

# Political attitudes and voting behavior of government employees

Evidence from the International Social Survey Program

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## Abstract

Public opinion has always taken a marginal place in public administration research. Existing studies primarily focus on differences in the organizational values of public and private sector managers or examine citizen's attitudes toward public administration reform, underestimating or even neglecting the role of politics in public opinion formation on these processes. This study puts the political attitudes and voting behavior of government employees at the center of the analysis. Starting with the standard public choice approach it investigates whether there are differences in the voting behavior of public and private employees and whether these differences are able to explain pathways in public administration reform across OECD countries.

Public choice theory assumes government employees to be rational and self-interested budget-maximizers. If this is the case, government employees should vote for public policies and political parties that preserve or expand the public sector. Taking into account partisan ideology formation, which assumes left-wing parties to take a state-interventionist position, government employees should be more left-leaning in their political party preferences and voting behavior. One might argue that these effects could even be magnified if government employees show to be politically more active than other citizens. In this case their votes would gain a disproportionate weight in electoral competition.

Despite the elegance of simplicity embodied in the public choice approach, current research gives reason to doubt the empirical validity of its predictions. The days in which budget-maximizing was a positive measure of a bureaucrats performance seem to be over. In times of public sector modernization it might be necessary to take into account the differentiation of government employment and the relative position of employees to explain their political attitudes. Moreover, country-specific differences are also likely to matter since comparative research already reveals substantial differences in public employment regulations. In this respect "civil servants" in Anglo-American countries differ considerably from the "fonctionnaires" or "public servants" in France and Germany. Thus, it remain an empirical question whether the public choice approach is able to explain political attitudes and voting behavior of government employees in today's context of public management modernization.

The empirical analysis employs data from various waves of the International Social Survey Program, a large comparative survey including major OECD countries, in order to evaluate the explanatory power of the public choice approach against conflicting evidence on public management reform. In this respect the study tries to makes a contribution to the still small literature on political science research of government employees.

<sup>a</sup> Collaborative Research Center 'Transformation of the State (CRC) 597', Project D6 'The Transformation of the State as Employer: Public Employment Regimes between Efficiency and Effectiveness, 1980-2010', Internet: [www.sfb597.uni-bremen.de](http://www.sfb597.uni-bremen.de)

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