Edited by
FRANK L.K. OHEMENG, JOSEPH R.A. AYEE & ABENA FRIMPOMA DADZE-ARTHUR



The POLITICS *of* DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Bureaucratic and Political Relationships in Emerging and Developing Countries

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Emerita Professor Barbara Wake Carroll and the Families of the Editors.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Politicians and Bureaucrats in an Era of Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

Politicians and bureaucrats' relationships continue to attract scholarly interest and debate even in this age of democratic governance (DG) and democratic backsliding (DB). This book, which contains 13 chapters (including 11 regional and country cases), contributes to the debate by examining the relationships and rules of engagement of politicians and bureaucrats and the changes and impacts across different DG contexts. It emphasises the bureaucracy's autonomy, service-orientation, and resilience despite recent global developments in attacking its meritocratic principle because of DB or democratic erosion (DE). It also discusses why and how illiberalism manifests in the behaviour and attitudes of bureaucrats. The book addresses the following questions: (i) Why and how did politician–bureaucrat relationships change during an era of DB, and what strategies were developed to resist authoritarian encroachments? (ii) What are the lessons and their implications for literature? The uniqueness of the volume lies in its reconceptualisation of DB as a contextually embedded and epistemically contingent process. Rather than treating phenomena such as executive aggrandisement, bureaucratic capture, or the politicisation of administrative norms as universally comparable across settings, the book demonstrates that their meanings, manifestations, and consequences are shaped by locally specific worldviews, belief systems, and historically

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constituted state–society relations. The chapters draw on qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods together with a historical–analytical approach aimed at making an original and significant contribution to existing literature on politicians and bureaucrats' relationships in DG and DB. Data were derived from documentary, secondary, and internet sources.

Keywords: Politicians; bureaucrats; relationships; democratic governance; democratic backsliding

Introduction

Notwithstanding criticisms from some scholars as being a false division, irrelevant, and dubious (Appleby, 1972; Simon, 1948; Waldo, 1984, 1955), the seminal work of Woodrow Wilson (1887) on 'The Study of Administration' in which he drew a dichotomy or separation between politics and administration, which was supported by Goodnow (1900), has remained a key reference point in any discussion of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats even in this age of DG and DB (Sager & Rosser, 2022). Others, especially organisational theorists such as Fayol (1949), Taylor (1911), White (1926), Weber (1947), Gulick (1937), Mintzberg (1983), Morgan (1990), and Peters (1989) built on the work of Wilson with emphasis on structure, hierarchy, rules, regulations, impersonality and scientific management to construct a science of administration. However, the views and positions of organisational theorists were rebutted by Appleby (1972) and Simon (1997), who argued that the behaviour of individuals and groups is equally important. Simon (1997), for instance, emphasised the presence of 'administrative man' who 'satisfices' and decides on a satisfactory course of action rather than an all-knowing 'economic man' who has the potential of taking decisions that bring maximum benefit.

Irrespective of the era in which the scholars wrote, they were confronted with the political, managerial, and programme effectiveness of public administration and the need to find ways to reconcile and balance these concerns (Lynn, 2011; Menzel & White, 2011). How can public administration be used to not only effectively and efficiently deliver services to citizens but also to spearhead socio-economic development through the design of policies and programmes (Cox et al., 1994)? This development has naturally led to an increased role and size of the administrative state, whose operations revolve around two groups of officials, namely politicians and bureaucrats. The view is that the tasks of public institutions should be the responsibility of politicians. They are part of the 'power elite', the political class, the policy elite, or entrepreneurs (Lane, 1993). They have been in and out of government and designed and implemented policies and programmes ostensibly to promote the public interest. Despite this, a bureaucratic endeavour seems to be political in nature because of the interplay of political and administrative responsibility in which the politician and bureaucrat have guided 'the same wheel down the same road' (Cox et al., 1994, p. 37). This is a

clear case of interdependent relationships and the complementarity of the roles of politicians and administrators in a highly intense and complex political environment buffeted by different choices, interests, and preferences of the actors, and by how they navigate complexities, tensions, and differences (Egeberg, 2012; Goodsell, 1983).

At the heart of this development is the exercise of power and authority, and reconciling democracy and bureaucracy with different, and perhaps contradictory values such as efficiency, allocating power between politicians and bureaucrats, expert opinion or knowledge, citizen participation, and respect of the legal and institutional framework. In normal times, it is less difficult to manage the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats and reconcile differences and contradictions. However, in an era of political change, including a democracy wave or resurgence with its aberrations of DB or erosion, in which elected politicians manipulate the legal and institutional framework to their advantage, it becomes taxing to reconcile and manage the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats. This is due to the interplay of political economy issues such as power and interests, conflict, benefits, winners and losers, manipulation, bargaining, and compromise (Durant & Marvel, 2011; Peters, 2018).

Some have, however, blamed the tenuous relationship between politicians and bureaucrats on the fundamental differences between democracy and bureaucracy (Cox et al., 1994; Peters, 2018). As rightly pointed out by Cox et al. (1994, p. 161):

> The relationship between bureaucracy and democracy is not a simple zero-sum power relationship. The issue is neither one of allocating nor sharing power. The relationship is more complex … although certain aspects of the structure may be threatened by the ideological support for bureaucracy that comes from modernism and science. Bureaucracy can be made more democratic, even though the two represent fundamentally different structures. Conflicts between the two will remain; the very reason for the conflict is that both concepts continue to exist. The choice can never be that of one or the other structure. … Weber's formulation suggests that structure and values shape the process. The structure and values of bureaucracy and democracy are at odds. No amount of tinkering with the 'process' will alter that. Changing values and possibly the structures of bureaucracy to make them more 'democratic' is the only path to any kind of convergence of concepts.

Perhaps it is this irreconcilable relationship between bureaucracy and democracy that has provided the harbinger of DB or DE and its consequences on the roles of the bureaucracy and the pursuit of illiberalism by politicians in DG. The backsliding should be viewed against the gains made by countries since Huntington's 'third wave' of democratisation in the late 1990s across the globe, which led to the dismantling of non-democratic and authoritarian regimes and ushered in an era of DG (Huntington, 1991).

A phenomenon that has emerged under DB is executive aggrandisement, whereby leaders expand their powers beyond the 'checks and balances' provided by the legislature and the judicial system and interfere with the independence of the public services, thus undermining democracy by consolidating their powers and using government resources to debilitate their political opponents (James, 2025; Schiffers, 2025). In some cases, the merit principle has been circumvented by politicians in the appointment of party apparatchiks to the public services (Kippin, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this book examines the relationships and rules of engagement of politicians and bureaucrats and the changes and impacts across different DG contexts. It emphasises the autonomy, service orientation, and resilience of the bureaucracy despite recent global developments in attacking its meritocratic principle because of DB or DE. In addition, it also discusses why and how illiberalism manifests in the behaviour and attitudes of bureaucrats.

The book addresses the following questions:

- Why and how did politician–bureaucrat relationships change during an era of DB, and what strategies were developed to resist authoritarian encroachments?
- What are the lessons and their implications for literature?

After this introduction, the chapter highlights the methodology, which is followed by the contribution of the book to the literature. Thereafter, there is a definition of DB and its political and economic costs. This is followed by a discussion of the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats in an era of DB. The final section is devoted to a summary of the chapters contained in the book.

Methodology

The chapters draw on different methodological lenses (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods). The historical–analytical approach was used to enable the two questions to be adequately addressed. The methodology, therefore, is geared at offering a relatively original and significant contribution to existing literature and thus moving forward the corpus of the contribution or otherwise of politicians and bureaucrats to DG and backsliding empirically, analytically, and ideationally. The chapters' data were derived from documentary, secondary, and internet sources.

The book relies on regional and country case studies. The regional cases are those of Latin America and the Caribbean, while the country ones are from Hungary, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Botswana, and Ghana. Except for Hungary, which is a global north country and in Central Europe, the regional and country cases are from the global south. The selection was not based on any criteria but rather the response to the call for abstracts and papers and their consequent peer review. The presence of Hungary emphasises DB as a global phenomenon. The country case studies represent some regions of the world. Botswana and Ghana (Sub-Saharan Africa), Pakistan and Bangladesh (South Asia), Turkey (a transcontinental country and a bridge between Western Asia and

Southeast Europe), and Hong Kong (a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China located in East Asia). This diversity of countries in different regions is important for comparative analysis of the trajectories of politician-bureaucrat relationships in eras of DG and DB.

Contribution to Scholarship

Scholarly attention continues to focus on DE or backsliding; how authoritarian leaders engaged in it (Bauer, 2024a, 2024b; Boese-Schlosser et al., 2025; Carothers, 2025; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; James, 2025; Kippin, 2024; Lewandowsky et al., 2025; Mantas & Shapiro, 2025; Piotrowska, 2024; Riedl et al., 2025; Roberts et al., 2025; Schiffers, 2025; Somer & McCoy, 2026; Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2026, among others). There is, however, less attention to the link between DE or backsliding and the public services or bureaucracy, even though it is well established that the public services enhance and sustain democracy. The scant literature that focused on the link between DB and public administration has done so from a more general discussion than looking at the recruitment, values, norms, and the complementarity of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats (Nord et al., 2025; Wike & Fetterolf, 2024). This book, therefore, fills the lacuna in the literature by examining the contribution of recruitment, values, norms and complementarity of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats to sustain DG during a period of DB largely in some global South countries except Hungary, and the strategies to promote a meritocratic and politically neutral public service akin to those in the developmental states.

In addressing the two questions, the book contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends the research on DB and organisation theory by showing the connection or disconnect between politicians and bureaucrats and the coping or survival strategies of both to either strengthen or undermine institutional erosion. Second, it contributes to the debates in public administration with emphasis on the drivers of bureaucratic ethos, such as recruitment, values, and norms during an era of DB that have the potential of dealing with executive aggrandisement and populism. Third, the diversity of the regional and country case studies gives us interesting comparative (including similarities and differences) and historical perspectives, dynamics and interplay of politics and administration that will enable useful lessons and implications for literature to be highlighted for future trajectories and agenda setting.

Crucially, the distinctive contribution of this volume lies in its *reconceptualisation of DB as a contextually embedded and epistemically contingent process*. Rather than treating phenomena such as executive aggrandisement, bureaucratic capture, or the politicisation of administrative norms as universally comparable across settings, the book demonstrates that their meanings, manifestations, and consequences are shaped by locally specific worldviews, belief systems, and historically constituted state–society relations. By explicitly foregrounding these contextual and epistemic dimensions, the volume moves beyond the predominantly universalist and Western-centric frameworks that have characterised much of the existing literature. In doing so, it not only deepens scholarly understanding

of the interplay between politics and administration under democratic strain but also advances a more plural, reflexive, and globally relevant approach to public administration research. At the same time, it provides contextually grounded insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to sustain meritocratic and politically neutral public services in vastly different governance settings, thereby linking conceptual innovation with practical relevance.

DB Defined

There seems to be near unanimity in the definition of DB (Karolewski, 2021), which some have called DE or simply illiberalism (Campbell, 2021; Little & Meng, 2024; Waldner & Lust, 2018). There is, however, the admission that it is conceptually complex (Mantas & Shapiro, 2025). According to Bermeo (2016, pp. 5–6), DB 'at its most basic … denotes the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy'. In other words, it entails state-led processes of institutional debilitation. Somer and McCoy (2026, p. 1) see it as the 'gradual and piecemeal erosion of democracy under elected governments'. DB involves elected office holders, who actively weaken democratic institutions and rules by lawful means (Bauer & Becker, 2020a; Bauer, 2024a, 2024b; Bermeo, 2016, 2022; Druckman, 2024; Gamboa, 2022; Little & Meng, 2024; Waldner & Lust, 2018). This distinguishes DB from other forms of DE, such as coups d'etat to terminate democracies. However, the trend is similar in that there is democratic regression from liberal democracy to electoral democracy, and then on to competitive autocracy and finally closed autocracy. According to Lewandowsky et al. (2025), DB complies with the '3 Ps of autocrats: populism, polarisation, post-truth'.

In a nutshell, DB may be seen as a subversion of the principles and practices of DG. The pursuit of illiberal policies by elected politicians by subverting state legal and institutional framework and practices, by authoritarian leaders to have their way and pursue their parochial or partisan interests against those of the public. State institutions are either emasculated or co-opted, while bureaucrats become the immediate victims as they are those who stand for continuity, meritocracy, professionalism, and stability (Peters & Pierre, 2019).

Rethinking DB in Emerging and Developing Contexts: An Epistemically Diverse Lens

Understanding DB within emerging and developing country contexts demands an approach that is attentive to the epistemic, historical, and institutional specificities that shape governance beyond Eurocentric templates (Bentancur, 2024; Dadze-Arthur & Mangai, 2024; Nisar, 2023). Dominant conceptualisations of DE – often grounded in liberal democratic ideals and Weberian assumptions of bureaucratic neutrality – risk obscuring the ways in which political–administrative relations in these contexts are constituted through postcolonial legacies, hybrid institutional arrangements, informal power structures, and locally embedded norms of authority and legitimacy (Drechsler, 2017; Haque,

2022; Moloney et al., 2022). In many settings across emerging and developing countries, DB does not necessarily represent a clear departure from an established liberal democratic equilibrium, but rather unfolds as a gradual, uneven, and contextually mediated reconfiguration of political and bureaucratic relationships – deeply entangled with historical continuities, power asymmetries, and competing epistemologies of governance (Drechsler, 2015; Jhagroe & Salazar-Morales, 2025; Koga et al., 2023). As scholarship on epistemic justice underscores, governance is not merely a technical or institutional domain, but a site of contestation over whose knowledge counts, whose experiences are rendered visible, and which interpretive frameworks are privileged in defining notions such as meritocracy, professionalism, and 'good governance' (Cummings et al., 2023; Dadze-Arthur & Mangai, 2026, 2024).

In this respect, the present edited collection departs from existing scholarship on DB, which has largely prioritised macro-institutional analyses, regime typologies, and explanatory frameworks derived from Western democratic trajectories (see e.g., Bauer & Becker, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021). While these approaches have advanced understanding of DE, they remain limited in capturing the lived, relational, and contextually embedded dynamics of political–bureaucratic interaction in emerging and developing countries. This volume addresses this gap by foregrounding epistemic diversity as both a conceptual and methodological lens. Building on Dadze-Arthur and Mangai's (2024) argument that epistemic justice requires not only the inclusion of marginalised perspectives but also a rethinking of the foundations of knowledge production, the collection brings together contextually grounded case studies and theoretically plural contributions to offer a more nuanced account of how DB is experienced and negotiated across diverse governance settings. In doing so, it reframes DB as a *heterogeneous and epistemically contingent process* rather than a uniform deviation from an idealised liberal democratic model.

The Political and Economic Costs of DB

DB has attracted enduring scholarly interest and debate largely because of its deleterious political and economic consequences (Bermeo, 2016). Politically, DB has been on the rise globally, even in developed democracies. For instance, the United States is said to have witnessed DB for almost two decades, and especially more recently, during the period of the Donald Trump-Joseph Biden–Donald Trump presidencies (Mantas & Shapiro, 2025). A grim description of the situation is that the country has transitioned from a 'full' to a 'flawed' democracy since 2016, ranking 28th in 2024 out of 167 nations in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Democracy Index (Economic Intelligence Unit, 2024a; Smith, 2025). So too were France and South Korea, which were downgraded from a 'full democracy' to a 'flawed democracy' in 2024 because their score fell just below the 8.00 threshold to qualify as a 'full democracy' as a result of a decline in their score for functioning of government amidst a year of political unrest and deteriorating confidence in government (Economic Intelligence Unit, 2024a).

DB undermines the principles and practices of DG and the 'primary challenge to the quality and even the survival of liberal democracy in the twenty-first century' (Somer & McCoy, 2026, p. 2). According to the Legal Clarity Team (2026), DG involves the framework of institutions, rules, and norms that translate the will of ordinary people into government action. It includes the making and implementation of laws, accountability and transparency of public officials, government accountability, independence of the judiciary, the participation of citizens in shaping policies and programmes between elections, peaceful resolution of conflicts and the presence of an active civil society. To Johnson (2026), the cornerstone of DG is a system of checks and balances, which prevents any branch of government (executive, legislature, and judiciary) from abusing its power and engaging in overreach to limit the actions of the other branches. This is to prevent tyranny, dictatorship, and the protection of the rights of citizens.

As a corollary, its four core principles are popular sovereignty, rule of law, human rights, and equality under the law. DG, therefore, goes beyond the ballot box and involves systems and practices to prevent authoritarianism, abuse of power, injustice, and promote transparency, accountability, and participation (Legal Clarity Team, 2026). Similarly, Menocal and Wingfield (2025) have identified five principles: (i) openness, which involves individual rights, civic liberties and freedoms for popular participation; (ii) inclusion process (how decisions are made and who has a say) and outcome (who benefits and how wealth and prosperity are distributed); (iii) rule of law that covers impersonal and impartial rules that apply to all equally; (iv) political accountability (checks and balances), popular accountability (elections); and social accountability (local governance and participatory budgeting); and (v) effectiveness which involves state capacity and authority to make and implement decisions, get things done, and enforce rules within the country (Menocal & Wingfield, 2025).

There is the morbid fear that DB threatens democracies globally, is a 'major worldwide political threat' (Mantas & Shapiro, 2025), and poses a particular challenge to public officials as democratic backsliders who are politicians need public services, especially the civil service to advance their illiberal agendas (Bauer, 2024a, 2024b). There is the genuine fear that bureaucrats who are trained in instrumental values and expected to neutrally implement political choices risk lacking orientation on how to act in situations when obeying the incumbent government, thereby making them accomplices of DB. Moreover, Guedes-Neto and Peters (2025) see it as the primary challenge to the quality and even the survival of liberal democracy in the 21st century.

The UK's Economic Intelligence Unit (2024b) has categorised the following four levels of DG leading to authoritarianism, which has become a DB tracker:

1. Full democracies have comprehensive democratic features, to a great extent, in which citizens can choose their political leaders in free and fair elections, enjoy civil liberties, prefer democracy over other political systems, can and do participate in politics, and have a functioning government that acts on their behalf.