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# POLITICAL AND OCCUPATIONAL BARRIERS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: ADMINISTRATIVE, EXECUTIVE, AND LEGISLATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD REPRESENTATIVE BUREAUCRACY[1]

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**Abstract**

This article reports the results of a five-state survey of administrators, executives, and legislators from Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, and Wisconsin. The survey was conducted in 1979 regarding attitudes toward representative bureaucracy/affirmative action and policies in support of improved conditions for ethnic minorities and women.

Government elites are divided in their views of representative bureaucracy with more registering disapproval than approval; however, this "opposition" is not supported by demands that less effort be expended on such efforts. Political and occupational characteristics (ideology, party, state, age, seniority, and education) show slight effect. Some evidence exists supporting a self-interest thesis among administrators and a general politicization of the topic.

## Introduction

It is the state government elites — administrators, executives and legislators — who have and will continue to have the most influence on the implementation and, ultimately, the success of America's affirmative action efforts. This article reports the findings from a five state survey conducted in 1979 highlighting the attitudes held by state-level public officials toward the topics of representative bureaucracy/affirmative action and the programmatic support for improving conditions for ethnic minorities and women. These attitudes help shape the environment in which our affirmative action policies are formed and implemented.

While distinct, affirmative action and representative bureaucracy are conceptually linked. Pragmatically, affirmative action is one if not the primary means for the operationalization of representative bureaucracy in the United States. Hence, while the interest in or support behind each is drawn from different sources (one primarily academic, the other socio-political), their focus is identical. Affirmative action and representative bureaucracy are different sides of the same coin.

Administrators have come to exercise a great deal of discretion over the policymaking process (Lowi, 1969; Mainzer, 1973; Meier, 1979). Hence, administrative attitudes toward the public policies which they may exert influence over have become more and more the focus of research (Wynia, 1974; Rinehart and Bernick, 1975; Meier and Nigro, 1976; Aberbach and Rockman, 1976 and

1977). Concomitantly, administrative reforms designed to control the bureaucracy (thereby assuring an administration responsible to the people-at-large) have also been the center of study.

Representative bureaucracy is one proposed solution; it draws equally upon these two concerns melding together the study of administrative attitudes with a mechanism for controlling the bureaucracy. "The fundamental axiom/proposition underlying the concept of representative bureaucracy is: *If the attitudes of administrators are similar to the attitudes held by the general public, the decisions administrators make will, in general, be responsive to the desires of the public*" (emphasis in original) (Meier and Nigro, 1976: 458). Most available research, however, has focused on the use of demographic characteristics (e.g., race and ethnic background, religion, sex, socio-economic status, etc.) as surrogates (indicators) of value preferences (Subramanian, 1967; Sheriff, 1974; Krislov, 1974; Meier, 1975; Kranz, 1976; Saltzstein, 1979; Smith, 1980).

Representative bureaucracy is a theoretical concept; affirmative action is one effort at operationalizing it.[1] Affirmative action directly challenges the problem posed by the statistical unrepresentativeness of the public service. Where that unrepresentativeness is due to a lack of appropriate credentials, it strives to provide ethnic minorities and women with opportunities to acquire the requisite education and training. Where that unrepresentativeness is rationally unfounded, it strives to overcome and eliminate these obstacles.

Affirmative action is controversial (Thompson, 1978; Davis and West, 1980). The public service (which only mirrors the patterns extant in American society) did not become statistically unrepresentative entirely by accident. Our current state is the result of conscious and subconscious actions by generations of Americans. Affirmative action is an attempt to reverse these patterns.

Affirmative action is a pervasive concern in personnel management. Arising with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Griggs v. Duke Power Company* (1971) and the EEOC's (1978) *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures,* statistical unrepresentation is itself proof of discrimination (adverse impact) if not demonstrated to be "rationally" justified. "Affirmative action" demands that administrative techniques be proven valid (a most difficult if indeed not impossible task). Wherever job analysis (for position description), job evaluation (for compensation), staffing (for recruitment, testing, and selection), or performance appraisal (for promotion, demotion, transfer, merit pay, and training) techniques are employed, affirmative action stands guard.

To require that such important administrative techniques be valid should hardly elicit any concern at all let alone lead to the raising of a hue and cry. Yet, it does. While personnel specialists may be justly concerned with the expense and difficulty which validation poses, this is but a minor point in the whole scheme of things (and after all that is why personnel specialists exist). The controversy and divisiveness entailed by affirmative action arises from the perception of the "job market" as a zero-sum game.[2] Inasmuch as affirmative action

benefits ethnic minorities, women and other protected groups, it is seen as taking jobs away from those left "unprotected."

## Data Collection

Administrative, executive and legislative attitudes were assessed via a mailed questionnaire. A three-wave design was used; an initial letter and accompanying questionnaire were followed up at two-week intervals — first by a reminder postcard and then by a second letter and another copy of the questionnaire. Business reply envelopes were included with the questionnaires.

The five states surveyed were selected in accordance with the percentage of public employees covered by merit provisions. Jay Shafritz (1974) has posited that merit systems are related to Daniel Elazar's (1972) notion of state political culture. Lee Sigelman (1976: 131) has confirmed such a relationship ($r = -.341$). Using the data provided by Sigelman (personal inquiries to the Council of State Governments and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management were unable to produce anything more recent with the same degree of accuracy), the states were rank ordered and grouped into five ordinal categories. One state was then randomly selected from each category. The states so selected, ranked in order of decreasing merit system percentages, are Maine (95%); Kentucky (83%); Wisconsin (78%); Florida (33%); and Iowa (7%). Changes in merit coverage are, of course, a serious concern in this instance.

Analysis is based on the responses of 431 administrators (51 percent), 84 executives (48 percent) and 229 legislators (30 percent). State administrators (those occupying career positions as division directors, bureau chiefs, supervisors and professional staff) were selected from the five states using random samples drawn from the various "capitol complex" directories. All executive officials (elected, statewide officeholders and appointees reporting directly to the Governor) and legislators from the five states were included in the survey (*The National Directory of State Agencies* and the Council of State Governments' *Supplements to the Book of the States* were used in compiling these lists).

The potential success of representative bureaucracy/affirmative action lies with those responsible for its adoption and implementation. It is here that state officials exercise special power. Legislators and executives must favor a concept for it to be adopted, and executives and administrators must favor it for implementation. Without the support of any one of these governmental groups or sectors, it is unlikely that the concept would succeed.

Administrative, executive and legislative attitudes toward representative bureaucracy were assessed through three items: "Approval," "Increase," and "Ethnic." Respondents were provided with a brief description of representative bureaucracy: "RESPONSIBLE POLICIES RESULT FROM THE DEMOGRAPHICALLY PROPORTIONATE COMPOSITION OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE (I.E., THE PUBLIC SERVICE REFLECTS THE SAME ETHNIC AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AS SOCIETY). IMPLEMEN-

TATION OF REPRESENTATIVE BUREAUCRACY MAY INVOLVE THE USE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PLANS AND SPECIAL TRAINING PROGRAMS WHERE REQUIRED TO ASSURE PROPORTIONALITY." Using this as a guide, respondents were asked to indicate whether they *approved* or disapproved of representative bureaucracy as well as whether they favored *increased* or decreased efforts in its behalf. Finally, in the questionnaire's policy preference section, administrators were queried regarding their support for "improving the conditions of *ethnic* minorities and women."

While related, these three items tap differing aspects of the representative bureaucracy concept. While "Approval" taps the general feelings which administrators, executives and legislators have toward representative bureaucracy (and affirmative action), the question of increased efforts focuses on the issue of support for the status quo versus the commitment to change. Finally, the policy item provides a more specific framework since programs are viewed in comparison with other, competing priorities.

In addition to reporting the basic attitudes which administrators, executives and legislators hold toward representative bureaucracy, this article also examines the variations found in these attitudes, using for this purpose various political (party identification, liberalism-conservatism, and state merit coverage) and occupational (age, seniority, and education) characteristics.

While data related to sex were collected (no attempt was made to ascertain racial and ethnic backgrounds), the responses were judged to be too few and unevenly distributed to merit separate analysis. With women comprising only 28 percent of the administrators, 7 percent of the executives and 12 percent of the legislators, interpretable results would hardly be expected.

## Attitudes Toward Representative Bureaucracy

Administrators, executives and legislators were asked to indicate the extent to which they approved or disapproved of the concept of representative bureaucracy (using the previously cited explanatory comment as a guide). The distribution of responses for this item is displayed in Table 1. Representative bureaucracy and, by inference, affirmative action are controversial. The findings here support that condition. More administrators, executives and legislators registered disapproval (respectively 45%, 48%, and 41%) than approval (36%, 32%, and 39%, respectively). This cannot be considered as very heartening for those who advocate either representative bureaucracy or affirmative action.

Although a sizeable proportion of state administrators, executives, and legislators do not approve of representative bureaucracy, their disapproval may not be an intensely held attitude. A test of this was provided by a second item on the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate their views relative to the level of effort which they felt should be committed to representative bureaucracy (i.e., was it adequate, or should it be moderately/markedly increased/decreased). These findings are presented in Table 2. Many administrators, executives and

## TABLE 1

### Attitudes Toward The Approval of Representative Bureaucracy (Percentages)

| | Administrators (N = 431) | Executives (N = 84) | Legislators (N = 229) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Approve | 12% | 10% | 8% |
| Approve w/Reservations | 24% | 22% | 31% |
| Neutral | 19% | 20% | 21% |
| Disapprove w/Reservations | 26% | 24% | 21% |
| Disapprove | 19% | 24% | 20% |

legislators are in support of increased efforts in behalf of representative bureaucracy and others (including many who disapprove of it) feel that current efforts are adequate. The number of administrators, executives and legislators who indicate that they favor decreasing the commitment given the representative bureaucracy/affirmative action, while certainly not negligible (23%, 18%, and 24%), does not reach the magnitude of what was registered for disapproval (these figures are roughly halved).

## TABLE 2

### Attitudes Toward Increased Efforts in Behalf of Representative Bureaucracy (Percentages)

| | Administrators | Executives | Legislators |
|---|---|---|---|
| Markedly Increase | 9% | 7% | 10% |
| Moderately Increase | 27% | 23% | 23% |
| Adequate at Present | 41% | 52% | 43% |
| Moderately Decrease | 15% | 12% | 17% |
| Markedly Decrease | 8% | 6% | 7% |

One should also note that with respect to policy preference, support for "improving the conditions of ethnic minorities and women" was ranked 13th by administrators, 6th by executives, and 14th by legislators out of 15 policy areas. Administrators and legislators do not accord this area a high priority among the issues facing state governments (executives, perhaps because they are mandated to enforce it, do). Given the crisis management (fire fighting) atmosphere in which government often operates, "low priority" often means "no priority." The ultimate result of such neglect may not be benign.

## Impact of Political and Occupational Characteristics

The above research has dealt only with aggregate conditions; administrators, executives, and legislators were examined as groups. In contrast, this section examines the attitudinal differences within these groups. Further analysis was performed using a multiple correlation approach. Approval for representative bureaucracy and demand for increased efforts in its behalf as well as support for improving the conditions of ethnic minorities and women were analyzed with respect to six common control factors — party identification, liberalism-conservatism (ideology), state merit system coverage, seniority, age, and education. These six items may be divided into two segments. First, party identification, liberalism-conservatism, and state merit system coverage all tap differing political aspects. Second, seniority, age, and education pertain to organizational or occupational characteristics.

American politics is examined within a three facet framework. With respect to the individual, politics is commonly viewed as involving the effects of partisanship and ideology. In the United States, especially, these two can be quite distinct. Unlike the political parties traditionally associated with Western Europe, the major American parties are of a more non-programmatic, "catch-all" type (Epstein, 1967). Compromise for electoral victory often overshadows ideological beliefs (although the latter may predominate in pre- and post-election periods as well as in non-competitive electoral settings). In terms of a specific hypothesis, one would expect a similar relationship to exist among all three governmental sectors; Democrats should demonstrate more support (in terms of all three variables) than Republicans for representative bureaucracy/affirmative action.

Ideology provides a second facet or perspective with which to view politics. One should note that self-assessments (employed in this instance) of liberalism-conservatism are subjective and might differ from third party or "objective" measurements. Furthermore, there remains some question as to whether liberalism-conservatism represents a bipolar continuum or is based on separate issue preferences or dimensions which need not come into conflict with one another (Conover and Feldman, 1981). Again (and for a similar reason), relationships are hypothesized for administrators, executives, and legislators. Those respondents who identified themselves as liberals should be more supportive than those claiming a conservative stance.

Partisan affiliation and ideology are not only political characteristics but also personal attributes. Yet, another indirect aspect (applicable to administrators, executives, and legislators) in the measurement of attitudes is suggested by the "merit concept" (Sigelman, 1976). The extent of merit system coverage has been posited to be among the major determinants of the style and verve of a state's administration and sets the political tone for much of the rest of state politics (Elazar, 1972; Shafritz, 1974).

In this instance there is no straightforward hypothesis. Assuming a political culture (merit system) relationship to exist, its direction could be either in sup-

port of or in opposition to representative bureaucracy/affirmative action. Inasmuch as civil service reform is associated with the notions of progressivism, one would expect that support for representative bureaucracy should increase in proportion to the percentage of public employees under civil service coverage. The same conditions which support one should lead to support for the other. Alternatively, if one accepts the ideas presented by O. Glenn Stahl (1981), affirmative action is seen to pose a challenge or threat to the merit principle. At the least, administrators would tend to oppose it (whether from altruism or because they benefit from current merit systems), and if the same progressive-political culture relationship posited above existed, representative bureaucracy would be opposed in general as a "nonprogressive" concept.

While less openly political, the organizational/occupational characteristics (tenure, age, and education) have often proven to be important behavioral indicators. Seniority (length of government service) addresses the issue of occupational socialization (and indirectly organizational power since seniority is related to upper level positions). Specifically, does a business-as-usual attitude develop? Two caveats arise in this instance. First, do individuals indeed undergo a process of significant socialization upon entering government service? Are their beliefs and attitudes subject to transformation? Second, if there are differences, are they actually distinctions arising between "Old Guard" and "Young Turk" factions?

A split hypothesis is suggested here. With respect to seniority and education, a null hypothesis should be evident among executives and legislators. Any opposition which might exist among them towards representative bureaucracy should be generic and not attributable to length of service or educational attainment. Administrators on the other hand should be subject to a self-interest (bureaucratic politics) interpretation. Affirmative action is not merely an esoteric topic for administrators — for here they are clearly the "target population." Seniority along with educational credentials are criteria for personnel selection and promotion. Representative bureaucracy with its explicit statement of affirmative action introduces another criterion upon which to base such decisions. Hence, increased seniority and levels of education should be associated with opposition to affirmative action.

Age, while related to tenure in office, taps a slightly different, external dimension. Age may intervene either as a maturing (developmental) process through which all individuals proceed or in terms of age cohorts wherein the specific historical events of an era forever mark and shape a given "generation" (e.g., the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate). To some extent age should covary with seniority. However, any maturation effect (a more general instance of the socialization question) should have already transpired. A cohort effect is, however, possible, for executives and legislators as well as for administrators. Older respondents (reflecting the attitudes of earlier times) should be less supportive of representative bureaucracy/affirmative action.

The findings for these political and occupational effects are examined in Table

3. In general, what relationships there are tend to be relatively weak[3] (although the magnitude of these correlations is similar to that found by Meier and Nigro, 1976). While some of these results can be "explained away" (the lack of statistical significance among any of the executive correlations is, in part, due to the smallness of the sample), weak correlations are still weak correlations.

If the correlations found are indeed so weak, then why bother examining them at all? While the magnitude of relationships is certainly important, it is not the only thing to be considered. Administrators, executives and legislators are not ordinary individuals; they are governmental elites. Even small differences can be important. The political process is not an arithmatic operation; the ebb and flow of politics can be influenced by even the minutest event.

Ideology and party affiliation show some support for the hypothesized relationships (especially with respect to legislators). Liberals and Democrats are more likely to support representative bureaucracy/affirmative action than are conservatives and Republicans. Of these two variables, ideology appears to be the stronger and more consistent (party affiliation must contend with the confounding effects provided by Southern Democrats).

There appears to be little evidence of any state effect. The extent of merit system coverage neither advances nor opposes the notion of representative bureaucracy. This poses a challenge to Shafritz (1974) and Sigelman's (1976) contention that merit system coverage is a key political determinant or indicator in state politics.[4] In general, age, seniority, and education exhibit little effect. For executives and legislators this was hypothesized with respect to seniority and education; the cohort effect hypothesized for age is not supported by this evidence. For administrators, our hypotheses were posited on a self-interest or bureaucratic politics model. The findings here, at most, are mixed. There is some evidence, albeit weak, that age and seniority are, as hypothesized, inversely related to the approval/increase of representative bureaucracy. On the other hand, the educational correlations are contradictory (the relationships' signs indicate opposite directions — those with advanced degrees are more likely to disapprove of representative bureaucracy while placing a higher priority on programs for ethnic minorities and women).

## The Future of Affirmative Action

While the future consequence of these findings has already been alluded to in a number of instances, a more explicit summary is outlined below. The survey reported here was administered in 1979 prior to the 1980 elections. The Reagan Administration is less predisposed towards affirmative action than its predecessor, and the ensuing recession has placed more constraints on the job market. Hence, the results reported here, if anything, should be more optimistic than those from a similar survey conducted today. Furthermore, the focus on representative bureaucracy even with its explicit mention of affirmative action provides an "academic veneer" which might have mitigated hostile feelings to some extent.

## TABLE 3

### The Impact of Political and Occupational Characteristics (Simple Correlations)

| | ADMINISTRATORS | | | EXECUTIVES | | | LEGISLATORS | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Approval | Increase | Ethnic | Approval | Increase | Ethnic | Approval | Increase | Ethnic |
| Democratic-Republican | .07 | .09 | .15** | .05 | .03 | .02 | .25*** | .28*** | .28*** |
| Liberalism-Conservativism | .28*** | .32*** | .28*** | −.03 | .18 | .10 | .32*** | .35*** | .40*** |
| State Merit Coverage | −.20*** | −.04 | −.09 | −.18 | .01 | −.22 | −.10 | −.01 | .21** |
| Age | .13* | .22*** | .09 | −.22 | −.07 | .01 | .01 | .17* | .11 |
| Seniority | .14** | .21*** | .07 | −.14 | .00 | −.08 | −.04 | .02 | −.01 |
| Education | .14** | −.09 | −.13** | .15 | .01 | −.06 | .03 | −.08 | −.03 |
| $R^2$ | .16** | .13* | .11* | .07 | .05 | .09 | .14*** | .13* | .20*** |

*P = .05
**P = .01
***P = .001

The fact that even with all of these favorable "biases" the findings are not supportive of representative bureaucracy/affirmative action marks ill for its future prospects. Representative bureaucracy meets with significant disapproval. It is somewhat heartening that this disapproval has not yet been translated into wholesale demands for decreased efforts (although that too is noticeably large). While most administrators, executives, and legislators are satisfied with present efforts, there is strong support for increased responses (outweighing the demands of those calling for decreased efforts).

The low priority given to programs for ethnic minorities and women is another cause for concern. While this may reflect the more pressing needs of other policy areas (which may have indirect effects, e.g., the higher priority support for education), it still channels affirmative action into the political backwaters. The higher priority given this policy area by executives (6th) provides at least one glimmer. Administrative literature is replete with calls for executive support if programs are to be implemented successfully. In this instance that support does not appear to be lacking. Executives may not personally approve of or like affirmative action, but they seem to be willing to place a good deal of official emphasis upon it.

The political dimension hardly needs comment. Affirmative action is a politicized issue (i.e., it is partisan). The liberal-conservative, Democratic-Republican differences are almost tautological (only because of prior supporting evidence). Confirmed here, they place constraints, however slight, on the "advancement" of affirmative action as long as political power is held by conservatives and Republicans or, at least, as long as such individuals oppose it (this statement is, of course, an over-simplification of the issue).

The self-interest thesis among administrators (or for any other occupational group) is well established. As long as administrators perceive the job market as a zero-sum game, there is likely to be little change. This is only compounded during economically depressed periods or when "shrinking government" policies are advocated. Inasmuch as fostering a zero-sum attitude draws attention away from the other shortcomings and faults inherent in our economic system, it is often encouraged. However, this "confrontation" between affirmative action and merit (which is a moral imperative as well as a rational approach to personnel management) is beginning to be dispelled (Mosher, 1968; Nalbandian and Klingner, 1978).

Finally, the general "non-effect" attributable to age and seniority is significant. Cross-sectional survey research such as this is but a "snapshot"; it pictures how attitudes were at one place and point in time. Longitudinal studies provide another dimension to our picture. In a way the age and civil service items approximate that dimension. In this case they seem to say that the present is indeed a good picture of what the future will be. Since there are no age/seniority differences, one should not expect major attitudinal changes in the future. The retirement of administrators, executives, and legislators should only lead to their replacement by individuals with similar attitudes. It is not

merely elderly and/or senior officials who stand in the way of affirmative action. Changing the ship's watch will not change its course.

## NOTES

[1] Affirmative action is an extension of the civil rights and equal employment opportunity policies with which it is so closely associated. The focus of these earlier efforts was on prohibiting discriminatory practices. While successful at this, the consequences did not lead to a reduction (or as quick a reduction as desired) of the statistical unrepresentativeness that existed. This led to the attempt to address these conditions through "affirmative action." For our purposes here affirmative action may be deemed to include these other, earlier concepts.

[2] Whether this perception is true is of secondary importance; the fact that it is believed is primary. As long as people perceive the job market to be a zero-sum game, it is unlikely that their attitudes toward affirmative action will change.

[3] Zero-order correlations are used here for two reasons. First, they provide a liberal test of the hypotheses in that they register any linear impact. Partial correlations or regression coefficients, while measuring direct impact, provide a more narrow focus. Second, there is no effort here to suggest causal patterns (as would be the case with some of the other available statistics).

[4] A state effort emerges when the states are grouped in order of the size of their minority population. Affirmative action is less controversial (vehemently opposed) in states which have small or no ethnic minority groups. Relative to this, see Meier and Nigro (1976) and Thompson (1978).

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