

Why do democratic and authoritarian regimes result in different types of public policies?

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There is a difference between the types of public policies that democratic and authoritarian regimes provide, and it is debatable what the reasons for these differences are. As defined by Thomas Dye in 1972, public policy is “[...] at its simplest, a choice made by government to undertake some course of action”, while also noting that non-action is public policy too (Capano and Howlett 2020, p 10). It is critical to identify the reasons for these differences in policy because a large majority of the world’s population live in authoritarian regimes (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). In addition to, we also now see that current democratic regimes are experiencing democratic backsliding, thus becoming more authoritarian (Waldner and Lust 2018). By understanding the differences between the two regime’s types of public policies, we can reach an understanding of the dynamics behind public policy in authoritarian regimes as well as democratic ones, which can strengthen our understanding of the future. This assignment will argue that the difference in public policies when comparing democratic and authoritarian regimes are due to the different power structures of the regimes. Acknowledging that structural power can come in different forms and have many faces, this assignment will initially argue that whether the power is central or decentral can shape public policy. Moving on, the assignment will investigate the roles of different structural power players, such as businesses and bureaucrats. Competing views will be presented, considered, and discussed. In the end, the assignment will conclude the discussion and arguments.

In democratic regimes, public policy is partly a result of who holds the structural power. In democracies, the power is described by Robert A Dahl as being spread throughout society, and because of this spread of power, people can vote politicians in and out of office, so the politicians have incentives for creating policies that benefits their constituents (Dahl 1974) In democracies, the structural power has a decentral nature, and not one single leader or group can decide autonomously (Dahl 1974) That makes the process of passing public policy more difficult or complicated,

as proposals need to have broad support among the groups holding structural power; the media, voters, businesses, or other political parties. An example of the difficulty of passing legislation and thus public policy in democracies can be found in the democratic regime United Kingdom (UK). When negotiating the Brexit with the European Union (EU), British Prime Minister Theresa May had to gain the approval of the British parliament every time she had gotten an agreement with the EU (Cooper 2019). A further example of passing public policy can be found looking at the Supreme Court in the United States with *Roe v. Wade*, which by rule of court secured legal abortion for women across the US from 1973 until 2022, and this was despite state parliaments wanting to limit abortion (Orvis and Drogus 2021, Nash and Guarnieri 2023). Thus, the shared power structure of democracies, influences the type of public policies in democracies, as not one single actor or a small group gets to decide the public policies.

The more concentrated structure of power can partly explain public policy in authoritarian regimes. As Orvis and Drogus stated: “In electoral authoritarian regimes [...] the ruling party manipulates electoral rules and processes enough to ensure that it maintains virtually all effective power” (Orvis and Drogus 2021). Even though authoritarian regimes have some of the same components that democracies have¹, power is concentrated among one ruling party (Linz 2000). Authoritarian regimes, compared with democratic regimes, therefore, do not have to take as many power actors into account when passing public policy, as they inherit the effective power (Orvis and Drogus 2021). An example of this can be found in the economic policy of China, which is effectively passed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) alone. While they seem to take many different interest groups into account when passing such policy, they control the biggest Chinese businesses, which makes their opinions in the public debate align with that of the CCP (Li, Chan, and Ma 2020). Another example of effective authoritarian regimes passing policy is the Russian invasion of

¹ Pluralism, businesses, opposing political parties and elections.

Ukraine in 2022, where president Putin and his circle of advisers, generals and ministers effectively decided to go to war. (Taub 2022) Compared with democratic regimes, where the process of going to war is more difficult, as it involves a greater number of actors and conflicting interests (Orvis og Drogus 2021)

Economic systems of regimes can also play a role in determining the public policy of a regime. Businesses in capitalist economies tend to have more structural power, and democracies tend to be allow for a free market economy. Thus, it can be argued that there is a connection between economic system and the regime form (Brunk, Caldeira, og Lewis-Beck 1987) We see that China, to an extent a controlled economy, is maintaining strict control with its businesses (Li, Chan, og Ma 2020) thus avoiding the influence of big and powerful business leaders, as exemplified in a democracy like the United States. An example of business power in democracies can be found in the US with the extensive lobby organizations influencing American politics (Drutman 2015) Tech companies such as Google, Amazon and Meta play a significant role in US private data-policy, often lobbying to prevent legislation restricting their access to private data (Zuboff 2019, *The Economist* 2021) Thus, the economic system decides whether or not businesses can become big, powerful power players influencing public policy. It can therefore be argued that the economic system can explain why policies can be different.

Bureaucracy in authoritarian regimes is a catalyst for implementing public policy. Bureaucracy plays a role in public policy both in implementing the policy and proposing improvements of policy areas. Bureaucracies hold significant structural power regardless of regime, as they implement public policy. The bureaucracy in current day Russia, which has aspects of being an authoritarian state, is legendary. It is recognized that becoming a state official or pursuing a career in the civil service require personal links to higher ranking officials (Fortescue 2020) Thus, bureaucracy could in the instance of Russia not play the role of bureaucracy that German sociologist Max Weber

identified as ideal in being merit-based, apolitical and securing efficiency (Weber 1922) An extreme example of bureaucracy in authoritarian regimes was found in the DDR, where a career in the civil service was closely linked with regime loyalty and membership of the SED (the ruling party). When bureaucracy is too ideological, state controlled or corrupt, it will never challenge the public policy proposed by legislators, only securing that policy will be carried out more effectively. This differs from democratic regimes, where Weberian bureaucracy secures compliance with the constitution and bureaucrats also challenge the public policy (Kuhlmann 2021)

The long-standing proud Weberian tradition of being independent from party politics of bureaucrats in Germany can explain their public policy. Believing that bureaucracy in regimes holds structural power because they implement public policy, we can look to Germany, who's exact bureaucracy stands on the shoulders of Weberian bureaucratic tradition (Kuhlmann 2021). German bureaucracy has features such as merit-based hiring, education, and formal procedures when carrying out the civil service – and most importantly, they cannot inflict their political beliefs on their work. As Kuhlmann notes in a study of German bureaucracy: “[...] the established orthodoxy of a civil service model based on the tenets of a Weberian professional staff organization stands out for its hyperstability” (Kuhlmann 2021). While bureaucrats in authoritarian regimes plays a supportive role in policy passed by the regime, the bureaucracy in democratic regimes acts as Weberian tradition prescribes by being independent from party politics securing efficiency in carrying out tasks. Thus, bureaucracy in democracies will also not comply with the political decisions if these do not comply with the constitution.

So far, the assignment has argued that the difference in public policy can be explained by looking at the power structure of democratic and authoritarian regimes. However, critics claim that power, even in democratic regimes, are not shared or diffused throughout society. For instance, the American sociologist C Wright Mills suggest that the US was ruled by elites sitting at the top of

society (Calhoun et al. 2012) Believing this, how can we explain the difference in public policy between the two regimes, if the power sharing in a democratic regime such as the US is concentrated, too? Examples of elite theory can be found in the US, because some believe that powerful lobby organizations have a lot more advantageous political influence than smaller interest groups or local communities (Orvis and Drogus 2021) However, elite theory puts too much emphasis on elites. Power distribution in democratic societies is not so simple, that a small elite holds it. Moving on, looking at the economic structures might make sense in democracies, but we do not know to what extent businesses holds power in authoritarian regimes because contemporary work on the matter is a lot more extensive for democratic regimes.

To conclude, this assignment argued that there are differences in public policies due to differences in the power structures of the regimes. Thus, authoritarian regimes differ from democratic regimes in that their allocation of power differs. The difference in public policy can be explained by this, because of accountability and a longer and more difficult process when passing public policy in democratic regimes. Another explanatory factor of the difference was economic systems, as businesses structurally holds more power in democratic regimes, and through that, they can influence public policy. We know from China that businesses do not have the same influence in authoritarian regimes. Lastly, the assignment argued that bureaucratic forms could also influence the difference in policy, because of the Weberian tradition of bureaucracy in democracies that challenges public policy proposals, and the lack thereof in authoritarian regimes, making bureaucracies here serve as a policy catalyst. A topic not yet covered is the role that institutions might play in the difference between the regimes public policies. It is important to note that power structures, economic systems and bureaucracies does not explain the difference to it's fullest, and one would have to investigate other factors explaining the difference.

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