

# BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA

First term 2026

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**Course description:** Bureaucracies around the world have expanded significantly over the past century, particularly in developing countries, where public servants have become increasingly central to politics, regulation, and the delivery of public goods. This course offers a comprehensive overview of bureaucratic politics, with a strong empirical and theoretical **focus on Latin America**. It engages in key debates on how bureaucracies shape and are shaped by political institutions, as well as their interactions with citizens and politicians.

The course begins by reviewing foundational theories of bureaucratic politics, including principal agent models and more recent approaches that emphasise informal institutions, social embeddedness, and frontline implementation. Particular attention will be given to the evolution of bureaucracies in Latin American countries, with a focus on their size, structure, and changing roles in policy design, implementation, and regulation. Students will examine how bureaucracies mediate the relationship between the state and society, including in contexts of democratic backsliding (Week 7).

From Week 3, the course will turn to the politics of patronage. We will examine competing measures of patronage and assess recent evidence on both its adverse and potentially beneficial effects on bureaucratic performance and accountability. In Week 4, we will focus on the delivery of public services, exploring the organisational and political factors that influence it, as well as the implications of poor service delivery for citizens' trust in institutions and evaluations of government performance.

The subsequent weeks will explore a range of public policy topics related to bureaucratic politics, including strategies to enhance bureaucratic performance, civil service reform, and accountability mechanisms. Later sessions will engage with the literature on street-level bureaucrats, drawing on classic and recent research to examine how frontline workers interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist policies. We will examine how discretion, resource constraints, and political incentives influence the everyday practices of public administration, drawing on cases from several Latin American countries.

## Learning Objectives:

- Provide an in-depth understanding of key topics in the bureaucratic politics literature, with a particular focus on issues relevant to Latin America.
- Critically appraise the scholarly and policy work in the field of bureaucratic politics, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and offering constructive critiques.
- Identify gaps in the existing literature and policy work, and develop case-based policy designs to explore and evaluate these gaps.
- Foster active engagement in comparative analysis across Latin American countries, encouraging identification of patterns, contrasts, and distinctive political or institutional dynamics.

**Prerequisites:** This course is designed for postgraduate students with a basic understanding of statistics. No background in politics or economics is required, but it is beneficial. The course primarily draws on empirical evidence from various disciplines, including political science, public policy and economics. Thus, a basic understanding of regression analysis and research design would be beneficial.

### Tentative Course Outline:

- | **Week 1:** The Politics of Bureaucracy in the Developing World and Latin America.
- | **Week 2:** Principal-Agent Problem and Delegation.
- | **Week 3:** Patronage.
- | **Week 4:** Service Delivery.
- | **Week 5:** Selection, Retention, Incentives, and Motivation of Bureaucrats.
- | **Week 6:** Civil Service Reform.
- | **Week 7:** Bureaucrats under Democratic Backsliding.
- | **Week 8:** Bureaucratic Representation.
- | **Week 9:** Oversight and Rent-Seeking Behaviour.
- | **Week 10:** Unionization in the Public Sector.
- | **Week 11:** Front-Line Bureaucrats.

**Grading Policy:** Weekly policy memos (20%), Midterm (40%), Final (40%).

### Key Dates:

Policy memos ..... Every Friday at 12:00 am  
Midterm ..... February, 2026  
Final Exam ..... March, 2026

### Course schedule and readings:

#### Week 1: The politics of bureaucracy in the developing world and Latin America

**Background:** This week, we will discuss the main topics addressed within the sub-field of bureaucratic politics and its implication on development. We will also explore which of these issues are particularly salient in the Latin American context.

- Besley, T., Burgess, R., Khan, A., & Xu, G. (2022). *Bureaucracy and Development*. *Annual Review of Economics*, 14, 397–424. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080521-011950> [General]
- Ramos Larraburu, C. (2019). *The politics of bureaucracy: A view from Latin America*. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 21(3), 513–521. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148119844498>. [Region: Latin America].
- Polga-Hecimovich, J. (2019). *Bureaucracy in Latin America*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1675>. [Region: Latin America]

## Week 2: Principal-Agent Problem and Delegation

**Background:** We review some canonical literature on the principal-agent problem. We will discuss principal-agent problems in the context of bureaucracy and examine the implications of bureaucratic autonomy and delegation for policy-making.

- Bertelli, A., & Palma, N. (2021). *Rational Choice Perspectives on Bureaucracy*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1461>. [General].
- Waterman, R. W., & Meier, K. J. (1998). *Principal-Agent Models: An Expansion?* *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 8(2), 173–202. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024377>. [General].
- Cunha, B. Q., & Silva, M. S. (2024). *Incredibly Committed? Assessing Regulatory Agency Financial Autonomy in Brazil From a Critical Perspective*. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 16(3), 353–379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X241277214>. [Country: Brazil].
- Bersch, K., & Fukuyama, F. (2025). *Calibrating autonomy: How bureaucratic autonomy influences government quality in Brazil*. *Governance*, 38(1), e12865. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12865>. [Country: Brazil].

## Week 3: Patronage

**Background:** We will examine the research frontier on the effects of patronage on a range of policy-relevant outcomes. Particular attention will be given to recent and emerging scholarship that challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the negative consequences of patronage.

- Cornell, A., & Grimes, M. (2022). *Brokering bureaucrats: How bureaucrats and civil society facilitate clientelism where parties are weak*. *Comparative Political Studies*, 56(6), 788–823. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221115171>. [Country: Peru].
- Riaño, Juan Felipe. (2025). *Bureaucratic Nepotism*, Working paper. [Country: Colombia].
- Toral, G. (2024). *How patronage delivers: Political appointments, bureaucratic accountability, and service delivery in Brazil*, *American Journal of Political Science*, 68(2), 797–815. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12758>. [Country: Brazil].
- Brassiolo, P., Estrada, R., & Fajardo, G. (2020). *My (running) mate, the mayor: Political ties and access to public sector jobs in Ecuador*. *Journal of Public Economics*, 191, 104286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104286>. [Country: Ecuador].
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- Panizza, Francisco E., Peters, B. Guy, & Ramos Larraburu, Conrado (Eds.). (2022). *The Politics of Patronage Appointments in Latin American Central Administrations*. University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv35bfdwc>. [Region: Latin America].

## Week 4: Service delivery

**Background:** Bureaucrats play a crucial role in the production and delivery of social services and public goods. However, the effectiveness of service delivery can be shaped by bureaucrats' institutional embeddedness and political motivations. This session will examine the canonical literature on service delivery, with particular attention to how political dynamics and bureaucratic behaviour affect outcomes. We will also consider the implications of poor service delivery for citizens, including increased uncertainty, diminished trust in institutions and public officials, and broader evaluations of government performance.

- Pepinsky, T. B., Pierskalla, J. H., & Sacks, A. (2017). *Bureaucracy and service delivery*. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20, 249–268. [General].
- Slough, Tara. (2022). *Squeaky Wheels and Inequality in Bureaucratic Service Provision*. Working Paper. [Country: Colombia].
- Auyero, J. (2011). *Patients of the state: An ethnographic account of poor people's waiting*. *Latin American Research Review*, 46(1), 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2011.0014>. [Country: Argentina].
- Andrew Schrank. (2009). *Professionalization and Probity in a Patrimonial State: Labor Inspectors in the Dominican Republic*. *Latin American Politics and Society* 51 (2). [Country: Dominican Republic].

### Week 5: Selection, Retention, Incentives, and Motivation of Bureaucrats.

**Background:** There is a significant body of research examining how to improve bureaucratic performance. The literature primarily addresses two main approaches: (1) monetary incentives through performance-based schemes and (2) non-pecuniary incentives aimed at boost intrinsic motivation. This week, we will explore both approaches as well as a combination of the two.

- Lim, Claire S.H., and James M. Snyder (2021). *What Shapes the Quality and Behavior of Government Officials? Institutional Variation in Selection and Retention Methods*. *Annual Review of Economics*, 13, 87–109. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-072720-041256>. [General]
- Dal Bó, E., Finan, F., & Rossi, M. A. (2013). *Strengthening state capabilities: The role of financial incentives in the call to public service*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128(3), 1169–1218. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjt008> [Country: Argentina].
- Colonnelli, Emanuele, et al. *Patronage and Selection in Public Sector Organizations*, *American Economic Review*, 2020 [Country: Brazil].

### Week 6: Civil Service Reform

**Background:** We will review the historical trajectory of civil service reforms across various Latin American countries. Our examination will focus on the reforms' impacts in reducing patronage, improving service delivery, and fostering bureaucratic autonomy.

- Cortázar Velarde, J. C., Lafuente, M., Sanginés, M., Schuster, C., Echebarría, K., Longo, F., Strazza, L., & Iacoviello, M. (2014). *Serving Citizens: A Decade of Civil Service Reforms in Latin America (2004–13)*. Inter-American Development Bank. <https://doi.org/10.18235/0012567>. [Region: Latin America].

- Mikkelsen, K. S., Schuster, C., Meyer-Sahling, J.-H., & Wettig, M. R. (2022). *Bureaucratic professionalization is a contagious process inside government: Evidence from a priming experiment with 3,000 Chilean civil servants*. *Public Administration Review*, 82(2), 290–302. [Country: Chile].
- Schenoni, L. L. (2023). *Reinvented governments in Latin America: Reform waves and diverging outcomes*. In M. A. Centeno & A. E. Ferraro (Eds.), *State and Nation Making in Latin America and Spain: The Neoliberal State and Beyond* (pp. 243–268). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Region: Latin America].

## Week 7: Bureaucrats under Democratic Backsliding

**Background:** In this week, we will examine the literature on public employees react to illiberal policies proposed by authoritarian leaders during democratic backsliding.

- Guedes-Neto, João V., & Peters, B. Guy. (2025). *Bureaucratic Resistance in Times of Democratic Backsliding*. Elements in Public and Nonprofit Administration. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [General]
- Bauer, Michael W. (2023). *Public Administration Under Populist Rule: Standing Up Against Democratic Backsliding*. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 47(15), 1019–1031. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2023.2243400>. [General].
- Massaco Koga, et al. (2023). *When bargaining is and is not possible: the politics of bureaucratic expertise in the context of democratic backsliding*. *Policy and Society*, 42(3), 378–391. <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puad023>. [General].
- Gamboa, L., García-Holgado, B., & González-Ocantos, E. (2024). *Courts against backsliding: Lessons from Latin America*. *Law & Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lapo.12246> [Countries: Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico]
- Bauer, M. W., Gomes, R. C., & Thiel, S. V. (2024). *Bureaucratic militarization as a mode of democratic backsliding: Lessons from Brazil*. *Democratization*, 32(3), 595–613. [Country: Brazil]

## Week 8: Bureaucratic Representation

**Background:** We will examine the theory of representative bureaucracy and review the evidence on how demographic similarities between bureaucrats and the communities they serve can improve service delivery and advance the broader goals of democratic governance and social equity.

- Kappe, R., & Schuster, C. (2022). *Agents of past principals: The lasting effects of incumbents on the political ideology of bureaucrats*. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(3), 807–828. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12473> [General]
- Ding, F., & Riccucci, N. M. (2023). *How does diversity affect public organizational performance? A meta-analysis*. *Public Administration*, 101(4), 1367–1393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12885>. [General].
- Meier, K. J., & Melton, E. K. (2015). *Bureaucratic Representation and Responsiveness*. In *Oxford Handbook of Topics in Politics* (online ed.). Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566631.013.5>. [General].



- Dantas Cabral, A., Peci, A., & Van Ryzin, G. G. (2021). *Representation, reputation and expectations towards bureaucracy: Experimental findings from a favela in Brazil*. *Public Management Review*, 24(9), 1452–1477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1906934>. [Country: Brazil].
- Figueroa Huencho, V., & Araya Orellana, J. P. (2020). *Representative bureaucracy: Exploring the factors that inhibit active representation in Indigenous managers from a Latin American case*. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 44(16), 1404–1414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2020.1773496>. [Region: Latin America]

## Week 9: Oversight and Rent-seeking Behaviour

**Background:** We will review and critically appraise on the literature on the different institutional arrangements to deter rent-seeking behaviour amongst bureaucrats.

- De La O, A. L., González, L. I., & Weitz-Shapiro, R. (2023). *Voluntary audits: Experimental evidence on a new approach to monitoring front-line bureaucrats*. *World Development*, 162, 106131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106131> [Country: Argentina].
- Nieto-Morales, F., Peeters, R., & Lotta, G. (2024). *Burdens, bribes, and bureaucrats: The political economy of petty corruption and administrative burdens*. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 34(4), 481–497. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muae010>. [Country: Mexico].
- Bourlès, Renaud, et al. Forthcoming. *Audits and Bureaucratic Corruption: Evidence from Brazilian Municipalities*. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. [Country: Brazil].

## Week 10: Unions in the Public Sector

**Background:** In this week, we will examine what role partisan alignments play in shaping public sector union strategies. We will also study how neo-liberal reforms have altered labour-state relations in Latin America and compare the trajectories of public sector unionism in Argentina and Mexico as case studies.

- Murillo, M.V., & Ronconi, L. (2004). *Teachers' strikes in Argentina: Partisan alignments and public-sector labor relations*. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 39(1), 77–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686316> [Country: Argentina].
- Murillo, M. V. (2000). *From Populism To Neoliberalism: Labor Unions and Market Reforms in Latin America*. *World Politics*, 52(2), 135–168. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100002586> [Countries: Multiple countries].
- Etchemendy, S., & Lodola, G. (2023). *The Rise of Public Sector Unions in the Twenty-First Century: A Theoretical, Mixed-Methods Approach with Evidence from Argentina*. *Politics & Society*, 52(4), 547–585. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292231205440>. [Country: Argentina].
- Anner, M., Fischer-Daly, M., & Ramírez, C. Q. (2024). *Between labour control and worker empowerment: Authoritarian innovations and democratic reforms in Mexico*. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 66(4), 578–603. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856241278989>. [Country: Mexico].

## Week 11: Front-line Bureaucrats

**Background:** Street-level bureaucrats play a crucial role in development, serving as the direct point of contact between the government and citizens. They are responsible for implementing policies and delivering services, often with discretionary power that allows them to adapt to individual situations and local needs. This week, we will examine the literature on STBs in the context of Latin America, exploring whether the state of politics affects their behaviour.

- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447713>. [General].
- Eiró, F., & Lotta, G. (2024). *On the frontline of global inequalities: A decolonial approach to the study of street-level bureaucracies*. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 34(1), 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muad019>. [Region: Global South].
- Jarpe, M. (2015). Zachary W. Oberfield, *Becoming Bureaucrats: Socialization at the Front Lines of Government Service*. *Social Service Review*, 89(1), 211–214. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681295>. [General].
- Eiró, F. (2022). *Translating politics into policy implementation: Welfare frontline workers in polarised Brazil*. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 18(3), 303–316. [Country: Brazil].

### Curriculum Content Metrics:

Diversity of the authors:  
Epistemic Diversity  
Critical Engagement with Colonialism

**Office Hours:** By appointment, or post your questions in the forum.

### Class Policy:

- Regular attendance is essential and expected.

**Academic Honesty:** Lack of knowledge of the academic honesty policy is not a reasonable explanation for a violation.