

The Bureaucratic Politics of Polycentric Governance: Bringing the Bureaucracy Back In *

Santiago Quintero

Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science

S.Quintero-Suarez1@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

Bureaucratic autonomy is one of the most important institutional determinants of government performance, yet its effects have been studied almost entirely within hierarchical settings. This paper extends the comparative bureaucratic politics literature to polycentric systems, a form of governance that depends on the coordination of multiple autonomous decision-making centres, and that characterises much of contemporary governance. Public bureaucracies function as primary nodes in most polycentric systems, and the political arrangements that govern their recruitment, tenure, and organisational independence reshape the conditions under which polycentric coordination can succeed or fail. I propose three analytical dimensions through which bureaucratic autonomy shapes polycentric systems: capacity, intertemporal dynamics, and political capital. Because no single configuration of autonomy optimises all three dimensions simultaneously, the framework argues that the level of autonomy best suited to polycentric coordination shifts as the governance system develops. The paper proposes mechanisms to respecify enabling conditions and dysfunction syndromes identified in polycentric theory in terms of their upstream political-administrative determinants, and proposes a research agenda that bridges polycentric governance with comparative bureaucratic politics and public administration reform.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Politics; Polycentric Governance; Bureaucratic Autonomy

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1. Introduction

Reforms that define whether agencies are staffed through merit-based recruitment, enjoy secure tenure, or possess decision-making powers independent from political incumbents have been shown to systematically produce measurable differences in economic development, corruption, and the delivery of public services both in the Global South and North (Bersch & Fukuyama 2023; Brierley et al. 2022; Dahlström & Lapuente 2022). Bureaucratic autonomy—the degree to which public agencies operate according to professional norms and possess independent decision-making powers (Fukuyama 2013)—is, indeed, argued as one of the most important institutional determinants of government functioning and performance (Bersch & Fukuyama 2023; Fernandez & Cheema 2024; Holt & Manning 2014; Oliveira et al. 2024; Schuster et al. 2023). This scholarship, however, has been framed and tested almost entirely within hierarchical governance settings. How bureaucratic autonomy shapes agency behaviour when the relevant actors are embedded in horizontal, voluntary coordination arrangements, where hierarchy is weak, remains largely unexplored.

Many of the most pressing policy domains are precisely so characterised, defined by fragmented authority, cross-boundary interdependencies, and multiple autonomous decision-making centres whose actors must coordinate and engage in collective action. Climate change, land planning, and metropolitan management are familiar examples, but

the pattern extends well beyond them. 1(E. Ostrom, 1990 2010). The polycentric governance scholarship has developed precisely to understand how these multi-actor arrangements emerge and develop (Carlisle & Gruby 2019; E. Ostrom 2010; Thiel et al. 2019). This literature, however, has largely bracketed the internal structure and politics of public organisations, treating them as relatively homogeneous nodes with fixed capacities and stable preferences. Whether an agency was staffed through competitive examination or wholesale political appointment or whether its budget is ring-fenced or subject to annual discretion, for instance, are issues typically left outside the analytical frame of polycentricity. The extent to which the frameworks that comparative bureaucratic politics has developed travel to this governance terrain is an open question. This paper develops a framework and research agenda to bridge the two fields. Public bureaucracies are among the most important actors in polycentric systems (Biesbroek, Peters, et al. 2018; Fischer & Sciarini 2016). They carry resources, legal mandates, and technical knowledge that make them indispensable partners, and the empirical literature consistently places them in central positions within governance networks (Biesbroek & Lesnikowski 2018; DeCaro et al. 2017; Ingold & Leifeld 2016). Furthermore, many of the composite categories that polycentric scholars (often abstractly) utilise to explain variation in performance, such as “institutional strength” and “state capacity” (e.g., Berardo & Lubell 2016; Pahl-Wostl & Knieper 2014; Furumo & Lambin 2021), have clear identifiable sources in the bureaucratic arrangements of the actors involved. The failure

to trace these categories to their political-administrative foundations may itself contribute to the field's persistent difficulty in explaining when and why polycentric arrangements succeed or fail (Baldwin et al. 2024).

Building on comparative bureaucratic politics scholarship (Bersch & Fukuyama 2023; Brierley et al. 2022; Dahlström & Lapuente 2022), I propose three analytical dimensions through which bureaucratic autonomy reshapes the conditions under which polycentric coordination can function: (i) *Capacity*, and specifically how politicians' control over personnel affects the distribution of technical competence across governance nodes and the epistemic communities that connect them; (ii) *Intertemporal dynamics*, and how bureaucratic insulation from political principals governs the credible commitment and organisational stability on which sustained coordination depends; (iii) *Political capital*, that is, how the closeness of politician-bureaucrat ties shapes the brokerage assets and capture vulnerabilities of bureaucratic actors in governance networks. A central argument of the framework is that, because no single configuration of autonomy optimises all three dimensions simultaneously, the level of bureaucratic autonomy best suited to polycentric coordination shifts as the governance system develops. This makes the question ultimately empirical, and I derive a set of testable propositions from each dimension to guide future research.

The framework and proposed research agenda aim to contribute to both literatures. For polycentric governance theory, it respecifies enabling conditions (Carlisle & Gruby 2019)

and dysfunction syndromes (McGinnis et al. 2020) in terms of their upstream political-administrative determinants, offering more precise accounts of why polycentric governance succeeds or fails across administrative contexts. Cross-national and cross-regional differences in governance performance that existing accounts attribute to vague characterisations of institutionalisation may prove more tractable once disaggregated into the bureaucratic dimensions proposed here. For comparative bureaucratic politics, polycentric governance represents an analytically distinct terrain on which to test and extend existing findings. How principal-agent dynamics or career incentives play out when the relevant actors are embedded in horizontal coordination structures remains an open frontier. The trade-offs between higher and lower levels of bureaucratic autonomy—which have been thoroughly theorised and empirically studied in hierarchical settings (Bersch et al. 2017; Bersch & Fukuyama 2024; Fukuyama 2013; Holt & Manning 2014)—may operate quite differently where no single principal holds hierarchical authority and where the interdependencies that structure the system are ecological or functional rather than organisational. The paper addresses what Peters and coauthors (2022) have identified as a broader disciplinary blind spot between political science and public administration, one that has left the political foundations of governance outcomes under-theorised.

2. Polycentric Governance and Its Bureaucratic Foundations

Originally coined by Polanyi (1951), the concept of polycentricity was born to governance studies as a theory of public administration. Vincent Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren (1961) developed the concept to argue that metropolitan fragmentation of political and administrative units need not lead to inefficient management of common-pool resources. By considering each other and engaging in competition, collaboration, and conflict resolution, fragmented and overlapping political jurisdictions could function as a coherent and predictable system. The concept emerged from a direct engagement with the organisational character of public agencies, and the question of how their overlapping jurisdictions could produce coordination without centralisation.

The scholarly trajectory that followed progressively distanced polycentric governance from these origins as the intellectual environment in which polycentricity matured was broadly sceptical of bureaucratic hierarchy (Aligica & Tarko 2012). The Ostroms' critique of monocentric public provision shared conceptual ground with the New Public Management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, and with the broader "governance without government" turn in public policy scholarship (McGinnis & Ostrom 2012; Milward & Provan 2000; Peters & Pierre 1998). In fact, polycentric literature is sometimes viewed as opposing the intervention of public agencies and promoting the reduction of the central state's size and power in favour of local actors (Eakin & Lemos 2006)—a position often

supported by E. Ostrom's governance design principle #7, according to which government authorities should not challenge "the rights of appropriators to design their own institutions" (E. Ostrom 1990, p. 101). The result is that the internal structure and politics of public bureaucracies are largely bracketed in contemporary polycentric research. If bureaucratic hierarchy is what you are trying to work around, there is little reason to examine its internal structure and politics carefully.

This bracketing has taken two analytically distinct forms. The first is visible in empirical network analyses that model public agencies as one type of node alongside community groups, firms, and even individual experts, using their structural position to infer coordination patterns and system evolution (Berardo et al. 2020; Scott & Ulibarri 2019). In doing so, a municipal water office whose director was politically appointed for a single year and a federal environmental agency staffed by career civil servants with twenty-year tenures are homogenised and even analytically equated with an individual policy consultant or a community leader. Who runs the agencies and how they got there, whether ties between bureaucratic actors carry the same meaning as ties across actor types, and how vulnerable these nodes are to electoral turnover all go unmodelled.

The second form is a more normative view that treats public bureaucracies as impartial facilitators whose principal functions are to provide neutral information and create arenas for negotiation and compliance monitoring (Mansbridge 2014; E. Ostrom 1990). The characterisation is not wrong so much as incomplete. Government agencies

retain much decision-making power even in the most horizontal governance networks worldwide (Biesbroek, Peters, et al. 2018; Fischer & Sciarini 2016). Beyond creating and enforcing regulation, they channel the electorate's interests and preferences into the system, connect heterogeneous actors, lead the design and implementation of policy initiatives, and bear public accountability on behalf of most governance participants (Angst et al. 2018; Fischer et al. 2012; Lubell et al. 2017; Villamayor-Tomas et al. 2019). They have considerable resources, such as funding, technical knowledge, power and legal mandates, that make them attractive and often indispensable partners, and the empirical literature confirms that government agencies play central roles in creating and sustaining the networks through which polycentric governance operates (Biesbroek & Lesnikowski 2018; DeCaro et al. 2017; Ingold & Leifeld 2016).

More fundamentally, these empirical and normative imprints of polycentric governance misrepresent the nature of the actor they describe. Public bureaucracies are not unitary organisations with homogeneous and stable preferences; they are collective, internally differentiated bodies whose behaviour is profoundly shaped by political factors (Dahlström & Lapuente 2017; Dasandi & Esteve 2017; Peters 2010). Participation in collaborative venues, for instance, is often assumed to be a managerial decision aimed at optimising policy outcomes (Scott et al. 2019; Scott & Thomas 2017), but it may as well be driven by political motivations unrelated to the specific policy area, such as increasing electoral support or furthering professional careers (Huang & Berry 2021). Similarly,

information-sharing and advice-seeking patterns within governance networks are shaped by political homophily and party affiliation (Alexander et al. 2011; Song et al. 2018; Walker et al. 2007; Weible 2011), and processes as critical as establishing partnerships or mediating conflicts are strongly affected by political allegiances (Hood & Lodge 2006).

In sum, the emergence, evolution, and performance of polycentric systems is also a function of the political organisation of the bureaucratic actors that populate them. Theorising that function is what this paper sets out to do. I build on a central argument of the comparative bureaucratic politics literature: the political relationship between elected officials and the bureaucratic apparatus determines what governments can do and how they perform (Brierley et al. 2022; Dahlström & Lapuente 2017; Fukuyama 2013). In polycentric contexts, besides capturing some of their political and organisational individual qualities, bureaucratic autonomy also defines relational properties of governance nodes, describing an agency's dependence on or freedom from the discretion of other actors (Maggetti & Verhoest 2014). Autonomy thus adds a key institutional and political dimension of the interdependence that characterises polycentric systems.

An agency whose personnel, budget, and decision-making are controlled by a political principal is embedded in the polycentric system differently than one that operates according to professional norms and possesses statutory independence. The former's technical capacity and knowledge resources reflect the personnel politics that

governed its staffing (Kolvani & Nistotskaya 2025); its commitments are credible only as long as its principal's preferences hold (Miller 2000) and its coordination patterns likely are shaped by political allegiances (Hood & Lodge 2006). The latter may sustain commitments across electoral cycles and coordinate through professional networks, but it may also become unresponsive to the democratic demands and adaptive pressures that polycentric governance is designed to transmit (Cornell 2014; Paterson et al. 2022). The following sections elaborate three analytical dimensions through which these differences reshape polycentric coordination.

2.1. Capacity: Competence Distribution and Epistemic Coordination

The technical capacity of public organisations is one of the most reported gains from reforms increasing bureaucratic autonomy (Holt & Manning 2014; Oliveira et al. 2024). Politicians shape bureaucratic capacity through multiple channels, including budget authority, administrative restructuring, and the reassignment of functions (Bomberg 2021; Hejny 2018; Iyer & Mani 2012), but the politics of personnel selection has received the most systematic attention. Where incumbents prioritise loyal over expert employees—what the patronage literature calls the loyalty-competence trade-off (Kopecký et al. 2016; Lewis 2007)—the results tend to be deleterious (Oliveira et al. 2024). Political appointees are on average less competent than their merit-recruited counterparts (Colonnelli et al. 2020), exhibit lower performance ratings (Gallo & Lewis 2011), and can

be deployed to enable strategic non-enforcement of regulations by sidelining technical staff (Xu 2025). Political interference in human resources also degrades the capacity of permanent staff, suppressing service motivation and discouraging investment in specialised knowledge acquisition (Fuenzalida & Riccucci 2019; Oliveros & Schuster 2017).

Agencies that are understaffed, technically weakened, or populated by officials whose loyalties run vertically toward a political patron rather than horizontally toward governance peers are qualitatively different nodes in a polycentric system than those insulated from such pressures. In polycentric settings, effective coordination across multiple autonomous actors in complex policy domains requires shared technical vocabularies and compatible analytical frameworks, as well as the capacity to produce, process, and act on policy-relevant knowledge (Landriani et al. 2022; Leach et al. 2014; Vantaggiato & Lubell 2022). When agencies participate in polycentric governance, their technical shortcomings become other agencies' coordination challenges. The political determinants of bureaucratic capacity shape the distribution of that capacity across nodes, creating asymmetries that affect who can participate meaningfully in knowledge-intensive coordination.

Meritocratic recruitment fosters shared epistemic communities across jurisdictions. Where recruitment follows merit-based criteria and secure tenure provides predictable career rewards, agencies tend to attract employees who are more competent and oriented

toward technocratic policymaking (Dahlström et al. 2012; Evans & Rauch 1999; Kolvani & Nistotskaya 2025; J. Lee 2024). These shared professional repertoires lower the cognitive and organisational frictions that ordinarily impede cooperation, allowing neighbouring governments to interpret challenges in a similar fashion, learn from one another, and converge more rapidly on feasible solutions (Haas 1992; Mavrot & Sager 2018). Where bureaucrats are recruited on the basis of political connections, however, the evidence suggests the opposite effect. Their loyalties and information networks flow vertically, toward the patron who appointed them, rather than horizontally, toward the professional peers with whom they might otherwise coordinate (Oliveros 2021). Evidence from U.S. local governments shows that technocratically oriented managers are more inclined to think interjurisdictionally and to engage in cross-boundary problem-solving, whereas politically selected officials tend to prioritise narrower, locally focused political agendas (Alexander et al. 2011; Frederickson 2006). In polycentric systems, the epistemic infrastructure that enables coordination across autonomous decision-making centres depends, in practice, on the personnel politics that determine who occupies those centres.

Berardo and Lubell (2016) found a related pattern across water governance systems of varying institutional strength. In two of what they called “strongly institutionalised” systems in the U.S., professional and technically competent government agencies served as the primary bridging actors connecting otherwise fragmented governance networks. In the “weakly institutionalised” Paraná River delta system, by contrast, government

participation was marginal and an international NGO occupied the central coordinating role. Specialisation and collaborative experience predicted participation in governance forums only in the strongly institutionalised systems. Where professional capacity was robust, the expected relationship between expertise and participation held; where it was absent, participation appeared to be driven by political necessity rather than substantive engagement.

The relationship between professional autonomy and epistemic coordination is, however, not monotonically positive. The professional socialisation that produces shared analytical frameworks among technically similar nodes can simultaneously work against some of the goals that polycentric governance is supposed to advance. There are at least two reasons for this. The first concerns epistemic exclusion and rigidity. The argument that bureaucracies can become stiff and resistant to alien ideas is, indeed, already an old criticism (Fukuyama 2013; Grindle 2018). Agencies that share training, professional vocabularies, and analytical tools can coordinate efficiently with one another while becoming unresponsive to knowledge that does not conform to their established professional paradigms, including local and indigenous knowledge, experiential expertise held by community organisations, and the practical insights of front-line implementers (Jasanoff 2004). For instance, Turnhout et al. (2020), reviewing the politics of knowledge co-production in environmental governance, show how depoliticisation

dynamics in expert-led processes reinforce existing hierarchies and marginalise non-credentialed knowledge claims, even when the stated goal is inclusivity.

The second concerns the internal disjunction between knowledge and authority. Rittelmeyer et al. (2024), studying the science-policy interface in California's Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, found that specialised staff who participate in multiple policy forums form epistemic communities and report significant learning, whereas executive-level actors with decision-making authority engage less deeply with technically oriented discussions. In polycentric settings populated by professionally autonomous bureaucracies, the horizontal coordination gains among technically similar staff may fail to reach the decision-makers whose authorisation is ultimately required for implementation. In polycentric governance, where, indeed, the diversity of participating knowledge systems is often cited as a core advantage (Morrison et al. 2023; Thiel et al. 2019), insulated and homogeneous strong professional communities risk narrowing the epistemic range of the system even as they deepen coordination among technically sophisticated nodes.

How politics shapes quality and epistemic platform of bureaucratic organisations poses a trade-off in polycentric systems. Reforms such as meritocratic recruitment can strengthen horizontal coordination among professionally similar agencies, but the same professional homogeneity that lowers coordination costs among those agencies can raise

them with actors whose knowledge is organised differently and can shield decision-making from the adaptive pressures that polycentric governance is designed to transmit.

2.2. Intertemporal Dynamics: Credible Commitment and Organisational Stability

The insulation of public bodies from political principals has been championed by the regulation and bureaucratic politics literature as a means to enhance intertemporal stability and credible commitment (Gilardi 2002; Koop & Kessler 2021). The argument extends well beyond personnel selection. The creation of independent regulatory agencies, the establishment of fixed terms for senior officials, the ring-fencing of budgets from annual political discretion, and the legal protection of bureaucratic decision-making from executive override are all institutional devices designed to lengthen the effective time horizons of public organisations (Jordana et al. 2011; Koop & Hanretty 2018). Politicians face time-inconsistent preferences and discount future benefits relative to short-term electoral payoffs. In his classic argument, Miller (2000) suggested that politicians can enhance their own credibility by delegating to autonomous bureaucrats whose professional norms insulate decision-making from the short-term political pressures. Such delegation reforms tend to be adopted when incumbents anticipate losing office, because insulating the bureaucracy from political discretion ties their successors' hands and reduces future uncertainty (Schuster 2016; Ting et al. 2013).

Conversely, when politicians retain sufficient leverage over agency decisions and resources, the temporal horizon of the bureaucracy collapses toward the political cycle of its principals (Bueno 2021; Schultz 1995). A more insulated bureaucracy becomes, in effect, a credibility device.

That trust and credible commitment are functional prerequisites for effective polycentric governance is by now a well-worn argument (Lubell & Morrison 2021; McGinnis et al. 2020). Polycentric systems depend on sustained cooperation among actors who must make costly investments whose returns materialise over time. Where political principals retain strong sway over bureaucracy, however, the temporal horizons of governance participation compress and organisational stability falls.

On the one hand, in politicised public administrations, agencies face incentives to prefer policies and partnerships whose benefits are visible within an electoral mandate, and the commitments they enter carry only as much credibility as their insulation from the electoral cycles (Bueno 2021; Philips 2016; Sakurai & Menezes-Filho 2010). Dias and Schapiro (2026) offer recent evidence that can help illustrate this issue: The Brazilian Central Bank, whose meritocratic cadre, cohesive corporate culture, and legal independence shielded it from political intervention, continued to develop green prudential regulations throughout Bolsonaro's tenure. The National Development Bank, which possessed comparable technical capacity but significantly less autonomy, saw its share of green investments fall from a record 22 per cent of disbursements to the level

recorded when tracking began. For two similar agencies in the same multi-level governance architecture, political insulation can predict their ability to sustain green commitments across political cycles.

Political influence over the bureaucracy also means that electoral transitions trigger organisational turnover, compounding the commitment problem with instability and institutional memory loss. A widely recognised feature of politicised public administrations is that political turnover is highly correlated with bureaucratic churn (Askim et al. 2024; Brassiolo et al. 2021; Dahlström et al. 2019). Career senior executives in the U.S. whose policy views likely diverge from those of an incoming president are more likely to leave government service (Bolton et al. 2021; Doherty et al. 2019). The effects intensify in systems where incumbents can reshape the bureaucracy wholesale after taking office. Studies from Global South countries have provided causal evidence that when a new party assumes power, bureaucratic personnel are replaced across service sectors and hierarchical levels, measurably degrading public service delivery (Akhtari et al. 2022; Brassiolo et al. 2020; Toral 2024). Simultaneous personnel reshuffling across agencies participating in collective decision-making forums disrupts coordination capacity even if no single agency intends to withdraw.

Together, preference compression and organisational instability render politicised bureaucracies unpredictable nodes whose behaviour shifts with each electoral cycle, and this vulnerability propagates across the polycentric architecture. As mentioned above,

effective coordination in polycentric systems depends on repeated interaction, precisely because ongoing engagement builds the trust, shared knowledge, and overlapping networks that lower the costs of cooperation (Bodin 2017; Lubell 2013; E. Ostrom 1990). As organisational theory has shown, the capacity to learn, produce, and retain policy knowledge is itself a collective achievement that requires both technical capacity *and* organisational stability (Corbett et al. 2018; Geys et al. 2023; Pollitt 2009; Stark & Head 2018). When the bureaucracy is not insulated from political turnover, heightened churn disrupts the organisational learning and institutional memory on which these processes depend (Bagchi & Chakrabarti 2021; Rao & Argote 2006), diminishing the ability of repeated interactions to generate trust and making bureaucracies less reliable as collaboration partners (Gerlak et al. 2019; Sandström et al. 2021).

From the perspective of temporal evolution, high political influence shortens time horizons and increases turnover at transition points, rendering iterative coordination games into sequences of one-off interactions in which participants have incentives to maximise short-term gains. In their original formulation of the risk hypothesis, Berardo and Scholz (2010) proposed that governance networks are expected to evolve from bridging-dominated structures (i.e., networks held together by sparse ties linking otherwise disconnected actors) toward denser configurations incorporating the bonding capital needed for higher-risk cooperation. Bureaucratic politicisation threatens to arrest this trajectory if high turnover repeatedly resets the relational clock. A good illustrative

case is the study by Eakin et al. (2011), who found that in Mexico's water management sector, municipal water operators rarely last more than a single three-year administration. Polycentric systems may thus remain trapped in early-stage configurations dominated by thin bridging ties, unable to develop the trust-intensive relationships and where some central nodes may unequally exploit their relational advantages.

As with epistemic coordination, the benefits of political insulation in polycentric systems are bounded. The credible commitment argument carries an implicit assumption that the preferences bureaucracies would pursue absent political interference are aligned with the collective interests the polycentric system is designed to serve. An insulated agency can also credibly commit to institutional self-perpetuation, to outdated policy paradigms, or to technocratic objectives that do not reflect the priorities of affected communities. When bureaucrats enjoy ample discretion to design or interpret regulatory norms without adequate horizontal or electoral accountability, the result can be increased corruption or rent extraction rather than improved implementation (Brierley 2020; Duvanova 2014; Olken & Pande 2012).

In polycentric governance, where legitimacy and adaptive capacity depend to a great extent on the system's responsiveness to diverse stakeholders and changing ecological conditions (Barnes et al. 2020), an agency that is impervious to political signals may be credible in the narrow sense of temporal consistency while being unaccountable in the

broader sense that democratic governance requires. Comprehensive insulation from political pressure can produce agencies that are temporally stable yet substantively unresponsive to the evolving needs of the governance system.

2.3. Political Capital: Relational Brokerage and Political Capture

The political relationship between elected officials and bureaucratic organisations shapes the political capital available to the bureaucracy, and that capital can be leveraged in very different directions within polycentric settings.

Close politician-bureaucrat ties have historically played important roles in facilitating coordination across fragmented institutional landscapes. Schneider's (1991) classic study of Brazil documented how politically embedded managers in the developmental state brokered agreements across formally separate ministries and agencies, relying on political relational capital rather than legal mandates. Similar arguments have been advanced in other developmental contexts (Ang 2016 2020; Geddes 1996; Grindle 2012; Leal Buitrago & Davila 1990), and growing causal evidence confirms that political embeddedness can improve policy outcomes under certain conditions (Jiang 2018; Jiang & Zhang 2020; Toral 2023). The mechanism that matters here is the relational capital: bureaucratic actors whose positions depend on political relationships often possess informal networks that span institutional boundaries (in ways that career civil servants' professional ties do not), allowing them to bridge interests and form

coalitions that formal mandates alone would struggle to assemble (Bersch et al. 2022; Panizza et al. 2019).

More broadly, the degree to which political principals shape bureaucratic careers can itself generate entrepreneurial behaviour that benefits coordination. When career advancement depends on demonstrating visible accomplishments or building a reputation across jurisdictions, bureaucratic actors have strong incentives to seek cross-boundary partnerships and policy innovations. Evidence from U.S. local governments suggests that externally recruited agency heads are substantially more likely to initiate policy innovations than those promoted from within and to engage with state-level policy signals when career advancement rewards alignment with statewide objectives (Huang & Berry 2021; Teodoro 2009 2013). Analysing a very different context, Chen and Yi (2024) found that the career path networks created by leadership transfers between Chinese cities substantially increased the probability of formal interlocal agreements. The implication for polycentric governance is that political influence over bureaucratic career structures can enhance the supply of cross-boundary entrepreneurship, as well as the relational reach to identify partners and negotiate cooperation.

The converse implication is that career civil servants whose networks are primarily professional may coordinate well with technically similar counterparts but struggle to mobilise the political support that polycentric governance ultimately requires. Governance decisions that survive the technical coordination stage must eventually

secure political authorisation, budgetary appropriation, and public legitimacy. Causal evidence from very different settings suggests that close politician-bureaucrat ties can enhance performance precisely by granting bureaucrats access to political information, material resources, and extended time horizons that professionally autonomous officials lack (Jiang 2018; Toral 2023). In highly fragmented polycentric systems with many small, technically weak nodes, politically connected actors may be the only ones with sufficient relational reach to broker across the whole system. Full professionalisation in such a context could produce technically competent but relationally isolated agencies, each capable of high-quality analysis but unable to coordinate because engagement with top decision-makers is limited (Rittelmeyer et al. 2024). To be sure, the argument here is not that politicised bureaucracies are inherently better brokers, but that the political capital embedded in systems with close politician-bureaucrat connections enables coordination resources that are otherwise scarce.

The perils of this politicised relational capital are, of course, easy to identify. Bureaucratic embeddedness in political networks can lead to equilibria that favour partisan or private interests across the system. On the one hand, political homophily, the tendency to form ties with politically aligned stakeholders, is a well-documented phenomenon in policy networks (Gerber et al. 2013; Henry 2011 2023; Song et al. 2018) and can be heavily accentuated when the relational incentives of bureaucratic actors are concentrated along partisan lines. Information-sharing and advice-seeking patterns that

exclude politically misaligned stakeholders become more likely, narrowing the diversity of perspectives and interests that functional polycentric arrangements are supposed to aggregate. Morrison et al. (2023), documented a structurally analogous pattern in the governance of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, where venue membership became more important than issue stakes in driving actor behaviour, producing a period of what they termed "functional navel-gazing." Such dynamics can become pervasive features of polycentric systems populated by politically appointed officials whose relational capital is partisan in origin.

On the other hand, bureaucratic politicisation also shapes the permeability of the boundary between public office and private interests. Where responsiveness to political principals is high and professional autonomy is low, the same networks that place appointees in bureaucratic positions can connect them to private actors who finance political campaigns and seek favourable regulatory or procurement treatment (Dahlström et al. 2021). Senior officials who move between regulatory agencies and regulated firms carry those private commitments into the coordination arena. The resulting brokerage may reduce transaction costs in a narrow sense, because revolving-door actors carry firm-specific knowledge and networks into government (K. Lee & You 2023), but it may also systematically skew governance outputs toward the interests of connected private actors (Carpenter & Moss 2014). When political influence over bureaucracy extends into collusion among allied elites, collaborative arrangements risk

being captured and repurposed for rent-seeking (Persha & Andersson 2014; Xu 2025). Corruption and capture are among the most frequently cited diagnoses of failing polycentric systems, yet they are typically treated as diffuse contextual pathologies (Mudliar 2021; Pahl-Wostl & Knieper 2014). The embeddedness of political or private elites in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state is a specific institutional correlate of such failures—a vulnerability that more independent and meritocratic bureaucracies have been shown to resist (Dahlström et al. 2012; Oliveira et al. 2024).

A final vulnerability of politically derived relational capital, one that also connects to the intertemporal consistency argument above, is its fragility. In at least somewhat competitive democratic systems, the relational assets of politically embedded bureaucratic actors dissipate with electoral turnover, making the network ties they enable vulnerable to the same political cycles that threaten credible commitment. While political embeddedness can catalyse early cooperation by lowering transaction costs through relational proximity, its performance-enhancing effects are likely short-lived under politically competitive conditions. As collaborative relationships become anchored in other forms of institutional trust and professionalised governance structures, the same political ties that initially enabled coordination may become a liability.

Table 1 presents the framework in structured form, organising each analytical dimension by its institutional drivers and governance channels, and mapping their influence on polycentric governance onto Baldwin et al.'s (2024) *Context-Operations-*

Outcomes-Feedbacks (COOF) framework, the most recent and comprehensive analytical scaffold for studying polycentric systems. In their framework, *contextual* characteristics refer to the background institutional and socio-ecological conditions in which polycentric systems are embedded; *operational* dynamics capture the governance structures and coordination processes through which decision centres interact; *outcomes* denote the social, environmental, and governance results that the system produces; and *feedback pathways* describe the adjustment mechanisms through which outcomes reshape context and operations over time. The table shows how each dimension of bureaucratic autonomy maps onto these COOF categories, and a set of testable empirical propositions accompanies each dimension to guide future research.

2.4. Interactions, Contingent Configurations, and Governance

Development

The three analytical dimensions proposed here do not operate independently, as the same bureaucratic reforms can simultaneously affect all of them. Because a bureaucratic autonomy typically reflects combinations of such reforms (Bersch & Fukuyama 2023), no single configuration is likely to optimise all three dimensions at once. Some interactions are mutually reinforcing: meritocratic recruitment builds the technical capacity that enables epistemic coordination while also reducing political capture, and the tenure stability that accompanies professionalised systems protects that capacity across political

cycles. The same insulation that shields agencies from electoral volatility, however, can sever the political ties that enable brokerage, leaving a fully insulated bureaucracy that is credible and technically capable but increasingly unresponsive to the democratic demands.

What combination of bureaucratic configurations best serves polycentric coordination in a given context is ultimately an empirical question. Although there is ample evidence and support from scholars, practitioners, and international organisations for reforms that widen bureaucratic autonomy and professionalisation (Cortázar Velarde et al. 2014; Moynihan 2010; Oszlak 2022; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011; Schuster et al. 2020; Zarychta et al. 2020), the framework also allows mapping the trade-offs that different bureaucratic configurations entail and identifies the conditions under which each carries a comparative advantage. A system whose governance challenge requires integrating diverse knowledge systems may need institutional arrangements that combine technical competence with mechanisms for incorporating non-expert perspectives in bureaucratic decision-making, a combination that neither extreme of the continuum reliably produces. Whether and how such arrangements can be assembled in practice depends on context that the framework can structure but not resolve in advance.

Table 1. Bureaucratic autonomy and polycentric governance

Analytical dimensions	Institutional drivers	Governance channels	Influence on polycentric governance	Empirical propositions
Technical capacity	Personnel politics: politicised vs. meritocratic recruitment, retention, promotion, and dismissal; loyalty-competence trade-off; professional autonomy	Capacity distribution Epistemic communities Epistemic closure Knowledge-authority disjunction	<p><i>Contextual:</i> Shapes the distribution of technical capacity across nodes and whether agencies can sustain shared knowledge production.</p> <p><i>Operational:</i> Professional homogeneity lowers coordination costs among technically similar nodes; it might also raise barriers to actors operating on different knowledge bases.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> Affects whether knowledge advantages facilitate collective action or undermine it through epistemic asymmetries.</p> <p><i>Feedback:</i> Degraded epistemic infrastructure fragments the professional communities that sustain cross-jurisdictional learning over time. Alternatively, strong professional communities may narrow the epistemic range of the system even as they deepen coordination among its technically sophisticated nodes</p>	<p>P1. Systems with higher meritocratic recruitment will display stronger bridging ties and more effective epistemic coordination.</p> <p>P2. Reforms reducing in-house technical capacity will weaken coordination.</p> <p>P3. The relationship between expertise and participation will be stronger in more professionally autonomous systems.</p> <p>P4. Highly professionalised systems will exhibit stronger coordination among technically similar nodes but weaker integration of non-credentialed knowledge holders.</p> <p>P5. Epistemic coordination gains among technical staff will be attenuated where decision-making authority is concentrated at executive levels with limited technical engagement</p>
Intertemporal Dynamics	Regulatory and operational insulation: fixed terms, tenure protections, budgetary ring-fencing, and statutory protection from executive override	Credible commitment Political and organisational stability/turnover Bureaucratic rigidity	<p><i>Contextual:</i> Governs the effective time horizons of bureaucratic actors within the system.</p> <p><i>Operational:</i> Shapes whether coordination is iterative or episodic and whether agencies can credibly commit to collaborative agreements.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> Determines whether polycentric systems can develop from bridging-dominated to bonding-intensive configurations over time.</p> <p><i>Feedback:</i> Electoral transitions can simultaneously disrupt multiple nodes, resetting relational capital and fragmenting coordination. Excessive insulation risks path-dependent commitment to outdated paradigms, reducing adaptive capacity or democratic responsiveness</p>	<p>P6. More politicised systems with higher post-electoral bureaucratic turnover will exhibit less dense coordination networks and weaker bonding structures.</p> <p>P7. Tenure stability and regulatory independence will predict the sustainability of collaborative agreements across electoral cycles.</p> <p>P8. Systems with more autonomous bureaucracies will be more resilient to electoral shocks.</p> <p>P9. The relationship between bureaucratic insulation and governance performance will be non-linear, with responsiveness declining beyond a threshold of autonomy</p>
Political capital	Political appointments and career structures: partisan ties and clientelistic networks linking bureaucrats to political principals; diagonal mobility, inter-organisational recruitment; revolving doors	Political embeddedness of bureaucrats Political support for bureaucratic decision-making Political homophily Bureaucratic capture	<p><i>Contextual:</i> Determines the supply, character, and partisan distribution of bureaucratic brokerage capacity as well as bureaucracy's permeability to private interests</p> <p><i>Operational:</i> Shapes partner selection, breadth of participation, and whether coordination is pluralistic or co-partisan.</p> <p><i>Outcomes:</i> Political embeddedness enables early-stage cooperation but risks co-partisan narrowing and capture. Professional autonomy sustains pluralistic coordination but may leave agencies unable to mobilise political support for implementation. Private capture of public resources might be hampered or facilitated by bureaucratic actors</p> <p><i>Feedback:</i> Politically brokered ties are fragile across electoral cycles; collusion can repurpose collaborative arrangements for rent-seeking.</p>	<p>P10. Networks brokered by politically embedded actors will exhibit higher co-partisan homophily and lower participation diversity.</p> <p>P11. The brokerage advantages of political embeddedness will diminish as collaborative relationships mature and anchor in professionalised governance structures.</p> <p>P12. Systems with more permeable public-private boundaries will exhibit governance outputs biased toward politically connected private interests.</p> <p>P13. In highly fragmented systems, politically embedded nodes will occupy more central brokerage positions than professionally autonomous nodes of comparable technical capacity</p>

One overarching argument, however, cuts across all three dimensions and deserves explicit treatment. The optimal level of bureaucratic autonomy shifts with the developmental stage of the polycentric system itself. In early-stage systems dominated by sparse bridging ties, governance arenas are not yet anchored in the professional trust and accumulated knowledge that insulated, autonomous bureaucracies are better positioned to generate and sustain. The relational capital of politically connected actors therefore carries its strongest comparative advantage at this stage. As collaborative relationships deepen and bonding capital accumulates, those relational advantages depreciate, and the epistemic depth and intertemporal stability of professionally autonomous nodes become progressively more valuable as systems require something more than cross-boundary entrepreneurship to function. A bureaucratic configuration that catalyses cooperation in a fragmented, early-stage system may obstruct the more demanding forms of coordination that a mature one requires. Cross-sectional comparisons of bureaucratic organisation and polycentric governance performance that do not account for developmental stage are therefore likely to produce confounded results.

3. Implications for Polycentric Governance Theory

The framework carries implications that go beyond restating the institutional mechanisms and governance channels that bureaucratic politics determine. Its most

significant theoretical contribution is to substantiate the conditions under which polycentric self-organisation is possible, and to do so in terms of upstream institutional arrangements rather than the downstream properties those arrangements produce.

Carlisle and Gruby's (2019) influential account of enabling conditions for polycentricity, including institutional diversity, cross-scale linkages, accountability mechanisms, and conflict resolution forums, as well as McGinnis et al.'s (2020) identification of dysfunction syndromes such as incrementalism, institutional hollowing-out, and progressive exclusion, both describe what polycentric systems need and what can go wrong. The bureaucratic politics framework provides a common explanatory substrate for both. First, the enabling conditions each have political-administrative determinants. Institutional diversity depends on decision-making centres possessing specialised expertise, which is degraded when political influence over personnel prioritises loyalty over expertise. Cross-scale linkages require the professional communities that meritocratic systems foster, but also the relational reach that politically embedded actors provide. Accountability mechanisms depend on institutional memory continuity, disrupted by high political turnover, and on bureaucratic responsiveness to democratic demands, potentially eroded by excessive insulation. Second, the dysfunction syndromes, similarly, are not randomly distributed. Institutional hollowing-out is more likely where political control is high. The progressive exclusion of marginalised groups

may accompany both extremes, occurring through clientelistic capture at the politicised end and through technocratic closure at the autonomous end.

The framework thus helps identify which bureaucratic configurations produce which failure modes, moving beyond composite characterisations of institutionalisation toward more precise accounts of why polycentric governance succeeds or fails in specific administrative contexts. It also offers a structured explanation for variation in polycentric outcomes across states that is grounded on the characteristic of administrative and public sector reform traditions (Biesbroek, Lesnikowski, et al. 2018; Dahlström & Lapuente 2022). Legalistic bureaucracies, characteristic of the Napoleonic tradition, may provide procedural stability for formal coordination structures, but their politicised senior appointments may direct cross-boundary coordination toward political principals rather than governance problems. Liberal bureaucracies, characteristic of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, may be well suited to informal, trust-based coordination but vulnerable to the marketisation reforms that have hollowed out in-house technical capacity (Eakin et al. 2011). Weberian bureaucracies may provide the strongest epistemic foundations for coordination through competitive entry and shared professional norms but may resist the informal relational dynamics that horizontal governance often requires. Each tradition exhibits a distinctive configuration of advantages and vulnerabilities that would allow scholars to move beyond composite characterisations of institutionalisation toward

more precise accounts of why polycentric governance succeeds or fails in specific administrative contexts.

3.1. A Research Agenda

I propose four directions for future research that build on the framework developed here.

The first concerns *the comparison of polycentric systems across bureaucratic contexts*. The different institutions that make up bureaucratic autonomy (e.g., personnel selection, budgetary insulation, operational discretion, legal independence) offer a way to disaggregate the composite categories that dominate comparative governance studies into more precise and measurable indicators. Patronage intensity, for instance, captures variation in personnel autonomy and can be measured through the share of political appointments across hierarchical levels (Dahlström et al. 2021; Toral 2023). Budgetary insulation can be operationalised through the proportion of agency funding that is legally ring-fenced from annual appropriation cycles. These dimensions often covary, but they can diverge in instructive ways, as when a legally protected civil service has been starved of training and resources, or when a politically directed agency invests heavily in the technical competence of its personnel. The growing availability of fine-grained administrative data on public employment, including records that track hiring, dismissal, and career trajectories at the individual level across multiple electoral cycles, increasingly makes it feasible to construct these measures for systematic comparison. Cross-national

or cross-regional differences in governance performance that composite accounts attribute to institutional strength or state capacity may prove more tractable once disaggregated into the bureaucratic dimensions proposed here.

The second direction concerns *the intertemporal study of polycentric systems using bureaucratic shocks as sources of variation*. Electoral transitions, civil service reforms, and episodes of bureaucratic weaponisation represent moments in which the political incentive structures facing bureaucratic actors change significantly. Tracing how polycentric networks respond (e.g., whether ties decay, whether new brokers emerge, and whether technical coordination capacity erodes or regenerates) would provide direct evidence on the dynamic relationship between bureaucratic politics and governance system evolution. These shocks have been identified as crucial factors shaping processes and outcomes in traditional, hierarchical forms of policymaking (Bauer et al. 2021; Peters & Pierre 2019; Schuster 2020; Ting et al. 2013), but we lack clear understanding of how they determine polycentric governance arrangements. Baldwin et al.'s (2024) COOF framework reinforces the case for this direction by foregrounding feedback pathways and adjustment mechanisms as essential but understudied components of polycentric change, and the analytical dimensions developed here specify concrete feedback pathways whose temporal signatures that framework is designed to capture.

The third direction focuses on *the political dimension of micro-level incentives for coordination*. We know remarkably little about the individual-level behavioural drivers

that shape coordination in polycentric systems (Kim et al. 2022). Whether a public manager invests in a cross-jurisdictional collaboration depends in part on whether that investment advances or threatens their career trajectory, and that trajectory is shaped by the bureaucratic system they inhabit. Career incentives, managerial mobility, and the interaction between political appointment patterns and collaborative behaviour represent an open and promising research frontier that reconnects polycentric scholarship to questions about the political nature of governance (Peters et al. 2022), and extends it to the behavioural dimension of public administration (Battaglio et al. 2019; Bertelli et al. 2022). This agenda can help elaborate how micro-level incentive structures relate to the macro-level coordination patterns that polycentric governance theory seeks to explain.

The fourth direction concerns the long-overdue discussion about *state reform and polycentric governance*. Polycentric governance requires a different kind of state than traditional top-down governance, one in which bureaucratic stability and technical capacity are deep enough to sustain coordination across electoral cycles, and insulation from short-term political incentives is calibrated to keep cooperation iterative rather than episodic. The qualifier “calibrated” matters, because the trade-offs identified in this paper suggest that the level and form of insulation that best serves polycentric governance will vary with the governance problem, the composition of the polycentric system, and the stage of collaborative development. The tendency for administrative reforms to accumulate, interact, and produce unintended consequences is long recognised (Lodge

& Gill 2011; Polidano & Hulme 1999; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011; Sanabria-Pulido & Leyva 2022; Schick 1998), and reforms that underpin polycentric governance, such as decentralisation, are not exempt from this dynamic. What types of civil service reform produce the bureaucratic conditions that polycentric governance requires, and how do those conditions differ across governance contexts? How do professionalisation and flexibilisation reforms interact with decentralisation, and under what conditions do they complement or undermine each other? Personnel flexibilisation reforms promoted under NPM, for instance, while intellectually adjacent to polycentric governance in their shared scepticism of hierarchical control, may have undermined its operational conditions in practice. The multilateral organisations that have promoted polycentric governance reforms while simultaneously advocating for civil service professionalisation have been right on both counts, though without theorising the connection between them. A systematic research programme on that connection would bridge the gap between polycentric governance and public administration reform literatures, which have developed largely in parallel.

4. Conclusion

The polycentric governance literature has made remarkable progress in theorising how multiple autonomous actors can coordinate to manage complex collective problems. It has done so, however, by treating the political organisation of public bureaucracies as

exogenous background noise, and this omission may account for much of the field's difficulty in explaining why polycentric governance works in some contexts and fails in others. The framework developed here brings bureaucratic politics back into this analytical picture by identifying bureaucratic autonomy as a structuring layer of polycentric systems and proposing three analytical dimensions for their joint analysis: the technical capacity and epistemic coordination shaped by personnel politics, the intertemporal dynamics governed by organisational stability and credible commitment, and the political-relational configurations that define brokerage assets and capture vulnerabilities.

These analytical dimensions respecify the conditions for polycentric self-organisation by tracing them to specific political-administrative correlates. The persistent circularity in polycentric policy prescriptions, which tend to recommend the conditions of successful polycentricity as remedies for its failure, can be broken only by identifying the specific institutional reforms in personnel systems, tenure protections, and organisational design that generate those conditions in the first place. The field has, indeed, invested heavily in mapping governance networks and cataloguing enabling conditions while investing far less in understanding the upstream political and administrative arrangements that determine whether nodes possess the expertise to coordinate, the stability to sustain commitments, and the relational capacity to broker across institutional boundaries. This is not merely an analytical gap. Building polycentric governance without attending to

these bureaucratic conditions is likely to produce systems that are polycentric in form but dysfunctional in practice.

The argument also runs in the other direction. Polycentric governance represents an analytically distinct terrain on which to test and extend the findings of comparative bureaucratic politics. How, for instance, principal-agent dynamics, career incentives, and the loyalty-competence trade-off play out in the horizontal governance settings that polycentric theory describes, remains largely unexplored. The four research directions proposed here can open that door.

The urgency of this agenda is increasing. The accelerating pace of democratic backsliding and bureaucratic weaponisation across multiple countries means that the conditions for effective polycentric governance are actively deteriorating in many of the places where such governance is most needed (Bellodi et al. 2022; Peters & Pierre 2019). When political principals systematically dismantle bureaucratic capacity, distort institutional time horizons, and concentrate relational capital along partisan lines, polycentric systems lose the operational substrate on which their coordination depends. The polycentric governance field's inattention to bureaucratic politics leaves it poorly equipped to diagnose this erosion, let alone to identify the institutional safeguards that might prevent it. Taking seriously the politics of the organisations that populate and hold polycentric governance together is an analytical task with practical consequences that are becoming harder to defer.

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