

Bureaucracy and public policy

Government



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In most situations of dealing with government, people often find themselves experiencing communication with street-level bureaucrats who, despite of their comparatively low position, in many ways define the person's further well-being. Street-level bureaucrats have a direct influence on the number of people participating in public programs, and it's them who determines what number of people is going to receive certain benefits, or participate in some programs. This, their final decisions become vital for certain groups of society.

The communication which occurs between bureaucrats and people in such situations creates the public policies which all the citizens experience when dealing with government. A very important issue concerning bureaucracy still remains understanding the mechanism of decision-making by street-level-bureaucrats, for it appears a much more difficult problem than it seems. As Brehm and Gates state, despite a large number of literatures sources on the point of decision-making by bureaucrats, it still remains uncertain what real reasons influence their behavior [1].

Due to the complexity of decision-making by street-level bureaucrats, different approaches have been suggested towards this matter. Various authors suggest their own solutions of the problem. The first approach is connected with economics, while the other one deals with public administration and organization theory. According to the behavioral theory of choice, bureaucratic decisions are the function not only of rational decision-making, but as well of all the variables which might influence the decision-making in the process.

This can occur in situations when cognitive abilities of decision-makers fail them in the situation of uncertainty, and they become unable to make rational decisions. One of the main economists who have carried out the research of decision-making by bureaucracy were Brehm and Gates in their work "Working, Shirking, and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public", and Michael Lipsky "Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of Individuals in Public Services". John Brehm and Scott Gates in their work were dealing with the problem of the types of bureaucratic decisions.

As far as authors have found out, the decisions which the bureaucrats make are divided into 3 categories: working, shirking, and sabotage, which are very different in their descriptions. The main criteria is the matching the supervisors' goals by the street-level bureaucrats in their decisions. In the category of "working", the bureaucrats completely answer the goals which their supervisors put in front of them, and this is the most efficient decision-making for them.

In the case of "shirking", the bureaucrats direct some of their efforts towards recreation or any other activities which have nothing to do with the goals set for them by the supervisors. The category of "sabotaging" is the least efficient because in this case the bureaucrats choose the goals which completely differ from the goals which their supervisors set for them, and that is why they can often fail to achieve the outcome which the supervisors would like them to achieve [1].

According to the analysis of the mentioned categories, Brehm and Gates come to the conclusion that in many cases it's impossible for supervisors to

<https://assignbuster.com/bureaucracy-and-public-policy/>

coordinate the actions of street-level bureaucrats, and thus the public policy which they carry out on a high level might appear very different from the policy which is actually provided on the lower levels in which the actual interactions of people with government occur.

It means that the efficiency of the government policy becomes much lower in the case of street-level bureaucrats' shirking and sabotaging because they don't achieve the goals set for them by higher officials. The connection between the bureaucrats of higher and lower levels does exist, but it's much weaker in reality than it appears in theory, so many decisions might simply not reach the lower level.

As far as the empirical evidence shows, the main argument in decision-making by street-level officials lies not in the instructions which they get from the top but from their own preferences, or the preferences which other bureaucrats have. However, here lies the crucial point of the analysis: lower-level bureaucrats have their own interests which they want to follow, but those interests turn out very close to the interests of high-level officials, and thus the actual public policy which is provided in the country becomes very close to the policy which was elaborated in the high level of government.

This means that according to Brehm and Gates, by understanding the policy-preferences of the bureaucrats, we are able to predict the decisions they will make in different situations. Michael Lipsky in his "Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of Individuals in Public Services" also investigates the problems of bureaucrats behavior in relation to their customers, and decision-making by bureaucrats of low level in relation to the instructions they get from higher officials.

According to the author, the mentioned issues are very important because "...in delivering policy street-level bureaucrats make decisions about people that affect their life chances. " [2] Michael Lipsky defines one of the main reasons of the importance of bureaucrats' behavior in the fact that "...they play a critical role in regulating the degree of contemporary conflict by virtue of their role as agents of social control. Citizens who receive public benefits interact with public agents who require certain behaviors of them" [2].

When investigating the main aspects of bureaucrats' decision-making, Michael Lipsky believes in rational decisions of bureaucrats: " There is every reason to think that the general evaluations of social worth that inform the society will also inform the decisions of street-level bureaucrats in the absence of strong incentives to the contrary" [2]. Unlike Brehm and Gates, Michael Lipsky focuses not on the relationship of higher and lower level bureaucrats but on the importance of discretion in this matter.

If Brehm and Gates tend to analyze the main categories of bureaucrats' decision-making through the prism of their working, shrinking, and sabotaging categories, Michael Lipsky devotes his attention to the analysis of the necessity of discretion in making decisions. He finds the main reasons of that in the fact that street-level bureaucrats cannot learn by heart all the instructions which they were given and carry them everywhere, or decide every matter in the same way not regarding the difference of cases, or not to take into consideration a personal impression of a person.

The discretion is very necessary in order to carry out the right decision because only the particular official investigating the particular case can make the right decision based on his knowledge of instructions and his

<https://assignbuster.com/bureaucracy-and-public-policy/>

general impression. In case of following his personal impression of interaction with a client, the bureaucrat doesn't simply sabotage or shrink, but makes the only right decision in the particular case. Michael Lipsky argues that there are some practices which commonly contribute to routine control of clients.

One of them is that clients are separated from the officers by certain desks in order to minimize the personal conflict. There are no comfortable sofas in such places, either. Another practice is isolating one client from another one for them not to know what is going on with others in the same position. It's also important to mention that street-bureaucrats carry out special sanctions for those who disobey the order of the procedure. The investigations have shown that it's impossible to conclude the general criteria for decision-making by street-level bureaucrats.

Brehm and Gates investigate the subject from the point of view of interactions between higher and lower level officials in the general outcome of the public policy, and argue that at the end, the preferences of the officials turn out the same. Michael Lipsky makes a point that discretion is very important in decision-making, and the influence of higher officials and instructions is minimized in this situation. Bibliography. 1. John Brehm and Scott Gates. "Working, Shirking, and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public". 2. Michael Lipsky. "Street-Level Bure