



Prospects for experimental approaches to research on bureaucratic red tape

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Abstract

Introduction Red tape (or, more precisely, red ribbons or strings), an attractive and useful physical artifice for securing official documents in the late Middle Ages, ceased to be a symbol of order and efficiency long ago (Bozeman 2000; Brewer and Walker 2010). Instead, modern lexical usage of the term bureaucratic red tape has been unequivocally pejorative, leading Goodsell (1983: 63) to call it a 'classic condensation symbol' and Pandey (1995: 5–6) to highlight the term's connotative and evocative usefulness to critics of bureaucracy. Despite the pervasive and sustained use of the term red tape in everyday language, encapsulating different implicit explanations for dysfunctions of bureaucracy and its impact on a variety of stakeholders, neither policy makers nor scholars paid serious attention to bureaucratic red tape until about 25 years ago. This state of affairs began to change in the 1990s in both policy making and academic domains. The reinventing government movement, spearheaded by then Vice President Al Gore, promised results by cutting red tape (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Thompson and Riccucci 1998). Reinventing government was of course the American version of new public management, a global good government movement targeting bureaucracy and advertising the benefits of 'business-like' methods to counter bureaucracy and achieve results (Hood 1991; Moynihan and Pandey 2006; Pandey et al. 2014; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Contemporaneously, the dominant academic view in public management scholarship regarding bureaucratic red tape as an epiphenomenon and a second-order event began to come apart in the 1990s. Barry Bozeman's insightful and frame-breaking scholarship provided the fillip to disintegration of the dominant academic view that regarded red tape as an epiphenomenon and also laid the foundation for a new way of looking at bureaucratic red tape in public management scholarship (Bozeman 1993, 2000; Bozeman and Scott 1996). In this chapter, we begin by providing an overview of advancements in public management theory on red tape. We furnish sufficient detail in this overview to provide insight into key perspectives and findings from the recently resurgent research on red tape. This also sets the stage for our review of the nascent body of work using the experimental method to study red tape and for our recommendations for further research.

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