A Theory of Administrative Burden: Connecting Micro Behaviors to Macro Outcomes

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Abstract

Administrative burdens are consequential to public sector outcomes and matter to inequality across and within groups. For these reasons, their study should be central to the field of public administration. We propose a causal framework for understanding and studying administrative burden, one that shows how the micro behavioral processes of policymakers, service providers and citizens matter to broader macro governance outcomes. The following claims arise from our framework. First, the administrative state constructs burdens, via processes of both policy design and implementation. Second, state-created burdens give rise to, but are distinct from, individual experience of burdens as learning, compliance, and psychological costs. Third, individual experience of burdens affects macro outcomes, such as access to social benefits and political efficacy. Fourth, both non-governmental third parties and human capital are key factors in shaping the experience of administrative burdens.
Evidence for Practice

- The state imposes administrative burdens on citizens through learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs.
- Administrative burdens are constructed by policy actors both through policy design and implementation.
- Burdens can exacerbate inequality by being targeted toward more vulnerable groups, who may also lack human capital skills to overcome burdens.
- The effects of administrative burdens can be buffered by help from third-party actors.

Introduction

The idea of administrative burden is intuitive. We recognize it from our experience as citizens engaging with the state. It reflects the time we spend getting a new drivers license, or the lines when we vote. For many, it also reflects the difficulties in accessing public services such as income supports. All policies that require citizens to engage with the state will, to varying degrees, create venues where the state may burden citizens.

To make the case for why we should study burdens, we first argue that burdens matter. In a symposium such as this, this point may seem obvious, but an articulation of how they matter and the scale of their importance deserves restating. Burdens affect whether people will be able to exercise fundamental rights of citizenship, like voting, or can access benefits that can improve quality of life, like health insurance. Burdens can alter the effectiveness of public programs. Social programs often reach only a fraction of their target population, automatically weakening their effectiveness by shutting out those who fail to negotiate the required procedure. These basic
facts place burdens at the center of big questions about the administrative state: Are people able
to enjoy in practice the rights and benefits provided to them in theory? Are public policies
working? How does the state facilitate or minimize inequality? How can we design citizen-state
interactions to better achieve shared normative goals? While there will always be debate about
what exactly are big questions, or how we define a macro field of public administration, such
basic queries were once and should still be central to any study of governance (Roberts 2017).

We then present a broad conceptual framework for administrative burdens, and
consequent implications for how we are governed, built on three types of costs and the
individuals’ experiences when they interact with public authority. *Learning costs* arise from
engaging in search processes to collect information: Are there services that can fulfill unmet
needs? Would one qualify for them? What are the requirements for the application process?
*Compliance costs* are the material burdens of following administrative rules and requirements.
This is the time lost waiting in line, completing forms or providing documentation of status. It is
the money spent on hiring an accountant to do your taxes, or the fees immigrants pay to process
paperwork. *Psychological costs* include the stigma of applying for or participating in a program
that carries negative associations, a sense of loss of personal power or autonomy in interactions
with the state, or the stresses and frustrations of dealing with administrative processes. The
framework also identifies the role that non-state actors can play in buffering or amplifying the
effects of burdens.

Our framework responds to a growing discussion of a micro and macro public
administration, arising partly from a concern that big questions are being neglected (Milward et
al 2016) but also from a consideration of how the study of different aspects of government can
connect together rather than operate in competition (Moynihan 2018). We point out that
behavioral processes are most prevalent in state implementation of burdens – via the behavior of street level bureaucrats – and in the experience of those burdened. People fail to submit to seemingly minor or routine bureaucratic demands, even with strong incentives to do so. The greater or more frequent those demands, or the more that individuals lack human capital to help them to overcome burdens, the more likely they are to fail. Our framework both makes clear how such behavioral questions contribute to macro outcomes, and how these behavioral processes occur within a political framework. Incorporating both behavioral and politics is necessary for a full understanding of administrative burdens and how to change them.

A necessary disclaimer is that burdens are not always bad. Indeed, some are unavoidable. The government has a legitimate interest in imposing costs on citizens to the degree that such costs effectively serve important political values or reflect administrative realities. We are most interested in cases where the value of burdens seems, at best, debatable, and at worse, entirely unjustified. How do we determine when burdens are unjustified? How do we design and manage public programs in ways that shift administrative burdens away from citizens? Whose role is it to shine a spotlight on these burdens, and how do they make determinations? To answer these very practical questions first requires the type of conceptual language we present in this paper. In doing so, we offer a toolbox to make government simple, accessible, and respectful to the citizens it serves.

**Why do Burdens Matter**

To make the case for why burdens are relevant, we present three basic claims. First, burdens are consequential – they make a difference in our lives. Second, administrative burdens are distributive. They affect some groups more than others, and in doing so, may reinforce
inequalities in society. Third, burdens, like public policies themselves, are constructed, and therefore central to policymaking and politics.

**Burdens are Consequential**

Administrative burdens can impose significant costs on citizens, especially if they result in programs failing to reach their intended recipients. Heinrich’s (2016) examination of an ambitious South African cash-transfer program aimed at 11 million South African children documented significant compliance costs such as extensive documentation requirements, delay at welfare offices, and learning costs that were exacerbated by changes in the policy rules. As a result, most beneficiaries experienced disruptions in cash transfers, with four out of five of those disruptions made in error. As eligible beneficiaries lost resources, this had a negative effect of adolescent outcomes, resulting in greater rates of sexual activity, alcohol consumption, and criminal behavior.

Burdens are also consequential in that they can, quite literally, determine who is and is not a member of society. Nowhere are these stakes clearer than in the area of immigration. Many who are eligible do not apply because administrative burdens – in the form of perceived language, personal, financial and bureaucratic barriers – are significant factors in their decision (Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015). In the absence of a national framework for addressing unauthorized immigrants, states have passed their own laws that utilize burdens as a means of discouraging immigration. For example, Texas has refused the use of an internationally-recognized Mexican identification card with the effect of making life more difficult for undocumented immigrants and their citizen children (Heinrich 2018).
Table 1 further illustrates the consequential nature of burdens by illustrating their centrality in key US policies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The Centrality of Administrative Burdens to Politics and Policymaking in the United States</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constitutional rights</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Voting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Increases burdens: 34 states, almost all Republican-controlled, have passed voter ID laws which disproportionately burden poorer and minority voters. Requiring a registration process separate from voting draws less political attention, but reduces turnout by an estimated 3-7 percentage points. In 2018, the Supreme Court allowed states to purge of non-active voters – who are more likely to be poorer – which increases costs by forcing those voters to re-register. Reduces burdens: Making registration easier benefits poorer, minority and younger voters. “One-stop shopping” that allows voters to register when they vote reduces burdens and increases turnout. Automatic voter registration, adopted by 8 mostly Democratic states change the default status to opt-in.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reproductive Rights</strong></td>
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<td>Increases burdens: Law passed in conservative states add burdens to women seeking abortions and third-party service providers not required for other medical procedures. For example, state laws require women to document rape, incest or risk to life to use health insurance, establish mandatory waiting periods, require physicians to be present to watch women swallow a pill, and mandate scripted counseling and ultrasounds. Providers may be required to have medically unnecessary facilities, licensing and services, causing many to close. The Supreme Court rejected some of these laws in <em>Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt</em> because the undue burden placed upon women were not offset by any medical gain, but a more conservative court is more likely to allow such burdens.</td>
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<td><strong>Health care</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Medicaid</strong></td>
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<td>Increases burdens: Healthcare.gov was intended to help people gain access to health insurance policies via the Affordable Care Act. But the disastrous rollout, while unintended, created enormous compliance costs. At the ground level, a special type of outreach employee – Navigators – was hired by the federal government to help reduce learning and compliance costs with the new and complex law, providing greater support to poorer and minority applicants than traditional health insurance brokers. However, 13 largely Republican states adopted rules that made it difficult for Navigators to work, requiring additional fees, residency requirements, and background checks including fingerprinting, training and examinations and evidence of financial responsibility. Navigators were further hampered by the near-elimination of financial support for the program by the Trump administration. The Trump administration has also encouraged states to add work requirements to maintain access to Medicaid. Such requirements create new learning and compliance costs. For example, Kentucky requires people to upload to a website the necessary...</td>
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documentation to verify their work activities. But 30 percent of Medicaid adults report they never use a computer, 28 percent say they do not use the internet, and 41 percent do not use email.

Medicare
Increases burdens: Older adults must choose traditional Medicare or Medicare Advantage; choosing between variety of Medigap programs, Medicare Advantage, and Prescription Drug plans that change annually. As people are asked to make more choices, they become subject to choice overload, sticking with the status quo, even when switching would benefit them. Less than one-quarter of individuals enroll in the most efficient plan for their needs, resulting in an average of $300 additional out-of-pocket spending each year.

Income Supports

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
Increases burdens: In 1996, welfare reform delinked SNAP (also known as food stamps) from those on welfare cash assistance, effectively altering the default status from opt-in to opt-out, and requiring participants to find out about and apply for SNAP separately. Welfare reform also cut benefits to non-citizen adults, with the result that children who remained eligible lost benefits when their non-citizen parents did not overcome the administrative burdens to register them. The increase in burdens led to a predictable decline in program enrollment of almost 20 percentage points, to 54 percent of the eligible population by 2001.

Reduces burdens: A series of policy changes during Bush, Clinton and Obama presidencies saw participation rebound to more than 83 percent of the eligible population. Federal funding formula were change to minimize penalties overpayments rather than under-enrollment. State governments were allowed to adopt streamlined eligibility determinations. Compliance costs were reduced by removing requirements to document assets, allowing phone rather than in-person interviews, creating online applications, and reducing the frequency of recertification. Stigma was reduced by the adoption of electronic cards rather than actual food stamps. Creation of call centers, on-line screening tools, along with outreach efforts with non-profits groups reduced learning costs.

Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

Reduces burdens: The EITC achieves an estimated take-up rate of 80 percent of eligible beneficiaries, higher than the 30-60 percent typical of other means-tested programs, but with administrative costs of less than 1 percent, relative to the 20 percent average for more traditional cash-assistance programs. Such benefits occur because the program is administered through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), with clear rules that do not vary by state or locality. The federal character and standardized approach prevents states from layering additional compliance costs on the program, thereby closing one route to administrative burdens observed in intergovernmental programs such as Medicaid. The tax preparation industry, private actors with strong business incentives to aid access to the EITC, also reduce the information needed by clients about the program, reduce compliance costs by helping tax preparation, and reduce psychological costs by treating citizens as clients to be served rather than claimants to be adjudicated. They also lobby to keep the process complex enough to require their services. Using tax preparers comes with financial costs, and the program could be simpler. When the EITC was relatively small, the IRS
simply provided the refund for filers who appeared eligible. Such an approach created a default status of opt-in, placing no burden on claimants to learn about and apply for the program.

Source: Table drawn from Herd and Moynihan (2018)

**Burdens are Distributive**

A classic definition of politics – “who gets what, when, where, and how” – underlines its essentially distributive nature (Lasswell 1936). Administrative burdens play a central role in determining when, how, and where goods, services and rights are distributed and, in practice, who is likely to receive them. If burdens are the product of governmental rules and procedures, this raises the question of whether they are distributive, i.e., do they help or hurt some groups more than others (Knight 1992)? If so, who are the winners and losers?

We argue that those who are least advantaged tend to more systematically face burdens, even as they have fewer resources to manage and overcome them. In general, those who lack political power or who are seen as undeserving tend to be less successful in winning benefits from the policy process (Schneider and Ingram 1997), and the same insight applies to administrative burdens: those who are powerless or are categorized as undeserving are more likely to be targeted with burdens.

Burdens reinforce inequalities in access to rights, including the most basic right of citizenship in a democracy: the right to vote (see Table 1). In the US, policies that make voting more onerous hit black voters, poor voters, and those with disabilities hardest (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Burdens can also be used to block access to other basic rights. In Pakistan, Nisar documents the how gender non-conforming individuals face burdens in accessing identity documents, documents that have become increasingly necessary to get a job, claim property rights, access welfare services, or negotiate encounters at security checkpoints (Nisar 2018).
For many Americans, especially poor Americans, the experience of government is predominantly the experience of burdens (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Individuals applying for Medicaid are also likely applying for SNAP and possibly the EITC. These same individuals are also less likely to have IDs or live in neighborhoods that provide sufficient polling places, making it harder to access the right to vote. Poor women are disproportionately more likely to have unplanned pregnancies and also to need access to abortion services—which many states are making more difficult to access. In short, it’s not just that policies targeted at the poor are more burdensome; it’s that the poor are more likely to experience government as routinely burdensome. As we discuss below, the distributive effects of burdens are exacerbated by variance in human capital across groups, and the greater cognitive stresses related to poverty.

_Burdens are Constructed: The Role of Political Beliefs_

Administrative burdens are the product of administrative and political choices. In some cases, burdens may arise inadvertently, through history, accident, or lack of foresight (Bozeman and Feeney 2011). In other cases, burdens are necessary to protect important political values. But there are also examples of how political ideology or policy preferences lead politicians to use burdens to make government a source of hindrance rather than help. Policymakers will sometimes deliberately construct administrative burdens – as a complement or alternative to traditional forms of policymaking – to achieve their policy goals. From a behavioral perspective, processes of motivated reasoning are likely to enable policymakers to rationalize imposing costs on groups they dislike, or policy areas they oppose (Grimmelikhuijsen et al 2017).

Regardless of whether the implications are fully understood, they can always be changed via political processes and administrative capacity. Table 1 makes clear how burdens represent
forms of political choice. To understand such choices, we do not offer a wholly new theory of politics. The ways in which we argue that elected officials and stakeholders operate are uncontroversial. Rather, we shine a light on a venue where politics matters and has played an underappreciated role. Our argument consists of a few simple strands that, when woven together, offer new insights into the relationship between politics and governing. First, the creation or reduction of burdens is a venue where political values – and therefore political processes – play out. Second, partisan attitudes toward burdens are policy-specific, and therefore relatively predictable once we know a party’s stance on a policy area. Third, partisan attitudes are consequential to burdens, since elected officials use burdens to act as a substitute or complement for other forms of policy action. Fourth, the opaque nature of burdens makes them an especially useful form of policymaking by other means.

The first and most basic claim in our argument about the politics of burdens is that the creation and reductions of burden is a process where politics plays out. Fights over burdens are fights about political values, such as access or program integrity. The venues of these fights are often within bureaucracies where values are converted into bureaucratic logics and procedures (Wilson 1989). Welfare policies offer a straightforward illustration of how burdens feature articulations of competing values. As far back as the Nixon administration, welfare programs have not been designed to balance take-up by eligible claimants with mistaken payments to ineligible beneficiaries; instead, administrative procedures have been used to reduce the former in the name of the latter (Brodkin 1987). Federal quality control guidelines offered states stronger incentives to avoid overpayment rather than to enroll eligible participants (Hanratty 2006). Performance evaluations of welfare programs maintain this tradition by rewarding reductions in fraud, but neglecting beneficiary take-up (Wichowsky and Moynihan 2008). As
noted in Table 1, a change in these guidelines to better balance overpayments with program access spurred state governments to find ways to increase participation in SNAP.

The second strand of our argument is that partisan attitudes about burdens in the abstract can be misleading, but partisan attitudes toward specific policy areas are revealing and predictive. The conventional wisdom on the politics of government regulation is clear enough: conservatives seek to lift the dead hand of government from individual liberties and free enterprise, while liberals use the tools of government to correct perceived inequalities in society. This image may be accurate for economic and regulatory policies to which businesses are subject, but it is not the case for many other policies (see Table 1). We propose that where partisans oppose a policy, or are unsympathetic to the beneficiaries, they will apply burdens as a tactic to limit access to rights or benefits.

The third strand of our argument is that political attitudes are consequential to burdens. The preferences of political actors – most prominently elected officials, but also stakeholders, political appointees, managers, and street-level bureaucrats – will often translate into actions governing the nature of burden in that policy area: whether it should be created or reduced, and the balance of burden between the individual and the state. This claim fits comfortably with a model of politics where actors design administrative structures to serve political ends, even if the outcomes are operationally dysfunctional (Moe 1989). Policymakers can seek to deliberately alter burdens to generate a behavioral response that aligns with their preferred policy outcome. In short, burdens are one of the tactics of contemporary political warfare about how policies are designed and delivered.

Fourth, we propose that the generally opaque nature of administrative burdens makes them valuable as a form a “policymaking by other means.” Where overt changes are unpopular
(such as reducing benefits), not publicly defensible (such as limiting the franchise), or where law constrains desired policy changes (such as Supreme Court decisions on abortion, or federal policies in intergovernmental programs), administrative burdens offer a low-profile alternative. For example, directly changing social benefits requires legislative battles which will often be re-litigated in court. By contrast, constructing complex, confusing, and time-consuming application procedures is a less visible form of policymaking that can effectively thwart an individual from accessing benefits, even if eligible by law.

A Framework for Understanding Administrative Burden

Figure 1 lays out a broad theoretical model of administrative burden. The three claims laid out above are central to the framework. The consequentiality of burdens is reflected in important citizen outcomes; the constructed nature is reflected in the way in which political beliefs underpin the state construction of burdens, and the distributive effects of burdens is a function of both the state targeting of burdens in policy implementation in the state construction of burdens, and how individuals respond can affect learning costs (Herd et al., 2013). We expand on the latter two points in more detail below.

To make the framework reasonably parsimonious, not all possible causal mechanisms are specified. The framework establishes some boundary conditions. While private sector use of burdens are numerous, they are not considered here. We also focus on the state construction of burdens that affects individuals who access public services. This may sound straightforward, but it is important to articulate, since much of the prior research on red tape in public administration has focused on the experience of bureaucrats, and research on regulation focuses largely on private organizations.
Given those parameters, our framework starts with a basic assumption that all encounters between citizens and the state generate some costs, even if minimal. Those costs will be borne by one party or the other, or are shared between the two parties to varying degrees. For example, does the state collect information from citizens via forms, or via its own administrative records? Does the state heavily advertise a program or service, or must citizens learn by themselves? A relatively neglected area in the study of government is how those costs are distributed.

**State Construction of Burdens: Role of Administrative Capacity**

State construction of burdens is made up of both policy design and implementation, which is driven by political beliefs (discussed above) and administrative capacity. Outreach efforts, and the availability and clarity of information, is an example of how policy implementation matters to learning costs. Choices about the design of customer service processes can make the wait time to get a driver’s license take 20 minutes in one state and two hours in
another. These design choices are limited by what is technologically feasible. As new options become possible, the burdens can be restructured and minimized. For example, those buying groceries using Electronic Benefit Transfer cards face lower compliance and psychological costs compared to those using traditional food stamps. Information technology makes sharing of accurate information easier, potentially reducing learning costs. For services that require verifying identity and eligibility, a mixture of technology and administrative data offers the promise of fewer compliance burdens. On the other hand, the use information technology in bureaucracies may also restrict the capacity of administrators to use their discretion to minimize the effects of burdens (Eubanks 2018).

Thus far, we have discussed how the state can establish burdens, how citizens experience them, the effects on citizen outcomes, and the role of human capital. We now return to the first link in the chain of effects in Figure 1: how administrative capacity and political beliefs matter to the construction of burdens. Financial resources, administrative expertise, and organizational capacity all influence the degree to which the state can reduce administrative burdens on citizens.

Financial resources affect the ability of the state to minimize or shift burdens away from citizens. This trade-off is easy to miss if we only examine government costs in the provision of services, and neglect citizen costs. Efforts to save money by closing Social Security field offices or limiting hours shifts compliance burdens on to citizens (Herd and Moynihan 2018). An administrator overseeing such cuts might not fully realize the implications, making the cuts more palatable, or may have little choice in the matter. Reduced budgets for such organizations is itself a matter of political choice. Congress has consistently cut the IRS budget since 2010, despite increased demands. As a result, citizens calling the IRS to get help filing might be greeted with a “courtesy disconnect” – 8.8 million callers were disconnected in 2015. In 2010, about three
quarters of calls got through, with an average wait-time of 11 minutes. By 2015 this had dropped to 37 percent, with an average wait-time of 23 minutes (Marr and Murray 2016).

Capacity includes not just financial resources, but administrative expertise. Ultimately, individuals within organizations help design the systems that individuals interact with to obtain benefits. Those with more expertise can use those skills to design more easily accessible systems, or use that knowledge to put more barriers in place. General organizational expertise also matters. For example, the ability of programs such as Medicare to automate aspects of eligibility assessments depends on functioning administrative data systems.

Differences in implementation may be the product of other administrative factors, such as bureaucratic culture and motivation, which in turn influence how administrative actors use their discretion to create, enforce, or buffer burdens. The individual beliefs and behaviors of street level bureaucrats, whether they be public officials or private providers of public services, also matters. Research on these street level bureaucrats finds they are sometimes biased against different groups – reflecting personal bias, or popular stereotypes – when they impose burdens (Brodkin and Lipsky 1983; Scott and Pandey 2000). Audit studies offer a promising technique for understanding how street-level biases increase burdens. Jilke, Van Dooren and Rys (2018) use an this approach to illustrate variation in learning costs across public and private settings. Fictional retirees sent requests for information to Belgian nursing-homes, some with typically Flemish names, some with Arab names. Private providers were about 20 percentage points less likely to provide information to the Arab. The findings confirm discriminatory biases shape the learning costs that people face. Another study found evidence of racial bias in how election officials responded to putative citizen requests to information about how to vote (White, Natahn and Faller 2015).
While not specified in figure 1, there will also likely be feedback effects between burdens imposed and the administrators who impose them. For example, the experience of burdens may make administrators wearier of new policies they suspect will be onerous (Burden et al. 2012). The experience of imposing burdens on citizens may undercut organizational commitment, motivation, and effort (Moynihan and Soss 2014; Kauffmann and Tummers 2017).

**Individual Experience of Burdens: The Role of Human Capital**

A simple definition of administrative burden is that it is an individual’s experience of a policy’s implementation as onerous (Burden et al. 2012). A more specific definition is that administrative burdens are the learning, psychological, and compliance costs that citizens experience in their interactions with government (Moynihan, Herd and Harvey 2015).

This definition is helpful for two reasons. First, it distinguishes between the actions of the state, and the experience of the individual. As Figure 1 makes clear, the state can construct rules and processes that give rise to the experience of burden, but the experience of burden is distinct from rules and process. Second, the definition allows for variation in the experience of burdens. Both the person who has waited 20 minutes to get their driver’s license and the person who has waited two hours have experienced burdens, but the costs imposed on the latter person are greater. It may seem excessive to label 20 minutes as burdensome. Perhaps it reflects the most efficient service possible. But allowing for variation in the degree of burden provides for greater precision, enabling us to distinguish between experiences that are more or less burdensome.

The “ordeal mechanism” perspective from economics suggests that citizens rationally weigh costs against expected benefits when engaging with burdens. Only those who truly derive a good deal of utility from a good or service will put up with the hassles involved. If this
perspective is correct, it makes sense to use burdens as a form of rationing (Nichols and Zeckhauser 1982). A shortcoming of this approach is that it predicts that the willingness to negotiate burdens is a function of desire: that those who do not wait in line, turn up for an appointment, or complete a form simply do not value the reward that comes with efforts highly enough.

We argue that incorporating other variables would result in better predictions of people’s ability to manage burdens. Specifically, we suggest that human capital – such as education, money, social networks, intelligence, psychological resources and health – also matters to how people cope with administrative burdens. For example, a wealthier immigrant can hire a lawyer to manage the compliance burdens in citizenship applications. Individuals with more social connections or education have a greater ability to learn about a program, understand the requirements they need to satisfy, and gain advice on how to satisfy them.

Human capital is not equally distributed across people. Therefore, those who may need services the most – individuals with lower income, education, and language skills – may be most negatively affected by burdens. This group may also have lower access to other forms of human capital resources that would help them overcome burdens. Indeed, there is evidence that burdens have differential impacts by class, race, and gender in social programs (Herd and Moynihan 2018). Variance in the distribution can therefore amplify the distributive effects of burdens.

Our judgement and decision-making skills and shortcomings are part of our human capital. These include cognitive biases. How biases work depend in partly upon the context in which they are triggered, but a few general observations can be made. Individuals are not necessarily rational; indeed, people rarely engage in a rational weighing of the benefits of a good with the costs of burdens (Baicker, Congdon, and Mullainathan 2012; Shafir 2013). The impact
of burdens depends upon how individuals construe the world, not on objective measures of costs and benefits. This basic insight explains why burdens that seem minor and defensible when designed by the administrator can exert dramatic negative effects when experienced by a citizen.

Behavioral economics also helps to identify particular cognitive biases that make burdens more consequential (Shafir 2013). Individuals have biases in perceiving risk and probability, which in turn alters their willingness to overcome administrative burdens. For example, people who underestimate the risks of ill-health are also less likely to make the effort to overcome the burdens involved in enrolling in health insurance. Another bias that affects people’s willingness to expend effort to overcome costs is being “present-based”: they overvalue the short-term and hyperbolically discount long-term outcomes (Lowenstein and O’Donoghue 2002). Avoiding costs in the present may therefore be preferred even if it means forgoing long-term net benefits. The effect is that people tend to not move from their default situation.

Another bias arises from choice overload or decisional conflict, which occurs when individuals feel overwhelmed by a multiplicity of choice, resulting in indecision, the selection of defaults, or poor decisions (Chernev, Böckenholt, and Goodman 2010). We see the evidence of choice overload in Medicare (see Table 1), where older adults are asked to make complex choices about health insurance on an annual basis. The net result is, again, that people stay with their status quo even when they would benefit from switching plans.

Behavioral insights also provide a deeper understanding of why burdens will have distributive effects. The stresses of poverty may reduce cognitive capacity and exacerbate biases that amplify the effects of burdens (Gennetian and Shafir 2015; Mullainthan and Shafir 2013). People who feel threatened or exhausted are more likely to make poor long-term choices. It becomes harder to take a long-term perspective on financial choices when bills are overdue. For
example, simply telling people to imagine that they face a large car-repair bill leads them to perform less well on IQ tests compared to those told to imagine they face a small bill (Mani et al. 2013). In this fashion, as experiences with the state become stressful they may further undercut an individual’s human capital and their ability to negotiate the administrative processes that gives rise to those stresses in the first place.

While behavioral economics focuses on problems of judgement, aspects of social psychology emphasize the importance of the procedural conditions that citizens encounter. Negative conditions can be psychologically costly in their own right, and discourage future interactions with the state. What are those conditions? Research on procedural justice points to a basic desire to experience processes as fair, consistent and equitable (Lind and Tyler 1998). Research on motivation suggests that we also desire a basic level of autonomy in our interactions with institutions, and resent sources of extrinsic direction we view as coercive (Deci and Ryan 1985). As individuals face uncertainty about access to their rights and services, they may experience stress. It also seems reasonable to assume that the accumulation of negative experiences – filling out all of those forms, dealing with an uncaring bureaucrat – can result in negative emotional affects, such as stress, aggrievement, or frustration.

There is less evidence on psychological costs relative to other aspects of administrative burdens, meaning that there is a significant research opportunity to unpack this topic – how the experiences of burden trigger psychological costs, the nature of those costs, their effects, and how to ameliorate them. In an experiment that examine people’s willingness to engage in co-production, Thomsen, Baekgaard and Jensen (2018) find that when people are asked to contribute to the co-production with private benefits (helping at an elder-care facility that includes a relative) rather than collective benefits (helping at a facility with no relative), it is
experienced as an increase in stigma, stress and reduced autonomy. Reflecting variance in human capital, the psychological costs are experienced most by those with low self-efficacy to start with. They also find that priming that increases self-efficacy can reduce negative psychological costs, pointing to the question of how behavioral designs can minimize psychological costs.

The translation of behavioral economics into policy ‘nudges’ offers a model for how to find constructive fixes that enhance policy outcomes (Sunstein and Thaler 2008). For instance, changing the default on private savings plans from opt-in to opt-out (i.e., participants are automatically enrolled) has a large effect on take-up rates (Choi et al. 2004). The strengths of this approach – a focus on cognitive biases and program design – are in some respect also weaknesses, as it has given less attention to questions such as the origins of burdens, and specifically the broader political processes involved in their construction. It’s easy to assume that the need for a nudge is simply the result of the “choice architect” being unaware of behavioral limitations. If so, once a better choice architecture is determined, it will be adopted. Thaler (2018) has recently portrayed “nudging for evil” – that is, taking advantages of cognitive processes in ways that are at odd with people’s interest – as “sludge” and encouraged “sludge clean-up campaigns.” As Table 1 illustrates, such campaigns depend on political support, and an nuanced knowledge of the policy setting.

Table 2: How Behaviors Connect to Burdens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy actor and domain</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policymakers in policy design</td>
<td>Political actors opposed to a policy or unsympathetic to a group become more willing to impose burdens to make the service inaccessible or dysfunctional. As a form of confirmation bias, motivated reasoning will exacerbate these tendencies by allowing easier rationalization of costs and justification of benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service providers in policy implementation</td>
<td>Biases against groups will spur administrators to use their discretion to impose burdens on disfavored groups, and ameliorate burdens for favored groups</td>
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</table>
Cognitive biases such as hyperbolic discounting (valuing present costs much more than future gains), underestimating personal risk, choice overload, and experience of resource scarcity, exacerbate existing difficulties to overcome administrative burdens. Psychological costs increase as people lose their sense of autonomy and experience violations of procedural justice.

Cumulatively, what does a behavioral perspective add to our understanding of burdens? Table 2 summarizes some basic points. People often do not respond to new requirements and paperwork that demands for them to engage with service providers, even at the risk of losing that service. Policy designs and administrative action can serve to trigger or lessen biases. For example, a policy design that makes the status quo opt-out rather than opt-in is a powerful way to facilitate access. Finally, because cognitive skills and other forms of human capital are not evenly distributed, and are more likely to be triggered in means-tested policy-designs targeted to the poor, they are likely to exacerbate inequality in outcomes.

The Role of Third-parties

Any discussion of burdens in public service delivery needs to account for third-party organizations. These non-state organizations play multiple roles in constructing and reducing burdens in policy design, and mediating or amplifying their effects in implementation.

First, third parties can act as political stakeholders that lobby to impose or reduce burdens in order to facilitate their goals. For example, as Table 1 notes, the tax preparation industry has lobbied to make the EITC broadly accessible – though still complex enough to justify the use of their services as a preparer (Herd and Moynihan 2018).

Second, third parties can alter the costs citizens face in their interactions with government. Most obviously, they can change learning costs by explaining a policy in ways that either increase or reduce knowledge about a program, the citizen’s legal rights, and how to
acquire services. They can reduce compliance costs by helping people to navigate bureaucracy or acquire documentation. Faith-based or civic groups can also play this role for members, and are often part of government outreach campaigns. For example, veterans seeking disability benefits are more successful if they live in a state with more active veteran’s groups that can help them with the process (Keiser and Miller 2010). In less obvious ways, third-parties can alter psychological costs by conveying messages about a program. For redistributive programs, they can convey that the program is valuable and that recipients are deserving (Herd et al 2013). In cases where they oppose the program, they can portray the policy as serving the undeserving, or inconsistent with liberty. For example, opponents of the Affordable Care Act funded non-profit organizations to target younger potential users to discourage them from enrolling in the program.

Third, non-governmental actors can alter costs in their role of service providers. Many public services are provided by third-parties, who have the opportunity to buffer or amplify burdens just as public employees can, but with greater flexibility to follow individual beliefs or financial incentives. Fourth, third-parties can be the object of administrative burdens. In the case of abortion, for example, states have burdened third-party service providers in an effort to limit access (see Table 1).

Across these different roles, government can direct third-party behavior via explicit incentives, regulation, or as a function of program design. Burdensome government processes create markets to overcome those processes, as is the case with tax preparers. The high number of uninsured patients, compelling the provision of chartable care, creates an incentive for hospitals to help enroll people in public health insurance programs. In the case of Navigators providing information about the Affordable Care Act, one level of government provided
incentives for outreach, while another level sought to regulate those third parties to make it difficult for them to work (see Table 1).

**Conclusion**

As a result of the limited attention to conceptualizing burdens until relatively recently, there is not a well-articulated agenda for managing and reducing burdens. Different aspects of the framework we identify in Figure 1 have been previously addressed, but not systematically, and almost entirely within the field of social policy. Others are relatively neglected: the political origins of burdens, bureaucratic relationships with burdens, the role of third-parties, and the psychological costs imposed on citizens. A comprehensive approach requires building knowledge about all these different dimensions of governance. The opportunity to identify behavioral factors in policymaking, implementation, and citizen’s experiences represent an enormous scholarly opportunity for public administration scholars to apply behavioral science in a way that maps onto important citizen outcomes, and an example of how to bridge micro processes with macro outcomes.

While this paper has largely sought to identify potential causal connections illuminated by the concept of administrative burdens, we conclude by being explicit about normative assumptions. In doing so, we hope highlight how the concept can inform practice. We do not, for example, train those who enter into the public service to think of administrative burden as a factor to consider in the program design in the same way that we coach them to consider efficiency. We do not give public affairs students the tools to analyze burdens in the same we equip them with skills like budgeting, program evaluation, or cost-benefit analysis. The field of
public administration could do much here, making it imperative to clarify the normative underpinning of such efforts.

First, citizens are better off when public programs are designed to be simple, accessible, and respectful of the citizens they encounter. Most people would agree that if the public sector provides a service, it should be one that is visible enough to be seen, simple enough to comply with, and not psychologically taxing. Second, burdens should be minimized to the greatest extent consistent with protecting important public values, such as cost and program integrity. Third, considerations of burden should be evidence-based, identifying the multiple values involved, with evidence on the likely effects of burdens on those values informed by logic and empirical evidence, rather than by political rhetoric.

A final assumption is that because burdens can affect some groups more than others, we should be especially attentive to costs on those who have limited resources, or in programs that are specifically to help those with limited means. One corollary to this principle is that where policies affect large numbers of people, there is a greater social benefit in reducing burdens. Broadly accessible programs can reach more people, and therefore be more likely to achieve policy goals, whether it be reducing poverty, encouraging work, or fostering better health. A second corollary is that the public officials should explicitly consider the challenges faced by those who have the greatest difficulties in overcoming burdens. When possible, burdens should be designed to be minimal enough to not exclude those that struggle with them the most. Having fewer hoops to jump through implies that those with fewer resources have a greater opportunity to participate, and less risk of facing discrimination. If such populations still struggle, support should be provided to facilitate their participation.
References


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**Endnotes**

i For a very good categorization of the array of public values relevant for public services, see Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007.

ii While it is tempting to label this as a status quo bias, the primary reasons behind status quo bias in behavioral economics – such as endowment effects, or loss aversion – generally do not apply in situations where not doing anything results in moving from a status quo where one has a benefit to one where that benefit is completely lost.

iii Drawing from the organizational and behavioral perspectives, Heinrich (2016) skillfully illuminates how burdens are created by multiple-directional encounters within government and between government, individuals and third parties.

iv Their tactics included an advertisement of Uncle Sam providing a gynecological exam to a college student, and campus parties where students were encouraged to demonstrate their independence from government by signing pledges to opt-out of Obamacare.