear rather heavy consequences if they are found guilty of disregarding their duties. Moreover, compared to other forms of participation, this offers little opportunity for them to use their acquired special abilities.

It may be conjectured that these four viable forms of participation are at least of the same importance as the bureaucrats' differential influence as voters. To consider the bureaucrats only in their capacity as individual voters may seriously distort the analysis, and can lead to biased empirical results.

NOTES

1. There is another approach which looks at public bureaucracy as a *supplier* of goods and services with a monopolistic position (Niskanen, 1971; Migué and Bélanger, 1974; Breton and Wintrobe, 1979).

2. This idea was probably first advanced by Tullock (1972). It may also be found in Tullock (1974); Buchanan and Tullock (1975); and, more recently, Courant, Gramlich and Rubinfeld (1979). A related approach (Craswell, 1975) concentrates on the voting pressure of the clientele groups of public bureaucracy.
3. The Headlee Amendment, a proposal to limit the State of Michigan's revenue to the fixed share of 9.4% of state personal income. A detailed description of this proposal and an analysis of voter behavior in greater depth (excluding, however, the question of participation) is given in Courant, Gramlich and Rubinfeld (1980).
4. This figure is based on statistics provided by Martin (1980, Table 1, p. 6).
5. An even higher value for the overrepresentation of public bureaucrats (10 percentage points) is reached by Musgrave (1980), based however on the assumption already mentioned that the participation rate of public bureaucrats corresponds to that of the members of American labor unions (80%).
6. A lot of evidence that public bureaucrats are very unrepresentative as compared to the working population as a whole is given by Meier (1975) for various countries and governmental levels.
7. The Tisch Amendment, requiring a large cut in the assessed value of property and thus drastically limiting the fiscal freedom of many localities; for details see Courant, Gramlich and Rubinfeld (1980). Studies showing a stronger adverse effect of government sector employees on voting for tax and expenditure limitation referenda include Levy (1975, 1979); Mariotti (1978); and Magaddino, Toma and Toma (1980).
8. See e.g. Romer and Rosenthal (1978, 1979).
9. The low benefit-cost ratio is reflected by the results of attitude surveys among those employees who are members of a union. Smith and Hopkins (1979) find for instance, in a survey of over 2000 unionized employees in five U.S. states, that the statement 'Public employees should have the right to strike' receives only a bare majority. The statements 'Wages and working conditions are better when all employees of a department belong to a union' and 'Unions can fight the selfishness of employees' have received greater acceptance.

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