

Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs

Vol. 5, No. 1

Valuing Bureaucracy: The Case for Professional Government by Paul R. Verkuil

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Verkuil, P. A. (2017). *Valuing bureaucracy: The case for professional government*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. \$29.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1316629666

Keywords: Book Review, Bureaucracy, Government

Bureaucrats are an easy and oft-targeted scapegoat for disgruntled politicians, political advisors, and the public. Yet, an important question to consider is whether this criticism is accurate? There may in fact be more value in the bureaucratic sector of government than people willingly acknowledge; and, with some adjustment, the results of bureaucratic work may improve. This is the reason behind Paul Verkuil's (2017) book *Valuing Bureaucracy: The Case for Professional Government*. Verkuil, a former chairman of the Administrative Conference of the United States, sees unique challenges in modern professional government and provides potential remedies to the pains that are felt by both citizens and elected officials.

Verkuil's argument is for solidifying the value of professional government. The key concern of the work is that the use of contractors devalues bureaucracy, ultimately harming the effectiveness of governance. A constitutional and a democratic argument is being made. First, there are constitutional (i.e., oath of office) obligations from bureaucrats that contractors are not held to. Second, the hiring of government contractors furthers the separation between the citizen and the individual responsible for carrying out government work. The expanding use of government contractors and the decreasing value in the human capital of the bureaucracy are two conditions Verkuil identifies as needing to be remedied to improve the value of professional government.

The growth in the use of government contractors is remarkable when compared with the growth in the size of the federal bureaucracy. Despite the fivefold increase in the Gross Domestic Product since 1960, "the bureaucracy remains the same size" (p. 48). The number of government contractors is not so easily measured, but estimates have the total ranging anywhere between 7.6 and 12 million. Verkuil is clear in his contention that contractors are not inherently bad; rather, he argues that their expertise in policy areas can serve as effective factors in the governing equation. What is necessary, he suggests, is direction from and accountability toward professional managers.

Verkuil reviews instances of governance failures at the federal, state, and local government levels, arguing that the reliance on contractors contributed to these problems. The first issue,

which provides tangible negative impacts, is that “When contractors do work involving discretion and judgment at senior levels, management problems arise” (p. 61). Contractors provide important insights into policymaking, yet the responsibilities of government agencies are clouded when the role of a contractor seeps over into decision-making. Furthermore, oversight is lost when contractors begin managing other contractors. The first example is the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, specifically the Healthcare.gov site. Verkuil argues that, in this instance, it was not necessarily a problem with the number of contractors but a lack of talent (i.e., professional government employees) available to oversee contractor work.

The second example is the Healthy Indian plan, which was a public–private partnership between the state of Indiana and IBM to modernize the state’s welfare system that resulted in a digitized system. This was a system that recipients could not navigate. The Healthy Indian plan demonstrated that, even when a contractor relationship is devised with experienced actors, if the project is ill-conceived, even good public leaders and high levels of professionalism are unable to save it.

Last, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan is evidence of a lack of value placed in human capital. The administration in Michigan did not value its employees. The governor of the state went so far as to blame “career bureaucrats” for the crisis (p. 78).

The second key issue Verkuil identifies is the loss of value in human capital of the bureaucracy. Verkuil argues that a reform to the civil service may fix the current “talent crisis and create a professional cadre for the future” (p. 112) and perhaps reinvigorate the professionals in government. There ought to be, he suggests, a reexamination and simplification of the ways in which government hires, fires, compensates, and promotes professionals if they want to develop the next generation of government employees. The need to examine these processes is clear. Indeed, government faces a talent crisis fueled by the aging-out of current government employees. This reform plan faces unique challenges posed by policies like the veterans’ preference in hiring, the role of unions who represent government employees, and the role of the Senior Executive Service. Ultimately, the reform efforts are in pursuit of a more efficient government and reformation may provide a way to reign in contractor use while enhancing government professionalism.

Verkuil proposes realistic ways to induce excellence in government, including encouraging creativity in the Office of Personnel Management, which manages the civil service; fixing the technology gap between government and developments in technology; insourcing or moving jobs from contractors to government employees; improving coordination among agencies; examining agency rules for inadequate or outdated regulations; measuring performance; and capitalizing on the forms of telework to provide flexibility in employment.

Verkuil’s proposal comes at a time when government credibility is on constant watch. There is unique value in a competent and credible professional bureaucracy. This book is an important reminder that the missteps of government are not necessarily the result of government employees running wild. On the contrary, these missteps are both the indirect and direct result of governments increasingly close relationship with contractor agencies. Verkuil concludes by arguing that “reducing the size of government arbitrarily only serves to weaken it. Such an effort would be self-defeating and counter-productive” (p. 153). Reform is certainly difficult, but the proposals Verkuil puts forth are pragmatic options for returning decision-making and professionalism to bureaucrats.

Regardless of the practical approaches that Verkuil puts forth for improving the value of professional bureaucracy, there remains the question of whose valuation is more important. Certainly, the value individual bureaucrats have for their role is critical to their job performance. Perhaps a focus on hiring and retaining those who exhibit high levels of public service motivation may result in a steadier value of bureaucracy as a whole. The other issue

not addressed by the book is the lack of value that the executive branch has for bureaucrats. It appears that so long as there is a lack of trust from executives in the bureaucracy, no human resources reform will be able to reinforce the value of the professional government employee.

This work is a valuable review of the relationship between bureaucracy and political decision-makers. Practitioners especially will be heartened when reading Verkuil's call for valuing the professional bureaucracy, as it is a sector of government that is regularly criticized. Moreover, this book provides both an important review of the ways in which bureaucracy may be revitalized and the assurance that these professionals are capable of the job that they are tasked.

Author Biography

Tyler Klatt is a doctoral student at the University of South Dakota. His research interests include local government ethics, public service motivation, and gambling policy.