Patronage

A formal definition of patronage is "the power of appointing people to governmental or political positions" and "the positions so distributed" (Webster’s II New College Dictionary 1995). Generally, the word patronage has a negative connotation that this straight-forward definition fails to convey. Patronage suggests the transgression of real or perceived boundaries of legitimate political influence, the violation of principles of merit and competition in civil service recruitment and promotion. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that governments the world-over accept that some political appointments are fully legitimate. A small number of these appointments are justified as a means for political leaders to fashion a circle of government policymakers and managers who share a common agenda. Patronage is clearly a problem, however, when these appointments pervade public administration, severely undermining merit principles. Somewhere between these two extremes the line between appropriate and inappropriate uses of patronage is crossed.

"Good" vs. "Bad" political appointments?

A conceptual distinction between policymaking and implementation holds that politicians and their immediate appointees should make decisions concerning political priorities, while neutral, professional staff use their skills and experience to implement those policies. Optimally, such an arrangement allows public administration to remain sensitive to political goals yet protected from political meddling in its day-to-day functioning. However, merit and competition are undermined – and arguably civil service performance, as well – when unqualified individuals are hired or promoted into posts for which they are unsuited. Morale is harmed as regular rank and file staff observe others disregarding rules or receiving special treatment, while their own prospects for advancement based on merit and competition appear dim. Finally, widespread staffing changes in response to shifts in political power have a crippling effect on institutional memory, which in turn is likely to be detrimental to performance.

Although the dangers of pervasive patronage are generally known, it is much less clear where the line between political and regular posts should be drawn. Certain measures exist. The most common is the ratio of political appointees to the size of the civil service. [Another measure that could facilitate the assessment and control of patronage is regular (monthly) data on turnover rates, provided by a personnel information system.] Still, there is no clear cut-off point beyond which patronage is plainly illegitimate. The following table provides some indication of the variation in the manner and incidence of political appointments in selected OECD countries:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Political Appointments</th>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Limited number of special advisors or aides to ministers. All civil service posts in ministries up to the rank of Permanent Secretary considered politically neutral.</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Approximately 3,000 political appointees, equal to about 0.25% of white collar civil servants, concentrated among the most senior posts. Political appointments to the Senior Executive Service are capped at 10% of total appointments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>No specific quota on political appointments, nor definition of which posts in a minister’s office may be filled with political appointees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Political appointments are unregulated by law. In 1998 the central government was reported to have 117 political appointees and a total civil service of 240,000.</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>The number of politically-appointed advisors in a minister’s office is set by the Prime Minister. Limited discretionary appointments at senior levels subject to approval of the Prime Minister and President.</td>
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The practice of political appointments within individual countries has evolved over time as conditions and mindsets have changed. In the United States, for example, the distinction between political appointees and civil servants selected on merit was first established in the Pendleton Act of 1883. This was the first in a sequence of steps over the next 40 years to establish a stable,
professional government workforce. Prior 1883 all public administration posts in the United States were subject to a "democratic" spoils system. In the United Kingdom, the transition to apolitical civil service began somewhat earlier with the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854.

Finding an Appropriate Balance

The challenge is to devise and implement policies that protect the administration from the potential abuses of patronage, while not attempting to prohibit all political appointments. Indeed, the absence of explicit provisions for political appointments can itself be problematic: when transparent mechanisms to define the extent and conditions of political versus non-political appointments are lacking, the risk is that every position de facto becomes subject to political influence. This is particularly the case in countries that have experienced extended periods of intense politicization, such as the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe. Political appointments are often an essential (and legitimate?) instrument to craft and maintain a multi-party and/or multi-ethnic governing coalition. Several countries use hybrid appointment methods to satisfy a political logic without abandoning meritocratic principles that govern public administration.

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