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Reciprocal Relationships:  
Relating to a Democracy with a Professional Civil Service

**Abstract**

Civil service reform requires commitment and buy-in from the two major sides involved. The first side is the political and democratic side – *political representatives*. The second is the professional and administrative side – *the professional civil service*. Despite our desire to resemble a true democracy, the professional civil service is tasked with a significant degree of discretion when it comes to policy implementation. Policy design and development begins with political representatives taking into consideration the interests of the people. But, the professional civil service determines the effectiveness of a policy by the style in which it is implemented. In a country that strives for equality, concepts such as democratic participation in government lead us in the direction toward altruistic and equitable reform (Dahl, 2000, p. 10). *Discretion* on the part of the bureaucracy however is the driving force that determines the legitimacy of any reform or policy implementation. No matter the type of democratic participation exercised by our government and its people, the degree of discretion granted to the professional civil service must be taken into consideration when attempting any kind of reform or policy implementation. Society allows for such discretion to exist because of an implied reciprocal relationship between the people and the civil service.

**Discretion**

Professionals at all levels of the civil service are asked to apply reasonable discretion to the decision-making process every single day (Denhardt et al., 2009, p. 133). Because we allow our public service professionals such discretion, their actions and choices greatly impact the effectiveness of any reform or policy implementation. Denhardt et al. notes that discretion not in line with a political agenda jeopardizes democratic governance (2009, p. 134). Public administrators have the power to either make or break a political agenda.

President Clinton saw his administration's attempts at reforming the Senior Executive Service largely determined by the interests of the Office of Personnel Management (Ricucci & Naff, 2007, p. 67). The process was slowed and shaped by the fact that OPM and other agencies

had a say in the decision-making process. Allowing the civil service to play a part in reforms and policy-making matters can either benefit or take away from the will of the democracy as a whole.

A major benefit of allowing for some degree of discretion is that it is often necessary to get things done (Denhardt et al., 2009, p. 134). Radical reform or policy implementation requires the expertise of professionals. A policy or reform will not be effective unless those who have knowledge and experience related to such a reform are consulted. Despite our ideal of an inclusive and participatory democracy, we retain the ability to leave some decisions up to the professionals. It is one thing to set an agenda, and yet another entirely to carry it out. That very fact may be the biggest reason why we allow our public administrators some freedom in decision-making process when it involves their field of expertise.

### **Implementation**

The will of the political and democratic side of government is best served when public service professionals work in harmony with legislative mandates and policies (Mosher, 1982, p. 11). Along with its ability to impact reform and policy implementation, the civil service is growing in size. By 2005, the state and local levels alone totaled almost 20 million employees (Ricucci & Naff, 2007, p. 86). With a growing federal, state, and local civil service, the administrative and bureaucratic side of government will continue to influence civil service reform and policy implementation.

In its infancy, the civil service was more concerned with creation rather than reform (Ricucci & Naff, 2007, p. 8). That has since changed. Civil service reform has become commonplace since the passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883. In recent years for example, President George W. Bush's administration proposed the Working for America Act – formally

known as the 2005 Civil Service Modernization Act (Ricucci & Naff, 2007, p. 75). After the writing of the act, the administration sought the input of congressional staff, human-capital officers, various agency employees, and union leadership (p. 76). Such a reform is a prime example of how the implementation process is collaborative. Reform requires the input of all parties involved, which in many instances includes public agencies and employees.

The implementation phase of any policy or reform is perhaps the most crucial. Michael Hill and Peter Hupe see the policy formulation phase as the cognitive phase (2009). But, the implementation phase is when, “the content of that policy, and its impact on those affected, may be substantially modified, elaborated on or even negated” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 7). Those involved in the implementation phase, the professional civil service especially, decide through their actions just how a policy or reform will end up looking to the public.

### **Democratic Discretion**

The people elect the political and representative side of our government. The civil service however is made up almost entirely of non-elected professionals. In a sense, political representatives exercise discretion when they interpret and react to the will of the people – we will call this *democratic discretion*.

Non-elected or appointed civil service professionals are not a part of democratic discretion. They are expected to act in accordance with their agency’s mission, the current political agenda, and the public good. *But*, their discretion differs from that of political representatives. Political representatives are elected with the belief that they will carry out the will of the people. Civil service professionals on the other hand are not elected and therefore not

tioned to any particular constituency. They are tasked with serving the entire system, whereas political representatives are tasked with serving special interests.

*Is the discretion we grant those professionals who implement public policy and reform reflective of a democracy?* Some argue that whether or not a lack of democratic participation in public administration in the sense of the citizenry being involved is irrelevant. Some degree of discretion is necessary in order to get things done (Denhardt et al., 2009, p. 134). This is of course the case in instances of emergencies, but it is also the case in instances of policy and reform implementation. It is unrealistic to think that any system can be fully democratic (Dahl, 2000, p. 42). No matter our efforts to foster greater equality and inclusion in the decision-making process, not every opinion can be heard and not every interest will be addressed. The politics-administration system that exists in our country however realizes this truth and aims to provide us with a neutral and representative bureaucracy.

Some discretion on the part of our civil service is necessary. We entrust public agencies to reflect the population as best as they can. Agencies strive to reflect the public in physical makeup of employees and in interests as public employees are themselves citizens.

### **Reciprocity and the Civil Service**

A reciprocal relationship between the people and the professional civil service exists in all democracies. Such a relationship is what gives the people peace of mind when they allot the civil service a certain degree of discretion. Reciprocity is a core concept in the formation of an atmosphere in which the people allow society to maintain a professional civil service.

The stability of a social system is based on a norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960, p. 168). Alvin Gouldner writes on what he calls “the mutuality of gratification.” Each party

involved in the reciprocal relationship – *in the case of this paper that is the people and the professional civil service* – have certain rights and duties (Gouldner, 1960, p. 169). It is understood that each side will uphold its duties in order to ensure that either maintains its rights. A right granted to the professional civil service is the use of discretion. That right only remains when the professional civil service upholds its duty to perform in a way that gratifies the public.

Reciprocity implies that there is some type of exchange. Gouldner talks of exchanges as goods and services, but they may also be more intangible services such as exchanges of trust in one another. Either way, each side of the reciprocal relationship is mutually dependent on the other for any number of reasons. The existence of mutual dependence leads to mutual gratification for either side (Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocity is evident at various levels of a stable society. In the case of a democracy, there can be reciprocal relationships between the civil service and the political representatives, the civil service and the people, and between the people and the political representatives. Reciprocity is a concept that must exist in order for a democracy to function and to maintain itself.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that we will continue to witness reform of the United States civil service for the indefinite future. The passage of the Pendleton Act ensured that the activity of reform was acceptable. Even prior to the Pendleton Act and the establishment of an official professional civil service, despite the existence of spoil systems, the country was founded on principles of reform. Reform, just like public policy, requires not only planning but also implementation. The implementation phase is vital to the success or demise of any reform or policy and a large chunk of that phase falls into the hands of the professional civil service. The civil service is largely

made up of career professionals who are non-elected, and yet the public still provides them with a degree of discretion to implement policies and reforms as they see fit.

Reciprocity is the glue that holds the life cycle of reform and policy-making together. The professional civil service is put in place to act in accordance with their own missions as well as in the interests of the public and political representatives. All parties involved in this life cycle are dependent on one another for a variety of reasons and each must recognize the benefits they receive from one another in order to sustain their individual and collective existences.

## Works Cited

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