

What are the sources of bureaucratic power essay



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Bureaucratic power is based upon the status of an individual's position in a social hierarchy and not the individual themselves. Power referred to in this essay means the social and political power as defined by Dahl " A has power over B to the extent that it can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" Dahl (1961). It will be argued that civil servants are the real sources of bureaucratic power in British society because of the traditional permanent positions they hold in the government. These ' bureaucrats' are officials in a bureaucracy. They are able, through their power, to implement policies and laws made by the legislature.

The public administration of a country is controlled by its civil service; a body of people who carry out laws and implement policy (Robertson, 1986). Thus, throughout this essay it will become evident that bureaucratic power is inextricably linked to the concept of authority. Any studies that concern power or policy-making in Britain are likely to focus their attention on the 650 or so, of the top grades of senior civil servants. They are the secretaries, deputy-secretaries and under-secretaries. It is this group of people who run the service and interact with ministers giving advice on policy making.

Furthermore, " Members of the civil service are responsible for the public administration of the government of a country" (Collins, 1992). All institutions in Britain have a bureaucratic structure in a general sense. Bureaucrats within the institution organize the activities so that the institutions can function efficiently. According to Weber, " bureaucracy is necessary for the development of the modern world" (Robertson, 1986).

Weber believed that bureaucracy was necessary due to the division of labour; the constant division of specialist skills. Bureaucracy is, he argued, the organisational principle of modern life – not just one way of organising an industrial society but the only way (Gamble, 1991). The civil service is the body that implements policy and applies laws and regulations, conducts the public administration of Britain. The elite group of top civil servants help and advise the official political leaders to draft policies into practical forms.

These officials only exist to advise and carry out their political masters instructions, but these ideals are hard to achieve. Civil servants everywhere have a great deal of political power as governments are dependant on their advice, therefore this elite group of bureaucrats hold the real power in government as politics is ultimately, the exercise of power (Robertson 1986). The permanent civil servants who act as advisors have the most influential positions in any bureaucratic institution. The most well known theorist in the field of bureaucratic power is Max Weber (1864-1920) who set out a basic set of organisational principles (1) “ That office-holders in an institution are placed in a clear hierarchy representing a chain of command” (Robertson, 1986, p25).

This is the Weber ‘ Rational-Legal’ authority of power where the officials have a strict set of formal rules to follow. People in authority expect their orders to be carried out because of the office they fill; the higher up the command structure the more authority or weight the official carries. Officials at the top of any institutional hierarchy have the most authority to issue orders and expect them to be obeyed. (2) “ That they are salaried officials whose only reward comes from the salary and not directly from their office”

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(Robertson, 1986, p25). The fact that permanent civil servants are salaried staff is very important as it keeps the job independent of internal or external pressures e. g.

bonus systems, productivity, targets, etcetera. This surely enables the civil servants to remain politically neutral. (3) “ That their authority stems entirely from their role and not from some private status and that the authority exists only in and as far as it is needed, to carry out that role” (Robertson, 1986, p25). As there are many forms of power it is this statement that clarifies the fact that the power of the civil servant comes from the office that they hold and not from charismatic or individual personal qualities.

The Legal-Rational authority is given to the office that the individual holds and orders are only to be obeyed if they are relevant to the situation in which they are given. (4) “ That appointments to bureaucratic positions are determined by professional skill and competence” (Robertson, 1986, p25). The civil service is a career service and when people are recruited they tend to move up the ladder until they reach positions of power. The civil service tends to recruit in its own image” (Dearlove and Saunders, 1993, p10). Most graduate administration trainees that are recruited are like the civil servants who recruit them, in other words they are like themselves thus, bureaucratic power is self-perpetuating. Power, in the political sense, starts with the people and progresses through Parliament to the elected minister responsible for that department.

It has been suggested that civil servants should not have such power in a democracy because they have not been elected (Coxall and Robins, 1991).

However, it could be argued that civil servants inform and advise on all options open to the minister and provide the evidence that these options are based on. It is up to the minister to make an informed decision on those options provided. This is how the system should operate and in most cases it probably does.

According to Coxall and Robins (1991) the traditional public administration model has been strongly criticised. Observers of this view believe the relationship between the minister and the civil servant has shifted in favour of the civil servant. Ministerial power has been declining but the power of the top civil servants has been increasing. For many people the 'traditional' description is no longer applicable. A liberal-bureaucratic model mixing liberal-democratic ideals with administrative reality recognises the fact that the civil service has power.

It has been suggested in the 'power-bloc' model that the civil service is only interested in 'promoting the interests of the privileged sections of society from which it has been recruited', (Coxall and Robins, 1991). According to Dahl, "power is more likely to be used when there is a disagreement about goals" (). This suggests it is possible that in such instances power overrides the hierarchy of authority. It is suggested that decision-making and policy is always in the hands of a few leaders and officials, the elite. If this is in fact the case, that rule by elites is inescapable, then it follows that real choice is not between democracy and bureaucracy, or democracy and elitism, but between the dominating elite.

Bureaucratic power and authority is inextricably linked. Another form of power is authority, a top civil servant would be considered as 'being in a position of authority' and would only remain in that position if their demands prove 'reasonable', if unreasonable demands are made over a period of time, this would eventually undermine their authority. Bureaucratic control is by means of formal rules and regulations. Bureaucratic organisations, including the civil service, have many rulebooks that specify all aspects of the post held such as, hours of work, holidays, time off, compassionate leave and grievance procedures etcetera. There are also standard operating procedures that must be followed during the course of their work; therefore the rules take on a form of authority. These controlling aspects of bureaucratic posts help to keep the civil servants politically neutral and unbiased.

In summary, it has been argued that the real sources of bureaucratic power in British society are found within the civil servants of government because of the traditional permanent positions they hold. However, it became evident that bureaucratic power is inextricably linked to authority, as power in the political sense is based upon the status of an individual's position in a social hierarchy and not the individual themselves. Thus, the elite civil servants have gained the authority to provide evidence to Ministers and to offer advice and guidance in policy making. Literature has suggested that the elite have the bureaucratic power to manipulate ministers into making decisions based on the evidence they put before them despite the fact that civil servants have not been elected. This essay has also shown that Weber (1864-1920) believes this is the only way to proceed in modern Britain where

there is a division of labour and it is necessary to keep order in society in an organised fashion; using bureaucratic power as the tool.

In conclusion, sources of bureaucratic power are rooted in civil servants. That is, the role of the civil servant as outlined in his or her job description according to the rules book. Thus, they have the authority to wield the power where they see fit for society. 1, 460 words.