

**What Causes Patronage Reform?
It Depends on the Type of Civil Service Reform**

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Abstract

Public employment in most developing countries is governed by political patronage. Patronage provides many incumbents with governability and electoral advantage. What causes governments to forsake patronage in favour of civil service reform? This article reviews scholarly explanations. It finds that studies usefully identify diverse socio-economic and political-institutional factors which can affect reform incentives. The causal effects of these factors – their weight, mechanisms and signs – are contested, however. This article partially resolves this contestation by considering *which* reform studies explain: different bureaucratic structures develop asynchronously and feature different determinants. To illustrate, political competition is argued to incentivize reform to ‘blanket in’ party appointees; or do the opposite by reducing expectations to reap longer-term state capacity benefits. Yet, ‘blanketing in’ requires bureaucratic job stability, state capacity merit recruitment of skilled bureaucrats – two poorly correlated reforms. The causes of patronage reform thus depend on the type of civil service reform.

Introduction

With the rise of good governance as a development paradigm, scholars have started paying greater attention to bureaucracies and bureaucratic development in developing countries. Central to bureaucratic development in the developing world are civil service reforms of patronage states (Grindle 2012). In patronage states, political power holders have discretionary power to appoint, advance and terminate the careers of public servants across all levels of hierarchy in the state – rather than only at top levels where democratic control

may legitimize it (Kopecky, Meyer Sahling et al. 2016). As a result, public servants are often hired, fired, promoted and paid on the basis of party-political criteria.¹ Civil service reform of patronage states seeks to supplant discretionary power with: merit-based recruitment and promotion (merit); predictable rather than politicized salary progression; and job stability protections from politically-motivated dismissals (tenure) (Weber 1978, Dahlström, Lapuente et al. 2012). Patronage reforms thus equate to Weberian reforms.²

That bringing about civil service reform is beneficial to development is relatively uncontested. Weberian bureaucracies have been associated with economic growth, lower poverty, lower child mortality, reduced corruption and more foreign investment, to name a few (Evans and Rauch 1999, Henderson, Hulme et al. 2007, Dahlström, Lapuente et al. 2012, Neshkova and Kostadinova 2012, Cingolani, Thomsson et al. 2015, Oliveros and Schuster 2016).

Unsurprisingly, practitioners have sought to advance civil service reform. Yet, their track record has been dismal. The World Bank's (2008) US\$422m annual civil service and administrative reform lending in 2000-2006, for instance, had no measurable impact on civil service practices. Instead, patronage prevails: the proportion of developing states in which political criteria trump merit criteria in the recruitment of public servants tops 64 percent (Dahlberg, Dahlström et al. 2013).

The poor track record of reform has been attributed to political – not technical – obstacles (World Bank 2008). Patronage secures governing parties with an army of campaign workers. Moreover, it steers state action towards electoral support for incumbents: institutions staffed with politically-loyal public servants constantly transform administrative procedures, regulations and services into favours for political supporters, be these voters, interest groups or elites. As such, patronage provides governments with both governability

and electoral advantage (Geddes 1996). In fact, parties with access to patronage were, on average, more likely to get re-elected in the U.S. (Folke, Hirano et al. 2011). Nonetheless, civil service reform has, at times, advanced – including in most of today’s developed economies. What factors cause governments to acquiesce to such reforms and thus give up the apparent advantages of patronage?

This article reviews and assesses 34 studies published over the last three decades which seek to resolve this conundrum. It is the first to review this research program. A three-step literature search identified these studies. First, a larger set of studies was extracted from an online library search with the keywords ‘civil service’, ‘patronage’, ‘developing countries’, ‘Weberianness’ and ‘(de-)politicization’. Second, studies which did not focus on: patronage in public employment; political causes of reform (but rather processes, designs or outcomes); or non-conflict democracies (but rather authoritarian or warring states with distinct incentives) were excluded. Third, bibliographies of studies were reviewed to ensure all relevant accounts were included.

Note that this state-of-the-art survey deliberately excludes studies on *how* to advance reform – be it through problem-driven or best practice approaches, for instance (Andrews 2013). Instead, it sheds light on *when* civil service reforms are incentive-compatible. This is of central relevance for the recent aid organization (donor) turn towards ‘political analyses’ as a basis for governance reforms. Such analyses recognize that political factors are crucial for governance reform success. Yet, analyses to-date remain idiosyncratic in analysed factors (Yanguas and Hulme 2015). This review informs such analyses by identifying the political conditions which, according to available evidence, can shape civil service reform incentives – and should thus be considered in ‘political analyses’. Studies are assessed with their utility to this end in mind: do they robustly identify political factors which incentivize reform?

The review's corresponding findings are ambiguous. Studies usefully demonstrate that reform rarely results from pressure from organized interests – be these civil society organizations, businesses, public sector unions or donors. Instead, the calculus of incumbents weighing governability and electoral advantage under patronage and reform is central. Studies point to numerous socio-economic and political-institutional factors which can shape this calculus. Practitioners would do well to consider them in their analyses.

Robust inferences about their explanatory weight, mechanisms and signs of effects are largely precluded, however: scholars disagree about them. This reflects a more general shortcoming in the state reform literature in which 'it has been impossible to approach a consensus as to the factors that produce or make possible a successful state-building effort.' (Kurtz 2013, p. 5) Even single cases – most prominently the U.S. case – have seen a range of explanations. This suggests that a confluence of multiple factors – rather than single causes – are typically required to incentivize reform. Future reform accounts would thus do well to pay greater attention to interactions between multiple causes.

In part, however, inconsistent findings also stem from a failure to differentiate *which* reform studies explain. Few patronage reform roads lead to Weber: distinct Weberian reforms – such as merit and tenure – are poorly correlated. Competing hypotheses result partially from oblivion to this insight: they inadvertently conflate distinct reforms and thus explain different dependent variables. Future studies should thus develop distinct explanations for distinct civil service reforms of patronage states.

Review: What Causes Patronage Reform?

To structure the review, studies are heuristically categorized into socio-economic (demand-side) and political-institutional (supply-side) explanations (table 1).

TABLE 1 *Causes of Patronage Reform*

<TABLE 1 about here>

Socio-Economic Explanations

Socio-economic explanations revolve around demands from organized interests and voters.

Organized interests.

Four organized interests take centre stage: civil society, businesses, bureaucrats and donors. Early accounts of the U.S. case in particular focused on civil society coalitions mobilizing public opinion and reformist legislators against corrupt patronage systems (Theriault 2003). Businesses, at times, joined these efforts. Business transactions could benefit from reform to secure functioning public services and credible commitments to predictable regulation and enforcement (Miller 2000). More recently, development assistance organizations (donors) have come to the forefront. The World Bank, for instance, supports governance reforms in 140 countries (Andrews 2013). Donor conditionalities for aid flows or EU accession and normative pressure stemming from greater legitimacy of international ‘good governance’ practices may incentivize reform (Goetz 2001). Lastly, bureaucrats may demand reform. Political discretion jeopardizes their job stability, career paths and societal legitimacy (Silberman 1993). Entrepreneurial bureaucrats may thus press for reform by exploiting executive-legislative rivalries or ties with interest groups and media (Johnson and Libecap 1994, Carpenter 2001).

These arguments notwithstanding, most studies attribute little causal leverage to patronage reform demands from organized interests. With citizen collective action challenges, the ‘broad mobilization of citizens ... in reform [is] an anomaly’ and largely limited to the U.S. case (Grindle 2012, p. 29). Businesses typically demand reform only for institutions central to business transactions, such as central banks or regulatory agencies

(Heredia and Schneider 2003). Moreover, businesses – when benefitting from (illicit) state contracts – may oppose rather than demand reform. Similarly, donors play an ‘often quite marginal’ role in governance reforms (Andrews 2013, p. 209). Approval cultures weaken conditionalities, focused on formal mimicry rather than reform in practice. Aid also relaxes patronage budget constraints, thus dis-incentivizing the professionalization of tax administration (Mwenda and Tangri 2005). Bureaucrats for their part typically lack the ability to press for reform. Politicians may dismiss bureaucrats seeking collective employee action for reform. Bureaucrats thus typically rise as interest groups only *after* reforms curb political power over careers (Johnson and Libecap 1994).

Voter demand.

More than organized interests, changing voter preferences for public and private goods can alter the electoral payoffs of patronage and reform – and thus act as proximate reform incentives. Weberian bureaucracies are associated with greater public goods provision: skilled public servants selected based on professional merit – rather than political affiliation – can deliver higher quality services to the electorate (Rauch 1995). By contrast, patronage facilitates the provision of private, excludable goods – including the exchange of state jobs for votes. Whether voters demand public or private goods from governments depends in part on their socio-economic situation. Socio-economic shifts which shift voter preferences towards public goods may thus incentivize reform.

Most prominently, greater income, education and private employment alternatives may heighten voter demand for public goods and patronage reform (Reid and Kurth 1989, Calvo and Murillo 2004). Wealthier and more educated voters with private employment alternatives derive less utility from patronage jobs and are more willing to forego immediate patronage offers in favour of longer-term public service improvements

through competent bureaucracies. Patronage thus becomes a less effective strategy to mobilize votes. Moreover, urbanization and migration may alter voter preferences. Ethnicity-based cleavages may complicate programmatic left-right competition and facilitate ethnicity-based patronage machines (Ruhil 2003). They may, however, also lead to excessive patronage demands and attempts by ethnic outsiders not favoured by patronage machines to reform (Ruhil and Camões 2003).

Several studies thus explain the transition away from patronage through socio-economic shifts. Others, however, only attribute a 'weak and inconsistent' role to them (Remmer 2007, p. 374). The under-provision of public goods in patronage states impairs the very socio-economic shifts which would cause patronage reform. Moreover, public goods-oriented politicians are frequently not elected: their promises lack credibility in patronage states (Keefer 2007). Most importantly, any aggregation of shifting voter preferences into reform choices depends on political-institutional factors. Hence, these factors have seen most studies.

Political-Institutional Explanations

Political-institutional explanations for patronage reform revolve around four sets of factors: (i) electoral competition; (ii) party organization; (iii) political institutions; and (iv) patronage budget constraints.³ Scholars disagree about their weight, mechanisms and signs of causal effects.

Electoral Competition.

Patterns of electoral competition have seen most studies. By increasing the threat of electoral defeat, electoral competition may incentivize governments to reform to (i) insure themselves against patronage access – and thus electoral advantage – of hostile successor governments

(Grzymala-Busse 2007, Ting, Snyder et al. 2013); (ii) ‘blanket in’ party appointees to secure their continued employment (Ruhil and Camões 2003, p. 34); and (iii) enhance the durability of legislative decisions by assuring that sympathetic bureaucrats remain in office to implement them (Horn 1995). Moreover, with electoral competition – and credible opposition parties – voters count on a clear alternative to punish incumbents seeking excessive patronage (O’Dwyer 2006). Electoral competition also enhances the likelihood of party parity. With equal access to patronage, reform imposes similar patronage losses on parties while allowing incumbents to claim small electoral gains from improved public goods provision (Geddes 1996). Likewise, party parity enables reformist factions to ‘play balance of power politics,’ offering pivotal electoral support in return for reform (Shefter 1993, p. 73).

At the same time, however, electoral competition may *dis-incentivize* reform through several mechanisms. First, frequent government turnover enhances the need for patronage to control bureaucracies staffed with untrusted appointees of predecessors (Meyer-Sahling 2006). Second, electoral competition reduces time horizons of incumbents and thus their expectation to reap longer-term state capacity – and public goods – gains from reform (Lapiente and Nistotskaya 2009). The inter-temporal cost-benefit incidence of reforms – patronage losses are accrued today, while future reform benefits from greater state capacity become more uncertain – thus worsens. Electoral competition thus also exacerbates the ‘politician’s dilemma’ (Geddes 1996, p. 18): long-run state building interests are superseded by an immediate interest in political survival. Trading patronage for political support from legislators, interest groups and other constituents can facilitate such survival (Arriola 2009).

Party Organization.

The role of party organizations is equally contested. In one account, stronger and more programmatic party organizations incentivize reform: their public goods promises are more

credible (Blum 2014, Cruz and Keefer 2015). Yet, stronger party organizations may also administer patronage more effectively: monitoring and enforcing patronage contracts with voters requires well-organized machines (Grzymala-Busse 2007). Similarly, the lack of party organizations – due to elections of outsider Presidents – can induce or thwart reform. Outsiders rising to power despite opposition of established party leaders may, variably, seek reform to undercut the patronage power base of their legislative opponents (Geddes 1996); or maximize patronage to construct parties of their own (Philip and Panizza 2011). Less controversially, the election of parties with wealthier and more educated constituents may reduce the attractiveness of patronage (Calvo and Murillo 2004).

Political Institutions.

Disagreement also extends to political institutions. Among electoral institutions, open-list systems have been argued to incentivize patronage: incumbents compete against not only candidates from other parties from whom they can distinguish themselves through programmatic appeals; but also candidates from their own party from whom differentiation through patronage is central (Geddes 1996). The limited large-n evidence on patronage reform, however, finds no effect of electoral institutions (Blum 2014, Cruz and Keefer 2015). The same holds for systems of democratic governance. Parliamentarism and unitarism may facilitate reform by reducing the number of veto players (Kenny 2015); or incentivize patronage by imposing fewer checks on incumbents (Asare 2012). Yet, available large-n evidence finds no effect (Blum 2014, Cruz and Keefer 2015). Rather than broad differences in democratic systems, specific institutional designs of patronage states may then matter. Where parliaments rather than executives hold patronage powers *and* electoral challengers control parliament, executives are argued to face greater reform incentives to deprive challengers of patronage access (Schuster 2016).

Patronage Budget Constraints.

Finally, scholars also disagree about the role of fiscal budget constraints. Fiscal crises may induce reform by curtailing political power of actors with vested patronage interests (Bunse and Fritz 2012). Fiscally-induced reforms, however, typically focus on containing payrolls rather than undoing political discretion (Heredia and Schneider 2003). At the same time, rising budgets and employment may induce principal-agent problems as local patronage workers become further removed from top patrons; and rising transaction costs, with appointments consuming excessive time of Presidents and other top patrons. Reform thus becomes more incentive-compatible (Johnson and Libecap 1994). Yet, rising budgets may also create fiscal space for, concurrently, patronage concessions to secure governability *and* professional recruitment – and thus enable reform (Geddes 1996).

What Can – and Cannot – Be Learned from the Literature about the Causes of Patronage Reform?

Which political factors robustly incentivize – and thus enable – civil service reforms? The review suggests the literature provides some insights in this regard. Studies usefully demonstrate that reform rarely results from pressure from organized interests – be these civil society organizations, businesses, public sector unions or development aid organizations. Instead, the political calculus of incumbents weighing the electoral and governability payoffs of patronage and civil service reform takes centre explanatory stage. Voter preferences for public and private goods matter for this calculus, as do – in particular – political-institutional factors. Theory building and practitioner ‘political analyses’ should thus usefully build on and include these two sets of factors. Practitioners should, similarly, limit optimism about

civil service reform prospects in countries in which these socio-economic and political-institutional factors do not change: reform will remain politically-irrational.

While the literature thus usefully circumscribes the socio-economic and political-institutional factors which shape reform incentives, it falls short of robust inferences about their specific causal roles. Instead, the literature features competing hypotheses about mechanisms and signs of causal effects of most factors – be these different political institutions or patterns of electoral competition, for instance. In that sense then, patronage reform remains ‘most poorly understood.’ (Fukuyama 2014, p. 26)

The multiplicity of competing hypotheses for a rare phenomenon – patronage reform – has also yielded a multiplicity of explanations for single cases. To illustrate, scholars have argued that reform in the U.S. was caused by civic reform movements, principal-agent problems in patronage networks, the rise of an outsider President facing congressional control over patronage and incentives to ‘blanket in’ party appointees, among others (Johnson and Libecap 1994, Ruhil and Camões 2003, Theriault 2003, Schuster 2016). Giving credence to these explanations suggests that a confluence of factors – rather than single causes – are typically required to incentivize reform. Future studies would thus do well to pay greater attention to interactions between multiple causes as a means to resolve competing hypotheses.⁴

In part, however, inconsistent findings also stem from a failure to differentiate *which* reform studies explain. As detailed next, different civil service reforms feature different determinants. A ‘poor understanding’ of patronage reform results partially from oblivion to this insight.

The Causes of Patronage Reform Depend on the Type of Civil Service Reform

In most studies, patronage vs. civil service reform (or politicization vs. insulation/autonomy) is a dichotomous choice (see, among many, Lapuente and Nistotskaya 2009, Ting, Snyder et al. 2013). ‘Reform’ is assumed to coincide with ‘Weberianness:’ the concurrence of merit, tenure and depoliticized pay (Evans and Rauch 1999, p. 748).⁵ Yet, this conflation assumption is empirically unwarranted. Merit and tenure ($r=0.14$), merit and pay structures ($r=-0.37$) and tenure and pay structures ($r=0.07$) are only weakly correlated in global expert survey and national public pay data. In fact, as illustrated by the confidence intervals in figures 1 and 2, there are no statistically significant differences between merit at high and low levels of bureaucratic tenure and pay decompression respectively.⁶

FIGURE 1 Merit and Tenure

<FIGURE 1 about here>

FIGURE 2 Merit and Pay Structures

<FIGURE 2 about here>

Sources: Dahlberg et al. (2013); Dahlström et al. (2015); World Bank (2014)

In other words, just as different components of political development – democracy, bureaucracy and the rule of law – can develop asynchronously (Fukuyama 2014), so can different components of bureaucratic development. Prior studies have hinted at this finding (Silberman 1993, Dahlström, Lapuente et al. 2012) – yet not considered its implication for explanations of patronage reform. If different civil service reforms are uncorrelated, then their determinants differ. The causes of patronage reform thus depend on the type of civil service reform.

Competing hypotheses stem partially from oblivion to this insight. Electoral competition hypotheses are illustrative. In one set of studies, electoral competition incentivizes reform. Facing a potential exit from office, incumbents are argued to advance

reform to ‘blanket in’ appointees to secure their continued employment; reduce patronage available to successors; and enhance the durability of legislative decisions by assuring sympathetic bureaucrats remain in office (Horn 1995, Ruhil and Camões 2003, Grzymala-Busse 2007, Ting, Snyder et al. 2013). In a second set of studies, electoral competition is argued to dis-incentivize reform. Reducing political time horizons, it limits the ability of incumbents to reap longer-term state capacity benefits from reform (Geddes 1996, Lapuente and Nistotskaya 2009).

Note, though, that these are not competing hypotheses, but hypotheses to account for distinct dependent variables. Locking in legislative deals, blanketing in partisans and constraining the patronage budgets of hostile successors all require, principally, tenure for appointees. Instead, reaping longer-term state capacity benefits requires, principally, competent bureaucrats through meritocratic recruitment and promotion. In fact, merit – yet not tenure – correlates with public goods gains in cross-country studies (Evans and Rauch 1999, Dahlström, Lapuente et al. 2012).

Organized interest explanations may be similarly clarified by disaggregating distinct reforms into distinct explananda. Bureaucrats, for instance, are more likely to demand tenure and predictable pay to protect themselves from political discretion. In contrast, civil society, businesses and donors are arguably more interested in state capacity building through meritocratic recruitment and promotion.

In short then, distinct patronage reforms feature distinct politics. The implications of this – and the review’s remaining findings – are discussed next.

Implications for the Study of Patronage Reform

Over the last three decades, numerous studies have examined the politics of patronage reform. This article was the first to review them. It found that the literature has usefully identified a range of socio-economic and political-institutional factors which *may* shape reform incentives. The causal roles of many factors – including the signs of their effects – remain contested, however.

Future studies should usefully focus on resolving this contestation. This review offers two guideposts to this end. First, the multiplicity of (competing) single-cause explanations for a rare reform suggests future studies would benefit from greater attention to interactions between multiple causes. Second, the differential politics shown to underlie distinct civil service reforms put a premium on developing and testing distinct explanations for distinct patronage reforms.

This latter lesson arguably extends to the politics of good government reforms at-large – be these different types of civil service, anti-corruption or freedom of information reforms, for instance. To-date, studies have not paid systematic attention to differentiating common from reform type-specific explanations. As a result, it often remains unclear which hypotheses explain which *types* of good government reforms. Paying closer and comparative attention to *differential* reforms could thus enhance the robustness of inferences about the determinants of institutional reform in the developing world.

Notes

¹ For other patronage conceptualizations, see Bearfield (2009).

² New Public Management reforms – such as decentralized personnel functions – in patronage states with, characteristically, weak rule of law typically do not curb patronage due to high risks of abuse (Sundell 2014). The review thus focuses on ‘Weberian’ reforms.

³ A last set of studies has looked to administrative legacies. Shefter (1977), for instance, argued that consolidating reform prior to democratization institutionalizes bureaucratic autonomy: parties may not mobilize mass support through patronage and turn to programmatic appeals instead. As legacy arguments do not explain patronage *reform*, however, the review does not cover them.

⁴ Studies of other good government reforms have started exploring such interactions, finding, for instance, that the effect of electoral competition depends on socio-economic context: it incentivizes reform where voters prioritize public over private goods (Charron and Lapuente 2010).

⁵ Other studies show that reform often proceeds incrementally through ‘islands of excellence’ (see, for an overview, Leonard 2010). In these islands, however, distinct civil service reform components are assumed to coincide. The conflation criticism thus applies equally.

⁶ Merit and tenure are proxied by the Quality of Government expert survey questions ‘When recruiting public sector employees, the skills and merits of the applicants decide who gets the job?’ and ‘Once one is recruited as a public sector employee, one stays a public sector employee for the rest of one’s career?’ (1-7 Scale) Salary structures are proxied by pay decompression rates: the ratio of highest to lowest salary on the central government’s main salary scale. Lack of data thwarts inferences about other aspects of pay structures (World Bank 2014). While pay decompression is an imperfect proxy, it approximates patronage at excessive levels, where it signals discretion and abuse in setting top salaries.

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TABLE 1 *Causes of Patronage Reform*

Socio-Economic Explanations	Political-Institutional Explanations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Demand from organized interests: civil society, business, donors and/or bureaucrats▪ Voter demands for public goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Electoral competition▪ Party organization▪ Political institutions▪ Budget constraints

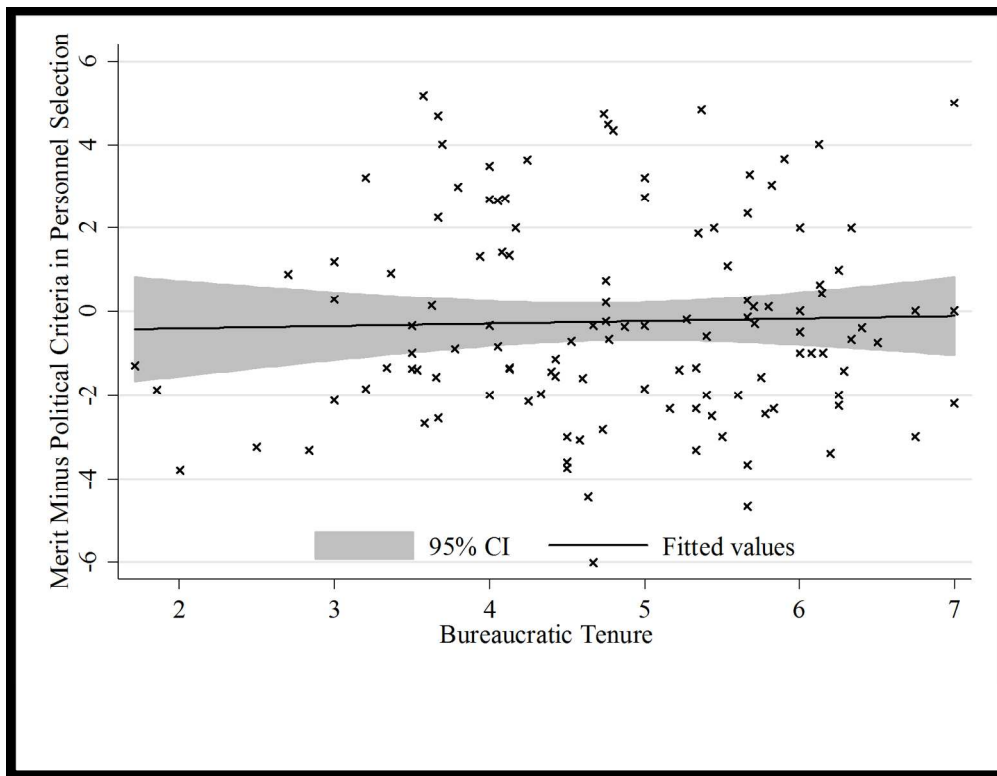


FIGURE 1 Merit and Tenure
Figure 1
505x390mm (96 x 96 DPI)

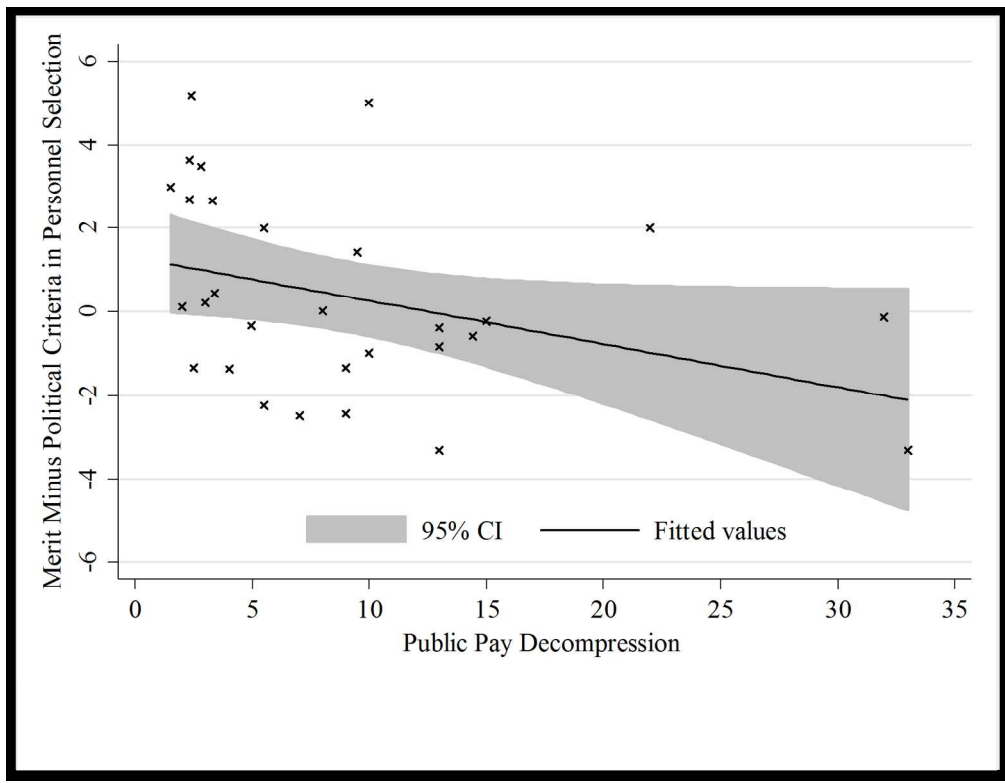


FIGURE 2 Merit and Pay Structures
Figure 2
505x390mm (96 x 96 DPI)