

The Economics of Civil Service Protections*

Guo Xu
UC Berkeley

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Abstract

The study of bureaucracy as a key dimension of state capacity has gained increasing attention in economics. What organizational features create an effective bureaucracy, however, remains subject to debate. This paper focuses on the central role of civil service protections in delineating the boundary between politics and administration. I introduce a simple principal-agent framework to discuss the key theoretical channels through which political insulation can shape bureaucrat performance. Guided by the framework, I establish stylized facts and organize evidence from historical and contemporary civil service reforms. Overall, the micro-level evidence documents a positive effect of civil service protections on the quality of public service delivery. I conclude with open questions about the political economy of reform adoption.

1 Introduction

In recent years, questions around the design and performance of civil services have emerged as a topic of keen interest among economists ([Finan et al., 2015](#); [Besley et al., 2022](#); [Jensen and Weigel, 2025](#)). This attention reflects a broader recognition of the pivotal role that bureaucracies – and their personnel – play in shaping state capacity and economic performance ([Besley and Persson, 2009](#); [Acemoglu et al., 2015](#)). Building on work in personnel and organizational economics, there has been a rapid growth of work trying to understand how to

*Guo Xu: guo.xu@berkeley.edu (UC Berkeley, Haas School of Business, 2220 Piedmont Ave, Berkeley, CA 94720). I thank David Romer, Sam Kapon, Shashank Singh, Marcella Alsan, and four anonymous referees for their excellent comments and guidance on improving this paper. All errors remain my own. I thank Yang Xu for excellent research assistance.

attract, motivate, and allocate public sector workers. One feature that distinguishes the study of bureaucrats from the study of private sector workers is their mission – the provision of public goods ([Banerjee, 1997](#); [Dixit, 2002](#)). Bureaucrats regulate markets, manage crisis response, implement industrial policies, and deliver public services. Across the world, public organizations rank among the largest employers, with public sector payroll making up a substantial share of government spending.

Despite their importance for public service delivery, the study of bureaucrats has received less attention in economics compared to the study of other officials, like politicians. One reason this might be the case is that bureaucrats are typically considered to act at the behest of their political principals ([Besley et al., 2022](#)). In contrast to politicians, however, bureaucrats are not elected or directly accountable to the general population.¹ Instead, bureaucrats are appointed either at the discretion of their political superiors, or they join the rank-and-file of the civil service through rule-based exams to then embark on a life-long service. Which of these two systems of appointment is most conducive for an effective bureaucracy, however, is unclear. On the one hand, granting politicians the authority to select and promote bureaucrats raises concerns about nepotism and political patronage – with potentially adverse effects on the quality of public service delivery. On the other hand, an independent civil service where entry and progression decisions are shielded from political control could render bureaucrats less responsive to the priorities of their political superiors, undermining accountability and distorting the allocation of public goods.

The large variation in the degree of discretion in appointments, promotions, and firings observed across bureaucracies and over time – as shown by previous work and the stylized facts I will establish in this paper – raises an intriguing question for institutional design: how much discretion should politicians have over their subordinates? More precisely, should politicians exert direct control over the appointment and firing of bureaucrats, or should bureaucrats — as independent agents of the state – be insulated from their political superiors?

In this paper, I provide a guide to research on bureaucracy in economics to synthesize what economists have to say about civil service protections. First, I briefly discuss the major milestones in the history of civil service protections. I then introduce a framework that motivates the study of civil service protections – the degree to which there exists a “firewall” between politics and adminis-

¹This indirect channel of accountability is also referred to as the “long route of accountability” ([World Bank, 2004](#)).

tration – by highlighting the key trade-off and theoretical ambiguity. Second, guided by the framework, I establish stylized facts documenting variation in the degree of civil service protections across countries. Equipped with these empirical regularities, I then discuss the micro-level evidence on the effects of civil service protections on organizational performance and public service delivery. Finally, I conclude by discussing open questions and pointing to the importance of understanding the political economy of civil service reforms.

For the purpose of this paper, it is helpful to define the scope. First, while I will introduce a simple theoretical framework of civil service protections to motivate and structure the discussion of the literature, the emphasis will be on the emerging empirical literature. While there exist review papers on the study of bureaucrats and the organizational and personnel economic determinants of their effectiveness more broadly (Finan et al., 2015; Pepinsky et al., 2017; Besley et al., 2022), there exists, to the best of my knowledge, no review focused on the role of civil service protections. Second, I will discuss primarily the literature in economics but also touch upon work in adjacent fields of political science, public administration, and sociology. Third, while the definition of a “bureaucrat” can encompass administrators in large private sector organizations, my focus will lie on civilian public sector workers across all levels of seniority. This definition will thus include a wide range of public sector workers going from senior-level bureaucrats to mid-level public sector managers to front-line providers such as teachers, health workers, or police officers.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief account of the major milestones in the development of civil service protections. I then introduce a simple model to clarify the definition of civil service reform and highlight the key tensions at play. Guided by this theoretical framework, Section 3 establishes stylized facts. Section 4 discusses the micro-level empirical literature. Finally, Section 5 concludes with a discussion of open questions.

2 Civil Service Protections: History and Theory

2.1 History of civil service protections

While many civilizations generated sufficient agricultural surplus to develop complex states early on (Borcan et al., 2018; Heldring, 2025), public officials – scribes, viziers, and collectors – were typically appointed at the discretion of the ruler who enjoyed absolute power. These rulers wielded their discretion in

personnel matters to maintain power over their territories. Public offices were filled by trusted kin and often hereditary.

The roots of the first institutionalized merit system are commonly traced back to Imperial China. Introduced gradually since the Sui dynasty (581-618) and fully established by the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), office holders were recruited through a formal and competitive examination process – the *keju* (Wang and Yang, 2025). A major impetus for the introduction of rule-based selection was to weaken the hereditary aristocracy that increasingly concentrated power through government roles. Over the centuries, the examination system became an engine of social mobility, giving rise to a new class of scholar-gentry (Bai and Jia, 2016; Chen et al., 2020). Personnel policies were put in place to control this new class of administrators, ranging from frequent rotations to banning officials to serve in their home areas. Similar examination systems spread throughout Asia, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (Wang, 2013).²

While the Chinese imperial examination system marked a first milestone in the development of professional civil services, it only governed the selection into public office and was not accompanied by measures shielding civil servants from the ruler’s influence *after* their appointment – such policies emerged only centuries later. The earliest example of modern-day style civil service protections is Prussia. The *Allgemeines Landrecht* of 1794 formalized the role of civil servants by statute, gradually replacing the hire-and-fire policy with lifelong tenure and political independence. Initially implemented to reduce the influence of the feudal elite, these protections gave rise to a new administrative class – the *Beamtenstand* (Rosenberg, 1958).³ Prussia’s defeat by Napoleon in 1806 marked the beginning of a period of “bureaucratic absolutism”, with “the bureaucracy – not the king – as the locus of the state” (Derlien, 1987).⁴

The better-known milestones for the development of civil service protections in the West are the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 in the U.K. and the Pendleton Act of 1883 in the U.S. Prompted by the need to modernize the patronage-ridden British administrative state, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report recommended the creation of a permanent civil service governed by merit-based selection, long-term careers, and political neutrality. The Report triggered a

²Civil service exams were in place in Japan between 700-800, in Korea during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties (918-1910), and in Vietnam during the Dai Viet (1075–1919).

³Heldring (2023) studies the legacy of the Prussian bureaucracy, finding that formerly Prussian municipalities were more effective at carrying out state actions.

⁴Weber (1922), greatly influenced by the Prussian experience, saw the rule-based bureaucracy as superior but likewise worried about the loss of control.

gradual path towards reform, starting with the creation of a Civil Service Commission in 1855. The Crimean War, exposing weaknesses of the bureaucracy, created public pressure that hastened the reform (Searle, 1993). Despite following Prussia, Northcote-Trevelyan was highly influential, its recommendations serving as a blue print for building colonial administrations in the British colonies. For example, India, as the largest British possession, held open competitive examinations in its colonial service only a year after the Report – the first colony to open its bureaucracy for “natives.”⁵

In the U.S., the Pendleton Act of 1883, similarly, led to the gradual introduction of competitive examinations and protections from undue dismissal. While pro-reform sentiments had been developing since the end of the Civil War (Hoogenboom, 1959), the catalyst for the 1883 reform was the assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed office seeker. The assassination made the issue of patronage salient, leading to pressure for reform (Theriault, 2003).

2.2 Key theoretical channel – a stylized model

The historical examples in subsection 2.1 highlight the prevalence of agency frictions in bureaucracies. Rulers and politicians – faced with the task of administering large swaths of territory and population – frequently rely on local elites or appointed bureaucrats to govern. The reliance on these agents of the state, however, creates concerns that the administrative class becomes too powerful for the ruler to control. Civil service protections – by shaping the degree of the ruler’s discretion in the selection and progression of bureaucrats – help structure the balance between political control and bureaucratic autonomy.

A large principal-agent literature in economics helps identify the different channels through which civil service protections can impact bureaucratic performance. Many of the organizational features that give rise to agency issues are not necessarily limited to the case of public organizations. For example, the difficulty of measuring objective performance – while certainly a common challenge in bureaucracies (Besley et al., 2022) – also applies to measurement in private organizations (Prendergast and Topel, 1993; Prendergast, 1999). Similarly, questions regarding the trade-off between discretion vs. rules in personnel

⁵While nominally open for all, the implementation of the exam was geared towards the British elite. Initially, exams were only administered in London; topics tested included Latin and the Western classics. As a result, successful Indian officers were few and hailed from elite backgrounds (Xu, 2023).

management apply to organizations more broadly.

Two features, however, make the study of *civil service* protections distinctive from the study of “job protections” more generally. First, public organizations are tasked with providing goods and services that markets are not designed for, or where markets fail (Banerjee, 1997; Dixit, 2002). In these organizations, both the mission and policy preferences of its personnel matter in addition to pecuniary incentives. While many theoretical models focus on how organizational features affect vertical traits like “ability,” heterogeneity in horizontal traits capturing policy preferences or ideology are relatively more important in the public sector. This applies especially to senior-level bureaucrats who are more closely involved in policy implementation than frontline providers.

Second, bureaucracies experience swings in policy preferences depending on the principal in charge. In contrast to private organizations where profit maximization serves as the dominant objective, the priorities of political principals will vary relatively more. Such policy swings are particularly common in democracies where ruling parties frequently turn over. These combined features make questions of preference alignment between the principal and its agents much more important in mission-driven organizations like bureaucracies (Besley and Ghatak, 2005; Prendergast, 2007; Ashraf and Bandiera, 2018).

My theoretical discussion of civil service protections will thus focus on the role of preference misalignment as the key political economy channel. I introduce a minimal framework designed to (i) highlight the role of civil service protections for both the entry and progression margins, and (ii) show how civil service protections shape the principal-agent conflict between politician and bureaucrat. Closest to my framework is Ujhelyi (2014a) who studies civil service rules in a richer model of electoral accountability. This framework, instead, will be silent on the role of electoral accountability – in part for simplicity, but also since the key tension involving the misalignment of bureaucrats and politicians is applicable to non-democracies as well. I conclude this section with a discussion of broader channels through which civil service protections can affect performance.

Basic setup. Consider a government that must decide over the implementation of a public policy $t \in [0, 1]$. The choice of t , for example, could reflect the allocation of a unit mass of public goods across two groups (e.g., urban vs. rural), so that the first group receives t and the second group receives $1 - t$. Alternatively, the choice of t could also reflect the allocation of effort across two tasks, or how much taxes to raise for public good provision. In what follows, I

refer to t as the allocation of a public good. For simplicity, I assume that the social welfare function takes the form $W(t) = -(t - \tau^*)^2$, so there is a socially optimal allocation $\tau^* \in [0, 1]$.

The government consists of a politician P and a bureaucrat B .⁶ Both have preferences over the allocation of the public good. The politician's preferred allocation is $\tau_P \in [0, 1]$. The preferred allocation of a fully rule-selected bureaucrat, on the other hand, is $\tau_R \in [0, 1]$. To create a conflict of interest, I assume that $\tau_R \neq \tau_P$. The preferred allocation of the *appointed* bureaucrat $\tau_B(\gamma)$ depends on the degree of civil service protections at the entry margin, captured by $\gamma \in (0, 1]$. In particular, the appointed bureaucrat type is given by a convex combination, $\tau_B(\gamma) = \gamma\tau_R + (1-\gamma)\tau_P$. Stronger civil service protections at entry γ move the preferences of the appointed bureaucrat away from the politician's preferred allocation towards those of the rule-selected bureaucrat. If $\gamma = 1$, the bureaucrat is selected entirely by a rule-based procedure, which reflects the *rule-selected* bureaucrat with ideal point τ_R . If $\gamma \rightarrow 0$, the politician has full discretion over selection, and the appointed bureaucrat shares the politician's preferred allocation τ_P . To simplify, I assume that bias is one-sided: both the politician and the rule-selected bureaucrat are weakly biased towards the first group, so that $\tau_P \geq \tau^*$ and $\tau_R \geq \tau^*$.⁷ This implies that the preferred allocation of the *appointed* bureaucrat is also weakly biased toward the first group, $\tau_B(\gamma) \geq \tau^*$. The misalignment in preferences between the politician τ_P and the appointed bureaucrat $\tau_B(\gamma)$ creates the key misalignment tension in this setting.⁸

Bureaucrat implementation and political influence. The public good $t \in [0, 1]$ is allocated in a two-stage game played by the bureaucrat and politician. The bureaucrat selects the allocation t . After observing the allocation, the politician decides to interfere $d \in \{0, 1\}$ at cost $\kappa \in (0, (\tau_R - \tau_P)^2)$.⁹ By interfering, the politician overrides the bureaucrat's choice t with τ_P , the politi-

⁶I will interchangeably use the terms politician and ruler since questions of civil service protections do not only apply to democracies. I will also refer to public good provision closer to the socially optimal allocation τ^* as reflecting greater performance.

⁷This assumption ensures all ideal points lie on the same side of the socially optimal allocation τ^* , so welfare comparisons reduce to the ordering of τ_R and τ_P rather than distances from the optimum. An intuitive way to interpret one-sided bias is that the (weak) bias towards one group could reflect ideology (e.g., elite or urban bias).

⁸Notice that with $\gamma \in (0, 1]$, $\tau_B(\gamma) \leq \tau_P \iff \tau_R \leq \tau_P$. I will thus discuss the results with reference to the *appointed* bureaucrat's preference $\tau_B(\gamma)$ for interpretational ease.

⁹The upper bound ensures that κ is small enough that the politician's interference threat is binding against the most independent, rule-selected bureaucrat ($\gamma = 1$).

cian’s preferred allocation. In this context, κ captures the cost incurred by the politician to exert pressure, for example, by using threats of firing or demotions to influence the bureaucrat’s behavior. I refer to κ as the degree of civil service protections at the career progression margin.

The bureaucrat’s utility $u_B(t, d)$ from choosing an allocation t hence depends on the politician’s interference decision d . If the politician does not interfere ($d = 0$), the bureaucrat’s utility is:

$$u_B(t, 0) = -(t - \tau_B(\gamma))^2, \quad (1)$$

which captures the disutility arising from deviations of the chosen allocation t from the appointed bureaucrat’s preferred allocation $\tau_B(\gamma)$. If the politician interferes ($d = 1$), [Equation 1](#) captures the disutility from misalignment with the politician’s allocation, $u_B(\tau_P, 1) = -(\tau_P - \tau_B(\gamma))^2$.

Given the bureaucrat’s choice t , the politician decides whether to interfere to maximize utility $u_P(t, d)$. If the politician does not interfere, utility is:

$$u_P(t, 0) = -(t - \tau_P)^2 \quad (2)$$

If the politician interferes, utility is $u_P(\tau_P, 1) = -\kappa$. The politician weighs the utility from interfering to achieve the desired allocation τ_P at cost κ against the disutility arising from disagreement with the bureaucrat’s chosen allocation. Anticipating this, the threat of interference influences the bureaucrat’s choice.

Key trade-off and theoretical ambiguity. The model illustrates the ambiguous effect of civil service protections on welfare via two margins. First, greater civil service protections at the entry margin γ shift the preference of the appointed bureaucrat away from the politician’s preferred allocation. In addition, greater civil service protections at the career progression margin κ raise the politician’s cost of interfering with the appointed bureaucrat. If the cost is small, the threat of interference constrains the bureaucrat, moving the bureaucrat’s chosen allocation closer to the politician’s preferred allocation. If the cost of political interference is high, the bureaucrat is insulated from the politician and implements the own preference ([Appendix A](#), Proposition 1).

Second, how civil service protections affect welfare depends on whether the bureaucrat or politician is more biased. Protections at the entry margin limit the ability of the politician to appoint a like-minded bureaucrat, while protections

at the progression margin κ constrain the ability of the politician to exert control over the bureaucrat using political interference. If the appointed bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P$), greater civil service protections *decrease* welfare by increasing distortions. This is the “deep state” view of the bureaucracy, where unaccountable bureaucrats implement their own agenda that deviates from the politician’s preferred policy. In contrast, if the politician is more biased than the appointed bureaucrat ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma)$), protections at the entry margin prevent more biased appointments, while protections at the progression margin shield bureaucrats from undue political interference. In this case, greater civil service protections *increase* welfare. This is the counterpoint to the “deep state” view – bureaucrats can act as a valuable check on politicians (Appendix A, Propositions 2 and 3).¹⁰

Interplay between protections at entry and progression. Civil service protections at the entry and progression margins interact. This interaction arises because an increase in civil service protections at the progression margin κ expands the range of entry protections γ in which the appointed bureaucrat can implement the own ideal point without political interference.¹¹ If the politician is more biased than the appointed bureaucrat, the welfare gain from protections at the entry margin is higher when protections at the progression margin are also present. Intuitively, this ensures that a biased politician can neither exercise patronage to appoint a biased bureaucrat, nor “corrupt” a rule-selected bureaucrat through political interference. Since each margin of protection alone can be undone without the other, civil service protections at entry and progression reinforce one another. When instead the bureaucrat is more biased, welfare is improved by loosening civil service protections on either the progression margin *or* the entry margin. In this case, civil service protections at the two margins are substitutes in the sense that relaxing one margin – entry or progression – suffices to reduce bias and improve welfare (Appendix A, Proposition 4).

2.3 Additional channels

The stylized model focused on the role of civil service reforms in shaping preference alignment between bureaucrats and politicians. There are, however, a

¹⁰This also resonates with the idea in Prendergast (2007) that biased bureaucrats can be useful if they help align incentives.

¹¹As Appendix A, Proposition 4 shows, this implies that the interaction between both margins of civil service protections operates through the regime boundary that governs whether the politician interferes or not. Away from the boundary, the two margins do not interact.

range of additional channels through which civil service protections may affect performance – this subsection discusses them, focusing on the key trade-offs.

Expertise vs. bias. A classic trade-off in organizations evolves around the use of discretion vs. rules in hiring and promotions (Baker et al., 1994; Prendergast and Topel, 1996). Discretion can enable the decision maker to leverage superior private information to improve selection. Such private information might be particularly valuable in settings where rule-based screening methods – like competitive exams – do not select traits predictive of on-the-job performance. Discretion, however, also enables the decision maker to exercise favoritism by biasing personnel appointments towards connected candidates at the expense of quality. In the case of bureaucracies, there is in particular the concern that partisan rulers trade off competence with loyalty when appointing subordinates (Egorov and Sonin, 2011).

The trade-off between expertise vs. bias is not only limited to the decision maker but is also relevant for the decision to delegate to subordinates. One way to interpret an increase in civil service protections is a shift of formal authority from politicians to bureaucrats. Delegating decision rights to bureaucrats can increase their incentives to invest in expertise. This can improve decision-making but also result in the principal’s loss of control (Aghion and Tirole, 1997).¹²

Civil service protections as a commitment device. A byproduct of serving “at the pleasure” of the ruler is the lack of job security. Civil service protections, by providing job security, are conducive to the accumulation of job-specific human capital and expertise (Becker, 1962; Carmichael, 1983). At the same time, however, guaranteeing job security limits the extent to which career incentives can be used to motivate workers, giving rise to the classic moral hazard problem (Holmstrom, 1982; Shapiro and Stiglitz, 1984).

In Gailmard and Patty (2007), civil service protections increase bureaucrats’ incentives to invest in policy expertise by insulating them from politically motivated dismissal. This raises the expected returns to career-specific investments in expertise. The same protections that encourage expertise, however, also increase bureaucratic discretion, potentially allowing bureaucrats to pursue

¹²More generally, there is a large theory literature that studies questions of delegation (Dessein, 2002; Dessein and Santos, 2006; Alonso and Matouschek, 2008), often with explicit applications pertaining to bureaucracies (Angelucci et al., 2024).

policies closer to their own preferences rather than those of elected officials.

Civil service protections not only incentivize investments in expertise but also solve time inconsistency problems by providing continuity in contexts of frequent political turnover. An example for this is [Hanssen \(2004\)](#) who considers the trade-off between judicial independence and political control. On the one hand, an independent judiciary makes it harder for future governments to overturn laws or policies – protections serve as a commitment device that stabilizes policy across political turnover. On the other hand, again, is the loss of control whereby judges insulated from replacement can more freely pursue their own policy preferences.

The role of civil service protections as a commitment device also connects to classic time inconsistency problems in macroeconomics. A prime example is central banking, where a central bank’s optimal long-term policy is abandoned for short-term gains because incentives change over time ([Kydlund and Prescott, 1977](#)). Delegating monetary policy to an independent central banker who puts more weight on inflation stabilization than society does – a biased bureaucrat – in turn, helps reduce the time inconsistency problem ([Rogoff, 1985](#)).¹³ Similar time inconsistency issues exist in fiscal policy, where long-term public investments often collide with short-term, election-driven political incentives ([Alesina, 1987](#); [Persson and Svensson, 1989](#)).

Interactions with political selection. The stylized framework discussed in [subsection 2.2](#) left open the question of what shapes variation in the politician’s type, as reflected in the ideal point τ_P . While discussing the vast literature on political selection and electoral accountability lies beyond the scope of this paper (see [Ashworth \(2012\)](#); [Duggan and Martinelli \(2017\)](#); [Dal Bó and Finan \(2018\)](#) for comprehensive reviews), there exists a narrower, related literature on whether public officials – such as regulators or judges – should be elected or appointed. The key insight in this literature is that elections render public officials more responsive to voters ([Besley and Coate, 2003](#); [Maskin and Tirole, 2004](#)). For selection, direct election allows the preferences of the elected officials to more closely reflect the preferences of the voters on the particular job-relevant issues. This link becomes weaker through appointments made via elected politi-

¹³Cross-country studies find a negative association between Central Bank Independence and inflation, both in the cross-section and using panel variation ([Alesina and Summers, 1993](#); [Dincer and Eichengreen, 2014](#)). [Drechsel \(2026\)](#), relying on a narrative identification strategy based on Nixon’s pressure on the Chair of the Federal Reserve, finds that political pressure increases inflation without any positive effects on real economic activity.

cians, who are elected based on a wider bundle of policy preferences (Besley and Coate, 2003). Similarly, re-election incentives discipline the actions of potentially misaligned officials. Appointed officials, in contrast, focus on professional reputation rather than electoral popularity (Alesina and Tabellini, 2007).

A prerequisite for elections to generate responsiveness is the functioning of electoral accountability. In Maskin and Tirole (2004), for example, elected officials only deliver higher welfare than insulated bureaucrats if voter oversight is strong and politicians are responsive. In this spirit, Ujhelyi (2014a) proposes an interesting channel through which civil service reforms may, in fact, erode electoral accountability. In the model, public good provision reflects a joint outcome by bureaucrats and politicians. Since Ujhelyi (2014a) assumes that civil service reforms increase bureaucrat quality, the quality of public good provision becomes less sensitive to the politician’s effort. As a result, voters are less able to learn about the quality of politicians. This reduces the ability of elections to discipline and screen politicians, highlighting a trade-off between improving bureaucrats and improving politicians.

3 Civil Service Protections: Stylized Facts

Guided by the framework, this section aims to (i) provide evidence on variation in civil service protections across countries at the entry and progression margins and (ii) discuss challenges in the measurement of civil service protections.

3.1 Measuring variation in civil service protections

The popularity of cross-country comparisons in the 1990s has produced a range of attempts to measure the quality of governance, including the strength of civil service protections. In the spirit of modern “management surveys” (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007), Evans and Rauch (1999) collect survey data on civil service personnel practices across 35 lower-income countries, demonstrating a positive correlation between “Weberian” institutions – merit-based selection and long-term careers – and economic growth.

Since then, a variety of cross-country datasets have been constructed to measure more granular differences in governance quality at a larger scale. Among the most prominent ones are the Quality of Government (QoG) and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) datasets. In particular, both datasets contain a range of questions regarding the prevalence of discretionary personnel practices in the

public sector. The QoG elicits expert assessments about the structure and functioning of public administrations for 117 countries. Data has been collected in three waves: 2008-12, 2014, and 2020. V-Dem, in contrast, is primarily concerned about measuring political institutions. Like the QoG, it relies on expert assessments. These assessments pertain to narrow features of political institutions. It has greater coverage, spanning 1789–2024 and covering a total of 202 countries. Given the focus on political institutions, however, the dataset has a more limited set of variables capturing features of the bureaucracy.

For the stylized facts, I focus on the combined cross-section of 73 countries in 2020. Guided by the conceptual framework (subsection 2.2), I select indicators from both datasets that map into the two dimensions of civil service protections. I then rescale each indicator to fall into the range $[0, 1]$ and invert the signs of indicators if needed so greater numbers correspond to higher degrees of civil service protection.¹⁴ Finally, I compute an index by averaging across the normalized indicators for each dimension:

1. **Career progression (κ):** Civil service protections governing the career transfer, promotion, demotion, and firing of bureaucrats, for example, whether civil servants can be arbitrarily transferred or fired without cause.¹⁵
2. **Recruitment (γ):** Civil service protections governing the extent to which the selection of bureaucrats is rule-based, or whether bureaucrats are appointed at the discretion of their political superiors.¹⁶

Before presenting stylized facts, it is important to point to some of the challenges and caveats around the measurement of civil service protections.

¹⁴Specifically, I rescale an indicator $x' = (x - \min(x)) / (\max(x) - \min(x))$.

¹⁵These are two QoG measures: **proff3** (In your chosen country, to what extent do bureaucrats working in ministries and other bureaucratic agencies of the central government enjoy security of tenure?) and **impar1** (In your chosen country, how often is day-to-day bureaucratic decision-making subject to interference from individual politicians?). While **impar1** does not directly measure interference in career progression, the main channel through which politicians control bureaucratic decision making is through the use of career incentives.

¹⁶These are two QoG measures and a V-Dem measure: **proff1** (In your chosen country, to what extent are appointments to bureaucratic positions in the central government based on the political and/or personal connections of the applicant?), **close2** (When a recruitment process to bureaucratic positions in the central government in your chosen country is held, does this process usually involve a formal examination?), and **v2stcritrecadm** (To what extent are appointment decisions in the state administration based on personal and political connections, as opposed to skills and merit?).

De-jure vs. de-facto. Many countries have formal civil service rules in place that govern the selection of personnel. For example, 59 countries today have merit-based exam selection enshrined in their constitution (Elkins and Ginsburg, 2025)¹⁷ – despite this, the predictive power of such legal features for the *de-facto* levels of civil service protections is surprisingly low (Schuster, 2017). The discrepancy might be especially large in weak state capacity settings, where enforcement is not sufficiently strong. A case in point is Colonnelli et al. (2020), who document the role of political connections in the allocation of municipal jobs even for positions that are *de-jure* regulated by civil service exams. Similarly, Riaño (2025) shows that *de-facto* family ties remain prevalent even if anti-nepotism laws nominally prohibit close relatives from serving within the same arms of government. More historically, Leucht (2024) documents significant non-compliance in the selection of police officers through competitive examinations during the period of machine politics in New York.¹⁸

Finally, it is often very difficult to point to one particular statute that clearly outlines the extent of civil service protections in common law countries such as the U.S. Laws can also be vague, leaving substantial scope for the judiciary to delineate the exact boundaries. While even civil service protected workers can be *de-jure* fired for “cause,” there remains ambiguity over what constitutes a reasonable cause, making dismissals *de-facto* rare. For these reasons, many governance indicators (including QoG and V-Dem) focus on *de-facto* governance.

Subjective assessments. While the presence of a statute or case law is verifiable, the focus on *de-facto* governance frequently relies on subjective expert assessment. The reliance on such subjective measures opens up a range of additional possible biases. Coders might be generally biased in their perceptions. When asked to rate multiple sub-dimensions of institutional quality, halo biases might also artificially create correlations across dimensions. For example, a country with weak democratic institutions might also be perceived to have weak administrative institutions beyond those governing political selection. While newer indices (including the QoG and V-Dem) address such concerns by relying on multiple experts and statistical aggregation methods, the assessments are – given the absence of “ground truth” measures – difficult to validate.

¹⁷Elkins and Ginsburg (2025): “Characteristics of National Constitutions, Version 5.0”, Comparative Constitutions Project.

¹⁸Leucht (2024) finds that voters in the network of officers selected in non-compliance with the civil service rules are more likely to support the incumbent party in later elections.

Finally, given the aggregate nature of these indices, many are designed to make “average statements.” For example, experts for V-Dem asked about the degree to which “appointments are politically driven” are prompted to make these assessments for the “average” department. Such average statements may mask significant heterogeneity. Heterogeneity in the form of “pockets of effectiveness”, however, has been shown to be prevalent in many developing country settings (Roll, 2014), suggesting that more promise may lie in work that focuses on comparing governance practices across specific organizational units.

3.2 Country-level stylized facts

Variation and correlates of civil service protections. Figure 1, panel (a) reports the cross-sectional relationship between (log) GDP per capita (in PPP) and the extent of overall civil service protections in 2020. The overall civil service protection measure is computed as the average of the career progression and recruitment indices. Several interesting patterns emerge. First, the scatter plot reveals substantial variation in the degree of civil service protections. The top 5 countries with the highest degrees of civil service protections are Norway, Germany, France, South Korea, and Ireland. Countries with the least amount of civil service protections are Venezuela, Eritrea, Uzbekistan, Iraq, and Ethiopia.

Second, while democracies (as classified by V-Dem) tend to have higher levels of civil service protections than autocracies, there exists significant overlap. This suggests that civil service protections as an institutional feature are not invariably tied to questions of political selection and accountability. This has implications for the relevant theories, which study the role of bureaucratic insulation in a system of elections. The only outlier among autocracies is Singapore, a country renown for its exceptionally strong and professionalized civil service.

Finally, countries with greater degrees of civil service protections tend to have higher levels of economic prosperity. This cross-sectional correlation resonates with earlier work by Evans and Rauch (1999) showing a positive relationship between “Weberianness” and growth. They also confirm the “Weberian facts” highlighted in Besley et al. (2022), who construct a broader measure of rational-legal organizational features. Interestingly, the relationship is strongest and tightest for the democratic countries. In the autocratic sample, the relationship is weaker once excluding Singapore.

Clusters of civil service protections. Figure 1, panel (b) breaks down

the overall index of civil service protections into its two components: (i) protections for career progression and (ii) protections for recruitment. As panel (b) reveals, countries where bureaucrats are more insulated from political interference in their careers are also countries where there is less scope for political influence at the entry margin. While this “clustering” of personnel practices can – to some extent – also reflect halo biases (see [subsection 3.1](#)), the presence of these positive associations is consistent with the idea of mutually reinforcing dimensions of state capacity ([Besley and Persson, 2014](#)).

[Figure 1 here]

4 Effects of civil service protections

In recent years, there has been a growing empirical literature that sheds light on the role of civil service protections. Broadly speaking, this work can be divided into two groups. The first group comprises work that speaks to the costs or benefits of civil service protections indirectly. These studies either focus on the *de-facto* link between political and bureaucratic turnover at a given level of civil service protections, or exploit cross-sectional differences in civil service protections across positions as a source of heterogeneity. The second group comprises work that directly studies civil service reforms – *de-jure* changes in the degree of civil service protections.

While the latter approach directly speaks to the effect of civil service protections by leveraging plausible counterfactuals, a limitation is that civil service reforms happen only rarely. As such, credible policy variation is hard to come by and tends to be restricted to a few historical episodes, with most of the evidence concentrated in the U.S.¹⁹ This can limit the external validity of the findings. I thus consider both the narrow literature focused on evaluating the effects of particular measures aimed at changing civil service protections as well as the broader literature studying the consequences of political interference.

Challenges. There are also a range of practical issues that make the empirical study of civil service protections difficult. First of all, changes in civil service

¹⁹While falling outside this paper’s taxonomy of the empirical papers, there is also a smaller, related literature that relies on cross-sectional comparisons of appointment rules in the judiciary ([Besley and Abigail Payne, 2013](#); [Gordon and Huber, 2007](#); [Lim, 2013](#)). [Gordon and Huber \(2007\)](#) and [Lim \(2013\)](#), for example, compare Kansas district courts with partisan elections for judges to those who employ non-competitive (uncontested) retention elections.

protections are not only rare but rarely occur in isolation. Instead, changes in civil service protections tend to be bundled with a range of other, complementary organizational reforms. For example, the Pendleton Act of 1883 – commonly associated with the introduction of rule-based selection through civil service exams – went hand-in-glove with the prohibition of arbitrary firings and the solicitation of campaign contributions from bureaucrats ([Van Riper, 1958](#)). Similarly, many reforms today that aim to improve the rule-based recruitment of public sector workers go with a wide range of changes in personnel management ([World Bank, 2017](#)), including changes in the remuneration of workers. While it is still possible to evaluate the joint treatment, it becomes much harder to credibly pinpoint the contribution of any particular change in the bundle.

Second, the evaluation of civil service protections ideally requires observable welfare-relevant outcomes. This often restricts the study of civil service protections to functions of governments which can be more easily mapped to an observable measure of output or public good provision. This measurement issue often tilts the research focus towards lower level bureaucrats and frontline providers such as teachers, health workers, or tax collectors. As a result, much less work exists on senior-level bureaucrats and middle-managers in the public sector. Since horizontal heterogeneity in policy preferences are less likely to play a role relative to vertical heterogeneity in ability when it comes to frontline providers ([subsection 2.2](#)), the dominant channels through which the effects of civil service protections operate are likely to differ: impacts on human capital, skill acquisition, and career concerns are likely to be more important for frontline providers than senior bureaucrats.

When research on senior-level bureaucrats exists, the mappings are invariably more aggregate.²⁰ [Xu \(2018\)](#), as a stark example, studies colonial governors of the British Empire, mapping governors to revenue performance of their assigned colonies. More recent papers in this spirit map public sector managers to office-level performance outcomes, such as the processing speed of social security offices or patient outcomes in public hospitals ([Fenizia, 2022](#); [Muñoz and Otero, 2025](#)). While this approach allows the study of upper level bureaucrats, the focus on such downstream outcomes can limit the study of the underlying mechanisms. Given the often times small number of departments and offices, it

²⁰A notable exception is [Bertrand et al. \(2019\)](#) who study senior-level bureaucrats of the Indian Administrative Service. To derive a comparable measure of performance, [Bertrand et al. \(2019\)](#) survey a variety of stakeholders (co-workers, journalists, civil society and business representatives) to collect subjective, performance-related measures regarding effectiveness, probity, and the ability to withstand illegitimate political pressure.

also gives rise to small N studies, with adverse implications for statistical power.

4.1 Co-movement of political and bureaucratic turnover

This subsection first presents the empirical literature documenting the link between political and bureaucrat turnover. The presence of a co-movement in turnover can serve as a *prima facie* evidence for political interference and the absence of civil service protections. Among the first papers to study this link is [Iyer and Mani \(2012\)](#), who exploit elections of Chief Ministers to show the presence of political cycles in lateral transfers in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). This fact is particularly striking since IAS officers operate in a regime where recruitment, promotions, and firings are strictly limited by civil service protections. Even in the presence of these guardrails aimed at limiting political influence, the resulting amount of turnover remains strikingly high: the probability of an officer to be transferred in a given year is as high as 53%. The prevalence of such short tenures contrasts sharply with the statutory term length of at least 2 years ([Bertrand et al., 2019](#)).

The presence of such a strong co-movement between political and bureaucratic turnover raises the question whether such a high degree of turnover is disruptive for the organization. [Colonnelli et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Akhtari et al. \(2022\)](#) in Brazil shed light on the costs of politically induced turnover. [Colonnelli et al. \(2020\)](#) find that supporters of winning mayors are significantly more likely to hold a public sector job after the election. Importantly, they find that these supporters are much less likely to be qualified for their assigned positions, suggesting that politicians leverage their discretion in appointments – due to the absence of well-functioning civil service protections – for favoritism. [Barbosa and Ferreira \(2023\)](#) expand on this evidence by showing that this type of turnover induced patronage can explain more than half of the increase in public sector employment in Brazil since re-democratization. This type of patronage appears to be prevalent, with similar findings in other developing country settings such as Ecuador ([Brassiolo et al., 2020](#)).

[Akhtari et al. \(2022\)](#) likewise leverage the political turnover of municipal mayors but focus on a subset of public sector employees – principals and teachers. The focus on education – while narrower – allows the authors to relate the politically induced bureaucratic turnover to schooling outcomes. Strikingly, [Akhtari et al. \(2022\)](#) find that excessive turnover negatively impacts learning

outcomes, providing direct evidence for the costs of political interference.

While excessive turnover is harmful, so is potentially entrenchment. [Bazzi et al. \(2025\)](#) adopt a similar close-elections design to focus on village administrations in Indonesia. In their setting, bureaucratic turnover is low. Here, election-induced political turnover thus serves to “shake things up.” They find that political turnover goes hand-in-glove with bureaucratic turnover. These bureaucrats appear to be better informed about the preferences of the villagers and, in turn, do a better job at public service delivery. Aside the different context, these contrasting results raise questions about the underlying differences in political incentives – did politicians appoint bureaucrats to exercise patronage, or to strengthen performance incentives?

As these findings show, the relationship between political and bureaucratic turnover can allow us to infer to the degree of civil service protections. This suggests significant heterogeneity depending on the institutions in place. In this regard, [Foy \(2024\)](#) and [Hsieh et al. \(2011\)](#) offer an interesting juxtaposition. [Hsieh et al. \(2011\)](#) study the role of political retribution in Venezuela’s government bureaucracy – a context where civil service protections are virtually absent (see [Figure 1](#)). They find that civil servant signatories of an unsuccessful petition to remove Hugo Chavez in 2004 saw a 5% drop in earnings and a 1.3 p.p. decline in employment after the voter lists – used by Chavez as an “enemies list” – were released. [Foy \(2024\)](#), likewise, studies potential retributions following an unsuccessful recall election but focuses on the disclosure of signatories to recall Wisconsin’s governor Scott Walker in 2012. In contrast to the Venezuelan case, [Foy \(2024\)](#) finds a precisely estimated zero effect of signing on earnings and employment of state civil servants with civil service protections. Signers in the unclassified service made up of political appointees, in contrast, were paid about 3% less annually relative to non-signers in the post-disclosure period.

The fact that *de-jure* civil service protections “work” holds not only in the state government but also the U.S. federal government. [Spenkuch et al. \(2023\)](#), linking personnel records to voter registration data, find an absence of partisan cycles in hiring and firing among civil service protected positions inside the U.S. federal government for 1997–2021. In contrast, they find large partisan cycles among political appointees serving at the pleasure of the President, suggesting that politicians prefer to seek alignment when civil service rules permit.

While the absence of partisan cycles suggests compliance with civil service protections, the inability to achieve ideological alignment with the vast major-

ity of rank-and-file workers could also give rise to agency frictions (Besley and Ghatak, 2005). When comparing the performance of aligned vs. misaligned procurement officers, Spenkuch et al. (2023) indeed find that misaligned officers incur greater delays and cost-overruns in their contracting. Such frictions are not only confined to procurement but also other bureaucratic processes. Bellodi et al. (2026) link regulatory outcomes to the partisan identity of the assigned regulators. Focusing on the U.S. rulemaking process, Bellodi et al. (2026) provide evidence consistent with the presence of misalignment frictions.

4.2 Civil service reforms, personnel and policies

This subsection now turns the attention to the literature evaluating the effects of civil service reforms. These papers rely on natural experiments comparing governance units experiencing a statutory change in civil service protections with counterfactual units maintaining the status quo.

U.S. as a laboratory for civil service reform. There exists a mature literature evaluating the effects of civil service reforms in the U.S. One attractiveness of the U.S. setting is the staggered nature of the Progressive Era’s roll-out of civil service protections across time, space, and different levels of government. The introduction of civil service protections was led by the federal government’s Pendleton Act of 1883. Two complementary papers take advantage of the differential roll-out across time, space, and departments. Aneja and Xu (2024) study the introduction and subsequent expansion of the Pendleton Act for the Post Office. This focus allows the authors to obtain office-level measures of delivery errors and cost-efficiency. Taking advantage of the staggered roll-out of the reform in a difference-in-differences framework, Aneja and Xu (2024) find that the reform improved postal performance. In terms of mechanism, the effects are driven by a reduction in political interference rather than improved selection. Linking personnel records to microlevel census data to obtain individual traits of civil service entrants, Aneja and Xu (2024) find only limited evidence for an improved selection due to competitive exams. Instead, they observe a marked decrease in turnover even among postal workers selected *prior* to the reform. The reform-induced decrease in turnover is strongest during election years, coinciding with the periods when performance improves most. As opportunities for patronage dried up, reformed cities also saw a weakening of local parties, as measured by the prevalence of partisan local newspapers.

Moreira and Pérez (2024) provide complementary evidence from the customs office. Exploiting the staggered roll-out of the initial Pendleton Act expansion, they likewise find that the reform decreased electoral cycles in turnover but did not improve revenue collection capacity. They attribute the weak gains from civil service reform to the imperfect implementation of the reform in the customs office, where exemptions enabled politicians to bypass the recruitment via classified positions. This case illustrates how *de-jure* changes may not necessarily bring about *de-facto* changes if politicians can circumvent the rules.

State-level civil service reforms followed the federal reforms. These reforms not only reduce the electoral advantage of incumbents (Folke et al., 2011), but likewise diminish political cycles. Bostashvili and Ujhelyi (2019) study how state-level highway spending varies over the electoral cycle. While they find significant electoral cycles in highway spending reflecting electoral incentives, these cycles weaken in states that introduce civil service reforms. Civil service protections thus reduce volatility in government spending, which is likely to be beneficial. Ujhelyi (2014b) also provides evidence for a strategic response to the introduction of civil service reforms: states implementing civil service rules see less spending through state-level bureaucrats, and instead a strategic reallocation to lower level governments that are not covered by the reforms.

Finally, there is a longer tradition of empirical work documenting the effects of civil service reforms at the local level. The classic piece here is Rauch (1995), who constructs a municipal panel to study the roll-out of local reforms on public service delivery. He finds that the introduction of reforms significantly increased public sector performance, as measured by investments in municipal infrastructure. Kuipers and Sahn (2023), as well as Carreri et al. (2022), follow in a similar tradition to study changes in bureaucrat composition brought about by the civil service reforms. These municipal-level findings anticipated many of the similar findings uncovered in later work for reforms at the state and federal levels. Speaking to performance-implications, Ornaghi (2019) uses population-based thresholds governing the implementation of civil service rules in police departments to study the effects on crime. Ornaghi (2019) finds that civil service protections improve police performance.

Evidence beyond the U.S. The focus on historical periods enables the study of civil service protections at the extensive margin. A range of papers complement these extensive margin studies with changes in the degree of civil service protections at the intensive margin. Blanes i Vidal and Leaver (2011)

study the effects of a reform that reduced senior judges’ powers over promotion decisions of junior judges in the UK. In their context, senior judges tend to hail from elite backgrounds (e.g., Oxford and Cambridge graduates), raising public concerns over elitism in promotions. To reduce judicial discretion in promotions, the reform proposed a promotion committee that included elected politicians. Despite concerns of elitism in the judiciary, [Blanes i Vidal and Leaver \(2011\)](#) find little evidence for bias in promotions among candidates of similar observable productivity. After the reform announcement, however, promotions become biased in favor of the *non*-elites, suggesting that the prospect of political interference led to distorted promotion decisions.

The increased availability of administrative data in developing country settings has also enabled the study of civil service reforms beyond the West. [Estrada \(2019\)](#) studies how standardized exams in the recruitment of teachers in Mexico affect performance, as measured by teacher value-added. Combining temporal variation in whether teachers were recruited by a standardized exam vs. union discretion with quasi-random variation stemming from the allocation of teachers to schools, he finds that discretionary hires perform significantly worse than rule-based hires. [Riaño \(2025\)](#) uses Colombian administrative data to study how the introduction of anti-nepotism regulation affects the prevalence of family connections among newly hired staff. Using a creative strategy to back out family ties based on disclosure data, he finds that the anti-nepotism regulation reduced the prevalence of close (illegal) family connections by 15%. This reduction, however, does not seem to translate into measured improvements in the quality of new hires or agency level performance indices based on survey-level data.

[Mocanu \(2025\)](#) and [Mocanu and Patacchini \(2025\)](#) study a reform in 1988 Brazil that aimed to improve impartiality in the recruitment of federal employees. Exploiting rich variation in screening methods across different exams, [Mocanu \(2025\)](#) finds that increasing screening impartiality reduces the gender gap in hiring. These gains come disproportionately from blinded written exams, consistent with increased rule-based selection reducing bias. Interestingly, [Mocanu \(2025\)](#) also finds a sorting effect, whereby women are increasingly likely to apply to the federal government post-reform, pointing to an increased ability of impartial bureaucracies to attract talent. The follow-up study by [Mocanu and Patacchini \(2025\)](#) also finds that the impartiality reform reduced the propensity of socially connected workers to be hired, providing suggestive evidence for coinciding improvements in budget execution.

In terms of historical work studying intensive margin changes, [Xu \(2018\)](#) studies the role of social connections in the allocation of governorships of the British Empire. Exploiting the political turnover of the Colonial Secretary, [Xu \(2018\)](#) finds that governors connected to the politician enjoy a boost in career progression. This premium of connectedness, however, disappears the moment a reform is introduced that reduces discretion in colonial appointments. Importantly, [Xu \(2018\)](#) finds that these changes affected governors’ revenue performance, consistent with an incentive effect arising from the removal of bias in promotions. Moving from the British Empire to Imperial China, [Liu and Zhang \(2025\)](#) provide evidence for the value of discretion in a unique case. They focus on the appointment of prefecture governors, who were appointed from a pool of eligible candidates by lottery draw before an appointment reform in 1736. After 1736, a subset of these appointments was reformed to be made based on a joint deliberation by the Ministry of Personnel and the Emperor. The results suggest that reformed prefectures saw an improvement in public good provision and state responsiveness, as measured by the speed of response to disaster relief provision. While lottery appointments are arguably an extreme form of rule-based selection, this stark case demonstrates that discretion can, indeed, go with improved selection and performance.

[[Table 1](#) here]

Taking stock. To summarize the evidence, [Table 1](#) provides an overview documenting the effects of civil service reforms. The presentation is restricted to (i) the narrower set of studies that explicitly exploit reform variation in civil service protections, (ii) include bureaucrats as subjects of interest, and (iii) contain outcomes related to government performance. For each of the studies, the table characterizes the population studied, the empirical context, which margins of civil service protections are affected (extensive or intensive; entry or progression), as well as the impact on outcomes.

A few patterns emerge. Overall, increasing civil service protections leads to outcomes reflecting better government performance. These gains appear to be driven by improved selection of better “types”, as well as greater continuity and improved career incentives stemming from a more stable workforce experiencing lower turnover. The two studies reporting null effects attribute their findings to evasion ([Moreira and Pérez, 2024](#)) or imperfect enforcement ([Riaño, 2025](#)). The only negative study ([Liu and Zhang, 2025](#)) is based on a very stark comparison of discretion vs. a very extreme (and non-meritocratic) rule of *lottery*

appointments.

A few qualifications are in place. First, the empirical evidence stemming from civil service reforms does not indicate that there is no downside of increased civil service protections. Indeed, the papers focused on the co-movement between political and bureaucratic turnover ([subsection 4.1](#)) provided evidence consistent with the costs highlighted in the theoretical framework ([subsection 2.2](#)). Misalignment between politicians and bureaucrats creates frictions in the context of the contemporary U.S. federal government, with negative implications for procurement performance and rule-making ([Spenkuch et al., 2023](#); [Bellodi et al., 2026](#)); and as [Bazzi et al. \(2025\)](#) show in the context of village governance in Indonesia, too little bureaucratic turnover can also be detrimental for government responsiveness. It is important, however, to stress that this evidence – while isolating particular channels – arises within a given system of civil service institutions. Given the absence of a clear counterfactual, these findings thus do not permit statements about the costs and benefits of different degrees of civil service protections. It can still be that the gains of greater civil service protections outweigh the costs that these papers document.

Second, there is also the possibility that the existing empirical settings are somewhat stacked in favor of finding positive effects. The need to study performance-related outcomes tends to direct the focus of study to lower-ranked, “street-level” bureaucrats. Their tasks – teaching, policing, mail delivery – may be less politicized than the works of higher-level bureaucrats in charge of implementing new policies. In that sense, data constraints may have directed the empirical study focus to tasks where the role of political misalignment is less severe. Similarly, most changes in civil service protections – especially those based on extensive margin changes – start from a very low base. If the effects of protections are non-linear, the existing findings reflect localized effects that make it hard to extrapolate the conclusions to settings where the existing level of protections are high.

Finally, most of the evidence relies on observational data and natural experiments. This can make it hard to tease out mechanisms that administrative data alone cannot capture (e.g., regarding beliefs and expectations of civil servants). While the focus on civil service institutions makes the use of experiments relatively harder, it could be a fruitful complementary avenue ([Callen et al., 2024](#)). Reassuringly, the few studies relying on RCTs to indirectly speak to the role of civil service protections provide evidence consistent with the benefits of removing opaque promotion criteria and the costs of discretionary promotion systems.

[Deserranno et al. \(2025\)](#) study health workers in Sierra Leone, varying expectations over whether their promotions would be based on clear merit criteria or discretionary supervisor assessment. They find that career incentives are stronger when promotion criteria are clearer under the merit-based promotion. On the costs of discretionary promotions, [de Janvry et al. \(2023\)](#) study Chinese civil servants and introduce experimental variation in which of two relevant supervisors would be in charge of promotion decisions and – importantly – whether this information was known to the subordinate civil servant. They find evidence for the strategic allocation of effort to the promoting supervisor consistent with wasteful influence activities ([Milgrom, 1988](#); [Prendergast, 1993](#)).

5 Conclusion and open questions

The study of bureaucracy and the public sector has gained increasing attention in economics. At the core of questions pertaining to the organizational design of the public sector is how strong the link between the politician or ruler and the subordinate bureaucrats should be. This paper focused on the central role of civil service protections in delineating the boundary between politics and administration. Guided by a simple theoretical framework of civil service protections, I first establish key empirical facts: (i) civil service protections positively correlate with economic prosperity (ii) different dimensions of civil service protections governing recruitment and progression go hand-in-glove.

These macro-level correlations are consistent with the causal micro-level evidence that documents a positive effect of civil service protections on the quality of public service delivery. Open questions, however, remain. First, if civil service protections are indeed overwhelmingly positive for public service delivery, the natural question to ask is: when do political leaders have the right incentives to establish civil service institutions that serve the public good? If civil service rules reflect a superior public “management technology” ([Bloom and Van Reenen, 2010](#); [Bloom et al., 2016](#)), then understanding the frictions hampering adoption becomes a first-order question. While there is a theoretical literature speaking to questions of civil service adoption and how civil service reform changes the “elite bargain” ([Gailmard and Patty, 2007](#); [Ting et al., 2013](#); [Mueller, 2015](#)), the empirical literature is scarcer, focused on understanding the diffusion pattern of broader sets of policies ([DellaVigna and Kim, 2025](#); [Angelucci et al., 2025](#)).²¹

²¹An exception is [Anzia and Troustine \(2025\)](#) in political science, who relate the adoption

In particular, case studies of major landmark reforms ([subsection 2.1](#)) appear to point to the important role of public pressure – highlighting deficiencies in governance (Prussia, U.K.) or the costs of the spoils system (U.S.) – in shifting political incentives for civil service reform. Rather than focus on the *effects* of civil service reforms, more work seeking to understand the endogenous adoption patterns and the frictions underpinning the failure of a political Coase theorem for reform ([Acemoglu, 2003](#); [World Bank, 2016](#)) appears to be a fruitful – albeit challenging, given the aggregate nature of such policies – avenue of research.

Second, despite the overwhelmingly positive evidence on the benefits of civil service protections stemming from civil service reforms, what the optimal level of civil service protections is remains an open question. Most of the evidence available – historical studies focused on the introduction of reforms or evidence from developing countries – document gains starting from low initial levels of protections. In the U.S. today, more than 99% of the federal bureaucracy enjoy some form of civil service protection, with political appointees only reserved for the highest echelons of the administration. The share of bureaucrats enjoying civil service protections in the U.K. is even higher, raising the questions: is there a “right” level of civil service protection? How does the level depend on the occupational structure and functions of the state? Most of the empirical work has been confined to the study of lower-level bureaucrats and frontline providers, where performance is easier to measure. The underlying mechanisms through which greater insulation from politics affects performance, however, are likely to be very different for senior-level bureaucrats where political alignment is arguably more important (see discussion in [subsection 2.2](#)). More evidence on senior bureaucrats is urgently needed.

Third, while the literature in economics on bureaucracy and civil service protections has seen a remarkable revival and growth since the seminal work by [Rauch \(1995\)](#) and [Rauch and Evans \(2000\)](#), this area of research could benefit more from deepening connections with other disciplines that have a much longer tradition and larger body of related work. The growing overlap in methods between political science and economics has generated a very fertile ground for cross-discipline collaboration, as evidenced in many of the works discussed in this paper. Connections to the field of public administration, however, have remained surprisingly scarce despite the clear overlap in research questions ([Ding et al., 2021](#); [Chang and Brewer, 2023](#); [Ingaggiati et al., 2025](#)).

of U.S. civil service reforms to the local presence of firefighter associations.

Finally, much of the work on civil service protections has taken on a personnel economics approach – focusing on the effects of reformed policies on the selection, incentives, and assignment of bureaucrats to jobs (Finan et al., 2015; Besley et al., 2022). These reforms, however, can also interact with the incentives and selection of politicians. While theoretical work has studied such interactions between bureaucrats, politicians, and voters (Ujhelyi, 2014a), most of the empirical work takes political turnover as given. Understanding how civil service protections interact with actors outside the organizations, for example, by shaping citizen trust in institutions, could further inform our understanding of the bureaucracy as a key dimension of state capacity.

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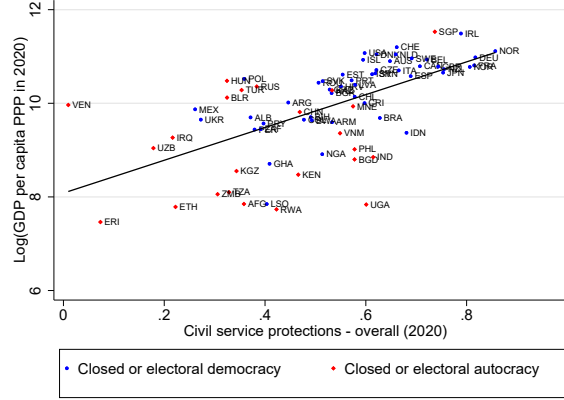
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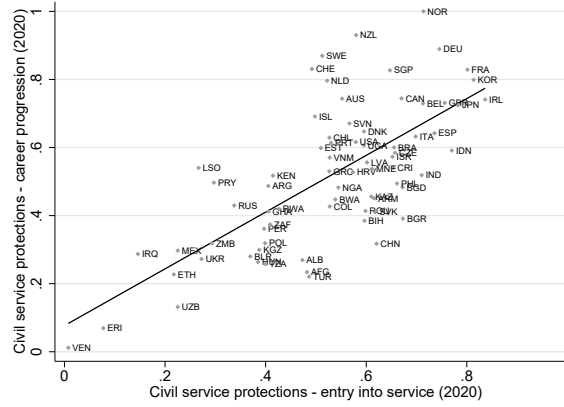
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Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Cross-country variation in civil service protections and correlates



(a) GDP per capita and overall service protections



(b) Civil service protections for career progression (y-axis) vs. recruitment (x-axis)

Notes: The data comes from a cross-sectional sample of 73 countries in 2020. The definition of political institutions for panel (a) relies on the V-Dem's *Regimes of the World* classification (`v2x_regime`). The GDP per capita PPP 2020 data is from World Bank Development Indicators (`NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD`). For Venezuela and Eritrea, I impute the 2020 data using the latest non-missing data available (2011). In Panel (a), the slope estimate is 3.503*** ($se=0.537$). In Panel (b), the slope estimate is 0.833*** ($se=0.074$).

Table 1: Summary of studies on civil service protections (CSP)

(1) Study	(2) Population	(3) Context	(4) Year	(5) Margin	(6) Change	(7) Outcome	(8) CSP good?
Rauch (1995)	City workers	U.S.	1902–1931	Extensive	$\gamma \uparrow, \kappa \uparrow$	Public utilities $\uparrow$	Yes
Blanes i Vidal and Leaver (2011)	Judges	U.K.	2003	Intensive	$\kappa \downarrow$	Promotion bias (bad) $\uparrow$	Yes
Xu (2018)	Governors	British Empire	1930	Intensive	$\kappa \uparrow$	Colony revenue $\uparrow$	Yes
Bostashvili and Ujhelyi (2019)	State civil servants	U.S.	1960–1989	Extensive	$\gamma \uparrow, \kappa \uparrow$	Var(Highway spending) $\downarrow$	Yes
Estrada (2019)	Teachers	Mexico	2013	Intensive	$\gamma \uparrow$	Test scores $\uparrow$	Yes
Ornaghi (2019)	Police	U.S.	1970	Extensive	$\gamma \uparrow, \kappa \uparrow$	Crime rates $\downarrow$	Yes
Aneja and Xu (2024)	Postal workers	U.S.	1883, 1893	Extensive	$\gamma \uparrow, \kappa \uparrow$	Delivery errors $\downarrow$	Yes
Moreira and Pérez (2024)	Customs officers	U.S.	1883	Extensive	$\gamma \uparrow, \kappa \uparrow$	Customs revenue	Neutral
Liu and Zhang (2025)	Prefecture governors	China	1736	Intensive	$\gamma \downarrow$	Disaster relief $\uparrow$	No
Mocanu (2025)	Federal civil servants	Brazil	1988	Intensive	$\gamma \uparrow$	Gender bias $\downarrow$	Yes
Mocanu and Patacchini (2025)	Federal civil servants	Brazil	1988	Intensive	$\gamma \uparrow$	Connected bias $\downarrow$	Yes
Riaño (2025)	All civil servants	Colombia	2015	Intensive	$\gamma \uparrow$	Connected hires $\downarrow$, Performance index	Neutral

Notes: In column (6), γ refers to the stringency of civil service protections at entry (e.g., exam or discretionary), κ refers to the stringency of civil service protections governing career progression. This notation is defined in subsection 2.2. $\uparrow$ refers to an increase in the parameter of interest (γ, κ), while $\downarrow$ refers to a decrease. Column (7) reports the outcome variable of interest and the sign of the estimated treatment effect. Column (8) summarizes whether the evidence is consistent with civil service protections (CSP) improving performance (“good”), neutral, or decreasing performance.

A Online Appendix – Model derivation

Proposition 1. *Assume that the politician does not interfere when indifferent. For fixed civil service protections at entry γ and progression κ , the politician interferes if $(t - \tau_P)^2 > \kappa$ and does not interfere if $(t - \tau_P)^2 \leq \kappa$. The bureaucrat's equilibrium choice is given by:*

$$t^*(\gamma, \kappa) = \begin{cases} \tau_P + \text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P]\sqrt{\kappa}, & \text{if } (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 > \kappa, \\ \tau_B(\gamma), & \text{if } (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 \leq \kappa. \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

where $\text{sign}[\cdot]$ denotes the sign function. In equilibrium, the politician does not interfere: $d^* = 0$.

Proof. Proceed by backward induction, starting with the politician's decision to interfere or not $d \in \{0, 1\}$. The politician interferes ($d = 1$) if the utility from overriding the bureaucrat's choice exceeds the utility from tolerating the bureaucrat's choice t under non-interference ($d = 0$):

$$\begin{aligned} u_P(\tau_P, 1) &> u_P(t, 0) \\ -\kappa &> -(t - \tau_P)^2 \\ (t - \tau_P)^2 &> \kappa \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

As Equation 4 shows, the politician will interfere if the disagreement over the preferred allocation is sufficiently high. Conversely, the politician does not interfere if the difference is sufficiently small $(t - \tau_P)^2 \leq \kappa$.

Anticipating this, the bureaucrat will choose their own preferred allocation $t_{NI}^*(\gamma) = \tau_B(\gamma)$ if the deviation from the politician's preference is sufficiently small to fall within the non-interference regime $(\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 \leq \kappa$.²² If the bureaucrat's preference falls outside the non-interference regime $(\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 > \kappa$, the threat of interference binds (the “constrained regime”). To avoid the politician from overriding the bureaucrat's decision with τ_P , the bureaucrat chooses the allocation that makes the politician just indifferent between interfering and non-interfering: $t_I^*(\kappa) = \tau_P + \text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P]\sqrt{\kappa}$. This yields an allocation that is closer to the appointed bureaucrat's preferred allocation $\tau_B(\gamma)$ than τ_P , hence yielding a higher bureaucrat utility. In equilibrium, the politician does not interfere ($d^* = 0$) – it is the threat of interference that disciplines the bureaucrat.

²²Given the quadratic loss function $u_B(t) = -(t - \tau_B(\gamma))^2$, $t = \tau_B(\gamma)$ is the utility maximizing allocation for the bureaucrat.

□

Proposition 2. *For fixed civil service protections at entry γ , an increase in civil service protections at the progression margin κ weakly raises welfare if the appointed bureaucrat is less biased than the politician ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma)$), and weakly lowers welfare if the appointed bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P$).*

Proof. Given Proposition 1, welfare depends on whether the interference constraint is binding or not:

$$W(t^*) = \begin{cases} -(t_I^*(\kappa) - \tau^*)^2, & \text{if } (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 > \kappa, \\ -(t_{NI}^*(\gamma) - \tau^*)^2, & \text{if } (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 \leq \kappa. \end{cases} \quad (5)$$

where $t_I^*(\kappa) = \tau_P + \text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P]\sqrt{\kappa}$ and $t_{NI}^*(\gamma) = \tau_B(\gamma)$ (see Proposition 1). Evaluating changes in welfare $W(t^*)$ with respect to κ ,

$$\frac{\partial W(t^*)}{\partial \kappa} = \begin{cases} -(t_I^*(\kappa) - \tau^*) \text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P] \kappa^{-1/2}, & \text{if } (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 > \kappa, \\ 0, & \text{if } (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2 < \kappa. \end{cases} \quad (6)$$

When the cost of political interference κ is sufficiently low to induce the threat of interference, raising civil service protections at the progression margin κ increases welfare if the appointed bureaucrat is less biased than the politician ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma) \iff \tau_P > \tau_R$) and decreases welfare if the bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P \iff \tau_R > \tau_P$).²³ Insulating the bureaucrat from the threat of political interference thus raises welfare if (and only if) the bureaucrat's preferred allocation $\tau_B(\gamma)$ is closer to the social optimum τ^* than the politician's. Welfare $W(t^*)$ exhibits a kink at the threshold $\kappa = (\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P)^2$ (where the derivative of $W(t^*)$ with respect to κ is undefined); for κ above the threshold, the threat of interference no longer binds and welfare does not change with respect to protections at the progression margin κ . □

Proposition 3. *For fixed civil service protections at the progression margin κ , an increase in civil service protections at the entry margin γ weakly raises welfare if the appointed bureaucrat is less biased than the politician ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma)$),*

²³Since $\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P = \gamma(\tau_R - \tau_P)$ with $\gamma \in (0, 1]$, the sign tracks $(\tau_R - \tau_P)$. I discuss results using $\tau_B(\gamma)$ rather than τ_R as the preference of the *appointed* bureaucrat is the object of interest and easier to interpret. Note that $t_I^*(\kappa) - \tau^* > 0$ holds under the one-sided bias assumption when the interference constraint is binding.

and weakly lowers welfare if the appointed bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P$).

Proof. Given the interference rule (Proposition 1), there exists a threshold $\bar{\gamma} = \frac{\sqrt{\kappa}}{|\tau_R - \tau_P|}$ for γ above which the preference of the appointed bureaucrat diverges sufficiently from the politician's to induce the threat of interference. Differentiating Equation 5 with respect to changes in γ , we obtain:

$$\frac{\partial W(t^*)}{\partial \gamma} = \begin{cases} 0, & \text{if } \gamma > \bar{\gamma}, \\ -2(\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau^*)(\tau_R - \tau_P), & \text{if } \gamma < \bar{\gamma}. \end{cases} \quad (7)$$

An increase in civil service protections at the entry margin γ (i) changes the preference of the appointed bureaucrat and (ii) makes political interference more attractive. Within the non-interference region ($\gamma < \bar{\gamma}$), changes in welfare are directly driven by changes in the selection of the appointed bureaucrat. If the appointed bureaucrat is less biased than the politician ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma) \iff \tau_P > \tau_R$), welfare improves. If the bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P \iff \tau_R > \tau_P$), welfare declines. At the threshold $\bar{\gamma}$, welfare $W(t^*)$ exhibits a kink (where the derivative of $W(t^*)$ with respect to γ is undefined) and outside the non-interference region ($\gamma > \bar{\gamma}$), increases in civil service protection at entry γ do not affect welfare since the threat of political interference incentivizes the bureaucrat to choose an allocation closer to the politician's preferred allocation $t_I^* = \tau_P + \text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P]\sqrt{\kappa}$. $\square$

Proposition 4. Fix $\kappa_1 > \kappa_0$ and consider an increase in civil service protections at the progression margin from κ_0 to κ_1 . For a given level of civil service protections at entry γ , this increase switches the equilibrium from the constrained regime to the non-interference regime if and only if $\gamma \in (\sqrt{\kappa_0}/|\tau_R - \tau_P|, \sqrt{\kappa_1}/|\tau_R - \tau_P|]$. On this interval, let $\Delta_\kappa W(\gamma) \equiv W(t_{NI}^*(\gamma)) - W(t_I^*(\kappa_0))$ denote the resulting welfare change. Civil service protections at the entry (γ) and progression margins (κ) act as welfare complements (in the sense that the welfare gain from protections at the entry margin is higher when protections at the progression margin are also present) if $\frac{\partial \Delta_\kappa W(\gamma)}{\partial \gamma} > 0$ and welfare substitutes (in the sense that the welfare loss from protections at the entry margin is larger when protections at the progression margin are also present) if $\frac{\partial \Delta_\kappa W(\gamma)}{\partial \gamma} < 0$. The two margins are complements if the appointed bureaucrat is less biased than the politician ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma)$), and substitutes if the appointed bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P$). The interaction between both margins

of civil service protections operates through the regime boundary. Away from the boundary, the two margins do not interact.

Proof. Intuitively, the interaction arises because an increase in civil service protections at the progression margin κ expands the range of γ in which the appointed bureaucrat can implement the own ideal point (Proposition 3). Using the welfare change from increasing civil service protections by $\Delta\kappa$ from the two cases in Equation 5, the cross-difference of welfare with respect to an increase in civil service protections at entry γ is:

$$\frac{\partial \Delta_{\kappa} W(\gamma)}{\partial \gamma} = -2(\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau^*)(\tau_R - \tau_P) \quad (8)$$

where Equation 8 is positive if the appointed bureaucrat is less biased than the politician ($\tau_P > \tau_B(\gamma) \iff \tau_P > \tau_R$), in which case increases in civil service protections at entry (γ) and progression margins (κ) act as welfare complements. If the appointed bureaucrat is more biased than the politician ($\tau_B(\gamma) > \tau_P \iff \tau_R > \tau_P$), in contrast, civil service protections at entry γ and progression κ are welfare substitutes. Away from the boundary, within the non-interference regime, welfare is $W(t_{NI}^*) = -(\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau^*)^2$ and independent of κ . Similarly, within the constrained regime, welfare is $W(t_I^*) = -(t_I^*(\kappa) - \tau^*)^2$ and independent of γ ;²⁴ thus $\partial^2 W / \partial \gamma \partial \kappa = 0$ off the boundary. Finally, by Proposition 3, the range of γ where the increase in κ from κ_0 to κ_1 triggers the change from the constrained regime to the non-interference regime is: $\gamma > \sqrt{\kappa_0}/(|\tau_R - \tau_P|)$ and $\gamma \leq \sqrt{\kappa_1}/(|\tau_R - \tau_P|)$, or equivalently, $\gamma \in (\sqrt{\kappa_0}/|\tau_R - \tau_P|, \sqrt{\kappa_1}/|\tau_R - \tau_P|]$. $\square$

²⁴While γ enters the optimal allocation $t_I^*(\kappa) = \tau_P + \text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P]\sqrt{\kappa}$ through the sign operator ($\text{sign}[\tau_B(\gamma) - \tau_P]$), the sign equals $\text{sign}[\tau_R - \tau_P]$ for any $\gamma > 0$ and is constant.