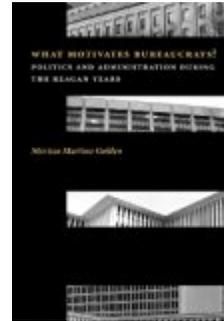


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marissa Martino Golden. *What Motivates Bureaucrats? Politics and Administration During the Reagan Years*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. x + 238 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10697-9.

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What motivates bureaucrats? Musty old volumes on public administration say that they just want to advance the public good and carry out the legitimate wishes of elected officials. Rational choice theorists suggest that they care only about their self-interest. In this thoughtful and well-written book, Marissa Martino Golden argues that neither generalization is sufficient, and that both altruism and self-interest are at work. And when presidents try to get their way with the federal bureaucracy, Golden shows, upper-level career civil servants are neither entirely resistant nor entirely responsive. They cooperate when political appointees can force them, and when they have a sense of professional duty. They balk when professional norms or personal passions make them, or when they have not yet learned bureaucratic meekness (p. 154).

This study focuses on the Reagan years, when the administration seemed to veer from where the bureaucrats wanted to go. It offers comparative case studies of four agencies: the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Agriculture Department's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division (CRD), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Its research relies mainly on interviews with current and former civil servants in the four agencies. In their version of bureaucratic history, responsiveness usually trumped resistance. That finding may come as a surprise, since Reagan had few political sympathizers in the career ranks.

At the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, one might expect sharp policy clashes, since the auto safety agency had been a seedbed of activism under Carter, and the Reagan transition team had targeted

it for deregulation. Yet the response of NHTSA bureaucrats was "passive and acquiescent" (p. 47). As Golden perceptively points out, NHTSA is "an agency peopled by relatively apolitical technocrats not inclined toward partisanship of any stripe" (p. 60).

By contrast, many liberal activists work at the Food and Nutrition Service, which runs the Food Stamp program. Again, though, anti-Reagan activity was minimal. In some instances, political appointees bypassed careerists when changing policy. The appointees also made clear to the civil servants that their chances for advancement hinged on cooperation. This approach was effective since most FNS employees have few career options.

The Civil Rights Division consists mainly of attorneys, who usually can find work elsewhere. Moreover, attorneys like to argue. Consequently, when Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds set a conservative course on issues such as affirmative action, he met with a vigorous internal response. While Reynolds listened to the careerists' arguments, he generally held to his position. Over time, the internal resistance weakened. Golden offers a novel insight: "Traditional political science wisdom makes a great deal of the fact that bureaucrats can simply outlast politicians because politicians come and go. In this case, Reagan and Reynolds outlasted many careerists and beat those who remained at their own waiting game" (p. 101).

The greatest resistance took place at the Environmental Protection Agency under administrator Anne Gorsuch (1981-1983). The Gorsuch team not only pursued policies that deeply disturbed the bureaucracy but fueled resentment by openly disrespecting careerists and squelching internal debate. Some careerists struck back

with leaks to the press, and a few even went public. Even here, the bureaucratic reaction had limits. According to Golden, most careerists disdained public whistleblowing. In any case, resistance faded when the more moderate William Ruckelshaus replaced Gorsuch. He appealed to careerists' self-interest with an "open-door policy" and he appealed to their altruism with policies more to their liking.

Unlike so many works of political science, *What Motivates Bureaucrats?* actually tells us something useful about the world of politics. A subheading from the concluding chapter asks: "How Do Real Bureaucrats Deal with Real Politicians?" The book handles this question both with admirable clarity and a healthy respect for the complexity of Washington life. Golden closes by recognizing that while bureaucratic responsiveness is often desirable, internal dissent can improve decisionmaking. Among other things, she makes the sensible suggestion that political appointees "receive training that exposes them to the value of deliberative democracy and provides them with the management skills needed to allow deliberation without losing control" (p. 171).

The book's major weakness is its failure to give adequate weight to the views of Reagan political appointees.

Golden says that she interviewed seventy careerists, two subcabinet appointees from before and after the Reagan years, and seven outside observers. No Reaganites seem to be on the list. The omission is striking, since Reagan appointees could have provided a different perspective on the events in question. One suspects that they might have reported more bureaucratic resistance than the careerists were willing to acknowledge.

More consideration of Reagan administration viewpoints might have prevented the occasional distortions that mar an otherwise solid work. Reagan, she says, claimed that the food stamp budget had grown greatly "to the detriment of military spending" (p. 65). Given that food stamp spending equals a small fraction of the defense budget, the passage makes Reagan seem foolish. But a check of Golden's references (*Public Papers of the Presidents*, 1982, pp. 74, 389, 436, 555, 1260, 1398) shows that he was talking each time about entitlement spending as a whole, not just food stamps. By fiscal 1989, Reagan's last budget year, outlays for entitlements outstripped outlays for defense by more than \$200 billion.

These reservations aside, this book is readable and valuable. It could work well in a wide variety of graduate and undergraduate courses.

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