

The bureaucratic returns to political office

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1 Introduction

The nature of bureaucracies is central to the performance of governments in delivering public goods and ensuring economic development (Xu, 2018; Belsey et al., 2021). There is a growing interest in studying the effectiveness of bureaucracies and the interaction between organizational structures and their personnel (Finan, Olken and Pande, 2017). In particular, it is argued that political systems have a strong influence on bureaucracies; in that sense, their success depends highly on the relation between politicians and bureaucrats (Besley et. al, 2021). This can be either one that ensures monitoring and accountability for the latter (Gulzar and Pasquale, 2016), as well as a meritocratic and qualified pool of public officials (Moreira and Perez, 2021), or one that ends up favoring patronage relations that diminish the capacity of the state (Collonelli, Prem and Teso, 2020). Much less attention has been put on the cases in which bureaucracies assimilate politicians and how this affects their performance.

Politicians can be motivated to gain access themselves into state bureaucracies, especially in developing countries with high levels of decentralization. For instance, these offer significant wage premiums relative to other jobs, (Finan, Olken and Pande, 2017; Chaudhary and Yuan, 2021), they exhibit a high turnover with a large share of discretionary appointments (Xu, 2018; Riaño, 2021) and their limited oversight creates opportunities for rent-seeking and patronage relations (Colonnelli, Prem and Teso, 2020). All these characteristics are attractive to politicians, who can see in bureaucracies a way to expand their career prospects by remaining relevant in the public arena -as well as deploying their mission-oriented motivations-, exploiting their prevailing connections (Toral, 2021)

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and gaining access -both for them and their political machinery- into strategic realms or strongholds of the public administration (Grindle, 2012). However, there is little evidence related to the interplay between political and bureaucratic careers, which can also shed light on the broad question of (political) elite formation and its consequences on economic development.

This paper empirically studies the bureaucratic returns of entering into politics, their spillover effects into supporters and its welfare consequences within the Colombian public administration. This setting combines different layers of decentralization and local representation with a major dominance of discretionary public appointments, which are suitable to study the transition from politics to the bureaucracy.

Studying the bureaucratic assimilation of politicians requires overcoming different empirical challenges. First, it is necessary to account for the public career paths of the individuals who aim to enter politics. Moreover, this data needs to be comprehensive about the different types of bureaucrat discretionary appointments, which are composed of almost equal shares of public officers and contractors. Even within the latter, one must be able to distinguish between those who are granted contracts and their trustees, who (subtly) benefit from them. Second, linking appointments or contracts to politicians requires a reliable measure of personal identification. Third, identifying political machineries that support a politician needs to capture the hierarchies between both, that in some contexts go beyond political donations. Finally, assessing the welfare implications of the bureaucratic returns of politicians requires hard measures of performance and efficiency.

To address these challenges I combine different data regarding Colombian politics and its bureaucratic structure. I first retrieve partisan data, electoral outcomes and vote counts for candidates to local and regional parliament elections, namely councils and assemblies, in the 1,120 municipalities and 32 departments of Colombia between 2007 and 2015. I also include electoral data for candidates to Local Action Committees (LAC), which are small councils located within municipalities that interact with municipal councillors and thus account for a novel measure of political support that captures hierarchies and implicit agreements. I then link politicians with ten years of data on their public appointments based on (i) biographical information from CVs for civil officials, and (ii) contract grantees or trustees for public contractors. I provide an alternative measure of long-term access to bureaucratic networks using data from the universe of recorded meeting assistance in Colombian public agencies and institutions between 2018 and 2020. To measure welfare mechanisms and implications, I use additional contract information, such as cost-overruns

and extensions, sanctions and investigations, and institutional performance measures.

The empirical strategy exploits variation in the election of a politician to hold a seat in local and regional parliaments. Since these are multi-member elections there is no particular threshold to win a seat as in a two member election, in which a conventional close election regression discontinuity design would suit up identification. Here, candidates belong to open or closed party lists and their election is determined by a proportional representation system, in which the number of seats gained by each party depends, not only on their own vote share, but that of the other party lists. In this case, I follow Folke (2014) and Fiva and Smith (2018) to build a measure of the vote distance to a threshold around which a candidate would marginally win or lose a seat. This party-specific threshold measures the minimum vote share across all parties that can change the seat composition. Note that only marginal candidates (e.g., those with a rank -fixed or given by votes- in the party list close enough to the threshold) are affected by this measure; also, it is almost impossible for these candidates to predict the seat threshold (Fiva, Olle and Sorensen, 2018).

I focus on local and regional parliamentary candidates, which are usually in an early stage of their political careers and thus can capitalize higher marginal returns to holding political office. This restriction is further ensured by the empirical design: these candidates are marginally close to winning or losing and thus do not have a secure seat by means of a long trajectory. I also exploit the fact that the functioning of the Colombian bureaucracy depends on a decentralized and local organizational structure that early career politicians have good chances of accessing.

The paper provides the following empirical tests. First, I track the future public career paths of politicians that (marginally) win a seat in parliamentary elections along the bureaucratic apparatus. I investigate if these candidates exhibit a higher probability of being appointed as public officials or contractors than candidates that marginally lost. I define this measure both in the extensive margin (at least one appointment) and the intensive margin (number of appointments). I then characterize the type of appointments (employee vs. contractor), the type of link with contractor appointments (direct contractor vs. legal representative/trustee) as well as their timing and geography. These measures give a sense of how deep can politicians dive into the bureaucracy. These distinctions are also relevant since public employees cannot participate in local politics while contractors can. I also explore a measure of long-run access by accounting for the extent to which winning candidates end up showing up on the network of bureaucratic meetings.

Second, I document the spillover effects of the bureaucratic returns to holding politi-

cal office. I focus on LACs, which are particular to Colombian politics, and configure an additional layer of local representative democracy. Council and community parliamentary candidates develop tight links and a clear hierarchy, exchanging campaign aid before elections, and promoting local debates and executing policies after. It is of interest of the latter to support the former (who act as role models) under agreements beyond traditional donor-candidate relations¹. The former need to nurture the latter as political “mates” that ease their work and follow their future career endeavors (La Silla Vacía, 2018). In that sense, I follow the bureaucratic career paths of LAC candidates ascribed to the parties and localities of winning councilmen.

The third set of results explore the welfare mechanisms behind the bureaucratic assimilation of politicians. I first account for the performance and corruption levels of the agencies and institutions where these appointments are held using measures provided by the national administrative and auditing authorities. These exercises shed light on the extent to which politicians access the inefficient and corrupt part of the bureaucracy. I then focus on the specific performance of politicians as contractor bureaucrats by examining measures of contract overpricing, extensions and cost-overruns. I also check if these are involved in auditing investigations and sanctions in the future, which account for possible bureaucratic costs and exposure. Finally, I document the extent to which politicians and their mates can cluster in public good provision strongholds, both at the local and regional level, such as hospitals, schools, land regulation agencies or public utilities, which are particularly desired by rent-seekers and at the same time key providers of local development and state capacity.

I rule out alternative explanations, such as the selection of these politicians -measured by human capital accumulation- or the sole prevalence of patronage relations -measured by the affinity of candidates with the winning mayor and the timing of appointments-, to make the case for bureaucracy as a desired long-run mobility mechanism for early career politicians and their followers.

This paper contributes to the broad literature on the role of bureaucracies on economic development and the personnel economics of the state (Besley et al., 2021; Finan, Olken and Pande, 2017). This literature has studied the mechanisms under which bureaucracies can increase their performance with a lens on its interaction with politics. Studies in this literature have examined how shielding bureaucrats from politics (Moreira and Perez, 2021)

¹In Colombia, a large share of donations are provided by the candidate itself, covering most of the informal political transactions.

or aligning them better to mission oriented goals (Spenkuch, Teso and Xu, 2021) can lead to a better performance. With a lens on the developing world and local levels of government, another strand of the literature has focused on the role of politicians in monitoring bureaucrats (Gulzar and Pasquale, 2017; Rogger, 2018), on the effects of a representative bureaucracy (Xu, 2021), and on how can the interaction between politicians and bureaucrats can incentivize patronage and clientelism while capturing important realms of public good provision (Akhtari, Moreira and Trucco, 2021; Colonnelli, Prem and Teso, 2020). Of relevance to this paper is Colonnelli, Prem and Teso (2020), which show how political connections determine a large part of public employment in Brazil with performance costs, and Brassiollo, Estrada and Fajardo (2020), which show that council candidates who lose a seat are more likely to get a municipal job when the mayor they supported wins in a close election in Ecuador.

This paper proposes a different approach to assess the overlap between politicians and bureaucrats: when politicians, themselves, become bureaucrats. In contrast to the studies that exploit variation in the election of a mayor and document the indirect benefits enjoyed by his political supporters, I levy variation directly from the election of council and assembly candidates to explore how entering local politics can lead them -and indirectly, their supporters- to pursue a long-term career as bureaucrats. This, in a context in which candidates must stand out among political competition between plenty of parties (Galindo, 2015). This allows exploring how the bureaucracy is shaped in the long-term, beyond immediate patronage arrangements. The use of assembly candidates adds an alternative layer of regional politics less explored in the literature; the use of LAC candidates to document indirect spillovers account for a novel type of link between local politicians that operates under different mechanisms from those traditionally explored, namely, those between a mayoral coalition and its donors or party members.

The paper also relates to the literature on the returns to public office. From the side of politicians, this literature has focused on the direct wealth returns of holding political office (Fisman, Schulz and Vig, 2014) and how these returns can shape perpetuation in power and political dynasties (Fiva and Smith, 2018). From the side of bureaucrats, it has been studied how politically aligned politicians can get higher pay (Fiva et al., 2021), and how rent-seeking bureaucrats can exploit reassignments to increase their wealth (Chaudhary and Yuan, 2021). This paper integrates the bureaucratic premium into the motivations of politicians to hold office, as well as how they can share these returns with their followers. Of interest to this paper is Fiva and Smith (2018), who show that winning parliamentary

politicians in Norway perpetuate themselves in power but do not form political dynasties. Using a similar regression discontinuity strategy in a proportional election system, in this case with open and closed lists, I show how winning politicians can push their career - and those of their followers- through non-elected public office. Also, Riaño (2021) shows how bureaucratic turnover reproduces nepotistic practices in the Colombian public sector at a high performance cost. I document how politicians can benefit themselves and their followers from the bureaucratic turnover as a mechanism of mobility and its welfare consequences. Finally, Lehne, Shapiro and Eynde (2018) show how winning regional parliamentary politicians in India can shape the allocation of road construction contracts toward contractors with their surname; they also show how these roads are less likely to be constructed. This paper uses direct links across datasets and presents evidence on how the bureaucratic assimilation of politicians can lead to rent-seeking and the conformation of strongholds in a variety of public good providing institutions; also, data on the institutional and contractual performance allows to account for the welfare effects of this process.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents details on the Colombian political and bureaucratic background. Section 3 describes data and Section 4 presents the empirical strategy and the baseline empirical exercises to estimate the bureaucratic returns to political office. Section 5 investigates the mechanisms that incentivize the bureaucratic assimilation of politicians and its welfare effects.

2 Institutional background

2.1 Local and regional politics

Colombia has 1,121 municipalities that belong to 32 states. Every four years, local and regional elections are held in which voters in each municipality simultaneously elect a municipal mayor, council and Local Action Committee (LAC), as well as a corresponding regional assembly and governor. The elected officials for these offices can be re-elected indefinitely and receive honorariums based on their attendance.

Municipal councils are constituted by 7 to 21 members, depending on the municipality's population. Councils decide the approval or modification of the mayors' spending proposals, regulate and create municipal public institutions -such as hospitals, schools or utilities companies-, modify land use norms and taxes, and authorize the mayor to sign large contracts. Municipalities are divided into urban and rural communes in which LACs are established. These are integrated by 5 to 9 members and work hand to hand with mu-

municipal councils by participating in the elaboration of spending plans and monitoring public spending and officers in their corresponding communes. Assemblies are larger parliamentary corporations at the regional level. These interact with state governors in a similar way as councils with mayors, but also have higher powers in determining state taxes and administrative organization.

Candidates to each of these constituencies must be born in or reside in the corresponding commune, municipality or state, and run for office under the sponsorship of a given party or coalition. They are elected under a multi-member system in which parties are free to present closed or open lists. For either case, parties or coalitions must exceed a threshold given by 50% of the ratio between total valid votes and the number of available seats in each constituency. The number of seats is then determined by a proportional representation rule that follows the D'Hondt method. After seats are assigned to each party or coalition, parties assign seats following either the candidate rank assigned in the closed list or the number of votes in the open list. A useful feature of this setting is the abundance of parties and coalitions, which gives candidates an individual incentive to develop their own enterprise up the political and bureaucratic ladder beyond specific loyalties and to given parties and ideological coherence (Galindo, 2015). Also, followers, such as LAC candidates, tend to gather around local politicians, which are followed as role models.

2.2 Bureaucratic careers

The Colombian bureaucracy consists of public officers, contractors and, to a small extent, exceptional appointees. Public officers are subject to civil examinations to ensure meritocracy. These appointments account for 50% of the Colombian bureaucracy, with the rest based on direct contracting, where hiring committees and directors have discretionary powers to select workers and assign wages (Riaño, 2021). This type of contracting is very attractive to public agencies due to its flexibility and low profile. It is also a fast way of delivering services or solving problems and thus a large share of the operation of the state at the local level depends on it. Given the decentralized nature of the Colombian bureaucracy, in which municipalities and states -as well as their agencies- have a wide margin of operation and independence, as well as plenty of central government-transferred resources, much of the public goods provision and social investment ends up delivered under direct contracting appointments. However, this does not rule out the fact that direct appointments can preserve meritocracy.

In any case, winning local politicians can be eager to participate in the bureaucracy.

They can end up meeting the requirements to operate as public officers or finding a way to be granted contracts. Under both types of appointments they can find in local and regional strategic institutions a vehicle to leverage their careers and control political strongholds.

3 Data

3.1 Electoral data

I gather electoral data for the 2007, 2011 and 2015 local and regional elections provided by Registraduria Nacional del Estado Civil, the Colombian electoral organization. This data is compiled at the individual level, including the name, corporation -LAC, council or assembly-, commune, municipality or state, vote count, party or coalition, type of list -open or closed-, rank within the list -in case the list is closed-, age, sex, an indicator for winning a seat in the corresponding corporation, and a national identification number. With this data I can recover additional variables such as the number of available seats in each corporation, the number of votes that each party or coalition receives and the party or coalition overlap between council and LAC candidates to account for their links. In that sense, LAC candidates are classified as supporters of winning council candidates if they run under the same party or coalition in the same municipality. I exclude previous elections due to the lack of individual level data and an electoral reform in 2003 that allowed parties to present either open or closed lists.

3.2 Bureaucratic career data

To follow candidates to local and regional elections I find their appointments in the Colombian bureaucracy, either as public officers or contractors.

I first retrieve data from the Sistema de Informacion y Gestion del Empleo Publico (SIGEP)², which includes detailed biographical information for all public officials in Colombia. For an individual in a given year I can observe the public institution and municipality or state for which they work. I can also recover their professional experience with dates up to that point. However, two challenges arise when using this data: first, national identification numbers are needed to check that links are correct; second, SIGEP data must be observed at different points of time to account for every public officer position that a candidate could have been appointed to. Even though SIGEP is open to the public in a limited

²See <http://www.sigep.gov.co>

version at a specific point of time, non-anonymized access for all years between 2011 and 2021 is required to cover the full career paths of politician bureaucrats.

Second, I gather data from the Sistema Electronico para la Contratacion Publica (SECOP)³, which includes detailed information for each contract signed by public institutions within the Colombian bureaucracy between 2011 -when the data began to be systematically reported and shared to the public- and 2021. For each contract I can observe its cost, length and the public institution and municipality or state in which it was awarded. I also recover the date in which it was signed, possible extensions and cost overruns, and the name and identification number of both the direct contractor and the legal representative. The latter, who acts as a trustee, can also receive indirect benefits from these contracts and thus can account for a subtle way of accessing the bureaucracy. From the names of the public institutions I can code if these belong to strategic public good providers such as schools, hospitals or public utilities.

3.3 Matching the data

I match candidate and bureaucratic career data by finding each candidate in either the public officer or contracting information. I rely primarily on the national identification numbers to find candidates in the data and cross validate these matches by comparing their names. I then consolidate a longitudinal dataset at the candidate year level, in which I observe and characterize their appointments during the 2011-2021 period and their political outcomes in the 2007, 2011 and 2015 regional elections. This dataset can be collapsed to a candidate level cross-section for investigating the probability of getting a certain appointment in the future. Additional characteristics, such as its type, timing or sector, are constructed. Data for the bureaucratic appointments of LAC supporters in the case of council candidates can also be added. Similarly, data at the contract level can be collapsed to account for the performance of ex-politician contractors.

Other variables are incorporated in the dataset to account for alternative bureaucratic access measures or performance indicators. I first rely on the scraped universe of recorded meeting assistance in Colombian public agencies and institutions between 2018 and 2020 by the Instituto Anticorrupcion, a Colombian think tank that investigates corruption and transparency in the Colombian state⁴. To measure if the bureaucratic assimilation of politicians comes at an individual cost I match data on investigations and sanctions to public

³See <https://www.colombiacompra.gov.co/secop>

⁴See <https://cabilveo.org/registro-de-agenda-1/>

officers and contractors provided by Contraloria General de la Republica, the Colombian fiscal oversight agency. To characterize the performance of public institutions, I incorporate annual index measures of performance provided by the Departamento Administrativo de la Función Publica, the Colombian department of public service.

4 Empirical Strategy and Results

This section proposes an identification strategy that allows to causally evaluate the effects of holding political office on bureaucratic assimilation. An ideal experiment would randomly assign some candidates into political office and others not to then trace their future careers in the bureaucratic apparatus. However, in practice, electoral results are not random and I thus need to exploit variation in these elections. To do so, I focus on candidates who won or lost a seat by a close margin. The former are defined as the last to be assigned a seat while the latter are the first to lose it. In this setting, the identifying assumption requires that winning or losing a seat by a close margin in a local or regional parliamentary election resembles the random assignment from the ideal experiment in a regression discontinuity setting.

Exploiting variation in the election of candidates in multi-member elections poses different challenges. First, there is no observable threshold or margin for winning a seat in parliament as it is in a unique member setting, such as mayoral or presidential races, where the threshold is given by amounting the majority of the votes. This makes it necessary to propose an alternative margin or distance measure to be included in the empirical strategy. In this case, the threshold to become a marginal winner or loser is given by the overall election vote count for all parties and candidates under a proportional representation system in which the D'Hondt rule holds. The Colombian system works as follows: each corporation has a given number of seats to be allocated. To participate in the allocation, parties' total vote count must exceed 50% of the ratio between total valid votes (this is, the sum of votes for all parties + blank ballots) and the number of seats available in the corresponding corporation. Then, seats are allocated between the parties that exceed that number using the D'Hondt rule.

A second challenge involves the types of lists. Parties or coalitions in Colombia are free to present open or closed lists. For candidates in closed lists, the procedure is straightforward since parties present an ex-ante rank of candidates. Candidates whose rank in the list falls in the number of seats assigned to the party are elected. For open lists, the ranking

of candidates is determined by the number of votes they receive. Thus, the highest voted candidate will be the first to be assigned a seat, the second highest voted candidate will be assigned the second seat, etc. In that sense, for closed lists I build a party specific seat threshold defined as the minimum change in the total vote count for all parties that is necessary for a party to obtain an additional seat. For open lists I build a candidate-specific seat threshold that accounts for the minimum change in the vote count for all parties and candidates that is necessary for a candidate in a given party to obtain a seat. To build these thresholds I follow the algorithm proposed by Folke (2014) and Fiva and Smith (2018), who elaborate distance threshold measures to exploit variation in being elected in closed multi-member elections.

Note that the challenges posed by multi-member elections strengthen the identifying assumptions since electoral outcomes are defined by the overall vote share of all parties. In this case, even candidates who work hard to get votes or who count with the voters' preference in open lists -which assimilates to unique-member elections- are subject to the randomness imposed by the votes for all parties and cannot predict the threshold to be elected (Folke, 2014; Fiva and Smith, 2018). To formally address concerns about sorting around the seat distance threshold I present a frequency histogram of these distances for marginal winners and losers as well as a McCrary test of manipulation. In absence of manipulation, winners and losers should not sort at any side of the seat distance threshold.

Once I identify candidates who obtain the last available seat and those who are first in the line to losing a seat, as well as the seat winning threshold margins, I estimate the following specification:

$$Y_{ipct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Seat}_{ipct} + \beta_2 \text{Win Margin}_{ipct} + \beta_3 \text{Win Margin}_{ipct} \times \text{Seat}_{ipct} + \varepsilon_{ipct}$$

where Y_{ipct} corresponds to different bureaucratic access outcomes for candidate i under party p in a given election for a corporation c in year t , Seat_{ipct} is an indicator variable of winning a seat and Win Margin_{ipct} is the distance to the seat threshold for each candidate. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-election level. Note that this regression pools across different election years and corporations to be elected (councils and assemblies). I restrict the sample to candidates who exhibit at most a 25 percentage point distance winning or losing threshold, following Folke (2014) and Fiva and Smith (2018).

To validate this specification, I verify that candidate specific characteristics, such as demographics and political experience are balanced between marginal winners and losers

around the seat distance threshold.

4.1 Bureaucratic assimilation of politicians

I measure the effects of winning a local or regional election on bureaucratic returns. I first focus on an indicator variable for being appointed as a public officer or contractor in the future. I provide different measures for this variable based on the type of appointment (official vs. contractor, and also direct contractor or legal representative), the intensive and extensive margin of appointments and their timing (years to first appointment). I provide an alternative measure of long-run access to the bureaucracy, namely an indicator for appearing in the network of bureaucratic meetings in the future.

These results allow investigating the extent to which politicians access the bureaucracy. If they enter the bureaucracy as public officials, this can shed light on the possible skills and selection that drives them to civil service. If they enter as contractors, this raises concerns on the role of discretionary appointments to reward political experience. If they figure more as trustees than direct contractors, it can be evidence in favor of a “back door” bureaucratic assimilation. The timing of the appointments is also insightful: one time appointments immediately after holding political office can be an indicator of patronage; multiple appointments in a longer time horizon can be an indicator of a thorough assimilation. Finally, if results are different across levels of government, namely local vs. regional, it could be an indicator of decreasing or increasing returns depending on the political seniority. For instance, early career politicians in municipalities can capitalize their bureaucratic returns to a larger extent; however, mid-career politicians in assemblies can exploit previously acquired connections and knowledge.

I also provide a specification in which I control for different observable variables, such as candidate age, sex and political experience, municipal characteristics, as well as municipality-election year fixed effects.

4.2 Spillover effects

I then explore how the bureaucratic returns to holding political office can extend to political supporters. I focus on the spillover effects towards LAC candidates under the same party or coalition of the winning council candidates. I measure the effect of winning a council election on the consolidation of a bureaucratic career for the party’s LAC candidates in the same election. I do so by following their public appointments. Note that this specification

exploits variation in how parties accumulate seats -and thus representation- in local councils relative to other parties and how that representation benefits political supporters. I explore if this effect is driven by all LAC candidates or just those who win to measure the extent to which holding office, as opposed to solely pre-electoral support, consolidates their careers.

5 Welfare mechanisms

I then turn to the welfare mechanisms and implications behind these bureaucratic returns. First, I shed light on the type of public institutions in which bureaucrats end up. I exploit heterogeneity for certain strategic public good providers, such as schools, hospitals or public utilities, which can serve candidates and their followers as political strongholds to consolidate a bureaucratic career. Evidence in favor of this can support a rent-seeking motivation behind politicians desire to access the bureaucracy. I also test if this behavior is more prevalent for open list candidates, which have more incentives to invest in their political salience and engage in these activities. Second I evaluate if these institutions tend to be also those that under-perform. If this is the case, it would be an indicator of the social costs of the bureaucratic assimilation of politicians, which are more likely to appear in a decentralized state with local operative independence. I then directly test performance implications by focusing on contractors and evaluating if ex-politician contractors extend or cost-overrun more their contracts. Finally, I test for the individual bureaucratic costs of holding office by accounting for the probability of being investigated or sanctioned by the fiscal auditing authority. If this is the case, this can introduce an opportunity cost in the politician's decisions to access the bureaucracy.

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