Politicians and Bureaucrats: 
Reassessing the Power Potential of the Bureaucracy

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Abstract: A strong civil service is vital in democracies. However, as widely acknowledged in the public administration literature, bureaucratic expertise constitutes power that can be used to influence the political agenda. Although this insight paints a gloomy picture of democratic governance, we argue that this literature actually underestimates the power potential of the bureaucracy. Bureaucratic expertise can not only be used for agenda influence, but also to influence political preferences. We make this argument by applying insights from political psychology about the importance of information for preference formation to the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians. To test the argument, we study almost 5,000 politicians in a most different systems design with four different political systems: USA, Italy, Belgium and Denmark. We use experiments embedded in surveys to (i) assess the close interaction between bureaucrats and politicians; (ii) investigate the importance of the bureaucracy as a provider of information; (iii) test whether bureaucrats can influence their politicians’ preferences by manipulating the valence of policy-relevant information (equivalence framing); (iv) by strategically highlighting subsets of potentially policy-relevant information (issue framing); and (v) by exploiting that politicians tend to prefer information sources with whom they ideologically agree (source cue effects). We find considerable support for these manipulation tactics as potential tools for bureaucrats wanting to affect the preferences of their presumed political masters. Our findings suggest that scholarly thinking about the power of bureaucracy should be redirected.

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Introduction: Never rely on experts

At the height of the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy had to make one of the most important decisions in the post-World War II period: how to respond to the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba. As recounted in Allison’s (1971) famous study of the crisis, Kennedy and his advisors discussed several options. Kennedy’s preference was for a clean, surgical air strike. But the Air Force informed the President that an air strike could not be surgical. It would have to be a massive attack. This information made the President opt for the blockage that eventually succeeded in deterring the Soviets, but as civilian experts afterwards discovered, the information from the Air Force was wrong. The surgical air strike option was realistic. As Allison (1971: 205) notes, the President had “learned the lesson of the Bay of Pigs, ‘Never rely on experts,’ less well than he supposed.”

This example of bureaucratic influence on political decision-making is dramatic. But it is unusual only in its drama, not in the fact that a political decision was influenced by advice from government officials. For over one hundred years, the literature on bureaucracy has pointed to the dilemma between bureaucratic expertise and political control. It is a delicate balance, and the nagging question is whether non-expert politicians can control a specialized and permanent bureaucracy.

The literature on bureaucracy has provided no final answer to this question, but agrees, despite its otherwise heterogeneous and multifaceted nature, that bureaucrats hold a privileged information-providing role, occupy a key policy advising role and interact closely with politicians. Because they control the flow of information to politicians, bureaucrats control, or influence, the set of problems and solutions that politicians consider (Goodnow 1900; Meier and O’Toole 2006; Niskanen 1971; Olsen 2005; 2008; Simon 1976 [1945]: 45-60; Weber 1970 [1922]; Wilson 1887; Wilson 1989).

The key insight from the study of bureaucracy is that top bureaucrats are often in a position to influence, if not decide, the agenda for their presumed masters. This fact may seem disturbing from the perspective of democratic governance, but the situation may, in fact, be worse than suggested by existing literature. We think that the literature has underestimated the power potential of the bureaucracy, because it has failed to sufficiently theorize what the close interaction between politicians and top bureaucrats really entails. We therefore believe that the relationship between politicians and top bureaucrats deserves reassessment.
We argue that bureaucrats may have political influence beyond agenda control. The informational advantage of top bureaucrats can be used for more subtle, but less visible, purposes. By carefully designing the information available to politicians, bureaucrats may not only determine the political agenda, but also shape their political masters’ preferences regarding the issues on the agenda. This reassessment of the bureaucracy’s power potential involves the important step of endogenizing politicians’ preferences to the politico-bureaucratic interaction, a step the literature has so far refrained from taking. We take this step by applying insights from political psychology to the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians about the impact of information on preference formation (Chong and Druckman 2007; Cohen 2003; Druckman 2001b; Druckman 2004; Goren et al. 2009; Nelson et al. 1997; Tversky and Kahneman 1981).

This paper makes two important contributions. First, we provide a theoretical reassessment of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats and introduce a new understanding of this relationship that places top bureaucrats in a much more influential position than suggested by the literature so far. Second, we present results from a comprehensive empirical investigation of our argument involving almost 5,000 politicians from four countries: The USA, Denmark, Italy, and Belgium. Relying on a most-different-systems logic we aim to demonstrate the universalism of the psychological mechanisms underlying our argument. We collect data by surveys. Embedded experiments and measures of respondents’ behavior during the completion of the surveys help increase the confidence that results are causal.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on bureaucracy and argues that the power position of bureaucrats has been an enduring, but undertheorized, concern. Then follows the presentation of our argument. Building on insights from political psychology, we argue that top bureaucrats may not only be able to influence the political agenda, but also the preferences of their political masters. We then turn to our empirical investigation. We start this part of the paper by explaining our data and methods and then move on to presenting the findings from our investigation. First, we show that bureaucrats indeed do enjoy a privileged position as information providers to their political masters. We then demonstrate through a series of experiments how the preferences of real-world politicians are open to bureaucratic manipulation. Having established that political preferences can be manipulated we discuss the real-world relevance of our findings. Our data does not allow for direct empirical investigations of the extent to which bureaucrats are actually using our proposed strategies to influence politicians’ preferences, but quantitative as well as qualitative findings from our surveys are indicative of
widespread concerns about bureaucrats’ interest in affecting political outcomes. We end the paper by discussing future directions for the scientific study of bureaucracy.

**Political dilettantes vs. bureaucratic experts: An enduring concern in political science and public administration**

The relationship between politicians and bureaucrats has been a constant focus in the study of bureaucracy since the late 19th century. Despite the multi-faceted and heterogeneous nature of this literature, an enduring concern can be identified over who is really in control. More specifically, the literature has been preoccupied with the intensity and exclusiveness of the interactions between politicians and bureaucrats, the importance of information from the bureaucracy for political decisions, and the political controllability of bureaucratic action.

These questions have run as an undercurrent in almost all intellectual streams within this literature. They were present in the very earliest contributions. For example, in his pioneering essay on politics and administration Woodrow Wilson (1887), while advocating the scientific study of bureaucracy, did not hide his fear of bureaucratic power. He worried that civil servants may develop into “an offensive official class, – a distinct, semi-corporate body with sympathies divorced from those of a progressive, free-spirited people” (Wilson 1887: 216). Likewise, across the Atlantic, Max Weber (1970 [1922]: 232), while praising the technical potential of modern bureaucracies, also famously worried that “(t)he power position of a fully developed bureaucracy is always overtowering. The ‘political master’ finds himself in the position of the dilettante who stands opposite the ‘expert’.”

The systematic study of bureaucracy started in the early 20th century with a series of works focusing on the politics-administration divide and management issues. Especially works of Goodnow, Fayol, Taylor, and Gulick lay the foundation stone to what is today known as the ‘scientific management school’. Undue influence of bureaucrats was not a central concern in this stream, but it ran as an undercurrent. Goodnow (1900: 5) discussed the relationship between politics and administration intensively and warned that “[t]he administrative system has, however, as great influence in giving its tone to the general governmental system as has the form of government set forth in the constitution”. He devoted a full chapter to balancing due political control against undue politicization of the administration (Goodnow 1900: 72-94). This theme was also treated in the field’s first textbook which emphasized the exclusive information-providing role of government
officials for policy formulation (White 1955 [1926]: esp. 6-8). Most work in the scientific management school focused on the administrative side and dealt with questions of how to structure an organization and design work processes. Much of this work, for example Taylor (1916) and Fayol (1930), had an almost exclusive focus on private organizations. However, applying scientific management principles in the public sector was also considered; but not without concerns of the implications for democratic governance. “Caveamus expertum”, Gulick (1937: 10) warned and went on to describe how much governments need expert advice from bureaucrats, but also how inclined bureaucrats are to abuse their privileged positions: “Every highly trained technician … has a profound sense of omniscience and a great desire for complete independence.”

The methods and recommendations of scientific management bred sceptics and paved the way for the behavioral revolution in the study of bureaucracy and the establishment of the human relations school of management. Barnard’s (1938) work was pioneering. He analyzed authority relations in organizations and maintained that all organizations are basically cooperative. Subordinates only obey orders if they are legitimate, that is, if they lie within the subordinates’ so called zone of indifference. Barnard’s work inspired a stream of literature on how organizations make decisions, but also generated a debate about how to control bureaucrats. If coercive control is an illusion, how can bureaucrats be controlled? A prominent debate between Friedrich (1940) and Finer (1941) set the scene. Friedrich (1940) found that political control of the bureaucracy was increasingly challenged by the growth of technical experts in the administration. It led to the danger that bureaucrats might advocate their own policy preferences disguised as expert advice. Friedrich’s solution was to rely on professional norms, ethical standards and the inner check of bureaucrats. Finer (1941) argued that the inner check was insufficient to control bureaucrats. He feared that the monopoly position of bureaucrats represented too much of a temptation to be regulated by the inner check. “Sooner or later there is an abuse of power when external punitive controls are lacking” (Finer 1941: 337). He consequently advocated the imposition of strict external control mechanisms. Worries of power abuse by bureaucratic experts shone through much work in the human relations school, which was otherwise preoccupied with internal organizational decision-making. The perhaps most prominent example is Simon’s (1976 [1945]: 45-61) analysis of fact and value in decision-making. According to Simon, all political decisions involve both fact and value, but the factual element is the responsibility of the bureaucrat. It is therefore important that the bureaucrat is neutral and compliant. However, this is far from certain since the administrator is likely to be motivated by “his own very definite set of personal values that he would like to see implemented by
his administrative organization, and he may resist attempts by the legislature to assume completely the function of policy determination” (Simon (1976 [1945]: 58-59).

The distrust of the personal motivations of bureaucrats was placed at center stage by the next intellectual stream in the study of bureaucracy, public choice. Using analytical tools from the discipline of economics, it began with analyses of internal decision-making in bureaucracies. Tullock (1965) investigated how information is distorted inside and between bureaucratic hierarchies and painted a picture of politicians as utterly dependent on bureaucrats, but also utterly unable to control them. “The vast and unwieldly departments are almost beyond the control of their nominal chiefs” (Tullock 1965: 223). This negative evaluation was echoed by Downs (1967), who identified five different bureaucratic types: climbers, conservers, advocates, zealots, and statesmen. Due to their different personal preferences, information flows in bureaucracies are distorted, which again leads to performance problems. “A very significant portion of all the activity carried out is completely unrelated to the bureau’s formal goals” (Downs 1967: 136). With Niskanen’s (1971) influential work this stream of literature took a more direct focus on the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. Niskanen analyzed this relationship as a bilateral monopoly, but one in which the bureaucratic side had an informational advantage which could be used to present politicians with a take-it-or-leave-it offer and pressure them into accepting larger budgets. Niskanen thus highlighted the privileged position of bureaucrats as information providers and demonstrated how this position could be used to manipulate the agenda of politicians.

Modern studies build on the insights reviewed thus far, but have taken the study of bureaucracy much further. Three lines of inquiry have been especially dominant. The first comprises studies using principal-agent theory. This theory was developed in the field of economics in the 1970s and was introduced to political science in the 1980s (Moe 1984; Weingast 1984). The core of the theory focuses on the relationship between a political principal and a bureaucratic agent. The principal needs the services of the agent, but cannot be sure of the agent’s good intentions because the agent may not share the principal’s preferences and may possess information not available to the principal (Miller 2005). Although the principal’s challenge logically depends on the degree of preference divergence and information asymmetry (Waterman and Meier 1998), this literature is often preoccupied with the challenges facing the political principal in terms of selecting the bureaucratic agent (Bertelli and Feldmann 2006), designing an appropriate incentive structure (Miller 1992; Connolly 2017), and monitoring and sanctioning the agent (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; McCubbins et al. 1987). This literature thus develops the concerns raised by Niskanen about
bureaucrats’ informational advantage and means of influencing the politicians’ agendas. Principal-agent theory has been used to study politico-bureaucratic relations in a large number of settings, including the US Congress (Kiewit & McCubbins 1991), Western democracies (Strøm et al. 2003), and the European Union (Pollack 2003).

Compared to the principal-agent literature, the second line of inquiry is more empirically guided. It focuses on front-line workers such as teachers, social workers and police officers. Its breakthrough came with Lipsky’s (1980) work on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky claimed that the real policy-makers are the frontline personnel charged with delivering services to the public. Due to the discretion they enjoy in their daily work, their high workload and the high demand by their clients for their services, they can and need to develop mechanisms to handle their workload. Lipsky identified several types of these so-called coping mechanisms, for example ‘creaming’ where bureaucrats prioritize those clients who are likely to succeed. The operation of coping mechanisms has now been demonstrated in a variety of front-line settings, including social workers, teachers, police officers, health care professionals, utility regulators, and forest rangers (Brehm and Gates 1999; Kaufman 2006 [1960]; Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Soss et al. 2011). More generally, coping mechanisms have been shown to function as policy-shaping devices that may direct public service provision “towards”, “away from”, or “against” clients (Tummers et al. 2015). The literature on front-line bureaucrats has revealed a major accountability and control challenge for politicians. If policy is effectively shaped in the front line, where does this leave politicians? The literature is pessimistic about the role of management and political control. The reason lies in the nature of front-line work. As noted by Lipsky (1980: 161): “Street-level bureaucrats have discretion because the nature of service provision calls for human judgment that cannot be programmed and for which machines cannot substitute”. In Wilson’s (1989: 154-175) view, front-line bureaucracies are difficult to control because they are often “coping agencies”, that is, agencies in which neither the output, nor the outcome can be observed. In other words, politicians are left with an information problem. When attempting to manage, reform or control front-line bureaucracies, they are almost completely dependent on their policy advisors, if they want an informational basis for their decisions.

These key policy advisors are the object of the third and final line of inquiry. This stream of literature directly investigates the relationship between politicians and top bureaucrats. It gained momentum with Aberbach et al.’s (1981) comprehensive cross-national analysis of this relationship in the USA, UK, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden. They found
that top bureaucrats increasingly engage in politics and that a “creative dialogue” appears to develop everywhere between top bureaucrats and politicians. Who has the upper hand, and who influences the public agenda the most, is difficult to determine. “Against the politician’s zeal, bureaucrats counter with facts and caution” (Aberbach et al. 1981: 114). The authors speculated that the relationship might develop even further and lead to the virtual disappearance of the Weberian distinction between the roles of politician and bureaucrat. However, when two of the authors later looked at developments in the 1980s, this speculation proved unfounded (Aberbach and Rockman 1988). But the core result of the original inquiry stood: Top bureaucrats appear to be key advisors for politicians and to engage with them in constant and intense dialogue about policy formulation. Despite important country-specific nuances, this finding has been confirmed by many subsequent analyses. This holds for countries like the UK (Bulmer 1988; Rhodes 2011; Wilson and Barker 2003), Germany (Derlien 1988; 2003), the USA (Aberbach 2003), Sweden (Ehn et al. 2003; Premfors and Sundström 2007), the Netherlands (t’Hart and Wille 2006), and Denmark (Christensen 2004; Salomonsen and Knudsen 2011). In sum, it appears to be a general trait, at least in the Western world, that top bureaucrats operate in close contacts with politicians and actively engage in policy-making.

Before concluding this literature review, a brief look at the most recent contributions to the study of bureaucracy is warranted. Although the categorization of these contributions into separate schools or distinct intellectual streams is hampered by the lack of temporal distance, it is evident that concerns of bureaucratic power, the importance of bureaucratic information, and the political controllability of bureaucratic action continue to run as important currents in this literature. First, several scholars provide fresh analyses of the dilemma between bureaucratic expertise and political accountability. Gailmard and Patty (2013) argue that some political control is worth sacrificing in order to motivate bureaucratic agents to acquire the expertise necessary to inform politics. Lewis (2008) shows how political appointments in the bureaucracy increase political responsiveness, but harm performance due to the appointees’ lack of expertise and long-term perspective compared to the permanent bureaucracy. Miller and Whitford (2016) argue that bureaucratic expertise should be kept at arm’s length from politicians in order to guard against short-sighted political opportunism. Second, other scholars focus on the informational foundation of the problem-solving capacity of modern governments. Baumgartner and Jones (2015) argue that in order to deal with complex problems, the bureaucratic collection, processing and presentation of information should be done in an open process, an organized anarchy in which politicians need to
accept a loss of control. Likewise, Workman’s (2015) dual dynamics theory stresses how crucial bureaucratic expertise is for Congressional attention to and prioritization of problems. Finally, a third set of researchers have put new efforts into investigating how bureaucratic information and the capacity to act on it can be used to pursue policies that are not politically directed, for instance to establish agency reputations (Carpenter 2010) or to engage in “strategic neutrality” (Huber 2007). What these recent studies have in common is a focus on the challenge which bureaucratic expertise poses for political control.

Summing up, the study of bureaucracy has for more than hundred years been preoccupied with the power of bureaucrats vis-à-vis politicians. Information is key in the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians who depend on the bureaucracy to get information about the different options for decisions they can make, and their relative legality and prudence. The literature agrees that bureaucrats hold a privileged position as providers of information, occupy a key policy advising role, and interact closely with the politicians. Bureaucrats use their position to formulate proposals for policy and provide knowledge about their feasibility. Bureaucrats are, in short, in a position to influence, if not decide, the agenda for their presumed masters. However, the literature also agrees that politicians bring something to the interaction, namely direction and policy goals. Even Aberbach et al. (1981: 113), who provide the perhaps most detailed and direct study of the politico-bureaucratic interaction, find that “[p]oliticians are inspired by goals and the advancement of interests; bureaucrats are forced to consider sobering possibilities.” In other words, the literature considers political preferences exogenous to the politico-bureaucratic interaction. However, by relying on this assumption of exogenous preferences, the literature has failed to sufficiently theorize what the close interaction between politicians and bureaucrats entails. In the next section, we draw on well-established insights from Psychology to argue that politicians’ preferences can be expected to be endogenous to the politico-bureaucratic interaction, and we argue how this theory suggests that existing literature has, in fact, underestimated the power potential of the bureaucracy.

**How political preferences are endogenous to politico-bureaucratic interaction**

In one sense it is unsurprising that existing literature has assumed politicians’ preferences to be exogenous to politico-bureaucratic interaction. Thus, the assumptions that people have consistent and coherent “preferences that reflect their desires and goals” and that they make choices that “are
logically derived from them (i.e., a rational individual chooses the most preferred outcome)” (Chong 2013: 98) are standard assumptions in rational choice theory. The assumptions form the theoretical basis of most literature in Economics (Frank 2010) and have been central to academic thought about human behavior in general (Chong 2013; Lupia et al. 2000).

However, while many still use the assumptions of rational choice theory as a normative baseline for how people “should” behave and make decisions, it is today uncontroversial to claim that actual human behavior is rarely (if ever) in complete line with assumptions of rationality (Achen & Bartels 2016). First, “unlike homo economicus, people are not omniscient calculators” (Lupia et al. 2000: 9) who are able to gather and take into account all relevant information when making choices. Instead, human cognition is limited and people have to make compromises between the (limited) effort they devote to decision-making and their desire to optimize decisions in terms of their preferences. Simon (1976 [1945]) used this insight to inform his idea about bounded rationality and theorized that decision-makers will often have to satisfice instead of maximize in light of their preferences when making decisions.

While the idea of bounded rationality questions peoples’ ability to make optimal decisions that are logically derived from their preferences, it does not question the exogenous nature of the preferences themselves. However, a rich psychological literature on attitude formation has questioned the assumption of exogenously given, consistent preferences by showing that not only do people tend to be unable to make optimal decisions based on their preferences; the preferences themselves are subject to manipulation, e.g. through the design of information. Below, we present three prominent examples of this, namely insights about equivalence framing effects, issue framing effects, and source cue effects on peoples’ preferences.

We should emphasize that the relevance of these insights is not limited to the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians. In principle, anyone who is in the position of being a trusted information provider to politicians could use these strategies to influence the politicians’ preferences. However, compared to other actors in the political system, bureaucrats are in a privileged position as they serve as central information providers and have a lot of control over the political agenda. This is clear from the literature review above and it will be clear from our empirical investigation below. Thus, we argue that bureaucrats are in a privileged position to leverage these psychological insights to design information in ways that influence the preferences of their political principals. This is an argument, which – if it finds empirical support – has
important implications for democracy as we know it. Thus, it would imply that bureaucrats have much more potential power over politicians than existing literature has acknowledged.

**Equivalence framing**

The first line of research we draw on is the literature about equivalence framing effects on preferences. An equivalence framing effect occurs when “different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases (…) causes individuals to alter their preferences” (Druckman 2001: 228). Equivalence framing gained prominence with the work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman and is nowadays recognized as “one of the most stunning and influential demonstrations of irrationality” (Druckman 2004, 671).

Tversky & Kahneman (1981) developed prospect theory based on insights about equivalence framing effects on peoples’ risk preferences. They argued that people tend to be risk seeking in the domain of losses and risk-averse in the domain of gains, and they showed this with their influential Asian Disease Problem. Here, respondents were asked to choose between different programs to combat the outbreak of a fictitious disease. The disease would kill 600 people if nothing was done and each program would have an expected value of 200 saved lives. However, one program was risk seeking (there was a 1/3 probability that 600 people would survive/0 people would die and a 2/3 probability that 0 people would survive/600 people would die) while another was risk-averse (200 people would survive/400 would die). Tversky and Kahneman found that framing the two programs positively by presenting them in terms of saved lives (gains) led 72 % of the respondents to choose the risk-averse option, while framing the programs negatively by presenting them in terms of the expected number of dead people (losses) led 78 % to choose the risk seeking option (Tversky and Kahneman 1981, 453). Thus, people’s preferences fundamentally differed depending on which of two versions of logically equivalent information they responded to.

Since the work of Tversky and Kahneman, insights about equivalence framing have been applied to studies of other kinds of preferences than risk preferences, and results have been consistent: people tend to react differently to logically equivalent but differently framed pieces of information. As an example, Quattrone’s and Tversky (1988) showed that people generated less favorable attitudes towards an employment policy proposal if they were told that the proposal would lead to 10 % of the workforce being unemployed than if they were told that the proposal would lead to 90 % of the workforce being employed. And similarly, in a recent application to public management research, Olsen (2015) showed that citizens tend to evaluate public
organizations more negatively if they are told that 15% of the organizations’ users are dissatisfied with the organizations’ services than if they are told that 85% are satisfied. Thus, people tend to react more negatively on negatively framed information than on logically equivalent but positively framed information. Druckman (2004) draws on insights about accessibility processes to explain these effects as processes where the positive labelling of information automatically activates positive associations in memory and the negative labelling of (the same) information activates negative associations, which in turn shapes overall evaluations. “[B]y highlighting negative or positive information, the frame leads individuals to subconsciously focus on that information (e.g. lives lost or lives saved, unemployment or employment) and this leads to the given (negative or positive) evaluation/preference” (Druckman 2004: 674).

Equivalence framing effects are remarkable as they result from seemingly uncontroversial changes in information where no information is left out and where no blatant manipulation is involved. If politicians are susceptible to the same mechanisms as other citizens who have been in focus in existing literature, it would be an insight with important implications for the power potential of bureaucracy. Thus, we would expect the valence of information to be clearly within bureaucrats’ zone of discretion when designing and preparing information for their political principals. Not many people would be suspicious of bureaucrats presenting an 80% user satisfaction rate instead of a 20% user dissatisfaction rate when reporting a satisfaction survey of users of a public service. Similarly, it would seem innocuous for a policy advisor to use negative-valence information to report the expected effects of a policy proposal instead of equivalent positive-valence information. However, such information design choices would have the potential to lead to non-trivial changes in the politicians’ preferences, which could be used by bureaucrats with an interest in e.g. increasing or lowering the chances of a policy proposal getting passed. We thus hypothesize that:

**H1:** Bureaucrats can affect preferences of politicians by presenting logically equivalent information by different words or phrases.

**Issue framing**

A second line of literature, which has been highly influential in terms of understanding attitude formation among voters, is the literature about issue framing. Issue framing effects occur when “by emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker leads individuals to focus on
these considerations when constructing their opinions”, which in turn affects the opinions being formed (Druckman 2004, 672). Thus, issue framing has similarities with equivalence framing in as both kinds of framing aim at affecting the light in which individuals form attitudes. However, while equivalence framing happens through the presentation of logically equivalent pieces of information, the same is not the case for issue framing. Instead, “issue frames focus on qualitatively different yet potentially relevant considerations” (Druckman 2004, 672) in order to make people form their opinions in light of these considerations instead of others.¹

A prominent example of issue framing and its power to influence peoples’ attitudes is the seminal study by Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) who studied the effects of issue framing on peoples’ political tolerance towards groups with whom they disagree. Thus, they investigated the effects of framing on peoples’ willingness to let hate groups like Ku Klux Klan make speeches and hold public rallies and showed that people were more willing to do so if the question had been framed as a question of free speech than if it had been framed as a risk for public order. Similarly, studies have shown that “when government spending for the poor is framed as enhancing the chance that poor people can get ahead, individuals tend to support increased spending. On the other hand, when it is framed as resulting in higher taxes, individuals tend to oppose increased spending” (Druckman 2001b, 1043).

While both issue framing and equivalence framing affect peoples’ preferences by influencing the light in which these preferences are formed, the two kinds of framing have been found to work through distinct psychological processes. We described above how equivalence framing works through unconscious accessibility processes where the positive or negative labelling of information automatically activates certain associations in memory, which in turn affects peoples’ overall evaluations. Issue framing, on the other hand, has been shown to work through more deliberate processes where the framing affects how people think about the relative importance of different considerations with relevance to an evaluation (Druckman 2001b; Druckman 2004).

¹ There is some debate on the use of the term “framing” in existing literature. Some find it misleading to use the term “framing” to refer to qualitative differences in information (Druckman 2004, 672) and for instance, Scheufele and Iyengar (2015) argue that framing literature is in a “state of conceptual confusion” where “any attribute of information is treated as a frame and any response from the audience is deemed a framing effect. From this perspective, framing cannot be distinguished from other forms of media or social influence such as agenda setting, learning or persuasion” (Scheufele and Iyengar (2015) as cited by Leeper & Slothuus (2015: 3)). This terminological dispute is, however, less relevant to our argument than the fact that the literature has provided influential insights that we expect, bureaucrats will be able to use to affect politicians’ preferences. Thus, we are interested in bureaucrats’ ability to influence politicians’ preferences – not whether to term this influence “framing effects”, “persuasion” or something else.
Thus, a preference can be viewed as a weighted sum of different considerations with relevance to a problem (Chong & Druckman 2007) and issue frames affect what considerations are considered relevant in peoples’ overall evaluations (plus how relevant or important these considerations are considered to be). Thus, when Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley highlight considerations about free speech in relation to the question of letting Ku Klux Klan rally, respondents are led to think that these considerations are relevant and important to the question. People therefore reach other conclusions than they would have done if other considerations (e.g. about public order) were made salient in their mind at the moment of preference formation.

Findings of issue framing effects have left researchers concerned about citizen competence and the power of politicians over ordinary peoples’ preference formation. Pessimistic observers worry that elites are more or less unconstrained in influencing citizens’ political preferences as illustrated with the following quote from Kinder and Herzog (cited by Druckman 2001b, 1041): “Our worry about the nefarious possibilities of framing is just that they can become freewheeling exercises in pure manipulation” (Ibid., p.1041). Others are less pessimistic and argue that it can be reasonable for people to “delegate to credible sources to help them sort through the many possible frames” (Druckman 2001a, 244). This, however, still leaves “credible sources” in a powerful position to influence which considerations are considered relevant and/or important when people form their political preferences. While existing literature has mainly focused on voters’ preference formation (for an exception, see Blom-Hansen et al. 2015 who investigate framing effects among elected officials, and Andersen & Jakobsen 2017 who investigate framing effects among front-line bureaucrats), we would also expect these insights to be relevant in other contexts such as the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians. Thus, we expect that bureaucrats can use their privileged position as trusted information providers to frame information, thereby allowing them to affect the preferences of their political masters:

**H2: Bureaucrats can affect preferences of politicians by emphasizing different attributes of issues.**

**Source ques:**
In the two sections above, we have presented how we expect politicians’ policy preferences to be subject to manipulation through different kinds of framing in the design and presentation of policy-relevant information. Our third hypothesis also regards the presentation of policies. However, instead of focusing on how information about the policies themselves is presented, our third
hypothesis draws on insights about source cues to expect that bureaucrats can affect politicians’ policy preferences by highlighting policy advocates that are either ideologically aligned or unaligned with the politicians.

In Psychology, it is well-established that people tend to use signals from their social environment to inform judgments. The ability to judge objects in light of other peoples’ reactions is learned in early childhood (Cohen 2003) and continues to help decision-making throughout life. Thus, social signals provide social meaning, helping people to determine what judgments and actions are compatible with socially shared values: “[b]ecause social groups serve as a primary source of personal values (…) people can safely assume that other members of a self-defining reference group have a moral sensibility similar to their own” (Cohen 2003: 808).

Research in political psychology has drawn on these insights to show that party cues often guide voters’ policy preferences. “Political parties serve as reference groups for citizens by providing them with a simple evaluative basis for rendering judgments about” policies (Goren et al. 2009: 806). Thus, when forming a preference on a policy, people tend to rely on cues about which political parties support and oppose the policy, instead of analyzing the objective features of the policy in light of their own political values (Petersen et al. 2013). “If the cue giver and recipient share a party label, the latter will trust the former and accept the message without reflecting much on message content. But if the cue giver and recipient lie across the partisan divide, the recipient will mistrust the source and reject the message, again without much reflection” (Goren et al. 2009: 806).

Party cues have proven influential to voters’ preferences regarding a wide range of policies. This even holds for policies that are highly politicized, meaning that one could else expect attitudes to be quite crystalized. For instance, Cohen (2003) found that peoples’ attitudes towards social welfare programs were meaningfully guided by the compatibility between actual policy content and ideological beliefs, whenever no party cue was present. However, once people were told that the policies were supported by either the Democrats or the Republicans, “the persuasive impact of the objective content was reduced to nil” (Ibid.: 811). Now, people evaluated the policies through the lens of their party identity instead. Similarly, Bolsen et al. (2014) found party cues to distort peoples’ evaluations of an energy policy and Goren et al. (2009) even showed that peoples’ support for fundamental political values like equal opportunity, self-reliance, moral traditionalism, and moral tolerance was subject to manipulation through party cues.
While existing literature in political psychology has been preoccupied with parties (and thus politicians) as cue senders, we switch the logic around and expect that the politicians will also be subject to source cue effects (as cue receivers) themselves when forming preferences on policies in their daily work as decision-makers. Groups like interest organizations, political think tanks etc. will often advocate for or against policies throughout decision-making processes and we expect these groups to affect politicians’ preference formation the same way that political parties have in existing literature been found to affect voters’ preference formation. Thus, we hypothesize that:

**H3:** Politicians show greater support for a policy if they learn that the policy is advocated for by an ideologically aligned group, and less support if they learn that the policy is advocated for by an ideologically unaligned group.

Like equivalence framing and issue framing, source cue effects give bureaucrats a potential to influence their political principals’ preferences on policies (given that H3 finds support). Under the right circumstances, bureaucrats would be able to highlight policy advocates that are either ideologically aligned or unaligned with the politicians, depending on whether the bureaucrats wanted the politicians to form more favorable or less favorable preferences. For instance, a bureaucrat serving a right-wing\(^2\) dominated city council would be able to generate less favorable preferences on a policy by making the politicians aware of a left-wing think tank supporting the policy, or she could generate preferences that are more favorable by making the politicians aware of a right-wing think tank supporting the policy. It is, however, worth noting that compared to equivalence framing and issue framing, which bureaucrats can use when designing and presenting information themselves, bureaucrats have less control over the usefulness of source cues to influence politicians in a given situation. Thus, in order to use source cues to affect politicians’ preferences in a positive direction, the bureaucrats would need to be able to find policy advocates who are ideologically aligned with the politicians (or policy opponents that are ideologically unaligned with the politicians). And similarly, in order to affect the politicians’ preferences in a negative direction, the bureaucrats must be able to find policy advocates who are ideologically unaligned with the politicians (or policy opponents who are ideologically aligned with the politicians).

\(^2\) For reasons of simplification, we use the terms left- and right-wing throughout the paper although we are aware that in some contexts, including the US, distinguishing between Liberals and Conservatives is more appropriate.
politicians). However, when such advocates are present, we would expect source cues to work as an effective strategy to influence politicians’ preference formation.

**Empirical setting**

We face three important challenges in relation to testing our argument empirically. First, a starting point for our argument is the assumption that top bureaucrats are in a privileged position as information providers to their political principals. In order for our argument to have real-world relevance, we need to address this assumption directly. Before we turn to the test of our hypotheses, we therefore include self-reported survey measures as well as behavioral measures of the extent to which politicians consider the bureaucracy an important source of information.

Second, when testing the psychological basis for our argument, there is the issue of internal validity: We need to establish causal impacts of how bureaucrats present information. In order to do so, we rely on randomized survey experiments. Randomized survey experiments require quite large sample sizes. Local government is attractive from a design perspective, because of the large number of politicians, thus making a large-N test of our hypotheses possible. Hence, we focus on local government because the large number of elected politicians in local government allows us to collect a sufficient number of answers. By using local politicians we get a large number of respondents who are real-world elected politicians, responsible for decision-making of high importance for a large number of citizens, and who can be expected to rely on information from their respective administrative apparatus in the process of preparing decisions, monitoring policy implementation etc.

Third, there is the issue of generalizability. The extent to which politicians are subject to manipulation may vary with factors like political institutions and political culture. We address this challenge by using a most different systems logic where we conduct our study in four very different political systems. While being all Western democracies, these four countries are selected because they belong to four different types of local government. Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidström (2011) distinguish between the local government type of the Nordic states connected to the Scandinavian state tradition, the type of the Southern European States connected to the French state tradition, of the Rhinelandic States connected to the German tradition, and the British Isles
connected with the Anglo-Saxon state tradition. Among the important differences in this typology are features such as the form of decentralization, the political culture (or policy style), the form of political organization, and the state-society relationships (Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidström, 2011: 11). From the Nordic type we focus on local government in Denmark, from the Southern European type on Italian local government, from the Rhinelandic states we choose municipalities in Flanders, Belgium, and from the Anglo-Saxon tradition we focus on local government in the U.S. Our theoretical claim is general: We expect that bureaucrats can affect preferences of politicians in democracies, regardless of the type of the political system. The logic of the chosen most different system design, of course, is that we expect to see similar patterns in the four different countries with their different types of local government.

We rely on survey data collected using email-based questionnaires among local politicians in the USA, Denmark, the Flanders region in Belgium, and Italy in late 2016 / early 2017. We provide a description of the four groups of politicians and the empirical settings in which they work in the appendix. Information about our data collection is summarized in Table 1.3

Table 1 about here

Are top bureaucrats an important source of information?
A starting point for our argument is the assumption that top bureaucrats are in a privileged position as information providers to their political principals. Our literature review provided a theoretical basis for assuming that this is the case. However, before turning to the experimental investigation of the psychological foundations of our argument, it is useful to investigate the assumption empirically as well. In order to do so, we rely on descriptive evidence collected in the surveys with the local politicians (see the appendix for further description of the actual survey questions used).

Figure 1-4 about here

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3 All surveys were pilot tested with small samples of politicians in order to check the relevance and clarity of our questions. In order to maximize comparability of treatments across countries, we first developed a Danish questionnaire which was then translated into English. We then discussed the English version of the questionnaire with native experts, while native speaking research assistants helped us translate the questionnaire into Flemish and Italian.
Figure 1 shows the extent to which politicians report to be in contact with the local bureaucracy as compared to other actors. As can be seen, the contact is close since between as much as 37% (in Flanders) and 74% (in Italy) respond that they are in contact with local administrative staff at least twice a week. This makes the local bureaucracy one of the two by far most heavily contacted actors, only surpassed slightly by respondents’ own political party. Figure 2 furthermore shows the extent to which the local bureaucracy is considered an important source of information as compared to other sources. Again, the local administration comes out as one of the most important sources in all countries, though its importance is not very different from that of relevant ministries, local government associations and research institutions in Italy and Flanders. In addition to the self-reported measures in Figures 1 and 2, Figures 3 and 4 show evidence from a decision board exercise which was placed at the very end of the surveys. The decision board was made using MouselabWEB, an open source decision board tool (Willemsen & Johnson, n.d.). The method allows us to track the politicians’ actual behavior while searching through decision-relevant information and thus it provides us with behavioral measures of the importance of the bureaucracy compared to other sources of information. In the exercise, respondents were presented with a fictitious policy proposal. They could then consult various boxes (each representing different actors including the local bureaucracy) in order to obtain information about the recommendations of the actors. The decision board exercise is based on the assumption that actors, who are considered more relevant information providers, are consulted before less relevant actors and that more time is spent on information from relevant actors than on less relevant actors (see the appendix for a thorough description of the decision board exercise). As is evident from Figures 3 and 4, more time is generally spent on the information from the local bureaucracy than on other sources in Denmark and Flanders, while the picture is less clear in Italy. Similarly, the local bureaucracy box is generally one of the boxes first consulted in Denmark, Flanders, and the US but less so in Italy. In conclusion, our results across the four figures point to the local bureaucracy being an important source of information, though probably slightly less so in Italy than in the USA, Denmark and Flanders.

**General design considerations**

In order to test the psychological foundations of our argument, we ran three randomized survey experiments on each of the four samples. Each experiment was designed to test one of the psychological mechanisms discussed in the theory section above, and thus, the experiments test
different strategies that bureaucrats can possibly use to influence politicians’ preferences. In each of our experiments, respondents were presented with a policy proposal and asked to form a preference regarding the proposal as if it had been proposed in their own local council. Experiment 1 is an equivalence framing experiment where we test whether politicians’ preferences on a policy vary with the valence of logically equivalent information about the policy. Experiment 2 is an issue framing experiment where we test whether respondents’ preferences on a policy can be influenced by selectively highlighting subsets of potentially policy relevant considerations. Finally, experiment 3 is used to test whether respondents’ preferences can be influenced by highlighting policy advocates with whom the respondents are ideologically aligned or unaligned (that is, the source cue part of our argument). In all three experiments information is – in different ways – presented by bureaucrats to politicians. We do not claim that similar effects cannot be obtained by other groups. On the contrary, the theoretical argument applies to anyone in the privileged position as information provider to politicians. We focus on bureaucrats exactly because of their privileged position, and this is why we only use bureaucrats as information providers in the experiments.

The experiments were all using between-subjects randomization to one experimental condition in each experiment. Experiments were randomized independently of one another. In the survey, the experiments were placed right after the descriptive questions presented in the previous section. The order in which respondents were presented with the experiments was fixed across all respondents and all four countries.

Designing the experiments in ways that allow for cross-country comparisons of results is not a trivial task. Local politicians in the different countries are responsible for different policy portfolios, which makes it difficult to formulate experiments that make sense across countries. Moreover, even identical words and formulations may have different meanings in different countries with different cultural settings (Italian respondents may understand something else than Danish respondents when responding to identically formulated survey items) and this constitutes a threat to the comparability of the experimental results across countries (Jilke et al. 2016).

However, the purpose of running the experiments in different countries is not to formally compare effect sizes across countries (e.g. by testing whether one country’s politicians are more affected by equivalence frames than politicians in other countries), but to test the basic psychological mechanisms behind our theoretical argument. Thus, we test the foundations of our argument in a broad range of political systems in order to address issues of generalizability. Therefore, primacy has been given to formulate experiments that are realistic in the empirical
settings in which the experiments were run, while we consider it impossible to ensure full measurement equivalence.

In each experiment, respondents were asked about their preferences on policies for which they are actually responsible in their own city councils. This means that each experiment’s policy proposal was not identical for all four countries (proposals were identical in Denmark, Flanders, and Italy, but alternative policy areas had to be used in the USA due to differences in policy portfolios for which local councils are responsible). To make experiments as realistic as possible, we collaborated with experts in local politics in all countries apart from Denmark\(^4\) who helped us formulate the experimental material (translate to local language and adjust wordings to make sense in the local empirical settings).

**Experiment 1: Equivalence framing – Design**

The purpose of our first experiment is to test \(H_1\) according to which we expect the valence of information about a policy to matter for politicians’ preferences on the policy. In order to test this hypothesis, we conducted a classical equivalence framing experiment (Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Druckman 2004; Olsen 2015). Respondents in all countries were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a fictitious policy proposal. In Denmark, Flanders, and Italy, the policy proposal concerned a limitation in the number of weekly hours where the municipality’s libraries would be manned by a librarian, whereas city councilors in the USA were presented with a proposal about limiting the walk-in hours at the local police station.

Respondents in two experimental groups were told that a neighboring municipality had made a similar change a year ago. One experimental group was given the information that 60 percent of the citizens had been satisfied with the change in the neighboring municipality (the valence of the information was positive) while another was given the logically equivalent information that 40 percent of the citizens had been dissatisfied with the change (the valence of the information was negative). Finally, a control group was added to the experiment, where the policy proposal was presented without information about other municipalities’ experiences with similar proposals. An English translation of the wording of the Danish, Flemish and Italian version of the

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\(^4\) We are indebted to comments from, among others, Mariafrancesca Sicilia, Bert George, Steve Kelman, Oliver James, Gregg Van Ryzin, Sebastian Jilke, Emily Cochran Bech, Donald P. Moynihan, Matthew Motta, and Matt Loftis.
experiment is presented in Table 2, while the wording of the US version of the experiment can be found in the appendix.

Table 2 about here

H₁ finds support if the average member of group 1 agrees more with the policy proposal than the average member of group 2. The control group allows us to investigate whether experimental effects are primarily driven by members of group 2 being affected by the negative framing of information, or whether effects are primarily driven by members of group 1 being affected by the positive framing of information.

Experiment 1: Results
As shown in Figure 5, politicians in all countries report significantly different preferences for the policy proposal, depending on whether a positive, a neutral or a negative frame is used (see Table A1 in the appendix for formal tests of statistical significance). The hierarchy of preferences across experimental groups is as expected with positive frames producing more support for the proposal than the neutral frame, which in turn is producing stronger support than the negative frame. In all countries, the effects are of substantial size bearing in mind that the dependent variable is measured on a scale running from 1-5 (DK: ~0.4; FL: ~0.2; IT: ~0.9; US: ~0.6). Thus, our hypothesis about the importance of the valence of the information is supported by data. Some cross-national differences should be noted, however: Notably, differences in preferences between the positive and the negative frame are of considerably different sizes across countries. Moreover, several previous equivalence framing studies have found evidence of negativity bias, where negative valence matters relatively more than positive valence (e.g, Olsen 2015). This pattern is only found in Denmark and the USA in our investigation, while we, on the other hand, detect stronger impacts of positive valence in Flanders and Italy. Thus, in sum the findings indicate that valence of information is more important under some conditions. However, this does not change the general impression from the experiments that politicians’ preferences are susceptible to information valence.

Figure 5 about here
Experiment 2: Issue framing - design
The purpose of our second experiment is to test H2 about issue framing effects on politicians’ policy preferences. Issue frames (also known as “emphasis frames” (Druckman 2004, 672)) focus on “qualitatively different yet potentially relevant considerations” (Ibid.) in order to affect which considerations will guide information recipients’ attitude formation. Thus, we expect that bureaucrats (and other providers of information) can influence politicians’ policy preferences by highlighting selective subsets of policy relevant considerations, thereby leading the politicians to focus on these considerations when forming an opinion on the policy.

In order to test this hypothesis, we designed an experiment where respondents in three experimental groups were asked to form an opinion on a fictitious policy proposal. In Denmark, Flanders, and Italy, the policy proposal was an offer to users of the municipality’s elderly care of an extra bath per week, whereas city councilors in the USA were presented with a proposal to renew and renovate public parks in their city. The policy proposal was identical in all experimental groups in terms of the content of the proposed policy change and the financial effects of making the proposed change in policy. However, for one experimental group (the positive framing), the proposal was presented with a politically appealing title in an attempt to make respondents form an attitude in light of positive thoughts and considerations. Another experimental group (the negative framing) was explicitly reminded of the obvious fact that spending extra money on one policy area would necessarily mean that other policy areas would need to be given less priority, which may lead to protests from groups that do not benefit from the proposed policy changes. Finally, a control group was presented with the factual content and financial consequences of the policy proposal (without any issue framing). An English translation of the wording of the Danish, Flemish and Italian version of the experiment is presented in Table 3, while the wording of the US version of the experiment can be found in the Appendix.

Table 3 about here

Following H2 we expect that recipients of the negative frame will be less supportive of the policy proposal than recipients of the positive frame as they form their opinion in light of more negative considerations (they are led to think of the proposal as a conflict issue) even though the factual content of the proposal is identical. The control group allows us to investigate whether experimental effects are primarily driven by recipients of the negative or the positive frame.
Experiment 2: Results
The results from experiment 2 are presented in Figure 6, while formal tests of statistical significance can be found in Table A2 in the appendix. The results are largely consistent across countries with the positive issue framing having a statistically significantly more positive impact than the neutral frame, which in turn has a more positive and statistically significant impact than the negative issue frame. Results are substantially significant bearing in mind that a scale running from 1-5 is used with the average support for the proposal between the positive and negative issue frame running between around 0.5 in Denmark and around 0.8 in Italy and the USA. In sum, the findings support the proposition that politicians’ preferences are susceptible to issue framing by the administration.

Figure 6 about here

Experiment 3: Source cues - design
The purpose of our third experiment is to test $H_3$ according to which we expect that bureaucrats can exploit insights about source cue effects by highlighting policy advocates that the politicians either like or dislike. Thus, we expect that politicians will tend to like a policy if they learn that the policy is advocated for by groups that they like or identify with, e.g. because they are ideologically aligned. Similarly, we expect that they will tend to dislike the same policy if they learn that the policy is advocated for by groups that they do not like or identify with.

In order to test our hypothesis, we designed an experiment where respondents in different experimental groups were asked to indicate their preferences on a fictitious policy proposal about outsourcing technical services. A control group was presented with the pure content of the policy proposal, whereas two other experimental groups were presented with the proposal and were additionally informed that a think tank (either a right-wing or a left-wing think tank) is advocating for policy proposals like the one to be evaluated. An English translation of the wording of the Danish, Flemish and Italian version of the experiment is presented below. The wording of the US version of the experiment can be found in the appendix.

Table 4 about here
In general, contracting out public services tends to be popular among ideological right-wings and less popular among ideological left-wings (Baekgaard et al. 2017). Therefore, we expect right-wings to be more supportive of the proposal than left-wings at the outset. However, when respondents learn that a think tank advocates for the policy, we expect the respondents’ preferences to become distorted by the degree of ideological alignment between them and the think tank. For instance, in the experimental condition in which respondents learn that the policy proposal is supported by a left-wing think tank, right-wings are expected to become more skeptical towards the policy, even though the proposal is in line with their general ideological preferences. Similarly, left-wings in the same experimental group are expected to show more support for the proposal, thus beginning to support policies that are at odds with their underlying ideological preferences.

**Experiment 3: Results**

Figure 7 and Table 5 present the findings from experiment 3. We expected a positive impact of right-wing cues among right-wings and a negative impact among left-wings. Likewise, we expected negative impacts of left-wing cues among right-wings and positive impacts among left-wings. The Danish case offers some evidence in support for these expectations. Left-wing politicians become more supportive of the policy proposal if it is supported by a left-wing think tank. However, the evidence is not consistently supporting the hypothesis, as the interaction term between ideology and the right-wing think tank condition in contrast to expectations is negative and statistically insignificant. The Flemish case provides no evidence in favor of the hypothesis whatsoever. It is noteworthy, however, that the left-wing think tank condition in itself has a positive impact on the support for the proposal. This may suggest that adding sources which are considered trustworthy across the political spectrum at large may have the potential to generally mold the preferences of politicians. The Italian case lends further support to this proposition since both source cue treatments exhibit positive main effects on the support for the proposal. As in the Flemish case, we do not find any evidence in support for hypothesis 3. In fact, the significant interaction between the right-wing source cue and ideology is positive, thus suggesting that right-wing politicians in contrast to expectations tend to respond more positively to left-wing sources than do left-wing politicians. Finally, the strong positive effect of right-wing source cues for right-wing politicians only in the US case is in accordance with hypothesis 3. However, the similarly strong positive effect of left-wing source cues for right-wing politicians is in outright opposition to our expectations.
Thus, in sum, the experiments produce only weak and inconsistent evidence in support of hypothesis 3 across the four countries. However, we also find that source cues appear to matter but in different ways than suggested by theory. The findings from in particular Italy and to some extent Flanders seem to suggest that source cues may have effects independent of the ideological viewpoints of recipients. One plausible explanation here is that these sources are generally considered reliable across the political spectrum. Likewise, one possible explanation of the stronger positive impact of left-wing sources among right-wing politicians in Italy and the USA may be that the addition of a source cue with an opposing ideological point of view in some cases lend additional credibility to the proposal for those supporting it. Thus, source cues appear to work in more complex ways than suggested by our theoretical framework.

Figure 7 about here

Table 5 about here

Discussion and real-world relevance

According to the classical study of politicians and bureaucrats in Western democracies by Aberbach, Rockman, and Putnam (1981), the bureaucracy is a central provider of relevant information to elected politicians. Our findings show that this picture prevails today almost 40 years later across four very different political systems, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, and the USA. This raises the questions of whether and in what ways the bureaucracy can exploit their central position to influence political decisions. We argue that they can potentially do so by strategically designing information to politicians, thereby pushing politicians’ preferences in the directions desired by the bureaucracy. Experimental evidence indeed support this expectation. In all four countries examined, politicians’ preferences are substantially susceptible to equivalence and issue framing. However, there are cross-country differences in the strength of such effects (with framing effects being more pronounced among Italian politicians) and in whether positive or negative framing creates the strongest deviations from the control condition.

In light of our findings, an obvious question is whether real-world bureaucrats do actually exploit the preference-shaping power we argue they have, or whether it is merely an unreleased potential? The main purpose of this paper has been to provide evidence of the underestimated power potential of the bureaucracy and thus, our data does not allow for a direct empirical investigation of the extent to which this power potential is realized. However, as was
clear from this paper’s introduction and literature review, it is far from outlandish to argue that bureaucrats do sometimes have policy preferences that differ from the preferences of their political principals. Furthermore, literature on performance management has shown how government agencies tend to use information strategically in their interactions with policymakers, in attempts to advocate for policies and defend and expand their budgets (Moynihan 2008). And while our data does not allow for a direct investigation of the extent to which real-world bureaucrats use equivalence framing, issue framing, and source cues in their interactions with politicians, we do have qualitative indications of our respondents being concerned with undue influence of bureaucrats. Thus, after the three experiments, the respondents were asked about when was the last time they had experienced that the bureaucracy had tried to influence political decisions and acting in a non-neutral manner. In all countries, more than 50 per cent of our respondents indicated that they had experienced such behavior from the bureaucracy within the last half year. This was moreover followed by an open-ended question in which the respondents were asked to describe what had happened. The respondents were asked to leave this question blank if they did not wish to provide further information. Nevertheless, a substantial share of the respondents (more than one third of those for whom it is relevant) gave some kind of response to the open-ended question. The responses point in many different directions and are rather difficult to quantify. However, as shown in the display in Table A6 in the appendix, four – to some extent overlapping - themes are relevant in all countries. Importantly, several respondents provide examples or general statements about how the administration influence political decisions by framing, manipulating, withholding, or postponing important and relevant information to either some or all politicians. While these statements can be taken as evidence that the behaviors suggested by us are indeed occurring in reality, two reservations should be mentioned. First, the statements are based solely on how the politicians experienced the situation. However, some situations that are experienced as framing or manipulation may simply be a story of poor administrative work where not all relevant information has been included. Second, as mentioned by a Danish respondent, it is sometimes difficult to say whether a manipulation is made by the bureaucracy as such or whether the bureaucracy was ordered by the ruling coalition to present a case in a certain way. We believe that qualitative approaches will be promising when it comes to shed light on the extent to which bureaucrats are actually using the manipulative strategies in this article.

A second important question concerns whether the power potential described is limited to the bureaucracy or has relevance for other groups of actors as well. In this respect, it is
important to note that the aim of our study is to examine the power potential of the bureaucracy; not to compare it with that of other groups. We by no means claim that the power potential uncovered here is limited to the bureaucracy. However, an important precondition for the power potential to unfold is a privileged position of the group under scrutiny. In that sense, the bureaucracy is particularly relevant to consider, bearing in mind their importance as information providers in all four countries examined and presumably in most modern democracies. We consider it likely, that other groups will have similar leverage over politicians if they are also able to assume privileged positions as trusted information providers. Such groups could be interest organizations, lobbyists, or party machines.

**Conclusion**

The question of the policy influence of the bureaucracy is at the heart of research on bureaucracy. Yet, little attention has been given to a potential main source of such influence: manipulation of elected politicians’ preferences through strategic presentation of information. The present study provides a framework for understanding how such manipulation could take place. Our analysis across four different systems reveals a considerable impact of equivalence and issue framing and to some extent also of source cues on politicians’ preferences. Thus, our results may reshape scholarly thinking about the power of bureaucracy. For instance, classical literature argues that political principals can reduce agency problems by designing an appropriate incentive structure (Miller 1992; Connolly 2017) or by introducing proper monitoring and sanctioning systems (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; McCubbins et al. 1987). However, such institutional solutions are doing little to prevent the bureaucracy from influencing political outcomes if they do so by shaping the very preferences of their political masters. In order to get at this question, we suggest a new research agenda on the influence of the bureaucracy.

Of primary importance to such an agenda would be to uncover to what extent and under what circumstances the power potential is unleashed in practice. While our qualitative evidence as well as the example outlined in the introduction provide support of the relevance of our perspective, future studies could use qualitative case studies to provide more solid evidence on the occurrence of this kind of behavior. Relatedly, future studies are well advised to consider moderating circumstances such as norms about appropriate bureaucratic behavior.
Another relevant step in such agenda would be to uncover under what conditions politicians are susceptible to manipulation from the bureaucracy. This may to some extent depend on both institutional, cultural, and situational variables. Factors, such as the general level of trust in the bureaucracy, the extent to which the bureaucracy has an explicit directional interest in the topic covered by information, whether the information has been demanded by the political assembly, the extent to which politicians are able to get second opinion advices, and whether politicians are part of the ruling coalition may all be important to the effect of information provided by the bureaucracy.

Finally, future research may also want to expand the perspective outlined to other groups than the bureaucracy. If the bureaucracy is able to mold the preferences of politicians, so should other groups who are important information providers to politicians be. Further research can clarify the extent to which political preferences are equally amenable to influence by actors outside the bureaucracy by experimentally manipulating the provider of the information.

Our study also provides a set of interesting findings relevant to the field of political psychology. In light of the prominent proposition about negativity bias in much of the literature, we find it remarkable that positively framed information has a stronger influence than negatively framed information in two of the four countries in the equivalence framing study. Although we would be hesitant to compare findings directly across countries, this may suggest that the level of negativity bias to some extent is a culturally bound phenomenon. Thus, future research may want to develop comparable experiments across country borders to get at this question. Particularly promising seems to be experiments across, for instance, English-speaking countries to keep language constant. Likewise, it is interesting to note that source cues matter in a quite different way than expected, since such cues surprisingly sometimes matters for politicians who are ideologically unaligned with the sources and sometimes even more than for those whose ideological preferences are more in alignment with the ideological position of the sources. This finding calls for more research into how sources are understood and why adding a source matters under some conditions and not under others.
Literature
Blom-Hansen, Jens, Martin Baekgaard and Søren Serritzlew. 2015. ”Shaping Political Preferences: Information Effects in Political-Administrative Systems”, Local Government Studies, advance online access.


Tables and figures

Table 1: Data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>15 November 2016: Email invitation sent to all Danish city councilors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22 November and 29 November 2016: Reminders sent to city councilors who had not yet responded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 December 2016: Data collection closed with 1,038 respondents having answered some or all questions in our survey (corresponding to a response rate of 43.6 percent).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>22 November 2016: Email invitation sent to all Italian city councilors in cities with more than 10,000 citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29 November and 6 December 2016: Reminders sent to city councilors who had not yet responded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 December 2016: Data collection closed with 1,978 respondents having answered some or all questions in our survey (corresponding to a response rate of 13.1 percent).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>10 February 2017: Email invitation sent to all city councilors and members of OCMW councils in the Flanders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 February, 21 February, and 27 February 2017: Reminders sent to city councilors and OCMW councilors who had not yet responded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 March 2017: Data collection closed with 1,685 respondents having answered some or all questions in our survey (corresponding to a response rate of 18.7 percent).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>25 April 2017: Email invitation sent to a sample of 9,455 local politicians from multi purpose governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 3, May 11, and May 18: Reminders sent to local politicians who had not yet responded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DATE: Data collection closed with 946 respondents having answered our survey (corresponding to a response rate of 10.0 percent).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Research assistants were hired to administer data collection in collaboration with the authors. Data in Denmark and the USA was collected by Rasmus Jørgensen from Aarhus University. Data in Italy was collected by Alessandro Braga (Ph.d. in Public Accounting and Management). Data in Flanders was collected by Bert George (assistant professor at Erasmus University). Response rates are calculated based on the full sample of politicians minus invalid email addresses and addresses used in the pilot surveys.
Figure 1: “How often are you in contact with the following actors?”

Notes: Response categories: daily; 2-4 times a week; once a week; 1-3 times a month; more rarely/never. The columns indicate the percent of respondents indicating that they have been in contact daily or 2-4 times a week.
Figure 2: “On a scale from 0-10, how much do you rely on the following types of information (assuming that they are available) when you make decisions”

Notes: 0 = to a very low degree; 10 = to a very high degree. The columns indicate the average response for each source of information by country.
Figure 3: Decision board (mouse lab) evidence on information use

Note: The figure depicts the mean no. of milliseconds spent on each box in the decision board exercise divided by the no. of words in the box. 95% confidence intervals. Using medians instead of means yields a similar picture.
Figure 4: Decision board (mouse lab) evidence on information use

Note: The figure depicts the percentage of respondents for whom the box (the source) was opened as the first. 95 % confidence intervals.

Table 2: Experimental design of equivalence framing experiment (experiment 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive frame</th>
<th>Negative frame</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that a party in your local council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours where the municipality’s libraries will be manned by a librarian while, as a compensation, giving citizens 24 hour access to self-service at the libraries. Municipal career officials inform that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago, <strong>and that no less than 60 % of the citizens have here been satisfied with the change.</strong> To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that a party in your local council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours where the municipality’s libraries will be manned by a librarian while, as a compensation, giving citizens 24 hour access to self-service at the libraries. Municipal career officials inform that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago, <strong>and that no less than 40 % of the citizens have here been dissatisfied with the change.</strong> To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that a party in your local council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours where the municipality’s libraries will be manned by a librarian while, as a compensation, giving citizens 24 hour access to self-service at the libraries. Municipal career officials inform that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know
Figure 5: Results from equivalence framing experiment (experiment 1).

Note: Leftmost panel: The dependent variable runs from 1-5. Rightmost panel: The effects of treatments are calculated as compared to the control group. 95% confidence intervals.

Table 3: Experimental design of issue framing experiment (experiment 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive frame</th>
<th>Negative frame</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that your local council has asked municipal career officials to analyze possible ways of targeting the municipality’s public services in order to sharpen the municipality’s service profile compared to surrounding municipalities. The officials propose a political agreement with the title “Dignified old age offering users of the municipality’s elderly care an extra bath per week. This initiative would accommodate the most urgent concern among the users of the municipality’s elderly care. It is estimated that such an agreement will lead to a yearly cost-increase of [SUM OF MONEY CORRESPONDING TO APPROXIMATELY USD 225] per user and the civil servants point out that this should be financed via cut-backs on other services possibly leading to protests among users of these services. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that your local council has asked municipal career officials to analyze possible ways of targeting the municipality’s public services in order to sharpen the municipality’s service profile compared to surrounding municipalities. The officials propose a political agreement offering users of the municipality’s elderly care an extra bath per week. It is estimated that such an agreement will lead to a yearly cost-increase of [SUM OF MONEY CORRESPONDING TO APPROXIMATELY USD 225] per user. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that your local council has asked municipal career officials to analyze possible ways of targeting the municipality’s public services in order to sharpen the municipality’s service profile compared to surrounding municipalities. The officials propose a political agreement offering users of the municipality’s elderly care an extra bath per week. It is estimated that such an agreement will lead to a yearly cost-increase of [SUM OF MONEY CORRESPONDING TO APPROXIMATELY USD 225] per user. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know
Figure 6: Results from issue framing experiment (experiment 2).

Notes: Leftmost panel: The dependent variable runs from 1-5. Rightmost panel: The effects of treatments are calculated as compared to the control group. 95% confidence intervals.
### Table 4: Experimental design of source cue experiment (experiment 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocate is a right-wing think tank</th>
<th>Advocate is a left-wing think tank</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that career officials in your municipality make a proposal that a larger share of the municipality’s technical services should be contracted out. <strong>The officials explain that an analysis from [RIGHT-WING THINK TANK]</strong>(^1) has shown that contracting out of technical services has a positive effect on the economic situation of municipalities. Would you agree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that career officials in your municipality make a proposal that a larger share of the municipality’s technical services should be contracted out. <strong>The officials explain that an analysis from [LEFT-WING THINK TANK]</strong>(^2) has shown that contracting out of technical services has a positive effect on the economic situation of municipalities. Would you agree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that career officials in your municipality make a proposal that a larger share of the municipality’s technical services should be contracted out. Would you agree with this proposal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know. \(^1\): The right-wing think tank was CEPOS in Denmark, denktank Liberales in Flanders, Fondazione Farefuturo in Italy, and the Heritage Foundation in the USA. \(^2\): The left-wing think tank was Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd in Denmark, denktank Itinera in Flanders, Fondazione Italianieuropei in Italy, and Center for American Progress in the USA.
Figure 7: Results from source cue experiment (experiment 3).

Notes: Marginal effects of right-wing think tank source cue (rightmost panel) and left-wing think tank source cue (leftmost panel) on agreeing with the proposal. Calculations based on regressions reported in Table 5.
### Table 5: Results from experiment 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>FL</th>
<th>FL</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing think tank</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.408</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.446</td>
<td>0.124</td>
<td>-1.489</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.152)</td>
<td>(0.447)</td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
<td>(0.325)</td>
<td>(0.113)**</td>
<td>(0.320)</td>
<td>(0.167)</td>
<td>(0.530)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-wing think tank</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>1.071</td>
<td>0.184</td>
<td>0.257</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.198</td>
<td>-0.890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.145)</td>
<td>(0.448)*</td>
<td>(0.107)+</td>
<td>(0.316)</td>
<td>(0.114)**</td>
<td>(0.325)</td>
<td>(0.161)</td>
<td>(0.546)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (degree of being right-wing)</td>
<td>1.306</td>
<td>0.586</td>
<td>0.0010</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.112)**</td>
<td>(0.072)**</td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td>(0.123)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing think tank X</td>
<td>-0.166</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.552</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
<td>(0.102)</td>
<td>(0.132)</td>
<td>(0.166)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-wing think tank X</td>
<td>-0.248</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>0.254</td>
<td>0.376</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>(0.145)+</td>
<td>(0.097)</td>
<td>(0.132)+</td>
<td>(0.169)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pseudo R²                      | 0.00 | 0.15 | 0.00 | 0.05 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.03 |
N                                | 885 | 835 | 1,672 | 1,561 | 1,531 | 1,203 | 719 | 660 |

**: p< 0.01; *: p< 0.05; +: p<0.10; entries are ordered logit coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses. Ideology is measured on a self-reported five point scale (placed at the end of the survey) running from 1 (most left-wing) to 5 (most right-wing).
Appendix

1. Testing statistical significance of findings in experiment 1 and 2

Table A1: Ordered logit regression of experiment 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>FL</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive frame</td>
<td>0.104 (0.150) **</td>
<td>0.294 (0.106)**</td>
<td>0.823 (0.116)**</td>
<td>0.188 (0.171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative frame</td>
<td>-0.617 (0.154)**</td>
<td>-0.066 (0.113)</td>
<td>-0.432 (0.116)**</td>
<td>-0.844 (0.169)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>1683</td>
<td>1538</td>
<td>738</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**: p< 0.01; *: p< 0.05; +: p<0.10; entries are ordered logit coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table A2: Ordered logit regression of experiment 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DK</th>
<th>FL</th>
<th>IT</th>
<th>US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive frame</td>
<td>0.266 (0.157)+</td>
<td>0.300 (0.114)**</td>
<td>0.672 (0.117)**</td>
<td>0.219 (0.175)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative frame</td>
<td>-0.632 (0.150)**</td>
<td>-0.810 (0.110)**</td>
<td>-0.634 (0.116)**</td>
<td>-1.539 (0.178)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>1626</td>
<td>1492</td>
<td>728</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**: p< 0.01; *: p< 0.05; +: p<0.10; entries are ordered logit coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses.
2. US versions of experimental questions

Table A3: US version of equivalence framing experiment (experiment 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive frame</th>
<th>Negative frame</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that a member of your city council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours during which the municipal police stations are open for walk-ins and to compensate by increasing the hours open for scheduled appointments. Top administrative staff inform you that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago and that 60% of their citizens have been satisfied with the change. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that a member of your city council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours during which the municipal police stations are open for walk-ins and to compensate by increasing the hours open for scheduled appointments. Top administrative staff inform you that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago, and that 40% of their citizens have been dissatisfied with the change. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that a member of your city council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours during which the municipal police stations are open for walk-ins and to compensate by increasing the hours open for scheduled appointments. Top administrative staff inform you that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know
Table A4: US version of issue framing experiment (experiment 2)

| Positive frame                                                                 | Negative frame                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Control group                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Imagine that your city council has asked top administrative staff to analyze possible ways to improve your municipality’s services relative to neighboring municipalities. **The proposal has the title “Attracting new citizens” and is to renew and renovate the public parks. This initiative will improve access to green areas for current citizens and make the municipality more attractive to newcomers.** They estimate that such a proposal will lead to a 5% increase in total annual spending on public parks. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal? | Imagine that your city council has asked top administrative staff to analyze possible ways to improve your municipality’s services relative to neighboring municipalities. The proposal is to renew and renovate the public parks. They estimate that such a proposal will lead to a 5% increase in total annual spending on public parks and they point out that this should be financed via cut backs elsewhere in the budget. This may lead to protests from users of other services. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal? | Imagine that your city council has asked top administrative staff to analyze possible ways to improve your municipality’s services relative to neighboring municipalities. The proposal is to renew and renovate the public parks. They estimate that such a proposal will lead to a 5% increase in total annual spending on public parks. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal? |

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know

Table A5: US version of source cue experiment (experiment 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocate is a right-wing (conservative) think tank</th>
<th>Advocate is a left-wing (liberal) think tank</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that top administrative staff in your municipality propose that the municipality should outsource more of its technical services (such as for example water, sewer, and road maintenance). <strong>They explain that an analysis from the Heritage Foundation has shown that outsourcing technical services has a positive effect on the economic situation of municipalities.</strong> Would you agree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that top administrative staff in your municipality propose that the municipality should outsource more of its technical services (such as for example water, sewer, and road maintenance). <strong>They explain that an analysis from Center for American Progress has shown that outsourcing technical services has a positive effect on the economic situation of municipalities.</strong> Would you agree with this proposal?</td>
<td>Imagine that top administrative staff in your municipality propose that the municipality should outsource more of its technical services (such as for example water, sewer, and road maintenance). Would you agree with this proposal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters.
3. Display of qualitative statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framing and manipulation of information</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Flanders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The administration gave a wrong explanation of calculations which meant that we [the politicians] were misled to believe that a huge increase in user fees in day cares was in accordance with existing rules. Later on, it was revealed that a different calculation method was used than usual which was the very cause of the increase in fees”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The administration was asked to list advantages and disadvantages for introducing independent [selvejende] day care institutions. They couldn’t really see any advantages - only disadvantages for the municipality. This is because they do not take the perspective of citizens but focus on power and administrative advantages”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Calculations can be made to fit a certain agenda. Four years ago, a citizen service center was closed due to high expenditures. Now it has been reintroduced by the administration based on the argument that it is cost neutral”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Most times, it is an attempt to shrink the room for political</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Maximizing the negatives of a given policy proposal”</td>
<td>“One official approved a convention, even if politicians highlighted that it had negative issues. The official presented just the positive perspectives of the convention”</td>
<td>“Data presented was skewed to favor a predetermined result, and was based on unreasonable, impractical assumptions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mentioning issues of a proposal which are not really issues”</td>
<td>“Sometimes officials obstruct consultancy proposals or they follow the guidelines and not the ones from other assessors”</td>
<td>“Offering crime data that seemed to be cherry picked to justify an increase in police funding, when FBI crime data contradicted the assertion.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Misuse of an advisory committee for a cultural centre to steer the decision of the college”</td>
<td>“Officials tend to influence political decisions by reporting pseudo-technical facts”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Blowing up the budgets to ensure that politicians think the projects are too expensive”</td>
<td>“Sometimes the administration highlight expenditures rather than other aspects”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Presenting the financial situation more poorly than it actually is”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Some numbers were presented as being more positive than they were in reality”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A6. Display containing qualitative statements
decisions. (…) For instance, they [the administration] do so by not informing the political committee and hence they deprive the committee from taking political action (…) another way to shrink the room for political decisions is to refer to laws and technical details”

| Withholding relevant information and/or including irrelevant information | “It sometimes happens that we are presented with material in support of a given agenda and not material in opposition to this agenda. It is difficult to assess whether this is intentional or the material has just been forgotten.”

"Changing the suggestion of agenda point for the city council from public personnel (decentral administration). This entails withholding information from people with potentially important knowledge of the substance and is completely legal”

| “Not providing a full dossier of an environmental issue even though we [the politicians] knew that much more information was available”

“During a submission of a tender concerning infrastructure, an outdated dossier was submitted. Nonetheless the dossier was brought forward to the city council and approved to start the tender”

| “Just some information was communicated, in order to direct one particular proposal. Discussion was limited because of the difference in technical knowledge between officials and politicians”

| “Officials claim that some technical and procedural obstacles hinder any attempt to implement a better service to citizens”

| “Because we were not given the full impact, we magpie a decision that was recommended which we would probably not have made if we had full disclosure.”

“City Administrator withheld pertinent documents to influence council to enter a conservation easement”

“Former City Manager in 2005 was withholding significant information from the Council and the general public on important issues relating to a major city expenditure. We were considering in an election whether to
issue $36M in debt to build an events center, and the City Manager received a letter from the project architect telling him that the budget was too small and the center could not be built without additional funding. He never revealed that, and the voters approved the proposition. Several months after the election, the truth came out and the Council had to kill the project.”

“In February the City Council gave clear direction that no future public housing contracts were to be brought forth without meeting certain conditions. Those conditions were not met, were completely ignored by staff and another public housing contract was
| Partial administration in support of the political majority | “The administration withholding relevant information for the minority in the city council” | “Trying to avoid that necessary and relevant information is provided to the opposition”  
“We are an opposition party. It is not always clear to me whether the manager withholds information by himself or the majority wants him” | “We discussed an issue in the local council. 10 days later, we found that the councilmen of the minority had been kept in ignorance of the existence of a letter that could have influenced the political decision” | “A senior official actively promoted her social agenda and also left policy initiatives of the republican elected officials off the agenda as much as she could. She left over a year ago and now we see…” |
| Postponing/delaying information | "One example: My group made a proposal that if 100 vote eligible citizens support a given proposal they can require that the city council discuss and vote about the proposal. It did not enter the agenda on the city council meeting in October due to vacation among the administrative personnel (it should be noted that the proposal was completely ready for the city council to discuss and was delivered 14 days in advance of the city council meeting). Now, the administration has looked at the proposal and they in their comments warn that it is going to cost a lot of administrative hours if our proposal is accepted…” | “Withholding important information on a construction dossier that needed approval as soon as possible”  
“Provision of information of a steering group very late and then demanding a fast political decision” | “In our complex society the public official does not need to ’play against’ but just ’not to play’ or ’play with delay’ in order to create damage”  
“Officials hide some information to politicians and they try to take certain decisions without consulting with the politicians. They basically try to lead the municipality according to their personal political opinions. When officials are in contrast with politicians' decisions, they bring elements to the discussion in order to divert the political choices”  
“Officials give us data and acts at the same time they need to be approved. We can only say 'yes', even if we have no time nor elements for a discussion.” | “Mayor (who is CEO) withheld School Impact Fee increase withheld from agenda until after a favored developer could "grandfather" existing lower fees.” |
to withhold information”

none of that. Her biggest offense was hiding a mandated low income housing project off until the last minute and then informed officials we had to act 3 days before a deadline all the while had her project for the housing in a wealthy neighborhood ready to go and presented it as the only option given the time constraints.”

| # of responses to qualitative question/ Number of respondents who have experienced that the administration sought political influence within the last half year/ number of respondents total | 161/516/875 | 346/891/1,686 | 293/807/1,477 | 192/265/759 |

Notes: The table contains examples of four themes which in the qualitative statements emerged as important across all four countries. The table is neither an exhaustive list of all themes raised about how the bureaucracy influences political decisions, nor is it containing all statements in support of the four themes. Priority has been given to presenting themes relevant to the topic of the paper (that is, with a focus on how information is provided), to themes that emerged as important in all countries, and to illustrative statements.