


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Limits of Meritocracy in Stabilizing Democracy and the Twin Importance of Bureaucratic Impartiality and Effectiveness

David Delfs Erbo Andersen 

Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark
Email: dandersen@ps.au.dk

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Abstract

Theories connecting meritocracy and democratic stability are heavily understudied, and there are few attempts to empirically disentangle the potential mechanisms. This article proposes a novel explanation, emphasizing that bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness provide separate shields that stabilize democracies. Impartiality protects the opposition from unlawful discrimination, which raises support for democracy among the (potential) losers of elections and reduces the incentives to rebel or stage coups d'état, whereas effectiveness serves incumbent policies, which raises support among the (potential) winners and reduces the likelihood of incumbent takeovers. I find support for these propositions in comparative-historical analyses of a few paradigmatic cases—interwar Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany—with similar levels of economic development, imperial-autocratic legacies, and meritocratic types of administration but different regime outcomes. The results show that both impartial and effective bureaucratic behavior rather than meritocratic recruitment norms as such are important stabilizers of democracy. Yet they emphasize the importance of bureaucratic effectiveness in raising the perception that votes count to change outcomes on the ground and thus that democracy makes a difference. I argue that this should have a wider significance for the study of contemporary processes of democratic recession.

Much research documents a robust and positive relationship between meritocratic recruitment norms in the bureaucracy and democratic stability (see e.g., Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Fukuyama 2015; Lapuente and Rothstein 2014; Rothstein 2011; see also Andersen et al. 2014; Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019). However, theories connecting meritocracy and democratic stability are heavily understudied. We find a wealth of small-*n* studies in related subliterations but few that theorize and empirically disentangle the general relationship by examining the multiple processes and mechanisms that potentially connect meritocracy with democratic stability (see Mazzuca and Munck 2014; Munck 2011: 337).¹

¹Andersen and Krishnarajan (2019) list a number of potential mechanisms but do not examine them separately. Mazzuca and Munck (2021) note that a meritocratic bureaucracy may be damaging to democracy but do not analyze this thesis beyond the Latin American context.

One of the more well-established theories proposes that meritocracy makes bureaucracies act more impartially, which reduces political conflict and incentives to topple democracy (Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Lapuente and Rothstein 2014). While meritocratic recruitment is certainly an important organizational norm that protects the opposition and thus strengthens opposition support for democracy, I point out that meritocracy neither fully explains bureaucratic behavior nor alternative routes to democratic breakdown such as incumbent takeovers.

To arrive at this conclusion, I propose that we need to distinguish between impartiality and effectiveness as two separate dimensions and demands of bureaucratic behavior in modern, democratic societies. On the one hand, voters and political elites prefer bureaucracies that are impartial in policy advice and implementation by respecting principles of legality and equality before the law. On the other, they demand bureaucracies to be effective in serving the policies of the incumbent and deliver results on the ground (Dahlström and Lapuente 2017: 13; Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009: 330–33; Rothstein and Teorell 2008). I argue that these parameters of bureaucratic performance provide cues to voters and elites that democracy will deliver economic development and public goods in a fair manner now and in the future. This performance legitimacy, in turn, reduces political polarization around democracy as the proper political regime and may thus save democracies, even if they are relatively poor or undergoing economic crisis.

To be able to distinguish effects of effectiveness from those of impartiality, I specify two mechanisms—the impartiality and effectiveness shields. In the effectiveness shield, public officials first help realizing incumbent policies, which furthers the perception among incumbent elites and progovernment voters that democratic elections matter to bring about policy change. This primarily builds support for democracy among (potential) winners of elections, weakens the resonance of authoritarian demagogues, and thus reduces the likelihood of incumbent takeovers. In the impartiality shield, by contrast, public officials mediate political interests and implement policies in a manner that diminishes incumbent discrimination of opposition groups, thereby reducing incentives among the (potential) losers of elections for rebellion and staging coups d'état. In this way, bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness have fundamentally different effects on voter support for democracy and political elite conflict.

I examine the propositions in comparative-historical analyses of interwar Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. I choose Finland and Czechoslovakia because they are typical in the sense that they represent the combination of democratic stability and meritocratic administration (see Aarebrot and Berglund 1995: 218). On top of this, the fact that these democracies survived common hardships of economic crisis during the Great Depression, medium-low levels of economic development, and legacies of imperial-autocratic rule likely illuminates effects of performance legitimacy and any mechanism that connects meritocracy with democratic stability (see Bermeo 1997: 19; Capoccia 2005: 7; Mann 2004: 38).

I compare with interwar Germany because it represents a case with a firmly established meritocracy, a medium level of development, and a legacy of imperial-autocratic rule similar to Finland and Czechoslovakia but where democracy broke down in 1933 (see Capoccia 2005: 7; Mann 2004: 38). Enlisting Germany therefore enables the study of potential, destabilizing effects of meritocracy.

In both Finland and Czechoslovakia, the results show evidence that both impartiality and effectiveness contribute to democratic stability but using two separate processes as expected. The analysis of Germany, by contrast, shows that a meritocratic yet recalcitrant bureaucracy that frequently sabotages key government policies is a driver of political radicalization and incumbent takeovers. Further, in all three cases the combination of contingent events in World War I and bureaucratic-meritocratic legacies from prewar, authoritarian contexts decisively shaped interwar bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness. Altogether, this suggests that bureaucratic effectiveness is not just a function of meritocracy and that it has effects on democratic stability separate from those of impartiality.

The article proceeds by presenting the conceptual distinctions and theoretical propositions. Next, I present the analyses of Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. For each case, I first examine the development of meritocratic recruitment norms across World War I to assess the impact of meritocracy on postwar impartiality and effectiveness and then trace the impact of impartiality and effectiveness primarily during the Great Depression. The final section discusses the general validity of the propositions and argues that, alongside impartiality, effectiveness is likely a major feature that separates stable from unstable democracies, also when considering contemporary processes of more gradual democratic recession.

Conceptual Distinctions

Meritocracy and democratic stability are empirically related but conceptually distinct. Democratic stability means the survival of a regime where governments are elected in contested elections based on popular suffrage and freedom of association and expression (see Dahl 1971). Whereas democracy concerns “access to power,” the state, including the bureaucracy, concerns “exercise of power” (see Mazza 2010). Meritocracy denotes a specific system for recruitment of public officials to administrative positions in the bureaucracy based on merits (usually conceived as a product of education and experience) rather than political or social-economic criteria (Rauch and Evans 2000).

Empirically, meritocracy and democracy tend to correlate positively between countries and within countries over time (Andersen et al. 2014). However, the correlations are far from perfect. Sustained and high levels of meritocracy pertain almost exclusively to a small set of the world’s democracies in Northwestern Europe and the British settler colonies. Other democratic countries such as Italy, Romania, Peru, and Senegal have significantly lower levels of meritocracy or almost entirely (neo-)patrimonial recruitment patterns. Some autocracies like China and Singapore display higher levels of meritocracy than many of these democratic regimes. In general, meritocracy and democracy develop at different paces and according to different institutional logics.²

I propose that we distinguish between administrations’ organizational rules and behavioral norms and further between impartiality and effectiveness as two separate dimensions of what is often termed bureaucratic quality. Most recent studies of bureaucratic quality in comparative politics emphasize the importance of

²Consider, for instance, the different timing of waves of (de)democratization (Huntington 1991) and (de) bureaucratization (Olsen 2008) in modern times.

impartiality (e.g., Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Rothstein and Teorell 2008), pointing out that a system of recruitment to the civil service based on merit is the strongest predictor of bureaucratic quality (see Dahlström and Lapuente 2017). Indeed, in cross-national perspective meritocratic recruitment tends to select more impartial and reliable public officials. However, meritocracy in particular does not guarantee that bureaucratic behavior aligns with the content and intensions of incumbent policies (Andersen 2018; Olsen 2008). As this indicates, the analysis of bureaucratic quality needs to go beyond characterizing modes of organization and instead consider the behavior of public officials in interacting with the political system. It further implies that we consider bureaucratic quality as a function of both impartial and effective behavior among public officials³ (see e.g., Dahlström and Lapuente 2017).

We may conceive of impartiality as the nondiscriminatory and lawful advice and implementation of policies during incumbent spells. Taken to its extreme, this implies the preservation of impartiality even under an eager, new incumbent that pushes for radical and swift political change by illegal means (Rothstein and Teorell 2008). Whereas impartiality is a well-known concept, the concept of effectiveness is rarely specified, although most scholars will have an intuitive sense of its meaning. In line with principal-agent theory, I define “effectiveness” as swift and diligent implementation with little waste of resources—in other words, a “fast-track” from political input to administrative output during incumbent spells. In the absence of effectiveness, civil servants slack and shirk, thus letting expenses run loose and sacrificing policy programs, or simply sabotage the policy intensions (see Brehm and Gates 1997; Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009: 330–33).

The twin qualities of impartiality and effectiveness are important bases of high levels of performance by the bureaucracy and describe the most important dimensions of between- and within-country variation in bureaucratic quality (Fukuyama 2013). However, it is often difficult for public officials to reconcile concerns for impartiality and effectiveness. Effectiveness only protects principles of impartiality if that is what incumbents want, while considerations of impartiality may oppose incumbent proposals and delay implementation processes (Andersen 2018). Tensions between impartiality and effectiveness thus operationalize the challenge in democratic governance of balancing concerns for bureaucratic autonomy and political control (Fukuyama 2013).

Theoretical Propositions

In this section, I propose that bureaucratic quality, rather than meritocracy as such, is what protects democracies. I further propose that the effectiveness of public officials unleashes a mechanism of democratic stabilization separate from that of impartiality.

In many countries, the characteristics of political regimes have changed relatively often and in sudden moves. More stable structural or institutional variables, such as economic development levels or meritocratic recruitment norms, have difficulties

³I focus on public officials in the judiciary and administrative organs of the public sector, i.e. except public service organizations such as hospitals or day care centers.

explaining such abrupt changes, including democratic breakdowns. More likely, the timing of democratic breakdown is a product of the handling of political and economic crises, which is in turn codetermined by the behavior of institutional agents (Bernhard et al. 2001; Svulik 2008), among which we find public officials (Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019).

Although policy making is ultimately a task born by political leaders and parties (Bermeo and Pontusson 2012; Capoccia 2005), bureaucrats have independent effects on policy outputs and outcomes. Most simply, the bureaucracy is in charge of implementing policies, meaning that no policy reaches the population without the mediation of public officials. In fact, on many occasions when politicians do not know how to solve a given problem, bureaucrats have considerable leverage over the process and substance of policy making. Politicians need the expertise of bureaucrats to devise the most prudent solutions to complex problems. This includes the organization of public service delivery (Dahlström and Lapuente 2017), long-term economic investment strategies (Evans 1995; Evans and Rauch 1999), and the handling of economic crisis hardships such as inflation or unemployment (Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019). In short, the behavior of public officials matters for democratic stability because it is essential for economic crisis management.

Apart from economic crisis management, public officials ingrained with norms of impartiality more generally tend to consider a fairer distribution of political, social, and economic goods in advising governments and implementing policies. They provide better protection of legal norms and rules (Rothstein and Teorell 2008), and the perceived neutrality of these public officials finally makes them able to mediate and build inclusive coalitions that will, all else equal, propose more inclusive policies (Cornell and Lapuente 2014).

Further, patterns of bureaucratic behavior are far from completely determined by short- or long-term economic fluctuations. The advent and later organization of bureaucracy as well as ingrained practices of bureaucratic (mis)behavior are to a significant extent results of historical contingencies related to the timing of geopolitical pressures (Ertman 1997) and mass democratization and the responses of political actors (Shefter 1977).

On this basis, I propose that bureaucratic quality furthers democratic stability by strengthening performance legitimacy, that is the perception that democracy manages the economy well and delivers important public goods, which in the eyes of voters and political elites make democracy worth preserving (see Rothstein 2011). I argue that the impact of bureaucratic quality on the performance legitimacy of democracy can be explained by two assumptions of voter rationality. On the one hand, voters act rationally in preferring and holding politicians accountable for the delivery of fairly distributed economic goods. On the other hand, voters' abilities to comprehend and separate policy making from implementation processes are limited, resulting in the perception that bureaucracy's performance is determined by or a reflection of the defining characteristics of the political regime. This particular argument is rooted in research on voter demands and interelite competition in democracies.

Studies on voting behavior suggest that voters care about the outcomes that high-quality bureaucracies provide. Economic voting literature suggests that voters prefer sustainable economic growth, but research also shows that voters care intensely

about equal opportunities and procedural fairness. More than equality per se, it matters whether the distribution of economic goods is perceived as legitimate (*ibid.*). These performance parameters determine voters' choice of candidates and parties (Anderson 2000). Yet frequently, voters also use information on bureaucracy's performance to evaluate democracy against other regime types, leading to increased (dis)satisfaction with democracy as bureaucracy performance moves up and down (Dahlberg et al. 2015; Norris 2011).

Blaming or rewarding democracy for bureaucracy's performance is not necessarily the rational choice of voters. Where bureaucratic and political positions overlap, as in patrimonial systems, may be completely rational, but most democracies refer some autonomy to the bureaucracy. Thus, in most cases, blaming politicians and the institutional rules that selected them for the poor performance of bureaucrats is misplaced.

Bureaucratic performance frequently affects democratic support because of the cognitive shortcomings of most voters. Performance information does not necessarily work in a linear, direct fashion whereby bureaucratic performance records are accurately observed by voters who use this to evaluate democracy. Performance information provides only imperfect cues to voters because many voters have limited cognitive skills to interpret—often complex—information. Relatedly, voters often only have a vague idea of the significance of public administrations and, for instance, the difference between a bureaucratic and a patrimonial or politicized administration, in managing the economy and delivering public services. Out of ignorance, voters therefore tend to credit and blame the political regime for the actions of public officials—to the voters, these actors appear most immediately responsible (see Bisgaard 2015). Moreover, evaluations may rely on presumptions about democracy's expected outputs in the future rather than past records of performance (see Svolik 2013).

Voters are thus often poorly informed about democracy's and bureaucracy's true functions, and this may be the backbone of mass polarization (Svolik 2019). This means that we should generally conceive of the effect of bureaucratic quality as resulting from voters' misperceptions that bureaucratic performance now or in the future is a product or reflection of the institutional rules of democracy.

The way voters evaluate democracy is important for democratic stability because dissatisfied voters sometimes mobilize to change the regime and because voter dissatisfaction changes the dynamics of interelite competition. Voter dissatisfaction over specific government proposals and administrative practices may spread and radicalize to threaten the entire democratic system by lowering the costs of antisystemic mobilization and strengthening the resonance of antidemocratic campaigns. This may lead to rebellion or provide popular support for coup attempts (Linz 1978; Svolik 2013).

However, voter dissatisfaction also spreads to the political arena and political elite calculations. Because incumbents and opposition want to maximize vote shares, antisystemic tendencies likely polarize the political elite because antisystemic claims often target the government specifically.

Thus, what starts as dissatisfaction among voters may lead to general polarization of the political system between those groups that support the incumbent and those that support the opposition. Such centrifugal elite competition may lead to

democratic breakdown through various processes: either an elite opposition coup d'état, meant to (re)claim what has perceptibly been lost through the poor performance of the incumbent, or an incumbent takeover or military intervention meant to stifle rebellion (Haggard and Kaufman 2016: 226–27; Svobik 2015).

In addition, bureaucratic performance also has direct bearings on political elite preferences and behavior, that is without the mediation of voters. Even if voters do not pick up performance cues or mobilize on them, the relative benefits of being in government are reduced if government proposals are not implemented. Equally so, the relative benefits of being in opposition are reduced if bureaucratic procedures do not protect the opposition from unlawful discrimination. In either case, the result is polarization that unleashes the aforementioned risks of democratic breakdown (see Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Weingast 1997).

In sum, brilliant politicians and moderate political parties go a long way toward protecting democracy. However, bureaucratic quality yields independent effects on democratic stability due to the discretion of public officials in implementation and their significance as policy makers and mediators of political conflicts.

The Shields of Impartiality and Effectiveness

Bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness both increase the performance legitimacy of democracy, which reduces polarization between incumbent and opposition, and, accordingly, reduces the risk of democratic breakdown. However, impartiality and effectiveness affect voter and elite preferences and behavior in entirely different ways. To clarify these differences, the next section specifies both mechanisms and in particular presents distinct observable implications of each shield.

Impartial public officials ensure that implementation processes strengthen or preserve inclusiveness and protect the rule of law. With these principles in hand, they also check the soundness of incumbent proposals in the policy-making process and intervene if necessary. In this way, impartiality tends to protect the opposition, including in particular minorities, from unlawful discrimination (Cornell and Lapuente 2014). In turn, the particular effect of impartiality is the building of support for democracy among those who lose (or think they lose) from elections over government power, typically the opposition. Only over the course of time and multiple government turnovers may this lead to an increase in general trust in democratic institutions, that is among government and opposition voters and elites alike (see *ibid.*).

Therefore, the particular effect of impartiality regards the protection of the opposition and thus support among the (potential) losers of elections for democracy. This has implications for opposition behavior in the sense that it should reduce mass opposition incentives to rebel and lower military and elite opposition incentives to stage a coup d'état against democracy. The following three criteria are each necessary and jointly constitute a relatively unique set of observations that indicate the impartiality shield:

- (1) Public officials advise or implement policies in accordance with existing laws while avoiding differential treatment of religious, ethnic, or other social groups.

- (2) The outcomes of those policies strengthen the impression among voters, in particular those supporting the opposition, that democracy is the best procedure for protecting minority interests.
- (3) This lowers mass opposition incentives to rebel and lowers military and elite opposition incentives to stage a coup d'état against democracy.

Effective public officials, by contrast, ensure that incumbent policies become reality within a reasonable (or at least clearly communicated) time horizon. For democratically elected governments, this is highly valuable because they can show to the voters that their wishes have been heard. This boosts electoral support for the incumbent. Yet it also, more generally, strengthens the perception among pro- and antigovernment voters alike that elections matter. Votes count because voters observe that incumbent policies become reality; and when government power changes, it is likely that policy outputs and outcomes change as well. When democracy proves worthy of its promises in the minds of voters and politicians, totalitarian and populist ideas can be thwarted off more easily and thus the position of political outsiders and authoritarian demagogues weakens (Linz and Stepan 1996: 11; Svulik 2013).

In turn, the observable implications of the effectiveness shield should focus on the voters in general, but in particular incumbent supporters. The following three criteria provide necessary and relatively unique indications of the effectiveness shield:

- (1) Public officials implement policies swiftly and diligently.
- (2) The outcomes of those policies strengthen the impression among voters, in particular those supporting the incumbent, that democracy is the best procedure for changing policies and achieving better results.
- (3) This weakens the appeal of populism and authoritarian demagogues and reduces incumbent incentives to stage a coup from within.

The impartiality and effectiveness shields are codependent. As is well-known from studies of politicized bureaucracies (e.g., Cornell and Lapuente 2014; O'Donnell 2010), effective implementation that is not moderated by norms of impartiality may be the instrument by which incumbents enforce discriminatory or antidemocratic measures that unleash processes of polarization so dangerous for democracy. I point out that impartial bureaucracy is of little use in terms of legitimation if not combined with effective service of incumbent policies. Such a bureaucracy may become recalcitrant and build the image of democracy as a slow-moving, ineffective system, thus lighting the fuse of demagoguery. In sum, we should expect that democracies with weak bureaucratic effectiveness are equally prone to breakdown as democracies with weak bureaucratic impartiality.

Research Design

To examine the theoretical propositions, I conduct comparative-historical analyses of processes of democratic (de)stabilization. A small-n design allows intense studies of processes and mechanisms and illuminates previously unknown links between

variables (George and Bennett 2005). In addition, a large-n design is not fruitful as there are no quantitative, time-series indicators that allow us to distinguish clearly between bureaucratic effectiveness and impartiality⁴ and no good instrumental variable that isolates the independent effect of meritocracy on democratic stability.⁵

The analysis is based on three cases: interwar Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. There are four reasons for this case selection. First, Finland and Czechoslovakia are suitable for studying different mechanisms and illustrating the relevance of meritocracy for democratic stability. The fact that both the Finnish and Czechoslovakian democracies survived⁶ and had, respectively, Scandinavian- and Germanic-inspired bureaucracies at the time (see Aarebrot and Berglund 1995: 218) makes them typical cases of an alleged relationship between meritocracy and democratic stability. Also, because we expect economic crisis to augment the risk of democratic breakdown and the effect of meritocracy (see Andersen and Krishnarajan 2019), the context of the Great Depression, which caused significant hardships in both countries (Bermeo 1997), raises the probability of observing any mechanism that connects meritocracy with democratic stability.

Second, the democratic survivors of Finland and Czechoslovakia as well as the democratic breakdown of Germany were all part of what Mann (2004: 38) has termed the so-called frontier-zone of interwar Europe. In this belt of countries from Southwest to Northeast we find democracies with medium or low levels of economic development whose fates thus depended on institutional dynamics or contingent events and actions rather than structural conditions. Consider the three most relevant structural explanations for democratic stability at the time: economic development, growth, and inequality. Germany had already gone through intense industrialization and was now ranked among the richest European countries, measured in GDP per capita. Czechoslovakia and Finland ranked significantly lower and had not yet experienced a full-blown industrialization that compares with Germany's.

Also, the economic crisis of the 1930s was a scope condition rather than an explanatory factor in the Central European belt. Specifically, Germany experienced a growth rate change in GDP/capita from 1931 to 1932 at -7.94 percent, which was more dramatic than Czechoslovakia's at -4.59 percent, although less dramatic than Finland's at -1.20 percent. In any case, we should note that these negative growth rates are all staggering in historical perspective and places all three cases among those democracies that were clearly susceptible to political extremism at the time

⁴Of measures with a wide temporal and spatial scope, we find the Varieties of Democracy indicator of "Rigorous and impartial public administration." However, this indicator does not separate effectiveness from impartiality (see Coppedge et al. 2019: 162).

⁵One of the best candidates is Hariri's (2012) use of the Neolithic Revolution as instrument of early state formation. However, by affecting the vertical organization of power in societies the Neolithic Revolution likely also had direct impacts on later regime developments.

⁶Some interpret the Anschluss of Czechoslovakia in March 1938 as a democratic breakdown (e.g., Bugge 2006/2007: 10–12). However, most assessments point to the Anschluss as a foreign invasion and thus code Czechoslovakia as democratic survivor (e.g., Bradley 2000: 104–5; Mamatey 1973: 156–59). Further, the democraticness of both Czechoslovakia's and Finland's regimes can be questioned in their methods of repression. However, their outlawing of antisystemic movements is nevertheless considered within the normal constitutional boundaries and thus legitimate from a democratic point of view (Capoccia 2005: 160–61).

(data on GDP/capita is taken from the Maddison Project, Bolt and van Zanden 2014; see also Bermeo 1997: 19; Capoccia 2005: 7).

Finally, land inequality was lower in Germany than in Czechoslovakia and Finland. Considering the most used metric, the percentage of family farms was 54 in Germany compared with Czechoslovakia's of 40 and Finland's of 47 (see Vanhanen 2003). Another metric was developed by Luebbert (1987: 462), who estimated the percentage of the total primary workforce from the "agrarian proletariat." This shows that Germany's proletariat was significantly lower, 30.7 percent, than Czechoslovakia's at 40.3 percent and Finland's at 63 percent.

In turn, we can reject variations in the dominant structural impediments to democratic stability—poverty, deep economic crisis, and an agrarian subsistence economy—as explanations for the diverging outcomes in the three cases. The three cases, therefore, provide an ideal testing ground for testing effects of more proximate conditions such as performance legitimacy that could drive democratic stability. In addition, studying underexplored parts of a case universe—interwar Europe—that remains paradigmatic in comparative democratization research means that we may generate new insights on democratic stability.

Third, historical explanations related to democratic legacies or, conversely, the impact of World War I, also fall short. The Germany history is well-known. The German Empire before 1918 was a thoroughly autocratic system although the popularly elected *Reichstag* had acquired significant formal and informal instruments of control with the executive power and influence over policy making in the decades before the Great War. Likewise, both Finland and Czechoslovakia only experienced their first democratization immediately after World War I and had profound legacies of autocratic rule, here from being peripheries in the former Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, respectively. Finland remained an entrenched part of the autocratic Russian Empire until 1917. Although the 1905 revolution in Russia paved the way for a unicameral, elected assembly based on universal suffrage in Finland, the tsar's representative frequently dissolved parliament and interfered in elections and government affairs (Kissane 2004: 971–72; Upton 1980: 35). The Czechs in Bohemia, the motherland of the later Czechoslovakia, achieved control of their own Diet from the late nineteenth century, but government affairs were controlled from Vienna. Although universal suffrage was granted the Imperial Diet in 1906, this did not change the fundamentally autocratic construction of the regional administrations throughout the empire (Bradley 1971: 133; Wallace 1976: 57). Apart from autocratic legacies, Weimar Germany shared with Finland and Czechoslovakia an imperial history of statehood with similar problems of ethnic heterogeneity and divisions around national identity (Caldwell 2008; Rothschild 1974: 91–92).

Thus, the autocratic-imperial legacies were similar in the three countries and, if anything, should have constrained democratic developments more directly in Finland and Czechoslovakia. This means that we can effectively reject potential reverse causality between a legacy of pre-World War I democracy and meritocracy (see Charron and Lapuente 2010; see also Ertman 1998; Luebbert 1991).

Fourth, the comparison with Germany is particularly instructive as it shared with Finland and Czechoslovakia a firmly meritocratic administrative system. In fact, Germany (and Prussia before German unification in 1870–71) is the paradigmatic

case *par excellence* representing a rule-bound and autonomous, meritocratic administration. However, as indicated, specific organizational rules do not transfer directly into specific behavioral trends among public officials. In this sense, Germany offers an opportunity to explore further the need for studying and distinguishing between different modes of bureaucratic behavior. Most notably, we can study when and how impartiality and effectiveness are sometimes more important than meritocracy and at other times insufficient in protecting democracy.

In sum, while the analyses of Finland and Czechoslovakia examine the relevance of bureaucratic quality for democratic stability, we can get a strong sense of the importance of bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness by comparing with relatively similar cases that nevertheless experienced democratic breakdown. To this end, the interwar German experience strikes as the most relevant and a very instructive comparison.

In the analysis to come, I challenge the explanation of meritocracy by first following the trajectory of meritocracy across World War I and looking at its impact on postwar democratization and democratic stability. I then assess evidence for the mechanisms of impartiality and effectiveness, focusing primarily on the period of the Great Depression from 1929. I start with Finland as the, arguably, most stable democracy in the sample, then move to the more fledgling democracy of Czechoslovakia, and end by comparing with the democratic breakdown in Germany.

Finland

The Development of Meritocracy

The basis for an effective, professional bureaucracy was established in Finland as the country gained status as an autonomous entity under Swedish rule in the late eighteenth century. Even though Swedish administration still contained strong elements of patrimonialism in the late 1700s (Teorell and Rothstein 2015), the administrative organization exemplified the modern principles of bureaucracy at the time: collegial boards at the central level and royal officials placed as heads of the *landskap* and *härad* locally, mostly staffed by legally competent or university-educated people (Ertman 1997: 314).

Despite Sweden's loss of Finland to Russia in 1809, Swedish nobles continued leading the Finnish bureaucracy. In turn, Finnish bureaucracy was ingrained with practices of meritocracy from subsequent Swedish reform waves to end systemic corruption (Alapuro 1988: 22; Karvonen 2000: 129; Kirby 2006: 39, 45; see also Teorell and Rothstein 2015). The liberal movement of *Fennomen* in the 1880s further strengthened the Swedish legacy to the bureaucracy as part of their resistance campaign against Russia (Kirby 2006: 74). The communes and counties were long established as integrative parts of the central administration in Helsinki and with the adoption of Finnish as the official language of the bureaucracy in the late nineteenth century, the cohesion and lines of command were strengthened (Alapuro 1988: 23, 95).

World War I, and more specifically the Russian Empire's dissolution in 1917 and Germany's defeat in the war, marked a watershed in Finland's political development but left the bureaucratic state apparatus relatively untouched (Alapuro 1988:

168–69; Jutikkala and Pirinen 2003: 407–8; Upton 1980: 26–28). The February Revolution in Russia in 1917 unleashed a bitter and ultimately violent conflict in Finland between the “White” bourgeois and “Red” socialist forces. The reality in which the Whites and Reds found themselves in 1917 was, as Alapuro (1988: 25) holds, a “thoroughly bureaucratized society” where even “the political sphere was bureaucratized” (see also Nousiainen 1988: 230). Thus, adherence to the legal principles of the old, Gustavian constitution and confidence in the state administration was one thing that Whites and Reds, perhaps apart from the anarchists and communists, had in common. Both the social democrats and the bourgeois parties fought hard to preserve the administration’s autonomy and organizational characteristics during the revolutionary 1917, the civil war in 1918, and the constitutional negotiations in 1919 that established a democratic-republican regime (Alapuro 1988: 175–76; Kirby 2006: 168).

The traditional Swedish-inspired legal and organizational principles were officially readopted in the new republic. These were further cemented by the immediate purge of public officials with Russian loyalties (Engman 1989: 107, 112; Kirby 2006: 74) and the social democratic willingness to exclude no particular class or group from the bureaucracy (Alapuro 1988: 199, 205). In turn, the basis for meritocracy as well as high levels of bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness in the interwar period was established.

The development of meritocracy in Finland across World War I shows that bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness were products of strong, bureaucratic path dependencies. Being weak if meaningful at all, democratic legacies played no significant role. Further, the bases of bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness was reproduced in the immediate aftermath of the war and only developed incrementally in the new democratic era. In this light, we can effectively reject reverse causality and other potential confounders and move on to studying potential mechanisms connecting meritocracy and democratic stability.

The Two Mechanisms

Both the impartiality and effectiveness shield are observable in the years of the Great Depression in the 1930s. The impartiality shield worked as a vital protection against polarization of both left and right (Stubbergaard 1996: 202)—a major challenge in the aftermath of civil war and with reinocations during the Great Depression (see Capoccia 2005: 11, 14, 41).

The Red-Green Alliance—manifested in 1936–37 with packages of unemployment protection similar to those of Sweden’s *Saltsjöbaden*, Denmark’s *Kanslergadeforliget*, and the United States’ New Deal—is often mentioned as the condition that strengthened the political center and built a lasting social compromise that sealed democracy (e.g., Karvonen 2000: 150–51; Nousiainen 1988: 236, 244–45). The backbone of the Red-Green alliance was not only parties’ willingness to compromise but also bureaucratic neutrality. The State Council, which consisted of ministers and their secretaries, led the central planning of the economy and social reforms. Generally, the council was strongly guided by bureaucratic values giving it leeway as a neutral mediator of left-right and government-opposition conflicts (Nousiainen 1988: 229–32). The continued presence of senior civil servants in

the council created a stable pattern of interaction between left and right parties characterized by mutual trust (Kuisma 1993; Nousiainen 1988).

In addition to impartiality, the bureaucracy contributed with effectiveness when implementing antiextremist policies targeting the *Lapua* movement and the policies of the Red-Green Alliance (Stubbergaard 1996: 130–31). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the body's countercyclical policies were carried out swiftly and accurately. This included agrarian reforms and support for state-led corporations that promoted a major redistribution of resources and secured a basic legitimacy of the democratic system among voters in general and progovernment voters in particular (Kuisma 1993; Nousiainen 1988).

The effectiveness shield was particularly important from the late 1920s. Kasekamp (1999: 598–99) notes that the Finnish President Svinhufvud, in contrast to Päts's and Ulmanis's coups in Estonia and Latvia, abstained from initiating a coup d'état to protect against the right-wing movement—the *Lapua* in Finland. Svinhufvud was attracted to the idea of a more authoritarian system, but in contrast to Päts and Ulmanis, he could rely on a strong executive power that was willing to and capable of, first, containing the *Lapua* movement (Capoccia 2005: 149, 160–61, 169) and second, mustering greater levels of support for a moderate, democratic course through the 1930s (Larsen 1990: 256).

Summing up, in Finland the effectiveness shield ensured that economic crisis was combatted in a way that fulfilled demands for redistribution, thus bolstering general support for democracy including among progovernment voters and elites. The impartiality shield played its part in the formation of reforms to combat the Depression, but through the interwar years, it had the more continuous effect of dampening tensions between left and right and grievances from the civil war. This, in particular, bolstered continued support for democracy among opposition voters and political elites. Bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness thus had separate and substantial effects on economic crisis management in Finland, and it is hard to imagine the survival of Finnish democracy without considering both these factors.

Specifically, the Finnish case is illustrative of how bureaucracies help mediate between conflicting political parties. Although political parties eventually found ways to compromise, most notably as evidenced by the Red-Green Alliance, they were clearly representing opposing interests and some of the bearing parties even flirted with autocracy up through the 1920s and 1930s. In this respect, it is hard to explain Svinhufvud's retreat from autocratic alliances and the major parties' eventual compromise without reference to the constant neutrality and mediation of the bureaucracy.

Czechoslovakia

The Development of Meritocracy

With the Treaty of Westphalia, Bohemia became part of the Habsburg Empire. This effectively destroyed the powers of the Czech nobility, which for the next three centuries acted as servants of the administration in Vienna rather than on their own terms (Bradley 1971: 91). In the late eighteenth century, the Habsburg

administration, including the imperial offices in provinces such as Bohemia, underwent vast reforms toward centralization, merit-based recruitment, and the opening of access to public offices for nonnobles. While this did not remove patrimonialism from the administration, it certainly was a major step to a modern, bureaucratic organization (Judson 2016: 54).

Resembling contemporary developments in Finland, a Czech nationalist movement emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, in contrast to Finland, the movement never managed to win significant concessions from the imperial center. Revolutionary attempts in 1848 were quickly abolished, primarily due to Russian intervention, and followed by a wave of repression from Vienna. One of the most notable consequences was the destruction of virtually all traditional, Czech institutions, including orders of local self-rule (Bradley 1971: 130). In turn, the pattern by which the affairs of the Czech lands were managed by servants who were loyal to Vienna and worked according to Austrian *Rechtsstaat* principles was consolidated (Benes 1973: 88; Janos 2000: 107–8).

This remained the institutional status quo until World War I, meaning that by 1914 there was hardly any Czech or Slovak administration but rather a Prague-based regional administration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Wallace 1976: 71). That is, in contrast to Finland where an autocratic, Russian-controlled regime coexisted with an autonomous Finnish administration, both the bureaucracy and regime remained firmly a mirror of Austrian institutions in Bohemia.

World War I and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 specifically marked a true *tabula rasa* in Czech and Slovak history. It was the entrance of a period of transition when the institutional framework of a new Czechoslovak state was in flux and could largely be decided by whoever showed the necessary political skills to do so (Mueggenberg 2014: chs. 2–3; Rothschild 1974: 76; Wallace 1976: 125). Thus, through a series of fortunate power grabs by Czech military forces and the leadership of extraordinary figures such as President Tomáš Masaryk, a Prague-based administration took over the majority of the stationed Austrian civil servants and distributed them alongside police forces in the provinces. In Bohemia and other northern provinces, the pre-World War I administrative structures were maintained only to be occupied by the Czech-Austrian servants, and the Austrian legal framework and traditions were readopted. The former Habsburg model of administration constituted a well-known model of governance for Masaryk and the reliance on former Austrian servants further limited the opportunities for large-scale administrative reform (Mueggenberg 2014: 45, chs. 12–14).

Next, the Versailles Treaty marked the settlement of some outstanding territorial disputes, and Masaryk's project of a parliamentary, democratic system was inaugurated with a new constitution in 1920 (Benes 1973: 52–53; Hendrych 1993: 41–42; Seton-Watson 1945: 146). The Slovak administrative units, relying on much less firm legal frameworks, were occupied by the better educated and organized Czechs (Benes 1973: 82). These developments manifested quickly and consolidated through the 1920s with Czech control of Slovak ministerial sections and further centralization around Prague from 1927 (Bradley 2000: 97; Mamatey 1973: 124, 134).

In contrast to Finland, the development and consolidation of meritocracy in the Czech lands was primarily a result of contingencies unfolding during and immediately after World War I—yet during this critical juncture, the reliance on the

Austrian legal framework and administrative units put significant strains on Masaryk's menu of choices. Over the course of a few dramatic years from 1918 to around 1920, this settled high levels of bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness that lasted well into the 1930s. That is, although bureaucratic path dependencies were not as strong as in Finland, the Czechoslovak bureaucracy followed its own logic of institutional development.

The Two Mechanisms

We find substantial evidence of both the effectiveness and impartiality shields in interwar Czechoslovakia. Yet, the evidence is relatively weaker than in Finland because it is limited to only some aspects of public official behavior with less clear-cut effects on radicalization and polarization.

Several policies sought to address the economic crisis from 1929: tax exemptions, increased public works contracting Sudeten German workers to appease minority dissatisfaction (Capoccia 2005: 99–100), nourishment and milk programs to alleviate the hardships of poverty (Wingfield 1989: 106), and the introduction of an 8-hour working day to generally protect workers from exploitation. Much of the substance in these policies can be attributed to the innovations and compromises struck in two political institutions, the Castle group (a ministerial coordination body led by the president) and the *Petka* (an extraparliamentary committee representing the five biggest parties in parliament), as well as the moderate leaderships of presidents Masaryk and Benes (Zückert 2008: 337). In Finland, bureaucratic impartiality was clearly important as mediator between otherwise conflicting political interests. Yet in Czechoslovakia, the political institutions and executives showed a constant willingness to compromise. In addition, many of the permanent bureaucrats in the Castle Group were handpicked by Masaryk, making it easier for bureaucrats to navigate between political signals and draft proposals that could be accepted by political opponents (see Capoccia 2005; Miller 1999; Orzoff 2009).

However, the powerful Czech bureaucracy undertook many policy-making functions such as the general macroeconomic management in the 1930s, which has been compared with Japan's MITI a generation later (Janos 2000: 112–13). More generally, the bureaucracy used its prerogatives in emergency and antiextremist lawmaking to de facto become an impartial legislator that refrained from aligning with one political faction against others (ibid.: 110–11). Importantly, the Czech-dominated bureaucracy generally refrained from implementing social and antiextremist laws in a biased way against ethnic or other minorities but stayed within legal boundaries.

The bureaucracy was also firmly effective in implementing these policies by generally working smoothly with shifting government coalitions and in interaction with citizens (Bradley 2000: 97; Taborsky 1945: 144). Implementation was prudent at both central and local levels (Bradley 2000: 98; Hendrych 1993: 42; Miller 1999: 194).

Whereas we find substantial evidence of effectiveness and impartiality, the evidence of positive effects on performance legitimacy and the neutralization of polarization is less clear-cut. At an overall level, the number and significance of radicalized movements increased through the 1930s. As Zückert (2008: 340–41)

notes, the measures implemented in the early 1930s, however gracious, could not decisively remove the major integrationist challenges related with the large Slovak and Sudeten German minorities. Partly in response to Czech dominance of public offices, many Slovaks became staunchly anti-Czech through the 1930s, and Sudeten Germans' claims for autonomy approached secessionism (Mamatey 1973: 149).

However, impartiality did work to appease the opposition during the 1920s and early 1930s in particular. The sizeable Hungarian, Slovak, and German minorities never radicalized as much as in other Eastern European countries with a politically and administratively dominating, ethnic majority (Bruegel 1973: 183–86; Kopstein and Wittenberg 2010). Moreover, the effective implementation of antiextremist laws at the courts and by the police hindered the broadening of antirepublican resistance from Sudeten Germans and Slovaks to the mainstream of the governing parties in the *Petka*. In turn, general antidemocratic sentiments and centrifugal politics never became dominant in interwar Czechoslovakia. The Castle Group and *Petka* institutions remained in de facto control of the political system until Germany eroded Czechoslovakia's independence with the occupation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 and the full *Anschluss* in March 1939 (Bradley 2000; Capoccia 2005: 99–100).

In sum, we see evidence that the effectiveness and impartiality shields worked as expected, minimizing democratic dissatisfaction and radicalization among pro-government and opposition voters and elites, respectively. The ingenuity of Masaryk and the strength of the more moderate, systemic parties in the *Petka* stand as separate explanatory factors. Yet judging the democratic survival as a contingent outcome of unusual political leadership or party-institutional traits alone overlooks the foundations of bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness that brought the unlikely Czechoslovakian democracy so far. The two bureaucratic qualities were important drivers of support for mainstream, democratically minded parties and thus, indirectly, the *Petka* system.

Germany

The Development of Meritocracy

In late-seventeenth-century Prussia, the Hohenzollern kings centralized and refined a fiscal and judicial administration on military organizational principles (Fischer and Lundgreen 1975: 510–17). Even though hiring and firing of bureaucrats was managed politically, by the kings personally or by commissions under royal supervision, this process effectively rooted out patrimonial tendencies at the central levels of administration by recruiting middle-class people on merits and in-job performance (Ertman 1997: 248, 253–54; Fischer and Lundgreen 1975: 521–22).

In 1794, a code established the class of professional civil servants, the *Beamtenstand*. Only a decade later, in 1807, all state offices were opened to merit-based competition, and the king's personal advisory board was dissolved and replaced by ministries (Sheehan 1989: 142). The Prussian bureaucracy here gained its so-called Weberian nature. Prussia's particular power position during the revolutionary period from 1848 to 1871 ensured the penetration of its administrative

structures and Weberian traits across the German imperial territory (Gillis 1971: 6–7, 11; Ziblatt 2006: 113–15).

Bismarck managed to align bureaucracy by strict enforcement of disciplinary laws and by presenting a conservative-nationalist program that appealed to the bureaucracy (Caplan 1979: 206). As the parliament of the *Reichstag* gained more power after 1890, the old bureaucratic class increasingly came under pressure to reform. Yet, although some politically appointed offices were installed, reforms attempts were largely avoided (e.g., Mann 1985: 85–86; Mommsen 1991: 79).

Thus, at the dawn of World War I, the German Empire had a streamlined and consolidated meritocracy that had remained the constant force under shifting autocratic regimes and political executives during the nineteenth century. With the defeat in the war and the sudden absence of former authoritarian strongholds, the social democrat, Ebert, and his support base were free to organize the detailed rules of new democratic institutions in the constitutional negotiations of 1918–19 (Craig 1978: 161, 404; Haffner 1973: ch. 7).

Nevertheless, the negotiations on the republic's administrative organization in many ways repeated earlier political-bureaucratic interaction. While the social democrats hastened the institutionalization of a stronger ethos of public service among the lower ranks of the bureaucracy, they also quickly understood that a rebuilding of Germany demanded the old bureaucracy's expertise and organizational presence (Böckenförde 1985: 15–16). Therefore, the characteristics and position of higher-level public officials and the court system in particular were not decisively disturbed.

Thus, as in Finland and Czechoslovakia, the meritocracy in Germany developed according to its own institutional logic and was reproduced after World War I. If following the official principles of conduct and organizational traits, we would expect this to establish an effective administration based on impartial norms. Yet the interwar period showed a different pattern of bureaucratic behavior in which the bureaucracy was recalcitrant in key political areas serving the Weimar system and shifting governments and acted in a biased fashion against social democratic governments in particular. The most powerful factor explaining this behavioral pattern is found in the bureaucracy as it was high-level public officials, backed by the powerful *Beamtenbund*, who reproduced their own power position and protected themselves from reforms and attempts at politicization (Caplan 1988: 59–61; Runge 1965: 36–38). Tellingly, the politically appointed *politische beamten* never got a strong hold as coordinators between the political and administrative spheres, which was otherwise the intention (Mann 1985: 85–86).

The Two Mechanisms

The analysis of bureaucratic performance in Weimar Germany is complicated by the highly complex administrative organization from central-level ministries to state-level administrations and the significant variations between policy sectors. Yet, the following analysis shows that it is possible to separate and compare distinct patterns of bureaucratic performance across policy sectors and administrative levels.

We find both biased and recalcitrant behavior by the bureaucracy in Germany. Whereas inefficient organization and corruption in the bureaucracy also hinder effectiveness, this was not a general problem in any policy sector. To be sure, fiscal

and monetary management was generally very effective despite the difficult economic circumstances (Müller 2014) and welfare policies, including assistance for the unemployed, were generally implemented diligently. In fact, during Brüning's austerity-focused cabinet from 1930 to 1932 in particular, the ambitions of social assistance were often more progressive in the bureaucracy than among political executives (Craig 1978: 420; Crew 1998: chs. 1, 8). Also, it is worth mentioning that the unsuccessful unemployment policies during the Depression were largely caused by Chancellor Brüning's miscalculations and strategy of austerity and, later, Chancellor Schleicher's ignorance of the unemployment problem (Wolffsohn 1981: 207–8).

Rather, the lack of effectiveness and impartiality stemmed from the political-ideological clash between staunchly conservative or outright authoritarian bureaucrats and social- or liberal-democratic politicians. This caused widespread implementation problems but also enormous problems of politician-bureaucrat conflict. At the same time, these recalcitrant bureaucrats systematically favored certain policies. In turn, biased and recalcitrant implementation had the same implications of an ungovernable bureaucracy.

Biased and recalcitrant implementation showed itself in several spheres of governance. There was notable sabotage of socioeconomic policies—mostly during the incumbencies of SPD and the German Centre Party and when they implied the protection or strengthening of the working class. For instance, the 8-hour working day was at first implemented but then gradually hollowed out, as the responsible ministries regulating labor relations remained passive when employers led working hours creep up to their traditionally high levels (Mäding 1985: 96; McElligott 2014: 79).

Ministerial departments also had a share in failing political leadership both before and after 1929. *Junkers* and old upper-class elites still filled vital administrative offices in the municipalities and the key ministries of agriculture and interior (Muncy 1947: 487–92). By means of the influence these positions provided, the ministries continuously shut out labor and socialist interests from negotiations while exclusively involving bourgeois-liberal and Church interest groups. From the mid-1920s, despite social democratic governments, big businesses were favored at the cost of ordinary workers, and during the Depression, the noble administrators at the local social insurance offices managed welfare benefits pitilessly, treating beneficiaries as servants rather than citizens (Hong 1998: 47–48, 123–24; McElligott 2014: 79, 93).

Such acts reflect how the bureaucracy to some extent guided social change toward pre-World War I economic policies that benefited heavy industry as opposed to workers and farmers. These tendencies can be observed across the economic cycles of hyperinflation until 1924, stabilization until from 1924 to 1929, and the Depression from 1929 (see Mommsen 1991: 83, 86, 90, 100, 111–12; Petzina 1985: 46, 55–56).

The recalcitrance and biased behavior of the bureaucracy was even clearer in judicial affairs. Most Weimar judges had survived the revolution in office and thus represented the old pre-1914 law school (McElligott 2014: 101). Accordingly, court rulings often biased toward conservative values, that is the institutions of Wilhelmine Germany, the old *ständ*er, and heavy industries (ibid.: 100–3). This

was particularly evident in the *Länder* where *Junkers* still dominated and practiced regular breaches of administrative protocols (ibid.: 172).

Weimar democracy ended with Hitler's Enabling Act on 24 March 1933, an incumbent takeover that authorized Hitler as chancellor to sanction any policy without the consent of the Reichstag. In hindsight, the breakdown of the parliamentary institution in 1930 and the subsequent emergency governments were preludes to this—a direct consequence of the Great Depression (Lehmann 2010: 98–100). Yet, if we want to explain the democratic breakdown, we have to understand what disintegrated mainstream parties, drove the Nazi vote, and thus paved the way for Hitler.

Although biased and recalcitrant implementation are hard to separate in the case of Weimar Germany, the effects of recalcitrance on voter and elite adherence to democracy and established parliamentary parties were much clearer than those of biased implementation. Starting in 1928 and manifesting over the next few years was the impression in the general electorate that the Weimar parliamentary system had failed in handling economic and judicial issues. As leading scholar of German history, Gordon A. Craig (1978: 419) notes, “the health and stability of the Republic were to suffer from faults of commission and omission with respect to the Civil Service, the administration of justice.”

The conflictual environment between different governments and the bureaucracy put strains on the social-democratic and other preropublic incumbent parties' ability to mobilize stable majorities and defend voter shares generally. Moreover, the ineffectiveness in addressing right-wing extremism at the courts radicalized undermined the credibility of the republic among the working class and middle classes, which were otherwise the backbone of the social and liberal democratic governments through the 1920s (ibid.: 420). Even though this situation improved somewhat during the economic restoration years of 1924–29, the Great Depression reinvigorated antirepublican sentiments across the political spectrum. Business elites came to distrust interventions by the state (Caplan 1988: 90–95; Hong 1998: 163; Mommsen 1991: 92–93). Workers, in particular, deeply mistrusted the civil service whom they believed were serving upper class interests (Caplan 1988: 72–73; Frye 1965: 651; McElligott 2014: 93–95).

Among the most important political developments, we should note the split between landowners and workers among the constituents of the structurally important German National People's Party, DNVP (Frye 1965: 646; Muncy 1947: 485–86). Such disintegration of conservative forces set the scene for emergency rule but also established the popular basis for the Nazi Party, NSDAP (Ziblatt 2017: 297–301). Likewise, NSDAP used the failures of former governments to attract voters from the social democrats and the center-right parties. Altogether, this formed the basis of the immense electoral success of the Nazis starting in 1928 (Capoccia 2005: 9; Craig 1978: 419; Lepsius 1978: 44–46). These voters did not react to injustices in the administration or discriminatory policies. In fact, as indicated, many administrative practices in economic and judicial policy implementation favored conservative interests. Rather, alongside disappointment over their party's inability to gain electoral victories, these voters acted on a general perception of ineffectiveness in the current political system and thus welcomed the promise of revolutionary changes in social and economic matters guided by a *Führer* (Mann 2004: 165).

In sum, meritocracy had detrimental effects on democratic stability in interwar Germany because the autonomy of a conservative bureaucracy enabled it to sabotage social and liberal government policies. However, rather than opposition voters and elites reacting to biased implementation, it was the general pattern of recalcitrance that paralyzed and delegitimized the Weimar democracy in the eyes of those voters and elites who initially supported Weimar democracy and frequently also its governments. As expected, this contributed to building a platform for Hitler's authoritarian demagoguery.

This analysis shows that we can trace much of Weimar democracy's problems to the survival of prewar conservative, even authoritarian public officials and their codes of conduct. Because of old norms of meritocracy and bureaucratic autonomy, there was a conservative discourse highlighting the importance of bureaucrats and ministers as experts standing above politics (Mommesen 1991). Ironically, however, the conservative discourse undermined the political stability it was meant to strengthen. I have shown how this came about in a process by which sabotage and bias in the bureaucracy made voters lose confidence in the ability of democracy and its elected politicians to deliver their preferred political results. Thus, when economic crisis hit, extremist parties won electoral support at the expense of the center parties. The comparisons with Finland and Czechoslovakia also make it clear that the breakdown of Germany's democracy was not an inevitable result of weak democratic legacies. It was modes of bureaucratic behavior, in particular a lack of effectiveness, that sealed the fate of democracy.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I have presented a theory of how bureaucratic behavior rather than meritocratic recruitment norms as such stabilize democracies by strengthening performance legitimacy and thus diminishing mass and elite incentives to topple democracy. Yet bureaucratic behavior has at least two dimensions—impartiality and effectiveness—each with their own important effect on democratic stability. Bureaucratic impartiality raises perceptions of fair treatment among the opposition and thus builds support for democracy among (potential) losers of elections and decreases incentives of rebellion and coups. Bureaucratic effectiveness, by contrast, helps realizing incumbent policies, thus building support for democracy among (potential) winners of elections and weakening the resonance of authoritarian demagogues.

Comparative-historical analyses of interwar Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany showed three kinds of evidence that support the propositions. First, meritocracy does not accurately determine bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness and may thus have diverging effects on democratic stability. In particular, meritocracy can coexist with and sometimes even cause major deficiencies in terms of effectiveness, most vividly shown in Weimar Germany.

Second, the findings support the separate importance of the shields of impartiality and effectiveness. When as in Finland and Czechoslovakia, bureaucracy acted with effectiveness and impartiality in serving shifting governments, extremists had difficulties occupying the political center and established party elites managed

to forge political compromise. Yet impartiality primarily bolstered opposition support whereas effectiveness primarily bolstered support for democracy among progovernment voters and elites. In Germany, bureaucracy was both biased and recalcitrant, reflected in a conservative bureaucracy's tendency to sabotage multiple incumbents' intensions in certain key policy sectors, which caused general dissatisfaction.

Third, bureaucracy and meritocratic recruitment norms in particular developed according to a bureaucratic institutional logic and under shifting, but basically authoritarian, political regimes in all three countries before World War I. Thus, interwar bureaucratic impartiality and effectiveness were neither a function of democratic legacies or postwar democratization nor of other potential confounders such as the legacy of statehood or economic development levels. Variations across the three countries also show that the importance of bureaucratic quality was far from trivial or true by definition. Finland and Czechoslovakia built impartial and effective bureaucracies—the former through path-dependent processes, the latter also through contingent events—whereas impartiality and effectiveness in Germany suffered from a legacy of meritocracy.

In sum, the results show the limits of meritocracy in stabilizing democracies. On balance, meritocratic reforms have more positive than negative effects and should still be pursued. Yet, this article in particular suggests that we should not neglect the basic ability of bureaucracies to serve incumbents and incumbent policies diligently. While norms of impartiality have important positive effects on democratic stability by protecting opposition and bolstering opposition support for democracy, democracies also need to show their electorates that government promises can become reality and thus, more fundamentally, that votes count. Otherwise, voters feel entitled to ask what democracy is good for.

The cases of interwar Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany have each been critical for scholarship on comparative democratization and thus bear potential for generalization to other democracies, especially those undergoing economic crisis. The impartiality and effectiveness shields are not only relevant in the interwar context but also describe more general processes that separate stable from unstable democracies. In this way, I suggest that we study the impartiality and effectiveness shields in more contemporary cases of gradual democratic recession. In many of these cases, we have seen similar patterns of mass and elite polarization and strained performance legitimacy as factors raising general support for populists or outright authoritarian leaders. This would shed light on the multiple interactions between state and political institutions, which are still relatively undisclosed.

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David Andersen is an assistant professor at Aarhus University, Denmark. His main research interests include state building, bureaucracy, political regime developments, and comparative historical analysis with a particular focus on European developments. He has published in international journals such as *British Journal of Political Science*, *Democratization*, *Comparative Politics*, *Social Science History*, *Government and Opposition*, *Political Studies Review*, and *Scandinavian Political Studies*.