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Bureaucrats, interest groups and policymaking: a comprehensive overview from the turn of the century

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Government officers are key players in designing and implementing public policies. Not surprisingly, a growing body of research approaches their connections with other stakeholders, such as ministers, elected officials, and political parties. Fewer studies, however, address the relationship between bureaucrats and interest organisations. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of recent publications regarding interest groups and the public bureaucracy. The paper introduces the findings of an extensive literature review with bibliometric techniques and qualitative content analysis. To map previous studies, I analysed 1978 abstracts with VOSviewer and R. The final collection included 415 papers which were read and coded through NVivo. Based on this review, this paper exposes data on authors, countries, and research methods related to texts published between 2000 and 2022. In addition, it critically examines concepts and empirical evidence regarding the interactions between interest groups and government officers. This study advances the research agenda on interest groups by identifying gaps in previous studies and proposing new perspectives to analyse the political connections of the public bureaucracy. The findings indicate that most publications focus on interest group strategies, revolving doors, and venue choice. Fewer texts assess influence over political appointments and personal networks. Therefore, further research is required to address the causal mechanisms between access to the bureaucracy and interest group influence over public policies. Moreover, the bibliometric analysis revealed that research networks have been located in the United States and Europe and publications tend to focus on the 'global North'. In this sense, more regional diversity might be beneficial for the development of theoretical and methodological structures able to 'travel' to other cases.

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Introduction

The political domain encompasses a varied range of individuals and groups: citizens, politicians, political parties, bureaucrats, social movements, and interest groups, among others. Government officers are responsible for designing and implementing public policies and play a key role in executing political decisions. On the input side of political exchanges, interest groups voice needs from society to the State. Not surprisingly, there is a growing body of research addressing the role of these actors in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, few studies approach the relationship between interest groups and non-elected officials (Boehmke, et al., 2013; Boehmke, 2018; Dwidar, 2022). Although the political functions of public employees is undeniable, assessing their political connections is challenging as it often involves contested concepts and subjective variables, such as power, motivation, and influence. Not Surprisingly, terms such as ‘politicisation of the bureaucracy’ or ‘patronage’ frequently have pejorative connotations.

This paper aims to advance the research agenda on interest groups and the public bureaucracy by mapping previous studies to identify their topics, gaps, and research strategies. I start from the proposition that the research literature on interest groups and bureaucrats is still underdeveloped, as cited by previous studies (Boehmke, et al., 2013; Boehmke, 2018; Dwidar, 2022). Accordingly, the paper introduces the findings of an original study aiming to identify the overlaps between these two research topics: public bureaucracy and pressure politics (lobbying and interest groups). In this sense, the search focused on publications on politicisation, patronage, and lobbying since these concepts are related to bureaucrats’ political connections.

By employing bibliometric techniques, I identified themes, authors, and organisations to provide an overview of this field. The general collection included 1978 texts analysed through VOSviewer and R Studio. In addition, I read and coded 415 texts with NVivo to identify the concepts, theoretical frameworks, and methods employed in these studies. Through qualitative content analysis, I discuss concepts and empirical evidence regarding the interactions between bureaucrats and interest groups. The study innovates by combining different research topics in political science and analysing an unprecedented large volume of publications. This paper introduces its finding through an integrative literature review highlighting the similarities and divergences between studies on interest groups and the public bureaucracy. The research questions guiding this project were:

- i. How does the recent research literature approach the interactions between bureaucrats and interest groups?
- ii. What are scholars’ predominant methods and strategies to address this relationship?
- iii. What does empirical evidence reveal about how interest groups interact with the public bureaucracy?

The bibliometric analysis pointed out that there are more studies on interest groups and bureaucrats than expected, but they focus on specific themes: venue choice and interest group influence on policymaking. Interest group influence over political appointments is understudied, potentially due to methodological challenges. Theoretical frameworks and research methods reflect the predominance of scholars from Europe and the United States.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. *Data and research strategies* describes research strategies and procedures adopted in the literature review. The following sections explore the final sample of publications deeper, discussing their conceptual frameworks, theories, and empirical evidence. The final remarks suggest research strategies and themes for further studies. This paper brings several contributions to this research agenda. By introducing the findings of an unprecedented

extensive literature review, the paper might assist other scholars in designing their research projects. The synthesis of most recent studies presented in this paper contributes to finding gaps, mapping topics, and clarifying concepts. Additionally, the directory with the list of publications and their metadata is available in an open repository. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis resulted in new reflections on theories and methods. In sum, the main contributions of this study refer to its breadth, theoretical and methodological insights, and the datasets originated from the bibliometric search and analysis.

Data and research strategies

This paper discusses the findings of a comprehensive research project on political connections of government officers. Recent studies mentioned that the relationship between interest groups and bureaucrats was still underexplored by the literature (Boehmke, et al., 2013; Boehmke, 2018; Lopes and Vieira, 2020; Dwidar, 2022). This review aims at mapping the literature on interest groups and bureaucrats, providing an overview of studies addressing their relationship. To this purpose, I employed bibliometric techniques and qualitative content analysis to give the big picture of what underlies these studies. Thus, the review addresses the overlaps between public administration and political science, encompassing topics such as the politicisation of the bureaucracy, patronage, interest groups, and lobbying¹.

The research strategies combined a semi-systematic search with an integrative literature review. The theme includes diverse areas and broad research questions, so undertaking a systematic review was not feasible. Furthermore, the goal is not to give a complete account of the field but to analyse the overall progression in a certain period, identify common themes and gaps, and propose new methods and theories. In this sense, an integrative review is beneficial for developing new theoretical frameworks or bringing contributions to previous ones (Snyder, 2019), which makes it more suitable for this research. The strategy was integrative insofar as I assessed texts critically to identify their similarities and divergences through qualitative text analysis. This analysis resulted in a synthesis of recent studies.

To identify and collect the bibliography, I looked for publications in Scopus and Web of Science databases. Using both databases posed additional challenges to the study as they have different operators, search mechanisms, and file formats. As the project’s theme refers to the political connections of bureaucrats, the search covered three topics: the politicisation of the bureaucracy, patronage, and the relationship between interest groups and bureaucrats. Politicisation and patronage were included in the search as both refer to connections between government officers and other stakeholders, such as politicians, social movements, citizens, and political parties. Therefore, I investigated whether these terms are connected to interest group participation in policymaking.

I employed different combinations of keywords in English (more details in the Appendix)—bureaucracy, bureaucrats, officials, officers, civil servants, interest groups, lobbying, appointments, politicisation, patronage—filtering by the period from 2000 to 2022 since the goal is to analyse the most recent literature instead of covering all publications. I opted for many combinations to have the greatest number of publications mentioning interest groups and the public bureaucracy. Using diverse combinations instead of one search with all keywords allowed me to analyse them separately and identify how the different kinds of literature and fields are connected. Tests on both databases and preliminary network maps revealed that the terms ‘officers’ and ‘officials’ resulted in the

greatest number of entries pertinent to the research topics being examined—specifically, the connections between bureaucrats and other stakeholders.

Accordingly, the final search terms were the following combinations:

- i. (Bureaucracy OR bureaucrat OR civil servants OR government officers OR government officials) AND (interest groups OR lobbying OR advocacy OR pressure groups OR interest organisations OR lobbyists).
- ii. (Bureaucracy OR bureaucrat OR civil servants OR government officers OR government officials) AND (politicisation).
- iii. (Bureaucracy OR bureaucrat OR civil servants OR government officers OR government officials) AND (patronage).

Data was exported to separate folders and then gathered into collections (according to the themes above) through a reference manager (Mendeley). The selection was based on three layers: preliminary collection (including all the terms), general collection (after the screening/excluding criteria), and final selection. To select publications for the general collection, I excluded texts following two criteria:

- i. Type of material: non-academic materials (newspapers, notes, magazines, among others) were excluded.
- ii. Topic, field, and scope: in some cases, the word ‘bureaucracy’ refers to employees in the private sector. Likewise, the term ‘patronage’ may be employed about arts. In some cases, the words were occasionally mentioned instead of being part of the main topic. For instance, some papers published in health journals mentioned that researchers interviewed government officers. Although analysing the relevance of words in abstracts may be subjective, this was assessed through the publications’ titles, keywords, and subject areas.

After eliminating texts according to the criteria above, the number decreased to 1978 articles, books, reports, and chapters, which were analysed through VOSviewer and R Studio. This collection includes every publication mentioning the terms above except for those not complying with the basic criteria. I read all the 1978 abstracts and selected texts for the qualitative text analysis according to the following screening criteria:

- i. Period: contemporary (studies on past imperial regimes were excluded).
- ii. Phase of the policy cycle: policymaking, rulemaking, or political appointments. Albeit relevant for other purposes, studies focused on evaluation were excluded.
- iii. Level of Government: Executive branch, federal agencies, and committees. State-owned enterprises and courts were excluded.
- iv. Type of material: journal articles and chapters.
- v. Type of bureaucrat: the final collection focused on senior government officers.

After the above screening criteria, 484 texts were selected. Reports, books, and unavailable texts were excluded from the final selection but maintained in the general collection analysed through bibliometrics. In addition, I added certain texts mentioned by authors according to their connections to the theme. Due to limitations regarding availability and language, this number was reduced to 415 journal articles, chapters, and papers, which I read and coded with NVivo. This paper introduces the findings of this analysis. Although most texts were in English, the final collection included a few texts in French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Texts in Romanian, Russian, Polish, and other languages were excluded, but their abstracts in English were

analysed. The codification (Appendix) of the content analysis followed a deductive approach (Mayring, 2000) as the codes were developed based on previous studies, theories, and the abstracts of publications selected in the first round. I used these codes to identify interactions between the actors, countries mentioned by authors, research methods, and theoretical frameworks. These codes were constantly revisited during the analysis.

Like any other study, this research faced challenges and limitations. First, the phenomenon and the research questions are too broad. Although I employed diverse terms, other relevant words may have been excluded from the original concept map. To solve this problem, I tried to use the most comprehensive expressions identified through a series of tests before the last search. Nevertheless, the overloaded stigma of some words, such as lobbying, and the need for a robust conceptual framework hinder a more systematic investigation. Using many different expressions related to the same phenomena with no conceptual clarity makes the search even more complex.²

Second, the final collection might be biased by the availability of studies and the selection criteria of the researcher. Third, some publications did not have metadata (keywords, abstracts), which is an additional hurdle to the bibliometric analysis. Finally, the language is another limitation of the study. English was chosen because it is the language employed in most publications available in the two databases. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the relevance of carrying out further studies with keywords in other languages and exploring other databases. These limitations were counterbalanced by the samples size ($N = 1978$ and 415) and the fact that I read all the abstracts of the broader collection. Moreover, the final collection included some texts in other languages, which is already a relevant scientific advancement for this research agenda.

Overview of the research literature

There is no consensual definition of interest groups. Beyers, Eising, and Maloney (2008) highlight interest groups encompass three elements: organisation, political interests, and informality. The most challenging dimension refers to differentiating interest groups from other types of policy participants. Classification of interest groups is even still more complex, as some scholars include Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) whereas others consider NGOs as another type of stakeholder. This paper does not address this debate. Instead, it discusses the relationship between interest groups and bureaucrats by assessing any study employing the terms ‘interest group’ or ‘interest organisations’ regardless of the meaning authors attribute to them.

Hence, the codification also included codes for stakeholders (list of policy participants) and the classification of IGs. In the sample, the stakeholders cited as an interest group or organisation most frequently were ‘firms, trade associations or business groups’ ($N = 73$), ‘citizens or public interest groups’ ($N = 32$), and ‘Unions or professional associations’ ($N = 25$). Most texts analysed do not present clear definitions of interest groups or lobbying. Although these are different concepts, they are related in studies addressing the influence of stakeholders over policymaking.

Main themes. The themes of the 1978 abstracts were analysed through a graphic representation of networks built through VOSviewer³. In the standard network map, the size of the circles represents the strength of the keywords, measured by their occurrence. The colours refer to thematic clusters, i.e., sets of correlated items. The map also allows to visualise the strength of links between words through the depth of the lines linking the circles¹². The network map in Fig. 1 shows keywords cited in 12 documents or more. As the map illustrates, bureaucracy and

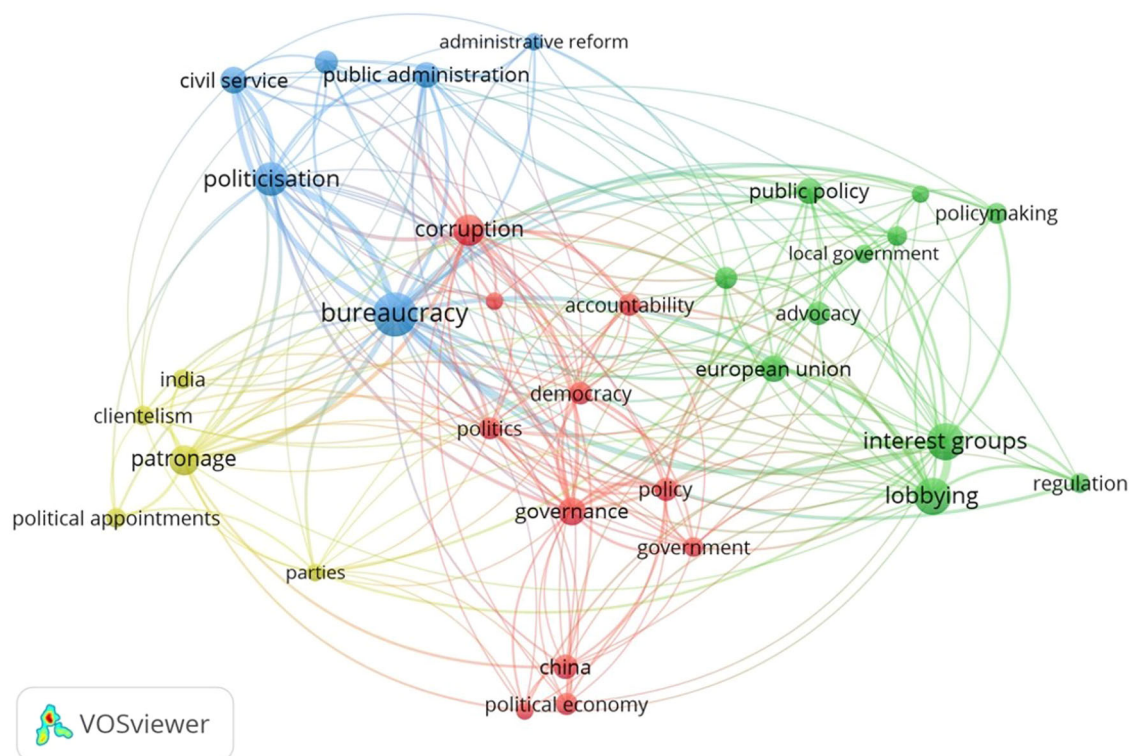


Fig. 1 Keywords (co-occurrence). Network map with keywords in the general collection, with circles representing occurrence and links co-occurrence. Colours indicate clusters automatically calculated by VOSviewer based on the items' attributes and co-occurrence (van Eck, 2021). Source: general collection ($N = 1978$)⁴.

lobbying belong to two different research literatures, since they are in different clusters (represented by blue and green). Nevertheless, some central terms are connected. Bureaucracy has links with interest groups and lobbying.

Corruption plays a crucial role and is interlinked with both fields, but it is even more prominent in studies about the public bureaucracy. The field of public policy is also related to both, emphasising the relevance of bureaucrats and interest groups in policymaking. 'European Union' is also a relevant keyword in this cluster, marked in green. In contrast, political appointments, which often refer to the distribution of public jobs, are related to terms such as patronage, clientelism, and political parties. It confirms the findings of previous studies: the main stakeholder in studies on appointments to public officers refers to political parties instead of interest groups and organisations.

The analysis of titles and abstracts reinforced the assumptions about the relationship between the two themes, interest groups and public bureaucracy, as they remain in different clusters according to the network map in Fig. 2. This map shows words with 120 or more occurrence frequencies. Whereas bureaucracy is more related to government, state, reform, politicisation, appointments and corruption, interest groups are more connected to terms such as policy and influence. The term "government official" falls within the same cluster as interest groups. This word is commonly used by numerous scholars to refer to both elected and non-elected officials. Contacting officers is part of the lobbying repertoire. In this sense, studies approach the relations between interest groups and policymakers (elected and non-elected officials). The qualitative analysis confirmed this information.

According to both network maps, bureaucracy, political appointments, and interest groups are part of different thematic clusters. The first one (red) refers to studies on lobbying and

interest groups. The second one (blue) refers to the literature on bureaucracy, whereas the third one (green) refers specifically to appointments, i.e. appointment of individuals to public jobs. The final collection ($N = 415$) analysed qualitatively followed the same patterns:

- i. Several texts mention corruption.
- ii. Studies on lobbying focus on interest group influence over policymaking. Nonetheless, a growing number of them mentions bureaucrats.
- iii. Studies focused on the public bureaucracy or bureaucratic politicisation rarely mention interest groups. They are concentrated in the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians.

The hierarchy chart in Fig. 3 exposes topics frequently approached by studies in the final collection, as measured by the number of texts mentioning them. Many studies mentioned political appointments, but this was expected once the term was one of the search terms.

In contrast to what authors identified as a gap in the literature, interactions between interest groups and bureaucrats are frequently cited in recent studies. Most authors address the access of IGs to the bureaucracy and bureaucratic lobbying (Beyers and Kerremans, 2004; Binderkrantz, 2005; Haider-Markel, 2006; Tsujinaka and Pekkanen, 2007; McKay, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2014; Boehmke, 2018; Graham et al., 2020). These studies are related to venue choice or the relationship between interest groups or lobbyists and government officials in policymaking.

They approach the reasons behind venue choice, such as resources (McKay, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2014) and the conditions enhancing interest group influence over bureaucratic rulemaking (Yackee, 2006a; 2006b; McKay and Yackee, 2007).

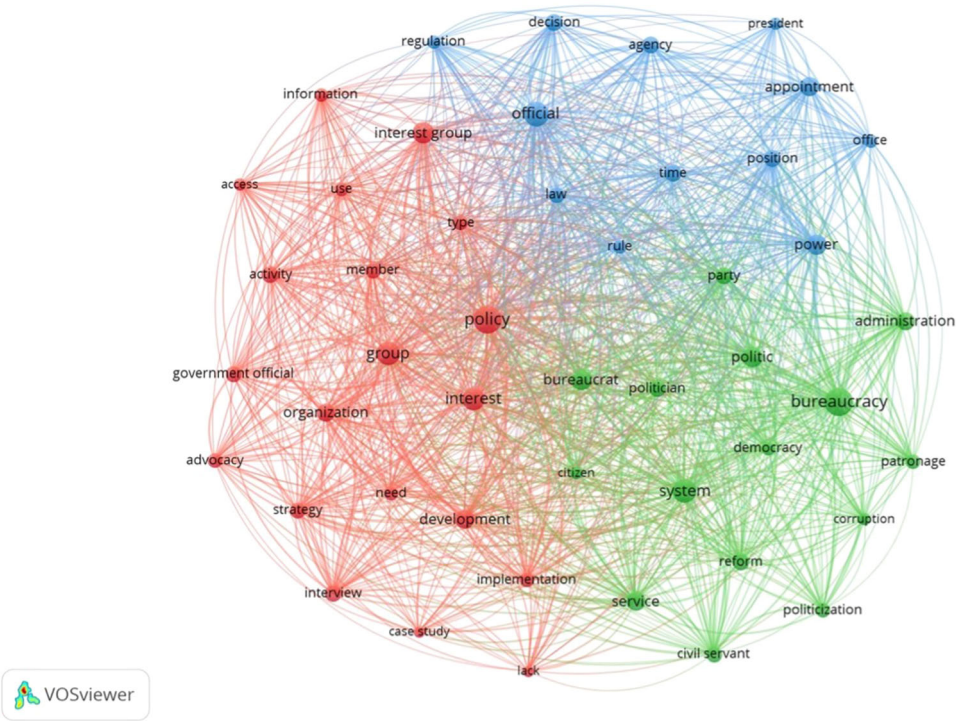


Fig. 2 Titles and abstracts (main terms). Network map with words in titles and abstracts of the general collection, with circles representing occurrence and links co-occurrence. Colours indicate clusters automatically calculated by VOSviewer based on the items' attributes and co-occurrence (van Eck, 2021). Source: general collection ($N = 1978$)⁵.

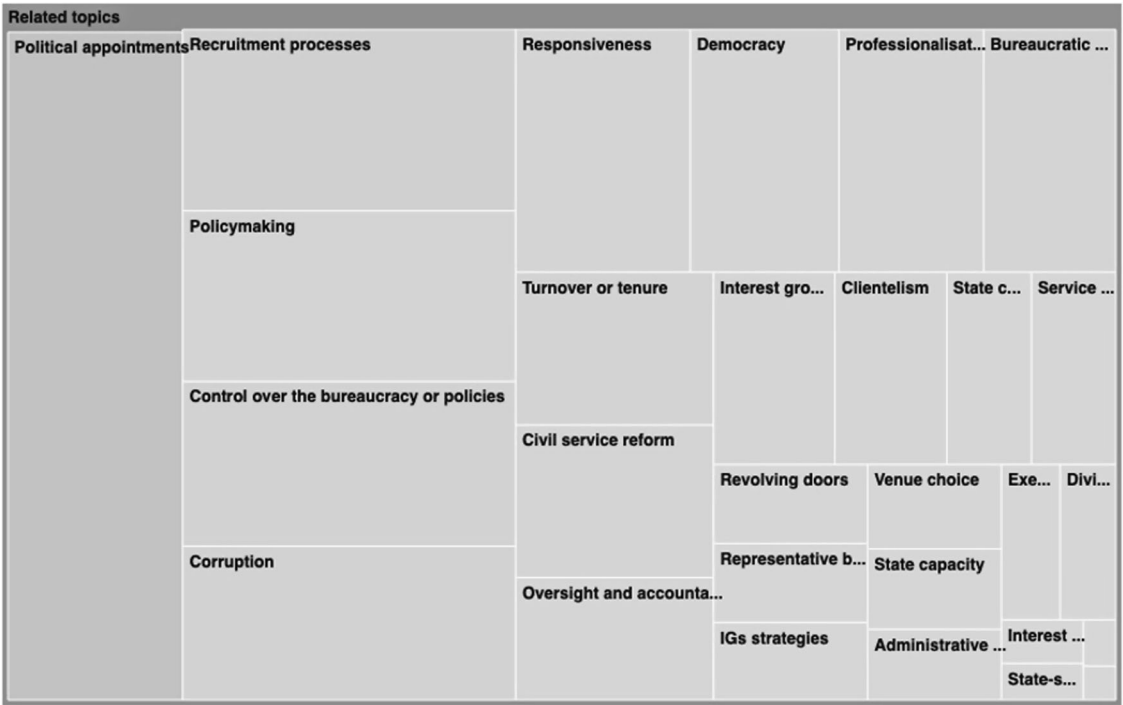


Fig. 3 Most-cited topics (number of texts) in the final collection. Most-cited topics calculated through the content analysis (number of files mentioning the topics). In the figure, the size of each square indicates the proportion of files mentioning the topic under analysis. Source: final collection ($N = 415$).

Thus, these studies emphasise the venues (Congress and agencies) more than the actors involved (interest groups, government officers, among others). Fewer studies take account of government officers' current memberships and their ongoing engagement in interest groups or advocacy organisations.

Andrei et al. (2012), for example, analysed the links between bureaucrats and unions in addition to partisan affiliation and other memberships. Likewise, some authors investigate revolving doors tactics. These studies involve former career civil servants working in

State-owner enterprises, former bureaucrats working in the private sector, or both directions of these revolving doors. Yates and Cardin-Trudeau (2021) approach three stages: entry into the public service, exit for the private sector, and circular. The latter refers to appointees from the private sector who have an experience in the public sector and then return to their previous employments. Investigating the European Union, Coen and Vannoni (2016) assess former government officers working for firms.

Most studies do not detail the causal mechanisms behind interest group influence over bureaucratic rulemaking, such as the factors that lead to their success in convincing government officers. Even fewer approach the three-tier interactions between parties or politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups. Inspired by delegation and principal-agent theories, most publications in the final sample focus on the indirect influence of interest groups over politicians' decisions regarding the public bureaucracy. The power of IGs in selecting members of the bureaucracy is another gap in this literature.

Sloof (2000) investigates interest groups' attempts to influence politicians' decisions regarding the delegation of policy authority to bureaucrats. Bertelli and Lynn Jr. (2004) and Bertelli and Feldmann (2007) investigate the influence of IGs in political appointments. However, this influence is still indirect insofar as it operates through the potential uses of oversight mechanisms—which are typical in the context of the United States but may not be available in other countries. Evaluating the scenario in the USA, the authors claim IGs affect the president's choices as they dispose of mechanisms to counterbalance decisions.

Thus, the president would choose appointees whose preferences offset the influence of IGs. The threat of IGs alerting Courts or Congress prevents the president from appointing ideological allies. Therefore, the authors refer to how the president may consider these potential actions of IGs when selecting appointees rather than explore direct means of influence over the selection of appointees. Durant and Resh (2010) mention that pacifying interest groups is a motive for selecting appointees, but they do not give further details. Sorge (2010) develops a model on IG influence over politicians' decisions regarding appointments. Sorge (2015) includes IGs direct influence over appointments in terms of approval or rejection of nominees. However, empirical studies are still rare.

Several studies mention interactions between interest groups and bureaucrats. However, they focus on either indirect influence through Congress or direct influence over policymaking. In the United States—the most-cited country in the studies—specific oversight and monitoring mechanisms shape the interactions between IGs and government officials. Haselswerdt and Bradley (2020) examine the opposite direction: how bureaucrats use IGs strategically to influence the process. Fewer studies approach interest group influence over political appointments, i.e. the discretionary distribution of public jobs common in many civil service systems. Most of them address the problem under the theoretical framework of the 'revolving doors' from an interest group (not bureaucrat) perspective. Since senior bureaucrats play a key role in designing and implementing public policies, it is expected that IGs might try to influence their recruitment. Moreover, even if IGs do not try to orientate this process, connections between bureaucrats and interest organisations might affect policy outcomes as officers' views and ideologies might affect their decisions.

The literature on political appointments, however, focuses largely on the presidential control over the bureaucracy and the influence of politicians or political parties (Auers, 2015; Bach et al., 2018; Ali, 2020; Alfirdaus and Manalu, 2020). Indeed, presidents and political parties are deemed the most relevant

players in these studies, which are inspired by the US literature. According to the qualitative analysis, 82 documents link appointments to political parties, 82 link them to the president, and 16 mention appointments and interest groups. This is convergent with the analysis of titles and abstracts as they show interest groups, bureaucracy, and political appointments do not belong to the same thematic cluster.

Authors, affiliations, and countries. Of 3193 authors in the general collection ($N = 1978$ documents), only 47 met the threshold of being the author of three documents. Considering authors with at least three documents in the general sample, most of them are affiliated to institutions from the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and Sweden. The positions of USA and UK were partially expected as the search employed keywords in English, although there are some texts in Portuguese, Spanish, and French in the samples. Nevertheless, Sweden and other European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, also have a great number of publications. Brazil and Argentina are the only countries from South America in this sample (Fig. 4). The University of California (USA)⁶ is the institution with the greatest number of authors, followed by the University of Gothenburg (Sweden) and Leiden University (Netherlands).

In sum, the authors with the highest number of publications are affiliated to institutions from North America or Europe, especially the United Kingdom, Sweden, Netherlands, and the United States. The research literature is concentrated on these two regions. Not surprisingly, the most-cited countries or regions in the final collection were: i) the United States (mentioned by 216 documents); ii) United Kingdom (mentioned by 101 documents); and iii) Europe or the European Union (mentioned by 97)⁷. Even when articles introduce empirical evidence from other countries or territories, they use theoretical frameworks and examples from the United States or Europe. Thus, information on authors and their institutions indicates that there is a regional monopoly over publications in English.

Research methods and theoretical frameworks. In the final collection, the most prominent research method was regression (155 documents), followed by surveys (89) and in-depth interviews (82). This might explain one of the gaps in the literature. Whereas quantitative studies are adequate for identifying general patterns, they fail to provide more details on causal mechanisms, i.e., causality chains between the independent variables and the outcomes. In contrast, qualitative research is marked by a rich level of details, the centrality of concepts, and the analysis of multiple causal paths and occasional individual effects.

The main theoretical framework refers to principal-agent or delegation theories (54 documents). This predominance is related to other characteristics of publications in this field: regional concentration and focus of studies on certain stakeholders. Principal-agent or delegation theories are employed to analyse the relationships between bureaucrats and politicians or ministers. In this sense, politicians and ministers are deemed principals whereas bureaucrats are their agents. The delegation interactions with government officers depend on the costs and benefits of monitoring agents. It focuses on conflicts or tensions between principals and agents as they may have different interests.

Rational choice plays a key role as many studies approaching interactions between interest groups and bureaucrats rely on formal models (32 documents). In these models, IGs and bureaucrats are rational self-interested agents bargaining to achieve their goals. Accordingly, some authors develop a game model to explain their interactions. Thus, these studies assess the

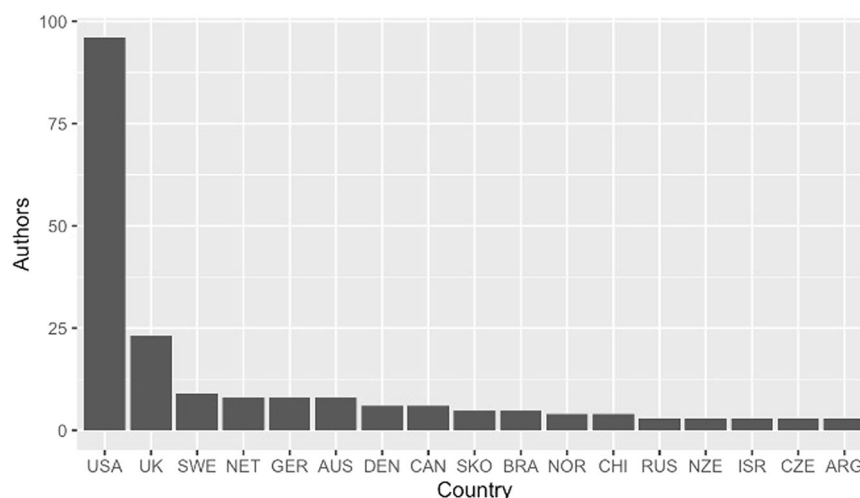


Fig. 4 Countries. The X coordinates refer to countries to which authors are affiliated (data from the general collection). The quantities in the vertical line refer to the number of authors affiliated to these countries. USA United States, UK United Kingdom, SWE Sweden, NET The Netherlands, GER Germany, AUS Australia, DEN Denmark, CAN Canada, SKO South Korea, BRA Brazil, NOR Norway, CHI Chile, RUS Russia, NZE New Zealand, ISR Israel, CZE Czech Republic, ARG Argentina. The graph was produced with R Studio. Source: general collection ($N = 1978$).

strategic behaviour of interest groups, politicians, bureaucrats, and political parties.

Institutions are relevant as structures of incentives shaping the behaviour of these political actors. Not surprisingly, authors also employ institutional theories. The most-cited political institutions are regimes and systems of government (41 and 35 documents). Informal institutions are barely mentioned by the research literature (4 documents), which is a relevant gap considering their relevance in certain political systems. The case studies carried by Schuster (2017), for instance, portray evidence that informal practices affected the real impact of civil service reforms in Paraguay and the Dominican Republic. Most studies, however, ignore informal institutions investigating only formal rules and procedures.

Several scholars analyse the impact of political regimes, such as democracies or autocracies, and systems of government (parliamentary vs presidential) on the politicisation of the public bureaucracy. Executive-legislative relations play a key role as influential presidential studies on the US emphasise how the relationship between presidents and Congress shape decisions regarding agencies and bureaucrats. Presidential regimes are said to require coordination between the president and members of parliament, which affects the distribution of posts. The classical theory predicts that presidents must choose between distributing posts to allies to control policies or delegating this prerogative to political parties in exchange for support.

Parliamentary systems are less prone to these pressures, except for hyperfragmented systems. Crucial cases are the United States and Brazil. The research literatures on both countries emphasise the president's dilemma. Regarding American politics, studies are concentrated on presidential control over the bureaucracy (Balla and Wright, 2001; Aberbach, 2003; Bennesen and Feldmann, 2006; Bertelli and Feldmann, 2007; Auer, 2008). In Brazil, the coalitional presidentialism—an odd mixture between a presidential system, federalism, and a fragmented multi-party system—is deemed to encourage party patronage as presidents constantly need to negotiate with parties with diverse ideological stances. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these countries have relevant institutional differences. In the United States, there are several oversight mechanisms—confirmation of the Senate for some posts, fire alarms, judicial reviews—that are completely absent in Brazilian politics.

Thus, authors must be careful when choosing cases for comparison and applying theories based upon foreign countries to other contexts. The number of mentions to the US and the employment of theoretical frameworks are additional evidence of the influence of the American literature, even in studies regarding different national realities. The particularities of the US system compromise the generalisation of these models.

Bureaucrats and interest groups: towards a new approach

Overall, studies on interest groups and bureaucracy focus on interest group influence over policymaking, strategies, and policy outcomes. Interest group influence is a complex variable to measure. A common proxy is access (Binderkrantz and Pedersen, 2017; Albareda, 2020). In this sense, scholars investigate interest group access to the public bureaucracy. Focusing on European associations, Albareda and Braun (2019) and Albareda (2020) measure access to officials by the number of meetings with commissioners. Investigating the governing boards of pension funds in the US, Anzia and Moe (2019) address the influence of IGs from inside (bureaucratic processes).

Another cluster of studies focuses on IGs strategies and venue choice. The main question refers to whether interest groups choose to lobby government officers or elected officials. By studying interest group registrations in the US, Boemke et al. (2013) analysed venue choice of legislative and executive domains. The authors point out a pro-business bias arguing that administrative processes reinforce the advantages possessed by groups and policies in the legislature. Ban and You (2019) also investigate the US with a case study about the Dodd-Frank Act. According to the authors, corporations and trade associations lobbied more during the congressional stage, whereas local governments, not-for-profit organisations, and elected officials participated more in the agency rulemaking stage.

Likewise, Beyers and Braun (2014) test hypotheses about whether interest groups have more access to bureaucrats or politicians. Analysing the case of Denmark, Binderkrantz (2005) found that groups with corporate resources usually use more the administrative strategy (contact with bureaucrats) compared to public interest groups. Binderkrantz et al. (2015) also compare IG access across arenas. In contrast, evidence from Seattle presented by Buffardi et al. (2015) indicated that non-profit groups contacted agencies more when they were advocating.

Albeit their relevance, these studies do not explore the causal mechanisms behind interest group access to the public bureaucracy deeper. In other words, the question ‘why do government officers comply with interest group preferences?’ remains underexplored. Braun (2012) investigates the impacts of strategic preferences and organisational routines on the brokerage potential of public agencies with data from the Netherlands and the UK. Even though studies mention the exchange of information or policy goods between bureaucrats and interest groups (Beyers and Braun, 2014; Bradley and Haselswerdt, 2018; Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Haselswerdt and Bradley, 2020), other potential explanations are not investigated. Alternative hypotheses are related to patron-client relations between IGs and bureaucrats, memberships, and personal connections.

Patron-client relations imply the exchange of goods. In this sense, public jobs are usually valuable goods to be traded between political actors and stakeholders. The prerogative of filling public jobs often belongs to the chief of the Executive. Nonetheless, it might be delegated to other relevant actors, such as ministers. Expectedly, there is a large volume of studies on the influence of political parties in appointing nominees for positions in the public bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, fewer mention efforts of interest groups in influencing the executive leader’s appointments or the memberships of bureaucrats. Bertelli and Lynn (2004) and Bertelli and Feldmann (2007) approach only an indirect influence of IGs on presidential appointments. In their model, presidents would strategically appoint individuals whose preferences partially offset the influence of IGs. Arroyo and Jiménez Cascante (2015) investigate ties between economic interest groups and bureaucrats in Costa Rica through memberships of officers. According to the authors, holding a public office while being a member of an economic IG poses a risk to the accountability of public service. Likewise, Baird (2019), through a case study of Brazil, employs the term ‘interest group’ about companies when analysing the connections of bureaucrats.

The literature on revolving doors tactics comes closer to investigating interactions between IGs and bureaucrats when presenting data on the previous professional experiences of government officers. However, this literature seems disconnected from the scientific literacy on public administration and bureaucracy. The literature on representative bureaucracy discusses characteristics of bureaucrats and their connections with social movements and other organisations. Studies on bureaucratic activism approach how connections between bureaucrats and social movements might affect public policies. Nonetheless, a more comprehensive portrait of those who hold office is necessary. Most recently, some scholars have estimated career paths and portraits by applying Principal Component Analysis or Bayesian models. They include variables such as age, career type, education, gender, professional experience, and partisan affiliation.

However, only some bring information on race and political organisations beyond political parties. Overall, the concepts of politicisation and patronage—largely employed interchangeably by this literature—refer to the relationship between politics and administration. The expressions are frequently related to discretionary appointments to public jobs. President, elected officials, and parties are the main players in this literature. This leads to reflections about the very concept of politics: why interest organisations are excluded from these studies? Therefore, a more robust dialogue between both literatures—public administration (bureaucracy) and lobbying—would be beneficial to advancing knowledge on the relations between civil servants and the realm of politics.

Final remarks

This literature review pointed out a growing body of research on the relationship between bureaucrats, interest groups, and politicians over the past 20 years. Nonetheless, as the bibliometric analysis confirms, the research topics ‘interest groups’ and ‘bureaucracy’ belong to different research literatures despite their connections. As Boemke et al. (2013, p. 7) affirm, ‘from a (positive) theoretical perspective, the literatures on lobbying and administrative policymaking stand in stark contrast to one another’. Whereas studies on lobbying tend to analyse contacts between IGs and government officers, the research literature on the public bureaucracy gives less attention to these interactions. Scholars investigating the profiles and political connections of bureaucrats rarely mention officers’ memberships besides partisan affiliation. Therefore, the main two gaps in this literature concern:

- i. Interest group influence over political appointments: although there are some studies based on game theory, few introduce empirical evidence of interest groups’ attempts to appoint individuals to high-level positions.
- ii. Political engagement of bureaucrats and memberships: even studies on representative bureaucracy do not mention frequently officers’ ties with interest organisations. When scholars investigate the profile of bureaucrats, they focus on characteristics such as education, previous professional experience, and partisan affiliation. Some include gender and race. Fewer studies assess the engagement of government officers in other types of organisations, such as civic associations and unions (e.g., Andrei et al., 2012).

These two elements point to a more problematic void in this literature: studies on politicisation and patronage are concentrated on political parties excluding other political activities bureaucrats might have. Therefore, the idea of politics is related to partisan activity instead of covering the various types of actions and organisations belonging to the political sphere. Furthermore, there are also gaps regarding theoretical frameworks, research methods, and regional bias. Most studies focus on formal rules and procedures, neglecting the role of informal institutions. Nevertheless, they may impact relevant questions related to the public bureaucracy, such as civil service reforms and political appointments. Moreover, patron-client relationships, which are informal institutions, may refer to the interactions between bureaucrats, IGs, and parties. In this sense, informal practices must be included in the analysis. Investigating informal institutions is challenging as the informal character exacerbates hurdles in collecting reliable data.

Regression was the predominant research method employed by scholars in the final sample. Although statistical models are useful methods, they fail to capture some elements of social interactions. Triangulation of methods and sources is the best solution to counterbalance the challenges related to data collection. In this sense, Principal Component Analysis and Network Social Analysis might be useful for analysing profiles and relationships. In addition, qualitative research may provide more details about causal mechanisms linking bureaucrats to interest group influence in policymaking.

Finally, as with other research topics in Political Science, the ‘politics of the bureaucracy’ is colonised by American and European studies. This implies employing concepts and theories that might not be able to ‘travel’ to other contexts, a common problem in comparative studies (Sartori, 1970). Investigating other realities and perspectives may contribute to developing more suitable travelling categories. Therefore, it is recommendable to conduct new reviews and comparative studies with a focus in other languages and regions rather than English and the axis US/Europe.

The next steps of this research include carrying out a literature review focusing on other languages (French, Spanish, and Portuguese) and conducting a qualitative comparative study. Both aim at testing and building theories beyond the traditional approaches. The review presented in this paper was only the first step towards this advancement.

Data availability

Information on publications, metadata, and the content analysis are shared in supplementary files (NVivo project and collections) available in the Appendix and at <https://github.com/fierycherry/bureaucraticpolitics> (the file used for producing the maps was 'GeneralCollection_vf.ris').

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Notes

- 1 Although interest groups and lobbying are different concepts, they are often co-related —as the network maps exposed here portray by the strength of the links.
- 2 Interest group has no consensual meaning. In some cases, it is adopted as a synonym for lobbyist or lobbying groups. Moreover, certain scholars do not mention the terms 'lobbying' or 'interest groups' but approach these phenomena in policymaking. In other cases, authors use these words with no theoretical precision. The word 'policymaker' is often used in studies on lobbying and may refer to either public officers or elected officials.
- 3 VOSviewer is a software tool for visualising bibliometric networks. It allows mapping scientific literacy by identifying and illustrating connections between keywords, authors, and organisations, among others (van Eck and Waltman, 2010)⁷⁶.
- 4 General collection (1978 entries). Parameters of the map: occurrence = 12, attraction = 1, repulsion = 0. Colours represent clusters. A thesaurus was used to avoid duplication due to expressions with similar meanings.
- 5 General collection (1978 entries). Parameters of the map: occurrence = 90, attraction = 1, repulsion = 0. Colours represent clusters. Of the 40440 terms, 96 met the threshold, and 58 were connected. I excluded the following 'stopwords': 'chapter', 'article', 'research', 'data', 'literature', 'study', 'analysis', 'research', 'addition', and 'literature' as they have little substantive meaning.
- 6 It includes different branches of this university.
- 7 The label included European regions, such as Central or Eastern Europe, and the European Union with its institutions (parliament, commission).

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not deemed necessary, as this study did not involve human participants or protected data.

Additional information

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