Recent years have witnessed a marked resurgence in scholarly attention to bureaucratic policymaking and its location within the broader separation-of-powers framework in which these laws are carried into effect. Such scholarship has shed important new light on such questions as the mechanisms governing congressional structuring of agency interactions over implementation, the reach of executive branch oversight of agencies through the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), strategic timing of rulemaking, and the ways in which agencies use the implementation authority delegated to them by statute. Within this dialogue of political science and public administration, Samuel Workman’s The Dynamics of Bureaucracy in the U.S. Government offers new insights into the agenda-setting mechanisms of the legislative—executive interplay over policymaking in recent decades, beginning in 1983.

Important to Workman’s study is the centrality of bureaucracy to the policies that ultimately emerge in this model of American politics, rather than agencies characterized as engaging in the rote implementation of policies passed down by Congress. While models of agency implementation have served to elucidate the strategic dynamics underlying congressional strategies of legislative design and delegation, the important role that agencies maintain throughout the policy making, as well as implementing, phase, cannot be overstated, and is acknowledged fully in Workman’s theory of agenda setting. Indeed, the author notes that this key policy influence persists “even when it appears that the elected branches of government are unresponsive ad macro politics seems stale” (p. 159), with members of Congress and bureaucrats both continually active in shaping the policy outcomes that we ultimately observe. And in evaluating bureaucracies’ role in this process, Workman puts forward a rich new data set comprising the coding of more than 200,000 regulations identified in the Unified Agenda, which in itself will pave the way toward understanding new sets of key questions about the American administrative state.

At the core of Workman’s analysis is the dual dynamics of the administrative state—formed by the tension between democratic authority and bureaucratic expertise— whereby agencies engage in problem solving and bottom-up influence, at which point Congress steers information processing by way of problem prioritization and agenda setting. In the first stage of the bottom-up process, bureaucracies detect and identify problems that carry policy consequences, with the necessary precondition that
agencies must have the autonomy to monitor and detect problems that warrant attention across a range of issues. Bureaucracies then define the detected problem in a way that facilitates government action, attaching causes to policy consequences and potentially calling attention to some dimensions of a policy while downplaying others so as to improve the agency’s ability to influence elected officials in taking up the given issue. Having defined the issue, the bureaucracy then generates the relevant information and conveys it to elected officials.

The top-down aspect of the policymaking process here involves, in part, congressional prioritization of issues, which Workman links to the creation and authorization of bureaucracies in the first place, with congressional delegation to agencies and coordination among them. Within this agenda setting, Congress engages in the processes of issue shuffling, which influences the problems being monitored and the strength of bureaucracies’ signals about those problems, along with issue bundling, in which legislation alters the ways in which issues relate to one another, thus altering the composition of interests that are mobilized and the policies that are salient. And given agencies’ incentives to maintain prominence in the policy landscape, agencies often respond by recasting their agenda in terms of those issues prominent on the congressional interplay between Congress and agencies in policymaking, with both top-down and bottom-up processes shaping the institutions’ information environment and the policy agenda that ultimately is set.

Rather than providing the familiar scenario of Democratic control of bureaucracy associated with pro-regulation versus Republican control with deregulation—such as with the “regulatory relief” efforts of the 1980s—Workman emphasizes the strong regulatory role that agencies maintain throughout the time series. A challenge, with no easy solution, is ascertaining the extent to which conservative agencies, while still taking regulatory action, were in fact scaling back, relative to proposed policy changes. An analog to this concept in the context of appropriations politics is the allocation of funds at levels lower than those requested, potentially not in keeping with increased regulatory responsibilities. In the context of agency policymaking, while not engaging in outright retrenchment, a key omitted variable is interest groups’ and others’ demands for regulatory action, which can serve as a useful baseline in evaluating Democratic- and Republican-controlled agencies’ responsiveness in policymaking. This can be particularly salient in those cases in which appointees are less supportive of the overarching mission of the agency in which they operate, a setting in which we might expect agenda-setting interactions to be different from those under friendlier agency leadership.

Workman demonstrates in a number of instances marked disjunctures in signaling by bureaucracies, congressional prioritization of issues, and bureaucratic issue attention under conditions of Democratic versus Republican control of Congress, with the change-point being the Republican Party’s sweeping victories in the 1994 midterm elections with its Contract with America. A fruitful avenue for future research would be to disentangle these dynamics further in order to evaluate in a more nuanced manner the precise political configurations in which the institutions operate. That is, from 1983 to 1994, there is divided partisan control of Congress with a Republican executive branch (1983–86); a unified Democratic Congress with a Republican executive branch (1987–92); a unified Democratic Congress with a Republican executive branch (1993–94); a unified Republican Congress with a Democratic executive branch (1995–2000); and a unified Republican Congress with a Republican branch (2001–6). Each of these different configurations can, in ways central to Workman’s theory, reshape the choice sets available to Congress and bureaucracies and the policies that ultimately emerge through these institutional interactions.

For example, given asymmetric dynamics of congressional control of more proregulatory versus deregulatory agencies (such as with Congress’s ability to exercise the power of the purse to preclude more than to spur regulatory action), the agenda-setting processes should likewise be affected by that composition of institutional preferences. And while both Democratic- and Republican-controlled Congresses are held accountable for taking action with respect to passing legislation and regulating policy, and Democratic- and Republican-controlled agencies pass regulations, the content of that policy is hardly identical under different administrations and should influence the ways in which the branches interact over the policy agenda. Understanding these more fine-grained dynamics would go a long way toward making more precise predictions as to congressional coalitions’ varied propensity to define and monitor problems in certain ways, and to engage in the processes of issue shuffling and bundling in accordance with Workman’s theory.

To be sure, all models necessarily require simplifying assumptions, and there are limits to what any one treatise can alone accomplish. The limitations that I have addressed here offer guidance as to future directions in which to consider the ongoing interbranch interactions that characterize policymaking in the United States, and to evaluate the regulatory (and deregulatory) processes at work over time. Workman’s evaluation makes an
important, novel advance in our understanding of the
dynamic relationship between Congress and bureaucracies
as they work to identify, frame, and respond to policy
problems, and his rich empirical contributions lay the
groundwork for further expanding our understanding of
these policymaking processes.

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Nation-Building in Turkey and Morocco: Governing
Kurdish and Berber Dissent. By Senem Aslan. New York:
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When do people rise up against their governments? Senem Aslan’s answer to this popular question is when
people become aggrieved as a result of state repression. States are centralizing agencies and punish forces that resist
these attempts. They routinely repress minority groups for expression of their culture, which they consider a challenge
to a totalizing central rule. The latter in turn resist such attempts, some of which turn violent as in the example of
the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey. Others find a way, though an uneasy one, to coexist with the center, as Berber
nationalists have done in Morocco. Aslan demonstrates in great detail the Turkish state’s policies, starting with the
single-party era as Turkish statesmen attempted to integrate Kurd areas in the Southeast into their nation-building project. These attempts, according to the author, mostly took the form of assimilation where expressions of ethnic identity were banned in the public sphere and were replaced with nationalistic ones. In a similar fashion, she documents the Moroccan state’s symbolic gestures to Berber activists, starting with the postcolonial period that included cultural rights as long as they were exercised under the monarch’s watchful eye.

Nation-Building in Turkey and Morocco opens with an important empirical puzzle: Two ethnic minorities in the Middle East context exhibit very similar features. However, the evolution and outcome of their political claims within the nation-state framework show wildly different patterns. Aslan attributes these differences exclusively to states’ policies, whereby ethnic movements are suppressed in one case and appeared with cultural concessions in the other. Her evidence shows that the Moroccan king skillfully engaged in political maneuver that allowed him first to retain his significance under French colonial rule and then to survive under the nationalist Istiqlal Party and eventually overthrow it. He adopted an ambiguous mix of Moroccan nationalism, Islam, and Arabism and refrained from undertaking an ambitious transformation project to upset the tribal hierarchy. This was mainly because his survival depended on appeasing the rural masses, most of whom were of Berber origin. The Moroccan king’s strategy seems to reflect the median Middle East experience, where fragile centers with ties to Western powers

While the Moroccan case is a familiar one, Turkish nation building is unique in its experimentation with modernization. After a hard-won peace, Turkish nationalists had public support and were independent of international pressure to replace the fragile societal status of Ottoman rulers, much like the Moroccan king, with a sense of nation and nationhood. Therefore, Aslan’s choice of Turkey in a comparative case study of minority—state relationships against the backdrop of state formation in the Middle East is an appropriate one, but since the Moroccan case is typical of the region’s experience, as in the foundation of Jordan, most readers will be left wondering why the author made this particular choice and will be looking for a justification of case selection in the book.

In her Introduction, Aslan asks why some states repress their minorities while others do not, but the answer remains limited to this chapter. The succeeding chapters address the “how states repress” question, mostly detailing the individual policies that Turkey and Morocco adopted to respond to the politicization of ethnic identities. The book is organized temporally and traces state policies from independence to the present day, rather than around mechanisms to address the causality between state policies and the course of minority nationalisms.

The author’s choice does not allow the book to substantiate some of the critical arguments, and it reads as an agglomeration of evidence. For instance, Aslan argues that while both states adopted repression toward minority groups, the Turkish state indiscriminately targeted the Kurds whereas repression was selective in Morocco. However, she does not present systematic evidence that would support this argument. Similarly, the reader is left to wonder the scale of repression in the Turkish case. Aslan mentions that local officials rejected registering Kurdish names. It is not clear if these were isolated incidents involving a few rogue regional administrators or if they were part of a systematic effort. The latter would require evidence to determine how prevalent the practice was. Similarly, the use of historical material from the early Republican era points to less clear patterns than the author expected. Given that most initial uprisings by Kurdish tribes were organized by members of Hamidiye Regiments established to fight Armenian nationalists, it remains a question if these groups were making ethnic claims or were using their military skills to force the center into a better deal. Similarly, counterinsurgency operations in the early era were not necessarily conducted in response to a rebellion but, instead, aimed to contain tribes that engaged in banditry.