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Beyond the WEIRD World: linking Bureaucracy and Democracy in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

Calls to make public administration research more relevant beyond the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD)[1] world are frequent, but neglect a perennial yet timely topic: the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy. This even though public administration theorists have long argued that democratic principles and practices are at the core of modern bureaucracies. This article aims to lay a foundation for addressing this deficit. It first synthesizes the many ways in which the bureaucracy-democracy nexus has been discussed in the "Western"-centric public administration literature at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels and identifies a set of core assumptions. Then, drawing on literature on and from the Global South, it discusses the applicability of these assumptions outside the WEIRD world, suggests possible modifications, and outlines a set of research questions that can advance our understanding of the democracy-bureaucracy nexus in developing and developed countries alike.

Key words: public administration theory; democracy; bureaucracy; developing countries; administrative ethics.

Introduction

What is and what should be the relationship between bureaucracy and democracy is a perennial question in public administration. This question is particularly acute today, given the worldwide rise of populism and resurgence of autocracy, which threaten to reverse decades of democratic and development progress. Responding to the global democratic rollback speaks to the core of what public administration research should do: study pathways to strengthen administrative systems in ways that are compatible with democratic values—not only in "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD)"[2] countries but everywhere.

Yet, both calls for more scholarly engagement with issues pertinent to developing countries (Beagles, Schnell, and Gerard 2019; Bertelli et al. 2020; Gulrajani and Moloney 2012) and critiques of unreflective and inadequate generalization of findings from the "WEIRD" world have focused primarily on managerial practices and reforms (Schick 1998; van der Wal, van den Berg, and Haque 2021). The transferability of democratic principles and practices in public administration has not been discussed (Moloney 2007; Nisar 2023).

To address this shortfall in our field's work, we must follow calls from decolonial and postcolonial public administration scholars to develop a truly global science of public administration, by (1) questioning how administrative theories, concepts, and findings from the "West" are applicable outside of it, (2) asking questions that are more directly relevant to non-WEIRD countries, and (3) drawing more on research on and from the Global South (Eiró and Lotta 2024; Moloney et al. 2023; Nisar 2023).

This article aims to seeks to advance such an endeavor by focusing on a hitherto neglected topic: the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy. To this end, it first reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy from the "North," where this subject has been amply debated, and identifies key assumptions about how bureaucracy can strengthen democracy at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. It then investigates how well these assumptions travel outside the WEIRD world, drawing on literature on and from the Global South, and identifies a set of further research questions.

The study concludes that a core problem of the WEIRD public administration literature is that it takes the democratic supra-structure in which bureaucracy is embedded for granted. This is especially problematic when political principals actively undermine democratic values and institutions—a scenario that is increasingly common in WEIRD countries too. Thus, more research on the democracy-bureaucracy nexus outside the WEIRD world is necessary not only to make the discipline more globally inclusive, but also to develop more robust theories about when and how bureaucracy can strengthen democracy—in the "North" and "South" alike.

[1] The term has been used to criticize overreliance of research in psychology on subjects from such countries (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010).
[2] Non-WEIRD countries, developing countries, and Global South are intentionally used interchangeably in this paper, as are WEIRD countries, the "North," and the "West." All of these terms are by default imprecise, but all signal/reflect an issue that has been repeatedly criticized: the overreliance of public administration research on a restricted set of countries, mostly in North America and Western Europe.

The many bureaucracy-democracy nexuses

Democracy is a perennially contested concept (Coppedge et al. 2011). At one end of the continuum are minimalist definitions which consider contestation of power and regular elections as sufficient (electoral democracy) (Coppedge et al. 2011). At the other end are participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy, which emphasize substantive participation of citizens across a broader range of public institutions and decisions (Coppedge et al. 2011; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2010; Morçöl, Shafi, and Menon 2022). Most interpretations of democracy see it as a system of governance that requires not only elections and representative assemblies, but also the separation of powers, civil and political rights, and equality before the law (Coppedge et al. 2011; Morçöl, Shafi, and Menon 2022). These different interpretations stem in part from the fact that, *before* being a set of institutions, democracy is an *idea*: the idea that citizens are "owners" of the state rather than its subjects. This idea is associated with values such as equality, inclusion, and respect for human rights. How to best fulfill these values remains a matter of debate. As Waldo (1952, p. 82, emphasis added) puts it:

> *the central meaning of democracy […] [lies] in an ethic, a set of values*. Certainly a good case can be made that the triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity furnish, both historically and logically, most of the "real" content of democracy; and that without these concepts representative assemblies, civil rights, universal suffrage, independent judiciaries, and the whole paraphernalia of contemporary democracy are meaningless.

Following Waldo (1952), this study embraces a broad interpretation of democracy, which starts with democratic values, but also considers the institutions and practices commonly associated with these values. Such a broad view allows us to identify multiple ways in which public administration scholars have conceptualized the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy at different levels of analysis (Gofen, Sella, and Gassner 2019; Jilke et al. 2019). These levels of analysis include (1) the macro-level, where democratic and bureaucratic institutions are part of broader systems of governance, (2) the meso-level, where organizational forms and management techniques can include democratic elements in addition to bureaucratic ones, and (3) the micro-level, where individual public servants need to reconcile both a bureaucratic and a democratic ethos.

The Macro-Level: The Bureaucracy as an Institution in a Democratic System

Implicitly, early theorists of public administration on both sides of the Atlantic focused on the *macro-systemic, institutional level* and embraced a rather minimalist, electoral view of democracy. Within this framework, they posited an ambiguous relationship between democracy and bureaucracy. On the one hand, they saw bureaucracy, "characterized by rationality, hierarchy, division of labor and specialization of function, professionalism, and so forth" (Waldo 1952, 100), as the ideal and most efficient organizational form for a modern state (Goodnow 2017; Weber 1964; Wilson 1955). It stood in contrast to patrimonial and clientelist modes of organizing and governing, such as the spoils system in the United States and the feudalistic/patrimonial systems of governance in Europe before industrialization and modernization. Their argument was that, to function effectively, democratic governments needed professional administrators, that is, a bureaucracy insulated from "partisan politics and patronage" (Rosenbloom 2008, 57) and staffed by a dedicated cadre of specialists recruited on merit (Goodnow 2017; Waldo 1952). The main task of these professional bureaucrats was the neutral implementation of the law, "without sympathy or enthusiasm" (Thompson 2007). Hence, the foundational politics-administration dichotomy, where the ideal public administration was apolitical and value-free (Wilson 1955).

On the other hand, many early theorists also feared that the highly trained cadre of specialists staffing the bureaucracy would accrue too much power, which could weaken the ability of democratically elected representatives to rule "in the name of the people" (Goodnow 2017; Weber 1964; Wilson 1955). Precisely because they concentrate expertise and procedural knowledge, the fear is that bureaucrats can become difficult to control, pursue their own interests, and shape policy implementation in ways not intended by their political principals. Thus, an enduring concern since the beginning of the field is how to ensure upward accountability of bureaucrats to democratically elected political principals. The hierarchical organization of offices, coupled with an elaborate system of rules and internal and external bureaucratic accountability mechanisms, was supposed to address this concern (Finer 1941).

However, more recent public administration scholarship has pointed out that even at the macro-institutional level, a professional, rule-bound, and politically neutral (i.e., nonpartisan) bureaucracy has a broader range of democratic functions than just neutral policy implementation (Cook 1992; Olsen 2006; Yesilkagit et al. 2024). One line of argument highlights that the merit principle and the principle of (partisan) neutrality themselves embody fundamental democratic principles such as equal access to public sector employment and equality before the law (Heath 2020). A second one argues that the benefits of neutral bureaucratic expertise do not lie only in increasing efficiency of policy implementation, but also in ensuring that policies are based on objective assessments of costs and benefits for the citizenry as a whole rather than particularized benefits for favored groups (du Gay 2000; Heath 2020; Rockman 2019). A third line of argument emphasizes that the continuity and stability of bureaucratic institutions also increase predictability and regularity of public action over time, thus reducing instability and arbitrariness of public action, especially in highly polarized environments and uncertain political times (Gajduschek 2003; Rockman 2019; Rohr 1986). In other words, a strong bureaucracy is "a constitutive part of liberal democracy" (Yesilkagit et al. 2024, 415) and a crucial element of democratic checks and balances (Cook 1992; du Gay 2000; Heath 2020; Meier et al. 2019).

In sum, reducing the democratic contribution of bureaucracy to increasing government efficiency and effectiveness, and positing that top-down political control is a sufficient condition to "reconcile" bureaucracy and democracy, does not fully account for the complexity of the democracy-bureaucracy nexus. At the macro-level, it neglects other democracy-enhancing functions of a professionalized and depoliticized bureaucracy. At the meso-level, it ignores that democratic principles and practices can be embedded in public organizations in a variety of

other ways, beyond top-down control. And it does not account for the complex ethical commitments of bureaucrats, that is, for possible tensions between the bureaucratic and the democratic ethos at the micro-level.

The Meso-Level: Democratic Organizational Practices

At the *meso-level*, early public administration theorists considered bureaucracy "'technically superior' to all other forms of social organization" (Morçöl, Shafi, and Menon 2022, 90) not only because of its rational-legal foundations but also because the organizational principles and practices associated with it—standardization, hierarchy, and centralization—were in line with prevailing management theories of the time, most notably scientific management (Waldo 1952). As Waldo (1952, 75) put it, "'Autocracy' at work is the price for "democracy" after hours." This, even though the view that more "democratic," that is, more participatory, collaborative, and egalitarian, modes of organizing are less efficient has been challenged already early on, for example by Follett (1998).

More recent meso-level challenges to the classic paradigm are at least three-fold. First, one claim is that hierarchical top-down and directive management techniques are not (always) the best for increasing staff and organizational performance. Indeed, more participatory and flexible management practices that emphasize horizontal collaboration and bottom-up participation, such as employee engagement or agile management, have been shown to be effective in increasing staff motivation and productivity, for example by enhancing employee autonomy and public sector motivation (PSM) (Deleon and Deleon 2002; Honig 2021; Mergel, Ganapati, and Whitford 2021; Perry 2020; Schnell and Gerard 2023).

Second, that top-down implementation through public bureaucracies is not (always) the best mode of delivering public services and creating public value. The public administration paradigm in the "West" has shifted from "old public administration" (OPA) and "new public management" (NPM) toward "new public governance" (NPG) (Osborne 2006, 2010), where policy is made and implemented through horizontal networks that involve multiple state and nonstate actors (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh 2012; Morçöl, Shafi, and Menon 2022). While not all governance is done in and through networks, the emphasis on horizontal coordination rather than hierarchical implementation creates additional room for incorporating democratic practices more directly into the works of public bureaucracies.

"New," more "democratic" modes of governance include a broad array of mechanisms, such as collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh 2012), participatory governance (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015), cocreation (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019), and coproduction of public services (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016). While terminology and focus vary, all of these reflect more expansive views of democracy, which consider the involvement of citizens in a broader set of government activities, beyond elections, as essential for the quality and robustness of democracy (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2021; Nabatchi 2010; Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). The options for citizen engagement are manifold—from coproduction of public services to deliberative forums to participatory budgeting, to name just a few (Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary 2005; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2010; Nabatchi 2010; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017; Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). While the ability of participatory practices to enhance democracy depends on various design factors, such as inclusiveness and opportunities for "thick" participation, when successful, they can act as supplementary democratic institutions, addressing some of the limitations of electoral representation and enhancing the legitimacy of the democratic system as a whole (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015; Warren 2009).

Third, other scholars have questioned the "the myth of bureaucratic neutrality," that is, the form in which and the degree to which modern bureaucracies really reflect meritocratic principles and fulfill other important democratic values, such as social equity (Guy and McCandless 2012; Gooden 2015; Portillo, Humphrey, and Bearfield 2022). The argument is that in societies characterized by historically high levels of inequality and discrimination, "neutrality" and "merit" in hiring and promotion do not ensure equal access to public employment and equality of opportunity. Rather, they reinforce existing inequalities, favoring those who already have social and institutional advantages. Organizationally, the response to this has been representative bureaucracy, which advocates for special efforts to include underrepresented and/or marginalized groups in the public administration (Groeneveld and Van de Walle 2010; Riccucci and Van Ryzin 2017; Meier 1975).

Advocates of representative bureaucracy argue that it contributes to strengthening democracy in at least two ways. First, as a key institution in a democratic state, the bureaucracy should be representative of the people it serves (Kingsley 2016; Mosher 1982). Second, the expectation is that civil servants from marginalized groups will also actively represent the interests of the communities they belong to, thus counteracting to some degree broader societal inequities and their influence on bureaucratic decision-making and behavior (Bradbury and Kellough 2011; Mosher 1982). This expectation, which empirical studies have borne out under some circumstances (Headley and Wright 2020; Meier and O'Toole 2006; Sowa and Selden 2003; Wilkins 2006), directly challenges a fundamental tenet of classic public administration literature: that bureaucrats are merely "neutral implementers" of laws and policies made by political principals. Rather, bureaucrats inevitably have (some) discretion (Lipsky 2010; Hupe and Hill 2007), which has critical implications for administrative ethics.

The Micro-Level: Democratic Administrative Ethics

If bureaucrats inevitably have discretion, then the principles and values that should guide *individual behavior at the micro-level* become particularly important (Bertelli 2021; Meier and O'Toole 2006; Rohr 2017; Heath 2020). Public administration scholars from the "North" have long argued that public servants need to (also) embrace a democratic ethos rather than a purely bureaucratic or managerial one, and that democratic values should be part and parcel of professional norms and codes of conduct in public bureaucracies (Cooper 1991; Nabatchi, Goerdel, and Peffer 2011; Woller 1998). A democratic ethos suggests that the primary duty of public administrations is to serve "the greater good" or the "public interest" rather than just be subservient to authority, as the classic bureaucratic paradigm implies (Balfour, Adams, and Nickels 2019; Cooper 1987; Rohr 1986, 2017). The Weberian "ethics of rules and impartiality" (Engster 2020, 628) needs to be complemented by an "ethics of care" (Engster 2020; Stensöta 2010) or a "relational ethics"

(Althaus 2022), which put empathy and human well-being at their core (O'Flynn 2025).

A democratic and a bureaucratic ethos are not necessarily incompatible. Public servants inevitably navigate conflicting values in their everyday work (Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Heath 2020). These conflicting pressures are particularly pronounced for street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), who have to reconcile a universalistic rule-based logic with the needs of individual clients, all while balancing competing demands for accountability (Hupe and Hill 2007; Lipsky 2010; Thomann, Maxia, and Ege 2023). However, value conflicts for any public servants are the most challenging when they pit obedience to authority, a key bureaucratic value, against fundamental democratic principles and norms (Balfour, Adams, and Nickels 2019; Cooper 2012). In extremis, prioritizing the former over the latter can lead to bureaucrats wittingly or unwittingly perpetrating "administrative evil" (Balfour, Adams, and Nickels 2019).

There are a few solutions to this dilemma. "Guerrilla government," where public administrators engage with the public directly and seek to influence policy against the wishes of their political principals in the name of the public interest, leaves unresolved the question of who the ultimate, "objective," arbiter of the public interest should be (O'Leary 2019). Positing a duty of bureaucrats to uphold political or "regime values" (Bertelli 2021; Bertelli and Schwartz 2023; Rohr 2017) offers only a partial solution since such values are also subject to interpretation when applied to specific cases. It also does not answer the question of what ethical duties bureaucrats have when elected leaders themselves undermine democratic values (Yesilkagit 2021), and what role individual moral awareness and respect for human dignity, as opposed to procedural compliance, should play under such circumstances (Balfour, Adams, and Nickels 2019).

Summary: The Many Democracy-Bureaucracy Nexuses

In sum, classic theories about the role of bureaucracy in sustaining democracy argued that a merit-based, rational-legal bureaucracy is essential for efficient policy implementation, and that the compatibility between democracy and bureaucracy is achieved through formal accountability and top-down control mechanisms that ensure upward responsiveness of otherwise politically neutral bureaucrats to political principals. Hence, the classic "politics-administration" dichotomy. However, since then, most PA scholarship has gone beyond the dichotomy and argued that bureaucracy can incorporate democratic values and strengthen democracy in a variety of ways:

- At the *systemic-institutional* level (macro), bureaucracy supports democracy not just by efficiently implementing the will of elected officials but also by embodying fundamental democratic principles, such as equality of opportunity, and contributing to the rule of law, the public interest, and democratic stability.
- At the *organizational* level (meso), bureaucracies can enhance democracy by incorporating democratic principles and values in their work through a myriad of policies and practices, such as participatory governance, representative bureaucracy, and "new," less hierarchical, and more empowering management practices.
- At the *individual* level (micro), democratic values can and should be a cornerstone of administrative ethics and guide the behavior of public servants.

Table 1 summarizes the key assumptions from the "Western" literature about how bureaucracy can contribute to strengthening democracy at the macro-, meso-, and micro-level. The next section uses them as a framework to explore emerging insights about bureaucracy and democracy beyond the WEIRD world and suggest some avenues for further research.

Paths forward: studying democracy and bureaucracy in developing countries

The assumptions identified above have been developed based on the historical experience and intellectual tradition of the "Western" world. Without further investigation they carry the risk of simplistic generalizations: presuming either that every aspect of administrative theory from the "West" is generalizable to the Global South or that nothing is. Moving beyond such binaries and contextualizing these assumptions requires asking how the bureaucracy (i.e., the public administration) can contribute to strengthening democratic institutions,

Table 1. Democracy and bureaucracy in WEIRD public administration literature.

Interpretation of democracy	Implications for bureaucracy
Systemic-institutional (macro): democracy as a system of governance	A professionalized (rational-legal, meritocratic, and depoliticized) bureaucracy is the most efficient form of public organization in a democracy. Compatibility between bureaucracy and democracy is ensured through the hierarchical organization of offices, internal controls, and upward responsiveness to elected officials. Neutral expertise, meritocracy, and legality/due process reduce arbitrariness in decision-making and are key democratic principles in their own right. A meritocratic and depoliticized bureaucracy functions as a stabilizing force in a democracy/as part of checks and balances.
Organizational (meso): democratic modes of organizing and managing public organizations	Democratic management practices such as employee engagement enhance motivation and performance. Participation, collaborative governance, co-production, co-creation, strengthen democracy by enabling citizen involvement beyond elections. Representative bureaucracy reflects democratic principles and can improve equity, inclusion, and legitimacy.
Individual (micro): democratic values and principles as a guide for behavior	Bureaucrats should balance the bureaucratic and the democratic ethos in their work A democratic ethics of dissent, if it exists, should be rooted in constitutional regime values.

WEIRD, Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic.

practices, norms, and values in contexts where these are insufficiently institutionalized or under threat. In other words, what happens when the "D" of the WEIRD acronym is weak or missing?[3]

To begin addressing this question, this section investigates what empirical research on and from the Global South tells us about the applicability of the assumptions identified above to non-WEIRD countries and what the blind spots of the current "Western" paradigm are. Based on this, it suggests questions for further research. The questions are not necessarily exhaustive but offer a starting point for expanding our understanding of democratic public administration in countries where democracy is absent, weak, or under threat—developing and developed ones alike.

Macro-Level: Strong Bureaucracy, Strong Democracy

Cross-national empirical evidence supports early theoretical arguments that bureaucracy is the most efficient form of organization in modern states. The degree of meritocracy and impartiality of the bureaucracy is one of the most robust predictors of several desirable governance outcomes, such as economic growth, poverty reduction, or lack of corruption (Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Dahlström, Lapuente, and Teorell 2012; Evans and Rauch 1999; Suzuki and Demircioglu 2019). An increasing body of research, discussed below, also highlights the importance of meritocratic, depoliticized bureaucracies for democratic stability. Yet, we know less about how such meritocratic and depoliticized bureaucracies emerge, and we lack a satisfactory answer about when upward responsiveness undermines rather than strengthens democracy.

Public administration literature on democratic backsliding increasingly emphasizes the importance of meritocratic, depoliticized bureaucracies as a potential countervailing power to autocratic encroachment—or as a possible enabler (Bouckaert et al. 2025; Guedes-Neto and Guy Peters 2021; Lotta et al. 2023; Peci 2021; Strobel and Veit 2021). Populist or "illiberal" leaders with autocratic tendencies seek to centralize power by (re)politicizing the bureaucracy, weakening civil service protections, stacking the administration with loyalists, and sidelining "uncomfortable" civil servants (Bauer et al. 2021; Dussauge-Laguna 2022; Hajnal 2021; Silva 2022). In extremis, autocratizing leaders succeed in turning the bureaucracy into an instrument of repression, especially if democratic norms are not deeply ingrained among bureaucrats (Strobel and Veit 2021). Where bureaucrats have, however, internalized a democratic ethos, protection from arbitrary dismissal and constraints on the discretion of political principals can create some space for "resistance" of civil servants to undemocratic mandates from above, at least in the short term (Bauer et al. 2021; Guedes-Neto and Guy Peters 2021; Lotta et al. 2023; Schuster et al. 2022). However, it remains unclear how effective such resistance can be in the long term in stemming autocratization (Bauer et al. 2021; Yesilkagit 2021).

Going beyond cases of democratic backsliding, the broader literature on clientelism and patronage also highlights a set of negative consequences of bureaucratic politicization for both bureaucratic performance and democratic stability. First, politicization raises the stakes of electoral defeat: when bureaucratic careers are tied to ruling parties or individuals, losing office entails loss of access to state resources and employment, thereby increasing incentives for incumbents to resort to extra-legal or authoritarian means to retain power (Andersen 2021; Cornell and Lapuente 2014). Second, even if clientelism and patronage can produce benefits for some marginalized groups under some circumstances (Bearfield 2009; Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2004), they still undermine administrative performance (Fuenzalida and Riccucci 2019; Story, Lotta, and Tavares 2023; Suzuki and Demircioglu 2019). Without well-performing bureaucracies, however, politicians cannot commit to delivering programmatic, broad-based public goods, thus having to resort (back) to using spoils to reward supporters (Keefer 2007). Thus, politicized bureaucracies can keep democracies trapped in a weak-bureaucracy-weak-democracy cycle in the long term (Carothers 2007; Dahlström and Lapuente 2017; Geddes 1996).

If meritocratic, professionalized, and depoliticized bureaucracies are essential for democracy, then the question of how such bureaucracies emerge becomes particularly important. The overreliance of public administration research on WEIRD countries means that much of what we know about the emergence of meritocratic and depoliticized bureaucracies is based on a small subset of historical cases in Western Europe and North America. This creates what Fukuyama calls "the problem of "getting to Denmark," where "we know what 'Denmark' looks like, and something about how the actual Denmark came to be historically," but not how transferable this knowledge is to other contexts (Fukuyama 2004, 30).

In WEIRD countries, civil service reforms advanced meritocracy, depoliticization, and professionalization by introducing legal requirements for merit-based hiring and protections against arbitrary dismissal of bureaucrats by politicians (Schuster 2017). However, on paper, most countries today already have such *de jure* meritocratic systems, that is, extensive legislation to ensure meritocracy and professionalization (Kopecký et al. 2016). Yet, in practice, politicians employ various strategies to circumvent these legal requirements (Grindle 2012; Kopecký et al. 2016; Langbein and Sanabria 2017; Schuster 2017). Indeed, research that looks beyond WEIRD cases suggests legal reform is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for bureaucratic professionalization (i.e., for meritocracy and depoliticization) (Geddes 1996; Grindle 2012; Schuster 2017). Rather, what matters are the broader political incentives and dynamics—which are themselves also shaped by the degree of bureaucratic professionalism and insulation from political influence (Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Schuster 2015).

The democratic dangers of politicized bureaucracies highlight a third, normative, question: how much and what kind of upwards political responsiveness of the bureaucracy is democratically desirable in different regime types. Clearly, in full autocracies, upwards political responsiveness means that bureaucracies are themselves instruments of oppression and repression. However, the answer seems more ambiguous in the case of clientelist and patronage-based systems. A clientelist and patronage-driven public administration *is* responsive to political power, and we could even argue that it represents the will of the people if political leaders came to power through reasonably free elections. However, it does not respect other democratic principles. For example, equality of opportunity is

[3] While in general, across countries, education, wealth, and level of democracy are highly correlated (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001), recent trends in democratic backsliding even in rich, presumably institutionalized, democracies show that neither wealth nor education nor 'modernity' are guarantees of democratic stability.

undermined because loyalists of the ruling elites have preferential access to public employment. Perhaps even more problematically, top-down control of the bureaucracy is not exercised through rules and procedures but through discretionary rewards for political loyalty, which often circumvent and undermine existing legislation. This weakens internal bureaucratic accountability mechanisms and undermines key democratic principles such as due process, impartiality, and legality.

Thus, upward responsiveness of bureaucrats to elected politicians, let al.ne unelected rulers, is not sufficient for ensuring that bureaucracy reinforces or strengthens democracy. Even Western scholars have increasingly started to recognize this conundrum (Bauer 2024; Yesilkagit et al. 2024). Scholars from developing countries have, however, long struggled with it (Nisar 2023), and some have looked for alternative ways to safeguard democratic principles and practices at the meso- and micro-level, even if broader, systemic (macro-level) conditions are less favorable. The next two sections highlight some insights and questions from this literature.

Meso-Level: Participation and Representation in Public Organizations

As noted in the first section of this study, many WEIRD scholars have argued that incorporating democratic principles and practices into public organizations is not only compatible with, but necessary in modern bureaucracies. However, these arguments typically presume a meritocratic and depoliticized bureaucracy and macro-level democratic institutions. As a result, tensions between competing principles and potential outcomes of these practices under less enabling macro-level conditions remain underexplored. Such possible tensions include trade-offs between democratic management practices and the need to depoliticize and professionalize the bureaucracy, the contribution of participatory approaches to democratic opening and socialization as opposed to legitimization of autocratic rule, and the conditions under which representative bureaucracy can compensate for existing social inequalities and contribute to democratic stability. In other words, at the organizational level, where most public administration research is focused, the key question for non-WEIRD countries is how public organizations can be managed in clientelist and/or autocratic systems to increase professionalism and performance, while also advancing democratic principles and social equity.

First, the evidence about the compatibility of democracy-enhancing managerial practices with the need to depoliticize the administration and strengthen meritocracy and professionalism is relatively limited and seemingly inconsistent. On the one hand, some studies show that introducing NPM-style reforms aimed at increasing managerial autonomy and replacing a focus on rules with a focus on results increases corruption in developing countries (Schick 1998; Schuster, Meyer-Sahling, and Mikkelsen 2020; Sundström 2019). This is because loosening internal controls and increasing managerial discretion in corrupt settings increases opportunities for collusion and nepotism (Sundström 2019). Hence, some authors argue that ensuring compliance with rules and strengthening the control-oriented elements of "Weberianism" should be the priority in developing countries (Schick 1998).

On the other hand, some experimental studies show that increasing autonomy for public employees leads to increased performance even in contexts characterized by patronage and clientelism (Bandiera et al. 2021; Rasul and Rogger 2018; Rasul, Rogger, and Williams 2021), especially if coupled with supportive management practices, high mission-salience, and high PSM (Honig 2024; Khan 2024). The challenge is, however, that we know relatively little about what broader macro-level factors encourage such supportive management practices and enable PSM (Schnell and Gerard 2023). In general, even though emerging comparative PSM research suggests that the degree of PSM varies depending on administrative history and other macro-level factors (Hassan and Ahmad 2021; Vandenabeele and Van de Walle 2008; van der Wal, Mussagulova, and Chen 2021), only 12 percent of comparative studies on PSM look at its antecedents, and none of them consider systemic institutional factors such as regime type, levels of corruption, or degree of professionalization of the bureaucracy (Mussagulova and Van Der Wal 2021).

Second, the use of participatory tools and mechanisms in autocratic and populist regimes can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, some authors show that even in autocratic countries, legal provisions mandating citizen consultation and participation can open the door to effective expression of voice from the bottom up (Distelhorst 2017; Gueorguiev 2021). On the other hand, autocratic and populist governments also use public participation and citizen consultation as legitimization and cooptation strategies (Batory and Svensson 2019; Gueorguiev 2021; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Schnell 2020). Such strategies are especially concerning when coupled with increased controls on freedom of expression and repression of independent, bottom-up collective action, as this can lead to autocratic consolidation rather than democratic opening (Batory and Svensson 2019; Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007; Schnell 2025). In such cases, it remains an open question when and whether participatory approaches contribute to democratic socialization as opposed to legitimization of autocratic rule and reinforcement of the existing power structure. This dilemma is not limited to autocratic countries. Even in established democracies, participatory initiatives risk being captured and becoming a form of tokenism or manipulation rather than genuine empowerment (Arnstein 1969; Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). However, such risks are even more pronounced in contexts of high corruption and high inequality, where elite capture is more frequent and democratic safeguards are weaker. Under such conditions, the effectiveness of participation in promoting inclusion and democratic socialization is even more uncertain (Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013; Mansuri and Rao 2012; Rigon 2014; Speer 2012; Veeraraghavan 2022).

Third, while evidence suggests that representative bureaucracy can increase organizational performance also outside the WEIRD world (Agyapong 2018; Fernandez, Koma, and Lee 2018), its goals, forms, and impacts depend on distinct colonial legacies, patterns of exclusion, and political dynamics (An, Song, and Meier 2022; Dhillon and Meier 2022; Groeneveld and Van de Walle 2010; Moloney et al. 2023). For example, representative bureaucracy can be used as a conflict-resolution and state-building tool in post-conflict states with high ethnic or religious fractionalization (Blum and Rogger 2021; Carroll and Carroll 1997; Dasandi and Esteve 2017; Groeneveld and Van de Walle 2010). Experience with representative bureaucracy in such fragile contexts, however, illustrates not only its potential but also some of its limitations.

First, "simple" representation along ethnic or other group-specific lines risks reifying and deepening ethnic identification (Brown 1999) and undermining the formation of a

shared national identity and common civil service ethos (Dasandi and Esteve 2017; Naff and Capers 2014). This is especially problematic in contexts with high levels of patronage and high political instability, where turnover of power can lead to wholesale replacement of civil servants along sectarian lines (Brown 1999; Blum and Rogger 2021). Thus, if dominant groups coopt representation for patronage purposes while marginalized groups continue to face barriers to influence and advancement, representative bureaucracy can reinforce rather than redress societal inequities and increase inter-group tensions (Dasandi and Esteve 2017; Moloney et al. 2023).

Second, using ethnicity, race, religion, or other group identifiers as a dominant criterion in civil service hiring and promotion risks undermining administrative capacity (Blum and Rogger 2021; Dauda 1990; Fernandez 2020). Indeed, successful examples suggest that for representative bureaucracy to support state-building and democratic stability it should be complemented by recruitment based on professional skills, targeted training for underrepresented groups, safeguards against politicization, and the cultivation of a shared public sector ethic (Blum and Rogger 2021; Carroll and Carroll 1997; Fernandez 2020; Groeneveld and Van de Walle 2010). Thus, representative bureaucracy is not democracy-, performance-, or equity-enhancing by default. Much depends on whether it reinforces or counteracts existing inequalities and inequities in society and contributes to the development of a capable bureaucracy and a shared, inclusive, administrative ethos.

Micro-Level: Global Democratic Administrative Ethics

A democratic administrative ethos requires, at a minimum, that bureaucrats respect human rights and treat people with dignity, fairness, and respect (Woller 1998). In other words, treat them as citizens rather than subjects. As noted, WEIRD public administration literature sees an inherent tension between a bureaucratic ethos of obedience to power and a democratic ethos of serving the broader public interest. This tension is, however, much more pronounced in systems where political principals are anti-democratic, and poses at least two particularly thorny questions: What (if anything) can bureaucrats do when political principals are "bad"? Where do democratic values come from in nondemocratic systems, and what ethical frameworks can bureaucrats draw on?

As noted, "Western" public administration theory has not found a satisfactory answer to the first question, not only because it is still built on the assumption that elected representatives adequately represent the "people," but also because democratic and administrative systems in the "West" have in-built checks on power that sometimes—though by no means always—protect citizens and bureaucrats and limit abusive behavior by the state. Where checks on power are missing and state-sanctioned abuses are the norm, classic bureaucratic values, such as obedience and "neutral" execution of political will, can conflict directly with democratic principles and respect for human rights. As Woller (1998, 99) puts it when discussing the ethics of the classic bureaucratic paradigm:

> Perhaps the most sobering, and certainly most widely noted, reminder of the dangers inherent in this ethical foundation is Nazi Germany, in which a morally numbed bureaucracy efficiently, obediently, and in a value-free manner participated in the attempt to exterminate an entire race of people.

In such systems, the moniker of bureaucratic neutrality—'without sympathy or enthusiasm' (Thompson, 2007)—can lead to bureaucrats committing egregious human rights abuses in the name of "duty" (Arendt 2006; Balfour, Adams, and Nickels 2019; Nisar 2023). Even the concept of regime values, that is, those that are constitutionally enshrined and (presumably) represent a broad societal consensus (Bertelli 2021; Rohr 2017; Wiersma Strauss 2021), is of little help in repressive regimes, since it can end up justifying discrimination and human rights abuses in the name of the dominant majority. Bureaucrats' own ethical commitments might well be the last line of defense in such systems (Bauer 2024).

Literature on and from the Global South illustrates various ways in which bureaucrats try to safeguard democratic values even under adverse conditions. First, as discussed earlier, literature on democratic backsliding explores how bureaucrats try to resist undemocratic mandates from above (Guedes-Neto and Guy Peters 2021; Lotta et al. 2023; Schuster et al. 2022). Resistance strategies include various combinations of exit, voice, and sabotage (Schuster et al. 2022), such as shirking, delaying implementation through procedural maneuvers, and invoking legal norms or documentation practices to protect programs and bureaucratic autonomy (Guedes-Neto and Guy Peters 2021; Lotta et al. 2023). They are motivated to do so by professional norms and forms of PSM that emphasize the duty to protect the broader public interest and democratic and constitutional values (Guedes-Neto and Guy Peters 2021; Schuster et al. 2022).

Second, literature on street-level bureaucrats from the "South" showcases that bureaucrats can enact democratic values not just by resisting or subverting undemocratic orders, but also by "repairing" the state from below. They can do so through work that "is collaborative, client-centered, and motivated by compassion and kindness" (Masood and Nisar 2022, 256). Such repair work includes improvising informal procedures when official ones break down and adapting service delivery to local norms and needs to meet citizens with dignity and care where formal systems and policies fail to do so (Eiró and Lotta 2024; Gofen, Lotta, and da Costa 2021; Masood and Nisar 2022; Peake and Forsyth 2022; Peeters and Campos 2023). While not couched explicitly in terms of safeguarding democratic values such examples of "moving toward clients" (Tummers et al. 2015) illustrate how in critical situations the ethics of care or relational ethics are not simply complements to the Weberian ethics of rules (Althaus 2022; Engster 2020; Stensöta 2010), but essential ingredients for a minimum of equity and access to public service. Such ethics are not dependent on formal regime values. Rather, they emerge from the bottom up, from social norms and relationships, and are embedded in practical judgments and everyday practices.

Even if such acts of democratic resistance or repair are rare, they do illustrate that some bureaucrats can reclaim agency and enact democratic values even in contexts of backsliding or in outright repressive regimes, drawing on multiple ethical frameworks—formal, informal, professional, and social. Indeed, if we relax the—paternalistic and dangerous—assumption that democratic principles, practices, and modes of decision-making are unique to the WEIRD world (Huntington 2008), we can see that they exist in many cultures, including in "traditional" societies (Mahdavi and Knight 2016; Sen 1998). For example, emperor Ashoka, who ruled almost the

entire Indian subcontinent in the third century BCE,[4] offers one of the earliest statements on the value of pluralism and the duty to protect minorities (Sen 1998). In North America, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy includes deliberative elements, checks on power, and a substantial role for women in decision-making, and is considered by some historians the "oldest living participatory democracy on earth" (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015, 49). Muslim scholars point to the principle of "shura," or consultation, as an Islamic democratic principle (Shavit 2010). Studies of "Western" vs. "Eastern" civil servants' values show minimal differences—differences overestimated by "Western" but not by "Eastern" respondents (van der Wal and Yang 2015). The Confucian view of bureaucracy includes democratic principles, such as deliberation among high-level officials and checks on the power of the ruler, and sees the bureaucracy itself as "a source of value, rather than simply a means to an end" (Frederickson 2002; Im, Campbell, and Cha 2013, 287).

More carefully engaging with such "nonWestern" democratic administrative principles can help identify common threads and shift the focus from overstating and reifying cultural differences towards bridging them and embracing a "dignity of difference" (Mahdavi and Knight 2016). Grounding administrative ethics better in universal values and "nonWestern" traditions can, in turn, contribute to developing more globally relevant normative theories about democracy and bureaucracy. These can be incorporated in curricula for the training of civil servants in ways that are both suited to the local context and reflective of democratic values. This way, administrative ethics could become a quieter way of "democratizing bureaucracy" everywhere (Bauer 2024; Yesilkagit 2021). As Nisar (2023, 6) puts it:

> In other words, our students should be able to answer a simple question for themselves: "Am I going to be contributing towards more efficient working of an autocratic or exclusionary or unjust system or am I going to work towards creating a better society and a just system of governance for everyone in my society?"

Discussion

In the WEIRD world, the politics-administration dichotomy has long been replaced by a more nuanced *and* more demanding view of bureaucracy as both a site of democratic governance and an essential democratic actor. In an ideal world, a professional, meritocratic, and democratic public administration is not just upwardly responsive to democratic political principals, it is also a guarantor of stability, due process, and equality before the law. It practices democracy both through and in interactions with citizens, and through other means such as collaborative governance, employee engagement, and bureaucratic representation. It is staffed by bureaucrats who embrace a democratic ethos, where serving citizens is as or even more important than serving political masters.

But we do not live in an ideal world. Democracy is under threat everywhere, including in what we assumed were established democracies of the WEIRD world. Established "Western" theories about the link between democracy and bureaucracy are increasingly insufficient for countering democratic backsliding (Bauer 2024). Engaging with the bureaucracy-democracy nexus outside the WEIRD is thus needed not only to answer calls for decolonial public administration (Eiró and Lotta 2023; Moloney et al. 2023; Nisar 2023), but to refine and enrich our theories about how bureaucracy can strengthen or undermine democracy in a world where "unprincipled principals" (Schuster et al. 2020) and fragile democratic institutions are increasingly common. Even from this necessarily constrained review of non-WEIRD literature, a few insights emerge.

First, at the systemic (macro) level, the non-WEIRD democracy-bureaucracy literature shows that professionalized, depoliticized, and meritocratic bureaucracies can function as democratic stabilizers—including in contexts of weakly consolidated democracies and democratic backsliding. As such, it lends additional credence to theoretical arguments that see the democratic value of the bureaucracy not (only) as an instrument of policy implementation, but as part of a broader system of checks and balances. However, the non-WEIRD literature also underscores that we do not yet know enough about how such professionalized bureaucracies emerge in current "world-time" – in part because of our excessive concentration on historical cases from the "Western" world. Relatedly, the literature also highlights that upward responsiveness of bureaucrats is not enough to ensure a democratic public administration in different regime types. At worst, upward responsiveness can lead to the bureaucracy becoming an instrument of repression in autocratic systems, or to undermining other democratic principles such as equality of opportunity and the rule of law in clientelist or patronage systems.

Second, at the meso-level, the non-WEIRD democracy-bureaucracy literature highlights tensions and trade-offs between democracy-enhancing organizational practices, such as increased autonomy for staff or representative bureaucracy, and the need to professionalize and depoliticize the bureaucracy. While tensions between different democratic principles are inherent in any understanding of democracy that goes beyond electoral minimalism, they are particularly pronounced in contexts with weak democratic institutions and deep social cleavages. For example, even in the "North," the democratic valence of participatory arrangements has been questioned given their lack of representativeness (Warren 2009). Their valence is even more problematic in autocratic or autocratizing regimes, if leaders use them to increase their legitimacy while undermining broader, foundational, democratic institutions. Similarly, bureaucratic representation along group-based lines can function as a state-building strategy but can also backfire, entrenching identity-based patronage and reducing organizational performance if not accompanied by efforts to ensure professionalism and build a shared administrative ethos. The insight here, however, is not that democracy-enhancing organizational practices are unsuitable outside the WEIRD world. Rather, the conclusion is that we need to expand our N and gather more evidence of how such initiatives function in different politico-administrative system, including by articulating more clearly the macro-meso linkage between different regime types and democratic and participatory organizational practices.

Third, at the micro-level, the most vexing question remains the one about the ethical duties of bureaucrats when political principals are "bad" and administrative systems reinforce

[4] Before the Common Era.

Table 2. Bureaucracy and democracy beyond the WEIRD world.

Interpretation of democracy	Key insights from non-WEIRD literature	Questions for further research
***Systemic-institutional (macro)*: democracy as a system of governance**	Meritocratic, depoliticized bureaucracies can contribute to democratic stability and make democratic backsliding more difficult. Legal provisions to ensure meritocracy and depoliticization are often circumvented through informal practices. Upward responsiveness can undermine democratic principles in clientelist and autocratic systems.	Under what structural conditions can bureaucracies effectively resist anti-democratic mandates from political principals? How and why do clientelist/patronage/spoils systems transition to professional, meritocratic bureaucracies? What kind and how much upward bureaucratic responsiveness is democracy-enhancing in different regime types?
***Organizational (meso)*: democratic modes of organizing and managing within and among public sector organizations**	Tensions can exist between autonomy-enhancing managerial reforms and controlling corruption. Increased autonomy can enhance bureaucratic performance when coupled with supportive management practices and high PSM. Participatory approaches risk elite capture or autocratic legitimization. Representative bureaucracy can aid conflict resolution in fragmented societies but risks deepening divisions without adequate institutional safeguards.	How compatible are democracy-enhancing organizational practices with the need to depoliticize the administration and strengthen meritocracy and professionalism? What macro-level institutional factors influence the emergence and sustainability of PSM and supportive management practices? Under what conditions do participatory approaches contribute to empowering citizens and to democratic socialization as opposed to legitimization of autocratic rule? Under what conditions does representative bureaucracy enhance equity and legitimacy, and when does it risk entrenching societal divisions or weakening administrative performance?
***Individual (micro)*: democratic values and principles as a guide for behavior**	Bureaucrats can engage in "resistance" when faced with undemocratic mandates, drawing on professional norms and democratic values. Bureaucrats can "repair" the state from below, drawing on local norms and relational ethics. Democratic principles exist across cultural traditions, challenging Western-centricity.	What ethical obligations do bureaucrats have under anti-democratic or repressive leadership, and what strategies can they use to safeguard democratic values? How are democratic values embedded in and enacted through everyday practices of bureaucrats? How can we integrate diverse ethical traditions and experiences to develop a truly global democratic administrative ethics?

PSM, public sector motivation; WEIRD, Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic.

inequity or oppression. "Western" solutions such as positing a duty to uphold regime values are of little use in systems where informality reigns or where, in extremis, upholding regime values can lead to egregious human rights abuses. Yet, even in such systems, if we look more closely, we can observe not only acts of bureaucratic resistance to undemocratic mandates but also attempts to repair the state from below through everyday acts of kindness grounded in local norms and relational ethics. Positing that democratic values are uniquely "Western" is thus not only incorrect, but ultimately self-defeating as it precludes the development of ethical frameworks that are robust to attempts to unravel democratic institutions from above.

In conclusion, relaxing the macro-level assumption of "good" principals and strong internal accountability mechanisms highlights the democratic value of a meritocratic and depoliticized bureaucracy. Yet, it also shows that such bureaucracies are hard to come by, and that they need to be complemented by a micro-level democratic administrative ethos to counteract or at least attenuate attempts to turn the bureaucracy into an instrument of repression or democratic deconsolidation. Broadening our focus from democracy as "just" a set of standard institutions to democracy as a set of values enacted—even if imperfectly—through multiple organizational forms and everyday practices opens the door to an expanded set of questions at different levels of analysis. Table 2 highlights the key insights and questions derived from the literature review above that can help inform further research about the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy in the "North" and "South" alike.

Conclusion

We cannot ignore the democracy-bureaucracy nexus outside of WEIRD countries not only because we cannot justify using a different set of normative principles for "other" places without resorting to simplistic and patronizing cultural arguments, but also because looking beyond the WEIRD world can provide important lessons and avenues for research in a world where democratic backsliding is increasingly prevalent everywhere. Drawing more on literature on and from the non-WEIRD world can thus help us develop both more robust and more globally inclusive theories about democracy and bureaucracy, answering calls from the Global South for "understanding and imagining different ways of governing and reorienting the citizen-state relation in their societies" (Nisar 2023, 4).

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