

Wayne A. Thornton  
Gov 2710  
November 26, 2001

**Edward Rhodes**

**“Do Bureaucratic Politics Matter?: Some Disconfirming Findings from the Case of the U. S. Navy”**

(*World Politics*, v. 47, n. 1, Oct. 1994, pp. 1-41)

This article attempts to refute the validity of the bureaucratic politics model of government decision-making and proposes an alternate model based on decision-makers’ “shared ideas.”

Rhodes traces the development of the bureaucratic politics model to Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision*. According to this model (which Allison also refers to as the “Governmental Politics Model” or “Model III”), decision-makers adopt stands and agendas based on the interests relevant to their positions—“Where a player stands depends on where he sits.” Consequently, policy outcomes reflect players’ parochial concerns, their relative power, the nature of “action channels,” and the “rules of the game.”

Rhodes tests the bureaucratic politics model by analyzing U. S. Navy budgets, procurement, and force mix versus the career backgrounds of the most senior Navy leaders (the Chiefs of Naval Operations, or CNOs) over a 30-year period. He notes that the Navy is divided into platform communities (or “unions”), with the principal communities being aviation, surface warfare, and submarine warfare. Observers and participants have typically characterized Navy decision-making as a process of political “pulling and hauling” between members of these communities. Rhodes argues that the CNO has many responsibilities, including acting as a champion for his respective community. Hence, analyzing Navy policies over time versus the “union” affiliation of CNOs offers a good test of the bureaucratic politics model. In the Navy case, the players and their interests are clearly identified, the CNO has a decisive influence on policy, and the rules by which players interact are well understood.

The author hypothesizes that if the behavior of the CNOs were consistent with the predictions of the bureaucratic politics model, CNOs should be expected to shift resources toward procurement that is favored by their “union” (i.e., aviators would shift resources to aircraft and aircraft carriers and surface officers would shift resources to surface ships). However, his analysis of empirical data reveals no statistically significant support for such hypotheses. In other words, the author finds “...no support for the proposition that aviators or surface sailors have used the office of the CNO on behalf of their parochial interests.”

As an alternative model, Rhodes suggests modeling government behavior as a function of shared ideas rather than competing interests—“Where a player stands depends not on where he sits, but what he thinks.” After loosely connecting this proposed model to the notion of constructed reality, the author attempts to analyze Navy policy outcomes in terms of “shared images of naval warfare” and “dominant images of foreign policy.” He develops hypotheses to test these notions and argues that the empirical data supports his thesis.