Symposium Introduction

Behavior and Burdens: Introduction to the Symposium on Behavioral Implications of Administrative Burden

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Abstract: The topic of administrative burden is relatively novel, but reflects people's most common experiences of government: confusion about what is expected of them (learning costs), onerous processes (compliance costs), and associated emotions such as frustration (psychological cost). This symposium applies a behavioral perspective to the topic. We learn, for example, of the role of race and social constructions in people's beliefs about burdens and their role in social programs. We are given evidence of how burdens restrict access to important public services. Perhaps most usefully, the authors engage with different interventions to find ways to reduce burdens. This ranges from changes in the physical space, to process redesign, to informational nudges. The resulting work provides a broad range of applied empirical insight that shines a light on a pressing area of study.

Administrative burdens have been conceptualized as people's experience of policy implementation as onerous. Burdens include learning costs, which are the time and effort it takes to find information about public services and what is required to access them. Such learning costs often mean that people are ignorant of programs they would benefit from, such as welfare supports (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Burdens also come in the form of compliance costs, which include the paperwork needed to demonstrate eligibility, and the time and financial costs required by administrative processes. Demands for documentation have, for example, undermined the effectiveness of cash transfer programs (Heinrich, 2016), and mean that residents of the US spend billions of hours each year completing paperwork for the federal government (Sunstein, 2021). A third aspect to administrative burdens are psychological costs, which can take the form of stigma arising from applying for and participating in an unpopular program; loss of autonomy that comes from intrusive state supervision, such as police stops; frustration at dealing with learning and compliance costs, or what are seen as unjust or unnecessary procedures; and stresses that arise from uncertainty about whether the individual can negotiate administrative ordeals, such as immigration procedures (Barofsky et al., 2021).

Both behavioral public administration (BPA) and administrative burden are relatively new constructs. In 2010, Moynihan and Herd made the case for understanding how frictions shape citizen's experience of the state. In 2012, Burden et al. proposed a definition "an individual's experience of policy implementation as onerous" which could include both citizens and public employees (they studied election officials dealing with new requirements). In 2013, Herd et al. start to apply the ideas to citizen-state interactions more rigorously, framing burdens as a friction that the state can shift either onto citizens, or onto itself, using the example of Medicaid. By 2015, Moynihan et al. propose the standard framework that remains largely in place, expanding

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the definition of burdens to include learning, compliance, and psychological costs, while mapping out a broader research agenda.

The BPA is of a similar vintage. The closest thing to a manifesto is Grimmelikhuijsen's et al. (2017) paper, though they reference work from the set of like-minded scholars using psychology and experiments in a way that came to be labeled as the BPA starting around 2011. This journal comes into existence in 2018. Thus, administrative burden and BPA grew up together, and now embark into their unruly teens. (Of course, few ideas are truly new, and both constructs drew extensively from prior work). The symposium allows us to determine how well they have grown together, and the promise of future engagement.

The connection between behavioral science and administrative burden is clear, but with much room to grow closer. Behavioral science generally points to the fact that frictions matter. In part this is because people are more stymied by confusion and weigh frictions more heavily than classical economic models would suggest. Early administrative burden work drew explicitly from behavioral research to make the case that burdens have a greater than anticipated impact in policy and administration (Moynihan et al., 2015).

In the first issue of the first volume of this journal, administrative burden was identified as an area where BPA could not just usefully contribute to an emerging topic while also offering an opportunity for BPA to link to broader macro questions (Moynihan, 2018). In other words, it served as a bridge between micro and macro approaches to public administration (Roberts, 2017). This symposium admirably makes a down-payment on that promise. It expands the empirical evidence about when and how administrative burden matter. Moreover, it connects to big topics and big ideas: access to critical public services, inequality, trust in state services, and administrative capacity.

Identifying and reducing burden

A normative aspect of the administrative burden framework is that governments should look for ways to reduce unnecessary hassles. A variety of different methods exist to that end. Perhaps the most obvious is the use of a randomized controlled trial, where different types of interventions are compared against some measure of take-up. An example of this comes from Lopoo et al. (2020), who test different messaging technique to increase SNAP recertification. They find text messaging to be more effective than auto-dialed reminders. Such low-cost experimental techniques can and should be part of the tool kit of governments at all levels, and can be easily implemented with the help of scholars interested in administrative burden.

Hock et al. (2021) provides another example. They examine the role of outreach in cases with high learning costs where enrollment may not always benefit eligible recipients due to the complexity of their disability status. In such cases, tools like auto-enrollment would actually make some people worse off. They show that fold-over postcards with more detailed information led to more enrollment than an open postcard, and that more urgent messaging led to faster enrollment. One lesson is that less information is not always better. In some cases, more information (though not so much that cannot fit on a postcard) is better. This fits with some other research that suggests that in some cases learning costs cause enough of a bottleneck that judiciously providing a little more information or an extra administrative step might reduce administrative burdens or errors down the line (Linos et al., 2020; Moynihan et al., 2022). In other words, general principles of reducing burdens always need to be matched against the contingencies of the policy setting.

As more and more public services are moved to a digital space, Bhanot (2020) examines efforts by the state to encourage citizens to move to online services. Such a move may help to reduce some burdens on both the state and the individual, but poses a challenge for those with lower digital literacy, and the shift itself involves frictions. Bhanot found that people tend to be most likely to make the shift when the government emphasizes the benefit to the citizen rather than to the government. The idea that individual incentives matter to getting people to opt into burden reduction strategies is further reflected in the fact that the encouragements to use online services was more effective for those who were more physically distant from in-person service delivery.

While much of the work on burden reduction relies on quantitative analysis, Camillo (2021) shows the value of detailed multi-source qualitative analysis of a state effort to reduce burdens in one policy domain. Rather than describing a specific intervention, such case studies provide a sense of organizational and political factors needed to tackle burdens in government. This topic will become of growing interest as governments try to systematically integrate burden reduction efforts into standard administrative processes, such as the

Biden Administration's Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government.

Descriptive work is also highly valuable in mapping out burdens. Rosinger et al. (2021) illustrate this point, cataloging the program characteristics of free college programs that make them more or less accessible to the public, and then analyzing state programs to identify the presence of such characteristics. Their analysis shows the power of the burden framework in making burdens legible in programs, thereby offering clear guidance to make those programs more accessible.

New domains
Part of the value of new empirical work is seeing new ways in which the concept of administrative burden is applied. Much of the early work and work in this symposium focused on social policies. Burdens in taxes payments and audit process have drawn less attention (though see Book & Olson 2021; Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Sunstein, 2021), and Shybalkina (2020) examines the role of burden in property tax assessment appeals. Audits and appeals represent secondary venues of burdens, after initial administrative decisions have been made, where better resourced and more persistent actors can prevail. To do so, they often need specialist help offered by third parties with the knowledge to manage burdens (for example tax accountants, special education advocates, or disability lawyers). The cost of such specialist help is itself a burden. Shybalkina offers evidence that governance settings that allow multiple owners to easily coordinate to appeal property assessments – thereby allowing them to reduce individual costs and rely on specialist third parties to deal with the hassles – are associated with higher appeals and net benefits to homeowners who can take advantage of such polices.

Flanagan et al. (2021) extend administrative burden work to the novel domain of trash. They argue that city housing residents deal with learning and compliance costs in seeking to dispose of trash, resulting in residents dumping trash bags in visible spaces and littering. A policy intervention that sought to make the infrastructure of trash access more visible and convenient, complemented by communication of the new policy, reduced these problems. One fascinating aspect of the case is how physical factors matter to burdens. Prior work has considered physical factors such as distance from administrative centers, or the layout of administrative offices (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Here, the authors make a strong case for more closely examining how the presence, visibility, and nature of physical artifacts matters for people's experience of burdens.

Burdens in low-capacity settings
Prior work has suggested that the bite of administrative burden may be worse in states with more limited administrative capacity, since the state has less ability to shift burdens away from the individual (Heinrich, 2016). Ali and Altaf (2021) add to this point in their examination of burdens in immunization programs in Pakistan. Learning and compliance costs – time and effort locating documentation, verifying child's vaccination status and schedule, and traveling to vaccine camps – are left to the parents. Psychological costs are heightened in cultural settings that disapprove of individuals accessing public services. Masood and Nisar (2020) make a similar point in examining how patriarchal norms in Pakistan shape how female professionals use maternity leave policies.

While the administrative burden framework emphasizes policy feedback effects where experiences shape beliefs about the state, Ali and Altaf (2021) illustrate how beliefs in turn lead to a reluctance to even engage with the state in the first place. As the state is seen as repressive, disempowering, and incompetent, citizens withdraw from vaccine programs. The role of cultural norms is perhaps easier to observe from some remove, but the pandemic saw a similar pattern emerge in richer states, where citizens more distrustful of the state avoided public health services that were clearly beneficial to them. In the latter example, such beliefs were less anchored in negative experiences, but in a populist and sometimes conspiratorial worldview (Hamel et al., 2021). Both cases point to the role of citizen trust as not just an output but also an input into administrative burden processes.

Burden tolerance
An emerging question is why people support burdens, what Baekgaard et al. (2021) refer to as "burden tolerance." Two experimental papers in the symposium speak to this question. Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2021) focus on the social constructions of deservingness. In addition to receiving fewer resources from the state,

those constructed as undeserving may also face more burdens. Nicholson-Crotty et al. show that the public grows less supportive of disaster food-aid programs when burdens are imposed on those seen as deserving (such as a military veterans) relative to welfare recipients or parolees. Program support also declines if parolees face low burdens. While people are less tolerant of burdens in disaster aid programs than in welfare programs in general –the military veteran and former criminal are equally blameless in their vulnerability to the disaster – there remains variation in support for disaster aid program depending on the identity of claimants.

Johnson and Kroll (2021) consider how race matters to burden tolerance. They do not find evidence of racial solidarity in general but do find that White subjects were more likely to tolerate burdensome processes in vignettes that described White administrators dealing with Black recipients (Johnson & Kroll, 2021). Together, these papers add evidence that people's tolerance of burdens are easily triggered by framings of individual recipients. This helps to explain why welfare programs, whose political framing emphasizes race and deservingness, are companied with high burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). It also raises troubling questions about how to maintain public support for burdens, which can easily justify an unequal distribution of burdens on populations who already enjoy local political power.

Conclusion: An ongoing agenda

In proposing this symposium, we framed the following questions as falling at the intersection of behavioral science and administrative burden:

- How people respond to burdens in terms of program participation, or the experience of psychological costs.
- How policymaker or administrative beliefs and actions contribute to the creation of burdens.
- What factors make policymakers, administrators, and members of the mass public more or less tolerant of burdens.
- Design solutions to minimize burdens, such as nudges, providing direct help, or redesigning systems.
- The ways in which human capital and design solutions alter people's ability to manage burdens, and the implications for how burdens facilitate inequality across and within groups.

The resulting symposium touches on all of these questions, in different ways. But they remain broad enough to demand more attention in a wider array of policy domains and administrative situations in the future. One point of the symposium is that general principles to identify and reduce burdens are a strong starting point, but to truly progress we need empirical evidence on when and how burdens emerge, how to reduce them, and the behavioral factors associated with these questions.

As much as anything, the value of the administrative burden framework has been to help those interested in the topic find shared venues to purposefully engage with one another, breaking down policy and disciplinary silos, facilitating the accumulation of knowledge and sharing of lessons. This symposium illustrates that value, bringing together a diversity of perspectives, drawing together scholars from multiple disciplines and backgrounds as well as many from the world of practice. In doing so, it illustrates how public administration can both export ideas that create discourse with other fields, as well as engage in practical and relevant questions of governance.

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