

Article

The Bureaucracy and the Policy Agenda

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Abstract

The public administration literature has been dominated by questions about how politicians can control the bureaucracy's application and implementation of laws at the back end of the policy process. Much less scholarly attention is devoted to the influence of the bureaucracy on the content and composition of the policy agenda at the front end of the process. Agenda setting is a fundamental aspect of politics, and this article examines the influence of the bureaucracy on the policy agenda and the conditions for this influence. The core proposition is that the policy agenda is larger and more diverse in political systems in which administrative professionals take up a larger share of the bureaucracy. This effect is expected to be mitigated by the involvement of elected representatives in the policymaking process. The empirical analysis supports these expectations. The findings are based on a time-series cross-section dataset from 98 Danish municipalities over 7 years containing a detailed coding of local council agendas and rich register data.

Since the US community studies of the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., [Dahl 1956; 1961; Hunter 1953; Mills 1956](#)), the importance of agenda setting (i.e., the ongoing selection of a limited number of policy problems¹ for politicians to handle) has been widely acknowledged in political science. Schattschneider is often credited as the founding father of the field with his observation that “[s]ome issues are organized into politics while others are organized out” ([Schattschneider 1960](#), 69). This identification of a “conflict of conflicts” was path-breaking, as it emphasized how political conflict is not only about decisions on issues that are already on the political agenda but also about which issues make it onto the political agenda in the first place (for recent reviews, see [Baumgartner et al. 2017; Eissler, Russell,](#)

[and Jones 2014; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014; Zahariadis 2016](#)).

Traditionally, the literature on policy agenda setting has explained the policy agenda using variables relating to party politics ([Novotny et al. 2016](#)), interest groups ([Bonafont 2016](#)), public opinion, and/or problem indicators, such as economic conditions, unemployment, or crime rates (e.g., [Baumgartner et al. 2011; Mortensen and Seeberg 2016](#)). Despite two recent exceptions ([Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Workman 2015](#)), however, the bureaucracy has been left out of the equation when it comes to the question about what or who influences the policy agenda.

This ignorance is surprising given the longstanding scholarly interest in the relationship between administration and politics (e.g., [Jacobsen 2006; Peters 2010; Svava 2001; Weber 1922; Wilson 1887](#)). It is further surprising given the importance and resources of bureaucracies in modern political systems. As argued by [Meier \(2007\)](#), any theory of politics must also be a theory of public administration. The bureaucracy does not merely implement policies at the back end of the policy process. With their expertise and specialized knowledge on various issue domains, bureaucrats

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¹We use “policy problems” and “issues” interchangeably.

filter information and generate alternatives to political decision-makers at the front end of the policy process (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Workman 2015). In other words, the bureaucracy is in a core position in the process of transforming conditions into political problems and solutions that reach the policy agenda.

This point is just as important for research in public administration as to agenda setting research. Even if the relationship between the political level and bureaucracy has featured prominently in the public administration literature, the debate has primarily centered on the back end of the policy process: How do popularly elected politicians get a bureaucracy to turn laws into rules in line with the politicians' intentions (e.g., Acs 2015; West and Raso 2013)? Although this is a natural and still highly relevant point of departure to understand the influence of bureaucracy on the output of the political system, it neglects the role of the bureaucracy in the earlier stage of the policy process, where policy problems are prioritized for action at the political level. In fairness, scholars of bureaucratic politics have emphasized how bureaucrats can advance policy proposals and ideas within their areas of expertise (e.g., Carpenter 2001; Krause 1999), but they have not been focusing on how characteristics of the bureaucracy may influence the size and issue composition of the broader policy agenda as such. Since studies in policy agenda setting document how critical this stage is for the final output of the political system, this neglect is undesirable if we are to better appreciate the significance of the bureaucracy in the political system.

To stimulate more systematic research on the agenda-setting effect of public bureaucracies, this article examines how the bureaucracy matters to the policy agenda and under what conditions it is most likely to have an effect. Following the Weberian tradition, we focus on *administrative professionals* who constitute a special part of the bureaucracy and typically have a university degree in administrative sciences, economics, or law (Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2009; Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2011). In particular, we argue that the share of administrative professionals influences the size and issue diversity of the policy agenda in the sense that when there are more administrative professionals in the administration, more issues and broader sets of issues are elevated onto the political agenda. Furthermore, applying a contingency perspective (Jacobsen 2006) to the relationship between the bureaucracy and the policy agenda, we argue that the policy agenda effect of the bureaucracy is contingent upon the politicians' involvement in the policymaking process. Although there might be other relevant contingencies, given the focus of this article, we begin by exploring the direct involvement of politicians in the policymaking process.

Examining these questions empirically requires rich and valid data on the policy agenda, the composition of the public bureaucracy, and the involvement of politicians. Being able to distinguish the effect of bureaucracy also requires a research setting in which we can control for the potentially large range of other policy agenda determinants. To meet these requirements, we base our empirical analysis on time series data (2007–2013) from all 98 Danish municipalities. As detailed below, the Danish municipalities are potent political units responsible for providing about half of all public service deliveries and accounting for around half of all public spending in Denmark. Danish municipalities employ some 500,000 persons (more than 60% of all public employees). For each municipality, we conduct a systematic content coding of the local council meeting agendas, which we analyze against data on central characteristics of the local bureaucracies. By studying the large number of Danish municipalities, we can statistically control for a range of potentially relevant variables, including population size, the economic conditions of the municipalities, and measures of the party political composition of the local councils. The article concludes with a discussion of the generalizability of the empirical findings.

The Bureaucracy and the Policy Agenda

Much policy agenda research has focused on describing how policy agendas develop over time with a special focus on the stability and change of policy agendas (e.g., Jennings, Bevan, and John 2011; Jennings and John 2011). Some studies have focused on explaining the changes in policy agendas investigating, for instance, how the size and composition of the policy agenda is shaped by party politics (Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011; Mortensen et al. 2011), economic conditions (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, chapter 8), changes in real-world problems (Baumgartner and Jones 2002), or changes in the media and public agenda (Jennings and John 2009; Soroka 2002). Meanwhile, scholars have recently started studying how bureaucracy influences what is coined “the rulemaking agenda” (Acs 2015; West and Raso 2013). Conceptually, however, this agenda is different from the policy agenda as it describes the decisions by bureaucrats on which legislative statutes to put into rules and when as opposed to which legislative statutes to consider in the first place (Boushey and McGrath 2017).

To understand the influence of bureaucracy on the policy agenda, the starting point of this article is that policymaking requires information and that one of the most important functions of the bureaucracy is to structure information about problems and alternatives and to channel it into the system. In a policy world in which bounded rationality (Simon 1947) prevents

politicians from attending to inputs proportionately (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), the processing of information from the bureaucracy to the elected politicians is critical to the policy agenda. Information and attention are closely related, and information makes politicians aware of new problems or facets of problems possibly requiring attention (Baumgartner and Jones 2015). Workman (2015) places similar emphasis on the relevance of the bureaucracy for policy agenda setting. According to Workman (2015), in addition to policy implementation, decision-makers also rely on the bureaucracy for policy feedback, problem detection, and the design of new policies. Workman (2015) thereby advances some classic perspectives on bureaucracy and public administration (Lindblom 1959; March and Olsen 1989; Simon 1947; Wildavsky 1964; Wilson 1989).

Despite the significance of the recent contributions by Workman (2015) and Baumgartner and Jones (2015), they also leave several important questions open about the agenda-setting influence of the bureaucracy. First and foremost, it is important to begin exploring whether and under what conditions bureaucracy matters to the policy agenda. Every bureaucracy of a certain size consists of different types of employees with different skills and responsibilities (e.g., Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2009; 2011; Wilson 1989). The next section focuses on a group of bureaucrats, *the administrative professionals*, who are likely to play a special role for the policy agendas.

Administrative Professionals and the Policy Agenda

Bureaucracies typically consist of agents with different educational backgrounds and responsibilities. We argue that *administrative professionals* constitute a part of the bureaucracy that is particularly likely to affect the number of policy issues up for active consideration on the agendas of the elected politicians. “Administrative professionals” refers to administrative personnel with a professional, administrative background for whom managing and developing the public sector and advising politicians is a main task (e.g., Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2009). Typically, they have a university degree in administrative sciences, economics, or law. Still, they might not be considered a *profession* in a strict sense, as defined by, for instance, Roberts and Dietrich (1999), because they might not necessarily share norms about appropriate behavior. Due to their respective educational backgrounds, however, they do possess strong analytical skills and theoretical knowledge distinguishing them from bureaucrats with other educational backgrounds (Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen. 2009; 2011).

Moreover, administrative professionals are educated and hired to be generalists rather than area specialists.

Whereas health or education professionals in the organization can be expected to try to gain professional autonomy from political interference in their area, administrative professionals may be more politically oriented (Smith and Christensen 2016). These skills allow administrative professionals—and their professional interest encourages them—to identify, connect, and process a wide range of potentially sensitive political problems. In contrast to bureaucrats with a more sector-specific educational background, they may also be able to communicate the identification of such problems to politicians more credibly.²

Providing relevant input to the policy agenda puts great demands on the bureaucracy. Analytical expertise is necessary in order to cut through large amounts of information, eliminate noise, and channel issues to the political level. Moreover, input to the policy agenda should be legally sound, economically possible, and politically feasible (Workman 2015, 42). The competencies to meet these demands vary among the different professions employed in the public administration (Egeberg and Trondal 2009). Bureaucrats who are highly skilled in political, legal, and economic matters, such as administrative professionals, can be expected to be better equipped to lift and fit issues to the political level than those with more limited training in these areas. For instance, even if chemists in the sewage section of a body of public administration might be the most capable of detecting a growing risk of water pollution, administrative professionals are best equipped to pick up on this potential problem and process the information in a manner that elevates it to the political level.³

Another contrast between administrative professionals and other public employees (e.g., engineers, school principals) is that the latter groups are often concerned with implementation and service delivery, whereas administrative professionals are skilled in planning and evaluation and often more focused on legislative proposals, future problems, and policy change and development. For instance, research addressing local government innovation has shown that the increased presence of administrative professionals in local government administration enhances

²Hird (2005) shows how professionals in US nonpartisan, publicly funded policy research organizations working on the borders of the US public administration serve a similar role as information processors. Hence, he also identifies the need to nuance the view of bureaucrats and their role in the policy process.

³An alternative mechanism is that the chemist and the administrative professional forward equal amounts of issues for the political agenda, but only the latter’s proposal is picked up by the politicians due to reputation. Based on previous literature (Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2011; Hird 2005), the mechanism we put forward appears more plausible than this alternative, even if both are at play.

the likelihood of adopting new, untried public services (Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2011). This is argued to be due to the importance of administrative professionals to innovation because of their analytical skills and theoretical knowledge. They are entrepreneurs, able to take risks and to work outside of the standard operating procedures and routines within an organization (Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2011, 581–2). Hence, they are qualitatively different from public sector employees who are specialized in casework and in implementing political decisions.

All else equal, then, what difference would it make to the policy agenda to staff a bureaucracy with a relatively larger share of administrative professionals? When combining the above characterization of administrative professionals with the work of Baumgartner and Jones (2015) and Workman (2015), who have shown that a larger bureaucracy means a larger policy agenda, we argue that this effect of the bureaucracy is especially strong in more professionalized bureaucracies. In other words, we expect the size and diversity of the policy agenda to increase with more administrative professionals. Here, the sheer number of administrative professionals is not what matters—perhaps except in very small bureaucracies—but rather the relative share. The question is not if there are 50 or 60 administrative professionals in the organization but if the hiring of administrative professionals replaces other types of bureaucrats. The latter may indicate that the bureaucracy prioritizes the processing of information to the political level, which increases the likelihood that the bureaucracy influences the general policy agenda. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The larger the share of administrative professionals in the bureaucracy, the greater the number of issues on the policy agenda and the greater the issue diversity of the policy agenda.

In a recent study of bureaucratic influence in US state legislatures, Boushey and McGrath (2017) forcefully argue and show that the bureaucratic influence on administrative rulemaking is conditioned on the relative degrees of professionalization of the state legislative and executive branches. This argument is consistent with the foundational agenda-setting assumption of policymakers having limited capacities and attention spans (Jones 1994; 2001). However, although the cognitive limitations of policymakers are assumed to be invariant in this body of work, Boushey and McGrath (2017) point out that there may be variation in the time and attention politicians devote to politics. Here, we extend their point and argue that the involvement of politicians not only moderates bureaucratic influence on administrative rulemaking but also the policy agenda influence of administrative

professionals. We focus on two aspects of the involvement of politicians in the policymaking process.

First, the attention and involvement of politicians possibly depend on the organization of the policymaking process. The committee structure of the political system has been studied extensively in research on the US Congress (Groseclose 1994; Shepsle and Weingast 1985; Sprague 2008) and political systems from other countries, including Danish municipalities (Bækgaard 2010; 2011). Important agenda setting studies indicate that the committee structure shapes political attention (Sheingate 2006; Talbert, Jones, and Baumgartner 1995). Within its jurisdiction, a committee may initiate hearings and investigations to follow an issue area closely. Thus, like the bureaucracy, committees consisting of elected representatives also process information and generate input to the political agenda.

The effect of committees, however, may depend on their organization (Sheingate 2006; Talbert, Jones, and Baumgartner 1995). We argue that the number of committees with elected officials in general will dampen the policy agenda effect of administrative professionals. If a large, specialized committee structure is in place, the political level will already be familiar with many different issues and closely involved in building the policy agenda. Thus, the information processing of the bureaucracy will make less of a difference because elected officials will be both broadly and deeply involved in the policymaking process.⁴ Conversely, if there are few committees, the direct and broad involvement of the political level may be limited and the bureaucracy can have a greater impact on the policy agenda. In other words, we expect that a professionalized bureaucracy may be an important substitute to a well-developed and highly specialized committee system, assuring that otherwise neglected issues actually enter the decision agenda of the political assembly.

The second aspect of political involvement that we examine is the professionalization of elected politicians. In political systems with higher compensation for elected representatives, politicians can often spend more time on politics and possess more expertise on policy matters. The policy agenda effect of administrative professionals might therefore decrease, because the politicians will be less dependent on the skills of the administrative professionals. This is consistent with the aforementioned US literature on state regulation, which shows that “... the eroding policy expertise of state legislators has resulted in increased bureaucratic participation in the policy process,

⁴In our analysis, we control for the size of the council to take into account that many committees in a small council may not allow for this specialization and capacity at the political level.

as amateur politicians rely more heavily on professionalized executive agencies to define problems and develop solutions” (Boushey and McGrath 2017, 85). Our reasoning is that such an effect of political involvement on regulation must go through an effect on the policy agenda. As discussed below, we utilize a measure of councilor remuneration as the indicator of how professionalized the elected politicians are. This corresponds directly to the measure used by Boushey and McGrath (2017) in their study of US states. Theoretically, both the committee structure and the councilor remuneration are seen as two different indicators of the degree of politicians’ involvement in the policymaking process:

Hypothesis 2: The policy agenda influence of administrative professionals decreases as the number of standing committees increases.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the remuneration of the politicians, the less policy agenda influence of administrative professionals.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The Danish Municipalities

Most of the advances in research on agenda setting builds on studies of one national, political system over time. The work by Baumgartner and Jones (2015) and Workman (2015) offers some of the most recent contributions. A key limitation of this analytical approach is the difficulty in estimating the effect of slow-moving characteristics of the political system, which might possibly lead to, for example, the underestimation of the impact of differences in the bureaucracy on the content and structure of the policy agenda. Cross-national studies are also constrained by limited access to comparable data on the bureaucracy as well as limited statistical control possibilities given the low number of observations.

To overcome these challenges, we utilize the 98 municipalities in Denmark to examine the hypotheses derived above. A major advantage of this choice of research unit is the high comparability of units across time and space, which enables the control for a range of potentially relevant alternative explanations. Although Denmark can be characterized as a unitary parliamentary state, there is substantially more local autonomy than is usually found in such states (Boadway and Shah 2009, 5). As illustrated by the key facts of the Danish municipalities summarized in table 1, they are potent political units with directly elected politicians and considerable autonomy from the national level of government, which renders them well-suited for generating insight into the workings of political decision-making

Table 1. Key Facts About Danish Local Governments

Key Facts	Mean ^a
Council members	25
Parties in council	6 ^b
Turnout	71.9%
Council members average working hours/week	18.3
Pct. of revenue from local taxes	75%
Share of public employees at local level	65% (500,000 employees)
Share of GDP spent at local level	20%

Note: ^aAverage across municipalities at/around the 2013 election.

^bApart from the parties also represented in the national parliament, representatives from “local party lists” are typically elected together with independents.

systems. Danish municipalities have both breadth and depth in their responsibilities to deliver public services on a wide number of key policy areas, including public schools, job training, daycare, eldercare, road and park maintenance, disaster relief, and environmental control. Thus, the municipalities can be characterized as multi-purpose political units. Apart from block grants from the central government, a main source of local government revenue comes from income taxes set by the local councils and which range between 22.5% and 27.8% across municipalities (2017 data). In competitive elections with high voter turnout, the local representatives are elected every 4 years (Bækgaard and Jensen 2011) and form durable coalitions in the council through their membership of competitive political parties (Bækgaard et al. 2014; Serritzlew, Blom-Hansen, and Skjæveland 2010). A committee form of government is used in the municipalities, where standing committees composed of city council members oversee the daily administration of their jurisdiction (Bækgaard 2011). At public council meetings, typically held once or twice monthly, the city council makes final decisions.

Measuring the Local Policy Agenda

Policy agendas have been operationalized and measured in several ways. At the national level of policymaking, prime ministers’ speeches, congressional hearings, parliamentary debates, legislative activity, and budgets have all been used as indicators of the policy agenda. A distinction is normally drawn between the systemic and governmental agendas (Cobb and Elder 1983). The issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention are usually considered part of the systemic agenda, whereas the governmental agenda is more narrowly defined as the set of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of the decision makers (Cobb and Elder 1983, 86).

The council agendas utilized in this study come very close to what could be termed a *local governmental agenda*. This includes the issues that are up for active and serious consideration at local council meetings. Furthermore, no nationally defined institutional rules set the local council agendas; each local council puts together its own.⁵ From the homepages of each municipality, we have collected and counted the number of points on the docket for local council meetings and coded the content of each agenda point. We have done so for all of the council meetings for each municipality for the years 2007 through 2013.⁶ For the content coding, we build on the issue coding scheme of the comparative agendas project (www.comparativeagendas.info), which identifies the substance of an item on the agenda. Using this scheme, each item on the council agendas has been coded into one of 189 different subcategories. The topic codes are found in [Supplementary Table S1](#). Trained student coders have been used to code the material in combination with machine coding.⁷

To measure the topical diversity of the policy agenda, we count the number of categories used every year to code the council agendas of a municipality. On average, 68 of the 189 available issue categories are used. There is substantial variation in the diversity of the council agendas. In the municipalities with the least diverse agendas, we find years where only 36 issue categories are employed, whereas up to 110 issue categories are used in the coding of other council agendas.

The diversity of an agenda depends on the number of different issues as well as the variation in the space allocated to each issue. Two municipalities might have the same number of issues on the agenda, but while the first one might spend most of its time on only a few such issues, attention is more evenly distributed in the second. In order to capture these differences, we use the entropy score commonly used in agenda setting studies ([Baumgartner and Jones 2015](#); [Jennings et al. 2011](#)). For the entropy score, we follow the recommendations of [Boydston, Bevan, and Thomas \(2014\)](#) and use Shannon's H, which is calculated by multiplying the proportion of the agenda that each item receives by the natural log of that proportion, then taking the negative

sum of those products: $-\sum_{i=1}^n (p(x_i)) \cdot \ln p(x_i)$, where x_i

represents an item, $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of the total attention the item receives, and $\ln(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the item receives. The entropy score increases as the spread of attention across all items becomes more equal ([Boydston, Bevan, and Thomas 2014](#)). Across the council agendas of the 98 municipalities, the entropy score varies from 2.9 to 4.2 with a mean of 3.8. This slightly exceeds the entropy scores reported by [Jennings et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Mortensen et al. \(2011\)](#) for the policy agendas of Western European countries, which range from about 1.2 to 2.7 with an average of 2.1–2.4. As a comparable codebook is applied in our study and the national study, these entropy scores corroborate that the Danish local councils generally deal with many different issues.

Administrative Professionals and Standing Committees

After a local government reform in 2007 merged many of the smaller municipalities, reducing the number of municipalities from 271 to 98,⁸ the number of administrative professionals in each municipality has been tallied annually along with the total number of administrative personnel. In combination with the detailed content coding of the issues on the council agendas, this large- n research design with comparable yet not identical units of analysis offers an opportunity to conduct a fine-grained investigation of the impact of the bureaucracy on the local policy agenda.

The administrative professionals are not politically appointed but hired based on a classic merit system. Ultimately, the bureaucracy serves the council and whereas the top city manager is typically hired on a short-term contract ([Christensen et al. 2014](#)), the administrative professionals are generally more sheltered from direct political pressure through the Danish public law of civil servants and a strong code of conduct.

These professionals typically hold university degrees in law, economics, or public administration, hold generalist position in the administration, often as a manager, and are members of *DJØF*, the Danish professional association for public managers, lawyers, and economists. However, it can be hard to capture the population of administrative professionals based on only information about their educational background, employment position, or union membership. Relying only on educational information might include civil servants that despite a relevant education to be administrative professionals do not work as such. Looking only at union-membership might under- or overestimate the

⁵National level regulation may require that some issues—such as an annual local school performance report—are placed on the council agendas, but this is the exception and it affects all municipalities equally, meaning that it cannot account for the agenda variation observed below.

⁶The comprehensive reform of local government in 2007 involving large-scale municipal mergers prevents an extension of the time series further back in time. Furthermore, given the massive task of content coding these ~200,000 agenda dockets, the time series ends in 2013, where the data collection process was initiated.

⁷See [Loftis and Mortensen \(2017\)](#) for a description of the coding strategy, including intercoder-reliability tests.

⁸239 municipalities were merged to form 66 new municipalities, whereas 32 municipalities remained unchanged.

true number of administrative professionals due to self-selection bias. Hence, to arrive at the most valid and reliable indicator, we combine three indicators into an index. Our first indicator is taken from previous work (Bhatti, Olsen, and Pedersen 2009, 2011), and from each municipality and each year we gather from the *DJØF* member database information about the number of municipal employees who are also *DJØF* members. Many of the other administrative employees, typically caseworkers and secretaries, are members of *HK*, the “white-collar office workers’ union.” Moreover, from the Danish Statistical Bureau (Statistics Denmark), we extract information on the number of employees in each municipality and for each year who hold university degrees at the master level or higher in law, economics, or public administration. Finally, as an indicator of employment position, we extract the number of municipal employees who are covered by a collective agreement negotiated by *DJØF* from the Danish Public Salary Office (www.fldnet.dk).

With factor loadings between 0.85 and 0.91, our three variables are highly correlated despite the fact that they come from independent sources (the eigenvalue of the first factor in the principal factor analysis is 2.35, and the Cronbach’s alpha is 0.9; see Table A3). Hence, we are confident that our index is a useful proxy for the number of administrative professionals, and we construct the index by adding the three variables and dividing by three. Comfortingly, our index approximates a normal distribution (Figure A1).

Most Danish municipalities are broadly organized according to policy domains corresponding to the main tasks of local governance, the most common being schools, water supply, sewage, roads, elderly care, culture, and leisure. Aggregate data from the Danish Public Salary Office (KRL 2017) suggest that administrative professionals are not concentrated in any one issue domain but are quite evenly scattered among them. More importantly, the vast majority of administrative professionals (roughly 75%) are located in the central administration at the city/town hall, which coordinates across domains and prepares bills to the council floor. Hence, we should not expect issue-specific effects in which, say, primary education makes it to the political agenda more often in a bureaucracy with a high share of administrative professionals. Consistent with the theoretical argument, this instead points to an influence on the size and diversity of the local government agenda as such. Moreover, *DJØF* (2017) membership data reveals that a high proportion of the administrative professionals are in central management and advisory positions. This underlines how administrative professionals engage with the political level to develop public policies.

Particularly, we measure our main independent variable as the number of administrative professionals (our index) per 100 administrative employees in the municipality. Along with this measure, we control for the total number of administrative employees in the municipality (i.e., not service providers such as teachers and daycare workers). As explained above, we use this measure to study the implications of administrative professionals as part of the composition of the full administration. If administrative professionals make up a large part of the bureaucracy, we expect the processing information to the political agenda to be one of its key tasks. Only a relative measure reveals the commitment of the bureaucracy to prioritize this task. We control for the total number of administrative employees to take into account that the ratio of administrative professionals may change not because of a change in the number of administrative professionals but because of general changes in the administration unrelated to the commitment to hire administrative professionals. Had we instead relied on an absolute measure of administrative professionals, our measure would not have told if an increase in their number truly reflected an increased role for administrative professionals in the bureaucracy or if such increase was only part of a broader expansion of the entire administration potentially leaving the administrative professionals less important in the administration.

To examine Hypothesis 2, we count the number of permanent standing political committees from official municipal documents. These are committees that each new council agree on forming after the election for the coming term and do not include the mandatory committee for economic affairs. Given that a local election took place at the end of 2009, for observations 2007–2009 and 2010–2013, respectively, the same score is used for each municipality. With respect to Hypothesis 3, we use councilor remuneration collected from the Danish Statistical Bureau (Statistics Denmark 2017). We have extracted the total sum of payment (real prices) for each council in each year and divided it by the number of council members. We follow Boushey and McGrath (2017) and take remuneration as a valid proxy for politicians’ professionalization.⁹ To the extent that salary is based on the hours put into the job as councilors, it reflects professionalization in the sense that it takes time to excel in a job. Councilors who invest more time

⁹The formal rules for financial remuneration are regulated by the departmental order on remuneration for local politicians (Vederlagsbekendtgørelsen 2016). The amount contains a fixed element which is increasing with municipality size. The municipalities have wide discretion, however, with respect to whether and to what extent this fixed element is supplemented by additional salaries for committee appointments and other posts.

can be expected to deliver more and to rely less on administrative professionals to form the policy agenda. Moreover, a higher salary might attract more dedicated and competent councilors to public service. Hence, salary is a central indicator of the involvement and professionalization of the local councilors.

Detailed summary statistics of the main variables in the analysis are reported in the appendix (Table A4). Important for our analysis, the statistics reveal substantial variation, both over time and across units. The number of permanent political committees varies considerably (from 2 to more than 10). Moreover, the standard deviation of the number of administrative professionals per 100 administrative employees reflects how the ratio of administrative professionals in the municipalities has generally grown each year. The same is true for our diversity measure: more issues have come to the policy agenda in our period of analysis. This might obviously suggest that if our empirical analysis shows a relationship between administrative professionals and the policy agenda, it may simply be an artifact of the reorganization in 2007. To control for this we add a dummy variable to the analysis separating merged from non-merged municipalities.

The concentration of administrative professionals is partly—but far from fully—correlated with the municipal population size, the size of the public administration at large, and the number of standing committees (correlation coefficients are shown in Table A2). Importantly, we are therefore able to disentangle the impact of administrative professionals from that of other determinants of the city council agenda, including other characteristics of the local administration.

To give a better sense of the variation underlying the quantitative results reported below, table 2 provides information about four of our 98 municipalities. Consider for example Albertslund and Herlev, two municipalities in the metropolitan area of the Danish capital of Copenhagen, both of which have a population with relatively weak socio-economic backgrounds and both of which have an average number of council committees and socialist mayors. Nevertheless, the council agenda covers many more issues in the former than the latter municipality. This might reflect the slight difference in the socio-economic index or the

number of committees but possibly also reflects the much higher share of administrative professionals in Albertslund compared to Herlev. A similar comparison could be made for a set of municipalities that are almost opposite on the background variables compared to Albertslund and Herlev but with a similar agenda diversity. Both located in rural Denmark, far from the capital and governed by liberal-conservative mayors and with low socio-economic pressure, one might expect Kerteminde and Rebild to have rather similar council agendas, but the composition of the respective council agendas proves highly unequal. Rebild, with the most diverse council agenda, has almost twice the number of administrative professionals per 100 administrative employees. These are the sorts of puzzles that will be subjected to multivariate statistical testing in the analysis reported below.

Controls

One advantage of studying the Danish municipalities is that we have access to a number of potentially important control variables, including the number of residents, the degree of urbanization, and the socio-economic pressures measured using an index compiled by the Danish Ministry of the Interior and Social Policy, which includes indicators of the percentage of residents without employment, with limited education, and with low income. Moreover, it may be the strength of the political level vis-à-vis the bureaucracy—where the political level is unable to resist the pressure from the bureaucracy—and not the professionalization of the politicians that restrain the influence of administrative professionals. Directly measuring the relationship between the bureaucracy and the political level is difficult, but we believe that several of our controls are relevant. Strong and durable political coalitions might be harder to form in a context with many political parties, and the absence of such coalitions might offer the bureaucracy greater opportunity to influence the political agenda. We control for this possibility by including the number of effective parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) in the local council. Based on a similar argument, we also control for the number of council members. Furthermore, we control for the party color of the mayor, as a socialist majority might be more receptive

Table 2. Summary Statistics for Four of the 98 Danish Municipalities (Averages 2007–2013)

Municipality	Residents	Socio-economic Index	Committees	Number of Issues on the Agenda	Administrative Professionals (Percentages)	Mayor
Albertslund	27,733	1.68	6	79.3	9.2	Socialist
Herlev	26,666	1.32	5	45.9	6.3	Socialist
Rebild	28,836	0.67	5	75.4	7.8	Liberal/conservative
Kerteminde	23,715	0.82	5	59.3	3.8	Liberal/conservative

Table 3. The Effect of Administrative Professionals on Agenda Size and Agenda Diversity in Danish Municipalities 2008–2013

	Number of Issues		Entropy	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Administrative professionals _{<i>t</i>-1}	1.32** (0.61)	1.23* (0.62)	0.03** (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)
Size of the public administration _{<i>t</i>-1}		-0.01 (0.01)		-0.00 (0.00)
Mayor (left = 1)	-0.58 (1.13)	-0.60 (1.11)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Effective parties	0.49 (1.11)	0.41 (1.09)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Election year (2009 = 1)	3.43*** (1.11)	3.32*** (1.09)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Size of council	-0.01 (0.30)	0.00 (0.29)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Standing committees	0.58 (0.46)	0.56 (0.46)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Resource pressure	-0.09 (0.14)	-0.10 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)
Socio-economic problems	-4.87 (9.52)	-4.36 (9.55)	-0.26 (0.19)	-0.26 (0.19)
Residents	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Urbanization	1.40** (0.61)	1.43** (0.61)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
<i>Y</i> _{<i>t</i>-1}	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
Constant	-44.81 (56.69)	-47.01 (56.87)	3.40*** (1.03)	3.36*** (1.04)
Observations	466	466	466	466

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Year dummies not reported in the table.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (two-sided tests).

to input from the bureaucracy that invites politicians to consider a new problem and potentially take on a new task. Summary statistics and source descriptions of the control variables used in the analysis are presented in [Table A1](#).

To estimate the model, we use fixed effects with municipalities as our panels and robust standard errors. This choice of estimation is corroborated by a Hausman test, which indicates that fixed effects are preferable to random effects. The models also include year dummies as well as a lagged dependent variable to account for the autocorrelation revealed by diagnostic tests.¹⁰ To ensure a correct order of time, the main independent variables enter the model with a 1-year lag. We explore the direction of causality in greater detail after the main findings have been reported.

Findings

Our analysis of the 98 Danish municipalities shows that the percentage of administrative professionals matters to the local council agendas. Taking our control variables into account, the diversity of the council agenda systematically increases as the share of administrative professionals in the bureaucracy increases. According to the coefficients in [table 3](#), a municipality that has one more administrative professional per 100 administrative employees typically also has a little more than one more issue area on its agenda, and its entropy score is 0.03 points higher (ranging from 2.9 to 4.2).

¹⁰Additional analyses show that including a count variable does not change the results, which further corroborates that the statistical relationship found between our dependent and independent variables is not merely a product of a common time trend.

The percentage of administrative professionals varies from 2% of the total number of administrators in some municipalities to more than 15% in others. Thus, the span in the diversity of the council agendas can be quite marked between local councils. In the municipality with only two administrative professionals per 100 administrative employees, the council agenda is predicted to contain 63 issue categories. This figure is 79 in the municipality with 15 administrative professionals per 100 administrative employees. Thus, the difference is quite substantial, which supports Hypothesis 1.

The results also show that the administrative professionals make a difference to the council agenda, not the size of the administration as such. The effect of the total number of administrators in the municipality is statistically and substantially insignificant according to the results in [table 3](#). This is in accordance with our theoretical argument. Issues are not brought into the policy agenda by ordinary administrators but rather by skilled administrative professionals typically employed in central management positions from which they can advise the politicians and shape the development of the council agenda.

Additional analyses show that the effect also holds up when controlling for the sheer size of the council agendas measured simply as the number of items on the dockets. This implies that increasing the number of administrative professionals in the bureaucracy does not just lead to more of the same, but rather to a more diverse policy agenda, as hypothesized.¹¹ Furthermore, we have explored the effects of leaving out the measure

¹¹These results are shown in [Supplementary Table S2](#).

Table 4. The Effect of Agenda Size and Agenda Diversity on the Number of Administrative Professionals in Danish Municipalities 2008–2013

	Administrative Professionals					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Number of issues _{<i>t-1</i>}	-0.01* (0.00)		-0.01* (0.00)			
Number of issues _{<i>t-2</i>}		-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)			
Attention entropy _{<i>t-1</i>}				-0.56** (0.23)		-0.56** (0.23)
Attention entropy _{<i>t-2</i>}					-0.20 (0.20)	-0.18 (0.19)
Size of the public administration _{<i>t-1</i>}	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Mayor (left = 1)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.10 (0.08)
Effective parties	0.02 (0.09)	0.01 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)
Election year (2009 = 1)	-0.42*** (0.10)	-0.42*** (0.10)	-0.42*** (0.10)	-0.45*** (0.10)	-0.43*** (0.10)	-0.46*** (0.10)
Size of council	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Standing committees	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.03)
Resource pressure	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Socio-economic problems	0.92 (0.84)	0.89 (0.86)	0.93 (0.85)	0.91 (0.83)	0.94 (0.86)	0.97 (0.84)
Residents	0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)
Urbanization	0.07* (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)	0.07 (0.05)	0.08* (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
<i>Y</i> _{<i>t-1</i>}	0.50*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)	0.50*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)
Constant	-6.67 (4.71)	-7.04 (4.63)	-6.36 (4.74)	-4.99 (4.89)	-6.18 (4.96)	-4.01 (5.22)
Observations	465	465	465	465	465	465

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Year dummies not reported in the table.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (two-sided tests).

of administrative professionals in order to examine whether it is a mediator of some of the other factors included in the models. This does not turn out to be the case.¹² None of the other variables changes direction or statistical significance when leaving out the administrative professionals. This offers further indication that the measure of administrative professionals brings added explanatory value to the table.

Reverse causality is a concern when studying the relationship between the bureaucracy and the council agendas. Analytically, a very diverse council agenda might well lead to demands for more administrative professionals to implement decisions from the council meetings. First, however, this concern is mitigated by the use of lagged measures of the bureaucracy variable in table 3. Second, we have estimated alternative models, where the proportion of administrative professionals is estimated as a function of the diversity of the council agendas (lagged 1 or 2 years). Table 4 reports the results of this analysis, which clearly support the interpretation that the administrative professionals positively influence the council agendas rather than the other way around. A 1-year lagged agenda diversity does systematically influence the number of administrative professionals in the bureaucracy, but it does so negatively. Although this mechanism may call for further exploration, the results in table 4 strengthen the confidence in the interpretation of the results from table 3. In combination with the statistical control for a range of other potentially

confounding factors, this provides evidence in support of the claim that administrative professionals draw the attention of politicians to more issues.

Based on Hypotheses 2 and 3, we conclude the analysis by investigating if the effect of administrative professionals systematically diminishes with the involvement of the politicians in the policymaking process. In accordance with Hypothesis 2, the influence of administrative professionals on the council agenda decreases as the number of committees increases. This suggests that the effect of administrative professionals is higher in municipalities where a limited number of standing committees channels information and demands into the political system. This result applies to the number of issue categories on the council agenda as well as the entropy score and is documented by the negative sign of the $A \times B$ interaction terms in table 5. It is worth noticing that the number of committees had a statistically insignificant effect in the noninteractive analysis in table 3, which suggests that the influence of administrative professionals and the number of committees on the policy agenda is truly conditional rather than merely additive.

In accordance with Hypothesis 3, we find a diminishing effect of administrative professionals at higher levels of counselor remuneration. To illustrate, average remuneration ranges from DKK 113,000–374,000 across municipalities, and if it changes only by one standard deviation (DKK 35,000), the marginal effect of an additional administrative professional on the number of issues on the council agenda decreases ten

¹²These results are shown in Supplementary Table S3.

Table 5. The Effect of Administrative Professionals on Agenda Size and Agenda Diversity at Increasing Numbers of Committees and Increasing Average Councilor Remuneration in Danish Municipalities 2008–2013

	Number of Issues	Number of Issues	Entropy	Entropy
(A) Administrative professionals _{<i>t</i>-1}	3.58*** (0.96)	3.67*** (1.09)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.02)
(B) Standing committees	2.87** (1.13)		0.03* (0.02)	
(C) Councilor remuneration		0.10*** (0.04)		0.00* (0.00)
A × B	-0.45*** (0.16)		-0.01** (0.00)	
A × C		-0.01** (0.01)		-0.0001* (0.00)
Public administration _{<i>t</i>-1}	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Mayor (left = 1)	-1.05 (1.18)	-0.51 (1.15)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Effective parties	0.08 (1.08)	0.54 (1.11)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Election year (2009 = 1)	2.88*** (1.07)	3.38*** (1.12)	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Size of council	0.04 (0.29)	0.18 (0.29)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Resource pressure	-0.11 (0.14)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)
Socio-economic problems	-4.44 (9.54)	-4.39 (9.45)	-0.26 (0.19)	-0.25 (0.19)
Residents	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Urbanization	1.25** (0.54)	1.49** (0.61)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
<i>Y</i> _{<i>t</i>-1}	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
Constant	-41.78 (52.98)	-76.29 (58.43)	3.43*** (0.98)	2.87*** (1.05)
Observations	466	466	466	466

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Year dummies not reported. Councilor remuneration is measured in DKK 1000 (Danish Kroner).

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (two-sided tests).

percent. Hence, even if a very professional political level (i.e., with high remuneration) does not remove the effect of administrative professionals, the diminishing effect is quite substantial. In line with the estimated effect of committees, this also suggests that administrative professionals are more important to the council agenda when the political level is unable to feed and form the agenda on its own due to a lack of resources and time. This is indicated by the negative sign of the A × C interaction term in table 5.

To further spell out these conditional effects, we have visualized the marginal effect of administrative professionals at increasing number of committees in figure 1. The slope of the line in figure 1 shows how substantial the conditional effect of committees is. With few committees, an extra administrative professional per 100 administrative employees brings, on average, almost three additional issue areas to the council agenda. This is more than twice the average effect in table 3. At about nine committees, the other end of our measure of committees, the number of professionals no longer makes a difference to the council agenda. This result may be interpreted as evidence that the bureaucracy takes over and helps supplement the policy agenda by focusing on issues that are ignored in narrow committee systems.

CONCLUSION

Bureaucracy matters. We already knew that, but disproportionately many studies have examined the effect of the bureaucracy from an implementation perspective and/

or looked at how bureaucratic interests may shape the policy within particular policy domains. Furthermore, the bureaucracy has been ignored in most previous policy agenda setting studies. This article has shown that the composition of the bureaucracy matters in the agenda-setting phase of the policymaking process. In particular, the share of administrative professionals in the bureaucracy has been shown to have a positive effect on the number of issues and composition of the local council agendas. This is an important message to policy agenda setting scholars who have traditionally paid very little attention to the agenda-setting effects of the bureaucracy.

A particular strength of these results is the fact that the large- n study allows for the statistical control of a range of possible confounders. The large number of municipalities also allows us to begin examining conditional effects. Particularly, the article focused on various indicators of the involvement of politicians in the policymaking process and revealed an important interaction effect between two indicators of the involvement of politicians, namely the committee system and the councilors' remuneration in relation to the effect of administrative professionals. A plausible interpretation of this effect is that administrative professionals take over and help to qualify and supplement the council agenda by focusing on issues that tend to be ignored in narrow committee systems or when council members do not have the time to process problems themselves.

The political systems at the local and national levels are obviously not identical. In terms of generalizability,

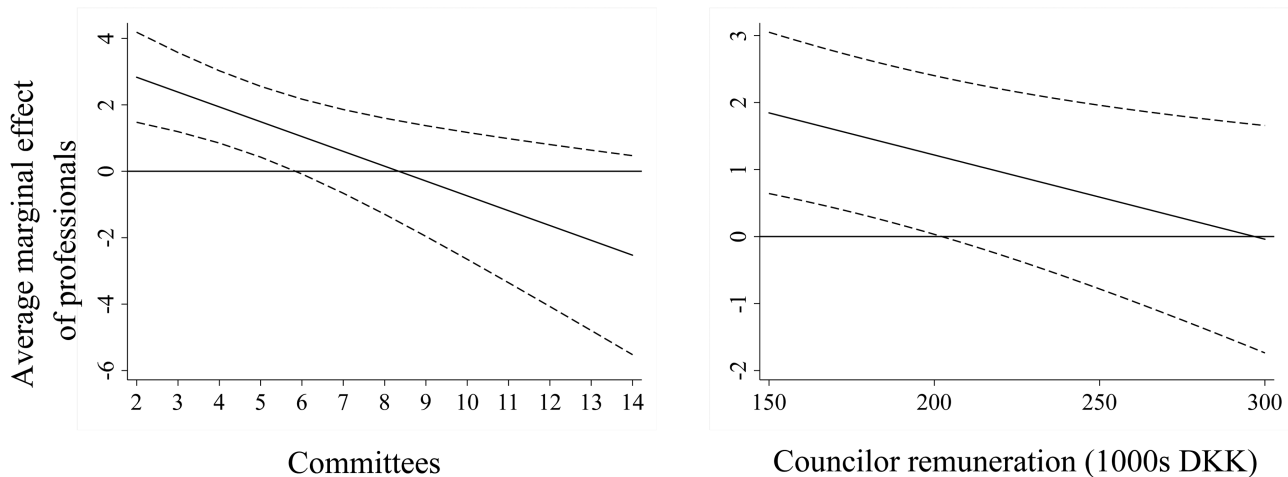


Figure 1. The Average Marginal Effect of Administrative Professionals on Agenda Diversity at Increasing Numbers of Committees and at Increasing Councilor Remuneration. *Note:* The Figure is Based on the Results in table 5. Dashed Lines Represent 95% Confidence Intervals.

however, we should expect our results to apply beyond Danish municipalities. The professionalization of the bureaucracy is a trend observed in most Western political systems, and there is reason to expect to see the effects on the policy agenda identified in our analysis, depending on the institutional setup of the political system, such as the committee structure. That said, and given our finding that bureaucratic influence diminishes with the professionalization of politicians, our results may travel best at the sub-national level (local and regional), where the professionalization of politicians can vary considerably and sometimes be very low. This is rarely the case at the national level. The evidence from the studies of US state legislatures by Boushey and McGrath (2017) and Hird (2005) hint at the potential to generalize our results to the subnational level in other countries.

Both the general and conditional effects obviously raise new questions about the mechanisms behind these effects as well as the scope conditions of bureaucratic influence. First and foremost, the quantitative results invite further investigation of why we observe these effects. What is it about administrative professionals that makes them important to the policy agenda? And how do they exert their influence? An avenue for comparative research could also be to compare the effects of administrative professionals with other types of bureaucrats, such as politically appointed advisors. Kingdon (1995), for instance, argued that the latter are more powerful agenda setters than civil servants, but this proposition has yet to be systematically examined. Furthermore, given the fact that this article shows that administrative professionals make a difference to the policy agenda also calls for further investigation into the decision to hire few or many administrative professionals. Is it an agenda-setting effect that is calculated and anticipated by the local deciding coalition?

Or is it an unintended side effect? In pursuing these new research questions, much can probably be learned by further investigating the local government level of policymaking.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online (www.jpart.oxfordjournals.org).

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Appendix

Table A1. Summary Statistics and Data Sources for Control Variables

Variable	Mean	Std.	Min	Max	Data Source
Mayor (left-wing = 1)	0.5	0.5	0	1	Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs (www.noegletal.dk)
Effective number of parties	3.7	0.8	1.9	6.8	Statistics Denmark (www.statistikbanken.dk) and www.kmdvalg.dk
Size of council (# of members)	26.0	5.4	15	55	Statistics Denmark (www.statistikbanken.dk)
Resource pressure	100.6	4.7	85.9	109.9	KORA and Statistics Denmark
Socio-economic problems	0.95	0.2	0.5	1.8	Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs (www.noegletal.dk)
Residents	58,798	63,730	12,399	559,440	Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs (www.noegletal.dk)
Urbanization	83.8	11.8	57.7	100	Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs (www.noegletal.dk)

Note: $N = 94$ (municipalities) $\times 6$ (years) = 564 observations on all variables.

Table A2. Correlation Matrix

	Administrative Professionals	Size of Public Administration	Standing Committees
Size of public administration	0.41		
Standing committees	-0.01	0.17	
Residents	0.40	0.99	0.18

Table A3. Factor Analysis of Three Indicators of Administrative Professionals

Administrative Professionals Based on...	Factor Loadings
...union membership	0.91
...collective agreement	0.85
...education	0.89

Note: Principal factor analysis. Eigenvalue factor 1 = 2.35; Cronbach's alpha = 0.90.

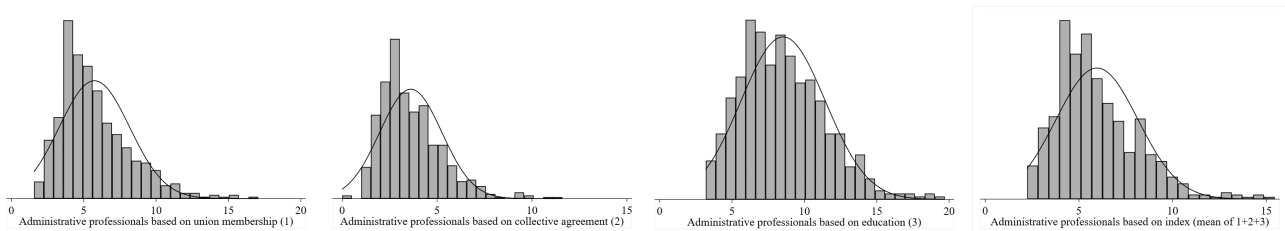


Figure A1. Distribution of Administrative Professionals Across Categories.

Table A4. Summary Statistics, Danish Municipalities 2008–2013

Variable		N	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
Administrative professionals per 100 public administrators	Overall	560	6.0	2.2	2.2	15.5
	Between	94		2.5	2.5	14.1
	Within	6		0.66	3.9	8.2
Number of employees in the public administration	Overall	563	797.9	959.3	130.0	8412.0
	Between	94		961.5	140.0	7968.3
	Within	6		49.0	258.2	1249.6
Standing committees	Overall	563	5.9	1.6	2	14
	Between	94		1.4	2	10.7
	Within	6		0.7	3.9	9.3
Councilor remuneration (DDK 1000)	Overall	563	192.3	39.0	113.1	436.0
	Between	94		33.1	124.5	325.9
	Within	6		21.0	135.6	306.2
Residents (1,000s)	Overall	563	58.8	63.7	12.4	559.4
	Between	94		63.9	13.4	534.1
	Within	6		20.3	34.6	841.3
Number of issues on council agendas	Overall	563	68.0	10.7	36	110
	Between	94		9.5	43	100.8
	Within	6		5.0	50.6	86.7
Entropy of council agendas	Overall	563	3.8	0.2	2.9	4.2
	Between	94		0.2	3.2	4.1
	Within	6		0.1	3.4	4.1

Note: $N = 94$ (municipalities) $\times 6$ (years) = 563 observations. Four municipalities are left out due to missing observations on one or more variables. The between-estimate gives the average across municipalities of the average estimate over time for each municipality. The within-estimate gives the average across municipalities of the average change within each municipality over time.

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