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Some Observations and Theory about the Behaviour of Politicians and Officials

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Abstract

Politicians and officials behave in different ways. If the differences are not understood they may cause confusion and undermine morale. A simple model is developed to explain differences in behaviour by reference to the rules that control achieving and holding office as a politician or an official. This model may be helpful for teaching aspiring officials and may provide a basis for empirical research.

Introduction

Though both politicians and appointed officials have a shared interest in addressing public issues of the day, there are many differences in their normal behaviour.¹ For example, compared to relatively anonymous public servants, politicians are more likely to take public credit for administrative achievements, to make public criticisms of others, and to alter otherwise worthy policies to meet the wishes of the public. Politicians appear more likely to favour behaviours that improve their public image while appointed officials seem to be more narrowly focused on analysis, process and management.

These differences in behaviour can be confusing for some officials. Career public servants can be surprised by political reactions. And if they don't understand why politicians behave as they do, some officials can be demoralised. Commonly there are some officials who attribute differences in behaviour to differences in attitude or even different moral outlooks. Where that happens, officials' trust in their political leaders is undermined and the morale of officials can be harmed. That loss of morale may be costly in terms of reduced productivity.

But if that loss of trust in political leadership is based on a misunderstanding, then there is a social cost which could be avoided. If differences in behaviour can be explained without asserting the moral superiority of officials over politicians, and if politicians are seen to be no more self-seeking than anyone else, including officials, then there is no basis for officials to be concerned because of differences in observed patterns of behaviour. On the contrary, this paper suggests that officials should expect that there will be differences in behaviour. Such differences are not a sign of a problem; they are a sign of the government working well as people discharge their various roles.

This paper proposes a simple theory to explain differences in behaviour between officials and politicians, without relying on any presumptions about different attitudes or values.² The first section introduces the issue to be explored and sketches where this model fits in the literature. The following sections outline and critique a simple model of behaviour in government. The conclusion suggests possible future developments.

Behaviour in Government

The following stylised facts are commonly observable across a wide range of democratic nations.

1. Politicians and appointed officials form distinct sets of officeholders;
2. The members of these two sets tend to behave in distinctly different ways, with politicians tending to behave like other politicians and appointed officials behaving like other appointed officials;
3. In particular, politicians are more likely than officials to: seek publicity, voice public criticism of other office-holders, and pursue policies with popular appeal.

¹ John Yeabsley and Gary Hawke have made extensive comments on a series of drafts of this paper. Others who have offered helpful comments on an earlier draft are John Alford, Peter Allen, Jonathan Boston, Michael Di Francesco, Patrick Dunleavy, Derek Gill, Richard Mulgan, John Wanna, and Richard Zeckhauser. I am grateful to all those for their help; remaining errors are mine.

² This model is a more formal statement of the ideas explored in Prebble (2010). This paper is the first step in an ANZSOG-sponsored project to generalise the thinking in that work.

The aim of this paper is to account for this pattern of behaviour in a way that is plausible and explanatory – that is, it demonstrates both how and why people behave in this way.

In addition to those tests, it is preferable that the explanation be non-judgmental (and ideally even affirming). The purpose of the non-judgmental test is both to avoid bias and also to address a public management issue: if the behaviour of politicians can only be explained in judgmental terms, then the explanation is unlikely to promote loyalty and service among officials. More bluntly, if officials believe that politicians behave differently because politicians have different values or morality, then the officials are less likely to offer dedicated service. That means that this paper is not solely concerned with researching behavior – it is also concerned to explain reality in a way which will support public administration in a democracy.

A number of possible explanations for differences in observed patterns of behaviour are considered; these include sorting, acculturation, and self interest. There is also a brief reference to the wider literature on the evolution of institutions and practices in public administration, before an alternative approach is proposed.

Sorting

The simplest explanation for systematic differences in patterns of behaviour is that they arise from a sorting process. Those holding this view are effectively asserting that differences in behaviour occur because people who prefer to be showy, confrontational and shallow are more attracted to a career in politics than a career as an official. By contrast, the implication is that those who are more drab, timid and pedantic seek to become officials.

If a sorting hypothesis is to be taken seriously, it is necessary to specify the process by which sorting occurs. There seem to be a number of possible avenues. Sorting might arise on entry, as only meretricious people stand for elected office. Or it could occur as political leaders select similar personalities to sponsor for office. Alternatively, altruistic aspiring politicians may be driven out by the behaviour of other politicians.

This paper rejects the sorting hypothesis because it fails all of the required tests.

First, sorting is not plausible. For a sorting argument to be valid, it would be necessary to explain why public-spirited people would be attracted to appointed roles and opportunists to elected office. Intuitively that self-selection seems unlikely because most self-serving behaviour is more successfully conducted in relative privacy (where officials work), and the actions of politicians are subject to considerable scrutiny. Opportunistic sorting may have occurred under patronage systems, but it is much less likely in an open democracy with active media. In addition, the most significant empirical examination of officials and politicians across six western countries found little evidence to support sorting (Aberbach *et al* 1981).

Second, the sorting hypothesis fails the explanatory test. That is, there is no apparent reason why individuals would sort themselves into the two groups. Even if some sorting were apparent *ex post*, an explanation of why the groups emerge is still needed.

Third, sorting fails the non-judgmental test. Officials who accept the sorting view of politicians can find it difficult to offer loyalty to the government of the day. In effect the suggestion is that politicians are flawed, and those who hold that view may wonder why they would work hard for such leaders. In the extreme, those who consider politicians to be corrupt can be more likely to flirt with corrupt behaviour. That is, if a sorting process were generally held to occur and to

reflect a difference in the values of those attracted to elected or appointed office, then that belief may damage the effective administration of government.

Acculturation

Differences in behaviour, however, need not rise as a result of sorting. Instead, different behaviours might reflect the nature of the job. That is, those whose job it is to open school fairs and speak to Rotary clubs get used to the limelight; those who are required to hold the government to account may get used to voicing criticism so that it becomes second nature; and those who have to defend the government's record will pursue naïve policies that are easy to explain in public. Joel Aberbach and his colleagues put forward some evidence and analysis that supports an acculturation argument.³

Explanations based on the nature of the job may address the plausibility test, but they do not explain why the different behaviours are preferred in the two jobs. In addition, a theory based on acculturation is judgmental. Even if these behaviours are learnt behaviours, in essence the assertion is still that politicians behave as they do because they have come to like it. Their alleged character flaws may not be innate, but acquired flaws are no more worthy because they are new. The implications for morale and performance remain the same.

Self Interest

A third approach is to analyse individual behaviour in the light of the interests of the participants. This lies at the heart of the literature on economic analysis of public administration. Seminal ideas such as Oliver Williamson's organisation theory (1986) or James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's earlier public choice theory (1958) have explained the role of government institutions. Murray Horn (1995) and others have built on these ideas to explain how government practices have evolved.

However, though this stream of literature is illuminating, it suffers from a similar problem to the previous theories of sorting or acculturation. That is, the economic approach is based on self interest. Technically this approach is non-judgmental, because all participants are assumed to be motivated by self interest. However, in a public management context, analysis based on self-interest fails the harder test of being affirming.

When trying to reassure disillusioned civil servants, recourse to analysis that is based on private interest may serve to increase their cynicism. Far from being inspired by the idea that public policy decisions are made by self-serving rational actors, many officials are appalled – especially at the idea that they may be self-serving themselves.⁴ This means that economic explanations of bureaucracies (see for example Tullock (1965) or William Niskanen (1971)) may not be a useful means of motivating many civil servants.

This paper does not reject analysis based on self interest. On the contrary, for most purposes it is both the most credible approach and the most illuminating. However, for the purpose of explaining without disillusioning the aim is to see if there is an approach that can explain behaviours without recourse to self interest.

³ Though most of their discussion was focused on how bureaucrats work. See especially Aberbach *et al* (1981) pp81-83.

⁴ This is an observation drawn from personal experience. My attempts to motivate groups of public servants by reference to economic analysis of rational actors only succeeded in the Treasury; elsewhere I met with incomprehension at best and hostility at worst.

Cultural Explanations

There is a wider literature that discusses various cultural explanations of public administration. For example March and Olsen (1985) explain how government institutions can assist to create meaning and Hood (1998) describes how different cultural contexts tend to lead to different institutions of government. These approaches can be very illuminating, but they do not explain behaviour at the level of individual politicians or officials.

The relationship between officials and politicians is sometimes explored, but this is commonly an attempt to explain structures and systems rather than individual behaviour patterns. For example, the work of Hood and Lodge (2006) focuses on the relations between officials and politicians, but it explains things by means of the analogy of a bargain between groups rather than an explanation for individual behaviour.

One of the most determined attempts to analyse the differences between officials and politicians at an individual level was conducted by Joel Aberbach, Robert Putnam and Bert Rockman and colleagues (Aberbach *et al* (1981)). This involved interviews with 1400 officeholders in Europe and USA. It provides a valuable source on differences of views between officials and politicians but makes only partial attempts to explain the drivers of behaviour.

Perhaps the closest approach to explaining the behaviour of officials and politicians is the work of James Q Wilson (1989). His work builds from the role of individuals to explain much of the government. However he did not focus specifically on the difference between elected and appointed officials, and he did not express his ideas as formally as is attempted here.

An Alternative Approach

Another approach is to analyse whether different behaviours arise as a *requirement* of the job. If it is demonstrated that patterns of behaviour are a predictable result of the rules by which incumbents achieve and hold office then the issue need not be one of trust so much as a need for mutual understanding between the two sets of officeholders so they may operate more effectively together. That is the approach pursued here.

The question then is whether it is possible to explain the stylised facts listed above by reference solely to the rules of the job; in particular, is self interest a necessary condition to explain differences in behaviour between politicians and officials?

The aim of this paper is to construct an explanation of the difference in the behaviour between elected politicians and appointed non-partisan officials which:

- is not reliant on self-interest,
- is not based on sorting or acculturation,
- is based on weak assumptions (so the results are not predetermined), and
- is parsimonious.

The next section outlines that model, and the following section critiques the result.

A Simple Model of Behaviour in Government

Assumptions

All participants are rational, in the specific sense that their actions (at least in part) are driven by deliberate decisions as individuals attempt to achieve their preferences.

Information has a cost, so that participants will acquire information up to the point where the cost of assembling more information equals the expected gains from acquiring that information.

The consequences of actions are uncertain. Further information may increase the reliability of predictions but the future cannot be predicted with certainty, and as forecasts extend further into the future, uncertainty increases.

All participants are motivated to do their best for society. Specifically, they have no more interest in their own well-being than the good of society as a whole; that is, they are not self-interested. Such people may be said to be idealists.⁵

Participants and Rules

There are two types of participants in this model of government behaviour. The first group is officeholders who hold one of two types of senior public position. The second group is all other members of society, who are described as the electorate.

Office confers control of the powers and resources of the state, and so provides the most effective opportunity to serve society. Accordingly, idealists compete for office.

There are two forms of office. Elected office is held by politicians. Non-partisan appointed office is held by officials. Elected office is superior to appointed office.

Achieving and holding elected office is dependent on support from a combination of the electorate and other elected politicians. In particular, elections are held from time to time in which aspiring politicians compete for office. Success depends on securing more votes from the electorate than are cast for other candidates. Seniority and relative power among elected officeholders depends on the support of fellow politicians.

Achieving and holding appointed office is dependent on support from other appointed officials. When vacancies arise candidates make their case privately to panels of appointed officials who select the best person who can do the job; where no candidate is suitable this search may be prolonged.

Three forms of behaviour are considered. Publicity seeking is the process by which individuals attempt to widen public knowledge of their achievements. Rivalry is the process of publicly demonstrating the deficiencies of competitors. Policy selection is the process of determining the set of policies that officeholders are to follow in order to promote the good of society.

Publicity Seeking

In order to achieve office, politicians must gain support from the electorate. However, in an election, each member of the electorate has a small role in the decision. In addition, the voter

⁵ Here idealist has a meaning similar to that used by Henry Ford, "An idealist is a person who helps other people to be prosperous," and is not meant to imply that idealists are impractical.

generally does not expect to work closely with the elected official, and the outcome of the election is usually only one of a range of factors that may impact on the lives of the voter. Accordingly the voters (on average) will be prepared to use little effort to gather information to determine their preferences.

This means that a candidate for elected office needs to make it as easy as possible for voters to acquire favourable information about them, and publicity is a necessary part of that process.

None of the considerations above apply to candidates for appointed office. Accordingly, for politicians the value of publicity is higher than it is for officials.

Rivalry

Both elected and appointed positions are filled in a process of competition; candidates compete to persuade the electorate or appointers of their merit for the job, but there are key differences between the selection processes.

Elections happen at particular times. Candidacy is public; the incumbent is often among the candidates; and a winning candidate emerges irrespective of whether the electorate considers that any individual is up to the job. That is, the choice is entirely relative and it is made by people with partial information. This suggests that success for a candidate need not rely on demonstrating personal prowess; it may be sufficient to show the deficiencies of the other candidates

Selecting an appointed official is generally a more discreet and less certain process. First, competitions occur when there is a vacancy, and the identity of the competing candidates is not public; this reduces the opportunity to criticise other candidates. Second, if the appointers cannot find a suitable candidate there is an option to extend the search; this means that relative ability may not be sufficient to achieve appointment.

These differences mean that rivalry can be a successful behaviour for politicians but it is less useful for officials.

Policy Selection

All participants are idealists aiming to do the best for society. However, where the future is uncertain and information is costly, policies that offer an early result are preferable to those with long-term benefits because those longer term results are less certain.⁶ In particular, members of the electorate place a higher value on tangible results which can be readily observed, and a lower value on uncertain promises about the future which can only be assessed by the assembly of a lot of data.

Those holding office, especially officials, have the opportunity to gather more information about likely policy outcomes and, because they anticipate holding office for some time, they have an incentive to select policies that will provide social benefits for several periods into the future.

Like officials, politicians have the opportunity to use the resources of the state to gather information about the effectiveness of policies. However, unlike officials, politicians must persuade the electorate of their effectiveness in office if they are to continue to have the means of

⁶ I am grateful to John Yeabsley for reminding me that time horizons are the simplest way of establishing different policy preferences between groups.

delivering policies that will benefit society. This drives politicians to favour policies with short-term benefits either so they can show results before the next election or so they can explain the likely benefits to an electorate with little means of assessing long-term benefits.

The process of democratic election pushes politicians to have a shorter time horizon than officials. This suggests that politicians will tend to select a different set of policies with shorter-term expected benefits than those proposed by officials.

A critique of the model

The model is simplistic, but that is inevitable in a minimalist theory. The test of its usefulness depends on whether its assumptions and rules capture essential elements of public administration and whether the results are consistent with real-world observations.

Assumptions

First, consider the assumption of rationality. Plenty of non-economists deride any analysis based on *homo economicus*. However, this model does not rely on a rigid application of rationality with perfect comprehension; it simply requires that people act on their preferences frequently enough for it to influence observable behaviour. It is a form of bounded rationality (Simon 1983). Without that modest assumption simple theorising would be very difficult.

The assumptions that information is costly and that the future is uncertain seem straightforward, but there is room for some contention. For example, the experimental results which underlie prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) suggest that people may not use discount rates as predictably as this model suggests; but that work is broader in its intent than this model. For this model the assumption that uncertainty is addressed by assembling information is intended to capture some of the decision process of officeholders. This assumption of methodical decision-making is simplistic, but it serves for a simple model.

The assumption that everyone is an idealist is clearly odd. But it is no odder than the assumption that everyone is solely motivated by self interest. In recent decades experimental work has shown that individual behaviour cannot be explained solely by reference to self-seeking motives. Some of this work is helpfully summarised by Arthur Schram (2000) who suggests that it is more accurate to acknowledge that different people may be motivated by various different “seekings,” including fairness-seeking and cooperative gain-seeking.

The real world is not populated by saints, but the assumption of idealism is the point of the model. The question of whether an assumption of self-interest is a necessary part of an explanation of behaviour of officials and politicians can be best explored by examining the effect of adopting its polar opposite.

Rules

The rules for selecting officeholders are simplifications. Electoral and administrative laws are more complex than are described here, and the rigid disparity between the appointment of non-partisan officials and the election of politicians is often less stark than described in this model. In particular at the highest levels of officialdom in most jurisdictions there is some degree of political involvement in appointments.

The absolute case, where most of the highest non-elected officials are effectively selected by another non-elected official, may be unique to New Zealand. However, for all democratic systems there exists some level, generally quite senior, at which the appointment to non-elected office depends primarily on other non-elected officials. Wherever that level may be (and that level may be hazy in some jurisdictions) that is the level which is the focus for this model.

Similarly, appointment to office does not always occur in explicit competitions to fill particular vacancies. Many jurisdictions have periodic “promotion rounds” during which the relative merits of candidates are considered. However, the essential points that these processes are discreet and may not result in an appointment where no candidate merits promotion are widespread.

Results

The differences in behaviour that are predicted by the model are consistent with common patterns of behaviour. This is most obvious with publicity. There is a substantial difference in the publicity-seeking behaviour of elected and appointed officials. Politicians are generally pleased when their actions are publicised, but for appointees being the focus of media attention is generally bad news. That is in line with the prediction from the model.

Rivalry is more complex. It is easy to observe that politicians criticise each other more in public than officials do. But the detail of politicians’ behaviour provides confirmation that their behaviour stems from the rules of the job. Public denigration generally occurs between parties. Inter-party criticism is business as usual; intra-party public criticism is a sign of serious problems. But that does not mean that all members of a party are mutual admirers or friends. Progress within a party is often at the expense of a colleague’s aspirations. Mistrust between members of the same party is common. But these strained relations are very rarely reflected in public behaviour. That is, public criticism of colleagues in one’s own party is not likely to persuade the electorate to support the party or colleagues to support their critic. Since tenure depends on those two sources, that behaviour is avoided.

Similarly, politicians frequently demonstrate an understanding that inter-party criticism is an expected part of politics. Public denigration which would permanently sever relations in other contexts is regularly endured in politics. Ministers and opposition politicians sometimes move straight from abusive public encounters in parliament to (frosty) cooperation in select committees. That is, much of the rivalrous behaviour is turned on and off to meet the needs of the moment; if there is no gain in criticising an opponent then the criticism is often suppressed.

On the other hand, is there rivalry between officials? Appointed officials frequently see other officials as rivals and can become embroiled in rancorous disputes. In this paper, however, a distinction is drawn between competition (which may be intense) and rivalry (which is characterised by public denigration). Though relations may be strained, public attacks between appointed officials are very rare; they are certainly less common than inter-party criticism between politicians.

One reason for restraint between officials lies in the appointment process. Appointment panels are generally aiming to select the candidate best suited to serve within an organisation; a track record of public attacks on colleagues tends to undermine a candidate’s credentials as a good leader or member of a team.

The apparent difference in time horizons of officials and politicians also needs careful consideration; the suggestion that politicians favour the short term is not universally accepted. Many who have worked closely with ministers know that politicians are generally motivated by a

wish to improve things for the future, and can identify occasions when political leaders have taken unpopular decisions in the public interest.⁷ However there are others, usually those working at a greater remove from politicians, for whom the term “short-sighted politician” is all too apt. That is because the official’s careful advice on a preferred policy approach is sometimes set aside because politicians are aware that the recommended approach will not be well received by the public, especially in the run-up to the next election.

The interpretation that should be drawn from this paper, however, is not that politicians are careless about the future; instead, the results suggest politicians are likely to be responsive to the priorities of the electorate they represent. The real point is that officials have the luxury of ignoring the electorate while using taxpayers’ resources to acquire more information than others. Some may think that this extra information makes officials wiser than others, and specifically wiser than politicians. However, this result cannot be used to support that proposition. Though a longer time horizon makes officials feel less uncertain about the future that does not mean they are correct. Forecasts are often wrong. And more importantly, even if officials’ forecasts and advice turn out as predicted, that doesn’t necessarily prove that the best policy has been selected. Arrow’s impossibility theory (Arrow 1950) demonstrates that it is not possible to establish that any particular policy is socially superior to others. Officials are not wiser; they are doing an easier job.

Conclusions

The original purpose of developing this model was to provide a means of explaining politicians’ behaviour to bureaucrats in a way which would improve understanding, without feeding unnecessary anxieties about values or morals. If the logic of the model is accepted as robust, then the model has achieved its purpose. That is, it is possible to explain differences in the patterns of behaviour between officials and politicians without recourse to preferences or values. In particular, self interest is not a necessary condition to explain the stylised facts of behavioural difference between politicians and officials.

But though producing persuasive rhetoric may be a useful management device, it is not sufficient for useful scholarship. To meet that standard two further tests are necessary.

First, can the theory be validated? As always in matters of values, measurement is difficult; establishing that two groups share a common value or preference is no easier than demonstrating a difference in values. Questionnaires to politicians and officials may offer a way forward. However the monumental work of Joel Aberbach and his colleagues still stands as a testimony to the complexity and scale of work needed to achieve robust answers, and the tentative results that can be expected. Recently in New Zealand, for example, a questionnaire to staff and politicians involved in local government demonstrated differences in perceptions of strategic planning processes (Laking and Yeabsley 2006, pp4-7). Though the issues were different, the general pattern that officials had less faith in the robustness of political processes and decisions is broadly in line with the results that would be predicted by a rules-based model like the one developed here. Clearly that result cannot be claimed to validate this model, because it did not explore preferences, but it does point the way for future research to test the model.

⁷ This has been my own experience in New Zealand, confirmed by comments from senior officials at state and commonwealth level in Australia.

Second, can the model be extended into other areas of behaviour and interaction between officials and politicians? This paper has been restricted to some very simple examples of behaviour, and has abstracted from any context for the behaviours that are considered. Examples of more particular areas that might be explored include relations after a change in government, or changes that might occur as a government continues in office for a long time. Alternatively it may prove fruitful to add more institutional detail. For example, this model is a simple form of a Westminster system; other results might be found if political appointees were to be considered.

Finally, at a more fine-grained level, this model may help to predict successful behaviour among senior officials. Having understood why politicians behave differently, successful senior officials also understand the need to support politicians in their role rather than attempting to drag politicians into management roles. That is, this approach offers both means of exploring successful behaviour among senior officials and a framework for teaching future senior officials what to expect in their work.

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