1 *Introduction: Populists, Democratic Backsliding, and Public Administration*

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Liberal democracy is at risk. Its ascent since the Second World War has recently come to a halt. Once considered to be the only political game in town, the fate of liberal democracy is growing more uncertain as actual and aspiring authoritarians have begun to undermine its hallmark institutions. Political pluralism, separation of powers, and rule of law are increasingly called into question. The "end of history," implying the exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism (Fukuyama 1989; 2006), has failed to come closer in recent years. Instead, liberal democracy is contested as it has not been since 1945.

Two trends contribute to liberal democracy's current stagnation. On the one hand, many authoritarian regimes – China above all, but also many Middle Eastern and African states – have not faltered, as modernization theories once predicted. Rather, they have proven resilient, even in the face of external and internal pressure. On the other hand, many democracies, both old and new, have seen authoritarian backlashes. While almost complete collapses of democracy, such as in Venezuela, remain exceptions, governments in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland have implemented far-reaching illiberal reforms – hollowing out their democratic institutions. Even the United States, one of the most robust liberal democracies, has witnessed authoritarian dynamics with President Trump. In many other Western states, too, liberal democracy is under siege, as authoritarian-minded parties shift political discourses and thereby influence policies, or even enter government and implement illiberal reforms.

Many of these current processes of liberal-democratic backsliding are driven by populism. A rather controversial term in political practice, populism can be understood as "a thin-centred ideology that

considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the [general will] of the people" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6). The relationship between populism and liberal democracy is complex; in some circumstances, such as in autocratic regimes, populist movements can boost democratic politics by opening the political playing field for actors formerly excluded or underrepresented. Ultimately, however, populism is incompatible with modern notions of liberal democracy. As Müller (2016a, pp. 19–20) argues, populism is a "a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified . . . people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some way morally inferior." Following this logic, populist ideologies are not only anti-elitist, but also anti-pluralist and, as such, illiberal. Some also see explicitly authoritarian elements increasingly blended into many, if not most, forms of contemporary populist ideologies (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Liberal-democratic backsliding and the role of populism have attracted much scholarly attention in recent years (see, e.g., Galston 2018; Krastev 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018a; Luce 2017; Manow 2018; Mounk 2018; Zielonka 2018). However, while knowledge on the sources, variants and consequences of backsliding processes is accumulating, one central aspect of policymaking remains neglected: public administration. Much scholarship focuses on populist politicians breaking rules of political discourse, attacking the media and, if they enter government, obstructing the courts and interfering with elections. Yet how they approach the state bureaucracy features less prominently. This omission creates a peculiar void in the debate on liberal-democratic backsliding and populism, for bureaucracies are crucial in preparing and implementing policies. As Max Weber (1978, p. 220) wrote, "the exercise of authority consists precisely in administration."

Against this empirical and theoretical background, this volume addresses the administrative dimension of liberal-democratic backsliding with a focus on populist governments. It studies public administrations as both objects and subjects in the backsliding process. For this purpose, the volume brings together country case studies and cross-cutting analyses. The contributions combine theoretical and empirical

work, providing the first truly comparative perspective on liberal-democratic backsliding, populism, and public administration.

The rationale for this undertaking is twofold. First, as already indicated, the volume fills an empirical void. We currently know little about administrative policies of populist governments, although there are ample hints that the recent wave of populism also involves transforming public administration. Many populists, for instance, are currently engaging in the rewriting of the "operational manual" of the state (Müller 2016a). These efforts cannot stop short of the state bureaucracy. Furthermore, in those cases where populists must still face credible elections, they seek to deliver on policy promises – an effort that is doomed to fail without the backup of the administrative machinery. Much dynamism is therefore to be expected when incoming populist politicians interact with established state bureaucracies, but most studies focus on alterations in the systems of checks and balances and tend to neglect public administration. This volume thus explores an overlooked aspect of one of the most important contemporary political trends – that is, democratic backsliding.

Second, the volume builds bridges between different strands of scholarship, which have remained rather insulated so far. It complements the debate on system transformation and democracy with administrative aspects, which it has long neglected. While there is a rich body of literature that deals with the causes, conditions, and consequences of liberal-democratic ascent and breakdown, most research has focused on macrolevel associations. It has thus paid little attention to the extent to which bureaucracies were objects and subjects in transformation processes. This volume offers one path to integrate public administration aspects in system transformation research by eliciting the role of bureaucracies in reform projects of populist governments. At the same time, it brings questions of democracy back to the Public Administration community, which has long favored studying issues of management and efficiency. It addresses the place and role of bureaucracy in democracy through the lens of recent backsliding dynamics. Also, the gathered knowledge on strategies and pathways of illiberal public administration policies employed by populist governments can offer advice on how to make the bureaucracy less penetrable to authoritarian tendencies.

This introduction lays the theoretical and conceptual groundwork. It first reviews broader debates on system transformation and public

administration, showing that the repertoire to study the administrative dimensions of liberal-democratic backsliding is currently meager. It then identifies three areas of inquiry, outlining expectations and propositions for the empirical case studies. These areas are the general governance concepts of populist politicians, their strategies for administrative reform and the potential reactions of the bureaucracy. Taken together, these areas provide a comprehensive framework for studying the administrative dimensions of liberal-democratic backsliding.

Background: System Transformation, Democracy, and Public Administration

Understanding the conduct of populist governments in liberal-democratic settings could, in theory, greatly benefit from system transformation research, which has generated plenty of knowledge on democratic ascent and breakdown. Most of this research, however, focuses on macrolevel associations, building on Lipset's (1959) insights on modernization theory, and perhaps best exemplified by the study of Przeworski et al. (2000). It thus pays little attention to state administrations. Some studies have illuminated administrative issues, such as the phenomenon of bureaucratic authoritarianism as a variant of autocratic rule (Collier 1979) or the bureaucracy's role in the transition of Eastern European states after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Baker 2002). Yet these studies hardly add up to a comparative perspective on bureaucracies.

With a limited recognition of public administration, system transformation research follows the path of much thinking on democracy, wherein civil liberties, political competition, and fair elections lie at the core. The historical trajectory of system transformation research may explain this narrow view. The focus has long been on the shift away from authoritarian regimes and toward democratic rule. Democratization starts with greater societal organization, freer political competition, fairer elections, and so forth. These processes happen far from the bureaucracy, which instead remains dominated by an authoritarian executive until democratic transition in the other arenas has been successful. It follows that the bureaucracy is usually the natural stronghold of the autocratic leadership in power, and it is of little concern to transformation theorists interested in regime change *toward* democracy. However, analyzing transitions *from* democracy to

authoritarianism is likely to need a more bureaucracy-centered perspective, as modern democracies feature highly entangled politico-administrative relations. It is also plausible that democratic public administration is among the first institutions subject to backsliding pressures from authoritarian-minded politicians. For these reasons, a stronger focus on the state bureaucracy could benefit transformation research.

If scholars were to direct their attention toward bureaucratic aspects, they would have difficulty finding appropriate concepts and operationalizations for their purposes, however. Whereas literature on democratization has mostly disregarded the bureaucracy, much scholarship on public administration has avoided issues of democracy. These research strands thus implicitly agree that such issues belong to the "political" rather than the "administrative" domain. Indeed, for much public administration literature, threats of democratic backsliding regarding the bureaucracy are irrelevant; by contrast, they perceive the hierarchical character and culture of bureaucratic organization as an impediment to democratic governance. The bureaucracy's comprehensive power is feared as being susceptible to escaping political control and turning citizens into underlings to anonymous rule (Durant and Ali 2012, p. 278), or perceived as overproducing public goods for its own organizational aggrandizement (Niskanen 1971). From this perspective, political control of the bureaucracy has utmost priority, and elected politicians should determine the direction according to which the bureaucracy must act. The underlying dichotomy of politics and administration remains a prominent analytical anchor, in particular for model-based, quantitative political science scholarship (Shepsle and Bonchek 2007), which focuses on idealized control and applies formal principal–agent analysis (Weingast 1984).

Other approaches, however, challenge this view. They apply bottom-up perspectives based on case studies to disentangle what undergirds the conduct of bureaucracy (Meier and O'Toole 2006, p. 12). This research strand perceives interactions between politicians and the bureaucracy as multifaceted and complex; regularly, they are more a matter of negotiation or collaboration than of top-down command and control. This approach does not render questions of political control irrelevant, but it emphasizes the democratic quality of the bureaucracy itself. As public administration constitutes a component of modern government, it must also be organized along some

democratic guidelines. In the words of Dwight Waldo, who advocated this point of view, it is just not credible to claim that "autocracy during working hours is the price to be paid for democracy after hours" (Waldo 1952, p. 87).

Studies on bureaucracies provide empirical evidence as to why disregarding the bureaucracy renders discussions about democracy incomplete. The policymaking impact of administrations has been elicited in studies about implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984), street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010), representative bureaucracy (Meier 1993), coproduction (Bovaird 2007), networks, governance and bureaucratic interest intermediation (Lehmbruch 1991; O'Toole 1997), and administrative input in the preparation of laws – to name only a few prominent examples. Furthermore, the link between administrative capacities and the legitimation of the state (Suleiman 2013) suggests a much more complex relationship between public administration and democracy than system transformation debates and standard political science have hitherto acknowledged (Denhardt and Denhardt 2002). However, while these and other contributions have generated much systematic knowledge on many bureaucratic phenomena, they have hardly addressed issues of system transformation – regarding neither democratization nor democratic backsliding. Furthermore, they have barely been translated into democratic terms at all. While studies on accountability, citizen participation, and corresponding topics soared, they have rarely benefited debates on either democracy or system transformation.

The study of administrative dimensions of liberal-democratic backsliding can therefore build on a broad literature base, but it must still develop its own conceptual repertoire. System transformation research and Public Administration provide elements that must be ordered and synthesized, before being put to the empirical test.

Agenda: Studying the Administrative Dimensions of Liberal-Democratic Backsliding

Liberal-democratic backsliding is a complex, multidimensional process that can be approached from many different viewpoints. This section develops a framework for studying its administrative dimensions. It first discusses the broader governance concepts of recent illiberal sentiment, particularly in the guise of populism, before reflecting on its

repertoire of specific reforms to transform the bureaucracy. Because administrations are no mere objects of political initiatives, this section also discusses concepts to capture the reactions of the civil service toward the new populist leadership. First, however, a few clarifications on the term "democratic backsliding" are in order.

Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding has become a fashionable topic of debate in the last decade, but its precise meaning is often unclear. This volume follows Bermeo's (2016) use of the concept that captures, as coups d'états and revolutions become rarer, the more clandestine ways of undermining democracy. This backsliding includes harassment of the opposition, censorship of the media, and subversion of horizontal accountability, but it also shows itself in "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo 2016, p. 10; see also Coppedge et al. 2018). This specific use of the concept has been criticized on normative and analytical grounds. As to the former, the concept implicitly defines democracy as liberal. Many understandings of democracy are more nuanced (see, e.g., the five dimensions of the *Varieties of Democracy* project (Lührmann et al. 2020): deliberative, egalitarian, electoral, liberal, participatory), and the broad notion of liberalism itself has drawn plenty of criticism. Accordingly, debates on what counts as democratic backsliding are often heated. While acknowledging different interpretations of democracy, this volume restricts its analysis to the liberal one, which takes a negative view of the concentration of political power and emphasizes the importance of civil rights and the rule of law, as well as checks and balances (see Coppedge et al. 2018). The normative premise is that, without some liberalism, other dimensions of democracy will also suffer, whereas the pragmatic reasoning is that, in a vast field of empirical developments, the analysis must start somewhere. The initial focus on liberal democracy can and should later be expanded.

The concept of democratic backsliding has also been criticized on analytical grounds: for its imprecision, implicit automatism and missing agency (who or what drives this process); its subjective starting point (deteriorations in authoritarian regimes do not seem to be included); and its lack of measurement strategies and reliable data.

These analytical problems lend weight to suspicions that the empirical phenomenon might not be as relevant as portrayed. The existence of a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) has, however, been empirically substantiated. While claims of the end of liberal democracies (Diamond 2016; Runciman 2018) appear exaggerated, "the deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime" is apparent (Waldner and Lust 2018, p. 8). This volume thus acknowledges the conceptual problems associated with the concept of democratic backsliding, but still uses it as a starting point, hoping to contribute to its further development by bringing in administrative factors.

General Approaches to the Bureaucracy

As acknowledged earlier, the voting of populist parties and politicians into government does not represent democratic backsliding; rather, it depends on their conduct in office. While governing always entails randomness and situational activity, governments, no matter their outlook, face a few general choices on how to govern. Their answers precede any specific policy preferences; they define how politicians in government see their role in relationship to other institutions. These governance concepts are crucial in understanding the dynamics after a new government enters office – and all the more so in cases of illiberal governments winning elections in liberal settings, given the presumably stark difference in governance approaches. Regarding the institution of interest here – public administration – politicians have three general choices after entering government: sidelining, ignoring or using the bureaucracy (see also Peters and Pierre 2019). Each of those can, however, entail unintended side effects.

In the first scenario, the government is reluctant to use the established bureaucracy. This unwillingness is, for instance, in line with the general populist dichotomy of the virtuous elite versus the corrupt elite. The public bureaucracy is, very clearly, part of the elite in capital cities, and therefore is a natural target for rejection and avoidance on the part of populist politicians. The sidelining of the bureaucracy may come through various forms of patronage (for options, see Peters 2013). Depending upon the nature of the administrative system, an incoming president or prime minister may be able to appoint hundreds,

sometimes even thousands, of officials to replace incumbent officials. While this may be common practice, the style of patronage appointments may change: the appointments may move from being largely technically qualified individuals who can work easily with a qualified public bureaucracy to more politicized officials with few qualifications other than their political connections to the leadership.

Another option for populist politicians attempting to "occupy" the state is to construct alternative structures that complement or substitute for the work of the career public service. The Executive Office of the President in the United States is, for instance, a ready-made opportunity for this approach, and only needs to be occupied by populist loyalists to have a parallel structure to the bureaucracy. But other political systems that have had a more respected senior civil service have had leaders create such advisory structures for their political leadership. The Trump administration in the United States has made several moves to undermine the independence of the civil service and to politicize appointments in the federal government. These have included a gradual downsizing of the service through attrition, removing some protections against dismissals, and significantly undermining the powers of labor unions at the federal level.

A third alternative for sidelining the established bureaucracy is to adopt a technocratic solution to governing. Somewhat paradoxically, although populists may argue that elites are inherently corrupt, at least some American populists have attempted to involve experts, whether from within the bureaucracy or from outside. For example, Charles Postel (2007) has pointed to a "populist vision" of governing in which professional, businesslike solutions would substitute for the presumed incompetence of the politicians. This version of sidelining the bureaucracy tends to assume that more than being venial, the public bureaucracy fits the familiar stereotype of bureaucracy as lazy and incompetent. This leads to a vision of governing through creative, innovative and committed employees brought in from outside the "system." The recommendations of populist political leaders for the professionalization were roughly coterminous with the progressive movement's similar recommendations for improving governance. This vision of technocratic governance has been very evident in Latin American governments, especially those with relatively low levels of party system institutionalization (Mainwaring, Bizarro, and Petrova

2018). In these cases, the absence of expertise within government has led to the use of experts, often tied to individual political leaders, but in other cases with strong ties to a political party (Panizza, Peters, and Ramos 2019).

The second option for incoming governments is to ignore the established bureaucracy. Their rationale could stem from different reasons. One the one hand, political leaders coming into office may simply not be interested in governing; on the other hand, as in the case of Donald Trump (and many other populists), they may think they can govern more personally and with their cronies rather than through the apparatus of government. Many populist leaders tend to assume (often quite rightly) that the establishment is opposed to them and revert to governing through a smaller coterie of friends and advisers.

Paradoxically, this governance approach is likely to empower the bureaucracy. Despite the politicians' indifference, government will have to go on somehow. The absence of effective leadership and direction from the top may enable some form of "bureaucratic government" to appear, in direct contradiction to the intentions of politicians who wanted to "drain the swamp." This is analogous to the observations made at the time of extreme political instability in France and Italy that left the bureaucracy effectively in charge (Diamant 1968). Populist politicians may focus on a few policy domains, such as immigration and environmental regulation, and leave much of the rest of government unattended. Some civil servants may even engage in "guerilla government" (O'Leary 2006; Olsson 2016). While this is the stereotype of the role of bureaucracies held by many populists (as well as by others on the extreme right and left), public servants may believe their only reasonable option is to resist in place. Thus, the lack of concern of many populists with the bureaucracy – other than to denigrate it – may undermine their agenda. Such undermining may not be so much outright sabotage as the continuing daily tasks of public administrators to administer the laws that are on the books already. Rhetoric and anger will be insufficient to tame the administrative state. Without a clear strategy for controlling and remodeling the bureaucracy, the governance capacity of any illiberal regime will be limited.

The third option for populist politicians entering government is to use the bureaucracy. Roberto Michels argued (1915) that when socialist parties won power in government they had in fact lost. His argument was that, once in power, the principles of equality and shared power