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Abstract

Studies of bureaucracy have expressed great concern about whether the bureaucracy exploits its informational advantage vis-à-vis politicians to influence policy decisions. Yet, little theorizing has been made about how such influence takes place. We identify and test three mechanisms that must be at work in order for policy information to function as a vehicle for political influence of bureaucrats. Using data from politicians and bureaucrats in five different political systems and survey experimental methods to deal with endogeneity and social desirability bias, we find evidence supporting all three mechanisms: Bureaucrats are generally willing to use policy information to influence political decisions, politicians rely on policy information from bureaucrats when making such decisions, and the way policy information is presented matters for the policy preferences of politicians. We discuss the implications of the results and factors that are important for the mechanisms to apply.
Introduction

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

While this example of bureaucratic influence on political decision-making is exceptional in its drama, it is far from unusual that political decisions are influenced by policy information from government officials. For over one hundred years, the literature on bureaucracy has pointed to the dilemma between bureaucratic expertise and political control. The nagging question is whether non-expert politicians can control a specialized and permanent bureaucracy. The literature on bureaucracy has provided no final answer to this question but agrees that bureaucrats hold a privileged information-providing role and occupy a key policy-advising role. Because they manage the flow of information to politicians, bureaucrats control, or at least influence, the set of problems and solutions that politicians consider (Goodnow 1900; Meier and O’Toole 2006; Niskanen 1971; Olsen 2005; Simon 1976 [1945], 45-60; Weber 1970 [1922]; Wilson 1887; Wilson 1989).

The literature points to several ways in which bureaucratic expertise may influence political decisions. Bureaucrats have complex motives. They can be motivated by a ‘public spirit’,
professionalism, and a role perception as civil servants, but they can also be motivated by self-interest (Golden 2000, 20-24). The latter type of motivation also entails that bureaucrats may seek their own policy objectives. This is a classic idea. Weber (1970 [1922], 233) cautioned that bureaucrats may withhold information from politicians; Niskanen (1971) notes that bureaucratic-political information asymmetries make it possible for bureaucrats to engage in political agenda-manipulation; and Baumgartner and Jones (2015) argue that bureaucratic expertise influences the identification of political problems.

Although many mechanisms may plausibly link bureaucratic expertise to politics, it has proven challenging to bring systematic empirical evidence on the causal impact on political preferences. The reason is probably that such an endeavor faces daunting methodological challenges. How can bureaucratic information-providing behavior of a manipulative nature realistically be observed? How can political reliance on bureaucratic expertise be mapped? How can the influence of information be isolated from the multitude of other factors that influence political preferences? Do bureaucrats sometimes provide information as a reaction to anticipated political decisions, or information they know their political masters like (reverse causality)?

Our contribution is to provide causal evidence on one way in which bureaucratic expertise may influence political decisions. More specifically, we study the bureaucratic provision of information that functions as the basis of political decisions on policy problems. We refer to this type of information as policy information (and discuss this concept in more detail later). For policy information to play a role in bureaucrats' shaping of political preferences, three mechanisms must operate. First, bureaucrats must be willing to use policy information to influence policy. Second, politicians should rely on policy information from bureaucrats when making political decisions. Third, the way information is presented should matter for political preferences. If one of these mechanisms or conditions fails, it is limited how much policy information will matter. However,
exploring the mechanisms empirically is methodologically challenging because of endogeneity and social desirability bias. The former refers to the two-way nature of the relationship between information and preferences. Information may influence preferences, but information may also be provided by bureaucrats in anticipation of political preferences. The latter refers to the tendency of people to underreport socially undesirable activities and overreport socially desirable ones (Krumbal 2013). Bureaucrats may not provide valid information on our first mechanism because it may be seen as illegitimate behavior. Politicians may not provide information on our second mechanism because it may portray them as incompetent.

We handle these methodological challenges with experimental designs (Mutz 2011). We study the first mechanism by involving a group of bureaucrats in a list experiment. In this type of experiment, respondents are randomly assigned to either a list of non-controversial statements or a list of the very same statements plus one additional controversial item, which is the one of interest to the researcher. The respondents are only asked how many statements they agree with but not which specific statements, and hence the respondent can express a potentially objectionable opinion to the controversial statement in the safe knowledge that the researcher cannot identify this answer (Glynn 2013). We investigate the second mechanism by a decision board experiment where respondents are asked to select pieces of information from different information sources in an online decision board (see Christensen and Moynihan 2020). This allows us to measure directly how much politicians rely on policy information as compared to other information sources. Since the decision board experiment to some degree suffers from issues of ecological validity, we supplement it with observational survey data. The third mechanism is studied by involving politicians in survey experiments in which we draw upon insights from psychology about framing (Tversky and Kahneman 1981).
The next section argues that the question of policy information has been an enduring concern in the study of bureaucracy and that arguments consistent with the two first mechanisms are common threads in the literature. This is followed by a discussion of the third mechanism, where we use framing theory to discuss how policy information can be shaped to affect decisions. Framing of information can have dramatic effects on preferences (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), and a recent study demonstrates its relevance for bureaucrats (Bellé et al. 2018). We then turn to our empirical investigation which is a series of three experimental studies of the three mechanisms outlined above that link policy information to political decisions. Our data stem from surveys of bureaucrats from the Danish central government and almost 5,000 local politicians from four countries: the USA, Denmark, Italy, and the Flanders region in Belgium.¹ We find evidence supporting all three mechanisms. This, of course, does not imply that bureaucrats will in practice always seek to use their informational advantage to shape political decisions, and it is entirely possible that politicians will be more likely to rely on policy information and be susceptible to framing under some circumstances than other. We return to these questions in the discussion.

**Policy information and bureaucratic influence**

Information has many meanings in political science and public administration. We focus on a particular type of information, which we label policy information. By this term we mean information from the permanent bureaucracy concerning the issues or problems confronting politicians. It is information that functions as the basis for political decisions on practical policy problems. Policy information is thus more technical than policy advice which is tactical information from the bureaucracy on how to maneuver the political decision process. It is more operational than

¹ While we refer to the Flanders region specifically rather than Belgium because only this region was surveyed in Belgium, we do not have reason to believe that our findings do not generalize to other parts of Belgium.
policy analysis, which is also a type of information that is regularly provided by the bureaucracy in the form of white papers, reports, policy briefs, and the like, and which serves a role in the development of politicians’ understanding of what constitutes political problems (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Feldman 1989). Policy information is technical, but operational. It suggests solutions to specified problems. It is reported by the permanent bureaucracy to politicians orally or in brief notes (Mangset and Asdal 2019), not in lengthy reports.

Policy information is central in modern political systems. Expertise is the basis of the power position of bureaucrats (Weber 1970 [1922]). According to Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman's (1981) images of the political-administrative relationship, politicians rely on bureaucrats for facts and knowledge. There is no clear distinction between politics and administration; politicians must rely on information from bureaucrats (Aberbach and Rockman 2006, 984-5). They do this because information is needed in order to understanding what problems are facing government, and what mix of solutions might be relevant to address them (Baumgartner and Jones 2015, 40-1). Bureaucrats “monitor issues for changes and potential problems” (Workman 2015, 26), help define problems and transmit information about this to politicians (Workman 2015, 34). According to this literature, politicians cannot rely on their own policy preferences alone, they need to get information about complex set of problems, and the bureaucracy is a vital source for this.

Information, of course, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is necessary for politicians in order to succeed in governing. On the other hand, policy information has potential as a means for bureaucratic influence on political decisions. This argument also figures prominently in the classic public administration literature. Max Weber (1970 [1922], 232) famously worried that “(t)he power position of a fully developed bureaucracy is always overtowering. The ‘political master’ finds himself in the position of the dilettante who stands opposite the ‘expert’.” Gulick (1937) also noted how much governments need expert advice from bureaucrats, but also how
inclined bureaucrats are to abuse their privileged positions – “Caveamus expertum,” he warned (Gulick 1937, 10). Ten years later, Simon (1976 [1945], 45-61) reached a similar conclusion in his analysis of fact and value in policy decisions. Values belong to the realm of politicians, but bringing facts to policy decisions is the responsibility of the bureaucrat. Simon was deeply mistrustful of bureaucratic loyalty fearing that the bureaucrat has “his own very definite set of personal values that he would like to see implemented” (Simon 1976 [1945], 58). The first major empirical study of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats was done by Aberbach et al. (1981). They found that policy decisions almost everywhere are the result of a “creative dialogue” (p. 260) between politicians and bureaucrats in which “[a]gainst the politician’s zeal, bureaucrats counter with facts and caution” (p. 114). More formal analysis of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats has been done by principal-agent analysts. Their analyses have often been driven by a concern for bureaucratic abuse of their informational advantage (Miller 2005). This concern does not imply that bureaucrats always seek to influence political decisions in order to pursue their own goals. The creative dialogue can also be used to identify policy options that can achieve political goals. Again, motives are complex: As Golden (2000, 155-160) shows in her case studies of US federal agencies during Reagan’s presidency, bureaucrats can be motivated by their role perception, potentially as servants, but they may also pursue private interests or their own policy goals.

Information also figures prominently in modern public administration literature, but often in ways that are distinct from ours. Gaimard and Patty (2013) study how bureaucrats acquire information. Lewis (2008) investigates how presidential appointments harm the application of bureaucratic information. Carpenter (2001) analyzes how bureaucratic expertise may underpin agencies’ autonomy. These studies understand information in a sense that is broader than ours and study it for different purposes. Our study is more in line with Workman’s (2015) study of bureaucracy and government in the USA. His dual dynamics theory of problem solving by the
federal administration and Congress is multi-facetted, but at a certain stage includes the generation
of information by the bureaucracy about the problems facing Congress. He argues that this
information needs to be relevant, not only in a political-tactical sense, but also for practical policy.
The bureaucracy is allegedly uniquely positioned to deliver this type of information because
“[b]ureaucracies contain a wealth of information on the likely consequences of given courses of
public policy, including the likelihood of failure and success, the difficulties associated with
implementation using given policy tools or mechanisms, and their differential effects on specific
policy targets” (Workman 2015, 42). At the same time, Workman shares Weber’s worry that
bureaucratic and political preferences are different. “What still lingers in the background is that
these preferences often diverge…” (p. 42). Workman’s (2015) understanding of bureaucratic
information is close to our definition of policy information. But while his study is a broad
investigation into the role of bureaucracy in both problem definition and solving, our study narrows
down on Weber’s worry about bureaucrats abusing their information advantage and prioritizes the
 provision of causal evidence on this exact question.

In sum, policy information has received considerable attention in the public
administration literature. It is widely understood as an important element in the political decision
process, and there is a shared concern in the literature that policy information places the permanent
bureaucracy in a potentially powerful position. However, the link between policy information and
political influence is not automatic. After all, politicians are free to use policy information as they
please, and they often receive information from other sources than the permanent bureaucracy, e.g.
interest groups or the media. For policy information to function as a vehicle for political influence
by bureaucrats, three mechanisms must be at work:
• Mechanism 1: Bureaucrats are willing to use policy information to influence political decisions
• Mechanism 2: Politicians rely on policy information from bureaucrats when making political decisions
• Mechanism 3: The way policy information is presented matters for the preferences of politicians

The first mechanism is built on the notion that bureaucrats want to influence politics. This argument is, as we have shown above, one of the classics in the literature. The second mechanism is based on the notion that bureaucrats are an important source of information for politicians. Again, this is a common assumption in the literature. The third mechanism stipulates that presenting information can be used to manipulate political preferences. This idea does not follow from our literature review and therefore requires more argumentation, which follows in the next section.

The power of policy information

Political psychology has a long tradition for studying the effects of alternative ways of presenting information, or more simply, of framing effects (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). This research has shown that framing issues in certain ways can change people’s preferences and be used by, e.g., politicians to influence the preferences of voters. We apply this line of thinking to the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians and focus specifically on two prominent ways in which information can be framed to manipulate preferences, i.e., equivalence framing and issue framing.

An equivalence framing effect occurs when “different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases (…) cause individuals to alter their preferences” (Druckman 2001, 228). Equivalence framing gained prominence with the work of Tversky and Kahneman (1981), who developed
prospect theory: People tend to be risk-seeking in the domain of losses and risk-averse in the
domain of gains. A well-known example is the “Asian Disease Problem” where respondents are
asked to choose between different programs to combat a fictitious disease. The disease would kill
600 people if nothing was done, and each program would have an expected value of 200 saved
lives. However, one program was risk-seeking (there was a 1/3 probability that 600 people would
survive), while another program was risk-averse (200 people would certainly survive). Tversky and
Kahneman (1981, 453) found that framing the two programs positively by presenting them in terms
of saved lives (gains) led 72% of the respondents to choose the risk-averse option, while framing
the programs negatively by presenting them in terms of the expected number of dead people
(losses) led 78% to choose the risk-seeking option (Tversky and Kahneman 1981, 453). Bellé et al.
(2018, 834-835) show that similar effects apply to bureaucrats. Effects of equivalence framing is
also found in other settings and to types of preferences other than risk preferences, e.g., Quattrone
and Tversky (1988) and Olsen (2015). The general lesson is that people tend to react more
negatively to negatively framed information than to logically equivalent but positively framed
information.

Equivalence framing effects result from seemingly uncontroversial changes in
information and involve no blatant manipulation. This happens because positive labeling of
information automatically activates positive associations in memory, while negative labeling of
(equivalent) information activates negative associations (Druckman 2004). There is no reason why
politicians should not be susceptible to the same mechanisms. Indeed, recent studies show that
politicians are affected by equivalence framing in survey experiments (Baekgaard et al. 2019;
Sheffer et al. 2018). This has important implications for the power potential of bureaucracy. We
expect the valence of information to be clearly within bureaucrats’ zone of discretion when
designing and preparing information for their political principals. It would, for example, seem
innocuous for a bureaucrat to use negative-valence information to report the expected effects of a policy proposal instead of equivalent positive-valence information. However, this could potentially lead to substantial changes in the politicians’ preferences, affecting the chances of a policy proposal being passed.

In contrast to equivalence framing effects, issue framing effects occur when “by emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker leads individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions,” which in turn affects the opinions being formed (Druckman 2004, 672). Thus, issue framing differs from equivalence framing in focusing on qualitatively different aspects of an issue. A prominent example of issue framing is the Ku Klux Klan study by Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997). They showed that people are more willing to accept a rally by hate groups like the KKK if the question is framed as one of free speech rather than as a question about risk to public order. Thus, focusing on free speech increases support whereas a focus on order reduces support. Similarly, studies have shown that “when government spending for the poor is framed as enhancing the chance that poor people can get ahead, individuals tend to support increased spending. On the other hand, when it is framed as resulting in higher taxes, individuals tend to oppose increased spending” (Druckman 2001, 1043).

Unlike equivalence framing, issue framing works through a quite deliberate process where the framing affects how people think about the relative importance of different considerations with relevance to an evaluation (Druckman 2001; 2004). Thus, a preference can be viewed as a weighted sum of different considerations with relevance to a problem (Chong and Druckman 2007), and issue frames affect what considerations are considered relevant in people’s overall evaluations. This leaves credible sources in a powerful position to influence which considerations are considered relevant when people form their political preferences. While existing literature has mainly focused on voters’ preference formation, we would also expect these insights
to be relevant to the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians. Thus, we expect that bureaucrats can use their privileged position as information providers to frame information, thereby allowing them to affect the preferences of their political masters.

In sum, we argue that policy information can function as a means for bureaucratic shaping of political decisions. Our argument stipulates three mechanisms through which information is linked to influence. We now turn to the empirical investigation of these three mechanisms.

**Design and empirical setting**

An empirical test of the three mechanisms faces methodological problems of social desirability bias and endogeneity. These problems must be addressed for both politicians and bureaucrats. We do so by using experimental methods in five different political systems. The problem of social desirability bias owes to the fact that two of the mechanisms involve what can be seen as illegitimate behavior. Interviews or survey responses from bureaucrats and politicians are therefore likely to suffer from underreporting. We meet this challenge by two means, list experiments and decision board experiments. We study the first mechanism by involving a group of bureaucrats in a list experiment, which is a type of experiment that has been developed to measure sensitive issues because the respondent can express a potentially objectionable opinion in the safe knowledge that the researcher cannot identify this answer (Glynn 2013). We investigate the second mechanism by involving politicians in a decision board experiment in which we measure how much they rely on policy information compared to other information sources. Since a downside of decision board experiments is low ecological validity, we supplement this analysis with survey responses on the perceived influence of and contact with the bureaucracy.
The second methodological challenge is endogeneity. We need to establish causal effects of how bureaucrats present information. This is a crucial element in our third mechanism. We are interested in effects of framing of information on politicians’ preferences. To avoid the risk of reverse causality we need to create exogenous variation in framing. Hence, we rely on randomized survey experiments. Getting a sufficiently large sample size for such experiments presents a problem. It is notoriously difficult to collect survey answers from elected politicians, and thus even prominent studies have typically been based on a limited number of respondents. A recent study comparing politicians and citizens was based on six samples with \(18 \leq N \leq 113\) MPs (Sheffer et al. 2018, 305). The classic cross-national study on the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats by Aberbach et al. (1981) built upon interviews of MPs and bureaucrats in seven countries, with \(44 \leq N \leq 104\) for MPs (Aberbach et al. 1981, 26). The low N in these studies can mainly be ascribed to small population sizes due to their interest in national-level elected politicians. We therefore focus on local government where—in each of the four countries included in this study—the population of elected politicians is counted in thousands. By using local politicians, we get a large number of respondents who are real-world elected politicians, responsible for decision-making importance to a large number of citizens, and who can be expected to rely on information from their respective administrative apparatus in the process of preparing decisions, monitoring policy implementation etc.

The third methodological challenge is that information is needed from both bureaucrats and politicians. Our first mechanism deals with bureaucratic behavior, while the second and third focus on political behavior. To address the concern for sample size, we study political behavior in local government politicians in four countries. Thus, we study politicians in different political, institutional, and cultural settings although we do not want to overstress this aspect of our research design because we cannot be sure that our results generalize to other tiers of government.
The list experiment of bureaucrats requires a large sample size and—for practical reasons—access to contact information. Both requirements are met in Danish central government, and thus civil servants in Danish central government are used as respondents to test the first mechanism.

The survey data were collected in late 2016/2017 using email-based questionnaires among central government bureaucrats in the ministerial departments in Denmark (221 responses; response rate: 29%) and among local politicians in four countries, namely, Denmark (885 responses of the survey experiments; response rate: 36%), Flanders in Belgium (1,683 responses; response rate: 18%), Italy (1,538 responses; response rate: 10%), and the USA (738 responses; response rate: 8%). To comply with ethical standards, respondents were explicitly told that the scenarios that they were presented to were fictitious. Also, they were debriefed and offered a report of the main findings.

In the remainder of this section, we provide a brief introduction to our five empirical settings. Danish central government is composed of 20–25 ministries, each headed by a minister. Together, the ministers constitute the government, but they function according to a *ressortprinzip* and are individually responsible towards the Parliament. Each ministry is organized according to meritocratic Weberian principles and consists of a ministerial department and one or more agencies. Comparatively speaking, there are few politically appointed civil servants, but functional politicization is relatively high since the permanent secretaries provide relatively extensive political-tactical advice to their minister (Grøn and Salomonsen 2020).

As to local government, Denmark is a unitary state with three tiers of government. The lowest level consists of 98 municipalities. Each is governed by a city council, elected every four years, with day-to-day administration left to standing committees under the city council and to the mayor, who is elected by the city council. Danish municipalities are responsible for eight major policy areas: Elementary schools, day care, eldercare, children with special needs, roads, culture,
administration, and labor market. The population of the survey consists of all councilors in the 98 municipalities.

Flanders is the Northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. The local level consists of 308 municipalities and a similar number of Flemish Public Centers for Social Welfare (PCSWs). The municipalities are multipurpose organizations responsible for schools, culture, youth, sport, nature and forest, and municipal roads. The PCSWs are responsible for social welfare in a municipality. Municipalities and PCSWs are governed by separate councils and bureaucracies. Both councils consist of local politicians. In municipalities, the politicians are elected whereas in the PCSWs the members are typically selected by the municipal council. The municipalities are run by a college of mayor and aldermen, which reports to the municipal council; in contrast, the PCSWs are directly run by the PCSW council, which has a chairman. We surveyed councilors in all municipalities and PCSWs.

Italy has almost 8,000 municipalities. Their main functions are road maintenance, local police and transport, sports facilities, waste, and primary schooling. The municipal council is elected for five-year terms. The mayor is elected directly and chairs the Giunta, which is responsible for daily administration. The mayors also appoint the assessori, who are members of the Giunta. Each assesore has a special responsibility for a certain policy area. In small municipalities, the assessori are often members of the city council. It is difficult to find contact information for many of the smaller Italian municipalities, which are typically not responsible for the major policy areas. We collected contact information only in municipalities with more than 10,000 citizens.

Local government in the USA is very diverse across and within states. Many municipalities are governed by a mayor-council system in which the mayor is elected directly and responsible for administration, often with veto power and power to hire and fire department heads. Another important model is the council-mayor system in which the council appoints a manager and
where the mayor is elected by the council and with few formal powers. As in Italy, it is difficult to collect contact information for local councilors. We selected 10 states with reasonably detailed information on the municipalities’ official websites. Most municipalities are responsible for local police and fire departments, parks and recreation, water and sewer systems, and road maintenance.

**Analysis: Three studies of the mechanisms of policy information**

We now report the results of a series of three studies. Together, they show that the three conditions for policy information to function as a vehicle for political influence of bureaucrats are satisfied, and we take this as evidence that bureaucrats can use policy information to shape political preferences. We discuss the studies for each of the three mechanisms in turn. The experimental design does not allow us to study how the strength of this effect may depend upon factors such as interests of politicians and bureaucrats and organizational procedures. We return to this in the discussion.

*Study 1 (list experiment): Are bureaucrats willing to use policy information to influence political decisions?*

The first mechanism focuses on the behavior of bureaucrats who are responsible for advising politicians. Asking bureaucrats about their willingness to use policy information to influence political decisions may be heavily influenced by social desirability bias and non-response due to the sensitive nature of the question. Study 1 uses a list experiment with random assignment to treatment and control groups (Blair and Imai 2012) to deal with these issues. In the list experiment, respondents are presented with a list of statements. Next, they are asked how many, but not which, items they agree with. This makes it obvious to respondents that their confidentiality is guaranteed, as there is no way to know which items the respondents agree or disagree with. Respondents in the
control condition are presented with items that are less sensitive. Respondents in the treatment group are presented with the exact same list and one additional item, which is the one of interest to the researcher. By comparing the number of responses that respondents agree with across treatment and control groups, we get an estimate of the average agreement with the sensitive item of interest. Bureaucrats in the control group (N=74) received a list of items that are all concerned with the preparation of cases and written information to politicians. We furthermore use two treatment groups: One contained the control items and an additional item about whether the expectations about what politicians will decide has an influence on what bureaucrats highlight when preparing information (N=73). The other treatment condition received the control items as well as an additional very controversial statement according to which bureaucrats prepare the information to make it easy for politicians to choose the solution that bureaucrats consider the best (N=74). The design of the list experiment is presented in Table 1.

We find that respondents in the control group on average agree with 3.29 of the four items. In comparison, respondents in treatment group 1 agree with 3.97 items. The difference is statistically significant (t=5.25; p < 0.00) and shows that 68% of bureaucrats agree that their expectations about what politicians are going to decide influence which aspects they highlight when preparing policy-relevant information. This does not necessarily entail that bureaucrats pursue their own interests in the preparation of policy information. But it is evidence that they take stock of the political support for various scenarios when preparing information. This can be consistent with firm political control. Turning to the more controversial treatment group 2, we find an average agreement amounting to 3.68. Again, the difference is statistically significant at conventional levels (t=2.90; p < 0.00) and shows that 39% of the bureaucrats agree that they prepare information to ensure that politicians make a decision in accordance with the bureaucrats’ preferred option. In contrast to treatment group 1, this is strong evidence that a rather large share of bureaucrats are
willing to design information in an active attempt to mold political decisions. This supports mechanism 1: Bureaucrats are—at least in Danish central government—to a large degree willing to use policy information to influence political decisions although it should be noted that the responses from our respondents indicate that a majority are unwilling to do so.

Table 1: Design of the list experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introductory text (all groups)</th>
<th>When we [the bureaucracy] present facts or other written information for discussion among politicians…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four main items (all groups)</td>
<td>… we are aware that we need to ensure that the prepared information should shed light on all relevant aspects of the case. … we try to organize the information in a way that minimizes the risk that bad solutions from a professional perspective will be part of the political discussion. … we always try to present the information as neutral as possible. … we ensure that complex technical or economic aspects are as easy to understand as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One item (treatment group 1 only)</td>
<td>… our expectations about what politicians will decide are sometimes important to which aspects of the case we highlight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One item (treatment group 2 only)</td>
<td>… we organize the information in a way that makes it easy for the politicians to choose the solution that we consider the best.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study 2 (decision board experiment and self-reported indicators): Do politicians rely on policy information from bureaucrats when making political decisions?

Mechanism 2 focuses on politicians. Therefore, we now turn to our surveys of local government politicians in Denmark, Flanders, Italy, and the USA. Some politicians may see a reliance on policy information from bureaucrats as desirable and thus overreport; others with a more critical view of the bureaucracy may underreport. We address this problem in a decision board experiment where behavior is measured directly rather than asking about it. In Denmark, 719 respondents participated in the decision board experiment, in Flanders 792, Italy 1,324, and in the USA 634.

In the experiment, the politicians are asked how they would vote for a policy proposal, and they are presented with information from various sources: The top administrative staff,
employees, service users, the local government association, university researchers, and a think tank. In the decision board (shown in Figure 1), the information is hidden behind boxes, one box for each source of information. The respondents can then consult the boxes (each representing different actors including the local bureaucracy) in order to obtain information about the recommendations of the sources.

The decision board was made using MouselabWEB, an open source decision board tool (Willemsen and Johnson n.d.). MouselabWEB allows us to track the politicians’ behavior while searching through the information. We use two behavioral measures of the reliance on the sources of information. The first measure is the time spent on information from each of the actors. We measure this in milliseconds. The second measure is which box was opened first. We measure this by registering the source of the information in the first box opened.

Figure 1: Decision board experiment (US version)
The decision board method is based on the assumption that actors who are considered more relevant information providers are consulted before less relevant actors and that more time is spent on information from relevant actors than from less relevant actors. Figure 2 shows the time spent on information from each of the sources of information, measured in milliseconds, and Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents opening a specific box as the first one.

Figure 2 shows that more time is on average spent on information from the local bureaucracy than from other sources in Denmark, Flanders and the USA. The confidence intervals for some information providers are quite large and thus we cannot reject the hypothesis that the time spent on the bureaucracy information box is similar to the time spent on some of the other boxes. Finally, the picture is less clear in Italy where information from the bureaucracy does not appear as influential as in the other countries.

Figure 2: Time spent on processing information in decision board
Moving to Figure 3, a similar picture emerges. The local bureaucracy box is among the first three boxes consulted in Denmark, Flanders, and the USA (although not necessarily the top priority), but less so in Italy. In general, although only some of the differences are statistically significant and information from service users and employees are consulted about as regularly and fast as information from the bureaucracy, the average measures from the decision board experiment offer support to the proposition that the bureaucracy is an important source of information.

**Figure 3: Information accessed first in decision board**

Note: The figure depicts the percentage of respondents for whom the box (the source) was opened first. 95% confidence intervals.
Figure 4 and 5 draw on observational data from the surveys of politicians to further explore the extent to which politicians rely on information from bureaucrats when making political decisions. Figure 4 shows the extent to which politicians report being in contact with the local bureaucracy as compared to other actors. Between 37% (in Flanders) and 74% (in Italy) responded that they are in contact with local administrative staff at least twice a week. This makes the local bureaucracy one of the two most heavily contacted actors, surpassed only slightly by respondents’ own political parties. Figure 5 furthermore shows the extent to which the local bureaucracy is considered an important source of information as compared to other sources. Again, the local bureaucracy comes out as one of the most important sources in all countries, though its importance is not very different from that of relevant ministries, local government associations and research institutions in Italy and Flanders.

**Figure 4: Frequency of politicians' contact with local bureaucracy compared to other sources**

Notes: Answers to the question “How often are you in contact with the following actors?”. Response categories: daily; 2-4 times a week; once a week; 1-3 times a month; more rarely/never. The figure depicts the percentage of respondents indicating that they have been in contact daily or 2-4 times a week. 95% confidence intervals.
Overall, our results across the four figures point to the local bureaucracy being an important source of information, though probably less so in Italy than in the USA, Denmark and Flanders. This supports the second mechanism: Politicians rely on policy information from bureaucrats in order to make political decisions.

Figure 5: Politicians' reliance on bureaucracy compared to other sources

Notes: Answers to the question: “On a scale from 0-10, how much do you rely on the following types of information (assuming that they are available) when you make decisions?” Response: 0 = to a very low degree; 10 = to a very high degree. The figure the average response for each source of information by country. 95 % confidence intervals.

Study 3 (survey experiments): Does the way policy information is presented matter for the preferences of politicians?

To test mechanism 3, we conducted two randomized survey experiments on each of the four samples. In both experiments, respondents were presented with a policy proposal and asked to state their preference regarding the proposal as if it had been proposed in their own local council. The first is an equivalence framing experiment where we test whether politicians’ preferences on a
policy vary with the valence of logically equivalent information about the policy. The second is an issue framing experiment where we test whether respondents’ preferences on a policy can be influenced by selectively highlighting subsets of potentially policy-relevant considerations. In both experiments, information is presented in different ways by bureaucrats to politicians.

The experiments used between-subjects randomization to one condition in each experiment. Experiments were randomized independently of each other. The order in which respondents were presented with the experiments was fixed across respondents and countries.

Designing the experiments in ways that allow for cross-country comparisons of results is not a trivial task (Jilke et al. 2017). Local politicians in the four countries are responsible for different policy portfolios, which makes it difficult to formulate experiments that make sense across countries. Moreover, even identical words and formulations may have different meanings in different countries with different cultural settings. Full measurement equivalence is therefore very difficult to ensure across countries. However, the purpose of running the experiments in different countries is not to formally compare effect sizes across countries; rather it is to test our hypotheses in different political systems in order to address issues of generalizability. Primacy was therefore given to formulating experiments that were realistic in the empirical settings in which they were conducted, meaning that the experiments were not completely identical across countries.

In each experiment, respondents were asked about their preferences regarding policies for which they were actually responsible in their own city councils. This means that the respondents could already be expected to have formed preferences towards the issues of the experiments, thereby making it even more remarkable if they can be manipulated through simple measures of informational design. To make the experiments as realistic as possible, we collaborated with local experts, who helped us formulate the experimental material, translate to local languages, and adjust wordings to make sense in the local empirical settings.
Equivalence framing

This experiment tests whether the valence of information about a policy matters to politicians’ preferences about the policy. The experiment is based on a fictitious policy proposal, and it draws on classical equivalence framing experiments from existing literature (Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Druckman 2004; Olsen 2015). Respondents in all countries were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a policy proposal. In Denmark, Flanders, and Italy, the proposal concerned a limitation in the number of weekly hours where the municipality’s libraries would be manned by a librarian, whereas city councilors in the USA were presented with a proposal about limiting the walk-in hours at the local police station.

Respondents in two experimental groups were told that a neighboring municipality had made a similar change a year ago. One experimental group was given the information that 60 percent of citizens had been satisfied with the change in the neighboring municipality (the valence of the information was positive), while another group was given the logically equivalent information that 40 percent of citizens had been dissatisfied with the change (the valence of the information was negative). Finally, a control group was added to the experiment. Here, the policy proposal was presented without information about other municipalities’ experiences with similar proposals. An English translation of the wording of the Danish, Flemish, and Italian version of the experiment is presented in Table 2, while the wording of the US version of the experiment can be found in Table A3 in the appendix.
Table 2: Design of equivalence framing experiment

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

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted with bold letters (positive framing before the slash, negative framing after the slash). Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know.

If mechanism 3 works as expected, the average member of group 1 agrees more with the policy proposal than the average member of group 2. The control group allows us to investigate whether experimental effects are primarily driven by the negative or the positive framing of information.

As shown in Figure 6, politicians in all countries report significantly different preferences for the policy proposal depending on whether a positive, neutral, or negative frame was used (see Table A1 in the appendix for formal tests of statistical significance). The hierarchy of preferences across experimental groups is as expected, with positive frames producing more support for the proposal than the neutral frame, which in turn produces stronger support than the negative frame. In all countries, the effects are of substantial size, bearing in mind that the dependent variable is measured on a scale running from 1–5 (DK: ~0.4; FL: ~0.2; IT: ~0.9; USA: ~0.6). Thus, our hypothesis about the importance of the valence of the information is supported by data.

However, some cross-national differences should be noted: Notably, differences in preferences between the positive and negative frame are of considerably different sizes across countries. Moreover, several previous equivalence framing studies have found evidence of negativity bias where negative valence matters relatively more than positive valence (e.g., Olsen 2015). This pattern is only found in Denmark and the USA in our study, while we detect stronger impacts of positive valence in Flanders and Italy. The findings thus indicate that valence of information is of
varying importance. However, this does not change the general impression from the experiments that politicians’ preferences are susceptible to information valence.

**Figure 6: Results of equivalence framing experiment**

![Figure 6](image)

*Notes: Leftmost panel: The dependent variable runs from 1–5. Rightmost panel: The effects of treatments are calculated as compared to the control group. 95% confidence intervals. N is 876, 1,683, 1,538, and 738 for DK, FL, IT, and the USA, respectively.*

**Issue framing**

The purpose of the second survey experiment is to test whether issue framing has an effect on politicians’ policy preferences. Issue frames focus on “qualitatively different yet potentially relevant considerations” (Druckman 2004, 672) in order to affect which considerations will guide information recipients’ attitude formation. Thus, we expect that bureaucrats can influence politicians’ policy preferences by highlighting selective subsets of policy-relevant considerations.

In order to test this hypothesis, we designed an experiment where respondents in three experimental groups were asked to form an opinion on a fictitious policy proposal. In Denmark, Flanders, and Italy, the proposal was an offer to users of the municipality’s elderly care of an extra bath per week, whereas city councilors in the USA were presented with a proposal to renew and
renovate public parks in their city. The policy proposal was identical in all experimental groups in terms of the content of the proposed policy change and the financial effects of making the proposed change in policy. However, for one experimental group (the positive framing), the proposal was presented with a politically appealing title in an attempt to make respondents form their attitude in light of positive thoughts and considerations. Another experimental group (the negative framing) was explicitly reminded of the fact that spending extra money in one policy area would necessarily mean that other policy areas would need to be given less priority, which may lead to protests from groups that do not benefit from the proposed policy changes. Finally, a control group was presented with the factual content and financial consequences of the policy proposal without any issue framing. An English translation of the wording of the Danish, Flemish, and Italian version of the experiment is presented in Table 3, while the wording of the US version of the experiment can be found in Table A4 in the appendix.

Table 3: Design of issue framing experiment

Imagine that your local council has asked municipal career officials to analyze possible ways of targeting the municipality’s public services in order to sharpen the municipality’s service profile compared to surrounding municipalities. The officials propose a political agreement [with the title “Dignified old age”]1 offering users of the municipality’s elderly care an extra bath per week. [This initiative would accommodate the most urgent concern among the users of the municipality’s elderly care,]1 It is estimated that such an agreement will lead to a yearly cost increase of [SUM OF MONEY CORRESPONDING TO APPROXIMATELY USD 225] per user [and the civil servants point out that this should be financed via cut-backs on other services possibly leading to protests among users of these services]2. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. 1: Additions in these brackets are the positive frame. 2: Addition in this bracket is the negative frame. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know.

If mechanism 3 works as expected, recipients of the negative frame will be less supportive of the policy proposal than recipients of the positive frame as they form their opinion in light of more negative considerations (they are led to think of the proposal as a conflict issue) even though the
The factual content of the proposal is identical. The control group allows us to investigate whether experimental effects are primarily driven by the negative or the positive frame.

The results are presented in Figure 7, while formal tests of statistical significance can be found in Table A2 in the appendix. The results are largely consistent across countries, with the positive issue framing having a statistically significantly more positive impact than the neutral frame, which in turn has a more positive (and statistically significant) impact than the negative issue frame. Results are substantially significant. Thus, bearing in mind that a scale running from 1–5 is used, the average difference in support for the proposal between the positive and negative issue frame runs between around 0.5 in Denmark and around 0.8 in Italy and the USA. In sum, the findings support the proposition that politicians’ preferences are susceptible to issue framing by bureaucrats.

**Figure 7: Results of issue framing experiment**

![Graph showing results of issue framing experiment across countries](image)

*Notes: Leftmost panel: The dependent variable runs from 1–5. Rightmost panel: The effects of treatments are calculated as compared to the control group. 95% confidence intervals. N is 856, 1,626, 1,492, and 728 for DK, FL, IT, and the USA, respectively.*
**Discussion**

The dilemma between bureaucratic expertise and political control has preoccupied the literature on bureaucracy since the first contributions by Woodrow Wilson and Max Weber. This literature is sprawling, takes inspiration from diverse currents in social science, and conceives of political-bureaucratic relations in different ways. Contributions come under headings like scientific management, human relations, public choice, principal-agent models, public service bargains, problem-solving, and reputational studies. They focus on different aspects of the political-bureaucratic relationship, use different theories, and employ different methods. However, a common undercurrent in this literature is the importance of bureaucratic advice for political decisions and a concern whether political control of the permanent bureaucracy is possible.

The literature on bureaucracy has hinted at many ways in which bureaucratic expertise may influence political decisions. In this paper, we have focused on the role of policy information, i.e., information from the bureaucracy that functions as the basis for political decisions. This is only one among many ways in which bureaucratic expertise is linked to politics, but it has been in focus in many studies of political-bureaucratic interactions.

Our contribution is to identify the mechanisms that must operate if bureaucrats use policy information to shape political preferences, to discuss the methodological challenges involved in designing a causal study of these mechanisms, and to conduct such a study in practice. More specifically, we identified three mechanisms that must be operative; we discussed social desirability and endogeneity as the most pressing methodological concerns; and we pointed at experiments as the most appropriate methodological tool for providing causal evidence on the operation of the three mechanisms. This allows us to shed empirical light on whether the three mechanisms can work, and thus whether it is likely that bureaucrats can shape political decisions through information. The
experimental research design does not allow us to say very much about the factors that may amplify or reduce this effect. We return to this question below.

Our experimental analyses yielded relatively strong support for each of the mechanisms. First, a list experiment of ministerial civil servants in the Danish central government revealed that bureaucrats are indeed willing to use policy information to influence political decisions. Second, a decision board experiment involving almost 5,000 local politicians from Denmark, Flanders, Italy, and the USA showed that they consider policy information from the bureaucracy one of the most important information sources when making political decisions—with the possible exception of Italy. Survey data among politicians on the perceived influence of various actors lends further support to this interpretation. Third, survey experiments with the same politicians demonstrated that their preferences can be manipulated by simple tools such as equivalence and issue framing techniques.

Thus, we have built an empirical causal chain from policy information from the bureaucracy to political preferences. Our findings therefore provide added fuel to the discussion about how politicians can control the permanent bureaucracy. This kind of bureaucratic power is, as Weber knew, both a strength and a weakness of the modern bureaucracy. Bureaucratic expertise is a condition for effective government, but it is also a potential democratic problem.

The mechanisms in principle apply to other actors than the bureaucracy. In that sense, we consider this a general theory of information applied to the bureaucracy. It is worth noting however, that the bureaucracy is in a very privileged position to influence politicians due to the formal ties between politicians and bureaucracy and the intense contacts between the two groups. In that sense, the bureaucracy may be better positioned to influence politicians through strategically framing policy information than most other groups.
Having established that information is a key to understand the ability of the bureaucracy to shape political decisions, the next step is to consider under which circumstances bureaucrats are in practice likely use this power successfully. According to the first mechanism, bureaucrats are willing to use policy information to influence political decisions, but this does not imply that bureaucrats will always do so in practice. One driver of this can be self-interest, one of the important motives of bureaucrats (Golden 2000, 158). This is the message of the classic rational choice account of bureaucrats’ motives (Tullock 1965; Downs 1967; Niskanen 1971). Another driver can be bureaucrats' policy preferences. This idea is inherent in Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman's (1981) images of the political-administrative relationship, and in empirical analyses of the impact of preferences of bureaucrats on public policy (Meier and O'Toole 2006; Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew 2015). These policy preferences can be at odds with preferences of politicians, but they may also reflect that bureaucrats pursue options that they believe better can achieve political goals.

The second mechanism stipulates that politicians rely on information from bureaucrats when making decisions. But again, this varies in practice. There is no guarantee that information or careful analysis provided by the bureaucracy will be used at all (Feldman 1989). Politicians are strategic actors, and have some leeway in choosing to rely on information from bureaucrats or from others. On the one hand, if political stakes are high, politicians may have a larger incentive to seek information from other sources. For instance, if an issue is highly salient to voters and likely to be decisive for the next election, politicians may prefer to lend their ear to public opinion rather than top bureaucrats (Gormley 1986). If an issue is important to powerful interests, politicians might be affected more by interest organizations and lobbyists than by the bureaucracy (Wilson 1989). On the other hand, politicians may be more likely to rely on information from bureaucrats if issues are
highly complex and specialized expertise is required in policymaking, or if they see an incentive to follow blame avoidance strategies (Weaver 1986).

The third mechanism is about how information is presented, and we have shown that framing matters for preferences of politicians. However, the effectiveness of this mechanism depends on the degree to which bureaucrats are free to present information as they see fit. Bureaucrats may be constrained by organizational routine (Allison 1963). For instance, Feldman (1989, 131-2) finds that paper-writing in public organizations is subject to a 'concurrence routine', which ensures that representatives from different offices must sign off to a paper before the paper is final. This limits the possibility for individual bureaucrats to frame information. It is also possible that information provision is formalized and regulated in detailed performance measurement systems (Moynihan 2008), which reduce the potential for framing the information. So, although we have found support for the three mechanisms, the question of when they apply is far from innocent.

The limitations of our study should also be kept in mind. Most importantly, we only studied one way in which bureaucratic expertise may be linked to politics. As discussed in our introduction, the literature on bureaucracy points to several ways in which bureaucratic expertise may influence political decisions. Investigating these ways is likely to be demanding. First, theoretical work needs to be done in order to distill the exact mechanisms involved in the chain linking bureaucratic expertise to politics. In our study, we focused on a bureaucratic advantage – policy information – where it is comparatively easy to identify the mechanisms that must operate if the theory is correct. However, this is far from always the case. Second, a research design that can address issues like social desirability bias and endogeneity needs to be developed.

Finally, it is unlikely that the literature on bureaucracy has discovered all the ways in which bureaucratic information may matter for policy. Politicians and bureaucrats interact so intimately for sometimes so long periods of time that their relationship gets as multi-faceted as a
marriage. Therefore theorizing is not the only thing needed to discover the full diversity of how bureaucratic expertise may be used for political purposes, observation is also needed. Many aspects of political-bureaucratic interactions simply remain to be discovered. Thus, we welcome the nascent inductive ethnographic approach to studying political-bureaucratic relations (e.g. Page and Jenkins 2005; Rhodes 2011; Rhodes, 't Hart and Noordegraaf 2007). Carefully designed inductive field studies can enrich our understanding of the potentials and limitations of informational advantages enjoyed by bureaucrats and pave the way for further theorizing and deductive causal empirical investigations.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

1. Testing statistical significance of findings in survey experiments

Table A1: Ordered logit regression of equivalence framing experiment

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

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

Table A2: Ordered logit regression of issue framing experiment

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

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

2. US versions of experimental questions

Table A3: US version of equivalence framing experiment

Imagine that a member of your city council proposes to limit the number of weekly hours during which the municipal police stations are open for walk-ins and to compensate by increasing the hours open for scheduled appointments. Top administrative staff inform you that a neighboring municipality made a similar change one year ago [and that 60% of their citizens have been satisfied with the change and that 40% of their citizens have been dissatisfied with the change]. To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters (positive framing before the slash, negative framing after the slash). Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know.
Imagine that your city council has asked top administrative staff to analyze possible ways to improve your municipality's services relative to neighboring municipalities. The proposal [has the title “Attracting new citizens” and]¹ is to renew and renovate the public parks. [This initiative will improve access to green areas for current citizens and make the municipality more attractive to newcomers.]¹ They estimate that such a proposal will lead to a 5% increase in total annual spending on public parks [and they point out that this should be financed via cut backs elsewhere in the budget. This may lead to protests from users of other services].² To what degree would you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Notes: Differences from the control group are highlighted here with bold letters. ¹: Additions in these brackets are the positive frame. ²: Addition in this bracket is the negative frame. Response categories: Completely agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Completely disagree; Don’t know.