A Cross-National Evaluation of Representative Bureaucracies: Implementation, Challenges, and Outcomes


In 2014, the New York Times published an article about a new index that measures colleges’ commitment to socioeconomic diversity in ways such as encouraging and accepting student applications from low-income families (Dreier and Kahlenberg 2014). Socioeconomic diversity is used in many societies to advance representative institutions. But the ways in which polities handle this vital matter are different. Krishna K. Tummala’s book Politics of Preference: India, United States, and South Africa presents a highly anticipated comparative study of three countries and their efforts to promote the representation of minorities in government bureaucracies. The book focuses on three of the largest federal democracies, all with different histories of political commitment to affirmative action, which makes this piece particularly appealing for experts and scholars engaged in the subject as well as for policy makers in newly emerging democracies.

In 1947, Dahl was one of the first to note that democracies are not all the same: although they share some key attributes, each democracy has its own distinctive characteristics based on historical, social, and cultural developments. Tummala, to a certain extent, echoes Dahl’s argument by thoroughly evaluating the policies used to promote representative bureaucracies and by demonstrating the differences in policy implementation in each country.

The book consists of six chapters. The introductory chapter elaborates the purpose of the manuscript and justifies the selection of the countries examined. Chapter 2 presents both theoretical and philosophical arguments for advancing affirmative action. The next three chapters are devoted to each individual country case, followed with a conclusion presented in the final chapter.

Among the three polities, the case of India appears to be the most complex, a point epitomized by the existence of a diverse number of categories of the population falling under the definition of “minority.” The focus of representation policy in India is on reserving openings in the public sector for minority groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other so-called Backward Classes (27). As a federal system, India provides a considerable degree of flexibility to local jurisdictions in designing and implementing locally specific policies toward the representation of minorities. Although several efforts were made at the national level to improve the policy of bureaucratic representation, the author notes shortcomings of the recent policies of preferences in India, including the fact that affirmative action is not applicable to all types of minorities. Religious minorities, for example, are not covered under the Indian preference policy. Furthermore, there are some discrepancies in drawing a line between the notions of class and caste, and loopholes for abusing the system exist—as does politicization of the preference policy, particularly in promoting the political interests of certain elected officials.

The chapter on U.S. representation policy begins with a discussion of American immigration history and how the state affected the rights and representation of different ethnic groups. Historically, the policy of preference in the United States progressed from exclusion, segregation, and other forms of discrimination to nondiscrimination and affirmative action. The beginning of affirmative action practice at the executive level officially started in 1961, when President John F. Kennedy created the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Ever since, diversifying the civil service system has been a political priority (if handled in very different ways) for each incoming U.S. president. Tummala’s book also notes the leading role of the executive branch in promoting affirmative action policies in the United States, followed by the judicial and legislative branches.
Politics of Preference sets out the view that, compared to most countries, South Africa experienced the most difficult modern history of discrimination against the largest portion of its population. Racial segregation in South Africa was enforced at the end of the 1940s and remained active until 1994, when international sanctions and internal resistance resulted in democratic elections. The newly elected government in the early 1990s implemented several reforms to address past discrimination. Despite this progress, more remains to be done in the country. Tummala stresses South Africa’s limited progress in advancing gender equality and the need for better representation of disabled people.

Taken together, the promotion of policies of preference appears to face similar challenges in the three examined polities. The first problem involves defining the notion of minority, a very fluid concept that, as the book persuasively depicts, changes over time and region in each country. A second challenge is the fact that, as Tummala summarizes, “to make all equal eventually requires unequal or preferential treatment of some now” (194). Such a view, when translated into policy, invariably attracts resistance—as Tummala presents in detail in the chapter covering the United States.

A third challenge involves the important role of equal access to education in advancing a more or less equal society in the long run. Tummala also emphasizes that access to high-quality education, free from “massification,” is even more important, as well as even more challenging to achieve in practice.

Although the author discusses both conceptual and practical issues related to preferential treatment in the largest democracies, the book might have been strengthened if it presented more references to policies that are employed in more advanced countries such as those in Scandinavia. Preferences indeed occupy virtually all countries, as Tummala emphasizes in his scene-setting opening chapter; these three cases are by no means the most successful. In a related vein, a helpful focus could be to identify specific public agencies that are considered most effective at successfully promoting preferential policies in each of the examined polities. Such a narrower focus could allow us to better understand the conditions that make the policy of preference successful at a local scale rather than at the entire federal level. Furthermore, the author rightly notes that affirmative action in the examined countries cannot be a blanket policy to cover all of the fragmented groups in society. But then how can affirmative preferences become more comprehensive? Contrariwise, as Tummala leaves unaddressed: is it possible to make preferential policies comprehensive in a global environmental with intensive migration flows and continuously changing demographic features in individual countries?

Despite these criticisms, Politics of Preference: India, United States, and South Africa is noteworthy in providing a thorough analysis of the challenges and opportunities in advancing representative bureaucracies in three of the largest democracies. Accordingly, it is successful not only in addressing academic deficiencies that exist in comparative studies of affirmative actions but also in providing insightful guidance for researchers and practitioners engaged in representative bureaucracy. Comparative public administration has been continuously concerned with the question as to why similar institutions implemented in different countries lead to different results (Andrews 2010; Terman 2011). Tummala’s analysis of preference policies reveals that countries face distinct challenges, particularly in the process of implementing similar institutions, although eventual policy outcomes appear to be more or less the same when they take place within a framework of democratic conditions.

References