Building Bridges, Seeking Support, or in Need of Expertise?

The importance of the bureaucracy in the decision-making process of modern societies has become almost axiomatic. It is true that the growth of executive power, de facto rule-making power in the bureaucracy, growing complexity of rule-making, the emergence of delegated legislation, the burgeoning of welfare state activity, the needs of regulatory and developmental bureaucratic agencies … all help us to understand why a bureaucracy cannot be adequately understood unless we take careful account of the role of interest groups in the bureaucratic process.  

1.1 Introduction

In January 2004, a Dutch parliamentary commission published its evaluation of Dutch integration policy, titled Building Bridges. This title, unintentionally but perfectly, summarised one of the most important reasons why civil servants continued to interact with immigrant organisations, even when current-day political and public opinion suggested a different approach. At that time, multiculturalism had become a politically sensitive issue. Politicians, scholars, and publicists alike were involved in public polemics about the negative outcomes of multiculturalism. One of the most often heard conclusions those days was that immigrant organisations had hindered the participation and integration of their members within Dutch society, rather than enhancing it. Meanwhile, however, most civil servants steadily continued to subsidise and maintain relationships with the very immigrant organisations that had been accused of creating substantial obstacles to integration. In the public hearings conducted by the parliamentary commission, civil servants, ministers, aldermen, and representatives of immigrants’ organisations described their relationships with each other. Illustrative of many of those conversations is the following quote from a former Alderman of Tilburg:

We want to arrange a meeting point for Somali people. Some see this as a means of segregating activities. We, however, think of this as a kind of stepping stone for these people. Also, we want to provide them with a place to meet, because we ourselves feel the need to have deliberation partners from the community with whom we can do business with and arrange things.

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It was exactly this concept of intermediation that explained why civil servants chose to keep in touch. The immigrant organisations fulfilled an important function, in Dutch neatly termed aanspreekpunt, which is best translated in English as the capacity to intermediate. This logic of intermediation proved to be more important than enhancing participation or integration of individual immigrants within Dutch society, a function these immigrant organisations were assumed to perform.

The challenges of administering a culturally diverse city call for an instrumental approach to such immigrant organisations, rather than the high politics involved in articulating policy ideas and policy advice (Poppelaars and Scholten 2008). The capacity to intermediate seems particularly important during political or societal events that may threaten the delicate balance of accommodating more than 150 nationalities within a single city’s boundaries. For example, the Dutch Minister of Housing, Communities and Integration and the Minister of Justice immediately convened meetings with several Islamic organisations after the release of Fitna, Geert Wilders’ anti-Islam cinematic essay in spring 2008. How else to probe the atmosphere in the different immigrant communities, in order to prepare an appropriate governmental response?

This link between contingencies and the logic of intermediation appears to travel the Atlantic well. In the early 1990s, Mayor Dinkins of New York City (NYC) came into office with the help of a broad civic coalition. His administration, however, did not maintain ties with this civic coalition while in office, which became problematic when attempting to solve major race riots between Caribbean and Jewish communities (Thompson 2005). Brooklyn, one of the City’s neighbourhoods, had a tense atmosphere, especially within the Heights community in central Brooklyn. A rapidly growing Caribbean immigrant population and a small low-income Hasidic Jewish community vied for scarce housing. One day, a Caribbean boy was killed in a car accident involving a car driven by a Hasidic Jewish man. A Jewish student was stabbed in a crowd of young Caribbean men only a few hours later. Severe race riots broke out after these accidents, which could not be quickly stopped by the NYC administration. This inability resulted from a lack of interactions with community organisations that had contacts with both populations in Brooklyn Heights. Those two populations were, literally and figuratively, out of reach for Dinkin’s administration. In the words of a former administration-member (Thompson 2005, 304):

> There were only a few community leaders with connections and respect among the alienated youth who might have served as channels for positive discourse. In the absence of more such channels, and because there had been little prior effort to include unemployed men in civic affairs or to have their voice meaningfully considered within a neighbourhood civic structure, there was no way to rapidly construct meaningful exchanges between blacks and Jews during the Crown Heights Crisis, or between blacks and the police department.

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4 Formulating policies that do not seem to address existing social structures in society tend to even reinforce rather than reduce such an instrumental use of immigrant organisations (de Zwart and Poppelaars 2007).

5 Geert Wilders is the founder of the PPV, a populist, right-wing party with immigrant integration issues as political priority.
Apparently, a lack of communication channels, i.e. links to various communities, determined whether the New York City administration could solve the problem. Either termed aanspreekpunt or ‘a need for communication channels,’ organisations or individuals that serve as intermediaries were important to both Dutch national and local government and the New York City administration.

Could the logic of intermediation also apply to immigrant issues in other countries? Interacting with immigrant communities in France might be difficult, as the French system does not consider organisations solely based on an ethnic or religious background to be legitimate partners to work with (Koopmans and Statham 2000). Or, could intermediation be equally important in other policy areas? Voluntary organisations, for instance, proved to be highly useful in tracing people to properly address the HIV problem in Australia (Brown 1999). And, as illustrated by a Dutch respondent in this study, intermediation capacity is useful, for instance, in the health care sector as well:

In my case it is very easy, this field is characterised by a diverse array of professional organisations. The existence of so many highly professionally organised interest groups simplifies the job as they are useful in reaching the proper people and offering new insights. My colleagues at the inspectorate for youth care face an unorganised field, which does not make life easier in monitoring and regulation.

Organisations capable of establishing access to the target population offer a useful resource to policy makers. Treasury civil servants involved with the budgetary process, however, are not very likely to need such intermediation capacity. Expertise on financial and fiscal issues would be more appropriate for them. Intermediation could, however, resume an importance in social security issues if governments seek to activate the long-termed unemployed. This group may be as unknown to governments as certain communities of immigrants.

These questions suggest that there are good reasons why civil servants choose to work with certain interest groups rather than with others. And although this implies limited responsiveness, it also seems that these particular patterns of bureaucracy-interest group interactions will vary along important political-administrative dimensions affecting the policy-making process, such as variation in policy sectors or public agencies. This study aims to explain such bureaucracy-interest group interactions systematically, and its central research question is as follows: Why do civil servants interact with certain interest groups, whereas they do not or only do so to a lesser extent with other groups? Bureaucracy-interest group interactions are thus the main dependent variable of this research.

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6 The French citizenship regime is often termed ‘assimilationist’ or ‘republican’, meaning that France allows immigrants easy access to the political community, but denies their cultural or ethnic differences (Koopmans and Statham 2000). Solving severe policy problems may nevertheless require relations between such organisations and civil servants (see also Favell 2001).

7 Interview by author.

8 However, a recent affair in the Netherlands concerning the impossibility of levying taxes on people living in caravan parks would suggest otherwise (De Volkskrant, 2003, ‘Wijn pakt illegale afspraken met woonwagenkampen aan’, 3 June, online newspaper, www.volkskrant.nl).
1.2 Explaining bureaucracy-interest group interactions

Instances of bureaucratic interactions with interest groups have been termed as instances of ‘bureaucratic politics’ or ‘bureaucratic autonomy’ by some scholars; others call them ‘iron triangles’ or ‘close-knit policy networks’, and still others speak in terms of ‘capture’, or less dramatically, ‘interest group influence’. Each approach examines the phenomenon through somewhat different lenses and arrives at different conclusions. The policy networks literature explains such behaviour by pointing to the mutual benefits for bureaucrats, interest groups, and parliamentarians interacting in policy making. Mutual benefits often result in long-term and close cooperation between a fairly limited number of policy actors (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Milward and Provan 2000; Rhodes 1990). Scholars in the field of bureaucratic politics argue that bureaucrats use their contacts with interest groups to enhance their autonomy or improve their bargaining power against their political superiors or other bureaucratic agencies (Carpenter 2001), or to otherwise serve their position or job performance (Peters 2001; Ripley and Franklin 1986; Suleiman 1974). The literature on interest group politics, finally, suggests that bureaucrats ultimately become dependent on powerful interest groups in society, often pointing to regulatory agencies that seem to be puppets in the hands of particular groups (Chubb 1983; Posner 1974; Yackee 2005).

The literatures on policy networks, interest group politics, and bureaucratic politics all agree on the existence of patterns of bureaucracy-interest group interactions that are not fully responsive to a comprehensive array of groups and interests. Yet, at the same time, they offer rather different explanations for these patterns. To date, it remains unclear which explanation will apply in which circumstances. A major reason for this ambiguity is that the literature lacks a single theoretical model capable of systematically comparing both bureaucrats’ and interest groups’ motives and how these motives vary across various political-administrative dimensions. This research is an attempt to formulate such a theoretical model. To do so, I adopt a resource dependence approach to explain these bureaucracy-interest group interactions.

1.3 Bureaucracy-interest group interactions unravelled

The three sets of literature discussed above share an implicit assumption that certain goods are exchanged for others. According to the bureaucratic politics literature, civil servants trade for political support by deliberately reaching out to those interest groups capable of providing them such support. The literature on interest group politics suggests that the information or expertise interest groups have to offer is so valuable that bureaucrats may to a large extent depend on these interest groups. And, finally, the policy network literature suggests that mutually beneficial exchanges result in long-term interactions. By employing this idea of ‘exchange of goods’, it is possible to integrate these different explanations into a single theoretical model of bureaucracy-interest group interactions.
Resource exchange is the key explanatory variable used in resource dependence theory to explain interorganisational behaviour. Its main hypothesis is that organisations are not fully self-supportive. They need to interact with other organisations to obtain the resources they need for their survival (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003[1978]). Such resource exchanges create interdependencies among organisations, which are a function of both the importance of a resource and its concentration in the environment. By measuring each of these two elements, the degree of dependence between organisations can be determined.

Based on classic resource dependence theory, bureaucracy-interest group interactions can be conceptualised as resource exchanges. By examining the importance of these resources and the availability of the resources in the environment, it should be possible to determine the degree of dependence that characterises bureaucracy-interest group interactions. Relevant contextual factors are included in the model to serve systematic comparisons of these resource exchanges. National interest representation regimes; political-administrative relations; agencies' tasks and culture; the influence of ideas; Europeanisation; and the salience, complexity, and political sensitivity of policy issues are all hypothesised to influence resource concentration, resource importance, or both. These contextual variables are derived from the literatures on interest group politics, bureaucratic politics, and network studies in which they have been shown to influence either bureaucrats' or interest groups' behaviour. Systematic variation of contextual variables thus makes it possible to determine the exact nature of bureaucracy-interest group interactions under different circumstances.

A model based on resource dependence theory incorporates the assumption that an organisation will try to minimise its dependence, and therefore the theory implicitly assumes that organisations can end their interactions when they think that this is beneficial for them. Indeed, why continue to interact when an organisation can no longer provide the resources you need? Factors such as trustworthiness, uncertainty reduction, routine behaviour or anticipating future consequences, however, will also determine resource exchange. In other words, bureaucracy-interest group interactions may not only be determined by strategic rationality that is implicit in a resource dependence approach but also by anticipatory and habitual rationality, which are revealed through a long-term perspective on these interactions over time.9

I constructed a dataset of bureaucracy-interest group interactions to assess the explanatory potential of the model. A survey of senior civil servants and interest groups in the Netherlands and the UK10 together with semi-structured elite interviewing were the methods used to collect data. To ensure equivalent data, I

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9 While this all seems beneficial to the study of bureaucracy-interest group interactions, it is important to note that when applying resource exchange to these interactions, I implicitly assume that bureaucracies have certain administrative leeway to act within a set framework of rules and arrangements. Moreover, full autonomy is not attainable in the case of public bureaucracies, as they have to be loyal to their political superiors and responsive to the public. So, autonomy refers to the possibility to influence politicians and interest groups and thus does not have the same implications as autonomy in the original resource dependence approach (see chapter 3).

10 Data was also collected for senior civil servants and interest groups in Sweden and the US. However, because of a low response rate, these data will not be included in the analyses.
developed and implemented a strategy to construct a dataset of interest groups in the Netherlands. The survey data allowed for a cross-sectional analysis of bureaucracy-interest group interactions to test the model and explore additional contextual variables related to the interest group environment. The different types of rationality that may underlie the resource exchanges between bureaucrats and interest groups could be examined via additional interview data.

1.3.1 Why study bureaucracy-interest group interactions?

The explicit focus on bureaucracy-interest group interactions in this study is driven by a two-fold aim. First, this study aims to offer a theoretical contribution to the study of both bureaucratic and interest group behaviour. It does so by developing a theoretical model which should enable the systematic comparison of bureaucracy-interest group interactions over time and across cases. Although the literature is rich with findings of bureaucracy-interest group interactions, it is very difficult to determine which explanation holds under which circumstances. When will the bureaucrat be able to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour, or when is he/she likely to be vulnerable for capture? The resource dependence model developed in this study is an attempt to integrate the fundamental behavioural logics the various existing explanations point to. My main contribution is thus to push forward the conceptual discussion about bureaucracy-interest group interactions and to offer an analytical tool for systematic comparative research.

This research is not only driven by a strong theoretical and analytical interest. It is also driven by sheer curiosity and an irrepressible interest in what exactly is going on when either bureaucrats or interest groups decide to interact. It thus also aims to provide empirical insights into this phenomenon. Turning to the case of immigrant integration policy in the Netherlands clarifies this second goal. When public opinion forced politicians to argue strongly against subsidising immigrant organisations, politicians overlooked an important aspect of administering society. In reality, immigrant organisations offered a meeting point for people in a foreign society. Few acknowledged the usefulness of those organisations for civil servants to probe the atmosphere and to get in touch with different communities. Put differently, these organisations served as a valuable instrument for civil servants to steer and monitor a culturally diverse society. If this had been more explicit, regulation concerning immigrant organisations could have been better geared to the actual situation. In general, insights on bureaucracy-interest group interactions could indicate when the administrative part of the policy-making process inevitably diverges from politicians’ plans, or to what extent bureaucracy-interest group interactions contribute to (un)intended consequences of policy making.

In sum, this study is predominantly aimed at contributing to a better analytical and conceptual assessment of bureaucracy-interest group interactions. At the same time, it also aims to make a significant empirical contribution, both in testing the proposed analytical model and by providing insights into what exactly happens when civil servants and interest groups decide to interact.
1.3.2 What follows

To answer the research question of why civil servants interact with some interest groups, but not (or only to a lesser extent) with others, I proceed as follows. Chapter 2 will review and discuss the most important literatures addressing bureaucracy-interest group interactions. I argue that the problem in explaining bureaucracy-interest group interactions is not so much a shortage of theories. It is much more a problem of offering different, even rival, theories that make it impossible to determine under which circumstances which set of explanations holds. Therefore, I develop a model to systematically compare bureaucracy-interest group interactions in chapter 3. I use the classic resource dependence theory of Pfeffer and Salancik (2003[1978]) to construct a model that not only enables a cross-sectional analysis, but also incorporates a longitudinal perspective on these interactions. Subsequently, I discuss the comparative design I employ in this study in chapter 4 as well as the characteristics of the datasets which have been developed to allow empirical analyses. Chapters 5-7 provide empirical insights on these interactions by testing the model empirically. The findings of chapter 5 imply that the resource dependence model has explanatory potential. It generates a satisfying explanation of bureaucracy-interest group interactions, and contextual factors are shown to have a small yet significant influence on the degree of dependence characterising bureaucracy-interest group interactions. Chapter 6 shows that interest group population dynamics influence the degree of dependence between interest groups and bureaucrats. Modest patterns of cooperation and competition in addition to highly valued access to the bureaucracy suggest that the degree of dependence for bureaucrats is mitigated. Chapter 7 explores the various types of choices that may potentially determine bureaucracy-interest group interactions, examining the (joint) contribution of strategic, anticipatory, and habitual rationality to explain their resource exchanges. Each of these chapters (chapters 5-7) incorporates a final paragraph summarising the main findings and reflecting on the implications of these findings. The final chapter, chapter 8, summarises the theoretical model, and the main empirical findings, and serves as a critical reflection of the explanatory value of the model and its implications for existing theories and future research.