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Does Meritocracy Lead to Bureaucratic Quality? Revisiting the Experience of Prussia, Imperial and Weimar Germany

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Abstract

How do state bureaucracies become high-quality organizations? Leading comparative politics studies assume that bureaucratic quality is forged by the introduction of meritocratic personnel systems because meritocracies, in contrast to politicized bureaucracies, select the most competent applicants for the jobs at hand. However, in line with principal-agent theory I propose that without a certain level of responsiveness of bureaucrats to the government in place and its policies, the positive consequences of meritocracy for bureaucratic quality are drastically reduced. Meritocracy is likewise essential to bureaucratic quality but, given that it demands some bureaucratic autonomy, meritocracy also creates a control problem. To study the consequences of meritocracy for bureaucratic quality, I revisit bureaucratic developments in the paradigmatically important historical cases of Prussia as well as Imperial and Weimar Germany. Based on extant scholarship of Prussian and German bureaucratic history, the analysis shows that bureaucratic quality varies over time with responsiveness even when meritocraticness is constant at high and low levels, and that governments knowing this hesitate to adopt meritocratic systems in spite of their advantages if they believe the bureaucracy will be unresponsive. Studying Prussia and Germany historically helps distinguish between the consequences for bureaucratic quality of meritocracy from those of responsiveness. On this basis, I identify where comparative politics studies may benefit from adding, in a comparative historical perspective, responsiveness to the explanation of bureaucratic quality.

Reexamining bureaucratic quality*

A leading argument in comparative politics studies concerned with economic growth (e.g. Evans and Rauch 1999), poverty reduction and social equality (e.g. Henderson et al. 2007; Rothstein and Teorell 2008), democratic developments (e.g. Bäck and Hadenius 2008; Cornell and Lapuente 2014), and the quality of government generally (e.g. Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Dahlström et al. 2012; see also Ertman 1997) is that meritocratic bureaucracies outperform non-meritocratic ones. Meritocracy is, more generally, the main point of reference when scholars attempt to capitalize on the broader notion of ‘bringing the state back in’ to macro comparative political research. Most studies (e.g. Rauch and Evans 2000; Dahlström et al. 2012) and widely used measures from the World Bank (Kaufmann et al. 2009: 5) and the Political Risk Services Group (PRS 2014) explicitly or implicitly suggest that meritocracy best indicates bureaucratic quality because it ensures that the bureaucracy is ‘autonomous from political pressures.’

The current literature correctly suggests that meritocracy depends on, and thus often comes with, bureaucratic autonomy, at least in questions of hiring and firing (Raadschelders and Rutgers 1996: 71-89). In meritocratic systems, recruitment and promotion are based on merit, whereas in politicized bureaucracies careers are dependent on political or personal loyalty and appointments controlled by the political leader.¹ By standing

* In preparing this article, I thank the anonymous reviewers for constructive criticism. For co-authoring earlier versions of the article, I thank Kim Sass Mikkelsen. For commenting extensively on earlier drafts, I thank in particular Jørgen Møller, Michael Bernhard, and Victor Lapuente.

¹ In another non-meritocratic system, historically referred to as patrimonial, bureaucratic offices are filled according to societal status. This also has detrimental consequences for bureaucratic quality but is fundamentally different because certain offices are outside the control of the political leader. In this paper, I

on the shoulders of Max Weber, the dogma is that meritocracy (and the bureaucratic autonomy it implies) dramatically and consistently improves states' bureaucratic quality. By contrast, it holds, a dominance of political hiring and firing distorts and biases policy-making and implementation as large groups of bureaucrats are repeatedly replaced by party or politically biased ones. This argument is far from unsubstantiated. Two leading comparative studies of bureaucratic quality by Rauch and Evans (2000) and Dahlström et al. (2012) show that meritocratic recruitment is consistently associated with high levels of bureaucratic quality (or, similarly, low levels of corruption) while pecuniary incentives such as competitive salaries, career stability, and internal promotion are not. They then deduce that the degree of meritocracy explains countries' bureaucratic quality and its positive consequences and should be the focus of bureaucratic reforms.

In this article, I argue that the sole focus on initiating meritocratic reforms to build bureaucratic quality rests on questionable assumptions. While the findings of Rauch and Evans (2000) and Dahlström et al. (2012) are likely genuine, they fail to investigate the full battery of predictors of bureaucratic quality that operationalize a broader version of compliance. I term this broader version 'responsiveness', i.e. the bureaucrats' propensity to serve diverging governments and their policies with equal care. Since cross-national measures of bureaucratic responsiveness are scarce if not wholly absent, there may be good reasons not to include it in statistical models. Nevertheless, I show that theoretically and in empirical cases of key importance highlighting meritocracy as a brainwave for bureaucratic quality runs the risk of misrepresenting the realities of politician-bureaucrat interaction in two

focus on politicized bureaucracies because traditional patrimonialism dominated under feudal states and is less relevant today (see Ertman 1997).

ways that lead to flawed conclusions about the consequences of meritocracy and thus the foundations of bureaucratic quality.

First, classic studies in the principal-agent (PA) literature remind us that bureaucratic quality is not just a matter of competence and impartiality but also swiftness and accuracy in bureaucratic decision-making. The hallmark of effective governance in any type of government system is that political principals can count on the services of the agents to whom they have delegated authority (see e.g. Bendor et al. 2001; Huber and Shipan 2002). Given that the PA literature found this in Western, meritocratic bureaucracies as well, I argue that meritocracy does increase competence and impartiality but may come at the expense of bureaucratic swiftness and accuracy in implementation and policy-making processes. Bureaucratic quality therefore needs more than meritocracy to fully unfold. Specifically, I propose that the bureaucrats' responsiveness or propensity to serve diverging governments and their policies with equal care is crucial in raising the likelihood that swift and accurate policy implementation becomes a permanent feature.² By making use of a few but paradigmatic cases, I pinpoint why and how bureaucratic autonomy can lead to poor administrative performance and point to responsiveness as an important factor that distinguishes low-quality from high-quality bureaucracies at equal levels of meritocraticness.

Second, and relatedly, the PA literature as well as comparative-historical studies of bureaucratic reform (e.g. Silberman 1993: Chs. 4-5; Fukuyama 2014: Chs. 9-10) suggest that responsiveness does not follow automatically from meritocracy. Even Weber (1978: 224) considered that effective compliance to political goals did not necessarily follow from his

² Apart from PA theory, my propositions align with recent contributions to comparative politics (e.g. Fukuyama 2013; 2014: 52-81) who warns against too much bureaucratic autonomy, not least in personnel management, which can have negative consequences for bureaucratic quality (Fukuyama 2013: 358). However, Fukuyama does not clearly theorize the mechanisms between meritocracy, bureaucratic autonomy, and quality.

criteria of bureaucracy. I propose and show that whenever a government – democratic or not - finds it necessary to depoliticize bureaucracy by recruiting instead on merits the government hesitates if it perceives the present or incoming bureaucrats' to be unresponsive to its political needs and desires. Perceptions of bureaucratic responsiveness should thus constrain moves toward meritocratic reform. In turn, if a reform is made, it is likely accompanied by initiatives to ensure responsiveness. While I recognize that bureaucratic responsiveness can be obtained via pecuniary incentives, these incentives likely do not change fundamental norms of behavior (see Olsen 2006: 13). Instead, by showing the permanence of unresponsiveness despite attempts to achieve better political control, the case studies I present indicate that responsiveness ultimately rests on an issue that has no quick fix: the successful legitimization of the political-executive office as impersonal, authoritative decision-maker – or to put it in Easton's terms, the forging of diffuse support (Easton 1975: 437).

I proceed as follows: First, I present the conceptions of meritocracy, responsiveness, and bureaucratic quality as well as theoretical propositions emphasizing the limits of meritocracy and the necessity of responsiveness for bureaucratic quality. Second, I revisit the bureaucratic developments of Prussia and Imperial and Weimar Germany. This amounts to a historical analysis from around the eighteenth to early twentieth century. As Prussian and German bureaucratic history is the basis of the concepts of bureaucracy and meritocracy, this history is paradigmatic for understanding the consequences of meritocracy. For reasons I will discuss, Prussia, and later Germany, installed meritocracy alongside pecuniary incentives for compliance with political goals. Nevertheless, unresponsiveness was a permanent problem that varied dramatically over time and policy areas and co-varied with

the ups and downs of bureaucratic quality.³ These cases hence provide an opportunity to show the effect of responsiveness on bureaucratic quality.

As I will show, comparative politics studies neglect important details in Prussian and German bureaucratic history. By contrast, numerous historical studies underline how an unresponsive bureaucracy came into conflict with the government in Prussia as well as in Imperial and Weimar Germany with the consequence that implementation of key government policies was distorted (see e.g. Rosenberg 1958; Gillis 1971; Mann 1985: 85-86; Caplan 1988; Mommsen 1991; McElligott 2014). The connection of the general theory I propose and the historical analyses help put Prussia and Germany in comparative perspective. I therefore finally discuss how Prussia and Germany provide historical correctives to comparative analyses explaining bureaucratic quality by reference to meritocracy alone.

Theory

The theory I build and later apply regards societies that are either pushed to bureaucratize, are in a process of bureaucratizing, or have already bureaucratized. It contains three variables: bureaucratic quality, meritocracy, and responsiveness. A comprehensive explanation of responsiveness goes beyond the scope of this article but my theory gives some indications that I explicate.

Bureaucratic quality is the degree to which government policies are constructed and implemented accurately, swiftly, competently, and impartially. This definition is applicable across time and space and consistent with Weber's conception and the dominating use of bureaucratic quality in the comparative politics literature (see Hanson and Sigman

³ Fukuyama (2014: Ch. 4) shortly touches upon the problems of bureaucratic autonomy in Prussia and Germany but not the connection with responsiveness and the consequences for bureaucratic quality.

2013). I merely add precision by explicating the characteristics inherent to quality. Accuracy is the precision with which the bureaucracy pursues the substance of the policies and the mandate as given by the government; swiftness is the pace of implementation from the time policies are communicated to the bureaucracy and until the bureaucracy applies the policies on society and citizens; competence is the prudence of the policy measures suggested and employed by bureaucrats, i.e. the timeliness of and level of information guiding bureaucratic decisions; and impartiality is the propensity of bureaucrats to treat equal cases equally.

In a given country, bureaucratic quality is assessed as an overall impression of these four characteristics, primarily across the policy issues of finance and economics, social protection, and law and order, which are essential in all states, including also the illustrative issue of civil service and government reforms. The focus is on how, for each policy, the bureaucrats strike a certain balance: They must act as accurately and swiftly as possible to serve the wishes of the government. But they should also inform the government of the facts of the problem and the possible solutions and consider the legality of the policy and the impartiality in its implementation. Although it is hard to measure this balance accurately, case studies contain relatively thorough assessments that I can make use of.

Meritocracy is defined as a system in which civil servants (though not necessarily ministers) are recruited and promoted based on their qualifications without reference to their personal or political views. This does not always imply rigid rules and closed career ladders, although this might be the case in some meritocratic systems. Meritocracy may fare equally well in modern administrative systems employing shorter-term contracts and performance management.⁴

⁴ For the purpose of a constructive dialogue with existing studies, I accept the notion that there is such a thing as 'a country's level of meritocracy.' Clearly, existing studies of 'islands of excellence' (e.g. Evans 1995) or

Why meritocracy may damage bureaucratic quality

The idea of meritocracy as paramount for bureaucratic quality builds on Weber's conception of bureaucracy (see Rauch and Evans 2000). It is therefore fruitful to restate his criteria of bureaucracy (see Weber 1978: 220-221).

1. Bureaucrats are personally free and subject to authority only within a defined area
2. Offices are hierarchically organized
3. Each office has a defined sphere of competence
4. Offices are filled by free contractual relationship
5. Recruitment of candidates is based on their technical qualifications
6. Bureaucrats receive pensions and employment protection
7. Bureaucratic office is the sole occupation of the office-holder
8. Office-holding constitutes a career
9. Ownership and management of offices are separate
10. Officials are subject to strict discipline and control

Some of these criteria have to some extent been loosened in many of today's state bureaucracies,⁵ but in criteria 1-5, we see the traits of also current meritocratic bureaucracies.

distinctions between policy areas (Kopecky et al. 2012) question this notion, as does my own empirical analysis to some extent. My issue with the contemporary literature in this paper is, however, not its level of analysis but its theoretical bases.

⁵ Especially pension and employment protection schemes have undergone considerable changes since the 1970s (Olsen 2006: 6), while the hierarchical organization principle is changing in some countries and policy areas as

These five criteria, as the current literature argues, distinguish meritocracies from other forms of bureaucratic organization in terms of quality. However, important dimensions of criteria 6-10 are overlooked. They involve how to ensure bureaucratic compliance with organizational and consequently political goals: pensions and employment protection, prospects of a career, and clear measures of discipline and control should all give incentives for bureaucrats to comply with orders from above. Overlooking these criteria is problematic in itself but the issue is broader than what Weber's criteria can overcome. As Weber (1978: 224) himself notes, compliance in fact demands acceptance of political orders beyond what can be obtained by financial benefits, discipline, or control (see also Simon 1976; Fukuyama 2013). Even the five criteria do not guarantee that it is government rather than bureaucratic policy that will be constructed and implemented.

Based on these considerations, I challenge a core theoretical assumption behind the alleged effects of meritocracy on bureaucratic quality. If meritocracy is to guarantee bureaucratic quality, it must assume that bureaucrats act as mere instruments of government. However, bureaucrats are strategic and self-interested agents. Despite their employment as servants in an ultimately politically controlled hierarchy, they may engage in slack generation, shirking, or sabotage to serve organizational, or even their own personal, interests (see e.g. Epstein and O'Halloran 1994).

Attempting to maximize pecuniary rewards is not necessarily the only purpose of such acts. A range of goals can motivate bureaucrats, including societally beneficial outcomes (Downs 1967; Gailmard and Patty 2007). Ultimately, bureaucrats can harbor convictions that they know better than the government what is good policy for the state, the

a result of decentralization and private-sector involvement. Yet, this mostly applies in the production of services.

nation, or society. Such convictions do not have to constitute a large problem. But they can generate unproductive advice and sabotaged implementation when bureaucrats disagree with the government and cannot be brought into line.

What this implies is that meritocracy results in bureaucratic quality only in the presence of some measure of bureaucratic responsiveness to government aims and policies. Responsiveness connotes the willingness of the bureaucrats to serve diverging governments and their policies with equal care. Responsiveness neither equals bureaucrats' loyalty to parliament, a wider public, a specific political order or regime nor loyalty to a particular government. Instead, it is driven by loyalty to any government in its authority as government. This type of loyalty is similar to what David Easton (1975: 437) terms 'diffuse support,' something that may be hard to articulate and defend as opposed to specific support but is nevertheless powerful in determining norms of behavior.

Unresponsiveness emerges when the bureaucracy perceives that a government policy or goal opposes its own, third party, or societal interests. In a given country, unresponsiveness is observed as differences from one policy (or government) to another in the bureaucracy's willingness to serve political orders from above. Unresponsiveness occurs where bureaucrats try to avoid, diverge, or distract policy making or implementation (slack, shirking, or sabotage) and thus hurt the accuracy and swiftness of bureaucratic quality (for a similar definition and application of the concept, see Aberbach and Rockman 1994; West 2005).

Hence, I argue that meritocracy without responsiveness is likely to damage bureaucratic quality - particularly in terms of swiftness and accuracy. But the opposite is equally true: Responsiveness without meritocracy likely damages bureaucratic quality because 'blind' adherence to government policy may hurt the bureaucracy's competence and

impartiality. Politicized bureaucracies tend to become ‘blind,’ that is, subject to manipulation by the government. This raises the risk of biased and/or incompetent decision-making. In other words, there are inherent tensions between bureaucratic values such as obedience, expertise, and principle. Rather than assuming responsiveness from meritocracy, these tensions can only be considered by conceiving of responsiveness and meritocracy as in continuous battle – in the minds of individual politicians and bureaucrats and in political parties and bureaucratic organizations (see Ibid.). The next section more formally shows how the conflict between meritocracy and responsiveness unfolds.

Politicization in the mirror of unresponsiveness

In realizing the potential damages of meritocracy, politicization is one widely used strategy that selects bureaucrats with the same political convictions. Politicization all in all impairs bureaucratic quality but to be able to understand the forging of bureaucratic quality, one first needs to recognize that politicization, beyond its function to gain political support, serves the purpose of ensuring that bureaucracies implement government policies in the intended way (see Peters and Pierre 2004; Kopecky et al. 2012).

To elaborate on these points, I take inspiration from the PA literature (see Huber and Shipan 2002). In the PA framework, a principal such as the government delegates authority to an agent, a bureaucrat, due to the complexity of administrating (and changing) society. But this agent has its own interests and information asymmetry of the task at hand, thus increasing the risk that the agent under certain circumstances commits moral hazard. This simple but general problem can be modelled by the concept of zones of acceptance (Simon 1976). Consider an abstract case where two actors interact in a hierarchical relationship. One actor, the government, wants to direct the other actor, the bureaucracy, to

faithfully implement its policy. The government and the bureaucracy each have a 'zone of acceptance', that is, a range of policy positions that they consider acceptable. Bureaucratic responsiveness occurs where there is an intersection between the government's and the bureaucracy's zones of acceptance. But if the government policy is outside the bureaucracy's zone of acceptance, disobedience, slack, shirking, or sabotage likely occur as the bureaucracy resists or becomes dissatisfied with the orders it receives. Stated bluntly, bureaucratic quality suffers if political-administrative relations are marked by contention and conflict rather than cooperation.

Monitoring and sanctions can constrain either the process or the outcome of bureaucratic decisions and thus force the bureaucracy to toe the government's line. However, adopting these constraints comes with its own set of problems. First, for some bureaucratic tasks outputs and outcomes are either not visible or not clearly connected, which limits the utility of using controls and sanctions considerably (Wilson 1989). Second, monitoring, sanctioning, and procedural constraints are costly in terms of the agents' ability to adapt to changing circumstances (e.g. Epstein and O'Halloran 1994: 701-702; see also Huber and Shipan 2002: Ch. 4). Third, and relatedly, even in situations where monitoring and sanctions apply perfectly, bureaucrats may rely on rules in an overly rigid fashion by producing exactly what the rules specify without consideration of the details of the individual case or task. As Simon (1976) realized, this is not beneficial to effective fulfilment of goals. Instead, what is often needed is some measure of subordinate acceptance that these goals are worth pursuing meaning that the goals are to some extent internalized and thus subject to the full attention and skill of the bureaucrats.

Provided these arguments, it becomes clear that bureaucratic unresponsiveness is a problem for a political leadership. The ally principle suggests that politicization is one

possible remedy to this problem because it ensures obedience by hiring civil servants whose zones of acceptance overlap with that of the government. However, politicization comes at a cost. In a less stylized line of thinking, of course, the government does not replace the whole bureaucracy but replaces managers, department or agency heads, or other key employees, who shape the goals and behavior of their organizations. While this limited politicization strategy is often used to extend the government's overall control into otherwise meritocratic bureaucracies, it merely tends to move the problems of moral hazard and information asymmetry further down the chain of PA relations, now between the politically hired official and the bureaucratic offices he is supposed to manage.

More fundamentally, politicization harms bureaucratic quality for several reasons, even when the zones of acceptance of government and bureaucracy intersect. First, politicization increases the risk that the bureaucracy becomes corrupt as the government has less incentive to oversee and expose it (Dahlström et al. 2012). Second, politicization makes employment in the state bureaucracy less attractive to competent and ambitious careerists (Lewis 2008: 143-145). Third, politicization may de-motivate bureaucrats from investing in the acquisition of field specific knowledge and consequently diminishes bureaucratic expertise (Gailmard and Patty 2007). Fourth, politicization may permit the government or related interest groups to pursue rents through loyal appointees in the bureaucracy at the cost of the pursuit of more general duties (Miller 2000). Finally, the increased job insecurity that politicization entails for the bureaucrats means that they have less incentive to commit to the implementation of long-term projects (Cornell 2014: 195).

Meritocracy and responsiveness combined as solution

Meritocratic recruitment is initiated because, as is well established in the literature, it makes administrations perform better than politicized ones in terms of policy advice and implementation. For a political principal, meritocracy benefits solutions to complex problems and particularly charged issues, such as socioeconomic development and distribution (see Dahlström et al. 2012). But meritocracy also bears political costs that make it hard to escape politicization. I now show why meritocracy needs responsiveness – not only to achieve bureaucratic quality but also to incentivize the establishment of meritocracy in the first place and ensure against rollbacks of meritocratic recruitment rules.

To show this, consider the abstract case where responsiveness is modelled through the bureaucracy's zones of acceptance. Zones of acceptance are not fixed but can vary in width (Simon 1976: 115-117, 130-134). For bureaucrats, wide zones of acceptance mean that they will faithfully assist in policy-making and implementation to reach a wide variety of government policies. As a consequence, intersections between governments' and bureaucrats' zones of acceptance become more likely. Indeed, the acceptance of many government policies is automatic simply because the policies are initiated by the government as the superior political authority – not because the bureaucracy is particularly pragmatic or agnostic when it comes to ideology or policy solutions. In this way, responsiveness prevents problems when government changes: Since responsive bureaucrats see the incumbent government as their ultimate source of authority, they will frequently be as willing to implement the policies of incoming governments as they were willing to implement the policies of its predecessors. This is why responsiveness is central to improve bureaucratic quality but, as indicated, is also why meritocracy is needed to avoid blind adherence to government wishes.

Responsiveness also explains variations in bureaucratic quality within and between countries on a deeper level because it explains the dynamics of contention over meritocratic reforms. Let us begin from the observation that governments considering the adoption of meritocratic systems anticipate that meritocracy may make the goals the bureaucracy pursues divert from their own. In some contexts, the government strategy is then to build a meritocratic bureaucracy with strong organizational or professional interests. Such interests allegedly tie the bureaucracy to serve a given ‘public interest’ (Silberman 1993: 40, 414-415). Yet, even this solution poses challenges to bureaucratic quality because the personnel of these bureaucracies are experts with strong professional opinions that do not necessarily align with government policy. As Weber famously saw, the expertise of professional bureaucrats may divert policy further away from politicians and delegitimize any ideologically motivated counterarguments: “The power position of a fully developed bureaucracy is always great, under normal conditions overtowering” (Weber 1978: 991).

If meritocratic recruitment is applied and the bureaucrats are not responsive, politicization becomes attractive. At some point, a government may come into power whose zone of acceptance does not overlap with that of the now permanent bureaucracy. As a result, the government will have reason to roll back meritocratic recruitment, particularly to managerial posts, to permit itself to follow the ally principle and politicize (such rollbacks do occur, see e.g. Geddes 1991). Rolling back meritocracy is costly for governments because meritocratic, professional bureaucracies often successfully unite to defend their established privileges (Shefter 1994). In turn, reforms may in fact introduce employment protection schemes, which add a shielding of bureaucrats from quick mass lay-offs. In some contexts where multiple veto players have to agree before reform can be adopted, rolling back meritocracy may be prohibitively costly even for governments facing very large control

problems vis-a-vis their bureaucracy. However, in most instances, with less powerful veto players, meritocracy would be rolled back if responsiveness fails. In fact, since rollbacks may be costly, governments may avoid meritocratic reforms in the first place if they fear that their bureaucracies will be unresponsive. Therefore, these reforms often stall and typically only succeed in trial-and-error fashion under substantial political uncertainty (see e.g. Silberman 1993: Chs. 11-12).

When realizing the political worries of unresponsiveness to follow meritocratic reform, it becomes clear that the combination of meritocracy and responsiveness is very hard to achieve but also that forging responsiveness would remove political barriers to initiate and successfully install meritocracy. However, pecuniary incentives only work instrumentally to motivate certain behavior but are highly dependent on year-to-year financing that make them a less durable source of responsiveness (see Olsen 2006: 13). A more effective, and less costly, way of achieving a stable pattern of accurate and swift bureaucratic performance comes through an internalization of norms of behavior. One powerful source that internalizes responsiveness is diffuse support – a sort of historically grounded force that transfers basic legitimacy from one government to the next, even amidst fundamental regime or policy changes (see also Easton 1975: 437). For instance, a shared national identity makes it easier for shifting governments to command the loyalty of bureaucrats from different ethnic or socioeconomic strata of society (Englebert 2000; Wimmer 2013: Ch. 5). Responsiveness is more often than not the outcome of such highly complex social processes as nation-building unfolding over decades, or even centuries.

Summing up, modelling bureaucratic responsiveness leads to the proposition (1) that a meritocratically recruited but unresponsive bureaucracy is likely to cause low quality in constructing and implementing policies. I thus expect to observe that meritocratically

recruited but unresponsive bureaucrats in a given state bureaucracy successfully obstruct government policies – in particular those policies that they perceive to threaten their personal, ideological, and/or institutional interests. I further propose (2) that governments typically value bureaucratic responsiveness just as highly as meritocracy and thus try to roll back meritocratic reforms if bureaucrats are perceived to be unresponsive. From these two propositions, it is clear that responsiveness, even in the presence of meritocracy, is essential in explaining bureaucratic quality.

The formation of bureaucratic quality in Prussia and Germany

To examine the two above propositions empirically, I argue that one needs to go historical by analyzing Prussia and Imperial and Weimar, a period from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The word ‘historical’ has two meanings here: First, the choice of the historical cases of Prussia and Imperial and Weimar Germany is deliberate since these cases are paradigmatic for understanding the consequences of meritocracy and bureaucratic quality – scholars indirectly refer to Prussia and Germany when theorizing so-called ‘Weberian’ bureaucracy. The Prussian-German bureaucracy thus gives specifically high analytical leverage to investigate the two propositions. Another benefit of historical cases is that the status of the variables studied is conclusive. Studying the Prussia-German past delimits time and space with clear analytical benefits. By tracing the first centuries of bureaucratization in Prussia and Germany one may look into periods where the developments of meritocracy and responsiveness are in their infancy and their interaction is most clearly shown. Prussia and Germany are further ideal cases because they are easily comparable (Prussia being the mother country of Imperial Germany) and because they both experienced numerous attempts at bureaucratic reform.

Second, the historical cases are ‘coincidentally chosen’ since I had to look for a combination of meritocracy and unresponsiveness that is relatively rare. This is only logical given my argument that governments, absent bureaucratic responsiveness, frequently politicize their administrative systems. As a result, Prussia and Germany – as would any other set of cases - are historically contingent in some respects. Nevertheless, they are among the few cases with relatively clear-cut meritocracy amidst notable instances of unresponsiveness.

As I show below, the Prussian and German expert bureaucracies certainly had strategic advantages over differently constrained governments⁶ in forwarding their own preferences for reform or stagnation. I mention these advantages – e.g. an immense external pressure such as the threat of war and extinction and internal problems such as staggering population growth and urban poverty that needed the building of a strong, autonomous bureaucracy (see e.g. Hagen 1976: 117; Sheehan 1989) - without much commenting. Yet, I elaborate on the simple point that the bureaucracies actually used these advantages to further their interests. I thus primarily trace the dynamics of responsiveness and show that bureaucrats were disciplined when the government was strong and acted successfully as veto-players preventing rollbacks or alterations of the career-based civil service system as well as several other key government policies when the government was weak.⁷

⁶ The period, for instance, covers monarchical absolutism, constitutional monarchism, and a democratic-republican regime.

⁷ Until the early twentieth century, the level of detail in scholars’ description and analysis of implementation processes and politician-bureaucrat interaction is relatively low – not just because of a lack of available primary sources but also due to the fact that the scope of the public sector only widened considerably with welfare provisions (Steinmetz 1993: 50-51). In turn, the early periods of the analysis focus mostly on civil service and government reforms alongside the relatively fewer examples of financial regulation and social legislation.

Writings on Prussian and German bureaucratic history are rich and varied. Whereas some of the early twentieth century scholars (e.g. Friedrich 1933) praised the autonomous nature of the German bureaucracy and its continued power from Prussia to Weimar, much of the postwar German scholarship focused on the downsides of the bureaucratic power and political leverage that followed from meritocracy (see e.g. Rosenberg 1958; Gillis 1971; Mann 1985: 85-86; Caplan 1988; Mommsen 1991; McElligott 2014). My analysis basically follows the latter group of scholars but by connecting the rich empirical details of their analyses with my theoretical propositions, I put the Prussian and German bureaucratic cases in comparative perspective.

As I present the cases chronologically, I divide them into relatively isolated periods where meritocratic bureaucrats successfully hindered large-scale rollbacks of bureaucratic autonomy and obstructed key policies. For clarification, I speak of ‘Prussian’ bureaucracy until the unification of Prussia and the other German states in 1871 and of ‘German’ bureaucracy from that point on because post-1871 German bureaucracy highly resembled the Prussian model. Next, issues of *Staat-Länder* coordination to some extent inflicted governance problems in post-1871 Germany but such issues are not regarded as instances of unresponsiveness or low bureaucratic quality and thus excluded from analysis. I further distinguish between three types of government: the monarchs (-1870),⁸ the Emperors/Chancellors in conjunction (1871-1918),⁹ and the Chancellors as elected by the

⁸ The absolutist powers of the Prussian monarch were curtailed in the 1850 constitution but he was still the supreme commander and executive power.

⁹ The Emperor had legislative prerogatives in foreign affairs but he needed the counter-signature of the Chancellor whom the Emperor himself had chosen. Simple majorities in both the *Bundesrat* and *Reichstag* had formal legislative prerogatives in domestic affairs but they neither chose the Emperor nor the Chancellor and parliament failed to achieve decisive political power.

Reichstag (1919-1933)¹⁰ (for discussions of the constitutional histories of Prussia and Germany, see Koch 1984: 25, 71, 79-80, 123-126, 266-267).

Before presenting the details of the cases, an overview of the development of meritocracy, responsiveness, and bureaucratic quality is warranted. The foundation of meritocracy was laid by the Frederick William (1640-1688) but only materialized with an autonomous organization recruiting from universities after 1794. The principle of meritocratic staffing and autonomy from politicization only strengthened through critical junctures in the 19th century and in Imperial and Weimar Germany. Responsiveness, by contrast, experienced ups and downs from monarch to monarch and government to government and on an overall account decreased from late eighteenth century and remained problematic in Imperial (except under Bismarck) and Weimar Germany. Levels of bureaucratic quality were only high in terms of competence, gradually increasing as university graduates replaced Junkers as civil servants from late eighteenth to late nineteenth century. However, the accuracy and swiftness in serving governmental policies took a downturn under Frederick William II (1786-1797) and deepened under subsequent monarchs, revamped under Bismarck, weakened again after Bismarck's death to an ambiguous mid-level, and declined to dramatically low levels after 1918.

Bureaucratic reforms in late seventeenth and eighteenth century Prussia

I begin in late seventeenth century Prussia. At this time, the Hohenzollern kings centralized, refined, and empowered the bureaucracy which became relatively effective – compared to

¹⁰ The Weimar constitution was ambiguous on the relationship between the executive and legislative power. Of relevance here, the Chancellor could be removed by a vote of no confidence by the *Reichstag* but the President chose the Chancellor and ruled on near-absolutist terms in periods of emergency (such as from the mid-1930 to Hitler's takeover in 1933).

European contemporaries - in terms of public goods provision and tax collection (Fischer and Lundgreen 1975: 510-517). Neither meritocracy nor responsiveness as conceptualized here but some premature forms of them formed this bureaucratic quality.

Hiring and firing of bureaucrats was managed politically, by the king personally or by commissions under royal supervision. The Great Elector, Frederick William (1640-1688), and his successors, including Frederick II the Great (1740-1786), effectively rooted out patrimonial tendencies at the central levels of bureaucracy by recruiting on merit. It was no fully-fledged meritocracy, however, since higher-level civil servants were only chosen among noble families and non-noble but wealthy men (Ibid.: 521-522; Ertman 1997: 248, 253-254).

Meritocracy and responsiveness were relatively well established in most of the eighteenth century but there was significant variation in responsiveness that concerned the kings. During the reign of at least three kings, the small central bureaucracy was generally unified and obedient to royal policies. This was evident from its success in cost-efficient and well-prepared tax extraction and organization for military conquest in accordance with royal wishes and with minimal corruption. The bureaucracy's militarily organized hierarchy and stable and predictable career paths contributed to this (Braun 1975: 276-277). Obedience was also nurtured by the Great Elector's 'Calvinist-disciplinary revolution from above' connecting symbolically the duty of office and royal service to religiosity (Gorski 2003: 80). Yet, as this bureaucracy excelled in revenue collection and became moneyed and equipped, it developed a self-sufficient attitude very well aware that the king was completely dependent upon its effort and expertise (Fischer and Lundgreen 1975: 510-517). So, for Frederick William I (1713-1740) the first priority was the tying and disciplining of the bureaucracy to

serve the crown. In turn, he installed boards to monitor the powerful administrative body, the General Directory (Sheehan 1989: 63; Gorski 2003: 80).

At the local level, the Hohenzollern kings initially managed to decrease the fusion of economic and administrative powers in the Junker estates (as simultaneously tax collectors and employers) in East Elbia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, the Junkers preserved their local-administrative authority and right to nominate candidates for the main office of local bureaucracy, that is, county commissioner in the *Landrats* (Braun 1975: 273). In matters of land, agriculture, and taxation, the Junkers' interests differed substantially from those of the king which led to continuous conflicts over the financing of public goods, most notably a standing army. This concerned how and at what level tax rates should be set and the reach of local autonomy that the Junkers should enjoy in return for extracting taxes (Ertman 1997: 246, 250). Royal reliance on traditional patrimonial institutions thus worried the kings continuously but, given the Junkers' economic power and position as controllers of peasants, a purging of Junkers was not an option (Sheehan 1989: 40). PA problems were thus built into the recruitment system because the interests of the agents, the Junkers, differed from those of the principal, the king. The gradual phase-out of Junkers in the administration by university-educated middle-class recruits was a deliberate attempt to solve this PA problem but, as indicated later, only created new issues of controlling professionals.

By the late eighteenth century, although basic reforms were still in the making, the basis of the later popularized 'Weberian' bureaucracy was established. However, the organizational strengthening of the bureaucracy and the nurturing of a bureaucratic class had come with their own expenses. From here, the usual presentation of Prussia's bureaucracy as a responsive unit seems particularly misleading.

Bureaucratic quality was, consequently, strained in accuracy and swiftness. By 1780, still under the strict disciplinary eye of Frederick II the Great, the bureaucracy had outgrown the General Directory and become a diversified, professional group with a corporate interest and identity based as it was on recruitment of university candidates. It also acted independently of the aristocracy. The expanding bureaucracy saw the small General Directory as an outdated royal service whose very existence was contradictory to the task of economic modernization and state-building. Outright unresponsiveness to the king rarely occurred. However, one prominent example is that the bureaucratic rank managed to force through a codification of rules of merit in recruitment that the king did not want. The king instead wished to maintain hirings and firings at his discretion (Hagen 1976: 42, 116) – a fundamental breach of bureaucratic accuracy in serving government wishes. Further, even though Frederick II insisted on personally viewing all pieces of legislation before enactment, the bureaucracy, due to its expertise, had considerable influence on the framing of problems, their policy solutions, and the implementation thereof to an extent that limited the de facto ability of the king to determine the direction and pace of policy implementation (Dorn 1931: 405, 414). The task of controlling bureaucrats was thus increasingly relevant for the Crown during the latter half of the eighteenth century but also an increasing concern around which serious political disputes circled (Sheehan 1989: 142).

Bureaucratic authoritarianism in nineteenth century Prussia

When Frederick II died in 1786 and the lesser capable Frederick William II (1786-1797) inherited the throne, the bureaucracy started dominating policy-making almost completely (Rosenberg 1958: 94). Exploiting the weakness of the king, the bureaucracy managed to establish itself as a class of professionals, the *Beamtenstand*, in the *Allgemeine Landrecht* of

1794 that guaranteed tenure by law and limited the formally absolutist, policy-making authority of the Crown. But to many among the bourgeois, university educated bureaucratic elites the larger goal was to bring the Prussian state and society in tune with the spirit of the French Revolution – that is, to abolish serfdom and the monarchy as such. This led to continued clashes with the king in the Law Commission - the main policy-making organ (Gray 1986: 42-43). Once again, the king had trouble determining policy directions and implementation pace.

Only a decade later, in 1807, Prussia's defeat in the battle of Jena to Napoleon's France forced Frederick William III (1797-1840) to install an emergency ministry led by the early agitators of constitutional reform, Stein and Hardenberg. While the king gave them wide-ranging authority to reform the political and administrative system, he did not foresee that Stein and Hardenberg would exploit this window of opportunity to strengthen bureaucracy at the expense of the Crown and initiate what has been termed the era of 'bureaucratic absolutism' (Ibid.: 73; Beck 1995: 125-127). Thus, all state offices were opened to competition on the basis of merit, and the General Directory was dissolved and replaced by ministries (Gillis 1971: 6-7, 11). Whereas the threat to Prussia's survival initially gave the opportunity for bureaucracy to take decisive power in 1807 (Sheehan 1989: 70), this does not explain the emergence of the *Allgemeine Landrecht* before 1807. Instead, as indicated, the expertise and autonomy of bureaucrats resulted in much lower bureaucratic quality than expected from a meritocratic system.

The continued bureaucratic dominance after 1807 was also primarily driven by the power of a meritocratic and autonomous bureaucracy. Until 1848, the increasingly meritocratic bureaucracy routinely circumvented royal wishes, weakening the accuracy and swiftness of bureaucratic quality. Policy-making in this period was simply dominated by the

bureaucracy, even when policies contradicted the will of the monarch, for instance in the abolition of serfdom and initiation of free movement of paupers which initially worried the king on behalf of his powerbase among the Junkers (Beck 1995: 1, 152, 157, 168; Eddie 2013: 2-3, 10, 16). The king, despite his still formidable formal powers in legislation and execution, could only passively observe the implementation of unwanted initiatives, not least those that eroded royal power (Rosenberg 1958: Ch. 9). Bureaucratic unresponsiveness went hand in hand with the nurturing of the bureaucracy's veto player status in policy-making and implementation. This was the stuff of what had basically developed into a bureaucratic authoritarian regime (Ibid.).

1848 was a watershed for Europe's as well as Prussia's autocrats. In the mid-nineteenth century, the *Beamten* had come to see themselves as 'Plato's Guardian Class' (Gillis 1971: 16), deeply engaged with and sure of their prerogative in policy-making by virtue of their power of knowledge and organization. In and around the time of liberal revolution in 1848, this proved to insulate the bureaucracy from political changes at the expense of royal power. Specifically, in the period leading up to 1848 the bureaucracy distorted the execution of royal orders and thus contributed to the demise of the Crown. From the 1830s, notably liberally oriented bureaucrats started to oppose the conservative governance paradigm that ensured bureaucracy's power under alleged, though actually limited, guidance from a supposedly enlightened monarch. This was a source of intra-bureaucratic conflict but also another source of unresponsiveness to the monarchical ambitions of Frederick William III. The mobilization by liberal bureaucrats of progressive groups for enfranchisement of the middle class and a revolution of the economic order in Prussia and other German states (Sheehan 1989: 633-634) illustrates a clear and serious

divergence between the zones of acceptance of a group of bureaucrats and the king that harmed the swiftness and accuracy of bureaucratic quality considerably.

When revolution approached in 1848, the conservative bureaucratic class closer to the new king, Frederick William IV (1840-1861), managed to preserve its power at the center of political decision-making by accepting a liberal constitution that ensured gradual reform without altering the basic identity of bureaucracy (Gillis 1971: 172; Mommsen 1991: 79). Importantly, the bureaucracy knew the king's interest in preventing further constitutional limits on his powers but did not respect it. Instead, the bureaucracy was more concerned with its own survival than supporting royal directives. Despite notable reforms aimed at politicizing bureaucratic careers during the 1840s and 1850s, the bureaucracy only increased its autonomy and power as a politically vital group – much to the king's regret (Sheehan 1989: 719-720). Against the predictions of meritocracy, the divergent zones of acceptance of the bureaucracy and the king led to bureaucratic unresponsiveness to royal wishes that harmed bureaucratic quality in fundamental matters of civil service reform and regime traits.

Aversion of challenges to bureaucratic power in Imperial Germany

The Prussian Foreign Minister Bismarck unified the German states through the 1860s. As a result, the Prussian model of state bureaucracy was adopted as model for the German Empire. The spreading of meritocracy went easily because all German states shared legacies of relatively strong meritocratic bureaucracies (Ziblatt 2006: 113-115).

Perhaps surprisingly, given the typical assessment of Bismarck as a strong Chancellor, the autonomy and power of bureaucracy was only consolidated further under Bismarck (1871-1890) (Gillis 1971: 172; Mommsen 1991: 79). But Bismarck was still highly concerned about issues of political control of the bureaucracy that otherwise was so

successful. In turn, he managed to some extent to make bureaucracy toe his line through strict enforcement of disciplinary laws. These were helped along by his political alliance with the Junkers and a common political-bureaucratic concern for the welfare of the nation state and the forging of heavy industry (Caplan 1979: 306; Bonham 1983: 650). Greater responsiveness was thus obtained but based on monitoring and sanctioning and temporary loyalty to specific policies.

As expected, such responsiveness did not survive government changes. After Bismarck's removal in 1890, the German Imperial bureaucracy remained extremely influential in policy-making but its zone of acceptance did not always overlap with that of shifting Conservative Chancellors from the Bismarckian through the Wilhelmine era. This resulted in increasing implementation problems such as in designing and executing social protection schemes where government proposals were sometimes delayed or circumvented in bureaucratic agencies (see e.g. Mann 1985: 85-86; Mommsen 1991: 79).

Alongside conflicts between Chancellors and bureaucrats, the new challenge to bureaucratic power from parliament grew and bureaucracy became a more heterogeneous organization. But even the more liberal or socialist bureaucrats subordinated themselves to bureaucratic interests. The line of conflict between Chancellors and the bureaucracy thus continued. To keep opposition in bureaucracy in check, Chancellors from 1890 to 1914 institutionalized in the *Reichstag* a group of so-called 'political bureaucrats' (*politische beamte*) whose function was to ensure loyal adherence to conservative policies in policy-making and implementation.

This politicization solution to a problem of unresponsiveness was, however, limited in success. Because of constitutional guarantees of bureaucratic autonomy, the *politische beamte* of the bureaucracy were highly limited in number and power. Moreover,

even the *politische beamte* could hardly be manipulated with by Chancellors. These bureaucrats were educated in universities and affected by the ethos of constitutional protection that dominated bureaucratic offices more generally (Mann 1985: 85-86; Gillis 1971: 33). As loyalty to the Chancellor would often imply an ambiguous stance on constitutional provisions, given the hybrid nature of the regime and parliamentary powers, these bureaucrats most often became disillusioned with politics rather than active political assets for the governments.

This pattern only crystallized further from the first years of the twentieth century when the the social democratic SPD increased its mandates in the *Reichstag* and later, in 1912, became Germany's most popular party (Mommesen 1991: 79). Until 1918, SPD was more revolutionary than reformist and its radical proposals to reform and democratize bureaucracy and strip the king and Chancellor of unchecked executive power were tried frequently in the early twentieth century but forcefully circumvented by higher-level bureaucrats in the ministries who, at this point, defended the Emperor-Chancellor power conundrum in which their own powers were vested (Caplan 1979: 308; Koch 1984: 146). Also, SPD was initially against social insurance to workers but nevertheless adopted by Bismarck and expanded by an increasingly activist bureaucracy after 1890 (Steinmetz 1993: 126-127). Unresponsiveness and, consequently, low bureaucratic quality were thus particularly strong when bureaucracy itself was the target of the policy.

Summing up on the Imperial German period from 1848 to 1918, problems of bureaucratic quality were, in contrast to predictions of meritocracy, confined to the periods when the bureaucracy acted most autonomously from government pressure. Bureaucratic quality waxed and waned not primarily with the level of meritocracy but mostly with the alignment of governmental and bureaucratic policy positions. It is characteristic that

implementation of economic policies was generally very effective. But civil service and constitutional reforms were sabotaged and mired in considerable political-bureaucratic conflicts and welfare policies were dominated by bureaucratic interests against significant resistance among parliamentary actors with legislative prerogatives. Consequently, responsiveness remained a major concern for governments but attempts at politicization such as the installation of *politische beamte* proved unsuccessful because of the bureaucracy's professionalism and veto player status.

At the brink of revolution in 1918-1919, what were then the prospects of bureaucratic responsiveness to the coming democratic-republican system?

Bureaucratic power preservation in democratic Weimar Germany

Let us look at three of the most salient issues to assess bureaucratic quality in Weimar Germany: civil service reform, socioeconomic policies, and law and order. First, civil service reform negotiations in 1918-1919 in many ways were a replay of former political-bureaucratic interaction despite the unusual circumstance of military defeat in World War I. SPD and DDP (German Democratic Party) opted for a radical break with the past by installing genuine social democracy and democratizing the civil service. They did not trust the old monarchical elite bureaucrats and sought to purge them. But they were met with considerable resistance from a unified *Beamtenstand*, including those bureaucrats with no attachment to the previous monarchy. The *Beamtenstand* was further supported by the *politische beamten* in the conservative party, DVP (German People's Party), and higher-level servants in the ministries (Runge 1965: 36-38). Furthermore, SPD and DDP quickly realized that a rebuilding of Germany after the war required the old bureaucracy and its expertise (Bockenforde 1985: 15-16). As a result, the constitution confirmed bureaucrats' protected

status and privileges as installed in the constitution of 1848. Changes to the meritocratic personnel system were sabotaged and delayed, even when SPD governments wanted change.

Some reforms in the early 1920s cut back on salary and rooted out remaining social privileges within medium- and low-level bureaucratic ranks. However, because of bureaucratic resistance several SPD governments failed to implement policies aimed at a democratization of civil service. The bureaucracy organized a trade union, DBB (*Deutsche Beamtenbund*), with the clear purpose of protecting civil service interests against parliamentary politics and working class ideology (Caplan 1988: 59-61). Also, unorganized lower-level civil servants simply circumvented reforms that, for instance, would have changed criteria for career advancement. Otherwise, department heads used their intimate connection with conservative parliamentarians to stall further reform policies (Runge 1965: 119). Thus, when the core interests of bureaucrats were at stake, they were both willing and able to sabotage clear government orders.

Cut-backs and rationalization only grew substantial after several efforts and more strict enforcement from the late 1920s and from 1930 under Chancellor Heinrich Brüning (Caplan 1988: 76-77). As expected given the importance of responsiveness, this served to break down the confidence between the bureaucracy as a whole and the government institution.

Comparing across periods, the explanation of the failed civil service reform attempts during the Weimar Republic is strikingly similar to that of the eighteenth and nineteenth century monarchs' insufficient attempts at rolling back the 1794-code: a combination of a political-functional need to have strong bureaucratic organizations (especially in the immediate aftermath of WWI) and the veto player strength of bureaucracy. The only difference in Weimar and Imperial Germany as opposed to early nineteenth century

Prussia was that the bureaucracy's power was further empowered by a nation-wide corporate organization that served bureaucratic interests.

In contrast to civil service reform proposals, fiscal and monetary management in Weimar Germany was generally very effective despite the difficult economic circumstances. Some examples of sabotaged implementation did occur, however. For instance, the most radical socialist reforms were tacitly circumvented in the ministries (Mäding 1985: 96). An example is the implementation of the 8-hour working day, which was effective at first but gradually hollowed out as the responsible ministries remained passive when employers led working hours creep up to their traditionally high levels (McElligott 2014: 79).

As is shown by Müller's (2014) analysis of the Ministry of Economics, not all ministries were opposed to socialist or Keynesian policies. Nonetheless, even the labor ministry, dominated by socialists and trade unions, was taken over by conservative bureaucrats from 1924 (Liu 1997: 363). This augmented the general tendency of the bureaucracy to guide social change towards pre-war economic policies benefitting heavy industry as opposed to workers and farmers. This continued across the period of hyperinflation until 1924, the financial stabilization from 1924 to 1929, and the unemployment crisis from 1929 (Petzina 1985: 46, 55-56; Mommsen 1991: 83, 86, 90, 100, 111-112).

Third, judges were among the oldest, most conservative of the bureaucrats and also among the most unresponsive. True, the judicial sphere was by law relatively more insulated from politics than the remaining bureaucracy but judges were still obliged to follow the democratic spirit of the Weimar constitution. Nevertheless, many of them saw the shifting governments inherent in a democracy as threatening the integrity of their vocation.

Therefore, their court rulings became increasingly biased towards conservative values. This was characteristic of the Länder jurisdiction where Junkers still dominated and practiced regular breaches of administrative protocols. Relatedly, when terrorism appeared in the 1920s, judges were notorious for protecting right-wingers (such as *Freikorps* and SA) as opposed to left-wingers (McElligott 2014: 172).¹¹ Judges also deliberately used their rulings and public deliberations to undermine the symbols of the republic (Craig 1978: 420). In turn, rulings became instances of unresponsiveness to certain (social democratic) governments. Judges also allied with the *Beamtenbund* in their attempt to protect bureaucrats' professional autonomy – especially as they were pressured on salary (McElligott 2014: 100-103).

Summing up, the Prussian and German cases largely corroborate the propositions that 1) a meritocratically recruited but unresponsive bureaucracy is ineffective in constructing and implementing policies, and that 2) governments try to roll back meritocratic reforms when bureaucrats are perceived to be unresponsive. Bureaucratic quality was harmed in the periods where unresponsiveness was most pronounced. This problem did not rise from politicization but instead increased continuously over time as bureaucracy became more meritocratic and grew in professionalism and autonomy.

As this suggests, the analysis allows me to go one step deeper. In explaining the level of responsiveness in Prussia and Germany, my cases indicate the importance of diffuse support, in particular national identity. Responsiveness was a primary concern for kings, Chancellors, semi-democratic, and fully democratic governments alike – and thus across the whole period of analysis. Specifically, it was the meritocratically oriented 1794-code and the successful 1807-reforms that limited the political and economic power of the political executive vis-à-vis bureaucracy. Kings and subsequent governments were thus trapped in a

¹¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

vicious circle whereby political control of bureaucracy via politicization would cause elite defection (under the more autocratic regimes) and public dissatisfaction (under the more democratic regimes). Since responsiveness never reached very high levels after a genuine bureaucratic organization was built in the mid-18th century, responsiveness seemed to lose out as long as meritocracy was in place. This period also corresponds with the centuries of aggressive and conflicting nation-building in the German states. In accordance with classical studies in nation-state formation (see Wimmer 2013: 114-115), it took the complete defeat of Hitler's Nazi regime in World War II – a major critical juncture - to decisively purge the old bureaucratic elites and reform the German bureaucratic ethos to one of public service through loyalty to shifting governments in the German Federal Republic (Mommsen 1991; Crawford et al. 1999).

Putting Prussia-Germany in comparative perspective

The findings in the Prussian-German cases have widespread implications. For reasons I will discuss, such comparative historical case studies improve our understanding of contemporary problems of bureaucratic quality in a wide range of cultural contexts.

First, the Prussian-German cases form an essential historical corrective to the current emphasis on meritocracy. While it is true that the degree of discrepancy between a very strong meritocratic bureaucratic class and substantial unresponsiveness makes these cases somewhat extraordinary, they pinpoint dimensions of politician-bureaucrat interaction among Western contemporaries. In the nineteenth century in particular, governments in the US (see analyses of the Pendleton Act, e.g. Fukuyama 2014: Chs. 9-10), England (see analyses of the Northcote-Trevelyan report, e.g. Hughes 1942), and France (see analyses of the Napoleonic reforms, e.g. Silberman 1993: Chs. 4-5) were notoriously concerned when

pushed to initiate meritocratic reforms with the exact issues of political control that the concept of responsiveness gets at. This historical dynamic explains why countries (mostly a select group of Western but also East Asian countries) today enjoy relatively high levels of responsiveness, meritocracy, and bureaucratic quality (see Dogan 1975: 4; Christensen 1991: 315).

Second, exactly because concerns over responsiveness were originally intertwined in the political negotiations on meritocracy, they cannot be disregarded in analyzing and understanding more fundamentally today's dynamics of bureaucratic reform and how bureaucracies function and assist policy-making and implementation. The PA literature is full of case studies and comparisons that observed the need for better organizational (and political) control of increasingly complex and autonomous bureaucracies in the meritocratic strongholds of Western (and to a lesser extent East Asian) countries after WWII and, in particular, from the 1970s when welfare systems some places had grown excessively complex and allegedly caused public budget deficits. This insight was a major motivation for installing New Public Management tools to measure and control the performance of bureaucrats (for an overview, see Gruening 2001: 6-7). At the same time, the failure of these instruments to provide better political control and their tendency to create new kinds of red tape and micromanagement devastated bureaucratic quality further and led to a resurgence of more traditional means of bureaucratic control. These developments are hard to explain without reference to the dual concern of securing meritocracy and increasing responsiveness (see Olsen 2006: 13; Fukuyama 2013: 352).

Third, the findings of this study also have significant though more limited implications for understanding postcolonial bureaucratic quality – or more often, the absence thereof. Upon gaining independence from their European colonial masters, most Latin

American oligarchic elites politicized bureaucracies in ‘pillars of party loyalists’ to facilitate inter-party trust and political stability and the dynamic basically continues today (Dahlström et al. 2012: 661). Pressures for bureaucratization in some countries led to selected agencies with meritocratic staffing procedures thus constituting ‘pockets of efficiency’ (Evans 1995). However, meritocratic reforms stalled due to presidential and majority-party incentives to sustain the control over the state apparatus and ensure survival in office. In the absence of meritocracy, this strategy to obtain bureaucratic compliance with political goals hindered fundamental improvements of bureaucratic quality (Geddes 1991). Thus, in the language of this article, the interaction between meritocracy and responsiveness informs dynamics of bureaucratic reform and levels of bureaucratic quality.

In cultural contexts farther away from the Western mass politics, Sub-Saharan African postcolonial bureaucracies to some extent need other explanatory frameworks than the one I have presented here. Analyses have illuminated the importance of a ‘Big Man’ political culture and the ‘politics of the belly’ (e.g. Bayart 2009). However, to understand African politician-bureaucrat interactions these assumptions of the main motives of African politicians must at least be complemented with more Weberian motives for fostering capable and responsive bureaucracies. As documented, Africa’s so-called ‘neo-patrimonial’ bureaucracies are dominated by phenomena such as slack, shirking, and sabotage that not only frustrate domestic parties and political elites, although their incentives and eventual behavior often draw them away from solving these problems (see e.g. Englebert 2000: 1824; Hyden 2006: Ch. 3). Nevertheless, the prevalence of patrimonial structures on balance makes my theoretical framework less relevant for analyzing Sub-Saharan African postcolonial bureaucracies. The failure of many African countries to even penetrate state territories with stable administrative infrastructure and the continued prevalence of local chiefs make

patterns of politician-bureaucrat interactions look more like those in early modern Europe (see Migdal 1988: 39-45).¹²

With this caveat in mind, the above points underline that cross-national research should be careful in employing meritocracy as the sole indicator of bureaucratic quality. Because responsiveness often coincides with meritocracy, for reasons I have discussed, such analysis would get the co-variation between them right. However, a scaling of meritocracy and responsiveness on a single dimension is likely due to a causal process, not the redundancy of the latter. In this sense, the analysis would be incomplete and only right for partially wrong reasons. Instead, a statistical explanation of bureaucratic quality ought to go beyond blunt scaling analyses and try to separate the causal effects of responsiveness from those of meritocracy, or analyses should be comparative-historical.

¹² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting me to take Migdal's work more into account in my analysis of postcolonial settings.

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