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## POLITICISATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN FRANCE

### POLITYZACJA ADMINISTRACJI PUBLICZNEJ WE FRANCJI

#### **Summary**

This paper proposes a model of analysis of the forms of politicisation in the public administration on French case. The purpose of this paper is to present politicisation as a dynamic process of changes in public administration.

#### **Keywords**

France, politicisation, public administration

#### **Streszczenie**

W artykule przedstawiono model analizy różnych form polityzacji francuskiej administracji publicznej. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie polityzacji jako dynamicznego procesu zmian w administracji publicznej.

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

Francja, polityzacja, administracji publiczna

## **INTRODUCTION**

The French political regime is currently the V<sup>th</sup> Republic, which also happens to be the second longest political regime of the country since the French Revolution. The longevity of the system has allowed the French institutions to become stable, although this does not mean that the system is frozen in time and that nothing has changed since 1958 and the establishment of this Republic. One of the features that has largely evolved is the relation between politics and public administration, leading to a relative politicisation of the latter. Throughout this paper, what is meant by the use of the word politicisation is the influence by the ruling power on the appointment and careers of senior civil servants. In this context, the term ruling political power refers to the political party represented by a front candidate that has won the latest presidential elections and has thus constituted a government with the President as its most powerful figure. Interestingly

enough, an “official” source<sup>1</sup> can be found. There, one is able to find a page solely dedicated to administration and politics. The article itself is not very controversial, and states that things have changed throughout history, and that if today’s situation is more complex, it is also much better than it used to be. This short text addresses the questions that citizens might have regarding politicisation, and testifies that the state recognises the existence of such an issue. This is an interesting point, for over the years, the French administration has been seen as an institution at the service of citizens. It was seen as loyal to the political power in place, but still acting with little political involvement. In a nutshell the administration was quite neutral and equalitarian in regards to its work for the citizens. Moreover, civil servants evolved, professionally speaking, far from political engagements. This did not mean that civil servants had no political opinions or engagements, but they had to keep them private and not let them show in the work place, so that those political preferences would not favour them in any way in the advancement of their career. This perception of French administration is certainly to be considered idealistic. Throughout the years, there have always been administrative nominations resulting from political interventions. Nowadays, it is recognised and almost expected that the government will favour its close friends through nominations and transfers. The administration is not being hidden any more, and is often depicted by journalists in the media. Some municipalities are transformed by the presence of trustworthy deputies from the ruling political power. Public administration has become a political stake as well as an instrument, far from its former role of neutrality. Overall, politicisation has been perceived as a negative process, but the slow merging of politics and administration is now considered a normal. As a result, few politicians and senior civil servants seem to care about its potential negative consequences, as long as they both benefit from it. The first part will quickly establish the background of the French administrative system while also highlighting the reasons why the government feels the need to politicise the administration. The second part will focus on the end of the administration tradition that ensured the political neutrality of senior civil servants.

## **1. The Government and Politicisation**

The French system, as described by Luc Rouban, had four main characteristics before it became widely politicised. The first is the great role played by senior civil servants in the enactment of reforms of the society. The second characteristic is the self-management of the administrative elite thanks to social resources. The third is the organisation of the administration around a strong hierarchy that leads to non-monetary advantages such as provided accommodations or chauffeur-driven cars. Claims by the senior public

service that the public administration is protecting the general interest of society, as opposed to the political elite that is ill-intentioned [Rouban, 2009], are the fourth and final characteristic. For Rouban, the administrative elite has, historically, always been in competition with politicians. However, the French administrative system as it stands today originated in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The latter imposed a rather “authoritarian and centralist sort of public management” [Le Bussy, 2001, p. 70], which in practice means that the administration is rather a supplementary of the government. By definition, it means that the administration has to “obey” the government, and thus the political power, by implementing their policies. This basic premise does not imply that the administration should be politicised in order for things to work well. If in the past the administration had been going back and forth, alternatively competing with the political power and submitting to it, in the 1960s things took a turn. The establishment of the V<sup>th</sup> Republic had for premise the alliance of the administration with the political power that was at that time embodied by Charles de Gaulle<sup>2</sup> [1890–1970]. Moreover, the new republic was designed in accordance with De Gaulle’s vision, that of a strong presidential figure granted a vast array of powers, thus further increasing the centrality of the French system. Article 13 of the French Constitution highlights this vision by establishing a list of senior civil servants that the President is to appoint during the Council of Ministers, such as highest-ranking Military Officers or Rectors of Academies. In addition, the Institutional Act No. 58–1136 on appointments to civil and military positions of the state enlarges the appointment powers of the President. Moreover these appointment powers are detailed in the decree by the Council of Ministers No. 59–587 on the appointments to management positions of certain public institutions (e.g. Banque de France, ENA etc.), public companies (Aéroport de Paris) or national companies (SNCF – railway company). It should however be taken into account that some of the nominations are to be approved by the permanent parliamentary committees of both assemblies as expressed in the legislative act No. 2010–838 on the application of the 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph of article 13 of the French Constitution. The initiative of an alliance did not come solely from the political side; civil servants wanted to establish stable institutions, and they entrusted De Gaulle – although not always sharing his political view – because of the respect and admiration they had for this charismatic and devoted historical figure. This started blurring the lines for what was the politicisation of administration. Today, when observing French administration, this process of politicisation appears to be inevitable. If administration is from the outset a political issue [Mabille, 2001], then in the context of the French system, it is also a tool of the ruling power to which the citizens gave their trust during the elections. Taking this into account, can the politicisation of the public administration be seen as a negative consequence of politics?

When dealing with politicisation, it is important to understand that it touches every part of the French public administration, and has its roots mostly in the education available to one. Most of the French educational system is public and therefore managed by the government via two main ministries: *Ministère de l'Education Nationale* and *Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur*<sup>3</sup>. Since the French state is largely organised on the basis of a strong hierarchy, it seems logical that its educational model be designed the same way. French politicians are often proud to claim that France gives a chance to everyone regardless to their familial, social, etc. background. In practice, many counter-examples can be found, for huge discrepancies can often be found between what opportunities for higher education and employment are given to two different individuals. As a matter of fact, the French system gives great importance to the *Grandes Ecoles*, considered to be the best way to succeed in one's career. If studying at university is good, getting in such an institution is regarded as better. Indeed, although reforms are under way, about any graduate student can get in a Bachelor's degree programme (except for some exceptions), regardless of their grades; whereas in such *Grandes Ecoles*, the student has to pass a thorough entrance examination, and therefore has no guarantee of being accepted. This educational system led to the creation of a school dedicated to administration: *l'Ecole Nationale d'Administration* more commonly known as ENA, which might be regarded as the most prestigious school in France. I would argue that this school embodies the French approach towards elitism and to a certain extent to the thin border between an administrative career and a political one. The ENA follows a very strict selection process to prepare its student to the highest positions of French Administration (senior civil servants). While studying at the school, the students are offered prestigious internship within any branch of the French administration (embassies, regional councils...). At the end of their course of study, students are ranked from least to most talented. Prior to the release of this index, they are asked to make a list of the positions they wish to obtain, and the best students are most likely to get what they asked for. Sometimes it is not necessarily what the student would like the most or would be the most interested in, but the most prestigious (*cour des comptes*) or where s/he already has made acquaintances. However, this school is not dedicated exclusively to an administrative/scholarly education, it also offers its members opportunities for strong political development. As soon as they are admitted, the students are urged by their environment to "choose" a political side. It is obvious that most students already have political opinions before starting their education at the ENA, but they are to take a clearer stance, or even become a member of a given party. This clear distinction will then guide the choices they will make and perhaps even the positions they will apply for [Ardant, 1987]. Even if they do in practice receive a political education, it does not contain any ideology

that would favour a specific political party, everything is still closely related to politics. For example when being an intern with a given President of region, who by definition has a political label, there is necessarily a strong political influence. Knowing that and the prestige afforded the ENA, it is no surprise that a large number of politicians who have had political responsibilities under the V<sup>th</sup> Republic have completed their education there. As a result, out of the eight Presidents that this Republic has known so far, four came out of this school. It is only half of them, however we have to consider the fact that the school was created in 1946. Thus, neither Charles De Gaulle nor Georges Pompidou<sup>4</sup> (1911–1974) had the opportunity to attend it. This brings the percentage of Presidents who have been former ENA student to 2/3 of the Presidents who could have actually made the choice to apply to this school. It is needless to mention here all of the ministers, members of Parliament, etc. who are also former students of the ENA.

As laid down in the introduction the French administration used to have an image of neutrality, however it can be said that it has always been seen as really slow, inefficient and bureaucratic. Politicisation can then be used as a way to make the public administration more efficient in its work. Neutrality and expertise are the key principles of administration in order for it to perform its administrative duties even during times of political changes, as well as to pursue its first goal, that of acting for the citizens and not for political parties. Politicisation on the other hand, enhances the cooperation between the administration and the political power [Le Bussy, 2001] for the former develops a feeling of belonging to the latter. This means that civil servants become loyal to the government in place not only because it is their duty in regards to their work, but also because they are politically engaged and share the same ideas regarding the implementation of reforms. Therefore, the main motive for the politicisation of public administration is that of the increase of efficiency. Not just any efficiency, but the efficient implementation of the government's policies. The democratic model implies that public administration is the institution in charge of implementing the manifesto of elected people, because what is laid down there is supposed to transpose the will of the popular majority. Reactivity and efficiency in the implementation of these policies is therefore a duty that the administration has towards the citizens. If the administration does not fulfil this within the acceptable limits, then the government would seem to have the legitimacy to take actions, translating in a relative polarisation of the administration via appointment of chosen people. The effects will be that the ruling power will know for sure that it can count on its civil servants to implement reforms and so needs to trust the senior civil service with the communication of such changes. Once the process of politicisation is under way, the ruling power is able to place its resources at key positions. In other words, it is able to make full use of its partisan forces that will remain loyal. The whole

process of politicisation also resembles that of centralisation. That is not to say that the government will act as an authoritarian one, for it is democratic, but it will nonetheless implement a strong hierarchy, forcing the administration to follow its policies.

We also have to take into account the phenomenon of counter-politicisation. It occurs after a switch in power during elections, when a different political party becomes the ruling one. In that moment, the administration has as its senior civil servants people who have been appointed by the last government, by another majority. The first reflex of the new government might then be to erase the whole senior public service, to replace it with new members that are also politicised, but loyal to them. It seems that the politicisation of senior positions helps ensuring the good functioning of the public administration. The established power is able to rely on people that will follow its directives with zeal/enthusiasm [Ardant, 1987], so that the whole bureaucracy will be faster, more effective. Moreover, if the administration has already been politicised by the previous government, then tensions can rise between the two institutions. The ruling power can for instance imply that civil servants are the reason why decisions are not implemented fast enough, or in the right way. This would discredit the administration, which, in addition, does not have the same tools as the government to defend itself (e.g. media representation). The resistance that some officials could express towards the new governmental policies would frustrate the ruling power, whose only answer to counter it would be to make use of politicisation to replace those people by other, carefully chosen ones. Utilising politicisation is really convenient for the government, for enables it to control actions taken by the administration without a form of resistance, and the administration turns out to be more reactive. In that sense polarisation can benefit the population, on the condition that the government knows when to stop and does not overstep its job to strictly implement its manifesto.

## **2. Civil Servants and Politicisation**

The French administrative system is mainly based on the principle of meritocracy. In other words, civil servants are selected through a process of entrance competitive examination<sup>5</sup> as laid down in act on statutory dispositions of the state's public service No. 84-16/Chapter III. However, the politicisation of the public administration changes the rules of the game. Although administrative departments are used to the numerous changes of leaders and can adapt to the different methods of work or ideas of these people with different personalities, the situation is different when regarding the process of politicisation. Indeed, when appointing officials on the basis of a political affiliation and not on their merit, the situation changes greatly. A person who would have followed

the “normal” path, and therefore would have earned his promotion, will be replaced at the last minute by someone else. The issue often comes up when political appointments are based on loyalty rather than competences [Ardant, 1987, p. 52]. That does not mean that every time someone is appointed on the basis of political loyalty, s/he is not competent for the job, but it is a feature to take into account when underlining the problems engendered by politicisation. Moreover, appointing someone to a position that would normally require ten years or more of seniority implies that those years of work are not really necessary and that the skills acquired during that period of time are also superfluous. Nowadays it often happens that young officials (in their 30s) are to be appointed to the rank of head of department after only few years of service upon leaving the ENA, whereas officials can, in average, hope to be appointed director at the age of 48 and after twenty-one years of service [Ardant, 1987, p. 52]. The politicisation brings inequalities to the core of the administrative system, when the latter is supposed to have as its main goals to treat every citizen the exact same way. It is not to be forgotten that if a career can start quickly thanks to a political input, the process works in the other way too, meaning that a civil servant’s career can be ended very quickly for the same political reasons. If those practises are to be recurrent, then it will have an impact on the public administration. Civil servants that had been working for a long time for the state will then be more likely to decide to switch to the private sector. The latter has clearer rules: efficiency and quality of work. The turn that the public administration has taken to appoint people regardless of their actual skills is in complete contradiction with the principles of the New Public Management<sup>6</sup> that have been applied to the French administration over the past decades.

Since politicisation is not a one-way phenomena imposed to officials [Rouban, 2009], some civil servants will then develop a new conception of public administration, understanding that their only option in order to move forward in their career is to take advantage of this process [Ardant, 1987]. As Luc Rouban stresses it, “is politicised only the one who wishes to” [Rouban, 2009, p. 62]. However, this decision might mean a less linear career that will be less secure for dependent on politicians and on which party manages to win the elections over the years. In such cases, there are two different options: either choosing one specific political party that embodies one’s personal opinion, or to always be on the side of the current majority, resulting in changing allegiance when the political majority changes in order to get the most out of it.

While civil servants feel like they are to take a public political position, they might also feel the need to start a political career in addition to their administrative one. Indeed, taking a political position does not require to campaign for a political mandate/position. It is important to mention that France has a relatively loose policy regarding such pos-



sibilities between politics and administration. As a result, one is allowed to carry out a political campaign while retaining their position within the administration. If s/he is elected s/he is allowed to get back to their previous administrative position when the mandate come to its end, which might not be the case in other countries. A senior civil servant makes a good Member of Parliament thanks to their experience in different positions, including some time as minister's personal staff. Essentially, there are more than a few advantages to starting a political career following an administrative, one of which being that in case of troubles, one can always go back to the one's former position, without having to face further consequences. Moreover, the civil servants already have connections within both administrative and political areas, and therefore can broaden their horizon when looking at after Member of Parliament perspectives. This sometimes leads them to work in areas of administration they would not otherwise have been open to them without such a political background. As mentioned above, members Ministers' personal staff are key players in the process of politicisation of the French public administration. Indeed, when part of such institutions, there is no other choice for one than to be politicised, for it is an argument for loyalty towards the minister one is working for.

With time, the civil servants who have followed the normal path have themselves become politicised. This resulted in the creation of a sort of breeding ground mixing "traditional" civil servants and ones appointed by previous governments, from which new governments can choose from when acceding power [Rouban, 2009]. Moreover, when a government or politicians are elected, they might lack relevant knowledge due to their lack of experience of politics at such a high level, hence the usefulness of this breeding ground. With this resource of experienced civil servants that are already supporters of a given political side, the possibility of resistance that the concept of neutrality afforded the public administration becomes almost non-existent. As a matter of fact, politicisation has created a new category of workers who, despite their education in the administrative field, will most likely spend their whole career at politicised positions.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the French state has always been very interventionist, we can support the argument that the process of politicisation is inevitable and merely a consequence of the French political culture. Under the V<sup>th</sup> Republic, this process has increased over the years along with the constant changes of political majority both at the head of the government and within the Parliament. Moreover, the amendment made to the French Constitution in 2000 on the harmonisation of the presidential mandate with the parliamentary one<sup>7</sup>, led to the near impossibility of a cohabitation government<sup>8</sup> therefore increasing



the process of politicisation. The governments of today clearly know how to make good use of politicisation. In the same way, civil servants too have learnt to use politicisation to benefit their personal careers. However, the ever-increasing politicisation of the public administration becomes a cause of concern when it impacts directly the way in which the civil servants are performing their duties, and therefore when it starts impacting citizens' when engaging in administrative procedures. As a result, citizens have become used to politicisation as a fact more than an idea, although it is mainly present within the senior civil service. No clear border or distinction can be found between the higher levels of administration and the political area any more. In a senior civil servant's career, there will most probably be administrative positions including numerous political highlights such as a parliamentary mandate. Politicisation, even if it seems inevitable in today's society and political games, should however not lead to the total disappearance of citizens' trust in the administration. They need to feel that the principle of neutrality is still very much implemented, and that every similar demands are met in the same way, without any interference from political allegiance.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Made available by the French government.

<sup>2</sup> First President of the V<sup>th</sup> Republic from 1959 until 1969, Union for the Defence of the Republic (right).

<sup>3</sup> Ministry for National Education and Ministry for Higher Education.

<sup>4</sup> Second President of the V<sup>th</sup> Republic from 1969 until 1974, Union for the Defence of the Republic (right).

<sup>5</sup> Often in several step the first one being a written exam with for instance a case study and the second (after a selection) being an oral exam with questions regarding your career (why taking those decisions and what are your goals).

<sup>6</sup> Application of techniques from the private sector to the public administration for more efficiency and profitability.

<sup>7</sup> 2nd October 2000 referendum deciding on the length of the Presidential mandate (from 7 to 5 years).

<sup>8</sup> Following the legislative elections, the majority party is different from the one of the presidential elections, resulting in the President and the Prime Minister to be from different political parties.