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Public Administration Under Populist Rule: Standing Up Against Democratic Backsliding

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ABSTRACT

What happens to democratic administration when populists come to power? This article depicts the contours of the debate within the discipline of Public Administration (PA) about populist attempts to transform the state bureaucracy. It presents the results and limitations of recent empirical research about populist public administration policies and discusses the options for generating more systematic insights. The argument is that populist public administration research needs to improve on three fronts. First, more comparative research is needed in order to identify and explain similarities and differences across affected administrative systems. Second, the threat of democratic backsliding requires scholars to revisit questions about the ethical basis of public administration. Third, as populist backsliding endangers the survival of liberal democracy, PA needs to provide pragmatic and concrete answers as to how administrative systems can be made resilient against threats of illiberal state transformation.

KEYWORDS

Democratic administration; populism; democratic backsliding; administrative responsibility; bureaucrats and democracy

Introduction



Democracies worldwide are confronted with the rise of populist movements (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Moffitt, 2016; Urbinati, 2019). While populists in opposition might be a force of democratic rejuvenation as they bring into the political arena concerns that have been ignored or suppressed (Kazin, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2014), there is little doubt that where populists conquer executive power, they pose a danger to the survival of the liberal character of democratic systems (Askim et al., 2022; Bartha et al., 2020).

The increasing number of populists in government has also put the spotlight on the public bureaucracies of the affected states (Arellano-Gault, 2020; Green, 2019; Rockman, 2019) because no government, not even of the most elite-bashing anti-establishment kind, can govern *without* relying on (at least parts of) the existing bureaucratic machinery (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Finer, 1997). Moreover, while the state bureaucracy is needed to implement their agendas, populists in government regularly dismantle the liberal features of their administration systems to secure their grip on power (Bauer, Peters, & Pierre, 2021). Under the rule of populists, the bureaucracy is thus tool *and* victim of democratic backsliding at one and the same time. This is the reason why the rise of populism has sparked a debate within the

discipline of Public Administration (PA) about what happens to public administrations when populists come to power, and what can be expected from a democratic civil service to safeguard the liberal democratic order from being undermined from within or even totally overthrown (Peters & Pierre, 2019; Yesilkagit, 2021).

So far PA research has centered on identifying populist strategies aiming at reforming the civil service – most of the time by renouncing liberal values, strengthening hierarchy and excessively politicizing recruitment and career advancement (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Bauer, Peters, & Pierre, 2021) – as well as on the ability and responsibility of public officials to react to the populist threat of undermining democratic procedures, standards, and structures (Box, 2021; Guedes-Neto & Peters, 2021; Moynihan, 2022; O’Leary, 2017; Schuster et al., 2022). The hopes and doubts of whether the bureaucracy can do more, i.e., assume a role of an active guardian of democracy, find expression in recent publications about whether “the bureaucracy can save liberal democracy” (Yesilkagit, 2021), whether “democracy can be strengthened through public administration” (Box, 2017; Goodsell, 2022) and how “pathways to administrative resilience” in face of illiberal tribulations (Bauer, Peters, & Pierre, 2021) might look.

Against this background, this article aims to advance the debate about the populist threat of transforming democratic administrative systems according to an

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illiberal script in the following ways. First, the debate about the populist challenge for liberal democracy is revisited in order to derive a working definition of populism and to formulate expectations where the populist challenge for democratic public administration might lie (Wood et al., 2022). That will guide, second, the summary of the current discussion about populism and public administration and allow for a focus on the main achievements as well as on the deficits of the extant body of PA literature in that area. Third, the state of the art of populist public administration transformation is examined with a view to provide propositions, empirical distinctions, and terminological clarifications able to advance future research.

At the center of this debate stands the responsible, public and democratically oriented bureaucrat, who is furthering the participation and deliberation of citizens while protecting the integrity of the system itself (Železnik & Fink-Hafner, 2023, p. 16). Thus, for the purpose of this article democratic administration will be understood as a form of governance in which civil servants are accountable to citizens, and decision-making is guided by democratic principles with the aim to balance individual and collective interests and to promote the common good (Brugué & Gallego, 2003). No claim is made that this article alone can identify, let alone settle, all theoretical, conceptual, and empirical challenges of the intriguing relationship between democratic public administration and the worrying rise of populism (Stoker, 2019). The hope is, however, that by ordering the debate and by putting into perspective achievements as well as open questions, the contours of a practical research programmatic emerge, especially in view of how to make democratic bureaucracies more resilient to the perils of populist rule.

Populism, its illiberal agenda, and democratic backsliding

To engage in a discussion about how the bureaucracy fares under populism, some clarifications about populism, its illiberal agenda, and how this produces democratic backsliding seem in order (Green, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018). As is the case with many concepts of the social sciences, the precise definition of populism is a matter of debate. Often used is the ideational approach to populism, as championed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 6), who conceive it to be “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics

should be an expression of the [general will] of the people.” In a similar vein, Müller (2016, pp. 19–20) defines populism as “a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some way morally inferior.” Following this logic, populists are not only anti-elitist, but – perhaps more importantly for the question of how populists conceive of the state – they are determinedly anti-pluralist. Populism is seen as transforming all the political institutions of the affected democracies (Urbinati, 2019) and shaking up the consensus of the ruling elites (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019).

Mansbridge and Macedo have analyzed the variegated debates on populism and suggested a definition of populism consisting of a core and its peripheral elements; while the core is fixed, the other elements vary widely, thus producing many different and empirically observable variants of populism (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019). Accordingly, the core element of populism should be seen – quite similar to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), Müller (2016), and Moffitt (2020)—as “the people in a moral battle against elites” (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019, p. 60), while other components have a close resonance, i.e., often appear in combination with populism (among the most important ones are “a homogenous people,” “nationalism,” and “charismatic leadership”). Only few scholars go as far as Laclau, who endorses populism as “the democratic element of contemporary representative systems” (Laclau, 2005, p. 176), but there is consensus that despite its “definitional precariousness” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 114) populism cannot outrightly be reprimanded as non-democratic (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 10).

Thus, populism must not necessarily be bad for democracy (Urbinati, 2014; Mouffe, 2018). Populism as a force of the political *opposition* is actually conceived to be democratically healthy. Populism *in government*, however, poses a threat to liberal democracy, mainly because populism has little respect for non-majoritarian democratic safeguards and counterweights to executive power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Although there is no automatism, it is precisely the observation that populism often drives the dismantling of formal and informal guardrails of liberal democracy – conceived of as democratic backsliding, i.e., the gradual reversal of democratic standards by incumbent governments (Bermeo, 2016, 2022; Coppedge, 2017) – which is seen as particularly dangerous (Levitsky & Way, 2002).

While it would be heroic to attempt to review the whole debate on populism here, it is important to note that populism is mostly debated with a view to its

definition, its substance, its ability to mobilize citizens and antagonize societal groups, its impact on party systems, and political radicalization (Kriesi, 2014). The nexus and impact of populist governments on public administration has only recently received more attention (Bauer, Peters, & Pierre, 2021; Rockman, 2019; Spicer, 2018). And this despite the fact that for populists in government, the public administration system in general, and the state bureaucracy in particular, are the first institutions of the democratic state they are “confronted with” or “have at their disposal” to pursue their agenda once they take over democratic government (Bauer & Becker, 2020). It is argued that populist governments – in particular under what is called the charismatic, one person leadership – can become dangerous for democracy when the connection between leader and people remains unmediated for a longer time, thus bypassing and surpassing mediating institutions to which one can also count, implicitly at least, the bureaucracy (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). In other words, the populist leader draws on the core antagonism of “the good people versus the corrupt elite” thus justifying impatience with the necessary compromises and frustrations of procedural democracy and its constraining checks and balances.

In other words, although “the” bureaucracy constitutes one of the elite groups populism is, per definition, skeptical about, one needs additional – in Mansbridge and Macedo’s terms – non-core elements to decipher what aims a specific populism in government has for its respective public administration. The greater the sense of mission empowered by a unique relationship to the supporting majority, the smaller the patience for expert advice, due process, and constitutional constraints and counterweights, the greater the populist desire to bring the bureaucracy “in line” and under undisputable control, at least as long as populists in government want to make use of the bureaucracy to govern and implement their agendas. In democracies, it is the duty of the bureaucracy “to speak truth to power” (Wildavsky, 1979), i.e., to be a provider of objective expertise as well as a platform for pluralist intermediation with societal groups and interests affected by public decisions (Lehmbruch, 1991). It is by feeding into the populist decision-making process the pluralism of societal interests and the objectivity of technocratic expertise, where conflict with the populist governments does regularly arise. Bureaucracy is, by construction, an epistemic counterweight to representative decision-making and infused with the very values that coin society at large, and the democratic system in particular (Adams & Balfour, 2016; Terry, 2003/2015). What is democratically problematic with populists thus is not necessarily

their policy stances in particular matters. It is, rather, their attack on what Levitsky and Ziblatt have called the “guardrails of democracy” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 101 ff.), i.e., their incremental delegitimization of pluralism, dissent, and opposition. While demands for drastic policy change may be grounded in legitimate grievances, the claim to exclusive representation of the people is at odds with how liberal democracy is practiced today.¹

In sum, the main feature of populism can be seen in its claim to execute the will of the “true people” unconstrained by corrupted elites or institutional counterweights. Liberal democratic backsliding is necessary to reduce pluralism, as it is “unjustifiably” constraining populist majoritarian politics. As the public administration has itself become a pluralist institution in modern democracies (Železnik & Fink-Hafner, 2023), populists need to address also the state bureaucracy in their quest to “rewrite the operational manual of the state in their favor” (Müller, 2016, p. 56), i.e., they need to mold and steer it according to their ideological image. It follows that different ideological underpinnings of populists – stemming from non-core features according to Mansbridge and Macedo (2019)—will most likely coin differential populist “responses” or “attitudes” to their public administration systems.² Against this background, the following section will provide an overview about what populists in government actually have done to their bureaucracies.

Public administrations under populist rule – the state of the art

Research about populists in government and their impact on public administration covers, first, the emergence and the nature of the populist threat for public administration, second, attempts to identify the strategies used by populists to transform bureaucracies, third, investigates the reactions of the bureaucracy to populist democratic backsliding, and, fourth, studies the outcome of populists’ illiberal policymaking.

Emergence and nature of the populist threat to democratic administration

As highlighted in the previous section, the rise of populism has received a lot of attention from political scientists (Mény & Surel, 2001; Norris et al., 2019), research that is, however, usually centered on political parties, organized society, legislatures, and courts, but rarely on the bureaucracy (Peters & Pierre, 2019). Only when Donald Trump took office as president of the USA in 2017, exhibiting unprecedented distrust and outright

hostility towards the public service, questions about what happens to public administration under populist rule became more current (Goodsell, 2019). If a populist leader with doubtful democratic inclinations and no scruples towards dismantling liberal administrative structures and cultures, i.e., “shaking things up to get what he wants” (Green, 2019; Rockman, 2019), could rise to power in one of the world’s oldest democracies, then – so is the fear expressed in the literature – it could happen anywhere (Runciman, 2018).

A sense of what kind of state transformation illiberal populist governments are capable to enact in extremis, could be gleaned from the example given by Orbán in Hungary (Hajnal, 2015; Hajnal & Csengődi, 2014; Kovacs & Hajnal, 2017); and the emergence of populist governments in other democratic countries like Brazil, Mexico, Poland, added up to a worrisome trend in need of further investigation (Coppedge, 2017; Dussauge-Laguna, 2021; Mazur, 2021; Morais de Sá e Silva, 2022; Pereira, 2022).

As for the causes of the rise of populists, PA scholars point to unkept technocratic promises to protect citizens from the impositions (concerning issues of welfare, economic growth, and also identity) of globalization (Rockman, 2019) which, so the argument goes, did fuel a decline of trust in ruling political classes, further amplified by the continuing failure of politics to equip the bureaucracy adequately to be able to cope with these challenges in the first place (Meier et al., 2019). Stoker even sees a co-responsibility on the part of public sector reformers themselves. By implementing excessively new public management agendas, thereby promoting an exceedingly instrumental view on the bureaucracy, they abetted the neglect of pluralist values and democratic mission of the services thereby “playing into the hands of the populists” (Stoker, 2019, 2021, p. 265). The populist threat to public administration, as discussed in the previous section, is precisely related to the ‘instrumental’ view of the bureaucracy held by most populists. All aspects of the modern democratic public administration – in terms of increasing diversity of staff, co-deciding and co-creation of public policy with citizens and societal interests, structures, or cultures of pluralistic intermediation and accountability relationships to other political institutions than government (i.e., to parliament, to the courts or to international authorities) – are seen with distrust and are opposed. Populists use various strategies to fight back against the liberal properties of their state administrations – especially if they decide to “use” their bureaucracies to deliver policies as promised – and not sideline or even ignore them (Peters & Pierre,

2019). By “using” their state administrations, varying patterns of interaction can be expected, namely capture, dismantling, sabotage, or a form of incremental reform of the bureaucracy (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Bauer, Peters, & Pierre, 2021; Drezner, 2019). One proposition of the literature in this respect is that, depending on the robustness of the administrative order of a state and on the varying ideological positions of populists towards the role of the state (laissez-faire or interventionist), the patterns of interaction between populist government and bureaucratic apparatus do vary (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Lotta et al., 2022).

Strategies used by populists to transform bureaucracies

Populists in government seem to use five strategies to coerce their public services (Bauer, Peters, & Pierre, 2021). They centralize and strengthen top-down command and control in central government, they cut administrative budgets to quell independent parts of the services, they undermine democratic norms of how to run the civil service, and they reduce external accountability as well as societal participation. Populists also use politicization – often excessively – to “cleanse” staff along ideological lines, offering patronage to favorites, and thus securing de facto control by putting trusted personnel in strategic positions (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Peters & Pierre, 2022).

Reactions of the bureaucracy

Research on the reactions of the bureaucracy, or more precisely of the individual bureaucrats, employs staff surveys and survey experiments as investigative tools. Using perception data and hypothetical vignette experiments, research in this area relies more on quantitative methods than the case studies about populists strategies and organizational transformations covered in the previous section.

Guedes-Neto and Peters, for example, ask whether Brazilian civil servants would be willing to act as veto players by refusing to implement policies that undermine democratic institutions. Using Brehm and Gates (1999) triad “working, shirking, and sabotage,” their results confirm that civil servants are willing to shirk and sabotage if assigned to implement policies that are perceived to restrict democratic rights, such as freedoms of the press and free expression. Furthermore, they demonstrate that different individual characteristics affect the bureaucrats’ behavioral intentions in these situations (Guedes-Neto & Peters, 2021; Saxlund Bischoff, 2022).

Another important study by Schuster and colleagues (Schuster et al., 2022), again based on a survey of Brazilian officials, features prominently Rosemary O’Leary’s propositions about guerilla sabotage combined with exit, voice, and loyalty choices (Hirschman, 1970; O’Leary, 2013). They conceptualize the democratic backsliding as problematic as “unprincipled policy demands by principles” and show that – conditioned by the intensity of their inclinations and motivation to public service – bureaucrats, while rarely willing to outright sabotage their superiors’ policy demands, are more frequently inclined to voice concerns or exit the service. With a view to ethical questions raised as to whether democratic bureaucracy *should* act as a guardian of liberal democracy when threats of democratic backsliding emerge (Goodsell, 2022; Yesilkagit, 2021) some gloomy implications emerge from this study. Because public service motivated officials seem over time likely to quit their job for “unprincipled principals,” indicating that the populists grip on their administrations will become ever stronger the longer they manage to stay in power (Schuster et al., 2022, p. 433), even if a decline in professionalism over time is likely.³

Finally, Gabriela Lotta and her colleagues advance the debate by pointing out that the reaction of the bureaucracy to the demands of populists in government to discipline them depends upon whether “oppression and reaction” is enacted formally or informally, and whether the scale of this control relationship plays out at an individual-direct or collective-indirect scale (Lotta et al., 2022; Lotta & Silveira, 2021). Conducting a comparative case study using semi-structured interviews with middle-level bureaucrats within, again, the Brazilian federal government, they provide evidence for essentially dynamic interaction modes, combining practices of oppression (formal, informal) and the reaction of bureaucrats (individual, collective), thus paving the way for more systematic comparative work on the question.

In sum, investigating the reactions of bureaucracies to populist takeover constitutes a logical “next step” to better understand the impact of populist rule on democratic administration. To do so using staff surveys and survey experiments, i.e., to focus on the individual agency, seems appropriate and has produced important insights. The challenge in this area now is to differentiate further between various forms of populist actions and bureaucratic reactions and to seek empirical data from civil services elsewhere than Brazil (but see Saxlund Bischoff, 2022).

Impact of populist policymaking through bureaucratic politics

There is no shortage of studies that investigate the impact of populist governments on policymaking

(Bartha et al., 2020), be it on social (Fenger, 2018), development (Bergmann et al., 2021), migration (Krause & Giebler, 2020), law and order (Biard, 2019), or environmental policies (Hoerber et al., 2021). PA studies bring into this debate examples of how direct control over state administration is employed to generate policy change. One reason for using direct executive powers over the bureaucracy in order to change a policy appears to be to avoid time-consuming revisions of legislation and the uncertainties of parliamentary involvement. Illustrative cases are President Trump’s strategy to marginalize the Environmental Protection Agency in order to alleviate regulatory pressure from polluting industry (Dillon et al., 2018) or to weaken the capabilities of US foreign policy bureaucracy in order to erode multilateral problem-solving attitudes (Drezner, 2019). Such “sabotaging” (Bauer & Becker, 2020, p. 26) or “enervating” (Drezner, 2019, p. 723) constitute “negative” strategies as they hamper the bureaucracy from doing its job by publicly bashing administrators, dismissing experts, decreasing operational budgets, or deploying loyalists as partisan leaders (Moynihan & Roberts, 2021). Analytically speaking, in such constellations public bureaucracies become intervening variables as their transformation per se interests less than the impact this administrative transformation has upon the policy under study.

In a case study on Bolsonaro’s U-turn in Brazilian human rights engagement, Morais de Sá e Silva shows, for example, how the promotion of human rights at home was reversed by persecuting activists and marginalizing human rights bureaucrats within the civil service (Morais de Sá e Silva, 2020, p. 647; see also Morais de Sá e Silva, 2022). In a similar vein goes a study on agro-commodity chains in Brazil. Focusing on state capacity, it becomes clear that via reorganizing and dismantling parts of the Brazilian state administration, the Bolsonaro government managed to effectively undermine transnational sustainability governance (Schilling-Vacaflor et al., 2022).

In another study, Pereira and colleagues trace the intentional dismantling of state capacities in the Brazilian deforestation inspection sector (Pereira, 2022). According to this research, populist leaders chose to ignore their own bureaucracy’s expertise. The underlying mechanism, conceived as “sidelining” of the bureaucracy, leads, so the argument goes, to intended policy dismantling through the backdoor as protection standards de facto decreased, which, in consequence, led to the acceleration of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. Finally, Peci shows how patronage can be used as an executive instrument to shake up existing equilibria within the bureaucracy or between the

bureaucracy and social actors needed to shape a certain policy. When populist governments oppose current policy aims, bringing in actors that antagonize in the policy subfield, it increases the chances of stalemate or at least it throws sand in the gears of policy production (Peci, 2022).

In sum, bureaucratic politics and bureaucratic reorganization are employed by populists as shortcuts to reach certain policy aims quickly and by subterfuge. Trump's handling of the Environmental Protection Agency and Bolsonaro's undermining of public deforestation control in the Amazon are both examples of how more pollution or logging is de facto welcomed by populist governments via intentional diminishing of the state's bureaucratic capacities. Such strategies remain, however, "negative" in the sense that they are destructive to the policy in place and therefore unlikely to lead to the creation of any kind of coherent populist policy alternatives (but see Milhorange, 2022). It is probably no coincidence that in most of these studies the bureaucracy is "enfeebled" so as not to be able to uphold prior policy standards which, in turn, are calculated to play to advantage specific economic interests that are part of the political coalition in support of populist rule. It is important to highlight that the studies in this area do change the analytical focus from democratic backsliding of *liberal bureaucracy* towards overt and covert dismantling of liberal policies *through populistically deformed state bureaucracies*. This has implications with regard to the analytical questions asked and research designs employed, as will be highlighted in the following section. Yet, all in all, the jury is still out regarding a central proposition in the debate about governing populists' lacking policymaking capability, i.e., their (in-)ability to convert their illiberal ideas into legislation and thus permanently into public policy regimes (Askim et al., 2022, p. 731; Peters & Pierre, 2019).

Insights and deficits of PA research on populist bureaucratic transformation

The previous section showed that intellectually inspired by the debate about democratic backsliding, on the one hand, and catapulted on top of the PA agenda by former president Trump's attack on the public service (Horwitz, 2021; Moynihan, 2021; Simon & Moltz, 2022), on the other, PA research on bureaucracy under populism has soared over the past 5 years. We now possess a good selection of case studies demonstrating how populists in government treat their bureaucracy in order to achieve their goals, why they do so, and with what results they do it.

Two insights stand out. First, populists see democratic administration as a threat and fight back on its "pluralistic" features, i.e., transparency culture, scientific expertise provision, the bureaucratic interest intermediation role, consultation, decentralization, societal participation, and so on. Populists in government centralize administrative structures, reduce organizational autonomy (vertically and horizontally), employ excessive staff politicization policies, insulate public administration from societal or parliamentary accountability, and disparage technical expertise. Most cases studied feature a populist image of the state bureaucracy that is strictly traditional, hierarchical, and instrumental, one of absolute loyalty and obedience towards the government of the day, i.e., their own leadership (see Brugué & Gallego, 2003).

Second, populists in government often use subterfuge methods (cutting operational budgets, dismissing or redeploying staff, installing administrative leadership that antagonizes) to undermine bureaucratic capabilities to implement liberal policies when other ways to achieve illiberal change are out of reach (because they seem too time-consuming, they lack parliamentary support, or they are bound by international agreements). Formal policy standards – in particular in the area of environmental protection – remain thus often untouched, while de facto breaches take place but are unlikely to be persecuted (Bauer & Knill, 2014; Morais de Sá e Silva, 2022).

As is perhaps normal for a new field of study, in the debate about bureaucracy under populist rule, theoretical reflections of a general kind and illustrative case studies dominate so far. Comprehensive analytical frameworks, sorting typologies or explanations about behavioral patterns of populist leaders or the bureaucrats working under them, remain rare. While the work by Bauer, Peters, Pierre, Yesilkagit, et al. (2021, p. 17) – combining propositions about general populist approaches to the bureaucracy, their administrative transformation strategies, and reactions to the latter by the civil service – provides a tentative frame for the debate, no coherent explanatory approach has yet emerged and the accumulation of insights collected so far remains therefore somewhat limited. Progress seems strongest in view of identifying the mechanisms populists in government employ to bring public bureaucracies in line with their agendas (sabotaging, capturing, dismantling) and in conceptualizing dynamically the action–response relationship between bureaucrats unwilling to implement illiberal policies and the attempts of populists in government to discipline them (Lotta et al., 2022).

Three weaknesses hamper progress in particular. First, there is a measurement challenge with regard to how to systematically observe populist public

administration policy. While the illustrations of populist attempts to change the bureaucracy are instructive and plausible, consensus on a precise distinction is missing between what in terms of administrative reform is still in the range of “normal” or “acceptable” bureaucratic politics, and where exactly the anti-democratic populist transformation heralding the illiberal state starts. In the absence of objective or, at least, consensual yardsticks, researchers still remain in danger of reifying their individual normative starting points, thus hampering the production of generalizable insights (Coppedge et al., 2011).

Second, there is a “three-country-bias” that hampers generalizations.⁴ The overwhelming part of the available studies empirically investigate bureaucratic transformations either under Trump in the USA, Orbán in Hungary or under Bolsonaro in Brazil. Not to be misunderstood: the case studies conducted belong to the best works produced so far. Bureaucracy under populism research would nevertheless benefit from enhancing the range of country cases under investigation. Therefore, first of all, more attention needs to go to the study of administrative transformations under populist governments under-researched so far, i.e., in Eastern- (for example, Poland, see, however, Mazur, 2021) and Southeastern Europe (for example, Serbia, Greece, and the Czech Republic), as well as in Africa (for example, Tanzania, South Africa, and Zambia) and Asia (India and Pakistan).

In addition to maximizing geographical variation over time or across sections (Lund, 2014), third, ideological and policy preference variations of populist governments should receive greater attention. In order to advance our understanding of populist bureaucratic politics, it is likely to be helpful to differentiate more systematically between the political-ideological variants of real-world populisms, in particular between populists in government from the political right or from the political left. Most PA studies so far have concentrated de facto on right-wing authoritarian populists. Thus, the results achieved so far are likely to be biased in terms of this particular variety, which usually embraces an ideology of mistrust against the bureaucracy, is skeptical about high standards of environmental protection, has identarian leanings, is hard on immigration, and endorses law-and-order stances on many issues. Left-wing populists – Italy with the Five-Star-Movement in government is an example (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019) – may have quite different agendas, like expanding the state sector, increasing popular participation in governance, or advancing in terms of administrative decentralization rather than centralization (Bellodi et al., 2021; DiMascio et al., 2021). What is thus needed is to develop and test differential

propositions about a broader range of potentially affected policy areas that take into account the varying ideological positions of the whole range of populists in government. The question with a view to bureaucratic transformations is what particular kinds of populists in government are likely to prioritize what kinds of strategies with regard to their dealings with the state administration.

Take one example. Varying the expectations about the choice of transformation strategies employed by populists on the basis of their differing “state vs. market preference,” combined with the varying “leadership ideology” a specific populism adheres to (i.e., whether a strong charismatic leader is preferred or not), could already help to orient researchers about why variants of populists handle their public administration systems in certain respects so differently. The proposition is that if populists adhere to a laissez-faire ideology, the abolition of regulations and state structures is per se preferred, and the logical response is to dismantle the responsible bureaucracy altogether. A good illustration is probably the attitude to the administrative state of President Trump, who combines an excessive hierarchical leadership concept of his role as president with a general distrust towards the Washington bureaucratic elites, which makes him opt for trying to close down responsible agencies if he dislikes the policies for which these agencies are responsible (Horwitz, 2021; Moynihan, 2021). In contrast, Orbán and his followers, while sharing the strongman attitude of the Trumpists, appreciate a strong state bureaucracy as an instrument at their disposal, so the bureaucratic agencies are not dismantled but populated with Orbán’s men and made use of to implement his illiberal agenda (Hajnal & Boda, 2021). Populists with basic democratic leanings (like the Five-Star-Movement in Italy) prefer collective grass-root devices to organize decision processes (hence they oppose strongmanship), but, like Orbán, they do see the state bureaucracy as an instrument to advance their agenda, and not as part of the problem to be abolished.

Note that this is just an example of how non-core elements of specific populism (appreciation of a strong state vs. appreciation of a strong leader) can be put together to explain the different positions of ruling populisms, with likely implications for their approach to the transformation of their public administration systems. Other combinations of factors may lead to yet different expectations. The point here is not so much of the theoretical plausibility of the claim just made as such, but rather the illustration that in analytical terms the combined logic of non-core elements of populist ideologies might be a good way ahead to solve puzzles of varying populist public administration policies.

Overall, PA has embarked on studying what happens to democratic bureaucracy under illiberal populist rule, and has identified worrying patterns of administrative transformation, providing a terminology as well as an analytical frame able to order empirical observations. However, the debate is coined in the considerable heterogeneity of the theoretical approaches employed and is empirically dominated by case studies located in a few “usual suspects” countries. Therefore, the geographically scattered and theoretically diversely approached cases of organizational, procedural, and policy change investigated so far do not yet provide the basis for an empirically consolidated picture of patterns, causes, and consequences of bureaucratic transformation under populist rule. It is no surprise that most approaches remain thus conceptually explorative and rest on strong, but implicit normative propositions. This is particularly the case when populist governments’ intention to dismantle policy (especially environmental policy) is assumed without considering competing explanations, even if only to show that there are broader societal interests involved in pushing for lower environmental policy standards regardless of what quality the government of the day has (Bauer & Knill, 2014). In other words, covered by often implicit normative beliefs, analysts sometimes jump too hastily from populist rule to diagnosing bureaucratic and policy dismantling as a result of presumed populist intentions. This might not be wrong. Still, the analytical purpose would often be better served by grounding such studies in the state of the art of comparative public policy analysis and comparative analysis of institutional change, such as policy dismantling, institutional drift, or conversion approaches (Hacker et al., 2015; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). There also seems to be a blind spot in the debate with respect to comparative administrative traditions, which barely play a role in the explanation of different patterns of populists transformation attempts and bureaucratic reactions to them (Van der Wal et al., 2021). Yet, it would be surprising if populist strategies and subsequent bureaucratic reactions were *not* conditioned by varying state structures, bureaucratic cultures, and legal traditions (Chandler, 2000; Painter & Peters, 2010).

In sum, populist public administration research would benefit from taking greater advantage of the available insights of institutional change and of comparative public policy science to advance its agenda (Železnik & Fink-Hafner, 2023, p. 17). Comparative research designs seem best suited for developing classifications of populist public administration transformation cases and for establishing whether similar trajectories can be explained by the same variables

across countries. It is via the identification, analysis, and explanation of similarities and differences in the populist transformation attempts where the best hope for a more systematic understanding of populist challenge for democratic public administration lies.

Populism as ethical challenge for PA

The continuing relevance of the topic of how populists in government, democratic backsliding, and public administration interrelate obviously depends upon whether populist movements remain successful in conquering executive power across the globe. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the evidence for further populist mobilization remains substantial, as the examples of the electoral victory of extreme-right populists under Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Marine Le Pen’s conquest of the *Assemblée nationale* in France, the populist-extreme right victory in Israel, or the wave of popular support after Donald Trump’s announcement to run again for the presidency of the United States indicate. If one adds to this picture the rise of ethnic nationalists with illiberal populist leanings in other parts of the world – India, Malaysia – as well as the participation of populists in coalition governments, in particular in Western Europe (Askim et al., 2022), the persisting seriousness of the backsliding challenge liberal democracies do face becomes evident. That challenge is not one to come by employing comparative methods and suitable research designs. Rather, it raises ethical and normative concerns about immediate practice, often put on the backburner of research geared towards positive empirical analysis (du Guy, 2020; Frederickson & von Rohr, 2015). Given the nature of the populist threat, the luxury of leaving aside the value questions appears, however, increasingly unaffordable (Stivers, 2008; Stivers & DeHart-Davis, 2022). PA will need to provide answers to what civil service reformers *should* be doing today to make public servants more resilient against a potential populist takeover and for the public service as a whole on how to pass the challenges posed by populist governments (Harmon, 1995).

If it is true that public bureaucracies in liberal states themselves fulfill the role of democratic institutions (Brugué & Gallego, 2003; Železnik & Fink-Hafner, 2023), the question then is how to prepare civil services to “stand up against” the populist challenge and what to expect from individual democratic bureaucrats under pressure to advance illiberal agendas. The point is that the orthodox image of bureaucracy as a pure instrument of government is far too narrow (see Jackson, 2009) and so is the conception of the bureaucratic ethos, deriving exclusively from values like efficiency, neutrality,

loyalty, expertise, and hierarchy (Cooper, 1990). Rather, what is needed is to renew the debate about administrative responsibility and an adequate kind of democratic ethos for modern public bureaucracies (Meier et al., 2019; Rohr, 1986, 1998). This would imply that public administrators cannot remain value neutral and purely instrumental if the political integrity of the democratic systems itself is at stake. Rather, individual bureaucrats need to ground their behavior on higher-order moral principles such as constitutionalism, citizenship, public interest, social equity, and justice (Nabatchi et al., 2011). Only such a perspective can enable us to embrace the possibility of an active guardianship of democratic administration in the face of democratic backsliding by incumbent governments (Terry, 2003/2015). According to such considerations, bureaucracy is not just an instrument, but a democratic institution with its own normative and organizational intrinsic values (which are usually shared with the society in which it is operating). The necessary legitimacy for the bureaucracy to act in such a way would, obviously, need to be based on constitutional principles, rule of law, due process, and impartial expertise. In addition, deontological ethical standards on which to base its performance as a kind of guardianship of democracy need to be developed (Nabatchi, 2010; Stivers, 2008). A change of perspective, however, constitutes the precondition for bureaucrats as “the servant and guardian of legal and professional rules and a constitutional order, not of the rulers” (Olsen 2008, p. 17; Yesilkagit, 2024 forthcoming).

Only in the tradition of democratic administration thinking can one expect to find a solid theoretical basis to conceive active administrative responsibilities against the potential exaggerations of illiberal governments (Brugué & Gallego, 2003; Etzioni-Halevy, 2013 [1985]; Wood et al., 2022; Železnik & Fink-Hafner, 2023). In particular, a shift of focus away from external controls towards internal responsibility would be needed; and this would mean a shift away from concerns of hierarchical control and towards those of how to make civil services democratically resilient. Potential solutions would be to make it harder for incumbent governments to abolish the institutional accountability relationships of the bureaucracy to parliament and organized society, to intensify participation of citizens in the management of the *res publica*, and to assure that recruitment and career progression cannot be monopolized by the political leadership of the day. Staff at all levels need to be trained on how to actively stand up for democratic values. Understanding of the democratic mission of public administration and trust in their professional standards can infuse confidence in staff that it is sometimes right to resist the demands of

political superiors is a veritable challenge to public sector leadership. Taking actions along these lines could potentially “toughen up” the bureaucracy and thus make it harder for anti-pluralists to succeed.

Conclusion

Research on how populists use and transform state bureaucracies in order to advance their illiberal goals is on the rise, mirroring the success of populist movements in challenging liberal democracies worldwide. This article showed, *first*, that public administration under the rule of populists has become both tool *and* victim of populists in government. *Second*, it discussed the main achievements as well as deficits of the emerging body of PA research in that area. While the literature teaches us how populists in government (mis-)treat their bureaucracies in order to achieve their goals and with what results they do so, substantial weaknesses still remain. Among them are the absence of a consensual yardstick to determine empirically the intensities of populist public administration transformations (the measurement challenge), the need to study examples of populist transformations beyond the “usual-suspects-countries” (the challenge to maximize geographical variation), and the still inadequate ability to differentiate systematically between political-ideological variants of populists in government (the challenge to decipher varying populist ideologies and their respective programmatic transformation). While progress in these areas will increase our empirical and explanatory accuracy with regard to the substance *of* and motivation *behind* populist public administration policies, this article identified, *third*, an ethical challenge, which goes beyond what positivist research is able to deliver. As populists in government constitute a real threat to the survival of the liberal character of affected democracies, PA needs to provide clues about what real-world administrations can do to prepare for the threat of democratic backsliding and whether democratic bureaucracy *should* act as an active guardian of liberal democracy when worse comes to worst. Such ethical concerns bear perhaps the most relevant and impactful questions that the populist challenge raises for PA as a discipline, because these questions require PA to explain how pluralist values and administrative responsibility can be defined and defended in dark times. PA needs to provide such ethical orientation as regards how civil servants and public organizations can be prepared to stand up against populist deformations, if it aspires to remain a policy science of democracy in the Lasswellian tradition (deLeon & deLeon, 2002).

Notes

1. While this argument may seem intuitive regarding political institutions, its relevance for public administration may appear dubious at first glance. Traditional wisdom has it that bureaucrats implement what political agents demand; and if not, the latter must find better ways of controlling and steering. In empirical practice, however, interactions between politicians and the bureaucracy are multifaceted and complex. Political control over the bureaucracy can never be perfect, which is why questions about professional responsibility and the democratic quality of the administrative apparatus itself become relevant. In the famous words of Dwight Waldo, who forcefully advocated this point of view, it is not credible to claim that “autocracy during working hours is the price to be paid for democracy after hours” (Waldo, 1952, p. 87; see also Mosher, 1982; Jackson, 2009; Spicer, 2018).
2. This aspect is discussed in more detail below.
3. That populist rule causes a higher turnover of top bureaucrats is also confirmed by Sasso and Morelli (2021) and by a study on the impact of populist mayors in Italian cities – see Bellodi et al. (2023).
4. Why research has focused especially on these three countries is open to speculation. A good candidate explanation probably lies in the “boldness” of the three leaders involved. Neither Orbàn, nor Trump nor Bolsonaro left doubts about their intentions and expressed openly plans to transform their states and bureaucracies, thus eliciting probably more resistance as well as more intellectual attention. Other populist leaders in Poland, Serbia, or Italy seem to have been more diplomatic and less outspoken, and thus have received much less academic attention.

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