Assessing Government Performance through the Lens of Public Sector Workers

For more than 30 years, Charles Goodsell has been tilting against the windmill of antigovernment sentiment, offering arguments and evidence that American government agencies work reasonably well and are not the dysfunctional structures associated with typical antibureaucratic sentiment. In his 1983 book *The Case for Bureaucracy* and subsequent editions, he clarified for more than a generation of readers how the work of American governments is accomplished, and he assembled the data that allow for a fair assessment of their capacity and achievements.

In the book under review, *The New Case for Bureaucracy*, he returns to the subject in an informal volume in which he writes directly to his readers on the challenges of taking on the subject. His mission: to "transcend stereotypes and think concretely and broadly about the agencies of administration that do the work of government in this huge country" (1).

Goodsell is dedicated to showing that American bureaucracies perform both complex and routine tasks efficiently and effectively. He recounts the great breadth and variety of American public agencies and notes that they are typically divided into surprisingly small units—hardly the "big government" entities of antigovernment propaganda. He also points out that about half of their employees work in the military or for defense agencies.

Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of the rest are not distant operatives demonized by critics as "faceless" and beyond reach. Rather, they are those "friends and neighbors" who work for local governments and special local districts. Although critics of government rail against excessive government involvement in public life, the author shows that compared to other countries, the United States ranks fairly low in the proportion of public employees to the general population.

Of particular interest is his summary of findings from his own research on exemplary public agencies, such as the National Park Service and the National Weather Service. For a volume defending administrative capacity in the United States, demonstrating that some public agencies are truly successful is a useful component of a persuasive argument.

These and other observations add up to a spirited defense of the capacity of American governments to perform to reasonable expectations. They are not particularly revelatory conclusions, but they are presented with clarity and passion for those who would like to review the subject or introduce newcomers to the case for bureaucracy.

In defending the performance of American governments, Goodsell sees himself as contributing to the ongoing debate between those who consider them instruments for solving collective problems and those who believe that the public welfare is best served when government plays only a limited role in society. The author understands that disrespect for government undermines the argument that society requires expansive public policies to respond to citizens’ needs when individuals cannot act for or protect
themselves. This is one of the great debates of our age, and The New Case for Bureaucracy offers important testimony for defending and investing in public sector capacity.

While focusing on the mostly positive performance of government workers is important, the issues are more complicated than the author acknowledges. A more thorough survey might consider some of the following points.

First, while we might expect that greater support for government would result in more stable public budgets, and loss of respect for government would result in lower public spending, we need to recognize that, at best, there is only a weak relationship between the resources allocated to public agencies and their reputation with the public. Government budgets may be cut and entire functions of government may be privatized or eliminated with scant response in public opinion beyond the concerns of affected organized interest groups. The National Park Service has had its budgets cut repeatedly and infrastructure repairs neglected over the years, with little evident public disapproval or reduced public regard. Only when the parks are closed during a budget crisis does the public actively seem to notice.

Should it be considered remarkable that there seem to be limited connections between bureaucratic capacity and degrees of respect for government? Certainly it is the case that public managers put the best face on productivity so that they can manage budget cuts without the public noticing. But public regard for the performance of government agencies, except in a few politicalized cases or when things go scandalously wrong, within a range seems indifferent to actual levels of performance.

Consider as well the low regard in which Americans seem to hold their state divisions of motor vehicles (DMVs). Despite extraordinary improvements in these state agencies over the last 20 years, greatly aided by information technology innovations, the state DMVs continue to be the butt of late-night television jokes and the focus of negative talking points among conservative politicians.

One is reminded of Murray Edelman’s (1977) work on the symbolic dimensions of the public sector. At the symbolic level, the very existence of public programs signals people that they are protected from harm, have access to important services, and so on, regardless of the actual performance of the agencies charged with these responsibilities.

Goodsell argues, in part, that public agencies work fairly well despite public opinion that often suggests the contrary. The paradox of this discussion is that there would seem to be a wide range of government performance that can evoke positive or negative public responses, so much so that (to exaggerate) it is unclear to what extent public opinion (and respect for government) is tethered to performance at all.

Relatedly, it is long past time to stop using polling data on “trust in government” as measures of the public’s view of the public sector. These are entirely unreliable measures of the public’s assessment of government capacity because polling questions on trust in government, at best, conflate the performance of public agencies with the broad behavior of political actors. Respondents to such polls are reflecting as much on whether they approve of policy makers’ decisions as they are on the execution of public policy. Goodsell is on the right track when he registers a preference for data on citizens’ assessments of interactions with public employees, but he muddies the waters when he uncritically reports “trust in government” data as relevant to the case for bureaucracy.

We also need more discussion of the extent to which government assumptions of responsibility are commensurate with the capacity to actually achieve the promised results. To say that government has a policy about a topic says nothing about whether it is a smart policy, adequately funded, and capable of achieving its nominal objectives. If a certain amount of fraud is registered in Medicare reimbursement, for example, is that amount a lot or a little? Considering the extraordinary number of transactions in a very complex financial web of claims and reimbursement, what is an acceptable amount of fraud, and how much would we be willing to pay in increased surveillance to reduce or eliminate it? Clearly, how much fraud the country is willing to tolerate, and at what cost, is a social or political construction.

These points are particularly relevant in the regulatory arena, where policies to prevent injuries and deaths in the workplace, lethal food contamination, and fraud in consumer practices and many other arenas only scratch the surface of possible restrictions while nominally applying those restrictions to countless numbers of human interactions. Of the 25 most significant “government failures” that Paul Light (2014) identifies in a recent article, a few reflect inadequate performance (underestimation of what was needed for the timely rollout of health insurance reform and to respond adequately to Hurricane Katrina; grave problems in the Department of Veterans Affairs). But almost half essentially reflect the popular judgment that regulatory agencies do not protect the public well enough from mining disasters, bridge collapses, exposure to pathogens in the food supply, and so forth. These and other incidents may have registered as government failures, but they also reflect the gap.
between the potential for harmful behavior on the part of businesses and the legal authority and enforcement resources of the regulatory agencies.

Ironically, one might conclude from Light’s list of government failures and their aftermaths that the failures reflect Americans’ desire for more government—to provide greater and more consistent protection from irresponsible financial institutions, food and drug companies, mining and other industrial operations, and the random violence delivered by disturbed or vengeful individuals.

Successes in regulatory protections are partly the result of public policies, policy implementation, and effective management. They are also the result of communications about best practices by public authorities and conformity by innumerable businesses and individuals to public laws and the norms they embody. In other words, public policies only partly account for conforming behavior. Students of regulation understand this and search continually for ways to tailor laws to achieve better results at lower costs. They understand that regulatory policy is coproduced by regulators and those who are regulated. Coproduction complicates analysis of the origins of public regard for government.

Finally, we need to turn the page on thinking that the term “bureaucracy” can adequately stand in for “the institutions that do the ongoing work of government” (xi). The world of American governments has changed dramatically over the last decades. To be sure, the work of American governments is still done by public agencies and their subdivisions. But it is also coproduced by businesses and nonprofit organizations working under contracts with governments. Those contracts, of course, are written and overseen by public agencies, but surely government contractors—whether providing security for American forces in Iraq or offering child care services in Iowa—are partially “making” the policies they implement.

In addition, as already mentioned, government policy is enacted by businesses and nongovernmental organizations such as hospitals and nursing homes that implement government policies every day when they follow government requirements in providing services for which they seek reimbursement or when they conform their practices to public regulatory requirements.

These matters do not resemble those that have traditionally been seen as government action, but surely the conforming of citizen and business behavior to government requirements in reimbursement regimes or regulatory practices is as much the “ongoing work of government” as the performance of the bureaus, large and small, that have traditionally been the faces of government over the years, although we may not yet have a convincing way of describing this complexity.

References