The effect of politician-constituent conflict on bureaucratic responsiveness under varying information frames

Annabelle S. Wittels

January 18, 2020

Abstract

Public participation in rulemaking has long been regarded as an integral part of a functioning democracy. It is however unclear how governments and administrations influence the throughput of public participation, and on a micro-level the decisions of bureaucrats tasked with acting upon such input. In representative democracies the policy positions of elected politicians can divert from public opinion. In addition, public participation initiatives do not commonly attract a fully representative set of society. Thereby demands from the participating public and political principals can diverge. Bureaucrats are then faced with conflicting input. Given bureaucrats’ discretion to manage public participation processes and their outputs, how can we expect them to act? Will they act according to the wishes of their political principal, will they side with the public or choose to divert. I use a survey experiment with senior bureaucrats in the US and the UK to test this. Further, I assess whether information frames alter such behaviour and whether this varies with the presence of citizen-politician conflict. I find that conflict leads bureaucrats to adopt more of an adviser role, but that information frames have no significant effect.

*European University Institute, annabelle.wittels@eui.eu
†I would like to express my gratitude for the pertinent feedback for this paper provided by Prof. Peter John, Dr. Christian Schuster, Prof. Oliver James, the attendees of MPSA 2019 and my peers at UCL and EUI. I am especially thankful for Vanessa Cheng-Matsuno’s expert review and work as a second coder.
1. Introduction

In a quest for democratic engagement, many countries have institutionalised mechanisms for citizens to express their preferences and needs in the period between elections (Speer, 2012). Public participation in rulemaking (hereafter public participation) varies in its form and purpose. The defining feature of public participation mechanisms is that they are top-down forms of participation; state actors initiate contact and set the parameters for engagement. Mechanisms can be formal, like so-called “consultations” in Westminster systems and most European countries; “public comment” in the United States. They can be more informal, testing sentiment through conversations with key stakeholders, town hall debates, ad-hoc focus groups or surveys of citizen groups. They also vary to what degree they offer opportunity for deliberation. While these processes claim to reinvigorate and support democracy, they also purposely leave room for discretion about how to handle the output from public engagement processes. Officials can ignore, cherry-pick and reframe what citizens propose. Invitations to citizens to participate might be motivated by a firm belief held by those in power that citizen participation can provide substantive input into the policy-decision process. In other instances, public participation mechanisms are used to legitimise but not change policy choices. Worse, the aim might simply be to provide an illusion of legitimacy to critics of the policy or policy actors. There clearly exists potential for conflict between demands voiced through public participation processes and what policy choices political representatives want to make. That noted, conflict is not necessarily a product of lacking goodwill or cynicism. Conflict can also arise simply because politicians tend to act as representatives, not delegates - they can and do moderate the demands of citizens (Sheffer, 2018; Ryan et al., 2018; Meier and Nigro, 1976).
This posits a tricky situation for the bureaucracy who is largely responsible for managing public participation processes and how their output is translated into policy implementation. Bureaucrats are typically tasked with helping to process the information resulting from public participation initiatives, feeding them into policy or organisational reform programmes. This makes bureaucrats a funnel and filter for information; bureaucrats have the power to moderate the influence of citizen input derived through public participation mechanisms. In this function, they can face a situation in which citizens provided input on policy through legitimate ways, but political principals are opposed to implementing such input.

Bureaucrats have contradictory responsibilities in such scenarios, which they need to negotiate carefully. They have a duty to serve the government in power but are also meant to be experts who guide against technically “wrong” decisions and those in violation of democratic principles. Bureaucrats need to balance democratic principles and the legitimacy of public participation processes with more practical concerns, such as the political and technical feasibility of being responsive to citizens demands. We currently know little about how bureaucrats navigate such complex scenarios, what it means for the theory of political control of the bureaucracy and for the ability of public participation processes to deliver on their promise of offering more direct ways for citizens to influence policy-making (on the promise of public participation processes in the UK see Parry (1972), Burns (1994) and McKenna (2011); for the US Fung and Wright (2001), Guo and Neshkova (2012), Hafer and Ran (2016)). Using a survey experiment, I set out to address this gap in the literature. I test how senior bureaucrats respond to citizen input when the demands of citizens conflict with those of political principals. Further, I investigate whether the quality of input specifically, the framing of demands - alters the responsiveness of bureaucrats.
to citizen demands.

This study is one of the few studies to provide causal evidence on the relationship between bureaucrats’ behaviour and public participation. What is more, it tests a relationship that is understudied yet crucial for forming a thorough understanding of the political control of the bureaucracy: how bureaucrats behave when they have discretion but face conflicting input from citizens and political principals. It also contributes to the literature on framing effects by testing whether how information from public participation processes is presented affects responsiveness.

1.1. Relations between politicians, bureaucrats and citizens and their influence on policy-making

A bureaucrat of the Weberian ideal would act with “neutral competence” – they acquire the expert knowledge necessary to manage policy processes but interfere in neither the choice nor the design of policies. Only when politicians demand something that is at odds with laws, rules or regulations, the Weberian bureaucrat would resist. It is of course clear that this ideal type does not exist. First, the impossibility of creating laws in a manner that specifies every detail about their implementation means that bureaucrats are obliged to take policy-relevant decisions (Huber and Shipan, 2002, pp.1-77). Even more so, changes in governance structures of modern democracies have brought about greater discretion and a desire for bureaucrats to take a more pro-active, responsive role in policy-making (Aberbach and Rockman, 1994; Marsh et al., 2000; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Whitford, 2010; Gains and John, 2010; Andersen and Moynihan, 2016). This is not only true for front-line, or street-level bureaucrats who interact directly with citizens (Lipsky, 1983). Bureaucrats in central planning and senior roles from European as well as US administrations have reported
that their daily work can veer into the political (Alford et al., 2017) and that neutrality is aspired to but rarely enforced in practice (Adolph, 2013; Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014).

The political influence of bureaucrats becomes especially salient when politicians diverge from public opinion, or in the context of this study, from the opinions brought forward by public participation processes. Politicians have been shown to be generally responsive to their constituents (Fox and Shotts, 2009; Rottinghaus, 2015; Costa, 2017; Simonovits et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2016; Coppock, 2014; Arnold and Franklin, 2012; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2006; Lax and Phillips, 2012), yet not on all issues nor for all constituent groups (Newman and Griffin, 2005; Costa, 2017; Ahler and Broockman, 2018; Emeriau, 2019; Simonovits et al., 2019; Ofosu, 2019; Lax and Phillips, 2012).

There is room for bureaucrats to influence politicians to shift their position closer to that of the citizenry or divert from it (Christensen and Opstrup, 2018; Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014; Callahan and Yang, 2003; Denters and Klok, 2012; Bryer, 2009; Lowande, 2018; Karlsson, 2019). Results of inter-electoral public participation mechanisms are not legally binding in most countries and contexts. For example, in the US, the government and most agencies have a legal duty to circulate new orders for public comment before they are adopted and to issue a response. Yet, there are no prescriptions on how they have to respond to them. Similarly, in the UK, it is left to the discretion of the government and agencies to determine whether and how to respond.

Bureaucrats are meant to provide technical advice and can act as an important counterweight to the short-term thinking encouraged by electoral politics (Miller et al., 2017). However, bureaucrats are neither necessarily neutral nor free from bias. Their decisions can have distributional consequences. For in-
stance, in an audit experiment Einstein and Glick (2017) find that ethnically white bureaucrats systematically discriminate against black constituents. White et al. (2015) find the same pattern with a different set of bureaucrats in response to Latino voters. Bias might also be aggregated and exacerbated at the agency level due to social sorting.

For instance, social workers might find poor people more deserving of help than people who did not opt into social work; police will be more likely to see punishment and incarceration as appropriate responses to minor crimes (Prendergast, 2007). The same logic applies to bureaucrats in central and planning roles. Lepers (2018), for example, observes that the alma mater of the members of the US Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), the monetary policymaking body of the US Federal Reserve, predicts how these bureaucrats vote on ideologically charged issues tabled for committee meetings. When bureaucrats use or abuse such discretion, it is often assumed that it goes against the interest of citizens (White et al., 2015; Einstein and Glick, 2017; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2011).

However, in a scenario where political principals and the consulted public disagree, bureaucrats can actively move policy-relevant choices towards or away from public opinion. To date, what bureaucrats do in such a scenario has not been thoroughly theorised nor empirically tested. Would they continue to behave as usual? Or, would they adjust their behaviour and exert more discretion? If they exert more discretion, will they side with citizens or undermine their claims on influence?

1.1.1. Information frames and the bias of bureaucrats

Career bureaucrats are a professional class, socialised into using technocratic criteria for evaluating options for policy design and implementation. Yet, even if they are determined to decide “objectively”, they are not immune to bias. Par-
particularly, how citizen input is presented - its information frame - might influence their decision. The effect of information frames is one of the most widely studied biases in policy-relevant decision-making (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984; Chong, Dennis and James N. Druckman, 2007; Arceneaux, 2012). In the now famous framing study conducted by Kahneman and Tversky (1984), people’s policy choice changed when the options were framed as losses rather than gains. Most political science literature on framing studies its effect on vote choices and public opinion (Lau and Schlesinger, 2005; Druckman and McDermott, 2008; Olsen, 2013, 2015). Few studies look at the effect of information frames on the decision-making of bureaucrats. After Herbert Simon pioneered the study of non-rational behaviour in the realm of politics, agency and firm behaviour (see Bendor (2003) for a commentary on Simon’s work and influence on the field of political science), the field reverted back mostly to principal-agent models that were dominated by rational or quasi-rational actors. Exemptions are few but generally support the idea that bureaucrats are subject to framing effects just as much as other individuals.

Banuri et al. (2018), illustrate this in a survey experiment with staff from the World Bank and DFID, the UK’s department for international development. They find that ideologically and emotionally loaded words change how accurately bureaucrats evaluate evidence. Bureaucrats are more likely to accept or dismiss a scientific claim when it is ideologically loaded than when it is not. Belardinelli et al. (2018) replicate framing effects used in Olsen (2015) with a sample of Italian bureaucrats. The bureaucrats are asked to evaluate the performance of contractors based on satisfaction ratings provided by citizens. When the same ratings are presented with a negative frame, bureaucrats are more likely to provide lower performance scores than when a positive frame is used. Despite the existence and significant impact of framing effects having been
empirically verified across many contexts and research designs, it is important to note that in real life situations the effect size of frames will likely be smaller than in laboratory and survey experiments.

Druckman (2004) finds some evidence in support of this in a randomised control experiment (albeit confined to the laboratory). He tests the effect of counter arguments and deliberation, which introduces competing frames and thus is more akin to real life situations. Receiving counter claims and engaging in discussion with people who received other information frames leads to smaller effects and null effects compared to when participants are exposed to only one frame or homogeneous group discussions. Literature on street-level, compared to office- and more senior bureaucracy, has seen a greater proliferation of work on framing in particular and behavioural biases affecting bureaucrat decision making more generally.¹ This literature provides many real life case studies of the behaviour and bias of bureaucrats.

Street-level bureaucrats use mental shortcuts such as stereotypes Lipsky (1983) and signals, which suggest differing degrees of need and deservingness (Raaphorst and Van de Walle, 2017), to define and sort citizens they interact with into different policy-relevant groups. Andersen and Moynihan (2016) test the causal relationship between frames - professional values, citizen-centred policy and empirical research - and the decisions of bureaucrats in an experiment with state-employed teachers (street-level bureaucrats) in the US and Denmark. Across three experiments, they find that using frames that emphasise professional norms significantly change the policy choices of bureaucrats. However, the case that Andersen and Moynihan (2016) study is a peculiar one: they test whether making a policy appear as beneficial to the clients (students) of bureaucrats (teachers) makes the bureaucrats (teachers) more likely to support

¹Literature on street-level bureaucrats tends to portray them as actors with power, motivation and a mission, but riddled with biases and emotion - a view very different to the homo economicus dominant in principal-agent models.
adoption of such a policy. The authors regard the behavioural patterns observed in this experiment as indicative of the behaviour of bureaucrats.

1.1.2. Role conceptions, norms and professionalisation influencing the behaviour of bureaucrats

Yet, as Prendergast (2007) discusses at length, different types of bureaucrats will have different baseline levels of bias in favour or against providing services to citizens. It is unsurprising that, as Andersen and Moynihan (2016) finds, teachers would support something that supposedly benefits students, especially when - as the authors find - this claim is backed up by a reputable university. For instance, police men and social workers are unlikely to respond to the same value frames (Prendergast, 2007). Scott (1997) shows in a - albeit underpowered - randomised experiment with social workers in the U.S that they are more likely to approve an applicant for benefits when the applicant’s profile includes compassionate words. It is less clear that a bureaucrat in a planning as opposed to a street-level role would show the same bias in response to compassionate language. Bureaucrats in planning roles are less exposed to beneficiaries of their work. Emotional appeals might therefore be less successful. Training might also play a role. Highly technocratic roles might lead bureaucrats to favour statistical evidence over personal, emotional accounts. As a case in point, Emeriau (2019) finds in a large scale study of French bureaucrats processing asylum requests that they - quite rationally - adjust their behaviour to process claims more equitably once their beliefs about the likelihood of prosecution have been updated. Thus, an evaluation of bureaucrat reactions to differing information frames should take into account whether this differs between frontline and more centrally employed bureaucrats. Another important consideration is how national contexts will influence the processing of information. Individual policy preferences and the ideology of bureaucrats influence policy outputs Clinton et al. (2012).
It is however less clear how institutionalised, regional or national norms affect bureaucratic decision-making. For instance, welfare and social care spending in the UK and US differ substantially (Burkitt et al., 2018). While in the UK public provision of health services is closely tied to a sense of national pride, in the US freedom of choice and client orientation play a much larger role (Cream and Robertson, 2018). The thresholds of need and deservingness that need to be met in the eyes of British and US bureaucrats could thus differ. The design of this study addresses this concern by randomising bureaucrats into survey conditions at equal rates for each of the survey countries (UK and US).

The current picture on bureaucrat-politician-citizen interactions is an incomplete one. It remains unclear how relations and information frames interact to affect bureaucrat behaviour, and how this in turn changes the odds for public participation processes to increase citizen influence over policy. So far, to my knowledge, only Butler (2010) has investigated the link between bureaucrat behaviour and public participation initiatives using a causal framework. In a field experiment Butler and Kousser (2015) tests the effect of ‘fire alarm’ threats, the suggestion that bureaucrats might be audited, on compliance with their role in helping students to register for civic participation initiatives. He finds no significant effects. We know even less about what happens when bureaucrats receive input from participation initiatives. A rare exception is Migchelbrink and Van de Walle (2019) who show that bureaucrats are influenced by the perceived legitimacy of input. Legitimacy is closely linked to representativeness, whereby input that is based on a large group of citizens is seen as more legitimate. It is likely that such considerations are also at play during conflict. When bureaucrats decide to side with or against the demands of the consulted public, they will need to support or challenge concepts central to the legitimacy, relevance and adequacy of input provided.
1.1.3. Self-report and post-hoc rationalisation: Markers of legitimacy, relevance and adequacy of citizen input

As the literature on motivated reasoning shows, voters (Redlawsk, 2002; Donovan et al., 2019; ?), politicians (Walgrave et al., 2018) and bureaucrats (Baekgaard et al., 2019) all alike might provide sound explanations why they prefer certain policies over others, yet their evaluations are biased by other factors such as social identity and information frames. Based on the expectations attached to public participation processes and the demands put on bureaucrats - objectivity and expertise markedly - I expect that bureaucrats will rationalise their choices by paying particular attention to markers of legitimacy, relevance and adequacy of citizen input.

Fishkin (2018) stresses the importance of representativeness in the justification for involving the public. In the case of Fishkin (2018)’s work, so-called mini-publics, randomly drawn samples of the public who are invited to deliberate on policy choices. Such representativeness goes beyond statistical considerations of sample size and demographic spread. It also requires what (Fishkin, 2018, p. 73) calls “attitudinal representativeness”. This is especially important in election contexts, where issue positions are better predictors of party choice than other demographic markers (e.g. gun control and abortion in the US). Input from citizens can be relevant because of its content or simply because of the power that the citizen groups wield. Generally, input is dominated by organised interests - industry organisations, charities and advocacy groups (Kantor, 1976; Grant et al., 2007; Wälti et al., 2004; Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007; Panagopoulos, 2011; Klüver, 2012). While organisation should provide for greater influence, this is not necessarily guaranteed and might be more akin to consensus-building than exercising direct influence (Kantor, 1976; ?). What is more, where governments actively recruit input from unorganised interested
parties\(^2\), it is questionable whether their input will weigh as heavily as that of organised interest groups. For one, there is less political pressure to implement any changes suggested by unorganised interests. On the other hand, the very fact that these individuals lack a representative body might make them appear to be a more genuine and trustworthy source. Bureaucrats might thus assign greater weight to output from public participation that is not reliant on organised interests.

Considering that bureaucracies encourage decisions based on techno- and meritocratic criteria, the content of input and its perceived adequacy for policy decisions will also factor into bureaucrats' decision-making process. Gailmard and Patty (2007) predict that government will grant more discretion to bureaucrats to make decisions based on their expertise as long as the policy preferences of bureaucrats do not diverge too far from those of the legislature. Bureaucrats are expected to be motivated by this power to shape policy. This is also referred to as the "bureau-shaping hypothesis". While Gailmard and Patty (2007) focuses on the US, qualitative (Marsh et al., 2000) and quantitative (Gains and John, 2010) suggests that the same applies for bureaucrats in the UK. Career bureaucrats managing public participation processes can thus be expected to evaluate citizen input against technical criteria, but potentially weighing this information depending on their own policy preferences (Banuri et al., 2018).

1.2. Hypotheses

1.2.1. Bureaucrat behaviour under conflict

The risk of sanction should motivate bureaucrats to comply (Whitford, 2010). The magnitude in response is likely to vary with the bureaucrat’s risk pref-

\(^2\)For example, the inhabitants of a residential unit, people aged 55+ who use public transport or other stakeholders who are clearly affected by planned policy changes but not represented by any association or body
erences, but bureaucrats can be expected to generally perceive the threat of sanction to be larger when acting counter to the demands of politicians than when acting against those of citizens. This can be expected for a number of reasons:

For one, politicians can sanction bureaucrats more directly and immediately than citizens. They can create and close agencies, set budgets, change salary levels, contractual terms and powers that agencies are granted. Politicians can affect the number, security and attractiveness of public sector jobs. In country contexts where patronage prevails, politicians can affect the careers of bureaucrats even more directly (Cruz and Keefer, 2015; Enikolopov, 2014; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018). Citizens too can sanction bureaucrats’ behaviour but need to rely largely on mobilising the legislature or judiciary to act on their behalf. For instance, Bertelli and John (2010) show that citizens’ performance ratings of local government services affect their budgets in the subsequent period as central government responds to these performance ratings.

This implies that bureaucrats should perceive there to be a greater risk of immediate sanction from their political compared to citizen principals. The expectation thus is that bureaucrats will yield more to politicians when demands are conflicting because negating politicians’ demands comes at a greater cost than ignoring citizen input.

When feedback is conflicting, bureaucrats will yield more to the demands of politicians than citizens.

Apart from evaluations of risk, norms and social identity shape behaviour. Bureaucrats have a professional duty to facilitate policy-making regardless of the party-affiliation of their political principal. It is thus possible that if such norms are strong, they override the effects of conflict. In such a case, there would be no observable difference between how bureaucrats choose when political and citizen
principals agree compared to when they are in conflict. Following theories on political elites, it is also possible that bureaucrats perceive themselves to be of the same group as politicians – the elite, governing – while citizens are perceived as the ‘other’ (Gains and John, 2010).

The exact opposite socialisation might be at play, especially for street-level bureaucrats as compared to those working in more central government functions, removed from daily interactions with citizens. As socialised professionals bureaucrats might attach more weight to citizens because they perceive them as their client group and key stakeholders. For example, teachers or social workers might perceive a strong norm that their profession needs to respond to clients first and foremost. In either case, if the effect of such a social identification is stronger than that of the tensions introduced by conflict, we should observe no changes in response in the conflict situation.

Bureaucrats are however also expected to act as a bulwark against overly short-term and politicised decision-making in the favour of technocratic considerations (Miller et al., 2017). Bureaucrats might therefore always try to maximise their discretion and prioritise their own knowledge over that of politicians and citizens. However, to what extent they feel the license to do so is expected to vary with the presence of conflict. If there is conflict, bureaucrats should feel more pressured to take a side to facilitate choosing one option over the other. Whereas when politicians and citizens’ input align, they can take a role as adviser and based on their expertise offer alternative strategies for consideration.

1.2.2. Emotional cues vs the effects of information frames using statistics

Based on existing research, I further anticipate that information frames will affect the decisions of bureaucrats (Chong, Dennis and James N. Druckman, 2007; Druckman and McDermott, 2008). As discussed in earlier sections, how
bureaucrats will evaluate certain information frames might correlate strongly with their professional identities and the norms they have adopted through professional socialisation. There are however two types of information frames which are widely prevalent across professions and highly relevant for the ability of public participation processes to influence policy choices:

Information from public participation processes is either summarised in a qualitative manner or relies on larger scale data collection efforts that aim for statistical representativeness. While the former claims legitimacy through selecting the relevant and right group of stakeholders, the latter does so through strength in numbers. Depending on their ontological outlook, bureaucrats might be more convinced by either a qualitative or a quantitative frame. On top of ontological considerations, qualitative evidence provides for greater use of emotional cues. An ample body of literature has shown that information frames containing emotional cues are more persuasive than evidence presented without such cues (Small and Lerner, 2008; Druckman and McDermott, 2008; Arceneaux, 2012; Brader et al., 2008; Nuñez et al., 2015; Van Kleef et al., 2004; Bas and Grabe, 2016; Lau and Schlesinger, 2005). Emotive language should make citizens’ demands more persuasive and thus increase responsiveness towards citizens in general. Moreover, information that is high in affect leads to different, more risk-hungry behaviour than the same information that is low in affect (Rottenstreich and Hsee, 2001; Petrova et al., 2014). Qualitative information might therefore render bureaucrats more responsive to citizens’ demands, especially when risk matters – like in a conflict scenario. I thus expect a hierarchy of effects:

When the information is presented in a qualitative way, using emotional words, bureaucrats will be more responsive to citizens than if it is described in a quantitative way, lacking emotional words.
If input is emotional-qualitative, bureaucrats will discount risks and be more willing to respond to citizen input.

\[ Y_{\text{Quali}}^{\text{NoConflict}} > Y_{\text{Quant}}^{\text{NoConflict}} > Y_{\text{Quali}}^{\text{Conflict}} > Y_{\text{Quant}}^{\text{Conflict}} \]  

(1)

While information frames are expected to shift responses, considerations of risk and power entailed in facing conflicting input from political and citizen principals is expected to have greater influence on bureaucrat behaviour. Framing effects will be smaller than the effects of conflict, so that bureaucrats are always less responsive in conflict scenarios than when there is no conflict.

2. Research design

I use a randomised survey experiment to assess the causal effect of conflict between politician and citizens’ demands on the behaviour of bureaucrats, and how information frames moderate their behaviour. The study was pre-registered at EGAP. EGAP registration number: 20171013AA. The pre-analysis plan is available for download at http://egap.org/registration/2884. The design and analysis described below follows this pre-registered plan unless stated otherwise. The survey experiment has a 2x2 factorial design. Conflict is randomised within subjects - half of bureaucrats are randomly allocated to receive the conflict scenario first, while the other half receives it as the second scenario. Information frames are randomised between subjects - half of bureaucrats receive both scenarios using quantitative information only, while the other half is exposed to scenarios that use an emotional-qualitative frame. The emotional-qualitative information frame is modelled on qualitative methods typically used to aggregate the results of public participation processes, while the quantitative frame is akin to results from email or online surveys, which are another popular mech-
anism used for inter-electoral public participation processes. The frames tested in this experiment are thus what Druckman called equivalency or valence frames as opposed to value or issue frames (Druckman, 2001). More conscientious or risk-averse bureaucrats might react very differently to conflict compared to more daring, less conscientious ones. Each bureaucrat receives one conflict and one no conflict scenario; the order is randomised and thus they act as their own control. Framing effects, to the contrary, have been replicated across many settings and population groups (Druckman, 2001). It is less likely that responses to information frames are heterogeneous. Apart from the experimentally manipulated factors, conflict and information frame, one would also expect the topic and the source of information to influence bureaucrats’ decisions (Hartman and Weber, 2009). Since bureaucrats act as their own control, topic choice should not matter much. The topic is chosen in such a manner that it is broadly relevant for any bureaucrat, regardless of their area of work (more detail on this in the section on interventions). Ideally, content of input is kept constant across the conflict and non-conflict situations to isolate effects. However, showing bureaucrats the same scenario twice, once with a conflict and once without, is obtrusively artificial. I therefore use two different scenarios but randomly assign the matching and order of the scenarios. Thereby, the effect of conflict remains uncorrelated with the type of scenario. One other important factor to consider is that disagreement is directional: X disagrees with Y. There is a judge (J) and an opinion-provider (O). Holding the scenario and status of the demands constant (conflict or no conflict), responsiveness might be a function mainly of the norms that bureaucrats hold (N), interaction between source - politician (P) or citizen (C) - and their role in the communication - judge (J) or opinion provider (O):
Table 1: OLS regression: treatment effect on client-value conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental conditions</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>No conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information frame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/qualitative frame</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional - Conflict</td>
<td>Emotional - No conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative frame</td>
<td></td>
<td>Qant - Conflict</td>
<td>Quant - No conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this reason, whether the politician or the citizen is the judge (the disagreeing party) is also randomised. It is not feasible to analyse the effect of these randomised factors on behaviour since the sample size required to measure them with adequate power exceeds the scope of this study. However, I report on the balance of covariates for these factors. Further, I measure the responsiveness to suggestions made by politicians and citizens separately (see section 2.2 for more details). This further allows me to parcel out the effect by information source.

2.1. Experiment materials

Before the experiment, I conducted a pilot with 120 participants who work in the public sector, recruited via MTurk. I tested 12 vignettes to pick those that were well understood and showed clear response patterns. More information on the design and results of the pilot are available in Appendix II of the online supplementary materials. Bureaucrats likely evaluate the vignettes with reference to their own area of work and experiences. I therefore tested vignettes that describing situations that were relevant for all types of bureaucrats; communication strategies and policies regarding responses to enquiries made by citizens. While not all bureaucrats would be tasked personally with the implementation of such policies, they will exist in one form or another for their agency, service or department. Qualitative responses to two open-ended questions at the end

\[
\text{Responsiveness} \approx f(Norm[N], Source[P, C], Role[J, O])
\]  

(2)
of the survey suggest that participants were able to make this connection and translate the scenario to their particular work context. The results of the open-ended questions are discussed in more detail in the results section and in the online supplementary materials.

Of the 12 tested vignettes, I selected two that performed well and adapted them further to provide the best fit to test them on both US and UK bureaucrats. Further, I adapted the language of the survey response options for the area of work and terms for political principles for each of the contexts. The equivalence and recognisability of terms was discussed and adjusted with the help of 15 former UK and US bureaucrats. A list of these terms is available in Appendix III of the online supplementary materials. After having consented to take part, bureaucrats each received two vignettes. The order of presentation was randomised. One vignette portrayed their political principal and the citizen group to be in agreement. The other vignette depicted them to be in conflict. In the conflict scenarios, who disagrees with whom was randomised. This was done for two reasons: First, source bias is a well-documented phenomenon, which predicts that people will react differently to a claim depending on who made the claim (Hartman and Weber, 2009). For instance, if the political principal makes a suggestion and the citizenry disagrees, this might be interpreted differently than when the citizenry suggests something and politicians disagree. The second reasons, pertains to English grammar - disagreement implies agency. If A disagrees with B, A might be perceived as the aggressor and B as more passive. Therefore 50% of respondents receive a conflict scenario stating that the politician disagrees with the demands put forward by citizens, whereas the other 50% receives the opposite phrasing.
Table 2: Overview of treatment messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental condition</th>
<th>Scenario 1</th>
<th>Scenario 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantitative</strong></td>
<td>The results show that 80% of citizens say that they are dissatisfied with what your organisation is doing.</td>
<td>The results show that many citizens say that they are dissatisfied with what your organisation is doing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>But 50% of all respondents also state that they would be more convinced that your organisation is doing a good job if it would inform them about how it responds to their queries in real time (e.g. via text message).</td>
<td>But 50% of all respondents also state that they would be more convinced your organisation is doing a good job if it would inform them about how it responds to their queries in real time (e.g. via text message).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with your organisation.</td>
<td>They would like to be given a choice in how their concerns are dealt with, supported by the advice of your staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Variation in treatment text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Type of response</th>
<th>Response text, where source is either “the citizen group” or “the group of councillors/the minister”.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NO CONFLICT:</td>
<td>Feedback by Source 1 [Source] studied the results of this survey thoroughly. [Source] advocates that local government/ministry name should address citizens’ needs and start texting citizens about the progress and status of their inquiries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NO CONFLICT:</td>
<td>Feedback by Source 2 [Source] also advocates that local government/ministry name should address citizens’ needs and start texting citizens about the progress and status of their inquiries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>CONFLICT:</td>
<td>Feedback by Source 1 [Source] studied the results of this representative survey thoroughly. [Source] advocates that local government/ministry name should not text citizens, as only [50% / several] of them endorse this. They think that the money could be used to support them in other ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>CONFLICT:</td>
<td>Feedback by Source 2 [Source] also advocates that local government/ministry name should not start offering a menu of choices to citizens, as only [50% / several] of them endorse this. They think that the money could be used to support them in other ways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2. Outcomes and covariates

The main outcome is willingness to respond. It is a proxy of how motivated and persistent a bureaucrat will be in their pursuit of adopting or preventing suggested policy changes. Bureaucrats are asked to rank their willingness on a seven-point scale. The scale was validated by Tummers et al. (2009).

\[ W_{i,s} \in [1, 7] \]  

(3)

To assess relative responsiveness to citizen demands compared to politician demands, I calculate the ratio of willingness to respond to citizens’ demands to the willingness to respond to politicians’ demands.

\[ Y_{i,s} = \frac{W_{i,s}^{\text{citizen}}}{W_{i,s}^{\text{politician}}} \]  

(4)

where \( i \) stands for the observation of participant and \( s \) denotes the scenario (one or two).

If the ratio is 1, then willingness is equal. If the ratio is less than 1, then willingness is greater for responding to the citizen. As a secondary measure, I look at the chosen plan of action. While bureaucrats might be sympathetic towards citizen concerns, when they are confronted with a choice and the consequences that such a choice will entail - e.g. it might negatively reflect on their career -, they will support whatever their political principal supports. In the conflict scenario, bureaucrats are asked whether they would support what the citizens or what their political principal proposed, or whether they would choose to openly disagree with both. In scenarios without conflict, bureaucrats are asked to choose whether they will adapt the suggestions made by the citizens and the political principal or whether they choose to object to them. Bureaucrats can thus choose one of three options in the conflict scenario and one of two in the
non-conflict scenario.

\[ P_{i}^{Conflict} \in [0, 1, 2] \]  \hspace{1cm} (5) \\
\[ P_{i}^{NonConflict} \in [0, 1] \] \hspace{1cm} (6)

This introduces asymmetry but approximates real life scenarios more closely.

The presence of conflict will change the number of parties a bureaucrat can align themselves with. To compare responses across scenarios, I convert the responses into z-scores.

Personal characteristics are expected to affect responses. For instance, women tend to be more positive in their responses in surveys (Moors et al., 2014). Those who work in pro-social front-line services such as teachers or social workers will likely be more responsive than bureaucrats whose clients consist of less vulnerable populations. Since they face different risks, more senior staff and those on higher salaries might also react somewhat differently. Those with higher education attainments are more likely to be comfortable with using statistics and might therefore respond somewhat more consistently to the numeric framing than those with lower numeracy. I therefore account for the area of work, seniority and gender, education and income of bureaucrats by including them as pre-treatment covariates in the estimation of the average treatment effect. Professional values and how suggestions made by citizens and politicians reflect on them should further affect responses. I therefore include scales on client-policy and client-value conflicts developed by Tummers et al. (2009). To manage trade-offs between the number of items included and the robustness of instruments, I pick the three elements of the scale that had the highest factor loadings as indicated by data from the pilot.

1. Working with the policy clashes with the wishes of many clients
2. My clients experience the policy as a breach of their privacy

3. Working with the policy conflicts with my values and norms as a professional

Pilot data indicated that the adapted items had high inter-item correlations (0.84 between the two professional-value conflict measures, and 0.65 and 0.66 for the professional-value conflict measures and the professional-client measures see section 2.2). At the very end of the survey, I included two free text fields, which asked bureaucrats to comment on (i) what they perceive to be barriers to more effective citizen engagement and (ii) to explain why they chose as they did in the experiment. All survey questions are included in Appendix II of the online supplementary materials.
2.3. **Estimation of treatment effects**

I use an OLS regression to estimate the average treatment effect, with the following specification.

\[ Y_{i,s} = \alpha + \beta_1 T_{i,s} + \beta_2 S_i + \beta_3 T_{i,s} \times S_i + \gamma_1 X_{i,s} + \epsilon_{i,s} \quad (7) \]

Where:

- \( Y_{i,s} \) is the outcome of interest, observed for participant \( i \) in scenario \( s \).
- \( T_{i,s} \) is a binary variable which is zero when participant \( i \) was randomised into the numeric condition and one if they were randomised into the emotional condition.
- \( S_i \) is a binary variable for which zero is the conflict scenario and one the no conflict scenario observed by participant \( i \).
- \( X_{i,s} \) is a vector of covariates as specified in the section above.
- \( \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3 \) are the coefficients of interest.
- \( \epsilon_{i,s} \) is an error term clustered for participant \( i \) in scenario \( s \).

2.4. **Recruitment and randomisation**

I recruited the bulk of the sample using Prolific.ac (Prolific hereafter). Prolific is a professional panel provider with roots in academia. According to recent tests,
Prolific provides good quality of responses. Peer et al. (2017) tested the reliability indices of several scales across Prolific, Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) - the most commonly used online recruitment platform in academia to date -, and a handful of other platforms. The results from Prolific were statistically indistinguishable from those obtained from MTurk, apart from scores on attention and those of a quality test. On this test, participants recruited via Prolific performed better than those recruited on MTurk. Significantly more respondents passed the attention test on Prolific than on MTurk. Apart from these encouraging findings, for this study Prolific was a more suitable platform than MTurk and alternative recruitment platforms. Predictiv contrary to others offered a large pool of bureaucrats based in the UK as well as the US. Further, Prolific makes it more difficult to prevaricate on screening characteristics than MTurk (Palan and Schitter, 2018), providing further confidence that participants truly were who they presented to be. Similar to other platforms, participant IDs on Prolific are unique and can be tracked across studies. Researchers can screen participants via their IDs; for instance, only allowing previous participants into a new study or excluding them from further studies.

While online panel providers offer many advantages compared to offline recruitment, such as reduced experimenter demands, lower cost and more demographically diverse panels, online panels struggle to attract higher income individuals. Consequently, they are less likely to attract bureaucrats who have more senior roles - i.e. those bureaucrats who have managerial responsibilities and are involved in organisational strategy and agenda-setting. To reach such bureaucrats, I advertised the study at events and meetings targeted at senior bureaucrats. In the US, I distributed the link to the survey with an explanation about its purpose via the Slack channel of the US What Works Cities networkSlack is a collaboration tool with a chat function at its core. Many government and
quasi-governmental organisations in the US and UK now use it to collaborate across teams, departments and agencies. In the UK, senior bureaucrats at the UK’s Civil Service Live conference were asked to complete the experiment in their waiting time before a talk started. Civil Service Live is the UK’s largest conference for public servants and takes place annually. Three talks, each on a different day, with a different speaker and spread across two venues, were used for recruitment purposes. The survey link was also provided to attendees at a meeting of the senior bureaucrats running a large local government in the UK and a cross-authority government meeting group. Through these offline efforts, I successfully recruited a total of 93 senior bureaucrats. The survey was only available to Prolific sample participants who had indicated on their profiles that they had managerial responsibilities. At the end of the survey, they were asked to specify their job level. To provide a more bespoke classification, I used distinctions used in the UK public sector and their US equivalents: officer, junior management, senior management and executive.

Bureaucrats recruited offline make up 40% of the sample of senior and executive bureaucrats, but only 12% of the entire sample. While one might suspect that they will act differently to bureaucrats recruited via the online platforms, I will illustrate in the results section that this is not the case.

2.5. Divergence from the pre-analysis plan

When the pre-analysis plan was written, it was unclear that policy value and policy-client conflict could be measured only as a post-treatment variable. If it were included in the regression as pre-specified it would likely bias estimates (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). I therefore instead analyse these two variables as additional, exploratory outcomes and mark analyses as such. Besides, the pre-registered robustness checks, I perform additional checks that address specific
properties of the data.

3. Results

3.1. Description of data

I find no significant association between assignment to treatment and attrition (Table 3). There is no attrition check for bureaucrats recruited at the local government executive meeting because all 15 attendees completed the experiment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-sample</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>p-value (unadj.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prolific USA</td>
<td>Numeric/emotional</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific USA</td>
<td>Conflict first/second</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific USA</td>
<td>Type of no-conflict scenario</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific USA</td>
<td>Type of conflict scenario</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works USA</td>
<td>Numeric/emotional</td>
<td>-.212</td>
<td>.336</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works USA</td>
<td>Conflict first/second</td>
<td>-.292</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works USA</td>
<td>Type of no-conflict scenario</td>
<td>.156</td>
<td>.297</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works USA</td>
<td>Type of conflict scenario</td>
<td>-.156</td>
<td>.297</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSL UK</td>
<td>Numeric/emotional</td>
<td>-.094</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSL UK</td>
<td>Conflict first/second</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSL UK</td>
<td>Type of no-conflict scenario</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSL UK</td>
<td>Type of conflict scenario</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-auth network</td>
<td>Numeric/emotional</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.151</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-auth network</td>
<td>Conflict first/second</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-auth network</td>
<td>Type of no-conflict scenario</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.146</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-auth network</td>
<td>Type of conflict scenario</td>
<td>-.108</td>
<td>.146</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific UK</td>
<td>Numeric/emotional</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific UK</td>
<td>Conflict first/second</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific UK</td>
<td>Type of no-conflict scenario</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolific UK</td>
<td>Type of conflict scenario</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Blocked (stratified) randomisation was infeasible due to logistical constraints. Due to the rarity of the target sample, senior bureaucrats, the recruitment period spanned several months. It was impossible to know which type of bureaucrat would decide to participate at which point in the recruitment period. Quotas could therefore not be set ex-ante. A rolling blocked randomisation would have required continuous checks against the existing databases. This was not pos-
sible with the technical set-up available. However, as Table 4 illustrates, the sample is balanced on all observable demographic characteristics. I do however find an imbalance in terms of recruitment source. Bureaucrats recruited offline were assigned at a higher rate to receive the conflict scenario first (66% vs 50%, p<0.01). I therefore provide an additional robustness check, which compares responses from bureaucrats recruited offline with those recruited online. As pre-specified for the other balance checks, I use OLS regressions with robust standard errors and covariate adjustment to regress offline recruitment (binary) on the key outcomes.

I find that bureaucrats who were recruited offline do not differ in terms of willingness from those recruited online (p=0.31), nor when they make a choice in the conflict scenario (p=0.90). They are about 9 percentage points more likely to accept a suggestion rather than suggest something else in the no conflict scenario, but this is only significant at p<0.1 This is the p-value before adjusting for multiple comparisons.. I therefore provide an additional robustness check for every analysis, in which I add a dummy variable for recruitment tactic. None of the conclusions change following the addition of this dummy.

In terms of demographic characteristics, the final sample comprised of slightly more female than male bureaucrats (60% vs 40%, Figure 3). Notably, many front-line public services - schools, social work, health care and street-level ad-
ministrative services - are female dominated. Given the composition of the sample, the gender bias is thus not surprising but more a reflection of the equivalent bias existent in the public sector workforce. Regarding age, the sample had a typical range for professions that require university / college education, but almost 80% of the sample were below the age of 45 (Figure 4). It is likely that this is due to Prolific being an online platform, which attracts younger people at a higher rate than older individuals. In terms of government sector, the distribution is very similar to that of the UK and US public workforce: most people are employed in front-line services or in local government (Figure 5). The same applies for the seniority of participating bureaucrats. There are more people at lower levels of management than higher ones (Figure 6). In terms of work location, 51% of participants were recruited from the UK and 49% from the US (Figure 7).
3.2. Primary analyses: willingness to respond

The primary outcome was the stated willingness of a bureaucrat to respond to citizen demands relative to politician demands. If the value is above one, the bureaucrat is more willing to respond to the citizen compared to the politician. Looking at the distribution of answers by conflict, it is already evident that there is a greater spread of responses in the conflict scenario than under “no conflict”, where answers cluster more around one (Figure 7). Under conflict
overall responsiveness is reduced - bureaucrats become less willing to respond to both citizens and politicians (Figure 6, Figure 8). However, they reduce responsiveness at a higher rate for politicians, making them relatively more open to citizen suggestions. Information frames had no significant effect (Table 6). Bureaucrats rate their willingness to respond to citizens (Figure 9, Figure 10) and politicians (Figure 11, Figure 12) similarly, regardless of whether the information used emotional-qualitative words or a purely quantitative frame.

Table 6: Primary analysis: OLS regression estimating treatment effects on willingness in response to demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Willingness</th>
<th>(2) Willingness - with demogs added</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>0.245**</td>
<td>0.245**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional × Conflict</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.015**</td>
<td>1.020**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covariates added</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01
Figure 5: Country of work of sample

Figure 6: Willingness to follow citizen suggestions under no conflict

Figure 7: Willingness to follow citizen suggestions under no conflict
Figure 8: Willingness to follow citizen suggestions under no conflict
Table 7: OLS regression estimating treatment effects on willingness in response to citizen and politician demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Willingness - Citizen</td>
<td>Willingness - Citizen</td>
<td>Willingness - Citizen</td>
<td>Willingness - Politician</td>
<td>Willingness - Politician</td>
<td>Willingness - Politician</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.086)</td>
<td>(0.086)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>-0.883**</td>
<td>-0.883**</td>
<td>-0.883**</td>
<td>-1.153**</td>
<td>-1.153**</td>
<td>-1.153**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(0.097)</td>
<td>(0.098)</td>
<td>(0.098)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional × Conflict</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>-0.122</td>
<td>-0.122</td>
<td>-0.122</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.116)</td>
<td>(0.117)</td>
<td>(0.117)</td>
<td>(0.136)</td>
<td>(0.137)</td>
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<td>offline=1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.138)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.620**</td>
<td>5.836**</td>
<td>5.831**</td>
<td>5.665**</td>
<td>5.557**</td>
<td>5.547**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>(0.173)</td>
<td>(0.172)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td>(0.146)</td>
<td>(0.145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covariates added</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01
3.3. Secondary analyses: choice of action

The secondary outcome was choice of action. I find something surprising: Bureaucrats tend to reject demands regardless of framing and conflict (Table 8). Notably, rejection rates are high (Figure 13, Figure 14). In the no conflict scenario 90% of bureaucrats reject the suggestion made by the politician and citizen, albeit the two parties agree. This is considerably lower in the conflict scenario, where 44% of bureaucrats reject both suggestions. However, bureaucrats accept politician and citizen suggestions at a near equal rate (27% and 29%).

The information frames have no significant effect on responses (Table 8), but a trend towards being more accepting of citizen suggestions under the emotional-qualitative frame is observable (Figure 15, Table 8).
3.4. Testing potential mechanisms

There might be different underlying reasons as to why conflict elicits the observed response. As hypothesised, shifts could be driven by the perceived risk of sanction and the differences between sanctions expected from politicians and citizens. Social identity and role concepts might be at play. Or the presence of conflict might alter how bureaucrats evaluate the legitimacy, relevance and adequacy of provided input.

Street-level bureaucrats are expected to be more responsive to citizens because of their proximity to them and the client orientation that many of these professions promote (e.g. teachers or public library staff). Since street-level bureaucrats dominate the sample in terms of numbers, I assess whether they drive the shift towards responsiveness to citizens (Figure 16, Figure 17), using a non-parametric test (a Chi-squared for choice and a Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test for willingness).

When there is no conflict, street-level and centrally employed bureaucrats do not
Table 8: Secondary analysis: OLS regression to estimate the effect of treatment on chosen plan of action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Choice b/se</th>
<th>(2) Choice - with demogs added b/se</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.061 (0.074)</td>
<td>0.063 (0.075)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>0.046 (0.073)</td>
<td>0.046 (0.073)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional × Conflict</td>
<td>-0.085 (0.101)</td>
<td>-0.085 (0.102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.033 (0.052)</td>
<td>-0.181 (0.123)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Covariates added | No | Yes
Observations     | 1440 | 1440

+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

differ (\( X^2(1) = 0.01, p=0.92 \)). Under conflict however street-level bureaucrats accept citizen suggestions at a lower rate than centrally employed bureaucrats (\( X^2(1) = 11.76, p=0.003 \)). In terms of stated willingness to respond, street-level bureaucrats are consistently less willing to respond to citizen suggestions than more centrally employed bureaucrats, both when there is no conflict (\( z =3.28, p=0.001 \)) and when there is conflict (\( z=-2.75, p=0.006 \)).

Next, I look at the effect of conflicting input on perceived client-value and professional-value conflict. If client orientations are underlying a shift towards responsiveness to citizens, perceived client-value conflict too would increase. If socialisation and professional identities are at play, perceptions of professional-value conflict should increase. Indeed, disagreement between politician and citizen demands makes bureaucrats experience significantly more client-value and professional-value conflict (Table 9). This holds up even after adjusting the p-value for multiple comparisons using the very conservative Bonferroni correction. The unadjusted p-value is 0.05. In each of the eight regressions, three comparisons are made, which sums to a total of 24 comparisons. Following the Bonferroni formula, the adjusted p-value is 0.002.

Findings on the effects of the informational frames are more mixed and only
significant at p<0.1, without adjusting for multiple comparisons. Directionally, values shift as expected: Perceived conflict in response to citizen demands is attenuated by the informational frame, especially when citizens and politicians disagree (p<0.1 for each of the tested interactions). The estimate is however imprecise to draw firm conclusions. Finally, perceived conflict in response to politician demands is not influenced by the information frame (p>0.6 for each of the comparisons).

To better understand how bureaucrats evaluate their choices, I next turn to results of the open-text responses.

![Figure 13: Choice to accept or reject proposals under no conflict](image1)

![Figure 14: Choice to accept or reject proposals under conflict](image2)
Figure 15: Choice to accept or reject proposals, under conflict and without conflict

Figure 16: Choice to accept or reject proposals under no conflict of street-level bureaucrats

Figure 17: Choice to accept or reject proposals under no conflict of bureaucrats employed in non-street-level roles
Table 9: Exploratory analysis: OLS regression estimating treatment effects on client-value and professiona-value conflict in response to demands from citizens and politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
<th>(8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>-0.040</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>-0.181+</td>
<td>-0.175+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>1.722**</td>
<td>1.722**</td>
<td>0.954**</td>
<td>0.954**</td>
<td>0.962**</td>
<td>0.802**</td>
<td>0.370**</td>
<td>0.370**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional × Conflict</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>-0.197+</td>
<td>-0.197+</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>0.195+</td>
<td>0.195+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.765**</td>
<td>3.043**</td>
<td>2.691**</td>
<td>2.779**</td>
<td>3.024**</td>
<td>3.380**</td>
<td>2.937**</td>
<td>3.139**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covariates added</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01
3.4.1. Qualitative responses: reasoning and rationalisation of choices

At the end of the survey experiment, bureaucrats were asked two open-ended questions. They were asked to explain what they considered when they made a decision in response to the presented scenarios, and second, what they thought to be barriers to responding to citizen input. About 87% of respondents answered both open-ended questions; 90% answered at least one of the two. Bureaucrats aged 65+ completed the open-ended questions at a lower rate than other age groups. However, there were only four bureaucrats in the sample who were aged 65+. Once I control for multiple comparisons, this difference is no longer be statistically significant. Therefore, this difference is likely not meaningful. Apart from age, I find no other significant association between observable demographic characteristics nor treatment conditions and completion of open-ended questions.

For analysis of the text responses, I randomly sample 300 responses. I then used thematic analysis to hand-code the first 300 submissions. As one would expect from successful randomisation, these 300 submissions do not differ significantly in terms of demographic characteristics from the overall sample; they should thus act as a representative sub-sample of all demographic groups included in this survey. A second coder independently and blind to treatment conditions recoded the same 300 submissions. The percentage of codes that overlapped between coders was 91%. The non-overlapping codes were harmonised following discussions with the second coder.

The ten most common themes on choice are summarised in Table 10 and for the question on perceived barriers to acting upon citizen input results are summarised in Table 11. In addition, to manual coding, I use the tm package in R to preprocess open-ended answers and map out key terms used in the answers against topics. Figure 18 summarises the most common words per code for the
question on choice and Figure 19 for the question on barriers.

Table 10: Most common codes: choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>%-age of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own opinion</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget / cost</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility concerns</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise between parties</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance / targets / work experience</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big picture / wider society</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representativeness of input</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of input</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whatever citizens demand</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own expertise</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To gain a better understanding of whether these themes are systematically related to demographics or choices of the participant, I created dummy variables for the presence/absence of each theme. I then created a correlation matrix of dummies for themes, demographic characteristics, the primary (willingness) and secondary outcomes (choice). Since there are more than 60 comparisons and the likelihood of false positives is high, I report only correlations that are significant at p<0.001 or have a correlation coefficient that can be considered as moderate (rho≥0.3). Associations with demographics were only weak and none was significant at p<0.001. The only meaningful association is that those bureaucrats who take an organisational view - their bureaucratic agency’s views comes first and foremost - are less willing to support the politician’s decision in a conflict scenario than bureaucrats who gave other reasons (rho=-0.27, p<0.001).

The lack of correlation between action and reported reasons is in line with the literature on motivated reasoning. Most commonly, bureaucrats relied on their own opinion, their experiences, the values they held and the perceived need to work towards a compromise between citizen and politician demands. A substantial number of bureaucrats stated that they would put citizen opinion first when they chose a plan of action during the experiment. However, most responded with the caveat that while they put citizens’ voice first they thought there were barriers that meant they could not feasibly support citizen suggestions. Indeed,
34 out of 43 (79%) bureaucrats who said that they cared above all about citizens’ voice, did not chose to support citizen suggestions in the conflict scenario. Instead, they made an alternative suggestion. One respondent, for instance, rationalised this by saying:

“I looked at what would best be in line with the desires of the citizens who are my clients.”

This suggests that while views were taken into account, bureaucrats might have felt that they should alter the suggestions of citizens somewhat; perhaps to make them more palatable to politicians or to protect citizens from what they saw as ill-advised suggestions. Many also doubted the representativeness of the input; whether it would speak for their entire client base or society at large. This is striking as the scenario stressed that the input was representative of the citizen group that bureaucrats served. Budget, feasibility and performance were other common considerations. Bureaucrats were concerned that citizen demands cannot be accommodated within available budgets, or are not feasible within given time and resources. Several were worried about the impact of the suggested changes on performance. Bureaucrats were concerned about how implementing suggested changes will affect their own work loads, how they can deliver on targets or overall service quality:

“Whether or not implementing the changes would work, really even matter, or affect me or the job I’m doing.”

Many stressed that they felt that they sought alternative strategies because they had to keep the big picture in mind: how society at large would be affected, how changes would affect longer-term issues and how they would be perceived by political actors other than their principal.
Figure 18: This figure summarises the three most important (stemmed) words for each theme related to the choice made by the bureaucrat. Where there are ties between the importance of words, more than three are represented.
Together with budget, an underlying scepticism about the validity of citizen input was perceived as a significant barrier to acting upon citizen input. Many bureaucrats doubted whether citizen suggestions can be taken at face-value. They insisted that citizens do not have the expertise or circumspection to suggest changes that are feasible, for their own good or for the good of society at large. For example, one bureaucrat laments:

“Citizens view our work from the outside, and only look at immediate consequences and effects. They don’t always consider the practicality of some ideas. Just because government salaries are paid by taxpayers doesn’t mean that the taxpayers’ opinions will always be well-developed and well-researched.”

Many bureaucrats thus took a paternalistic view: they cannot act upon citizen input because citizens do not know what is best for them and what is feasible. Those bureaucrats that were somewhat more enthusiastic located barriers among the net of other stakeholders involved in policy changes. These bureaucrats pointed out that often demands from citizens, politicians and pressure groups are conflicting. Finally, a tranche of bureaucrats found that it is mostly red tape, bureaucratic processes, inertia and political resistance that impede them from acting upon citizen input.

Table 11: Most common codes: barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of expertise / unqualified</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget / money</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicting demands</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility concerns</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time constraints</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of representativeness</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red tape</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior bureaucracy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political resistance</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inertia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45
Figure 19: This figure shows the three most important (stemmed) words from answers on the perceived barriers of responding to citizen input. Where there are ties between the importance of words, more than three are represented.
4. Discussion

Bureaucrats have always been "partial agents" of various governmental principals, "without being under the complete authority of any one in particular, and without any common understanding of how authority is legitimately divided among the competing principals" (Moe, 1985, pp.768-769). Adding to this confusion, bureaucrats now need to negotiate the demands of citizens supplied through government-led yet not pervasively politically supported public participation mechanisms.

This experiment set out to test empirically how bureaucrats react to the competing demands of political principals and citizens. I further tested whether this behaviour is malleable to information frames, in order to gain a better understanding of how the mode of citizen input might affect the influence that citizens can yield over bureaucrat decisions.

Results show that bureaucrats resist. When citizens and politicians are in agreement, almost 90% of bureaucrats shirk responding to demands and opt to provide their own advice. The rate of resistance decreases somewhat under conflict, in favour of the citizen group. Counter to what a risk-based model of bureaucrat behaviour would expect, on average, bureaucrats do not yield to politicians at a higher rate in the conflict scenario. Rather, conflict seems to activate considerations related to client orientation and professional values. Bureaucrats side with someone at a higher rate during conflict.

Notably, this goes counter to the idea of bureaucrats as arbiters (Miller et al., 2017; Whitford, 2010) but stresses their importance as political actors in their own right. The findings are more in line with the bureau-shaping hypothesis, according to which bureaucrats will choose policy roles over those of pure managers and implementers (Gains and John, 2010).
In terms of heterogeneity, if responsiveness is influenced by professional norms and experience, one would expect bureaucrats who are used to working on policy issues to choose an advising role (non-street-level bureaucrats) at a greater rate than those who have a service delivery role (street-level bureaucrats). Indeed that’s what the data suggests: street-level bureaucrats provide their own advice at a lower rate than bureaucrats employed in state and central government. Notably however, willingness to respond is high across all bureaucrat groups.

In line with predictions, the effect of conflict was larger than that of information frames. The proportion of bureaucrats who yielded to citizen demands when receiving a qualitative frame was directionally higher yet statistically not distinguishable from the quantitative frame. The small effect size could be an encouraging sign for public participation. Given that governments dictate what form participation takes, it is re-assuring that the mode of citizen input does not have large effects on the responsiveness of the bureaucracy. This finding could also point towards bureaucrats having developed a habit of filtering or counteracting biases that are introduced by qualitative/ emotional frames compared to purely quantitative information. This might be because of different experiences with citizen consultations. For instance, many central and local governments struggle to recruit broad-based, representative samples of citizens to comment on their policy proposals. As Migchelbrink and Van de Walle (2019) showed, bureaucrats do alter their responsiveness based on perceptions of representativeness of citizen input. Although the intervention materials in this experiment specified that the input was indeed representative, it is plausible that real life experience dominated such knowledge.

While I found no strong heterogeneity in responses to the scenarios, some types of bureaucrats might have found some suggestions more relevant than others. The number of bureaucrats who chose not to side with either principal could
thus be inflated. However, the presence of conflict still shifted behaviour. This
would not be the case if bureaucrats had simply dismissed the suggestions as
irrelevant to their work setting. Further, qualitative responses suggested that
bureaucrats considered how the scenario would translate into their work context
- they thus made a clear effort to see how the scenarios would apply to their
particular setting. Open-text responses were largely homogeneous, suggesting
that no particular sub-group found the scenarios unfitting.

The experiment also provided insights that have the potential to inform citi-
izen activism. Bureaucrats reduce their responsiveness to citizens at a lower rate
than do politicians. Thus, when citizen groups voice demands in public partic-
ipation processes that are at odds with those of politicians, citizens might be
able to exploit the effects such a conflict has on bureaucrats to their advantage.
Some other patterns uncovered in this experiment invite further development
of models and data collection. Experimental eplications could test whether
the salience and type of public input changes responses. For instance, do bu-
reaucrats react differently to referendum results compared to those from public
comment or consultations? Formal models could incorporate noisy signals from
political principals or citizens without the need to include third players, which
severely complicates the ability to find closed models. Audit experiments could
assess how different directives - such as politicians’ memos - affect behavioural
measures of responsiveness, such as the speed at which bureaucrats process re-
quests. They could also test the effect of aggregate versus individualised input.

For example, does it matter whether bureaucrats are confronted with citizen
input in an aggregate manner as opposed to when they evaluate single cases
such as in Scott (1997) where information frames did have significant effects?

Going forward, bureaucrat behaviour should also be studied at the group level.
Bureaucracies are not only hierarchical but also marked by collective decision-
making. Several bureaucrats in this experiment noted that they believe senior bureaucrats are an obstacle to responding to citizen input in a meaningful way. It remains an empirical question whether influence truly acts in such a top-down manner and why senior bureaucrats might act in such a way. Finally, motivations can be further unpacked. For instance, do bureaucrats obstruct to alleviate the need for politicians to heed to citizen demands between elections or do they do so for their own benefit, to retain greater control over the policy process?
References


Cream, J. M. D. and R. Robertson (2018). How have public attitudes to the NHS changed over the past three decades?


Miller, P., R. Reynolds, and M. Singer (2017). Mobilizing the young vote:


Speer, J. (2012). Participatory Governance Reform: A Good Strategy for In-


Online Appendix:
The effect of politician-constituent conflict on bureaucratic responsiveness under varying information frames

Annabelle S. Wittels*

January 18, 2020

1. Appendix I: Survey questions

A few questions on the above...

1. To what extent are you willing or unwilling to support changes suggested by your [political principal]?

   - [7] Absolutely willing
   - [6] Very much willing
   - [5] Somewhat willing
   - [4] Neither willing nor unwilling
   - [3] Somewhat unwilling
   - [2] Very much unwilling
   - [1] Absolutely unwilling

2. To what extent are you willing or unwilling to support changes suggested by your citizen group?

---

*European University Institute, annabelle.wittels@eui.eu
[7] Absolutely willing
[6] Very much willing
[5] Somewhat willing
[4] Neither willing nor unwilling
[3] Somewhat unwilling
[2] Very much unwilling
[1] Absolutely unwilling

3. Imagine you are now asked by the head of your team to choose a strategy based on the two opinions presented. Which one would you choose?

   In a conflict scenario

   [1] I would suggest to implement what the citizen group put forward.


   [3] I would accept neither of their suggestions but suggest something else.

   In a non-conflict scenario

   [1] I would suggest to implement what the citizen group and [political principal] put forward.

   [2] I would accept neither of their suggestions but suggest something else.

Now, we would like to ask a few questions about how you feel about the suggestions made by the [political principal]. [Professional-value conflict: item 1]
4. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The changes suggested by the [political principal] conflict with my values and norms as a professional. 

[7] Totally agree
[5] Agree somewhat
[4] Neither agree nor disagree
[3] Disagree somewhat
[2] Disagree mostly
[1] Totally disagree

5. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The changes suggested by the [political principal] would negatively affect my professional autonomy.

[7] Totally agree
[5] Agree somewhat
[4] Neither agree nor disagree
[3] Disagree somewhat
[2] Disagree mostly
[1] Totally disagree

6. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The changes suggested by the [political principal] would clash with the wishes of many of my clients (citizens affected by my work).

[7] Totally agree
7. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: *My clients (citizens affected by my work) would perceive the changes suggested by the [political principal] as wasteful*

[7] Totally agree  
[5] Agree somewhat  
[4] Neither agree nor disagree  
[3] Disagree somewhat  
[2] Disagree mostly  
[1] Totally disagree

Next, could you tell us next how you feel about the suggestions made by the citizen group?

8. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: *The changes suggested by the citizen group conflict with my values and norms as a professional*

[7] Totally agree  
[5] Agree somewhat  
[4] Neither agree nor disagree  
[3] Disagree somewhat  
[2] Disagree mostly  
[1] Totally disagree
9. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The changes suggested by the citizen group would negatively affect my professional autonomy.

[7] Totally agree
[5] Agree somewhat
[4] Neither agree nor disagree
[3] Disagree somewhat
[2] Disagree mostly
[1] Totally disagree

10. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: The changes suggested by the citizen group would clash with the wishes of many clients (citizens affected by my work).

[7] Totally agree
[5] Agree somewhat
[4] Neither agree nor disagree
[3] Disagree somewhat
[2] Disagree mostly
[1] Totally disagree
11. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: My clients (citizens affected by my work) would perceive the changes suggested by the citizen group as wasteful

[7] Totally agree


[5] Agree somewhat

[4] Neither agree nor disagree

[3] Disagree somewhat

[2] Disagree mostly

[1] Totally disagree
2. Appendix II - Pilot: additional information

Each participant received 6 vignettes: (a) positively phrased and quantitative information, (b) negatively phrased and quantitative information, (c) positively phrased and emotive/qualitative information, (d) positively phrased and emotive/qualitative information, (e) a mix of quantitative and emotive information and positive phrasing, (f) a mix of quantitative and emotive information and negative phrasing.

3. Appendix III: Overview of terms and contexts

Table 1: Terms used to refer to government and public sector organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>US term</th>
<th>UK term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local government (e.g. county, town, city, municipality)</td>
<td>Local government authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State government</td>
<td>Government department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal government / Federal agency</td>
<td>Regulator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State owned or run services (e.g. public schools, parks, Amtrak)</td>
<td>Front line services (e.g. NHS, education, police, TfL)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>