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Latin America: Bureaucracy and Policy Implementation

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Latin American public administration and public policy has tended to highlight the region's infamous administrative inefficiency and advocated different types of reform rather than explore bureaucratic politics *per se*. However, this is changing. Motivated by the puzzle of governments achieving policy success in supposedly "low capacity" places, scholars have used impressive survey instruments and methodological tools to show that there is a wider range of variation in agency capacity and autonomy than commonly thought. They also show that in many cases, successful bureaus are those that boast a strong organizational culture. Further, variation in administrative capacity has also enriched existing theory by relaxing a fundamental assumption of many existing models of political control of the bureaucracy, and has promoted exploration into other areas of bureaucratic politics. More work remains, but the field is already progressing.

INTRODUCTION

The bureaucracy is a fundamental building block of the modern state, tasked with carrying out the essential functions of the government and turning laws and other political initiatives into policies. Knowledge of this network of organizations and its role in the policy implementation process is essential to understanding how the state works. In places such as Latin America, this information guides the advice and recommendations of international financial organizations, think tanks, and other donor institutions. However, despite the enormous role of public administration in politics and citizens' lives, there is a relative paucity of scholarship on bureaucracy and implementation in Latin America with broad theoretical insight. Instead, the literature is splintered and has tended to focus on describing low administrative capacity and suggesting strategies of reform.

Part of this owed to a lack of coordination—or even dialogue—among the schools of public administration, political science, and organizational sociology. With few exceptions, each has generally advanced independently of the others, with a different focus, methodology, and goals. In Latin America, scholars of public administration often narrowly focused on describing policy areas and the policy implementation process of a specific country, with little apparent interest in comparative analysis. Of the three approaches to bureaucratic studies, this is the dominant school, and one whose findings often drive the policy recommendations and reform suggestions of organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank or the World Bank. On the other hand, organizational theorists and sociologists in the tradition of Herbert Simon are often more interested in understanding internal organizational dynamics, such as coordination among employees or

between street-level, mezzo, and high-level bureaucrats. They tend to draw broadly generalizable conclusions from detailed analysis of individual agencies. Lastly, political scientists have focused on the intersection of politics and the public administration, are usually data-driven, and often take a comparative approach to the study of bureaucratic politics. Given this fragmentation between fields, it is no surprise that the accumulation of knowledge has been more limited than might be expected.

Still, scholars in all three fields have managed to draw some shared insight in describing the organizational capacity of agencies in the region. At the same time, innovative public policies over the past two decades, including influential conditional cash transfer programs in Mexico and Brazil, police reform in Nicaragua, and locally managed health and education reforms across the region, have driven analysts to explain how and why they were successful. This success has bred a more nuanced understanding of bureaucratic capacity, and of the variation in administrative performance within a single country. It has also allowed scholars to focus on characteristics of successful policies, such as organizational theorists' contention that the most effective agencies benefit from a strong organizational culture.

Other Latin Americanists, especially in political science, have enriched existing theory by exploiting differences between Latin American agencies' behavior and the idealized conditions of many models and ideas developed in the United States and the United Kingdom. These comparative analyses of bureaucracy have yielded significant understanding of strategies of political oversight and bureaucratic autonomy under weak legislatures, regulatory development and diffusion across subnational units, and bureaucratic responses to budget shortfalls. Intracountry variation and dynamically changing public agencies means

that scholars should enjoy prime conditions for future bureaucratic politics research and theory building, especially if these different schools and their analytic approaches are able to coalesce.

LOW CAPACITY AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

High agency capacity is an assumption that undergirds many of the canonical explanations of bureaucratic behavior that have become accepted wisdom in the United States and Europe (e.g., Downs,^[1] March and Simon,^[2] and Simon^[3]). Yet, the Latin American experience shows this assumption rarely holds. Critics of Latin American bureaucracy take pains to highlight its Kafkaesque nature: centralized, top-down decision making, a lack of political neutrality in civil servants, intensely legalistic administration, weak rule enforcement, and a general lack of probity. Some scholars place culpability on the legacy of Spanish colonialism,^[4,5] while others blame twentieth-century economic development models,^[6] and still others recognize explicitly political roots.^[7]

Regardless of the origin, cross-national analyses support the perception that many Latin American government agencies suffer from low organizational capacity, or the ability to analyze increasingly complex social problems and carry out programs in accordance with previously specified plans. They also reveal low “Weberianness,” or the possibility of meritocratic recruitment or predictable, long-term careers. For instance, Evans,^[8] Evans and Rauch,^[9] and Zuvanic and Iacoviello^[10] find that most of the region’s civil services suffer from stunted development, while the World Bank’s World Governance Indicators or the Political Risk Group’s International Country Risk Guide place most Latin American bureaucracies firmly in the lower or middle tiers internationally.

One result is a literature and normative movement dedicated to administrative and governance reform, especially from scholars of public administration and policy experts from international aid organizations (e.g., Geddes,^[11] Graham et al.,^[12] Tulchin and Garland,^[13] Schneider and Heredia,^[14] and Echebarría and Cortázar^[15]). Since the 1990s, the dominant paradigm among these proposals has been the “new public management” (NPM), a movement advocating political and administrative decentralization, market-oriented performance pay, and creating incentives for management to act freely, all in an effort to achieve greater efficiency. The first generation of these reforms in Anglo-American states sought to decrease the size of the government, while the second generation looked to make structural and cultural changes.^[16] In the 1990s, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay, and a host of other Latin American countries pursued varying degrees of NPM reforms, often at the behest of right-of-center governments.^[6,17–20] Since the 2000s, “post-NPM” reforms

have emerged that stress horizontal coordination of government organizations, as well as coordination between the government and civil society.^[15,21]

These often controversial strategies have found mixed success in the region, improving policy outcomes in some places^[20] and generating significant problems in others.^[22] Yet, inconsistent organizational and policy results have allowed scholars to draw at least two key conclusions. First, since the administrative and political characteristics of states inevitably vary, universal standards for reform are unrealistic and successful modifications are unlikely to follow a “one-size-fits-all” recipe.^[23] Instead, situationally determined responses to specific problems appear more likely to improve governance and policy implementation.

Second, as much as possible, Weberian reforms should precede NPM in less-developed democracies that tend to possess low organizational capacity.^[24,25] Guy Peters, for example, has argued that in Latin America as well as central and eastern Europe, NPM reforms are likely to do more harm than good. He says that

Despite the appeal of ideas such as deregulation and flexibility, governments attempting to build both effective administration and democracy might require much greater emphasis on formality, rules, and strong ethical standards. The values of efficiency and effectiveness are important but in the short run not so crucial as creating probity and responsibility. Once a so-called Weberian administrative system is institutionalized, then it may make sense to consider how best to move from that system towards a more “modern” system of [public administration].

—Peters (p. 176)^[24]

This perspective is shared by others such as Ramió Matas,^[25] who contends that the presumed benefits of NPM tools are lost when they are implemented in countries with an administrative culture and tradition that differs from the Anglo-Saxon. In Latin America, for instance, the Roman civil law tradition may act as a constraint on the effectiveness of NPM.

POLICY SUCCESS IN LOW CAPACITY ENVIRONMENTS

Establishing a low or middling level of administrative capacity for Latin American agencies has led to other insights, specifically in explaining policy success. The logic is the following: in order for politicians to successfully carry out their oath of office, it is their responsibility to ensure the effective implementation of policy. The degree to which programs reflect their legislative intent affects politicians’ electoral success, perceptions of the governing party, and even government stability. In addition to following partisan attachments, ideology, and their own pocketbooks, voters assess elected officials policy performance at the ballot box. A popular, visible, well-implemented policy

will tend to have positive repercussions for politicians, earning them more power and greater chances at reelection (if applicable), while a poorly executed policy will do the opposite. The puzzle therefore is what happens when bureaucratic competence is low?

It turns out that the dreary portrait of Latin American bureaucracy is not always accurate. Political scientists, e.g., have taken pains to document the incredible variation in administrative capacity within these countries.^[26–34] According to them, some organizations, such as central banks and finance ministries, boast higher degrees of meritocratic recruitment and the ability to address complex problems regardless of the setting, while others, such as education ministries, often do not. One important study by Gingerich^[26] employs a Bayesian hierarchical ANOVA model—a statistical procedure developed for drawing conclusions about the relative importance of two or more categorical variables on an outcome of interest—on extensive surveys of public employees in Bolivia, Brazil, and Chile, to show that interagency differences in bureaucratic quality may actually be larger than cross-country differences. Similarly, Bersch et al.^[27] criticize the lack of conceptual precision surrounding the concept of capacity and propose a narrow definition of state capacity that adheres to the principal components of a Weberian legal-rational state: a professional bureaucracy able to implement policy without undue external influence. They then apply this definition across Brazilian government agencies to reveal a number of high-performing public organizations amidst a multitude of low performing ones—supporting the perception of Brazil’s administrative “archipelago of excellence.” Successful policy implementation is therefore possible in low capacity environments for the simple reason that not all agencies possess uniformly low capacity. What is more, Harbers^[35] shows the subnational variation that can exist in the reach and strength of even a single agency.

The sources of capacity go beyond budgets and civil servants’ training. Turning to the school of organizational theory, scholars argue that a root cause of improved agency effectiveness includes a strong organizational culture—i.e., a patterned way of thinking about the central tasks of human relationships within an organization (p. 91).^[36] Using examples from the Northeastern Brazilian state of Ceará, Tandler and Freedheim^[37] and Tandler^[38] contend that even in unfavorable contexts with overall poor public sector performance, managers can improve policy outcomes by promoting job dedication, a sense of mission, flexibility in response to client demands, and workmanship pride among civil servants, as well as fostering organizational accountability with local governments and civil society. Echoing this, Grindle^[39] argues that organizational mystique, management style, performance expectations, and a degree of autonomy in personnel management contribute to positive organizational culture in better-performing agencies.

Political factors also play a role. Through analyses of local politics in Mexico, Grindle^[23,40] shows that dependable local political leadership can help build more efficient, effective, and responsive governments. In a context of administrative decentralization, high-quality local leaders may be able to make significant reforms quickly and demonstrate higher degrees of responsiveness to citizens. At other times, resourceful bureaus may look beyond their national borders. Alcañiz^[41] uses a network analytic approach to show that technology-driven bureaucratic sectors in Latin America respond strategically to budget cuts and general instability by becoming more active in transnational policy networks. According to her, domestic resource scarcity may actually foment transnational collaboration rather than stifle innovation.

In sum, the constellation of agencies and actors that make up the modern bureaucracy are varied, and inferring an individual agency’s characteristics from a national mean runs the risk of ecological fallacy. Effective agencies in low capacity places may benefit from more meritocratic recruitment and better pay,^[26] a stronger organizational culture,^[38,39] or coordination with similar agencies from other places.^[41]

OVERSIGHT OF THE BUREAUCRACY

Latin America has also proved to be a good place to study the eternal tug-of-war between politicians and bureaucrats for control over policy, a favorite avenue of research among political scientists. Although McCubbins^[42] finds most of the scholarship on political control of the bureaucracy to be shaped by U.S. and European politics, the topic of autonomy has intrigued scholars of Latin America off and on since Peter Cleaves’ *Bureaucratic Politics and Administration in Chile*.^[43] Much of this work examines how elected officials are able to manipulate the bureaucracy so that it will implement their policy goals,^[28,44–46] while others analyze under what conditions the bureaucracy is able to effectively achieve autonomy from that political control.^[11,47] This literature finds that inefficient agencies are often less responsive to politicians, that control of bureaucrats depends on both political and bureaucratic inputs, and that significant longitudinal variation exists. Further, Latin America’s weak legislatures mean that formal tools of political control are often less successful than informal ones.

With few notable exceptions,^[48,49] existing models of delegation^[50–54] almost uniformly assume high capacity bureaucratic agencies. From the perspective of the political principal, this assumption generates a trade-off of informational gains from agency expertise and distributive losses from bureaucratic drift—the “fundamental tension” that motivates much of the literature. Politicians can either attempt to monitor bureaucrats directly and actively through hearings, referred to as “police patrol” activities, or they can engage in “fire alarm” oversight, under which they rely on

signals from third parties who have an interest in and information about bureaucratic activity.^[55] Yet what happens when these parameters change, and informational gains are reduced? What choices and new trade-offs must politicians—or bureaucrats—consider as they convert laws into policies?

Latin Americanists have addressed this question in fits and spurts. Taylor^[44] examines under what circumstances elected officials in Costa Rica are able to control juridically autonomous bureaucratic agencies. She finds that the president may be unable to induce a higher level of agency efficiency through budget control—and may inadvertently cause the bureaucracy to produce less efficiently. However, the president is still able to constrain the agency if he or she so desires. By contrast, the legislature is largely unable to induce changes in bureaucratic behavior through oversight mechanisms. Huber and McCarty,^[48] meanwhile, use a generalized formal model to show that low bureaucratic capacity not only reduces the general quality of bureaucratic outcomes though efficiency loss, but also changes policy making by diminishing incentives for bureaucrats to comply with legislative statutes.

There are also subtle ways by which weaker Latin American legislatures can ensure probity and administrative efficiency. Siavelis^[45] highlights four mechanisms in Chile by which constitutionally limited political actors can exercise control over the state's administrative apparatus: 1) the *oficio simple*, a request for information directed to a particular ministry; 2) the *oficio de fiscalización*, a request sent by a congressional majority to the president to investigate suspected impropriety from officials; 3) *cajas de resonancia*, special committees formed to investigate any irregularities involving state entities; and 4) a somewhat restricted ability to initiate impeachment proceedings against members of the executive branch. According to him, the legislature's ability to exercise these oversight mechanisms depends greatly on political coordination. In a more recent work, Ferraro^[46] pursues a similar strategy, describing four informal means of congressional influence over the bureaucracy in the same country. These mechanisms consist of legislative patronage through suggested political appointments, the development of stable networks of contacts between members of Congress and public officials, frequent formal and informal meetings between members of congressional committees and public officials, and the specialization of Chilean senators and deputies in areas of public policy. Politicians may also seek agency autonomy; Geddes^[56] uses a case study of the evolution of administrative capacity in preauthoritarian Brazil to show that executives can forge autonomy by creating agencies insulated from political patronage networks by promoting meritocratic recruitment, protecting agency funding from political rivals, and aligning bureaucrats' and executives' interests.

While politicians decide on an optimal level of discretion, bureaucrats seek more. Dargent^[28,57] exploits the

appearance of “technocratic democracies”—democratic governments whose bureaucratic ranks include high numbers of technocrats, especially in central banks and finance ministries—in Colombia and Peru to show that level of civil servant expertise is a fundamental source of bureaucratic autonomy. As a scarce resource in Latin America, expertise allows technocrats to advance their policy preferences against the interests of other powerful actors. Still, this principal-agent game is a back and forth between politicians and bureaucrats. Eaton^[47] shows that shifting partisan tides and political objectives in Argentina under the Menem presidency influenced the degree to which the country's General Tax Board sought autonomy from the congress, as well as its success at doing so. In other words, Latin America shows that politicians can still control bureaucrats in low capacity places, even though this control is not always consistent.

FUTURE AREAS OF EXPLORATION

Despite these contributions, more work is required to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Latin America's bureaucracies. Much of the scholarship on the policy-making process,^[58–60] policy adoption,^[61–63] governance (e.g., Domínguez and Shifter^[64] and Mainwaring and Scully^[65]), and even bureaucratic appointments^[66,67] in Latin America remains focused on the political arrangements behind action rather than public administration. Moreover, it is incumbent upon organizational theorists, political scientists, and public administrators to bridge the divides between their different approaches; for instance, neither the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) nor the Latin American Association of Political Science (ALACIP) have working groups dedicated to the study of bureaucracy in the region. The quality of knowledge would increase by combining, say, the detailed knowledge of government agencies and policy responsibilities from those in public administration, the comparative framework and links to the political process studied by political scientists, and a greater understanding of the internal dynamics of agency hierarchy and organization as understood by organizational sociologists.

However, Latin America's weak and varying bureaucratic capacity creates a rich laboratory for theoretical development and exploration beyond merely explaining the gap between idealized theoretical conditions developed elsewhere and empirical realities. Relaxing the assumption of uniformly high capacity challenges scholars to find new ways to explain bureaucratic and state behavior as well as the policy implementation process, much in the same way that non-reelection-seeking Latin American legislators violated a chief assumption of the U.S. legislative studies and encouraged theory building in that field in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Differences in governing structures and temporal variation in agency behavior should also aid researchers.

For one, comparisons among countries, states, and municipalities, as well as between these different levels provide a surfeit of possible research designs. Amengual,^[68] e.g., uses subnational variation in Argentina to explain how states with weak and politicized bureaucracies manage to enforce labor and environmental regulations. By holding a number of political and economic factors constant, he is able to show that strong linkages can facilitate the construction of pro-enforcement coalitions, and that administrative capacity determines whether bureaucrats passively or strategically use societal resources. The evolution of agencies—and emergence of a meritocratic corps?—across the region also holds many structural factors constant. Grindle,^[7] for one, uses this historical approach to identify cycles that govern civil service reform across a number of countries. Meanwhile, Cohon^[69] is able to exploit both subnational and temporal variation in his comparison of the emergence (and diffusion) of regulatory bodies in Brazil. Scholars should be able to use Latin America's spatial and longitudinal heterogeneity to explore an enormous range of theories and topics.

There is a wealth of topics to explore. Few Latin Americanists have studied street-level bureaucracy—judges, teachers, police, and other low-level bureaucrats—in the way of Kaufman^[70] or Lipsky,^[71] and there is an even greater dearth of knowledge regarding the logic of internal organization and coordination of agencies in the region in the tradition of Simon.^[3] Understanding of the emergence and functioning of the (at times admittedly weak) regulatory state is also weak. Further, scholars have often noted the propensity of Latin American governments to create new agencies, especially autonomous agencies, instead of making the regular ministries adapt to performing new programs.^[36,72] With this high incidence, scholars must seek better insight into agency creation and organizational design. Like legislative studies, presidentialism, and judicial politics, much of the scholarship on bureaucratic politics and policy implementation in Latin America is based on assumptions and theorizations imported from the United States. This empirical, conceptual, and theoretical insight is important, but scholars must now also strive to develop original theories out of the region's idiosyncrasies.

CONCLUSION

Existing scholarship on Latin American public administration and public policy is often splintered, and has tended to highlight the region's infamous administrative inefficiency and advocated different types of reform at the expense of a deeper understanding of the agencies in question. However, this tendency is changing. Motivated by the puzzle of governments achieving policy success in supposedly "low capacity" places, scholars in a number of social science fields have used impressive survey instruments and methodological tools to show that there is a wider range

of variation in agency capacity and autonomy within countries than commonly thought. Others show that in many cases, successful bureaus are those that boast a strong organizational culture. Understanding this variation in administrative capacity has also enriched existing theory by relaxing a fundamental assumption of many existing models of political oversight and bureaucratic autonomy, and has promoted exploration into other areas of bureaucratic politics. Ultimately, however, the quality of scholars' research would benefit significantly from greater collaboration among researchers from different fields, and better use of the spatial and longitudinal heterogeneity in Latin America's public administration.

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