Chapter 14

Executives and Bureaucracies

In 2008 Russian President Vladimir Putin, on left, handpicked his successor, Dimitri Medvedev, to be the new president. But Putin made himself a powerful prime minister and stayed in charge. (Sergei Ilnisky/Corbis)
As we considered in the last chapter, executives are more powerful than legislatures. Some political scientists fear another trend: Within the executive branch, power is shifting from elected officials to bureaucrats. There have been executives a lot longer than there have been legislatures. Tribal chiefs, kings, and emperors appeared with the dawn of civilization; only recently have they had legislatures to worry about.

Indeed, the word government in most of the world means the executive branch. In Europe, government equals cabinet. The “Brown government” is just another way of saying Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s cabinet plus some additional subcabinet assistants. In the United States (and few other places), this configuration is called the administration. What Americans call the government, meaning all of the bureaus and bureaucrats, is known in the rest of the world as the state.

Presidents and Prime Ministers

As discussed in Chapter 13, in parliamentary systems, a national legislature indirectly elects a chief executive from its own ranks, a prime (originally meaning “first”) minister. Such parliaments serve as electoral colleges that stay in session to consider legislation. They can also oust a prime minister and cabinet by a vote of no confidence, although this is now rare. Still, prime ministers are responsible to parliament. If they represent a party with a majority of seats, they are secure in office and can get legislative programs passed quickly and with little backtalk. A British prime minister with a sizable and disciplined majority in the Commons wields powers that might make a U.S. president jealous.

If no party has a majority, however, a government is formed by a coalition of parties, each of whom gets one or more ministries to run. Sometimes the coalition...
partners quarrel over policy and threaten to split up. This weakens the hand of the prime minister, as he or she knows that any major policy shift could lead to new quarrels. It is not quite right to say that prime ministers are “weaker” than presidents in presidential systems; it depends on whether prime ministers have a stable majority in parliament.

A presidential system bypasses this problem by having a strong president who is not dependent on or responsible to a parliament but is elected on his or her own for a fixed term. The U.S. Congress may not like the president’s policies and may vote them down, but it may not vote out the president. The U.S. president and Capitol Hill stand side by side, sometimes glaring at each other, knowing that there is nothing they can do to get rid of each other. It is sometimes said that presidents are “stronger” than prime ministers, and in terms of being able to run the executive branch for a fixed term, they are. But they may not be able to get vital new legislation or budgeting out of their legislatures. This “deadlock of democracy,” the curse of the U.S. political system, parallels parliamentary immobilism (see page 207). Neither system can guarantee cooperation between legislative and executive. Any system that could would be a dictatorship.

“FORMING A GOVERNMENT” IN BRITAIN

Great Britain is the classic of parliamentary systems, one in which we still see its historical roots. The monarch, currently Queen Elizabeth II, formally invites the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons to become prime minister and “form a government,” meaning take office with a cabinet. The prime minister appoints two dozen ministers and a greater number of subcabinet officials. All are members of Parliament (MPs) and in the prime minister’s party, usually chosen to represent significant groups within the party. Theoretically, the prime minister is primus inter pares (first among equals) and guides the cabinet to consensus. But the prime minister is the chief and can dismiss ministers. Ministers who oppose government policy are expected not to go public but to resign and return to their seats in Commons. Recently the British cabinet mostly concurs on decisions the prime minister has reached earlier with a few advisors, on the American pattern.

“CONSTRUCTIVE NO CONFIDENCE” IN GERMANY

The chancellor of Germany is as strong as a British prime minister. The chancellor, too, is head of the largest party in the lower house (Bundestag). Once in the office the chancellor can be ousted only if the Bundestag votes in a replacement cabinet. This is called “constructive no confidence,” and it has contributed to the stability of Germany’s governments. It is much harder to replace a cabinet than just oust it; as a result, constructive no confidence has succeeded only once, in
1982, when the small Free Democratic party defected from the Social Democrat–led coalition to the opposition Christian Democrats. A prime minister with constructive no confidence is more powerful than one without it, as one might see in a comparison of the average tenures of Italian and German cabinets (several months as compared with several years).

“COHABITATION” IN FRANCE

President Charles de Gaulle of France (1958–1969) designed a semipresidential system that has both a working president and a prime minister. The president was elected directly for seven years (now reduced to five) and a parliament elected for five years. If both are of the same party, there is no problem. The president names a like-minded premier, who is the link between president and parliament. In 1986 and again in 1993, though, a Socialist president, François Mitterrand, with two years left in his term, faced a newly elected parliament dominated by conservatives. The constitution gave no guidance in such a case. Mitterrand solved the problem by naming opposition Gaullists as premiers and letting them dismantle many Socialist measures. Mitterrand reserved for himself the high ground of foreign policy. The French called the arrangement “cohabitation,” an unmarried couple living together. In 1997, the reverse happened: Gaullist President Jacques Chirac called parliamentary elections early, lost them, and had to face a Socialist-dominated National Assembly. The solution was cohabitation again; Chirac named Socialist chief Lionel Jospin as premier. Cohabitation works, and the French accept it. France thus handled the problem of deadlock that is common in the United States. The 1993 Russian constitution incorporated a French-style system with both president and premier, and it produced executive-legislative deadlock, no longer the case under Putin, who controls both the executive and the Duma.

THE “PRESIDENTIALIZATION” OF PRIME MINISTERS

Parliamentary systems tend to “presidentialize” themselves. Prime ministers with stable majorities supporting them in parliament start acting like presidents, powerful chiefs only dimly accountable to legislators. They know they will not be ousted in a vote of no confidence, so the only thing they have to worry about is the next election, just like a president. This tendency is strong in Britain and Germany.

Increasingly, elections in parliamentary systems resemble presidential elections. Technically, there is no “candidate for prime minister” in parliamentary elections. Citizens vote for a party or a member of parliament, not for a prime minister. But everybody knows that the next prime minister will be the head of the largest party, so indirectly they are electing a prime minister. For these reasons, virtually all European elections feature posters and televised spots of party chiefs as if they were running for president. As in U.S. elections, personality increasingly matters more than policy, party, or ideology.
Two top executives met in Aachen, Germany, in 2008 when French President Nicolas Sarkozy (right) honored German Chancellor Angela Merkel with the Charlemagne prize for European unity. (Hermann J. Knippertz/AP Photo)

Case Studies

Israel’s Directly Elected Prime Ministers

In 1996 Israelis, under a new law, elected a parliament and a prime minister separately and directly, something never before done in the world. Each Israeli voter had two votes, one for a party in the legislature and one for prime minister. By definition, parliamentary systems elect prime ministers indirectly, usually the head of the largest party in parliament, while presidential systems directly elect their chief executives, so Israel turned from purely parliamentary to presidentialism, but not all the way. The Knesset could still vote out the prime minister on a motion of confidence, and coalition cabinets were as hard to form as ever.

Even worse, Israeli voters, figuring that selection of prime minister was taken care of by one ballot, used the other to scatter their votes among a dozen small parties, making the Knesset even more fractionated. After two unhappy tries of the unique hybrid system, the Knesset repealed it in 2001. The experiment showed that halfway borrowings from one system (presidentialism) into another (parliamentary) do not work. If you want stability, go all the way to presidentialism.
EXECUTIVE TERMS

Presidents have fixed terms, ranging from four years for U.S., Brazilian, and Russian presidents (they can be reelected once) to a single six-year term for Mexican presidents. French and many other presidents can be reelected without limit. When presidents are in office a long time, even if “elected,” they become corrupt and dictatorial, as President Robert Mugabe did in three decades at Zimbabwe’s helm, even as the country’s economy collapsed.

In parliamentary systems, prime ministers have no limits on their tenure in office, provided their party wins elections. As noted, increasingly their winning depends on the personality of their leader, almost as if they were presidential candidates. Britain’s Margaret Thatcher was elected for a third time in 1987, but by 1990 her mounting political problems persuaded her to resign after 11 years in office. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl won four elections in a row and served 16 years (1982–1998). Most prime ministers can dissolve parliament when they wish, namely, when they believe they’ll do best in elections. A good economy, sunny weather, and high ratings persuade prime ministers to call elections a year or two early. Powers such as these might make an American president jealous.

On the other hand, British prime ministers can get ousted quickly if they lose the support of a majority of parliament. When Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan lost the support of just 11 Scottish Nationalist MPs in 1979, he slipped below a
majority in Commons and was replaced overnight by Tory chief Thatcher. Some Italian premiers have held office only briefly as their coalitions disintegrated. Japanese prime ministers, the playthings of powerful faction chiefs within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, average less than two and a half years in office, some just a few months. Theoretically, prime ministers can serve a long time; in practice, their tenure depends on political conditions such as elections, coalition breakups, and scandals. Parliamentary systems practice a kind of easy-come, easy-go with their prime ministers, something an American president would dislike. Presidents in presidential systems are partially insulated from the ups and downs of politics. The Iraq War, for example, made President Bush 43 unpopular, but there was no way to oust him until his term expired.

A U.S. president can face impeachment, but this is a lengthy and uncertain procedure that has been attempted only three times. Andrew Johnson was impeached by the House in 1868 but acquitted in the Senate by one vote. Richard Nixon was about to be impeached by the House but resigned just before the vote. Bill Clinton was impeached but not convicted. If a problem character becomes chief executive, parliamentary systems have a big advantage over the

---

**Case Studies**

**Authoritarianism Returns to Russia**

Vladimir Putin (president 2000–2008, prime minister thereafter) consolidated authoritarian power. The 1993 Russian constitution, which set up a de Gaulle-type semipresidential system (see page 255), tilted power to the presidency. Putin made the Russian presidency even stronger. Putin had been a KGB colonel and headed the post-Soviet equivalent, the Federal Security Service (FSB in Russian). Unstable President Yeltsin plucked Putin from obscurity and named him his fifth prime minister in 17 months. Some thought Putin would be another temporary, but Putin pulled what amounted to a KGB coup. He used his police sources—who knew who had robbed what—to keep and expand his power. With Russia in steep decline, the unpopular Yeltsin in late 1999 handed over the presidency to Putin, who was easily elected to it in 2000 and reelected in 2004. He set up his own United Russia Party, which won most of the Duma seats.

Putin pulled Russia out of a climate of despair and immediately became popular. Russians like a strong hand at the top, and Putin continually strengthened his. He brought the oil industry and television back under state control, waged war against Chechens, and cracked down on uncooperative regional governors and the “oligarchs”—people who had gotten rich fast through insider privatization deals. Putin called it “managed democracy,” staffed it with KGB comrades—the siloviki, the “strong men.” He paid little attention to the Duma, where few opposed him. Some who criticized Putin were arrested or assassinated, but few Russians cared when the economy was good, thanks to oil revenues. In 2008 Putin pulled a bold switch: He named an obedient protégé, Dmitri Medvedev, to be elected president and accepted, by prearrangement, the prime ministership. Putin “demoted” himself but stayed in charge and set things up to return to the presidency a few years later.
U.S. system—a simple vote of no confidence and the rascal is out. This helps explain why, even though there are many scandals in parliamentary systems, few become as big and paralyzing as Watergate.

Key Concepts

AN IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY?

“The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands,” James Madison wrote in The Federalist no. 47, “may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.” Checks and balances, John Adams declared, are like “setting a thief to catch a thief.” In recent years, however, many fear that the modern presidency has amassed power and overturned the checks and balances of the constitution.

Congress and the presidency no longer balance (maybe they never did). Samuel Huntington noted that from 1882 to 1909, Congress initiated 55 percent of significant legislation; between 1910 and 1932, the figure dropped to 46 percent; and from 1933 to 1940, Congress initiated only 8 percent of all major laws. The legislative function, said Huntington, “has clearly shifted to the executive branch.”

As the Vietnam War wound down and Watergate boiled up, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. captured the worried feeling of the time in his book The Imperial Presidency. Lyndon Johnson had taken the country to war without a declaration of war. Richard Nixon had expanded that war into Laos and Cambodia, again with no declaration. Nixon also “impounded” appropriations made by Congress; he simply refused to spend funds in certain areas, in effect exercising an illegal item veto. Was the president overstepping constitutional bounds? Was America becoming an imperial presidency, going the way of ancient Rome, from republic to rule by Caesars?

Congress attempted to reassert some of its authority, passing the War Powers Act in 1973 and moving toward impeachment of Nixon the following year. It looked like the beginning of a new era, with Congress and the president once again in balance. But this failed to happen, for the U.S. system needs a strong president to function properly.

When Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, he attempted to deimperialize the presidency, but this led to an ineffective White House. As an outsider, Carter was ignorant of the ways of Washington and quickly alienated a Congress dominated by his own party. His legislation stalled on Capitol Hill and was diluted by amendments, especially his energy proposals. By the 1980 election, much of the American electorate and Congress wished for a more forceful and experienced chief executive.

Congress’s reassertion of independent authority in the 1970s proved brief, for with the arrival of Ronald Reagan in the White House in 1981, the president once again commanded Capitol Hill. In 1986 it was revealed that officials of the president’s National Security Council bypassed Congress in selling arms to Iran and using the money to fund the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. Even Reagan’s supporters in Congress turned angry and grilled his appointees in committee hearings. Once again, a Congress disappointed with executive misuse of power tried to check the executive branch it had repeatedly invested with enormous powers.

With the terrorist attacks of 2001, Congress gave even more powers to the executive branch. Bush 43 advisors argued a “unitary executive theory” that gives the president essentially unlimited power to safeguard the country, including warrantless wiretaps, imprisonment and trial outside of normal courts, and “aggressive interrogation techniques.” As he signed new laws, Bush issued more than 800 “signing statements,” telling Congress that he would enforce this law as he saw fit. Critics feared the unitary executive theory was a step toward one-man rule.
Executive Leadership

Back to back, America saw two distinct leadership styles. President Carter (1977–1981) was a hands-on, detail person; he tried to supervise much of his administration. With intelligence and energy, he put in long hours and memorized much data. Critics, including management experts, say this is the wrong approach, that chief executives only scatter and exhaust themselves if they try to run everything.

President Reagan (1981–1989) was a hands-off president; he supervised little and left most administration to trusted subordinates. He took afternoon naps and frequent vacations. Critics say Reagan paid no attention to crucial matters, letting things slide until they turned into serious problems. The Iran-contra fiasco showed what happens when subordinates get only general directions and go off on their own. The National Security Council staff thought it was doing what the president wanted when it illegally sold arms to Iran and illegally transferred the profits to the Nicaraguan contras.

Can there be a happy middle ground between hands on and hands off? Some say President Eisenhower (1953–1961) achieved it by appearing to be a hands-off president with a relaxed style. Princeton political scientist Fred Greenstein, however, analyzed Eisenhower’s schedule and calendar and concluded that he was a very active president who made important and complex decisions but did not show it, preferring to let others take the credit (and sometimes the blame). Greenstein called it the “hidden-hand presidency.” In 1954, for example, faced with the sending of U.S. forces to help the French in Indochina, Eisenhower called top senators to the White House. He knew they would be cautious, for we had just ended the unpopular Korean War. The senators opposed sending U.S. forces, and Eisenhower went along with their view. Actually, he never wanted to send troops, but he made it look as if the senators had decided the issue.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945) used a style that some call deliberate chaos. Setting up numerous agencies and advisers, some of them working at cross-purposes, Roosevelt would let them clash. The really difficult and important decisions would reach his desk; the others would be settled without him. This, too, was a kind of middle ground between hands on and hands off. The Clinton White House borrowed this spontaneous and creative approach, but Clinton participated personally in many policy deliberations in a more hands-on manner.

Cabinets

Chief executives are assisted by cabinets. A cabinet member heads one of the major executive divisions of government called a department in the United States and a ministry in most of the world. The former is headed by a secretary and the latter by a minister. Cabinets range in size from a compact 15 in the United States to 20 or more in Europe.
The United States enlarges its cabinet only slowly and with much discussion, for it takes an act of Congress and the provision for its own budget. For most of its history, the United States had fewer than ten departments. Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Energy, Education, Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security were added only since the 1960s. In Europe, chief executives add, delete, combine, and rename ministries at will; their parliaments routinely support it. In the 1980s, for example, most West European governments added environmental ministries. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency stayed at the sub-cabinet level, and environmental responsibilities were divided between it and several other departments.

What is the right size for a cabinet? That depends upon how the system is set up and what citizens expect of it. The United States has been dedicated to keeping government small and letting the marketplace make decisions. When this led to imbalances—for example, bankrupt farmers, unemployed workers, and collapsed businesses—the U.S. system added the Departments of Agriculture, Labor, and Commerce. The Department of Energy was added after the “energy shocks” of the 1970s. Slowly, U.S. cabinets have been creeping up to European size.

WHO SERVES IN A CABINET?

In parliamentary systems like those of Britain and Germany, ministers are drawn from parliament and keep their parliamentary seats. They are both legislators and executives. Usually they have had years of political experience in winning elections and serving on parliamentary committees. The chair of Germany’s Bundestag defense committee, for example, is a good choice to become defense minister. In a presidential system like those of the United States or Brazil, secretaries or ministers are generally not working politicians but businesspersons, lawyers, and academics. They

Classic Works

AMERICAN PARANOIA

In 1964 historian Richard Hofstadter wrote his celebrated essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” to explain the right-wing takeover of the Republicans and their nomination of hawkish Barry Goldwater. More generally, the work pointed to a persistent tendency in U.S. politics, the “sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” With this comes a belief in evil empires out to get us, “a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil.”

The paranoid then aims at “total triumph,” whatever it may cost. This, wrote Hofstadter, leads to impossible goals, but failure to reach them “heightens the paranoid’s sense of frustration,” and he redoubles his efforts. Only traitors and weaklings criticize; they must be denounced and ignored. The media are branded cowardly and defeatist. Some critics claimed the paranoid tendency appeared in the Bush 43 administration. Actually, paranoia is an ever-present danger in all regimes, especially those with no checks on power, such as Stalin’s, Hitler’s, and Saddam Hussein’s.
may have some background in their department’s subject area, but few have won elective office. President Bush 41 named four members of Congress to his cabinet; Presidents Clinton and Obama named three each. This made U.S. cabinets look a bit European, but the secretaries had to first resign their seats in Congress.

**How to...**

**CREATE GRAPHS**

Thanks to computers, graphs are easy and colorful but sometimes misused. A bunch of numbers does not necessarily make a good graph. The numbers should display some pattern. If upward, you would show the growth of something; if up and down, you would show cycles. We could do a longitudinal study of the growth of Washington-based interest groups of the sort we discussed on page 245, taking them over 30 years, from 1980 to 2010. Our hypothesis is that they grow over time.

We can either have the computer set up a graph or do it with paper and a ruler. First, draw a big “L.” The upright leg is the **Y axis**, on which you draw a scale, usually from zero to a little more than the highest number we find, say 2,827, plus a little more to make it 3,000. Divide that scale into increments of whatever interval fits the study. It might be every 5 percent or every $5,000 per capita GDP or every hundred interest groups. A metric ruler can make drawing scales easier.

Now take the horizontal leg, the **X axis**, and mark off steps from 1980 to 2010. Measuring rightward from the Y axis, mark with a dot the number of interest groups above the year on the X axis. For easier readability, you may connect the dots (or have the computer do it), thus making a **line graph**.
Which is better, a cabinet member who is a working politician or one from outside government? The elected members of European parliaments who become ministers have a great deal of both political and subject-area knowledge. They know the relevant members of parliament personally and have worked closely with them.

If the line generally rises (and it will always have some ups and downs), you have demonstrated your thesis, that interest groups keep growing in Washington. If the line trends downward, alter your thesis, now stating a decline of D.C.-based interest groups (unlikely). And if the line is generally flat, neither trending up nor down, change your thesis to match your findings.

If you want to compare how two or more things change over time (covariance), you could use different colored lines, say blue for the percent Democratic vote in Altoona, PA, and red for size of the railroad workforce in Altoona, to show how both decline at about the same rate. (Unionized workers tend to vote Democrat.) Pie charts are not very useful; use them to show popular preferences in pies.

Not every graph should be a line graph. The zig-zags of line graphs show change over time but are meaningless for comparing categories at the same time. For that, use a bar graph. A line graph indicates that one data point sets the stage for the next, a bar graph does not. If you want to show change over time, say, percent voting Republican over several elections, use a line graph. If you want to show differences between items at the same time, say, voting differences among income levels in the 2008 election, use a bar graph. Our GDP data from page 190 would go on a bar graph, not a line graph.
Ministers and parliament do not view each other with suspicion, as enemies. The ministers are criticized in parliament but from the opposition benches; their own party generally supports them.

Outsiders appointed to the cabinet, the traditional U.S. style, may bring with them fresh perspectives, but they may also be politically naive, given to brash statements and unrealistic programs that get them in trouble with Congress, where members of their own party do not necessarily support them. Their lack of political experience in the nation’s capital leads to another problem.

In the United States especially, the cabinet counts for less and less. A cabinet meeting serves little purpose and takes place rarely. Few Americans can name three or more cabinet members. Why has the cabinet fallen into such neglect? Part of the problem is that few cabinet secretaries are well-known political figures. And their jobs are rather routine: Get more money from Congress to spend on their department’s programs. Cabinet secretaries are in charge of administering established programs with established budgets, “vice presidents in charge of spending,” as Coolidge’s Vice President Charles G. Dawes called them. As such, they are not consulted on much. They are largely administrators, not generators of ideas.

The Danger of Expecting Too Much

In both presidential and parliamentary systems, attention focuses on the chief executive. Presidents or prime ministers are expected to deliver economic growth with low unemployment and low inflation. They are expected to keep taxes low but government benefits high. They are held responsible for anything that goes wrong but told to adopt a hands-off management approach and delegate matters to subordinates. The more problems and pressure, the more they have to delegate.

How can they do it all? How can they run the government, economy, subordinates, and policies? They cannot, and increasingly they do not. Instead, the clever ones project a mood of calm, progress, and good feeling to try to make most citizens happy. President Reagan was a master of this tactic. The precise details of governance matter little; they are in the hands of advisers and career civil servants, and few citizens care about them. What matters is getting reelected, and for this personality counts for more than policy, symbols more than performance.

Worldwide, power has been flowing to the executive, and legislatures have been in decline. The U.S. Congress has put up some good rear-guard actions, but it too has been in slow retreat. Some observers have argued that this cannot be helped, that several factors make this shift of power inevitable. If true, what can we do to safeguard democracy? Democracies still have a trump card, and some say it is enough: electoral punishment. As long as the chief executive, whether president or prime minister, has to face the electorate at periodic intervals, democracy will be preserved. The “rule of anticipated reactions,” of which we spoke in Chapter 7, will
keep them on their toes. Perhaps the concept of checks and balances was a great idea of the eighteenth century that does not fit the twenty-first. Maybe we will just have to learn to live with executive dominance.

**BUREAUCRACIES**

The term *bureaucracy* has negative connotations: the inefficiency and delays citizens face in dealing with government. The great German sociologist Max Weber, who studied bureaucracy, disliked it but saw no way to avoid it. A bureaucracy is any large organization of appointed officials who implement laws and policies. Ideally, it operates under rules and procedures with a chain of command or hierarchy of authority (see Chapter 6). It lets government operate with some rationality, uniformity, predictability, and supervision. No bureaucracy, no government.

Another definition of bureaucracy—or “civil service”—is that it is the *permanent* government. Much of what we have studied might be called the “temporary government” of elected officials who come and go. The *career* civil servants often stay with one agency. They take orders from elected officials, but they also follow the law and do things “by the book.” They usually know a lot more about their specialized areas than their new politically appointed boss, who wants to redo the system with bold, new ideas. The bureaucrats, who have seen bold, new ideas come and go, move with caution. A bureaucracy, once set up, is inherently conservative, and trying to move it is one of the hardest tasks of politicians.

**Classic Works**

**Weber’s Definition of Bureaucracies**

Max Weber (1864–1920) was the first scholar to analyze bureaucracy. His criteria for defining bureaucracy included the following:

1. Administrative offices are organized hierarchically.
2. Each office has its own area of competence.
3. Civil servants are appointed, not elected, on the basis of technical qualifications as determined by diplomas or examinations.
4. Civil servants receive fixed salaries according to rank.
5. The job is a career and the sole employment of the civil servant.
6. The official does not own his or her office.
7. The official is subject to control and discipline.
8. Promotion is based on superiors’ judgment.

Weber felt he was studying a relatively new phenomenon. Some of the above characteristics could be found in classic China, but not all. Like the nation-state, bureaucracies started in Western Europe around the sixteenth century but were reaching their full powers, which Weber distrusted, only in the twentieth century.

---

**bureaucracy** The career civil service that staffs government executive agencies.

**career** Professional civil servant, not political appointee.
Almost any large organization has a bureaucracy. In the Middle Ages, when Europe was loose confederations of feudal powers, the Roman Catholic Church had a complex and effective administrative system. Through a hierarchy of trained people who spent their life in the Church, authority flowed from the pope down to the parish priest. Until they developed their own administrators in the Renaissance, kings depended on clerics, who were among the few who could read and write. Armies also have bureaucratic structures, based on the military chain of command and myriad regulations. Bureaucracy comes automatically with any large organization, public or private.

**Bureaucracies in Comparison**

**THE UNITED STATES**

Fewer than 15 percent of American civil servants are federal. Of our 21.5 million civil servants, some 15 million are employed by local governments, 4 million by state governments, and fewer than 3 million (not counting military personnel) by the federal government. Remember, most government services—schools, police, and fire protection—are provided by local governments.

The 15 current U.S. cabinet departments (George Washington started with four) employ between 85 and 90 percent of all federal civil servants. They share a common anatomy. Each is funded by Congressional appropriations and headed by a secretary appointed by the president (with the consent of the Senate). The undersecretaries and assistant secretaries are also political appointees and, thus, in Weber’s definition (see box) are not bureaucrats. This differs from most other systems, where officials up through the equivalent of our undersecretaries are permanent civil service.

The departments carry out legislative and executive policies whose intent is often unclear. Most laws are general and let the bureaucracy establish specific working policy, so bureaucrats can tune policy. Bureaucrats have a lot of knowledge, and knowledge is power. The Reagan administration said it would abolish the Department of Energy (DOE). One of the authors of this book asked a friend, an official of the department, why he wasn’t worried. “They won’t abolish us,” he asserted knowingly. “They can’t. DOE manufactures nuclear bombs, and the administration needs the DOE budget to disguise how big the nuclear-bomb budget is.” Reagan did not abolish DOE. The U.S. bureaucracy is relatively small and light compared with many other countries. Europe and Latin America, with their strong statist traditions (see page 72), have much more bureaucracy and regulation than the United States.

**COMMUNIST COUNTRIES**

The Soviet Union was one of the world’s most bureaucratic nations, and that was one of the causes of its collapse. Tied to the Communist Party, the Soviet civil service was corrupt, inefficient, and unreformable. According to Marxist
theory, a dictatorship of the proletariat had no need for Western-style bureaucracy, but immediately after the 1917 revolution the Soviets instituted strict bureaucratic management, and Stalin increased it with his **Five-Year Plans** in the 1930s.

Top Soviet bureaucrats, the **nomenklatura**, were a privileged elite, often the most energetic and effective. They got nice apartments, special shops, and country houses. At the top of each ministry was a minister, who was a member of the Council of Ministers (roughly equivalent to a Western cabinet), the highest executive authority that was made up of high-ranking party members, some of whom were also members of the party’s Politburo. Trusted party members were placed in subordinate positions to carry out party policy. This made the Soviet bureaucracy conservative, an obstacle no Soviet president could overcome.

In China too officials are party members. The party is supposed to fight corruption, but China’s administration is dangerously decentralized to the provincial and local levels, leaving officials free to collect bribes and fake “taxes” and to transfer land from peasants to developers. In 2008, provincial and local officials managed to not notice that milk was being poisoned. Major riots break out in China every year over such corruption, but Beijing seems unable or unwilling to eliminate it, probably because the local officials are precisely who the regime depends on to maximize economic growth.

### Case Studies

#### Bureaucrats and Smoking

One vivid example of bureaucratic rule-making was the fight to place health warnings on cigarette packages and in advertisements. Congress would never have moved by itself because the tobacco industry is generous to candidates. Change came via a branch of the bureaucracy—public-health specialists and statisticians equipped with computers. In 1965 the Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health and the surgeon general (the nation’s chief public health officer) presented solid data that cigarette smoking increased lung cancer and shortened lives. The report disturbed the public, and public pressure on Congress increased. Since 1966 cigarette manufacturers have to print warnings on all packs. In 1969 the FCC banned cigarette advertising on radio and television. Since 1971 cigarette ads must show health warnings. Political scientist A. Lee Fritschler, in his *Smoking and Politics*, concluded:

> The initiation and continuation of the cigarette controversy were possible because of both the political power and delegated authority possessed by bureaucratic agencies. Had the decision on cigarettes and health been left to Congress alone, it is safe to assume that the manufacturers would have triumphed, and no health warnings of any kind would have been required. The cigarette-labeling controversy is a clear example of agencies’ power to influence and even formulate public policy.
In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France set the pattern for most of Europe with the highly bureaucratized state. After the French Revolution destroyed the monarchy, Napoleon restored central control by the bureaucracy and made it more rational and effective. Napoleon, with the intendants of Richelieu as his model, created the prefects to carry out government policy. Top French civil servants are now graduates of one of the “Great Schools,” such as the Ecole Polytechnique, an engineering school, or, since World War II, the Ecole Nationale d’Administration, created to train government officials. The instability of the Third (1871–1940) and Fourth (1947–1958) Republics increased the bureaucracy’s power because it had to run France with little legislative or executive guidance. France is still heavily bureaucratic, and centralization is often extreme.

**Case Studies**

**JAPAN: BUREAUCRATS IN COMMAND**

Japan is an extreme example of rule by bureaucrats. Modeled on the French civil service by the Meiji modernizers in the 1870s, Tokyo’s ministries were always powerful. Before, during, and after World War II, the same bureaucrats were in charge, boosting economic growth by guided capitalism rather than the free market. Japan’s bureaucrats view elected officials as clowns who should be ignored.

The key Tokyo ministries are finance, international trade and industry, agriculture, and construction. They guide their respective economic sectors by arranging loans, subsidies, and government contracts. Top Japanese bureaucrats are often graduates of Tokyo University (nicknamed “Todai”), Japan’s most selective school. Many civil servants retire young to go into lush jobs in the industries they supervised.

Tokyo’s ministries are self-contained and do not cooperate with each other or seek the good of the whole, provoking some to say that in Japan “no one is in charge.” The ministry supervises its economic sector, which mostly obeys the ministry. The minister is a political appointee, usually a member of the Diet, but the vice minister, who really runs things, is a career civil servant, much like a British “permanent secretary” (see page 269).

The most famous ministry was MITI, the brains of Japan’s export mania that set economic growth records after World War II and suggested Japanese guided capitalism as a model for others. Since the 1990s, however, the Japanese economy has been flat, and bureaucratic supervision was blamed for industrial overexpansion, money-losing investments, bankrupt banks, and the world’s highest consumer prices. A new generation of Japanese politicians is now trying to reform their bureaucracies and bring them under democratic control.
GERMANY

Prussia and its ruling class, the Junkers, put their stamp on German administration. Obedient, efficient, and hard-working, the aristocratic Junkers were a state nobility, dependent on Berlin and controlling all its higher civil service positions. Frederick the Great of Prussia, who ruled from 1740 to 1786, had a passion for effective administration and established universities to train administrators. Germany unified in 1871 under Prussia's leadership, which brought Prussian culture, namely loyalty to nation and emperor, to much of Germany. One of the reasons the short-lived Weimar Republic (1919–1933) failed was because the civil-servant class had only contempt for democracy. With the Third Reich, they flocked to Hitler.

The current German government has a strongly federal structure that puts most administration at the Land level. Today's German civil servants are committed to democracy. A section of Berlin's interior ministry, for example, in cooperation with Land agencies, does educational programs to fight political extremism. Generally trained in law—throughout Europe law is at the undergraduate level—German bureaucrats tend to bring with them the mentality of Roman law, that is, law neatly organized into fixed codes rather than the more flexible U.S. and British common law (see next chapter).

BRITAIN

Britain, unlike France, has strong traditions of local self-government and dispersion of authority. This pattern of administration is an outgrowth of the Anglo-American emphasis on representative government, which encourages legislative control of administrative authorities. During the nineteenth century, the growth of British government at the local level also encouraged the dispersion of administrative authority; it was not until the twentieth century that the central government began to run in local affairs. Until the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan reforms, the bureaucracy was rife with corruption and nepotism. Positions in the bureaucracy (for instance, military commissions) were openly bought and sold. By 1870, however, a merit civil service based on competitive examinations had been established.

British ministers are accountable to Parliament, but real bureaucratic power is in the hands of the career “permanent secretary” and the career deputy secretaries, undersecretaries, and assistant secretaries who serve at lower ranks. Thus, even though the British and American bureaucracies share the same tradition of decentralized authority, control over the bureaucracy is tighter in Britain than in America. British bureaucrats pride themselves on being apolitical, so they faithfully carry out the ministry's policies, whatever government is in power.
The world does not love bureaucracy. The very word is pejorative. In France and Italy, hatred of the official on the other side of the counter is part of the political culture. Americans like to hear candidates denounce the bureaucracy, but none ever solve the problem because at least some regulation is necessary. Incoming U.S. administrations, particularly Republican, often vow to bring business-type efficiency to public administration by drastic deregulation of private industry. As a result, no one said no to Wall Street’s reckless loans. Efficiency, profitability, and

**Key Concepts**

**Bureaucratic Politics**

Some political scientists argue that struggles—often behind the scenes—among and within bureaucracies contribute to or even control policy decisions. Bureaucrats provide the information on which top officials depend. He who controls information controls policy, goes the theory. America’s many bureaucracies gather, analyze, and disseminate information in different ways, often quarreling among themselves.

Harvard’s Graham Allison found that the 1962 Cuban missile crisis turned on when the photographic evidence arrived at the White House. It had been delayed because the Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency quarreled over who should pilot the U2 spy plane. Competition among agencies and “standard procedures” created the informational world in which Kennedy and his advisors operated. With a widely read 1969 article, Allison founded the bureaucratic politics model, which political science briefly embraced.

Control of information became a hot issue with 9/11 and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Before 9/11, the FBI and CIA did not share information, partly due to legal restrictions. The new Department of Homeland Security did not solve the problem, as the FBI and CIA are not part of it. Department of Defense (DoD) analysts claimed to have solid evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and was sponsoring terrorism. State and CIA analysts were cautious, saying evidence was unclear. DoD prevailed, making war a certainty. No WMD were found after the war. Furthermore, State, claiming that it had the expertise, drew up plans for the occupation of Iraq after the war. DoD ignored State and its plans. The result was a chaotic occupation and great anger in the State Department.

The bureaucratic politics model is still not persuasive because the president really is in charge. He often has strong personal preferences in advance and decides which agency to listen to. In 2003 President Bush had long hated Iraq, and DoD told him that Iraq was guilty. DoD even had a special staff to make the case for attacking Iraq; it excluded evidence to the contrary. By structuring bureaucracies, the White House created the informational world it preferred. Washington bureaucracies played a blame game for 9/11 and Iraq’s WMD—several of the CIA’s top people resigned—but it was more a question of how these agencies were used. Bureaucrats mostly obey.
productivity are hard to apply in government programs. Cutting a program like Social Security or Medicare is impossible.

At its worst, bureaucracy can show signs of “Eichmannism,” named after the Nazi official who organized the death trains for Europe’s Jews and later told his Israeli judges that he was just doing his job. Nazi bureaucracy treated people like things, a problem not limited to Germany. On the humorous side, bureaucracy can resemble Parkinson’s Law: Work expands to fill the staff time available. Parkinson never called himself a humorist, and many who have worked in featherbedded, purposeless, paper-shuffling agencies confirm Parkinson’s Law.

Bureaucracy and corruption are intertwined. Wherever officials carry out rules, some are bent for friends and benefactors. The more regulations, the more bureaucrats, the more corruption. A few countries with a strong ethos of public service—Finland and Singapore, for example—have been able to maintain incorrupt public administration. Most countries are corrupt, some a little and some egregiously (see box on page 289). Chile became the least corrupt Latin American country by cutting the amount of administration and number of bureaucrats. Under the argument that only specialists from private industry can monitor that industry, businesses sometimes “capture” or “colonize” administrative agencies. Top financiers were placed atop the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. They gutted its regulatory role and let it march straight to the 2008 financial meltdown. It should be noted, however, that political appointees, not career civil servants, made these dangerous decisions.

Early theorists of bureaucracy assumed that professional bureaucrats would never make public policy but merely carry out laws. Indeed, nonpartisan administration was the original motivation behind merit civil services, but most nations have administrators who make policy but are not publicly accountable. Japan (see box) shows this to an extreme. Making bureaucracies flexible, creative, and accountable is one of the great tasks of this century.

**Key Terms**

- productivity: The efficiency with which goods or services are produced.
Further Reference


Shapiro, Robert Y., Martha Joynt Kumar, and Lawrence R. Jacobs, eds. Presidential Power: Forging the Presidency for the
Further Reference


