

Political Influence on Street-Level Bureaucratic Outcome: Testing the Interaction between Bureaucratic Ideology and Local Community Political Orientation

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ABSTRACT

A basic principle of good government is that politics should be restricted to the input side, whereas the bureaucracy should operate independently of political considerations. However, previous literature documents an implementation gap between unitary political aims and varied local outcomes, which occasionally can be attributed to political reasons; both bureaucratic ideology and that local political constituencies can shape implementation and affect outcome. So far, however, research has neglected the question of whether one of these effects is conditioned by the other. This article presents original data on the political orientation of public employees in the Swedish Social Insurance Administration that allow these two factors to be tested together for the first time. The main finding is that neither the bureaucratic ideology nor the political orientation of the local community independently affects the outcome but that the real effect of political ideology on implementation takes the form of an interaction effect between the two. This interaction effect visualizes so that a rightward shift in bureaucratic ideology significantly reduces the number of annual sick leave days per capita when the political orientation of the local community is right leaning. Hence, political ideology only affects welfare state outcome by restricting policy implementation in a situation in which restrictive public employees are positioned in restrictive local communities.

THE ARGUMENT

A basic principle of bureaucratic administration is that implementation should be uniform (Weber 1964). Political preferences should inform the input side of government in launching policies but should not influence how these policies are implemented. However, this ideal is often not realized. A vast literature documents an implementation gap between unitary political programs and locally varied outcomes, a gap unattributable to factors to which the policies should pay attention according to law. In some policy areas, for example, welfare policy, such variation seems the rule than the exception, possibly leading to varying levels of actual welfare.

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Among the strongest determinants of individual views regarding welfare generosity is the left-right (i.e., liberal-conservative) political continuum. This relationship is well documented in the policy-making area. However, other studies examine how bureaucratic ideology can shape implementation, providing evidence that both political ideology and local political constituencies can influence welfare policy outcome. Oddly, however, previous research neglects whether one of these factors is conditioned by the other. Herbert Kaufman hypothesizes such an interaction in his famous study of the US Forest Service (1959), arguing that, to achieve uniform implementation of national policy, it is necessary to disrupt any link between local community values and bureaucratic values. Although Kaufman suggests that there may be interaction between the local community's and bureaucracy's values, he does not test the proposition empirically.

The present article empirically tests whether interaction between bureaucratic and local constituency values affects local welfare policy outcomes. I borrow the idea of such an interaction from Kaufman, but reformulate it as a theory of the influence of political orientation on implementation. I empirically test the proposed effect using original data on the political attitudes of public employees granting sick leave benefits in the Swedish Social Insurance Administration (SSIA).

Sick leave policy implementation is an interesting case because the policy consumes much of the public budget and because its redistributive nature means political conflict is likely. Furthermore, sick leave entails difficult street-level judgments as "inability to work" is highly subjective and resists precise definition. Swedish sick leave policy is a unitary national policy that nevertheless yields considerable local variation in implementation output unexplainable by factors to which the policy should pay attention according to law. Outcome levels measured as average number of sick days per person and year vary between 38 and 54 days at the county level, and the variation is even greater at the local level (figures for 2002; Stensöta 2009). Thus, an average person in the northern county of Jämtland is on sick leave for 3 weeks longer per year than an average person in the southern county of Småland. Other studies demonstrate in greater detail how the length of sick leave for specific diagnoses varies between regions, as in the case of sick leave during pregnancy (SNSIB 2003b). The problem has been high on the Swedish political agenda for over a decade, and discussion of the "overuse" and "abuse" of sick leave insurance schemes is common (Johnson 2010; Stensöta 2009).

The main finding is that neither bureaucratic ideology nor the political orientation of the local community separately affects welfare policy outcome, as previously predicted. Political orientation instead affects implementation via an interaction effect, in that a rightward shift in bureaucratic ideology significantly reduces the number of annual sick leave days per capita when the community's political orientation is right leaning. Similarly, a politically right-leaning local community significantly reduces the annual sick leave days per capita when the bureaucracy is politically moderate to right leaning. I conclude that political orientation only influences bureaucratic outcome via policy restriction that occurs when restrictive public employees are positioned in restrictive local communities. Future research into the impact of politics on administration should pay attention to interaction effects of this kind.

THEORY

What motivates the examination of street-level bureaucracy as a separate research field is the notion of discretion (Lipsky 1980), which refers to the latitude that frontline bureaucrats

possess to interpret rules when implementing programs, making them de facto bureaucratic policymakers (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003). Lipsky (1980) defined street-level bureaucrats as public employees who directly interact with citizens and have discretion over significant aspects of their lives. Originally, face-to-face interaction between public employee and client was integral to the definition (see also Hasenfeld 1992; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), but recent literature finds that, even in the absence of face-to-face interaction, bureaucrats who apply program rules to individuals still play a key role in determining policy outcome as most clients do not neatly fulfill all eligibility criteria (Keiser 2010).

Discretion has several implications. It can be regarded as necessary for implementation in policy areas in which, to be effective, policy choices must be flexible and responsive to the varying needs and circumstances of a diverse clientele (Wilson 1989). However, inconsistent discretion can result in policy outcomes that differ greatly from policy intentions, leading to inequitable implementation. The central problem in the research field is to explain in detail how discretion is applied (May and Winter 2007). Schematically, four sets of explanatory factors have been distinguished: (a) signals from political and administrative superiors about the content and importance of policy, (b) organizational implementation machinery, (c) knowledge and attitudes of street-level bureaucrats, and (d) contextual factors corresponding to the task environment (May and Winter 2007; Meyers and Vorsanger 2003). Findings indicate mixed results, which are interpreted as a sign of underlying complexity rather than contradiction (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003).

Bureaucratic Ideology

Much literature on street-level bureaucracy focuses on informal factors, such as organizational norms and employee attitudes, as powerful factors explaining behavior and output (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003). Similarly, Keiser (2010) has recently identified three kinds of employee attitudes that may explain the eligibility decisions of individual street-level bureaucrats: political ideology, adherence to bureaucratic goals or missions, and client assessments. There are several reasons to pay particular attention to the influence of political orientation on street-level bureaucratic output. First, studies of policy making demonstrate that the left-right political continuum is one of the strongest determinants of how generous people think that the welfare state should be. A more leftist or liberal attitude corresponds to a more generous view of the welfare state, in terms of both scope and level of generosity (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2008; Rudolph and Evans 2005). Second, several studies present evidence of the importance of political orientation for the output side of government (Stone 1984).

Whitford (2002) finds evidence that bureaucratic ideology affects output in the case of the prosecution of regulatory crimes by the Offices of the United States Attorneys. For such agencies, field location facilitates responsiveness to local constituencies, though national political oversight is exercised through the structural choices of agencies, such as the selection of office leaders or determination of routines for resolving office conflict. Whitford finds that both the political orientation of the appointing president and “structural, local, and internal office factors,” such as how office leaders are selected, the conditions under which field-level conflict is referred upward, and the external actors with whom the agency must regularly engage, influence the number of regulatory crimes handled by the US Attorneys. Given that the nominating president is seen as part of the bureaucratic ideology, the study demonstrates that bureaucratic ideology indeed affects output.

Opportunities for administration to affect political outcomes have also been identified in the election administration area. Stuart (2004) demonstrated that the implementation of disenfranchisement laws in Florida in 2000 may have affected voter turnout as considerable local variations were found in the severity of disenfranchisement. Furthermore, Kimball, Kropf, and Battles (2006) find evidence of partisan differences in the administration of provisional voting at the local level in terms of both the frequency of provisional votes cast and the number counted. Because Democrats typically prefer to expand the electorate to gain votes, while Republicans prefer to restrict it, variation in administration likely affects outcome. In the latter case, interaction effects are evident: more provisional votes are cast in a heavily Democratic jurisdiction if the local election authority is a Democrat rather than a Republican.

Other studies demonstrate how ideology at lower bureaucratic levels may affect variation in the realization of higher level goals. Riccucci (2005) studied the highly centralized policy area of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. She examined whether street-level bureaucrats regarded “work first” or “family independence” as the primary goal of the policy, finding that conceptions of program goals varied between counties even though policy goals were formally centralized at the state level. She concludes that implementation indeed mattered in the case of this policy. Insofar as the distinction between work first and family independence can be regarded as a source of variation in welfare state generosity, Riccucci demonstrates that employee attitudes do affect variation in output generosity.

At the theoretical level, Keiser (2010) has elaborated on the mechanism by which the individual political ideology of street-level bureaucrats can affect decision making. Drawing on theories of bounded rationality, she argues that the political ideology of street-level bureaucrats might affect how they interpret information, especially in bureaucracies with multiple or vague missions. She tests the idea in the Social Security Disability Program using a self-assessed measure of eligibility rates as the dependent variable. She concludes that the attitudes of street-level bureaucrats as to whether they feel accountable primarily to US taxpayers or to citizens in their own state affect how generously they assess eligibility. However, the political ideology of individual street-level bureaucrats did not exert an influence in this study.

Previous research demonstrates that bureaucratic ideology can indeed affect implementation, either supporting national policy goals or exaggerating local variations in output. These contrary results indicate that the impact of bureaucratic ideology is influenced by other factors.

Local Community Political Orientation

The attitudes and norms of the surrounding local community may also affect bureaucratic outcome. One point in Lipsky’s original characterization of street-level bureaucrats was that they identify more with client and local community needs than with the central policy-makers who are their ultimate principals, which may cause policy implementation to deviate from stated goals. Subsequent studies have repeatedly demonstrated this; for example, when Maynard-Moody and Muscheno (2000) found that street-level bureaucrats see themselves as “citizen agents” responding to client needs and circumstances (see also Møller 2009; Stensöta 2009).

Several studies document that local political authorities may influence how street-level bureaucrats implement national programs. May and Winter (2007) demonstrated that local political authorities could legitimize deviation from central political goals in street-level

bureaucracy. Focusing on four explanatory factors—political attention and municipal policy, managerial actions, caseworker knowledge and attitudes, and contextual factors—they examined how these factors affected the policy priorities of individual street-level bureaucrats. The analysis indicated that, although many caseworkers did follow national policy, caseworkers were more willing to diverge from national policy when their immediate political principal clearly endorsed such divergence. The study demonstrated that the ideology of local political authorities could legitimize deviations from national political policy through local street-level bureaucrat behavior. As the authoritative power in this policy is at the central level, the results indicate adaptation to lower level (i.e., state) political orientation. This can be seen as a form of local adaptation, although not at the local community level. Furthermore, the mechanism by which this influence operated was not through direct political channels, such as political attention, but instead through the street-level bureaucrats' understanding of policy goals, professional knowledge, and policy predispositions.

In another study, Keiser (1999) examined whether local economic, political, or task factors affected the implementation of Social Security Disability programs across US states. She concluded that professional norms largely directed how street-level bureaucrats exercised discretion and that implementation was responsive to local political concerns. State government, measured as the party composition of the local legislature, played an indirect role in policy implementation by creating an ideological environment that was more or less generous. The study demonstrated that the political orientation of state bodies indirectly affected the implementation of national policy programs by creating political environments with particular political orientations. Adaptation to lower levels of political orientation was also documented in this case.

A similar study set in Sweden (Lewin et al. 2008) examined whether the presence of political majorities in Swedish municipalities affected the level of municipal support for people with disabilities. In this case as well, a national policy was examined and the main question was whether local political majorities affected its implementation. The study ultimately tested whether consensual rule differed from majoritarian rule, finding no support for the hypothesis.

A study that more specifically addresses local community pressure on street-level bureaucratic output is Kaufman's classic study of the US Forest Service (1959). According to Kaufman, it was important to disrupt the identification of public employees with their surrounding community. This was achieved through street-level bureaucrat internalization of organizational norms, and a recruitment policy according to which employee relocation was a prerequisite for advancement. Subsequent studies of the US Forestry Service have documented similar patterns of implementation (Sabatier, Loomis, and McCarthy 1995).

Other studies document the impact of specific local political cultures on sick leave implementation. Such cultures need not be attached to local political authorities but may work more informally through peoples' general political orientation. For example, Frykman et al. (2009) used this conception of local culture in examining variation in sick leave benefits in Sweden. This ethnological study suggests that local cultural attitudes regarding how generously welfare state programs should be implemented affect regional variations in outcome. Their methodology, however, does not allow more rigorous testing of the hypothesis.

To sum up, previous studies have demonstrated that local political pressure might affect street-level bureaucratic output. This influence seems to operate directly, both as concerns formal political authority at the local level and when political culture is comprehended as part of the local community.

Interaction Effects

The idea that bureaucrats' values might interact with local community values to affect outcome has been presented before. As mentioned above, it was central to Kaufman's study of the US Forest Service (1959) in which he argued that, to achieve impartial case handling, it was important to disrupt the identification of public employees with their surrounding community. Kaufman focused on local identification, but his general prediction was that the impact of local community values differs depending on whether they coincide with the values of the bureaucracy. For local values to be realized in the bureaucracy, consonance between local and bureaucratic values was needed. If such consonance did not exist, would such values still have an impact?

It is easy to imagine how the influence of political ideology on implementation may operate according to Kaufman's logic. It could well be that a right-oriented public administration and a right-oriented political environment could not separately realize a more restrictive implementation of welfare state services and benefits. If the values of the two entities tend in opposite directions, as they are likely to regarding welfare generosity levels, they may well neutralize each other. More right-oriented public employees may be unable to realize their more restrictive views if they interact with a community where people feel they are entitled to generous benefits. Similarly, a more restrictive public may well accept offers of sick leave made by a more expansive administration. However, if a more restrictive bureaucracy meets with a more restrictive clientele, I hypothesize that these views are more likely to be realized. I elaborate on this idea below in the third hypothesis, which is my theoretical contribution to the field.

THREE HYPOTHESES

The first two hypotheses are drawn from previous theory; the third is my own.

H₁ A right-oriented/conservative bureaucratic ideology will be more restrictive in granting welfare state services and benefits.

Bureaucratic ideology is theoretically understood as the underlying view among public employees of how generously the welfare state should meet people's needs. I am not implying that public employees deliberately bend rules for personal political reasons, but rather that judgment and information assessment in welfare state administration are affected by political views at a deeper level of consciousness. This expectation is consistent with Keiser's (2010) theoretical explanation of how individual bureaucrats may be affected by their political orientations in case handling, but I treat these orientations as a property of the organizational level, aggregated from individual employee attitudes. Such political orientations may manifest themselves as "taken-for-granted" views of how judgments related to everyday work should be made and how tasks should be handled (March and Olsen 1989). These orientations may spread and reproduce themselves via routine peer interaction, creating shared knowledge and collective beliefs (Sandfort 2000). In short, this hypothesis predicts that, in offices dominated by a more right-leaning political orientation, public employees will be affected by this more restrictive view of welfare state implementation in case judgment and handling, leading to more restrictive implementation. Empirically, bureaucratic ideology is measured using original data on employee attitudes and aggregated to the municipality level per region. Several well-known studies gauge organizational or higher level properties using individual attitudes in this way, for example, Almond and Verba (1989) as well as Brehm and Gates (1999).

H₂ A right-oriented/conservative local community will be more restrictive when applying for welfare state services and benefits.

The political orientation of the local community theoretically represents what people in the community generally think they are entitled to in terms of welfare benefits and services. This may work through a deeper understanding, as in hypothesis 1, or may also constitute people's more conscious political opinion regarding what they think they are entitled to. There is no formal channel for local political orientation influencing sick leave benefit implementation in the Swedish case; however, some regions may be more affected by problems of unemployment and sick leave patterns, which may lead to a view that they should rightfully be compensated. Such political demand can be fostered and sustained through neighborhood meetings and other local public communication channels, such as local media, and local authorities may support such demand because it relieves the municipal social aid budget (Frykman et al. 2009). I expect that these views would affect patterns of sick leave application among citizens; I also expect that a more right-oriented local community would make fewer applications for welfare benefits and services. Empirically, the political orientation of the local community is measured using the individual attitudes of a representative sample of local citizens.

H₃ Bureaucratic ideology and the political orientation of the local community work in tandem; it is only when a right-oriented bureaucratic ideology meets a right-oriented local community that an effect emerges.

From Kaufman, I draw the idea that the consonance between the values of the bureaucracy and of the local community influences whether these values affect the welfare policy outcome. However, although Kaufman identified the value of local identification, I use the idea of value consonance between local community and bureaucracy to formulate a theoretical proposition regarding the importance of political orientation for implementation. In a political bureaucracy dominated by more restrictive political views of the welfare state, public employees cannot find ways to let these more restrictive views influence their implementation. Although their case assessments might be more restrictive, they meet with clients who make more expansive applications for benefits. In this case, the judgment and assessment of public employees exerts only limited influence as "inability to work" because of sickness is a very subjective determination. In this case, the more restrictive attitudes of public employees are restrained by the expansiveness of local public demand. Similarly, a public that is more restrictive regarding welfare benefits and services may have a limited effect on outcomes when the administration does not share correspondingly restrictive views. Previous research demonstrates that local case handling routines evolve in street-level organizations. Even a more restricted request can confront a more expansive organizational mindset and be neutralized.

In sum, following Kaufman, I argue that the influence of political orientation on implementation involves not only the implementing body but also interaction between it and the local community. The Kaufman/Stensöta hypothesis states that, for a right-oriented bureaucracy to let a more restrictive view of welfare implementation influence case judgment and handling, it needs to be embedded in a right-oriented local community.

The SSIA

Sweden's sick leave insurance program is administered by the SSIA. SSIA employees handling sick leave cases typically handle a range of tasks (Stensöta 2009), determining whether a claimant is eligible for sick leave and, if so, at what reimbursement level,

depending on previous salary. Furthermore, they decide whether a claimant is actually eligible for sick leave in a particular situation given a particular diagnosis. As inability to work and not sickness itself determines eligibility, SSIA employees must assess the work tasks of the claimant in relation to the perceived sickness. At the time of this study, no agreed-on limits for sick leave durations were attached to specific diagnoses. Indeed, several recent reports indicate considerable geographical variation in the length of sick leave granted for the same diagnoses (SNSIB 2003b, 7). Furthermore, SSIA employees also decide on rehabilitation, that is, when it will start and what its content will be. The room for discretion is fairly large as the motivation to return to work differs considerably from person to person and must be assessed by SSIA employees. At the time of data collection, SSIA employees also had some power to extend the duration of rehabilitation. Finally, employees decide whether to transfer a client to long-term sick leave when there is no obvious possibility of returning to work. This is a highly discretionary decision, and a regulation introduced in the 1990s states that minor illness could qualify claimants for long-term sick leave if they are unemployed.

THE KEY DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The key dependent variable captures the number of days an average person receives long-term sick leave. This is understood as capturing outcome generosity, as the measure is a function of how often allowances are granted and for how long. It is possible to distinguish between short- and long-term sick leave, the former referring to cases in which the sick leave period does not exceed 1 year, whereas the latter refers to longer cases. Based on the above description of tasks at the SSIA, discretion should be greater in cases of long-term sick leave. One observable sign that informal organizational factors affect how employees exercise discretion would be if long-term sick leave varied geographically more than did short-term sick leave. Table 1 presents the variation of these two types of benefits at the analytical level of municipality type per region, which is also the level of the subsequent analysis.

Table 1 clearly shows that geographical variation is greater in the case of long-term sick leave at the level of municipality type per region. The far-right column shows that the average variation in long-term sick leave is 31 days longer per person and year than the average variation in short-term sick leave. This finding supports the general notion that informal organizational orientation has a bearing on SSIA outcomes when tasks are characterized by discretion. Accordingly, the subsequent analysis will use the number of days an average person is on long-term sick leave as the key dependent variable.

EMPIRICAL SECTION

The analysis uses an original data set compiled in December 2005 from a total sample of employees handling sick leave benefits at the SSIA. The data were collected at the individual level, but the level of analysis is set to community type per region. Community type is an officially used division differentiating municipalities according to their level of urbanization.¹ In this study, I take the level of urbanization to reflect job availability. As

¹ The municipality types were defined as follows in 2005: (1) urban, (2) suburban, (3) large city, (4) commuter city, (5) industrial, (6) rural, (7) municipalities with >25,000 inhabitants, (8) municipalities with 12,500–25,000 inhabitants, and (9) municipalities with <12,500 inhabitants (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och landsting (SKL). Statistics 2005).

Table 1
 Geographical Variation in Number of Sick Leave for an Average Person per Year, Distinguishing between Short- and Long-Term Sick Leave; Level of Analysis: Municipality Type per Region

Type of Sick Leave Benefit	Degree of Discretion	Case Load	<i>n</i>	Median	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Difference, Maximum–Minimum	Difference in Variation between the Two Types of Sick Leaves
Short term	Limited	Large	106	13.59	13.97	2.44	9.44	23.20	13.76	0
Long term	Considerable	Small	106	34.57	35.44	7.04	21.64	66.45	44.81	+31.05

Source: Swedish SIA Official Statistics, available at <http://forsakringskassan.se/fj/servlet/prt/portal/prtooft/docs/guid/808e3fd2-8b9f-2c10-82ab-a4de9048bd58>.

Note: Average number of sick days per person and year. Level of analysis groups municipalities of certain types (1–9) in a specific region (1–21) into a single analytical entity. Municipality type refers to the degree of urbanization (official scale of 1–9 provided by Statistics Sweden). Short-term sick leaves are shorter than 1 year; long-term sick leaves are longer than 1 year. Data from December 2005.

long-term sick leave cases often involve clients who need to find new jobs better fitting their present ability to work, the possibility of returning to work from long-term sick leave is improved given better work availability. To this division, I add a contextual variable, region. Up to January 2005, the SSIA not only had a national control structure but also included a parallel structure in which the organization of the implementing bodies was delegated to regional-level bodies. Their autonomy concerned organizational issues and personnel, not formulating the actual rules of the sick leave insurance policy. However, this organizational history may have allowed regional variations in informal orientation to develop. This procedure creates a total of 106 analytical entities.² There are also more practical reasons for the level of analysis: the key dependent variable, the number of days an average person is on sick leave per year, cannot be distinguished according to the SSIA employee granting the leave. Furthermore, the municipal level cannot be distinguished in the original SSIA data set, and the regional level is unsatisfactory, as it comprises only 21 cases.

Independent Variables

Political orientation is measured by respondent (ideological) self-placement on a left-right scale. Respondents include SSIA employees and members of the local community, and the question to both was phrased identically: “People sometimes talk about political orientation ranging from left to right. Where do you place yourself along this scale?” The original response scales ranged from 0 (“far to the left”) to 5 (“far to the right”) for SSIA employees and from 1 to 7 for local community members. The political orientation of SSIA employees was measured using original data for a total sample of employees handling sick leave cases.³ The political orientation of the population was determined using available data covering a representative sample of the local public over an average of opinions between 2004 and 2006 (3 years) {The SOM-institute [Society, Opinion, Media] National Survey(s) 2004; 2005; 2006}. A table presenting descriptive data on all variables is found in the Appendix.

CONTROLS

The analysis applies three groups of controls: task environment, economic environment, and implementing organization.

Task environment refers to the environmental characteristics that might affect demand for a specific policy in a given area. According to previous studies of sick leave in Sweden, about half of the geographical variation in average number of sick leave days per person and year is attributable to task environment factors that generally affect sickness (reports from SNSIB 2003a, no. 4; 2003c, no. 12; 2003d, no. 17). I use three measures also used in previous research and two additional items, one of which consists of original data. First, age intuitively increases the risk of becoming unable to work because of sickness, and people

² In greater detail, the data set is composed as follows: All municipalities of a specific type in a specific region are included in one analytical entity; the same type of municipality in a different region forms a different analytical entity. A possible criticism of using this level of analysis is that the number of municipalities represented in each analytical entity varies considerably, ranging from 1 in rural areas to over 20 in the vicinity of Sweden’s largest city, Stockholm. However, since I use a total sample of employees handling sick leave benefit cases, even an analytical entity represented by only one municipality consists of a total sample of respondents handling sick leave benefit cases.

³ The initial data set of SSIA employees covered 5,890 individuals, which was reduced to 5,700 after oversampling was withdrawn. The response rate was 65.3%, resulting in a total of 3,722 respondents.

aged 55+ years are clearly overrepresented among those on sick leave in Sweden (SNSIB 2003a, report 4; 2003c, report 12; 2003d, report 17). To capture age, I use the proportion of the population 55–64 years old (in relation to the total population 20–64 years old). Second, educational level indirectly affects people's health as more educated people are less represented among people on sick leave. To capture educational level, I use the proportion of the population with at least 3 years of university education (see also Olsson 2006). Third, starting in the 1990s, women have become clearly overrepresented among people receiving sick leave benefits. Previous research suggests that this development stems from personnel cutbacks in the public sector in the 1990s that led to worsening working conditions, affecting women more than men as women are disproportionately represented in this sector (Hogstedt et al. 2004). I use the proportion of population (women and men) employed in the public sector (primary and secondary municipalities) as a control.⁴ Apart from these controls included in previous studies of the Swedish case, I include two additional task environment factors. Fourth, actual sickliness: people might be more sick in some areas of the country. The diagnosis “cardiac infarct treated in hospital” is arguably largely unrelated to environmental factors and can thus serve as a general measure of the sickliness of people in a specific area (see also Wilkinsson and Picket 2009, 85). Fifth, citizen demand for sick leave: Keiser and Soss (1998) have demonstrated that “demand” for social welfare is a key factor underlying variation in output. I use the level of agreement with the proposition that sick leave is justifiable when one “has done one's share in working life” (“har gjort sitt i arbetslivet”), an item in a questionnaire distributed to citizens by the SSIA in 2005. Hence, the measure represents original data on how generously citizens think sick leave benefit programs should be implemented and is especially related to the specific problem of long-term sick leave, the dependent variable in the study.⁵ In relation to the central independent variables, the demand for sick leave measures direct attitudes toward long-term sick leave benefit generosity, in contrast to the underlying and more general orientation toward welfare state generosity captured by political orientation.

Economic environment includes one control. Previous research demonstrates that unemployment correlates positively with higher average numbers of sick days per person and year (Goine and Edlund 2004). I control for open unemployment, measured as the unemployed proportion of the population 20–64 years old.

A third set of four controls refers to the administration. Previous research suggests that job tenure influences how employees perceive the problems and goals of the policies they handle, which in turn influences their case handling (Kaufman 1959; Simon 1947). Employee age can further be regarded as a variable capturing either cyclical change in the norms of society at large or individual maturity. Educational level has also been used in previous studies of the effect of political orientation on issues related to implementation (Keiser 1999). I further include a more specific employee attitude toward generosity of

4 Olsson (2006) also used employment sector to control for the impact of sex on the number of days an average person is on sick leave per year. Data distinguishing between men and women public employees are only available at the regional level of analysis (i.e., secondary municipality), as Statistics Sweden uses a selection sample. Therefore, I include both women and men.

5 The general question was phrased “Do you think one should be granted sick leave in the following situations?” followed by the above proposition and others. It was answered using a seven-point scale ranging from “do not agree at all” (1) to “totally agree” (7). The data were collected from Swedish citizens in December 2005. The sample frame of citizens was 5,026,353, from which a stratified, unbundled random sample was drawn. This sample consisted of 49,786 respondents after oversampling was withdrawn. The response rate was 57.4%, for a total of 21,218 respondents.

Table 2
 Dependent Variable: Long-Term Sick Leave as Average Number of Sick Days per Person and Year; Level of Analysis: Municipality Type per Region;
 Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (OLS) with Robust Standard Errors

Bivariate Effects	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3: Full Model	Model 4: Interaction Model
Proportion of people 55–64 years old	+9.75** (3.71)	+9.72*** (3.59)	+10.28*** (3.42)	+10.68*** (3.57)
Educational level of the population	-21.84*** (2.55)	-14.38*** (3.88)	-15.11*** (3.81)	-14.35*** (3.80)
Proportion publicly employed	+19.86*** (3.38)	+3.03 (3.85)	-6.55 (4.64)	-5.90 (4.15)
Unemployment, population	+12.40** (5.88)	+10.44** (4.59)	+7.62** (3.94)	+6.79** (3.66)
Actual sickliness, population	+7.00*** (2.47)	-5.76** (2.36)	-6.75*** (2.32)	-8.04*** (2.32)
Demand for sick leave, population	-10.34** (4.83)	-4.44 (3.09)	-4.84** (2.88)	-3.97 (2.81)
Tenure, SSIA employees	+5.40 (4.60)	-1.86 (3.60)	-0.66 (3.40)	-0.05 (3.37)
Educational level, SSIA employees	-0.67 (3.26)	-1.07 (3.35)	-0.43 (2.70)	-0.61 (2.76)
Age, SSIA employees	-4.63 (2.84)	-3.64 (2.97)	-1.32 (3.17)	-1.28 (3.08)
Demand variable, SSIA employees	+8.90*** (2.81)	+8.57*** (2.38)	+5.52** (2.10)	+6.47*** (2.26)
Political orientation, SSIA employees	-16.69*** (5.15)	—	-7.16** (4.21)	+19.99 (14.58)
Political orientation, population	-13.96*** (3.07)	—	-9.58*** (3.52)	+13.78 (11.53)
Interaction, political orientation of SSIA, and population	—	—	—	-43.19** (21.21)
N	106	106	106	106
R ² (adj)	.562	.635	.680	.694
Constant	+32.33*** (3.25)	40.34*** (5.32)	+48.76*** (6.46)	33.58 (9.73)

Note: All independent variables and controls have been normalized between 0 and 1. Model 1 includes task environment, economic development, actual sickliness, and demand for sick leave. Model 2 adds SSIA controls, that is, tenure, age, educational level of employees, and perceived demand for sick leave. Model 3 adds political orientation of the SSIA and the population. The interaction model (model 4) adds the interaction term. For operationalizations and sources, see Appendix. Levels of significance: *p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

long-term sick leave. This builds on the same question that was posed to the population, referred to above as “demand for sick leave.”

Table 2 presents the results of an Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression analysis with robust standard errors. The first column presents bivariate effects. Model 1 is the multivariate analysis of variables connected with the task environment and local economic conditions. Model 2 adds the controls connected with the SSIA: job tenure, age, educational level, and employee attitude toward demand for sick leave. Model 3 is the full model, including the political orientation of the employees and of the local population. The last model, model 4, adds an interaction term between the political orientation of the employees and of the local community.

The bivariate analyses presented in the first column of table 2 indicate positive relationships between long-term sick leave and four task environment factors: The average number of days granted for long-term sick leave benefits increases when the proportion of 55- to 64-year-olds is greater, when more of the local population is publicly employed in primary and secondary municipalities, when unemployment is more pronounced, and when actual sickliness is higher. As also expected, the educational level of the population has a lowering effect on long-term sick leave. The first column further shows that the control variables connected with the SSIA have no significant effects. The independent variables, that is, the political orientations of the SSIA and of the local citizenry, have significant negative bivariate effects, meaning that a right-leaning political orientation correlates with an average person being on long-term sick leave fewer days per year, which initially supports the general hypothesis.

Turning to the multivariate models, table 2 shows that the explained variance increases by approximately 13 percentage points from model 1 to 69.4% (adjusted R^2) in model 3. Model 3, the full model, shows that the political orientations of both the SSIA and the population have independent significant effects on outcome, controlling for 10 factors. Thus, from model 3, it would appear that the two political orientation variables work independently.⁶

However, if an interaction term for bureaucratic ideology and local community political ideology is introduced into the analysis, a different pattern emerges; it now becomes clear that these variables work in tandem. As shown in the interaction model (model 4 in table 2), the interaction variable has a strong, significant negative effect on the number of days an average person is on long-term sick leave per year, whereas the original political orientation variables shift to having positive nonsignificant effects. The first conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that there is an interaction effect between bureaucratic ideology and local community political ideology. What seemed to be two independent effects are actually a single interaction effect. This makes it possible to reject the first two hypotheses derived from previous theory.

⁶ The model has been examined for multicollinearity, and a Variance Inflation Factor test (VIF) indicates that all VIFs are above the critical value of 0.2, which does not indicate any severe problems. More formally, the problem can be identified with the known tolerance goal, which for a given variable is defined as 1 minus R^2 from a regression treating the variable of interest as dependent and all other independent variables as independent. Tolerance is thus a measure of how much a given variable varies independently over the other variables in the analysis. Normally, one is wary if the tolerance target falls below 0.2 and take action if it falls below 0.1.

Following the advice of Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006), figure 1 depicts the marginal effect of SSIA political orientation on the number of sick leave days at different levels of community political orientation.

Figure 1 indicates that a shift from left to right in the political orientation of the SSIA bureaucracy has a statistically negligible impact on the dependent variable when the general population’s political orientation is moderate to left leaning. However, a rightward shift in SSIA political orientation significantly reduces the number of annual sick leave days per capita in a community when the population is sufficiently politically right leaning (significance threshold approximately 0.66). For example, on average, a left-to-right shift in SSIA political orientation from 0 to 1 is expected to reduce the duration of average annual sick leave per person and year by approximately 10 days when the political orientation of a community’s population is 0.7, all else being equal. In the most extreme case (when the population’s political orientation is “1”), a one-unit increase in the SSIA political orientation is associated with 23 fewer per capita sick days annually, holding all other variables constant.

Figure 2 depicts the marginal effect of the community’s political orientation on the number of sick leave days at different levels of SSIA political orientation.

Figure 2 shows that a rightward shift in the community’s political orientation significantly reduces the number of annual sick leave days per capita in a community when the SSIA is politically moderate to right leaning (significance threshold approximately 0.47). For example, on average, a left-to-right shift in the political orientation of a community

Figure 1
 The Marginal Effect of SSIA Political Orientation on Sick Leave. The graph shows the conditional impact of SSIA political orientation on long-term sick leave days from model 4 in table 2, represented by the solid line. The two dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval around the estimate, and when they are both above (below) the zero line, this implies that the marginal effect of SSIA political orientation is positive (negative). The dotted line (0.66 on the x-axis) is meant to indicate where the marginal effect of SSIA political orientation becomes significant.

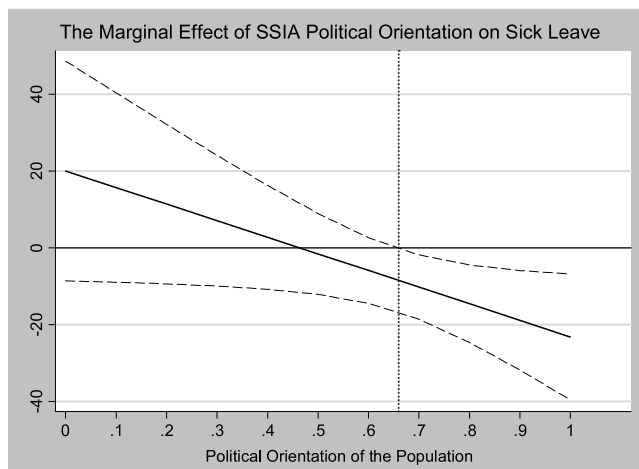
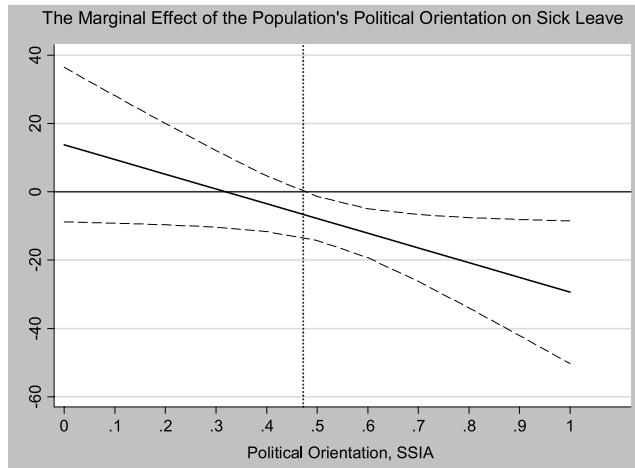


Figure 2

The Marginal Effect of the Population's Political Orientation on Sick Leave. The graph shows the conditional impact of the population's political orientation on long-term sick leave days from model 4 in table 2, represented by the solid line. The two dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval around the estimate, and when they are both above (below) the zero line. This implies that the marginal effect of the population's political orientation is positive (negative). The dotted line (0.48 on the x-axis) is meant to indicate where the marginal effect of the population's political orientation becomes significant.



from 0 to 1 is expected to reduce the duration of annual sick leave by almost 8 days when the political orientation of the SSIA is 0.5, all else being equal. In the most extreme case (when the population's political orientation is "1"), a one-unit increase in the SSIA's political orientation is associated with 29 fewer per capita sick days annually, holding all other variables constant.

A second conclusion can be drawn from the visualization of the interaction term. The empirically significant interaction effect indicates that a right-leaning or conservative-oriented bureaucratic ideology needs a right-oriented local community in order to have a significant lowering effect on sick leave benefit levels. In the same sense, a right-oriented local community can only affect outcome when the bureaucracy is politically moderate to right/conservative leaning.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Previous research into the influence of political orientation on implementation argues that outcome may be influenced by bureaucratic ideology and/or local community political orientation. Earlier research, however, has neglected to examine the possible interaction between the two factors.

The analysis has demonstrated that, in the case of welfare state implementation, neither bureaucratic ideology nor the political orientation of the local community affects

implementation but that the interaction between the two does. Thus, both the first and second hypotheses, derived from previous literature stating that the bureaucratic ideology and political orientation of the local community independently affect outcome, can be dismissed.

The main contribution of the analysis is to demonstrate that what previously seemed to be two independent factors was actually an interaction effect between the two, that is, the factors actually work in tandem. Hence, the analysis supports the general conclusion that welfare state administration is partisan. However, the analysis refines earlier theory by pointing out that the real effect of political orientation on implementation output and outcome is an interaction effect. Future research into political influence on street-level bureaucracy should pay attention to influences from both these bodies/entities before drawing any conclusions as to the influence of political orientation on implementation. We can regard this suggestion as identifying a second implementation gap: whereas the first gap is between higher and lower levels of administration, the second would be between lower levels of administration and their surrounding local communities. As far as political influence on the implementation process is concerned, this hypothesis states that the main problem lies in the second implementation gap.

Visualizing the interaction effect indicates that a rightward shift in the community's political orientation significantly reduces the number of annual sick leave days per capita in a community when the SSIA is politically moderate to right leaning. Hence, the second contribution of the analysis is to demonstrate that the interaction effect seems to be empirically significant only with respect to restrictive attitudes toward the welfare state. The political orientation of the welfare state bureaucracy only seems to have a significant effect when a right-leaning public administration meets with a right-leaning local community.

How can we understand this right-oriented effect? If we think about the welfare state in its entirety as a left/liberal project, the so-called "normal" working mode of the welfare state is to meet people's needs. No extra political orientation is needed to sustain the normal proceedings. However, if a more restrictive attitude toward welfare benefits and services is to have an effect, this is only possible when both public employees and the local community unite in a more restrictive ethos.

These empirical findings can also be considered from a more normative perspective. Any discussion of whether such an effect is good or bad must be related to the specific institutional model and how it derives legitimacy. In national programs, uniform implementation is the main approach to enhance legitimacy and, in such settings, any interaction effects, such as the above, may interfere with efforts to bolster legitimacy. On the other hand, in institutional settings where local adaptation is seen as a way to enhance legitimacy, an interaction effect such as that outlined here could be a way to enhance legitimacy.

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AppendixDescriptive Data; Level of Analysis: Municipality Type per Region ($n = 106$) or in One Case Region ($n = 21$)

	<i>n</i>	Median	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Task environment						
Proportion of people 55–64 years old	106	12.78	12.61	1.32	8.85	14.83
Educational level of the population: proportion of people with at least three years of university education (including doctorate)	106	10.76	12.10	4.52	6.26	28.87
Proportion of people publicly employed (primary and secondary municipalities)	106	12.34	12.39	1.76	8.33	18.20
Actual sickliness (regional level), population	21	627	628.10	81.69	429	772
Demand for sick leave, population	106	6.21	6.25	.38	4.94	6.94
Economic factors						
Open unemployment (percent of 20- to 64-year olds), population	106	4.31	4.44	1.07	2.28	8.48
Political orientation, population						
Political orientation, population (average, 2004–06)	106	5.06	4.94	0.34	4.09	5.48
Organizational variables, SSIA						
Tenure, SSIA employees	106	18.22	19.37	5.61	3.33	40.33
Age (year of birth), SSIA employees	106	1957	1958	3.75	1946	1967
Education (level), SSIA employees	106	3.65	3.55	.57	1.67	5
Demand variable, SSIA employees	106	1.11	1.11	.05	1.02	1.23
Political orientation, SSIA						
Left-right political orientation, SSIA employees	106	2.87	2.82	0.40	1	4.25

Operationalizations and sources: Open unemployment is measured as the percent of 20- to 64-year-olds who are unemployed (does not include the number of people involved in active labor market policy measures); *source:* Statistics Sweden (2005). Proportion of people 55–64 years old, related to whole population 20–64 years old; *source:* Statistics Sweden (2005). Proportion of people with at least 3 years of university education, including doctoral studies; *source:* Statistics Sweden (2005). Proportion of people employed in public administration (primary and secondary municipalities) is measured as a percent of the whole population 20–64 years old; *source:* Statistics Sweden (2005). Actual sickliness is the number of cardiac infarcts treated in hospital per 100,000 inhabitants (data available only at the regional level); *source:* National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) (2005). Demand for sick leave is an attitudinal variable measuring agreement that one is entitled to sick leave when one has “done one’s share in working life”; *source:* SSIA (2005b). Data set. Investigation directed towards citizens, on attitudes towards sick leave benefit granting. Tenure is operationalized as average number of years of employment by the SSIA. Age refers to mean employee age, educational level is a nominal scale variable ranging from below 9 years of schooling (1) up to more than 2 years of university study (5). Understanding of demand for sick leave refers to the same attitudinal demand item as directed to citizens, that is, left/right political orientation, employees. Source of all SSIA variables: SSIA (2005a). Data set. Investigation directed toward citizens, on attitudes toward sick leave benefit granting. Left/right political orientation, population; *source:* Investigation employees at the Social Insurance Administration, on attitudes toward sick leave benefit granting. SSIA, technical report; Statistics Sweden. Alternative operationalization of political orientation of the population: Population responses from an average of 3 years SOM (society, opinion, media) institutional survey(s) (2004; 2005; 2006). The question is phrased identically to the other operationalizations. *Source:* SOM National Survey.

Note: All variables are coded so that higher figures correspond to higher levels of the variables. For the political variables, a higher figure indicates a more right political orientation.

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