



Politicisation of the Civil Service: Contestation and Context

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Abstract:

The politicization of the civil service is not a new phenomenon but it is highly contested and contingent on the environmental and institutional contexts in which it operates. The global environment has changed radically and has become more turbulent witnessed by, inter alia, the rise of populism and democratic backsliding. Institutional contexts have also changed as politicians demand greater accountability from officials in implementing their (mandated) policies. What is new is the various forms that politicization takes. This review paper takes relations between politicians, political staff and bureaucracy and offers a multi-dimensional analysis of the politicization concept: politicized appointments; politicized recruitment; behavioural politicization; and, structural politicization. We analyse politicization in different regimes: the UK as liberal democracy; Georgia as electoral democracy; and Turkey as electoral autocracy.

Keywords:

politicization, political appointments, patronage, behavioral politicization, structural politicization

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1. Introduction

There is evidence of politicisation of the civil service across different administrative traditions, regime types and regions (Askim et al., 2024; Cooper et al., 2022; Panizza et al., 2019; Kopecký et al., 2016; Lewis, 2011), showing it not only remains a persistent feature globally, but its increase has also been observed in countries once considered to be immune, such as the meritocracies of Scandinavia, or some Westminster countries. Furthermore, the public administration environment within which bureaucracies and politicians design and implement policies has become much more turbulent in the past twenty-plus years. We have witnessed ideas of how bureaucracies operate as businesses (New Public Management movement), the rise of populist (illiberal) parties, subtle dismantling of democracies (labelled democratic backsliding), rise of populist regimes, unexpected crises (fiscal, COVID-19 pandemic, Russian aggression) that polarize societies, and all of that with constant attention of the media. These circumstances change what competencies are expected from civil servants, and the roles that parties and politicians play in a context where demands for loyalty, trust and public value are growing. The concept of “politicization” that reflects these relations has also changed shape to adapt to the above circumstances.

The concept of politicization has been traditionally associated with that of partisanship, especially in political science. Political parties control and reward bureaucracies for electoral gains and clientelistic behaviour, thus politicization is understood as “the ability of **political parties** [emphasis added by authors] to appoint individuals to (non-elected) positions” in the public sector (Kopecký et al., 2016, p. 418). Other studies show a more personalized politicization of such appointments (Staronova & Rybář, 2021; Cooper et al., 2022), which can be formal to legal political posts or patronage appointments into bureaucracy. In public administration, politicization of the civil service is traditionally defined as ‘the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service’ (Pierre & Peters, 2004, p.2) and thus relates more to discretionary power in personnel management. But the scope of politicization has extended well beyond what Pierre and Peters conceived in the early 2000s. Recent observations discuss more nuanced aspects of politicization, ranging from bureaucracy becoming politically sensitized (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2020; Van Dorp, 2023), to politicians applying “political screening” (Dahlmström & Holmgren, 2019; Veit & Vedder, 2024) in order to find political experience among candidates for civil service positions. Thus, functional and administrative types of politicization are investigated (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). Intuitively, one can already see diversity and variations in the concept of politicisation and its contestation. We use material from our upcoming Handbook on Politicization and Political Patronage to illustrate how we can theorize more generally about the concept of politicization.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to differentiate several dimensions of politicization, their key actors and measurement, to offer nuanced contextualization of

the politicization, and provide better clarification of the concept. We do this by unpacking four multi-faceted dimensions of politicization which we claim have relevance across different regime types: a liberal democracy (United Kingdom); an electoral democracy (Georgia); and Turkey as an electoral autocracy. While the vignettes used to illustrate the spread of politicization cannot be comprehensive, they do offer a flavour of the growing myth of the neutral civil servant. The choice of these countries (although limited by the number selected) broadly reflects the perceived spectrum of politicization settings. The UK has a strong tradition of civil service neutrality; Georgia, as a post-Soviet country, has made significant efforts to reform the public sector in a wider bid to create a democratic political system and meet the criteria for EU membership. Efforts to create an impartial civil service are challenged by political dynamics. Turkey is located at the other end of the spectrum with a high level of politicization where the ruling party exerts significant control over officials (Knox & Janenova, 2020; 2023). On a spectrum, these three countries therefore offer a continuum from neutrality to a highly politicized regime and somewhere in between. The rationale for selecting these vignettes is illustrative rather than comprehensive in demonstrating the rise in politicisation and its variegated outworkings in practice.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we trace the origins of politicization, its evolution and traditional conceptualization. We continue with identifying and offering four key dimensions of the politicization concept: politicization of the appointments; politicization of recruitment and promotion; behavioural politicization; and, structural politicization. Finally, we illustrate increasing politicization through examples/vignettes across three regime types which demonstrate the process is context-blind.

2. From traditional dichotomy to executive triangle and beyond

Much of the civil service professionalisation idea is rooted in Weber's original (normative) conception of bureaucracies. This model included, inter alia, that civil servants should be impartial and objective, and employment therein should be based on merit qualifications, rather than personal relationships or favouritism. Importantly, Weber argued for a clear distinction between politics and administration: politicians are responsible for making policy decisions based on their elected mandate; officials who were appointed on meritocratic principles are charged with implementing policies efficiently and effectively. Woodrow Wilson, on the other hand, was more ambivalent and suggested a 'harmonious' relationship between the political and administrative spheres. Although he supported the separation of politics and administration, he also diverged from Weber and recommended that 'the administrator should have and does have a will of his (sic) own in the choice of means for accomplishing his work. He is not and ought not to be a mere passive instrument' (1887, 212 cited in Sager & Rosser, 2009).

This debate continued in the literature with Svava (2001) arguing for a complementarity of politics and administration where politicians and civil servants operate as a partnership in governance. Put differently, Wilson's thoughts on the relationship between politics and administration are that 'they are analytically separate in province and process yet maintain a vital connection' (McCandless & Guy, 2013, p. 372).

The sharp distinction between the roles of politicians and bureaucrats articulated by Weber evolved into a much more nuanced picture. Aberbach et al. (1981) offered what they described as four images of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats that characterised this evolution. Peters (1987) developed Aberbach et al.'s framework by examining the patterns of interaction between politicians and bureaucrats using a five-type typology (formal-legal; village life model; functional model; adversarial model and administrative state model).

From a different perspective, Hood and Lodge (2006) examined the relationships between civil servants and politicians through the concept of explicit or implicit 'public service bargains' (PSB), where loyalty, reward, and competencies are the three main dimensions of this bargain. They outline different models of PSBs based on the how these dimensions are balanced, and conceptualised them as follows: trustee-type bargains where officials are trusted to act autonomously; agency type bargains in which civil servants act in a principal-agent relationship with politicians; patronage bargains where officials are selected and rewarded based on loyalty to political leaders; and, merit-based bargains – civil servants are selected and rewarded based on expertise and competence. They draw PSB from previous research by Schaffer (1973), who articulated the traditional bargain in politicians abandoning the hire-and-fire of senior civil servants in exchange for their competencies and loyalty; while senior officials, in return, forego criticism for rewards, such as job security and career.

More recently the concept of an executive triangle (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018) has been posited as a new framework for examining the interdependent relationships and dynamics between ministers, civil servants and political staff, including ministerial advisors. The executive triangle is described as 'an institution performing distinct functions in policy-making such as assessing policy alternatives, anticipating political support, coordinating with other actors both inside and outside government. Those functions are being performed by actors within the triangle and reflected in their roles and their direct and indirect relationships' (Bach & Hustedt, 2023, p. 338). Shaw and Eichbaum (2018) highlight the tensions in the executive triangle: blurring of roles between civil servants and political advisors; lack of accountability and transparency of advisors; and the short-term political horizons of advisors compared to officials. The executive triangle therefore helps explain the evolving and sometimes conflicting relationship between officials, politicians and political advisors. Different bargains, relations and roles exist within the executive triangle across countries with varying levels of politicization due to distinctive administrative traditions (Bach et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2022) or institutional settings (Bach & Hustedt, 2023; Staronova & Rybář, 2024).

3. Dimensions of Politicization

What is clear from the existing literature outlined above is that politicization as a concept is multi-dimensional and plays out differently depending on the context. We therefore attempt to unpack politicization through a more detailed explication of its dimensions which we suggest as: politicization of appointments; politicization of recruitment and promotion; behavioural politicization; and, structural politicization.

3.1 Politicization of appointments

Political appointments are the most direct and visible form of politicization as they result in nominations that can be documented even in less transparent settings. Here, individuals are selected for a variety of political reasons. First, one of the primary means by which politicians secure control over the bureaucracy is through the strategic placement of personnel into key civil service positions (Kopecký et al., 2016). Second, government jobs may be allocated to partisans, often party staff, serving as a reward to loyalists (Kopecký et al., 2016) or appointments become an “individualized power resource of an autonomous minister independent of their political parties” (Staronova & Rybář, 2021, p. 651). Third, appointments are used as a tool of coalition management under multi-party governments where parties expect to influence appointments in proportion to their representation. Here, appointments serve as a power resource in negotiations with other parties to tempt potential collaboration partners with the right to nominate ‘their’ people (Askim et al., 2024).

Political appointments may be legal where politicians have a right to appoint (hence *formal politicization*, see Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014) various number of political staff, ranging from narrowly defined political positions in the executive, such as deputy ministers, state secretaries and/or ministerial advisers to a broad number of political civil servant positions or heads of agencies, which are formally declared as such. The number of formal political appointments may increase by ‘thickening’ of government through multiple layers (Light, 2011). Westminster countries tend to have a small number of formal political appointments compared to the US government which is organized in a way that makes presidential political appointments a natural part of the structure (Ng, 2018; Cooper et al., 2022). In Europe, Germany has a top layer of political civil servants who work within the boundaries of politics and administration. In Napoleonic countries, the structural element of Cabinet systems provide space for political appointments. Countries with coalition governments usually have deputy ministers/state secretaries as part of the coalition bargain to better coordinate coalition parties e.g. Norway, Sweden, Slovakia (Askim et al 2018; Bach et al., 2020).

Political appointments may also be *illegal*, labelled as patronage appointments, where politicians use their discretion in public employment decisions (Kopecký et al., 2016). This variant of politicization is relatively rare in Western meritocratic systems, nevertheless occurring in many countries of Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe

and Asian countries (Staronova and Rybář, 2021; Panizza et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2023). These countries claim a *de jure* professionalized and meritocratic civil service system, yet, politicians *de facto* exert significant influence and utilize informal mechanisms on the hiring and firing of civil servants (Staronova & Rybář, 2024).

3.2 Politicization of Recruitment and Promotion

A second dimension of politicization focuses on screening officials for reasons other than their expertise. This applies to recruitment for both meritocratic and political civil servants. In this case, politicians act as designated gatekeepers who have formal power and influence in the final phase of the selection of senior civil servants or political appointees. Researchers have investigated which criteria politicians apply and the qualifications they look for in selection and promotion (Aucoin, 2012; Christiansen et al., 2016; Rybář and Podmanik, 2020; Veit & Vedder, 2024). They do so by looking at career trajectories of civil servants prior to attaining their current position as the information about previous political experience becomes relevant for a politician's decision on expected behavior and performance.

Recruitment and promotion patterns vary across countries depending on whether institutional settings are mainly merit based, hybrid or politicized. In a politicized setting, political criteria substitute meritocratic principles and can also include dismissal of officials. In a purely meritocratic system, senior civil servants are more likely to be recruited based on their professional merits and expertise as documented by a career path within the bureaucracy, whereas in hybrid and politicized settings political criteria apply more directly.

Thus, in contrast to the original definition by Pierre and Peters (2004), merit-based criteria may continue to play an important role and instead of being substituted, they are *supplemented* (Veit & Vedder, 2024) by political criteria. In the recruitment and promotion processes, candidates undergo a meritocratic multi-phased selection process, and politicians choose in the final phase on the basis of specific political criteria. During this process, research has shown, civil servants may “signal” (Veit & Vedder, 2024) their willingness or even enthusiasm to implement the government's agenda. In other words, senior civil servants flag their political loyalty, political competency, and party-political compatibility to ensure that the bureaucracy aligns with the wishes of their political masters.

In all settings though, the main rationale for this type of recruitment is to ensure greater political responsiveness across the bureaucracy, aligning political preferences of the appointees with those of politicians and consistent with managerial and professional competencies (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). Here research looks at how politicians weigh loyalty and competence in selection decisions. Even though a trade-off between both criteria occurs, in meritocratic settings research suggests that both political responsiveness and neutral competence can be optimized independently (Christiansen et al., 2016). The application of political criteria in public sector management processes becomes a question of balance. As Peters pointed out: ‘On the one hand the civil service

is meant to exercise *neutral competence*, and to make decisions about clients and to provide policy advice without regard to the political colours of the individuals involved. On the other hand, however, the civil service is part of government and should also exercise *responsive competence* (Peters, 2018, p. 13). As the connection between politics and administration became recognised as a reality, the skills and competencies required of senior civil servants adapted to include political awareness and an understanding of the political landscape as an integral part of their recruitment, professional development and promotion processes.

Nevertheless, the literature is not very clear what ‘political criteria’ actually mean. Political criteria mostly involve selecting bureaucrats with similar preferences to those of the principal, *partisan loyalty* or party-political attachment and ideological conformity to the person who hired them. Political criteria have increasingly been incorporated into competency-based recruitment processes. In Germany, over time, both party connections and political experience became important (Veit & Vedder, 2024). Similarly, across modern democracies, as politics has become more professionalized, a stronger emphasis is placed on political communication skills of senior civil servants (Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2015) and this criterion is also applied in the recruitment process. Also, many OECD countries use competency frameworks which focus on leadership at the senior levels of the civil service/public sector. One of the required competencies is to ‘balance the need for political responsiveness with that of merit and stability’ (OECD, 2021, p. 69). As a result, there can be political influence/involvement in the appointments or promotion processes of senior civil servants. The extent of this political influence varies across OECD countries from choosing a candidate on a shortlist arrived at by a non-political selection panel, to confirmation of a candidate based entirely on merit-based criteria.

3.3 Behavioural politicization

A number of scholars have argued that civil servants have gone well beyond the notion of ‘neutral competence’, resulting in the acquisition of new political roles, functions and behaviours referred to as *functional politicization* (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Christiansen et al., 2016). In this type of politicization, the focus has shifted from politicians to executive actors. Civil servants engage in behavioural responses to an increasingly complex policy-making process caused by exposure to the media, greater managerial autonomy, and the presence of political advisers. Civil servants provide not only professional policy advice but also ‘politico-tactical’ (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Christiansen et al., 2016). A key aspect of *functional politicization* is that civil servants are recruited on merit and are not subject to politicized appointments, processes and pressures but anticipate the political context in which they operate and behave accordingly. Thus, this type of politicization implies more politico-strategic competencies than simple neutral technical expertise (Belloir & Van den Berg, 2020; Christiansen et al., 2016). The most distinctive feature of functional politicization is its endogenous nature: it “bubbles up from within the civil service” (Shaw & Eichbaum,

2020, p. 843) because it is civil servants themselves who change their behavior (Van Dorp, 2023). Functional politicization is operationalized by self-perception of civil servants' roles, competencies and behavior.

This behavioural change has also been observed with the advent of New Public Management where senior civil servants and heads of agencies play a much greater role in being publicly accountable for policy outcomes and thus being publicly exposed (Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2015). Salomonsen et al. (2016) noted that some senior civil servants became engaged in strategic political communication due to their awareness of increased media interest in public policies. As a result, alongside their neutral and expert role, they carry out politically oriented tasks such as providing strategic political advice to their political superiors on potential opposition to policy proposals, coordinating across coalition partners, writing political speeches or engaging with the media (Grube, 2015; Van Dorp, 2023).

Thus, senior civil servants have emerged from the shadows of their ministers and comment through press and social media, public speeches, and appearances at televised parliamentary committee and public enquiries, described by Aucoin (2012, p.189) as acting like 'promiscuous partisans' supporting the political agenda of the government of the day. In examining the role of a senior civil servant across four Westminster jurisdictions (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom), Grube concluded that 'with public service leaders increasingly becoming part of the public face of government, the propensity for perception of politicization to grow becomes almost unavoidable' (Grube, 2015, p. 318). For example, the most senior public servant gave evidence to a highly publicised parliamentary committee in a criminal case in Canada against an engineering firm (SNC-Lavalin) facing charges of bribery, fraud and money laundering in 2019. There were allegations that Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, had intervened in the case. Researchers found that 'throughout his testimony the Clerk (senior official) redirects the line of questioning to defend and promote the sitting government's reputation...possibly the strongest evidence to date of 'promiscuous partisanship' within a Westminster country' (Cooper, 2023, p. 139). In sum, there is mounting evidence that senior civil servants operate in an environment where Weber's original conception of impartiality, meritocracy, political neutrality, and protection against politicization becomes more difficult to achieve in practice.

A variant of behavioural politicization that has been discussed theoretically is so called *anticipatory politicization* (see Peters, 2013) which has been observed in practice in highly politicized settings and populist/democratic backsliding regimes as exit strategy (Bauer et al., 2021; Schuster et al., 2022). This type of politicization relates to the perception of civil servants holding a starkly different vision of policy-making than the incoming new minister/president or government. When a new government enters office, the existing bureaucracy must determine whether they will remain in civil service, particularly if conflict over professional autonomy or democratic values, in cases of democratic backsliding, is likely and they may choose to leave their positions in anticipation. Attacks on the civil service and democratic values under populist and

democratic backsliding can change the bargain dynamics between civil servants and politicians, as the bureaucracy becomes “side-lined” (or even “comes under attack” (Bauer et al., 2021). The response of the conflicted civil servant may be to exit.

3.4 Structural politicization

The concept of *structural politicization* refers to how politicians organize administrative structures as a system which conditions politicization choices, or the politics of structural choice. This comprises: a) formal architecture, institutions and procedures, such as the organization of an executive triangle and/or agencies, hierarchy, number and type of political posts, specialization, legal oversight, organizational restructuring (Lewis, 2011; Dahlström, C., & Niklasson 2013; Zankina, 2017; Meert et al., 2024), b) constitutional and legal constraints on political authority, discretionary powers (Hajnal et al 2018; Bauer et al., 2021), c) the design of the personnel system, rules for appointments, selection, recruitment, promotion and protection (Staroňová & Gajduschek, 2013; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019; Moynihan 2022), d) transparency rules and access to data on the above (Staroňová & Rybář, 2024). A well known example emerged during the Trump administration: Schedule F Executive Order, which sought to transform career public service into political appointees, allowing them to be removed if they were not performing according to the president's goals (Moynihan, 2022).

This type of politicization uses political influence to manipulate administrative structures and procedures as a way for politicians to gain control over the civil service as a whole on system level, whereas the preceding three types of politicization (appointment, recruitment and behavioural) refer to practice at the individual level with the ultimate aim of politicians to increase political responsiveness. Research on public management builds on the assumption that change in public administration is instrumental, aimed at performance improvements. Nevertheless, there are instances when administrative reforms affecting the institutional environment may be politically motivated to transform the bureaucracy, install loyalists and, in this way, to increase political control and responsiveness of the person, institution, organization and administration as a whole. It is difficult to measure such structural politicization since how can one precisely know and explain when politicians aim to improve civil service performance and when they intend to politicize (see also discussion in Lewis 2011). Still, indicative of this politicization is an unstable environment with frequent structural changes linked with political interventions into the administration particularly after elections, as seen in Central and Eastern Europe or in countries experiencing populism and/or democratic backsliding where such changes jeopardize the essence of democracy (Hajnal et al., 2018; Mazur et al., 2018; Peters & Pierre, 2022). In these environments, the institutional architecture and structure may not be settled, and politicization may refer to constant shifts over time and after each election. In fact, one of the measures of politicization is looking at the existence of regulations, such as ministerial advisers and protections, changes in the respective formal legislation through civil service laws or

counting the layers and number of political appointees (Lewis, 2011) in the overall public administration system. More discussion within academic community is needed on how to best capture this phenomenon.

In structural terms, the ministerial cabinet, to be found particularly in Napoleonic systems, is a highly institutionalized form of executive triangle. It brings together a mix of temporary administrative and political staff, the size, type of appointment and structure of which may change over time on political grounds (Meert et al., 2024). This relatively sizable structure interfaces between the minister and the career civil service providing political responsiveness through political/strategic considerations, negotiating and communicating on behalf of the minister, and controlling the civil service. Ministerial cabinets can be also instrumental in civil service appointments, both formally and informally. Meert et al. (2024) show how ministerial cabinets undergo their own structural politicization over time by being dismantled, decreased in size or budget, or alternatively can be strengthened, or the ministerial offices evolve into cabinets.

A variant of structural politicization is *administrative politicization* introduced in a seminal work on the topic by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008). It refers to the emergence of political advisers as a new structural layer between ministers and bureaucracy, its primary purpose being to strengthen political responsiveness in policymaking. Administrative politicization considers how political staff influence the meritocratic civil service via administrative processes and decisions. It highlights how the activities of advisers engaged in the review of documents, restrictions on information flow, and gate-keeping access to ministers, can constrain civil servants in their effort to provide ministers with free, unbiased, and honest policy advice. Thus, the very existence of ministerial advisers and other political staff brings about politicization as it magnifies the conflict between responsibility and responsiveness. Ministerial advisers became a new venue of investigation of politicization with rich empirical findings describing their basic characteristics and political ties, hierarchical role and power distribution with other political advisers (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018). In highly politicized settings an informal category of ‘invisible advisers’ has been identified with calls to examine their emergence, qualities and impacts (Staronova & Rybář, 2024).

Table 1 provides a relatively simple representation of our review of approaches to the study of politicization and demonstrates the different dimensions.

Table 1:
Politicization - Four Dimensions

Dimensions	Rationale	Executive Actors Action	Measurement
Political appointments - Legal/formal: institutionalized political posts – part of structure and therefore legitimate - Illegal/informal: political appointments into bureaucracy, hire and fire, “patronage”	The appointees may have party/ personal ties or be civil servants with political commitment to government/president/party. Rationale relates to control, reward, search for loyalty, coalition management.	Politicians	Turnover Surveys Career data
Politicization of recruitment and promotion - Recruitment and promotion criteria - Political screening of competences	Alignment of preferences between politicians and civil servants in personnel management. Politicians have formal power and influence in the final phase of selection in search for political competence.	Politicians	Career data interviews
Behavioral politicization - Functional - Self-politicization - Anticipatory politicization (exit)	Civil servants assuming part or whole political roles (in addition to professional) for various reasons. Exit strategy of civil servants in anticipation of ideologically incompatible politicians.	Civil servants	Self-perception Surveys Observations Interviews vignettes
Structural politicization - Institutional architecture and politics of structural choice - Ministerial Cabinets - Administrative politicization (new layer of political advisers)	Manipulation of administrative structures, rules, norms, design (e.g. of personnel system) that guard and affect practice as a whole system. Intervention of ministerial advisers that constrain civil servants from playing professional roles.	Politicians Political staff	Textual analysis of documents: changes in formal regulations, organizations, size, budget, power, processes Surveys/ interviews

Source: authors’ own, 2024

4. Politicization in practice

We outline three country vignettes of politicization in practice: the UK as a liberal democracy; Georgia as an electoral democracy; and Turkey as an electoral autocracy. Each vignette illustrates different dimensions of politicization outlined in table 1.

Vignette 1: United Kingdom (structural politicization)

Allegations of politicization of the civil service in the UK were brought into sharp relief when the (then) Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary, Dominic Raab, resigned from his government post in April 2023 after an investigation into bullying allegations. Raab was accused of acting in an aggressive and intimidating way in his behaviour towards officials that could have amounted to bullying. This resulted in a five-month investigation led by independent legal counsel which concluded that Raab engaged in abuse or misuse of power that undermined or humiliated officials while he was Foreign Secretary. During the enquiry into his conduct, he was found to have intimidated civil servants by criticising their work as ‘utterly useless’ and ‘woeful’ (Tolley, 2023). Raab’s response to the findings of the enquiry was that he had been targeted by activist civil servants in a coordinated and politicised attack over his frustrations in trying to implement government policies. This incident came on the back of several other examples: former Prime Minister Boris Johnston was accused of orchestrating the departure of his Cabinet Secretary and National Security Advise (Sir Mark Sedwill) in favour of more ‘Brexiters officials’; and former Prime Minister, Liz Truss, allegedly engaged in an ‘ideological purge’ of mandarins. In an independent report (November 2023) conducted by a former Cabinet Office Minister (Lord Francis Maude) into reforms of the civil service, he called for changes to the ‘Byzantine and opaque’ Whitehall bureaucracy and recommended streamlining the governance of the civil service, including splitting the role of Cabinet Secretary between a policy adviser and a head of civil service role. Maude called for a more robust culture in Whitehall claiming the system needed to be ‘less mealy-mouthed about politicization’.

Importantly, Maude concluded:

Other than the accountability of civil servants to ministers, there is little external scrutiny of the Civil Service as an institution...Its independence is accordingly truncated... The public interest in having a permanent politically impartial Civil Service, able to serve any democratically elected government effectively and to give ministers well-informed and robust advice, is not well assured due to the absence of systematic external scrutiny. (Maude Report, 2023, 2.1.2)

Maude recommended that the arrangements for the appointment of civil servants should be revisited to allow ministers a greater role in some appointments while strengthening the public interest in maintaining a permanent politically impartial service able to give robust and objective advice to ministers (Maude Report, 2023, 2.3.5). This is a clear example of structural politicization masquerading as a report to overhaul external scrutiny of the civil service.

In a surprising move the former Labour Party Leader, and now Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer appointed a former senior civil servant (Sue Gray) as his Chief of Staff (September 2023). This was an unusual development for a career-long official not least because Gray played a pivotal role in the downfall of former Prime Minister Boris

Johnston through an investigation into his breach of COVID rules while in government. The Labour Party brought Gray in to professionalise their operations in the run up to the general elections in July 2024. In opposition, the Conservative Party now argue that the Labour Government is now engaged in politicisation by hiring special advisors some of whom made financial contributions to the party and has called on the Civil Service Commission to conduct an investigation to ensure the hires were made in accordance with the civil service code. This vignette illustrates structural politicisation at two levels: calls (via the Maude report) to radically changes the governance of the civil service to allow a greater role for ministers and administrative politicisation through a much greater role of political advisers.

Vignette 2: Georgia (politicisation of recruitment and promotion)

Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 witnessed political and economic instability and conflict. The Rose Revolution in 2003 led to political change and a pro-Western orientation aimed at improving governance, in particular tackling systemic corruption. More recently Georgia has pursued closer relationships with the European Union and has been recommended for candidate status, subject to conditions. One pressing problem is to tackle political influence over the judiciary.

A recent European Commission report on Georgia's progress on public sector reform noted:

There is no defined 'senior civil service' in the Georgian system that could properly delineate the civil service from the political sphere. The fact that all human resources decisions are made by the ministers or deputy ministers, instead of senior civil servants, increases the risk of politicization of the civil service and overburdens ministers with daily work routines. (European Commission, 2023a, p. 19)

The Commission recommended that efforts need to be maintained to ensure a stable, accountable and transparent civil service system.

One report suggests that there is pressure on senior civil servants from ministers which consolidates politicization (Blake, 2023). Top managers depend on ministers for guidance due to insufficient managerial expertise – this reliance comes in the form of politicised directives. 'Political control over the civil service is further solidified by ministers, who are political appointees, retaining the final say in top managerial appointments, with a consequence of someone not potentially compliant with politicized orders not getting the job. Collectively, these factors make it exceedingly challenging for the civil service to resist politicization' (Blake, 2023, p.5). Georgia represents a defining case of politicization in recruitment and promotion where politicians have significant influence over the appointments process and career trajectory of officials.

Vignette 3: Turkey (political appointments; behavioral politicization)

The failed coup attempt in July 2016 against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan precipitated a sweeping crackdown with more than 100,000 people sacked or suspended from the military, police and civil service. The government targeted those suspected of having links to Fethullah Gulen, the exiled Islamic cleric, and made political appointments to the judiciary and executive. The mass purge of civil servants was justified on the grounds of their alleged links to terrorist organisations. This politicization process is now fully entrenched in Turkey.

As part of Turkey's candidature for the European Union, there are yearly reports prepared by the European Commission on its enlargement policy. In the 2023 report the Commission noted that Turkey lacks the political will to reform its public administration and politicization continues with high levels of centralisation of the policymaking system. The Commission noted:

The civil service legal framework fails to ensure the political neutrality of the civil service. There is growing concern about the lack of merit-based recruitment and appointments in the civil service. The appointment procedure for senior civil service posts lacks competitive objective criteria, leaving appointments open to nepotism and political interference. There is a set of uniform criteria for demotion, dismissals and disciplinary measures, but there is a general lack of transparency in implementing the criteria. (European Commission, 2023b, p.22)

The European Parliament adopted a resolution that Turkey's EU accession process could not be resumed without a drastic change of course. Erdogan, in turn, has threatened to sever ties with the EU.

In the face of a highly politicised civil service, an interesting ethnographic study showed how a small group of street level bureaucrats in Turkey deployed their functional expertise to preserve institutional autonomy as officials working on local and parliamentary elections (O'Connor et al., 2021). The study concluded: 'civil servants made sure that their politically involved superiors...could not completely hollow out the institution they worked in and strived to use their expertise to preserve the organisational capacities until the trend in authoritarianism could be reversed' (Saglam, 2022, p. 296).

Turkey has therefore engaged in two forms of politicization: political appointments and behavioral politicization. Erdogan's purge of public servants deemed disloyal to his regime was replaced with officials seen to be directly aligned with his government. Officials also opted to exhibit behavioral traits in anticipation of what was expected under Erdogan or, as the example above illustrates, a studied resistance to his regime by a small pockets of officials.

5. Discussion

One cannot extrapolate on the consequences of politicization from three short comparative vignettes, yet they provide a limited window into the experiences of different regime types and the different forms of politicization. In the case of the United Kingdom there is growing frustration amongst politicians that the 'dead-hand' of civil servants is thwarting their political goals and, post-Brexit, officials have become overtly partisan (Smith & Richards, 2020; Diamond, 2023). The argument that the civil service represents a level of continuity and expertise is countered by the fact that regular career movement amongst officials renders them dilettantes with no institutional memory. There is also a frustration amongst UK politicians that collectively civil servants lack public accountability for radial public policy decisions on issues such as immigration, the cost-of-living crisis, and a decline in the health care system (NHS).

Georgia is struggling to shed the vestiges of its Soviet past including a hierarchical form of governance lacking a clear distinction between the political and administrative spheres. Even though it has made significant improvements in public administration and financial management reforms (including gender-responsive budgeting), it has been criticised for lacking a stable, accountable and transparent civil service system. This includes the fact that although the principles of merit are clearly stated in the legislation, implementing a merit-based, professional civil service, as well as transparent recruitment, promotion and dismissal procedures remains problematic.

Turkey has further consolidated its position as an authoritarian state since 2016 and this is reflected in civil service politicization. Saglam (2022, p. 290) captured this nicely when he describes senior officials as: 'men (sic) that had been appointed to their positions solely through phone calls from Ankara, indicating that their status as managers was achieved not because of their merits but through their connections to the AKP, the party-in-power led by President Erdogan's network'.

The consequences of politicization stem from the more fundamental questions which inform why it takes place in the first instance and these continue to be unresolved. Can civil servants remain politically neutral yet fully commit to the policies of different political parties which come to power? If not, would a more politically based system destroy merit-based recruitment and embed a system of patronage where loyalty to the political party was the key criterion for appointment? Do civil servants under the current model lack accountability to politicians and society, more generally, for some of the key public policy decisions which impact on the quality of citizens' life? How different regimes choose to answer these questions will ultimately determine the consequences of politicization.

6. Conclusion

To summarise, this paper has discussed the multi-faceted nature of politicization clustered around four key dimensions. First, politicized appointments where politicians place 'their people' into key civil service positions which may be legal or, if solely for the purposes of patronage, illegal. Second, politicization of civil service recruitment and promotion where politicians act as gatekeepers in the final stages of these processes to ensure greater political responsiveness across the bureaucracy. Third, functional politicization where civil servants become 'politico-tactical' and change their behaviour consistent with the political milieu in which they operate or exit the service in anticipation of radically different policies of an incoming government. Finally, structural politicization where politicians manipulate administrative structures and procedures to exert greater control over the civil service.

Importantly, however, the impact or effects of politicization can be both good and bad. Meritocratic based systems perform better, have higher economic growth and are less corrupt. Within politicized systems the quality of policy advice is partisan and short-term in nature resulting in the loss of institutional capacity. In an era where democratic backsliding is on the increase, a politicized bureaucracy is more likely to ensue in order to serve the needs of populist leaders. On the other hand, both professional politicization and functional and administrative politicization, a new layer of ministerial advisers, can be seen as a way of filling capacity gaps in the civil service where a deficit exists, be it expertise or political responsiveness. We illustrated the effects of politicization through three vignettes in very different contexts, a liberal democracy (UK); an electoral democracy (Georgia), and an electoral autocracy (Turkey) as examples of variegated politicization.

What these examples show is that regardless of the regime type there is growing politicization, even in countries which would be perceived as adhering to the Weberian principles of a neutral civil service. There is a palpable frustration amongst politicians that civil servants are not faithfully implementing their policies. This becomes more acute with rising political polarisation and populism. The role which senior officials now perform is changing in a milieu where political ideologies, and therefore public policies, can be hugely divergent. No longer are they the 'face behind the minister' but are increasingly drawn into the public arena to face media scrutiny and parliamentary committees. Working in a global arena where policy transfer is common means that officials are influenced by external political entities and, internally, by social movements who have become more adept at political advocacy and see themselves as an alternative voice to independent advice to politicians proffered by officials. This global environment has also weakened historic protection of their neutrality whether through legislation or more assertive politicians using ministerial directives. The growth in digitalization has also exposed civil servants to greater scrutiny and the reduction in bureaucratic autonomy which, in turn, creates greater potential for politicization.

What this paper has shown is that politicization is used in very different ways by

scholars and practitioners which makes the concept unclear and contested, often lacking refinement in terms of its various dimensions. Behavioral politicization, for example, is very different than using the recruitment and administrative process to influence appointments.

Our exploration suggests a number of emerging areas for future research. More detailed ways in which to capture and measure politicization along the dimensions outlined in this paper. Studies which explore politicization as an executive triangle rather than a dichotomy between politicians and civil servants. Different perspectives on politicization which recognise that it is not always normatively bad and, relatedly, the tipping point at which politicization becomes detrimental to bureaucracies or even democracy. And, the context within which politicization takes place – different politicization settings and regime types which view politicization in very different ways. One regime's politicization is another's custom and practice.

What remains clear however is that the politicization of the civil service in its various dimensions is multi-faceted and, on the increase. Weber/Wilson's conception of the relationship between politicians and officials has changed beyond recognition.

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