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Meritocratic Municipalities?

Promotions in Sweden's Local Government Bureaucracy

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Abstract

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The meritocratic principle—that public personnel should be selected based on competence rather than political loyalty, personal connections, or ascriptive characteristics—is a foundational normative benchmark in democratic governance. It is closely tied to efficiency, impartiality, and upholding legitimacy in democratic systems. While the macro-level benefits of institutionalized meritocracy are well-documented, we know less about how the principle functions in practice, particularly when it comes to internal career advancements.

This dissertation addresses this gap by analyzing whether promotions in Sweden's local government bureaucracy reflect adherence to the meritocratic principle. Using individual-level administrative data, it examines the promotion outcomes of three groups—former political candidates, women, and immigrants—whose career advancement may be influenced by non-merit factors. Each essay investigates whether political connections, gender, or immigrant background affects promotion probabilities once a rich set of individual merit indicators is held constant.

Sweden's local government bureaucracy offers a substantively important and analytically valuable setting for studying meritocracy in practice. Local governments play a central role in the Swedish welfare state and operate under strong normative expectations of impartial, competence-based staffing. At the same time, local staffing practices are lightly regulated, making adherence to meritocracy dependent on the practical exercise of discretion in personell decisions rather than on formal institutional safeguards.

The results show that former political candidates are more likely to be promoted than their colleagues, but this advantage is not driven by alignment with the ruling party, which is reassuring from the perspective of politicization. The findings also reveal a substantial promotion disadvantage for women that persists after accounting for merit, family situation, and policy sector, suggesting discrimination and a deviation from the meritocratic principle. For immigrants, the disadvantage for the whole group of first- and second-generation immigrants is modest, but a pronounced gap emerges for first-generation immigrants without Swedish upper-secondary education, raising concerns about exclusionary norms or bias in the recognition of credentials.

Taken together, the findings do not support an unequivocally positive assessment of internal promotions in Sweden's local government bureaucracy. While the absence of partisan favoritism is encouraging, the disadvantages faced by women and by a specific subgroup of immigrants indicate that problematic personell practices may allow non-merit factors to influence advancement. More broadly, the results underscore that different forms of non-meritocratic selection can coexist within the same institutional setting, and that meritocracy must be evaluated not only in relation to formal procedures but also in terms of how merit is defined, assessed, and applied in practice.

Keywords: Bureaucratic careers, meritocracy, representation, politicization, discrimination, local government.

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List of essays

This thesis is based on the following essays, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

I Anter, N. (2025) The Party-Affiliated Bureaucrat: Friend or Foe of Government Quality? Unpublished manuscript, Department of Government, Uppsala University.

II Anter, N. (2025) Based on Merit? Gender Inequalities in Bureaucratic Careers. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Government, Uppsala University.

III Anter, N. (2025) Meritocracy for Whom? Immigrants' Career Advancement in Sweden's Local Government Bureaucracy. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Government, Uppsala University.

Contents

Acknowledgements

My motivation for starting the PhD program six years ago was quite straightforward. After completing my master's degree and working as a research assistant on a few different projects, I wanted to learn more about the craft of research and explore questions related to public administration. Sitting here now, just a few days before this dissertation goes to print, it seems that I have managed to do so. And I know for certain that I cannot imagine a place where I would rather have done it than at the Department of Government in Uppsala. I am truly grateful for having had such intellectually curious, inspiring, generous, analytically sharp, funny, and kind colleagues at the department who have contributed to making this such a warm and stimulating environment, and for contributing in different ways to my learning and development. It is not without a fair amount of reluctance that I have started to take in that this will no longer be my workplace.

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Uppsala, October 2025

Introduction

The importance of meritocratic staffing in public administration extends well beyond any narrow conceptions of the efficient distribution of talent. In the context of public administration, the meritocratic principle is a foundational normative benchmark that is closely intertwined with broader expectations concerning the role and functioning of this institution in democratic governance. Rooted in Weber's (1978 [1922]) conception of legal-rational legitimacy, and later articulated through Kaufman's (1956) notion of "neutral competence", the principle holds that personnel should be selected based on competence, rather than political loyalty, personal connections, or ascriptive traits. As such, meritocratic staffing is central not only to the efficiency and impartiality of public administration but also to supporting the legitimacy of the broader democratic system (e.g. Olsen 2006; Rothstein and Teorell 2008).

In highly developed democracies, there may be a general assumption that public jobs are allocated meritocratically. Yet it is not necessarily the case that such assumptions hold in practice. And this cannot be inferred from institutional design alone, as formal arrangements may embody the ideal without ensuring that it is realized in staffing practices (e.g. Ingraham 2006; Dahlström and Lapuente 2017). To fully assess the realization of the meritocratic principle, it is therefore necessary to complement comparative research demonstrating that institutional-level meritocracy is associated with a range of favorable macro-level outcomes (e.g. Evans and Rauch 1999; Dahlström et al. 2012; Charron et al. 2017) with analyses of actual career outcomes.

At the individual level, several dynamics may give rise to departures from meritocracy. Specifically, non-merit characteristics rather than merit may influence de facto personnel practices—leading individuals with equal merit to have unequal probabilities of attaining positions. This dissertation focuses on three groups that are theoretically expected to be affected by such dynamics: individuals with political connections, women, and individuals with an immigration background. Individuals with political connections may enjoy career advantages based on ideological alignment with the political leadership, thus indicating politicization (e.g. Peters and Pierre 2004). In contrast, women may face discriminatory disadvantages stemming from restrictive gender and leadership norms and gendered social hierarchies (e.g. Eagly and Karau 2002; Ridgeway 2001). Similarly, individuals with an immigration background may be discriminated against based on, for example, perceived cultural fit or in-group favoritism (e.g. Phelps 1972; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Together, these

mechanisms highlight how meritocracy can erode at the micro level, underscoring the need to examine whether equal merit de facto translates into equal career outcomes for certain groups of individuals.

Promotions within organizations among already employed individuals warrant particular scrutiny. The importance of studying this career outcome is underscored, first, by the observation that cross-sectional patterns of representation and competence can be misleading. These patterns may be balanced in the aggregate even if underlying promotion dynamics systematically privilege some groups or disadvantage others (e.g. Cotter et al. 2001; Folke and Rickne 2016). At the same time, the dynamics theorized to confer advantages or disadvantages for the three groups under study are closely tied to signalling, familiarity, and the reproduction of norms within organizations. These dynamics may therefore be more likely to unfold in relation to the internal career advancements of existing personnel than in external recruitment. For these reasons, scrutinizing promotion dynamics is a crucial part of making rigorous assessments of whether staffing in public administration is truly meritocratic.

Despite the importance of studying whether promotion patterns reflect adherence to the meritocratic principle, there is a lack of knowledge on this topic. Previous research has examined how individual-level merit and non-merit factors shape the likelihood of entering the bureaucracy (Simon and Moltz 2023; Colonnelli et al. 2020; Brassiolo et al. 2020) and advancing from one top-level position to another (e.g., Xu 2018; Bach and Veit 2018; Veit and Scholz 2016). Other work has highlighted the importance of career mobility, showing that inter-organizational and cross-sectoral moves can predict advancement to senior positions (Skans and J Brösamle 2011; Bozeman and Ponomariov 2009). With few exceptions (e.g., Pierskalla et al. 2020), however, there is a noticeable lack of studies on internal career advancements across multiple bureaucratic levels. This lack of research stems not least from problems with data availability. Specifically, most empirical contexts come with limited access to individual-level panel data that allows for analyses of transitions to higher positions and identifying disparities linked to non-merit characteristics.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation examines whether promotions in public administration adhere to the meritocratic principle or, conversely, whether individuals with political connections, women, and those with an immigration background experience systematic advantages or disadvantages once merit is held constant. In addition to this introductory chapter, the thesis consists of three studies, each focusing on one of these groups: Essay I on politically connected bureaucrats, Essay II on women, and Essay III on individuals with an immigration background.

The studies are undertaken in the context of Swedish municipalities. This means that they are undertaken at a government level with notable substantive importance. Specifically, Sweden is a highly decentralized unitary state where local self-government is exceptionally strong in international comparison and is accompanied by far-reaching policy-making autonomy and financial inde-

pendence (Ladner et al. 2016; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006; Lidström 2016). The municipalities are funded primarily by the taxes they levy, and they also receive government grants. These local governments function as the backbone of the Swedish welfare state as they are mandated by the state to provide core welfare services (e.g., preschool, elementary school, upper secondary school, social services, and care for the elderly).

The empirical analyses focus on the local government bureaucracy in the municipalities. They are based on an individual-level panel (n = 510,508) constructed from multiple registers and datasets held by the government agency Statistics Sweden. The core of the panel consists of a detailed mapping of the municipal bureaucratic hierarchy and its personnel composition over time. Specifically, it includes the full universe of municipal bureaucrats who were working with administration and management on five hierarchical levels in the local bureaucracies of Sweden's 290 municipalities over a 12-year period (2008-2019). I identified these bureaucrats by linking labor market variables in yearly administrative data for the full adult population of permanent Swedish residents from the Longitudinal Integrated Database for Health Insurance and Labor Market Studies (LISA) (Statistics Sweden 2019) to a coding scheme developed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), the employers' organization for municipalities, to categorize employees with homogeneous tasks and responsibilities (SALAR 2020a). With this strategy, I identify bureaucrats who administer the municipalities' operations and work in a defined hierarchy, while excluding those who are directly involved in service provision on the street-level (e.g. employees in schools, elderly care homes, or childcare facilities). Specifically, I identify one level of desk officers and clerks and four levels of managers (C-, B-, and A-level, and the top level of Municipal Directors). I also identify which policy area the bureaucrats are working with (e.g. social services, education, and labor market programs).

In the panel, I have created a novel operationalization of political connections for use in the first essay. I created this measure by linking the bureaucrats in the hierarchy to data on political candidates in municipal elections to municipal-level data on local political majorities. With this strategy, I identify the employees who have previously run for political office, if they ran for a party in the traditional left bloc or the traditional right bloc in Swedish politics, and under which political leadership they were working in a given year. The panel also contains data on sex at birth, which I use to identify women for the analyses in the second essay. For the third essay, I create a multidimensional operationalization of immigration background by combining information available in the LISA database with information from the Multi-Generation Register. Specifically, I identify first-generation immigrants (born outside Sweden) and second-generation immigrants (born in Sweden with at least one foreign-born parent) and further distinguish between Western and non-Western backgrounds.

In addition to the information about the bureaucrats' placement in my operationalization of the bureaucratic hierarchy and their non-merit characteristics, the data also contain information about age, children, and children's birth years from the LISA database. Importantly, the data also include detailed measures of merit. Specifically, it includes measures of education level, field of education, and work experience from the LISA database, grades from Swedish upper secondary school from the National Agency for Education, and scores of cognitive ability and leadership ability from the Swedish military enlistment test from the Swedish Defense Recruitment Agency. Taken together, the data allow me to study the career advancements of former political candidates, women, and immigrants across five hierarchical levels while controlling for a rich set of observable merits.

Beyond the advantages of data availability, Sweden's local government bureaucracy offers a particularly relevant setting for studying adherence to the meritocratic principle. In Sweden's highly decentralized governance system, the local bureaucracies play a central role in government functioning. These organizations deliver key public services, employ a large share of public employees, and account for substantial public spending. Failures to uphold meritocracy at this substantively important government level can thus have far-reaching implications for service quality, presumptive employees, and the perceived legitimacy of local government.

The strong normative expectations regarding merit-based staffing in Swedish public administration further underscore the relevance of the case. These expectations are embedded in both legal provisions and sector-wide guidelines. The Instrument of Government (Chapter 1, §9) requires all public bodies to observe objectivity, impartiality, and equal treatment in the exercise of public authority, and the Administrative Procedure Act (SFS 2017:900) further mandates that authorities act objectively and fairly in their operations. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), the employer's organization for local governments in Sweden, further articulates complementary expectations on municipalities to base recruitment on competence, conduct hiring through quality-assured procedures, and adopt an equal-treatment perspective (e.g. SALAR, 2020b; 2022; 2024). Together, these provisions and guidelines establish a strong normative framework for staffing, making it particularly important to examine whether promotion practices in the local bureaucracies are meritocratic in practice.

From a theoretical perspective, Sweden's local government bureaucracy also constitutes an analytically valuable case for studying meritocracy in public administration. While classical and comparative discussions of bureaucratic meritocracy have often been informed by systems where staffing is formalized through structured career paths, competitive entry, and standardized procedures (e.g. Evans and Rauch 1999; Sundell 2014), staffing and recruitment practices in Sweden's local government bureaucracy are decentralized, relatively flexible, and lightly regulated. Studying meritocracy in this type

of context highlights that the principle itself is not bound to any single institutional arrangement, but must ultimately be sustained through everyday staffing practices. It also draws attention to the boundaries of what counts as legitimate merit, especially when selection may involve qualities that are contextually valued but difficult to assess objectively. This makes the Swedish case particularly valuable for understanding how the meritocratic principle operates where adherence depends on the practical exercise of discretion rather than on formal institutional safeguards.

Finally, the descriptive patterns in my data further underscore the relevance of focusing on promotions in Sweden's local government. Specifically, these patterns reveal clear vertical stratification across hierarchical levels for all three groups under study. While the proportion of former political candidates increases as one moves up the hierarchy, the proportions of women and immigrants decrease. While not in themselves evidence of non-meritocratic promotions, these cross-sectional patterns raise concerns.

Summary of results

Overall, the findings from the three essays provide both reassuring and troubling evidence regarding the extent to which promotions in Sweden's local government bureaucracy reflect adherence to the meritocratic principle. In the first essay, the results for the former political candidates are encouraging. There is no indication that being politically aligned with the political leadership confers an advantage, suggesting that explicit politicization may play a limited role in internal promotion decisions. However, former political candidates enjoy a general promotion advantage over their colleagues, unrelated to alignment status. These findings support the idea that political experience may reflect higher public service motivation or the value placed on political skill in a politically steered organization.

The second essay, by contrast, displays a substantial promotion disadvantage for women relative to men, one that remains even after accounting for qualifications, family situation, and policy area. This persistent gap is consistent with the interpretation that gender itself, rather than differences in merit or family responsibilities, constrains women's promotion prospects in the bureaucracy.

Turning to immigrants, the third paper shows only a modest disadvantage for the overall group of first- and second-generation immigrants, and no clear evidence of differences between Western and non-Western or between first- and second-generation immigrants. This is encouraging, as it suggests that large-scale ethnic or cultural bias in internal promotions is unlikely. However, a complementary set of results reveals a pronounced disadvantage for first-generation immigrants who have not completed Swedish upper secondary education, even after extensive merit controls. This pattern indicates that informal evaluative norms—linked to perceptions of cultural familiarity or the

value of foreign credentials—may produce a pocket of concern within otherwise largely meritocratic processes.

Taken together, the findings do not support an unequivocally positive assessment of internal promotions in Sweden's local government bureaucracy. While the absence of clear favoritism based on political alignment is encouraging, the disadvantages faced by women and by first-generation immigrants without Swedish upper secondary education suggest that the principle of merit-based advancement is not fully safeguarded against all potential sources of bias or favoritism. The findings thus indicate that while some dimensions of the process may operate largely in line with meritocratic ideals, others leave open questions about the strength and consistency of the commitment to meritocratic staffing.

Contributions

This dissertation speaks primarily to the rapidly growing body of research, spanning political science, public administration, and economics, concerned with who holds positions in public administration and how personnel are recruited, promoted, retained, and deployed. Early works on the topic mainly asked descriptive questions about public servants' backgrounds and demographic profiles (e.g. Kingsley 1944; Van Riper 1958; Derlien 1990; Landström 1954). More recent research has used increasingly sophisticated data and methods, often inspired by the literature on political careers, where scholars have analyzed elite formation and career dynamics using administrative and experimental approaches (Veit 2020). The vitality of this field is evident in the rising number of studies published in political science's leading journals (Brierley et al. 2023).

While this recent work has advanced our understanding of selection processes, relatively few studies examine actual internal career progressions within bureaucracies. Experimental studies have provided valuable insights into how meritocratic and non-meritocratic attributes shape hiring preferences (e.g., Baekgaard and George 2018; Jankowski et al. 2020), yet they do not reveal how such mechanisms play out in real promotion outcomes. Likewise, most observational studies have focused either on entry into the bureaucracy or on mobility among top officials.

Each of the three studies contributes empirically to this literature by providing comprehensive analyses of internal career advancement among former political candidates, women, and immigrants in Sweden's local government bureaucracy, thus highlighting processes that cannot be detected by studies limited to entry or to top-level appointments. The first study advances research on politicization by introducing a novel, individual-level operationalization of political connections, enabling systematic tests of both partisan favoritism and alternative mechanisms related to political skill and motivation. The second study provides the most fine-grained panel analysis to date of gender inequalities in bureaucratic promotions, disentangling the influence of gender

itself from differences in qualifications and family circumstances. The third study extends research on representative bureaucracy by distinguishing between standard meritocratic criteria and more ambiguous evaluative norms.

When viewed together, the three studies also generate broader insights that extend beyond the individual contributions. By examining promotions of former political candidates, women, and immigrants within the same administrative context and applying consistent measurement of merit, the dissertation reveals how distinct non-meritocratic mechanisms—political favoritism, gender bias, and barriers linked to immigrant background—can operate to varying degrees within the same organizational system. In doing so, it demonstrates that deviations from meritocratic advancement are not uniform in nature but shaped by the interaction between institutional safeguards and group-specific mechanisms of advantage and disadvantage.

Methodologically, the dissertation demonstrates how population-wide administrative registers can be leveraged to study bureaucratic careers in unprecedented detail. Building on Sweden's register infrastructure, I construct a new dataset that links comprehensive individual-level information to a five-level hierarchy of bureaucratic positions in all 290 municipalities. This enables systematic analyses of promotion dynamics across adjacent and non-adjacent levels within a complete administrative system.

The data construction advances methodological practice in two respects. First, it introduces a transparent and replicable operationalization of promotion, addressing a long-standing challenge in research on bureaucratic careers. Second, it demonstrates how rich administrative data—covering education, work experience, test results, and demographics—can be integrated with political candidacy and local context information to distinguish meritocratic from non-meritocratic determinants of advancement. Together, these innovations provide both a new empirical resource and a model for how large-scale administrative data can be leveraged to address fundamental questions about bureaucratic selection.

Beyond the literature on staffing in public administration, the empirical analyses speak to several neighboring research areas. First, they contribute to research on labor market stratification by providing evidence on career advancement for women and immigrants within a large public-sector employer, complementing existing work on wages, employment, and occupational attainment. Second, they connect to studies of political representation by examining whether barriers to advancement—well documented in party politics—also emerge within the internal hierarchies of public bureaucracies. Third, the analyses inform research on elite formation and career dynamics in political science, which increasingly treats political and administrative elites as overlapping but distinct spheres. Fourth, by linking promotion outcomes to measures of merit and non-merit attributes, the findings are relevant for labor economics and organizational research on recruitment, promotions, and internal labor markets more broadly. Finally, the results offer insights for public

management and human resource scholarship by showing how internal career mobility unfolds in a decentralized, position-based public sector context where formal regulation is limited but normative expectations of meritocracy are strong.

Theoretically, the dissertation deepens our understanding of what meritocratic staffing entails by showing how the principle is maintained or eroded in a decentralized and position-based context where strong normative expectations of impartiality and competence-based staffing coexist with limited formal regulation. The findings illustrate that meritocracy is a contingent and practice-dependent principle: one that depends not only on formal rules and institutional arrangements but also on how merit and fairness are interpreted and enacted within organizations. By connecting individual-level career outcomes to these broader institutional features, the dissertation contributes to theorizing meritocracy as a principle whose realization depends on how discretion in personnel practices is exercised in practice.

Finally, by examining three distinct groups of bureaucrats—former political candidates, women, and immigrants—the dissertation links the meritocratic principle to a broader set of normative expectations on public administration in democratic governance. The analyses underscore that meritocratic staffing must be understood not only in relation to its own core legitimizing logic as supporting rationality, efficiency, and impartiality. Specifically, the study of former political candidates speaks to the balance between administrative autonomy and political control, the analysis of public service motivation to the value of responsiveness, and the analyses of women and immigrants to the value of representativeness.

Outline

This introductory chapter proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the main theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation. It is followed by descriptions of Sweden's local government bureaucracy and the data on which the analyses build. The subsequent section offers methodological reflections on how promotion gaps that remain after controlling for merit can be interpreted as deviations from meritocracy, and discusses alternative empirical approaches. I then provide brief summaries of the three essays. The chapter concludes by synthesizing the findings across the essays and reflecting on what they reveal about the boundaries of meritocracy—how the principle is upheld, challenged, and interacts with broader democratic values. Finally, I outline potential directions for future quantitative and qualitative research.

Theory: Meritocracy in public administration

This section begins with the foundational accounts of meritocratic staffing in public administration, where Weber's theory of bureaucracy and Kaufman's

notion of neutral competence anchor the principle in the legitimizing logic of legal-rational authority, expressed through values of rationality, efficiency, and impartiality. The section then moves to contemporary elaborations, unpacking how meritocratic staffing can be sustained through different institutional arrangements and how the notion of "merit" is operationalized through functionally relevant and objectively assessable qualifications.

Building on this, I then turn to the main dynamics theorized to affect the promotions of the three groups under study. I begin by discussing two dynamics that may affect the former political candidates examined in the first essay. The first, politicization, raises the broader issue of the balance between administrative autonomy and political control. The second, public service motivation, relates to the value of responsiveness. I then move to discrimination as the potential source of non-meritocratic promotion patterns among women and individuals with an immigration background, a dynamic that connects the meritocratic principle to ideals of representativeness and social equity.

Taken together, this trajectory positions meritocratic staffing as a concept that must be understood in relation to its foundational logic, the institutional context in which it is practiced, the dynamics that may contribute to its erosion, and to broader normative expectations on public administration in democratic governance.

Legal-rational legitimacy and neutral competence

Weber (1978 [1922]) was writing during a period of rapid industrial and political change, as modern states were being fundamentally restructured. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an extensive process of bureaucratization and modernization, as governments in Europe and the United States developed more rational and efficient administrative structures to meet the demands of industrial society. Some notable expressions of this broader movement include the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in Britain and the Pendleton Act in the United States. In this context, Weber sought to understand the organization and legitimacy of the modern state, which he saw as grounded in legal-rational legitimacy. In contrast to legitimacy based on tradition or charisma in earlier societies, Weber emphasized that legal-rational legitimacy rests on the predictability, consistency, and calculability of the modern state's exercise of authority.

Bureaucracy, in Weber's account, constituted both the instrument through which legal-rational legitimacy was maintained and the expression of it in organizational form. Its hierarchical structure, rule-based procedures, specialized competencies, decision-making grounded in written documentation, and separation between office and office-holder enabled power to be exercised in a predictable, consistent, and calculable manner.

Appointing officials to the bureaucracy on the basis of professional qualifications rather than being distributed as favors or inherited through personal loyalty or patrimonial ties was essential to securing its proper functioning. By professional qualifications, Weber primarily referred to formal education, especially academic degrees that could serve as objective evidence of competence. In addition, he noted the importance of professional training, whereby candidates were schooled into the practical requirements of the office, as well as specialized competence, that is, the substantive expertise required to carry out administrative tasks. When positions are filled this way, it fosters official duties being carried out based on rational calculation and expertise rather than personal inclination or patrimonial obligation. Such appointments also manifest the legal-rational authority of the bureaucracy itself. By relying on professional qualifications rather than personal ties, the administrative structure demonstrates neutrality and predictability, and the authority exercised stems from the office rather than the office-holder.

Weber's reasoning was later translated into the American public administration context by Herbert Kaufman, who coined the notion of selection based on "neutral competence" (Kaufman 1956; Kaufman 1969). Kaufman emphasized that officials should be selected for their ability to perform the work of government expertly and according to explicit, objective standards, rather than on partisan or personal loyalty. In doing so, he sharpened the contrast between a merit system and the spoils system of patronage appointments and provided a more accessible articulation of Weber's core insight.

Taken together, Weber and Kaufman outline the foundational logic of meritocratic staffing: selection based on competence supports rationality, efficiency, and impartiality, which in turn underpin institutional and democratic legitimacy. In this sense, meritocratic staffing is not simply a technical device for improving organizational performance, but a normative cornerstone of how modern public administration is expected to function. While their contrast focused on political favoritism and patrimonialism, it is clear from their underlying logic as well as contemporary formulations that meritocratic staffing entails selection based on competence and in opposition not only to political loyalty or personal favoritism but also to discrimination and social bias/rules out selection based on ascriptive traits such as gender or immigrant background/immutable or socially inherited attributes such as gender or immigration background. This normative and universal foundation provides the point of departure for contemporary accounts that further substantiate the legitimizing logic underpinning meritocratic staffing in public administration and develop our understanding of how adherence to the principle can be conceptualized for empirical analysis.

Institutional arrangements

Contemporary research has deepened our understanding of the institutional arrangements through which meritocracy in public administration staffing can

be organized and sustained. The first thing is that scholars have cautioned against conflating the principle of meritocracy with any one institutional-level operationalization (e.g. Ingraham, 2006). Merit-based recruitment should be understood as a normative benchmark, not as identical to particular organizational or legal arrangements. As Ingraham emphasizes, meritocracy is first and foremost a value, while the institutional mechanisms through which it is pursued can vary across contexts. Institutional arrangements may thus inform our understanding of what counts as legitimate merit in a given system, but they remain analytically distinct from the broader principle.

The fact that meritocracy should not be equated with any single institutional form is also reflected in the considerable empirical variation in how the principle is operationalized across contexts that nonetheless subscribe to its underlying ideas. This underscores the importance of distinguishing meritocratic staffing as a normative principle from the specific organizational or legal mechanisms that seek to realize it. The institutional level arrangements can vary in terms of the degree and form of legal regulation, ranging from statutory procedural safeguards to softer regulation at the level of internal HR policies. It also varies whether recruitment systems are centralized, where a central agency advertises vacancies, conducts standardized examinations, and forwards lists of eligible candidates, or decentralized, where the hiring body itself manages recruitment (Peters 2018). Systems also differ in terms of being career-based or position-based (Horton 2011; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014). In career-based systems, individuals are recruited into the civil service as a distinct profession, with expectations of long-term service, internal promotion, and a strong identity tied to administrative roles. In position-based systems, individuals are recruited directly into specific jobs, mobility between the public and private sectors is more common, and career identities are weaker. These distinctions matter especially in decentralized, position-based systems—such as Sweden's local government bureaucracy—where fewer formalized safeguards mean that adherence to meritocracy must be evaluated primarily in actual staffing outcomes rather than assumed from institutional design.

Previous research also contributes to substantiating the functional and normative logic underlying the meritocratic principle. This is especially evident in research stemming from the neo-institutional turn, which gained momentum amid growing concerns about democratic legitimacy in the 1980s and in the wake of the political and economic transformations following the end of the Cold War. When newly democratized states continued to struggle with weak institutions, corruption, and ineffective governance despite having established representative procedures, it became evident that input-side structures—such as electoral representation and formal democratic processes, which the social sciences had previously emphasized—were not sufficient to ensure that states functioned effectively or fairly (see also, e.g. Norris 2012; Holmberg and Rothstein 2012). Against this backdrop, scholars in political science, de-

velopment studies, and public administration began to place greater emphasis on the "output side" of political systems, that is, how public authority is exercised and with what results. A key realization was that democratic legitimacy depends also on these aspects, not only on representative procedures or electoral accountability.

Within this broader shift, the good governance literature has been particularly influential. It has both theorized and empirically demonstrated the central role of public administration in democratic systems by operationalizing abstract ideas about administrative values and linking them to societal outcomes. While there is no single agreed-upon definition of "good governance," and the agenda encompasses a variety of emphases - ranging from classical administrative values to postwar concerns with equity and inclusiveness (e.g. Agnafors 2013; Fukuyama 2013; World Bank 2023) — they highlight that governance quality involves more than state capacity narrowly conceived, and that both formal and informal institutions, including norms of appropriate conduct, matter for how power is exercised (e.g. North 1993). A particularly influential contribution is Rothstein and Teorell's argument that good governance can ultimately be reduced to the impartial exercise of public authority (Rothstein and Teorell 2008).

Within the good governance literature, a substantial body of comparative research has investigated the macro-level outcomes of institutional-level meritocracy. Some studies focus on direct measures of meritocratic careers—such as recruitment based on qualifications, internally structured career paths, and promotion on the basis of merit—and find that such arrangements are associated with higher government performance and reduced corruption (e.g. Evans and Rauch, 1999; Dahlström et al., 2012; Charron et al., 2017; Nistotskaya and Cingolani, 2016). Other studies rely on broader institutional indicators—such as bureaucratic autonomy, professionalism combined with impartiality, or systematic reviews that pool different measures of merit principles—and similarly conclude that meritocratic arrangements support effective and legitimate governance (e.g. Cingolani et al., 2015; Suzuki and Demircioglu, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2023). Taken together, this literature contributes to substantiating the functional and normative logic underlying the meritocratic principle. At the same time, these studies rely on institutional features as proxies. They indicate conditions that make meritocratic recruitment more likely, but they cannot show whether the principle is upheld in actual appointment and promotion decisions. This underscores the importance of examining adherence directly at the individual level—where the principle ultimately stands or falls.

Merits

Similarly to how the classical accounts outlining the legitimizing logic underpinning meritocracy in public administration do not provide specific prescriptions on procedures or institutional mechanisms that travel to contemporary empirical contexts, they do not offer fixed lists of what constitutes legitimate

merit either. Their emphasis was instead on formal education, professional training, and specialized competence—qualities that remain highly relevant but should be understood as historically situated ways of operationalizing a broader ideal. The underlying logic was twofold: first, qualifications are legitimate insofar as they can meaningfully be seen as proxies for underlying competence that enhance an individual's ability to carry out duties professionally, impartially, and effectively; and second, they should be assessable in ways that ensure predictability and minimize arbitrariness. In this framework, the legitimacy of a characteristic as a merit hinges on both its functional relevance and its objective assessability.

In the following, I relate contemporary conceptions of merit to the classical logic of neutral competence and discuss their functional relevance and objective assessability. For education and professional experience, cognitive ability, and leadership ability, I briefly indicate how these are measured in this dissertation and note key limitations, while providing operational details in the data section and discussions on measurement caveats in the methodological reflections. A short note on political skill clarifies why it is theoretically relevant yet not measured directly in the dissertation.

Education and professional experience

Education and relevant professional experience constitute the near-universal core of what is understood as merit in public administration staffing. Their relevance is not unique to the public sector: across modern labor markets, postsecondary education and professional experience function as the primary markers of competence for white-collar jobs. Research on public administration and management routinely employs these indicators as measures of merit, reflecting the widespread expectation that individuals with higher levels of formal education and relevant professional experience are better equipped to perform administrative tasks effectively (e.g. Peters, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2023). In this sense, contemporary meritocratic bureaucracies can be seen as part of the broader pattern of education-based meritocracies, in which access to positions and career advancement is primarily mediated through credentials and accumulated labor market experience.

The relevance of education and professional experience is also illuminated by human capital theory. This framework provides an analytical foundation for understanding why such qualifications are considered meritorious. It makes explicit the assumption—often implicit in other literature—that selection based on education and relevant professional experience enhances efficiency by channeling the most competent individuals into public roles. Seminal contributions in economics by Becker, Schultz, and Mincer (e.g. Mincer, 1958; Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964) conceptualized education and professional experience as investments in individual productivity. By treating these qualifications as productive resources, the theory linked the skills and competencies of individuals to their expected productivity and earnings, and ultimately to aggregate

economic performance and growth. Becker's formulation also distinguished between general human capital, such as formal schooling that transfers across sectors, and sector-specific human capital, such as professional experience acquired within a particular organizational or institutional context. Taken together, the theory provides a language for analyzing why staffing on the basis of education and professional experience is not only normatively desirable but also functionally rational.

The link between education and professional experience and public administration performance has been further made more explicit by the state capacity literature. This body of work has older roots in historical sociology on state building during the rise of modern nation-states, especially in the Western world (e.g. Tilly 1975), but gained prominence as a concept and research field in the 1980s and 1990s within historical sociology and comparative politics (e.g. Mann 1984; Skocpol 1985). It later became central also in political economy (e.g. Besley and Persson 2009; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Acemoglu et al. 2001). In this literature, the human capital logic is indirectly corroborated: meritocratic staffing not only raises productivity at the individual level but also translates into more competent bureaucracies and more effective states. A cornerstone in this regard has been the influential studies by Evans and Rauch, which show that meritocratic recruitment contributes to capable bureaucracies, which in turn foster better policy implementation and economic growth (e.g. Evans and Rauch 1999; Rauch and Evans 2000). In other words, the literature zooms out from individual productivity to the productivity of public administrations. What it provides is therefore not primarily a new theoretical elaboration of meritocracy but empirical evidence that competence at the institutional level matters. This further substantiates the functional efficiency logic and the relevance of education and professional experience as merits.

In this dissertation, education is measured as education level and field of education. Professional experience is measured as previous work experience from within local government bureaucracies. As such, this experience can be thought of as sector-specific human capital that should capture relevant skills and knowledge acquired while working.

Cognitive ability

Cognitive ability—often referred to in the literature as general mental ability (GMA)—is another widely recognized proxy for underlying competence and expected job performance. Unlike education and professional experience, it was not explicitly emphasized by classical accounts such as Weber and Kaufman, but it is nonetheless fully consistent with their meritocratic logic. The rationale is similar: individuals with higher levels of GMA are expected to learn more quickly, solve problems more effectively, and perform complex tasks with greater accuracy. In this sense, cognitive ability represents a more

general and foundational resource than the acquired skills and knowledge reflected in educational credentials or accumulated professional experience.

Contemporary research in economics, psychology, and organizational studies has repeatedly shown GMA to be the single strongest predictor of job performance across occupations, largely because it facilitates the acquisition and application of further skills (e.g. Schmidt and Hunter, 1998; Schmidt and Hunter, 2004). From the perspective of public administration, a central point is also that measures of cognitive ability, when assessed through standardized and transparent instruments, provide an objective and impartial basis for selection. This makes them consistent with the broader normative values of meritocratic staffing: they are functionally relevant, observable in ways that minimize arbitrariness, and directly tied to expectations of competent, effective, and professional performance in office. In human capital terms, GMA can be seen as the underlying capacity that shapes how effectively individuals are able to acquire and deploy education and professional experience, thereby reinforcing its relevance as a merit in staffing.

In this dissertation, cognitive ability is measured through standardized test scores from the Swedish military enlistment test. This test provides a validated and standardized measure of general mental ability (GMA) of Swedish men for cohorts born 1951 and onwards, widely used in Swedish register-based research and closely aligned with the international literature on cognitive ability as a predictor of job performance (Carlstedt, 2000; Lindqvist and Vestman, 2011; Grönqvist et al., 2017). To some extent, GMA is also measured through grades from upper-secondary school. Academic performance at this level partly reflects general cognitive ability, given the well-established correlation between GMA and educational attainment (Strenze, 2007; Kuncel et al., 2004), but it also captures non-cognitive skills such as motivation, perseverance, and self-discipline (Heckman and Rubinstein, 2001; Borghans et al., 2008).

Leadership ability

Leadership ability represents a further dimension of competence that has gained increasing recognition in contemporary accounts of meritocratic staffing. While classical treatments such as Weber and Kaufman focused primarily on formal education and specialized expertise, later research in public administration and management has emphasized that effective bureaucracies also require individuals capable of organizing, motivating, and coordinating others. Leadership ability is therefore understood as a functionally relevant quality in positions that involve managerial or supervisory responsibilities. In this sense, it extends the traditional meritocratic logic beyond technical qualifications and cognitive ability to include interpersonal and organizational skills necessary for effective public administration.

Compared to education and cognitive ability, however, leadership ability is more ambiguous as a merit. On the one hand, it can be assessed through stan-

dardized instruments; on the other, it often relies on subjective judgments that risk arbitrariness and bias. This dual character places leadership ability closer to the boundary where legitimate proxies may shade into evaluative practices that are problematic from the perspective of the meritocratic framework.

From the perspective of public sector management, the functional relevance of leadership ability is nonetheless evident. Research on leadership in public organizations emphasizes the distinctive demands of leading in politically governed and administratively complex contexts. Public sector leaders must balance politics and administration, navigate accountability to multiple principals, and exercise leadership in networked governance settings (e.g. Van Wart, 2003; Vogel and Masal, 2015; Schwarz et al., 2020). In addition, reforms inspired by New Public Management have increased expectations on public managers to meet efficiency and performance targets, while the need for political sensitivity and collaborative capacity has not diminished but become more complex (e.g. Hood, 1991; Hood, 1995; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

In this dissertation, leadership ability is measured in a limited but standardized way, through scores from the Swedish military enlistment test. The score is based on a semi-structured interview conducted by trained psychologists, who assessed four underlying traits: social maturity, psychological energy, intensity, and emotional stability. These dimensions overlap closely with the Big Five personality traits—extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability—that research in organizational psychology has consistently associated with effective leadership (e.g. Judge et al., 2002). A higher score is intended to indicate greater potential to assume responsibility for others, motivate subordinates, and remain resilient under pressure. The measure has been widely used in Swedish register-based research as a proxy for leadership capacity (e.g. Lindqvist and Vestman, 2011; Grönqvist et al., 2017), but it should be noted that it - as in the case of the measure of cognitive ability - is only available for men in cohorts born 1951 and onwards. Moreover, it does not capture the more subjective and context-dependent aspects of leadership that may be compounded in evaluative practices less compatible with the meritocratic ideal.

Political skill

Political skill refers to the ability to understand and navigate the political dimension of public administration. It entails assessing the political implications of policy proposals, anticipating or influencing the reactions of involved actors, and designing policymaking processes in ways that increase the likelihood of realizing substantive objectives (Goetz, 1997; Hood and Lodge, 2006). In politically governed bureaucracies, such competence is functionally relevant: senior officials often work in close interaction with elected politicians, and the ability to communicate, translate, and strategically align administrative work with political priorities can be crucial for organizational effec-

tiveness. This relational dimension of administrative competence has been described as a "tango" between political and administrative leaders, where both parties must be attuned to each other's moves for the organization to function effectively (Cregård and Solli, 2008). Such interaction exemplifies how administrative and political leadership are overlapping rather than confined to strictly separated spheres (Svara, 2006).

Unlike partisan alignment, political skill does not necessarily imply loyalty to a specific political actor or ideology. Rather, it reflects a broader capacity to operate effectively in a politically steered environment. In this sense, political skill is analogous to leadership ability: valuable for the functioning of the bureaucracy, but harder to measure and more context-dependent than education or cognitive ability.

Previous research suggests that political skill can be acquired through direct political involvement, such as working for parliamentary groups, participating in election campaigns, or holding political office (e.g. Goetz, 1997; Bach and Veit, 2018; Lewis and Waterman, 2013; Schröter, 2004). Experiences of this kind may provide bureaucrats with knowledge about political processes, sensitivity to political dynamics, and the ability to anticipate and adapt to the expectations of political principals.

In this dissertation, I do not have a direct measure of political skill. Instead, I return to this competence in the paper on former political candidates, where candidacy experience is discussed as a potential proxy. There, political skill is treated—together with public service motivation—as a possible explanation for why party-affiliated bureaucrats may enjoy faster career advancement even in the absence of partisan alignment.

Dubious or hard-to-measure merits

Contemporary accounts recognize that what counts as functionally relevant qualifications can vary across contexts and evolve over time. Beyond formal education, professional experience, and cognitive ability, a wider set of attributes—such as interpersonal skills, social competence, or political sensitivity—are often seen as valuable in practice, especially in managerial or politically exposed roles. These qualities may indeed contribute to effective performance. At the same time, they are harder to assess in transparent and standardized ways, and evaluations often rest on subjective judgments. This makes them more vulnerable to arbitrariness and bias, and it raises the risk that legitimate considerations overlap with factors—such as favoritism, cultural fit, or stereotypes—that are incompatible with the meritocratic ideal.

In this sense, such "soft" or hard-to-measure merits occupy an ambiguous position. They may reflect genuine competence, but they can also open the door to non-meritocratic practices. For the purposes of this dissertation, they are therefore acknowledged as potentially relevant but approached with analytical caution. When assessing whether career outcomes align with the meritocratic principle, the guiding benchmark is not simply whether an attribute

may have been valued in practice, but whether it can reasonably be defended as functionally relevant without collapsing into illegitimate grounds for selection.

Politicization

Politicization represents one of the main violations of the meritocratic principle, and it is the central concern in Essay I. Following Peters and Pierre's (2004) widely adopted definition, politicization occurs when the executive branch seeks to expand its control over the bureaucracy by influencing staffing so that political rather than meritocratic criteria determine who is recruited, promoted, or retained. In the context of this dissertation, promotion advantages for politically aligned bureaucrats—once individual merit is accounted for—would thus be taken as evidence of politicization. Such dynamics constitute a direct breach of the meritocratic principle by introducing political loyalty as a non-merit factor in career advancement.

Politicization is closely related to, but not identical with, patronage. Patronage typically refers more specifically to appointments over which politicians hold formal appointment authority (e.g. Brierley et al., 2023; Kopecký et al., 2016; Panizza et al., 2019). It may also be used more broadly to denote the distribution of public jobs in exchange for political support, either as part of systematic governance strategies (Grindle, 2012) or through clientelistic exchanges (e.g. Hicken, 2011; Weingrod, 1968). Politicization, however, can also operate more informally, beyond positions directly filled by politicians, and need not be confined to overt exchanges. It refers more broadly to the intrusion of political considerations into bureaucratic staffing, regardless of whether formal powers of appointment are involved.

A useful perspective on these dynamics is offered by Dahlström and Lapuente's framework (Dahlström and Lapuente, 2017). Their central argument is that the separation of careers between politicians and bureaucrats—embodied in distinct accountability structures and incentive systems—is crucial for sustaining meritocracy in practice. Politicians are accountable to voters, while bureaucrats are accountable to professional peers. This separation not only shields administrative careers from political interference but also creates incentives for mutual monitoring and enables bureaucrats to "speak truth to power." By contrast, when bureaucratic careers are de facto tied to political loyalty rather than competence, bureaucrats become dependent on the fortunes of politicians, undermining the very conditions that sustain a meritocratic civil service. In this sense, Dahlström and Lapuente extend the classical arguments about why bureaucratic appointments are a matter of legitimacy, moving from abstract principles to concrete institutional design.

More broadly, politicization is part of a deeper dilemma in democratic administration: the boundary between politics and administration. In its most

fundamental sense, politicization refers to the intrusion of politics into administration. The notion is therefore closely connected to the politics–administration dichotomy, a discipline-founding tenet in public administration. Formulated by Woodrow Wilson (1887) and elaborated by Frank Goodnow (1900), this view held politics and administration to be distinct spheres with different logics: politics responsible for legislation and policy decisions, and administration for implementing those decisions neutrally and according to law. This framing highlighted the fundamental dilemma that all modern democracies must manage: how to balance administrative autonomy—protecting neutral competence from partisan pressures—with political responsiveness—ensuring that electoral mandates are translated into administrative action. If autonomy is too weak, the risk is politicization; if responsiveness is too weak, the risk is bureaucratic insulation.

This canonical dilemma was made most explicit in the Friedrich–Finer debate of the 1940s. Friedrich, in line with Wilson's and Goodnow's reasoning, emphasized administrative autonomy grounded in professionalism and internalized norms as safeguards for impartiality and stability. Finer, by contrast, stressed the primacy of political control and external accountability to elected leaders—that is, responsiveness (Friedrich, 1940; Finer, 1941). Their disagreement shaped subsequent scholarship by showing that the key question is not whether politics should influence administration, but where the boundary between responsiveness and autonomy should be drawn. After World War II, responsiveness was increasingly integrated into the legitimacy claims of public administration. Kaufman (1956, 1969) framed neutral competence, representativeness, and executive leadership as core democratic values, while Long (1949) stressed that administration is unavoidably embedded in political coalitions. Later accounts reinforced the same concern: as public administration grew increasingly professionalized and expert-oriented, the challenge was how elected officials could retain sufficient control to ensure accountability (e.g. Derlien, 1996; Gruber, 1987; Aberbach et al., 1981).

It follows that politicization does not call into question the legitimate right of elected politicians to steer the bureaucracy. Political control is a necessary condition of democratic governance, and some degree of responsiveness is normatively expected. Politicization refers instead to cases where the acceptable bounds of political influence are breached. At that point, political intrusion undermines the expertise, neutrality, and continuity that are essential for effective and impartial administration.

While staffing is the most common focus, the concept of politicization can also encompass other processes. Structural reforms may be designed to tighten political control over administration, such as reorganizations or the introduction of political advisers (e.g. Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008). Scholars have also distinguished functional politicization, where bureaucrats become directly involved in political decision-making, and role-based politicization, where civil servants act politically beyond their formal remit (Derlien, 1996). In addi-

tion, administrators may politicize their own behavior by anticipating partisan consequences and adapting accordingly (e.g. Hood and Lodge, 2006; Mulgan, 2007; Mulgan, 2008).

Public service motivation (PSM)

The first paper considers an alternative explanation for potential promotion advantages among former political candidates: that they may enjoy an advantage unrelated to partisan alignment, namely through political skill and public service motivation. While political skill has already been discussed, this section briefly outlines the literature on PSM and situates it within broader developments in thinking about normative expectations on public administration.

The literature on PSM conceptualizes bureaucrats as motivated not only by extrinsic incentives but also by an intrinsic desire to contribute to society, serve the public interest, and improve the welfare of others (Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). Closely related is the literature on administrative ethics, which emphasizes professional obligations to fairness, justice, and citizen rights as central to bureaucratic conduct (Cooper, 2012).

This perspective reflects a broader expansion of normative expectations on public administration during the postwar decades. In the face of profound political, social, and economic challenges, scholars and theorists began to argue that administrative legitimacy could no longer rest solely on efficiency, neutrality, or responsiveness to political leadership. Instead, legitimacy also required responsiveness to citizens, democratic justice, and the protection of individual rights. In conjunction with broader shifts in democratic theory, the ultimate reference point for public administration was increasingly seen as the citizenry itself. Bureaucracies were expected not only to implement political decisions competently and impartially, but also to safeguard the rights, welfare, and dignity of citizens.

Waldo's argument that administrative legitimacy must be rooted in democratic values rather than in procedural neutrality alone spoke directly to this development (Waldo, 1948). Selznick's analysis of organizations as "infused with value" likewise underscored the need for bureaucratic missions to be aligned not only with political leadership but also with broader social purposes, including citizen welfare and democratic accountability (Selznick, 1957). Read in this light, their contributions extended the responsiveness ideal into a more citizen-oriented conception of what makes administration legitimate.

While public service motivation can be measured through validated survey instruments, it is not observed directly in this dissertation. However, such motivation is not necessarily problematic within a meritocratic framework. If bureaucrats are driven by a sincere commitment to serve the public, this may enhance responsiveness to citizens without compromising merit.

Discrimination

Discrimination is the second major way in which the meritocratic principle can be violated. Essays II and III focus on women and immigrants, two groups for which there are theoretical reasons to expect discriminatory personnel practices. In meritocratic terms, such practices would be reflected in systematically lower promotion probabilities for these groups after controlling for legitimate qualifications—an outcome that directly contravenes the meritocratic ideal.

In addressing this, the dissertation adopts a mainstream social science understanding of discrimination that is widely used across political science, sociology, and economics (Pager and Shepherd, 2008; Blank et al., 2004). In this perspective, discrimination is present when differences in outcomes are attributable to ascriptive characteristics like gender or immigrant background, rather than to legitimate, job-relevant factors. The aim is not to establish discrimination in a legal sense, but to identify unjustified outcome differences in empirical research.

In this view, discrimination refers to outcome differences that cannot be explained by legitimate factors. In the context of this dissertation, such factors are captured by the notion of "merit." This usage resonates with the normative underpinnings of classical meritocracy in public administration, while substantively aligning with the standard notion of "job-relevant characteristics" in research on labor markets and career mobility (e.g., Cotter et al., 2001). Different fields operationalize these legitimate factors in varying ways—for example, as broader "individual resources" in studies of political representation (e.g., Dancygier et al., 2015) or as academic qualifications in research on higher education and academic careers (e.g., Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Ginther and Kahn, 2004; Ginther et al., 2011; Ceci and Williams, 2011). The underlying logic is the same: systematically different outcomes by group membership that are not accounted for by legitimate factors constitute discrimination.

This mainstream definition is outcome-oriented rather than intent-based. What matters is the production of differences in outcomes that are not explained by legitimate factors, irrespective of whether the actors involved consciously sought to disadvantage anyone. This sets it apart from intent-based definitions of discrimination, more common in philosophical and legal traditions, where discrimination is said to occur when an individual is deliberately treated differently because of their group membership (e.g., Hellman, 2008; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2013).

The definition is also agnostic about whether the source of discriminatory outcomes lies at the individual or institutional level. Discrimination may stem from actions of individuals - such as hiring managers - whether through explicit bias or implicit stereotypes (Pager and Shepherd, 2008; Reskin, 2000) - or from institutional factors such as rules, norms, or routines that systematically disadvantage certain groups (Feagin, 2006; Pincus, 1996; Bonilla-Silva,

1997). Such institutional disadvantages may be further reproduced and reinforced through organizational cultures and informal networks (e.g., Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977).

Applying this to promotion processes means that unequal outcomes despite equal merits are considered discriminatory wherever they arise: in the drafting of job announcements, interview practices, or final decision-making. In this sense, the framework encompasses what legal scholarship would describe as both direct and indirect discrimination (e.g., Fredman, 2011), a distinction that has also been adopted in social science research to capture how unequal outcomes may follow either from explicit bias or from seemingly neutral practices that systematically disadvantage certain groups (e.g., Blank et al., 2004; Reskin, 2000). Taken together: what matters, in line with this mainstream understanding, is not the intent behind particular actions, the level at which they occur, or the formal category they fall into, but the persistence of unjustified differences in outcomes even after accounting for merit.

A further clarification concerns differences in interest or ambition. Discrimination does not occur if unequal outcomes can be fully explained by genuine differences in individuals' aspirations or willingness to apply for or pursue advancement. Such differences are not, in themselves, evidence of discrimination (cf. Hakim, 2000). At the same time, a large body of research demonstrates that aspirations are not formed in a social vacuum but are shaped by cultural expectations, organizational norms, and structural constraints. For example, studies have shown how educational and occupational choices are strongly influenced by gendered expectations and values (Eccles, 1994; Charles and Bradley, 2009), how seemingly self-expressive career choices often reproduce traditional patterns of segregation (Cech, 2013), and how career ambitions can be shaped by institutional arrangements such as family leave policies (Morgenroth and Heilman, 2017). Persistent group-level differences in interest or ambition may therefore point to problematic workplace cultures or broader organizational environments that limit the attractiveness of certain positions. While such dynamics may not constitute discrimination in the strict sense, they nevertheless raise important concerns about fairness and inclusiveness in the opportunity structure.

To sum up, in this dissertation, promotion patterns are interpreted as bearing signs of discrimination if the ascriptive characteristics under study - gender and immigration background - are associated with lower promotion probabilities when merit is accounted for and when alternative explanations, such as systematically different career ambitions, can reasonably be ruled out or considered insufficient to explain the observed patterns. Against this backdrop, this part of the introductory chapter now proceeds to highlight how such processes can be dually problematic by not only undermining meritocracy but also being harmful from the perspective of representativeness.

Representativeness

After World War II, ideals of equality, fairness, and social equity became increasingly salient in political theory and administrative scholarship, giving rise to representativeness as a distinct normative expectation for public administration. This emphasis went beyond the classical logic of meritocracy, where ascriptive criteria were implicitly ruled out as illegitimate bases for selection. While Weber and Kaufman contrasted meritocratic appointments with favoritism and patrimonial ties, the same reasoning excluded immutable characteristics such as gender or immigrant background. Postwar developments, however, expanded the horizon of legitimacy: bureaucracies were now expected not only to refrain from discrimination, but also to reflect the citizenry more broadly. In this sense, representativeness signaled a shift from merely excluding illegitimate criteria within the meritocratic framework to actively incorporating equity and inclusion as democratic values in their own right. One early step in this direction was Herbert Kaufman's (Kaufman 1956) account of the three core values of American public administration, where he identified representativeness alongside neutral competence and executive leadership as essential to legitimacy.

Other key contributors to this tradition include Krislov, Mosher, and Rosenbloom (Krislov 1974; Mosher 1968; Rosenbloom 1977). They argued that for a bureaucracy to be legitimate, it must mirror the society it serves in terms of salient demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity. The legitimacy of public administration was thus refined to not only hinge on its efficiency and impartiality but also of its capacity to reflect the diversity of the population. In this view, a representative bureaucracy strengthens democratic legitimacy by ensuring that all societal groups, including historically marginalized communities, have a voice in the decision-making process. Institutions that fail to reflect the diversity of society risk alienating significant portions of the population, thereby undermining their perceived fairness and, consequently, their legitimacy.

Turning to contemporary research, the notion of representativeness as an important value is most explicitly communicated in the representative bureaucracy literature. This literature is permeated by a line of reasoining that is similar to that concerning 'descriptive' and 'substantive' representation in the political sphere (e.g. Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995; Young 2000). Specifically, scholars working in the representative bureaucracy tradition point to the importance of bureaucratic selection not contributing to the perpetuation of elites and the reproduction of social stratification, but rather promoting a bureaucracy that is accessible to all segments of society (Selden 1997; Finkel et al. 2021). The second part of the argument holds that narrow recruitment from dominant groups will tend to bias programs and policies or negatively affect bureaucratic performance overall (e.g. Park 2012; Peters et al. 2013; Pitts 2005). Against this backdrop, the following section discusses the complementarities and tensions between representativeness and meritocracy

Complementarities and tensions

While the normative foundations of representative bureaucracy and merit-based recruitment are distinct—emphasizing representation and impartiality, respectively—there are areas of overlap. The meritocratic ideal, grounded in the belief that individuals should not be selected on the basis of ascriptive criteria such as race, gender, or class, can be seen as complementary to the idea of representativeness. Both traditions stress fairness: meritocracy through impartiality in selection, and representativeness through ensuring that all groups have access to public positions. In this bounded sense, meritocracy can support representativeness by safeguarding equal opportunities and preventing exclusion based on illegitimate criteria.

Tensions arise, however, in how merit is operationalized. Education and professional experience—central to education-based meritocracies in post-industrial societies—are not neutral in practice. Research shows that the translation of educational attainment into labor market outcomes is stratified by social and cultural capital, meaning that even formally equal credentials may be valued differently depending on, for example, institutional prestige or country of origin (e.g. Bills, 2019; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1974). Strict adherence to "objective" qualifications can therefore reproduce existing hierarchies rather than level them, undermining the goal of building a representative bureaucracy.

Moreover, even if meritocracy operated under ideal conditions—free from biases in how qualifications are defined or valued—it would still deliver equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes. Access to educational credentials and career-relevant experience is itself shaped by family background, socioeconomic status, and early-life advantages. Merit-based recruitment can thus prevent unfair exclusion but cannot by its own logic redress deeper inequalities in access to qualifications. Equity, understood as the active correction of structural disadvantage, requires more proactive measures that extend beyond the neutrality of meritocratic selection. In this sense, meritocracy and equity are related but distinct: the former is about impartiality in selection, the latter about achieving inclusive outcomes.

Case: Sweden's local government bureaucracy

Sweden is a highly decentralized unitary state where the local self-government (stressed in the first paragraph of the Instrument of Government (SFS 1974:152) is exceptionally strong in international comparison. The municipalities have far-reaching policy-making autonomy and financial independence (Ladner et al. 2016; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006; Lidström 2016). Funded primarily through local taxes and complemented by state grants, the municipalities function as the backbone of the Swedish welfare state as they are mandated by the state to provide core welfare services (e.g., preschool, elementary school, upper secondary school, social services, and care for the elderly). The municipal-

ities account for almost two-thirds of all public expenditure, produce around 20 percent of Sweden's GDP, and employ approximately 60 percent of the country's 1.4 million public sector workers (The Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2023).

Staffing across the entire public sector in Sweden, including the national (state), regional (county), and local (municipal) levels, is surrounded by strong normative expectations of impartiality and competence-based selection. These expectations are reflected in the Instrument of Government (Chapter 1, § 9), which requires all public bodies to observe objectivity, impartiality, and equal treatment in the exercise of public authority. The Administrative Procedure Act (2017:900) further mandates that authorities act objectively and fairly in their operations. Although these provisions do not specifically regulate employment decisions, they articulate a broader administrative ethos widely understood to extend to staffing practices.

At the local level, a complementary normative framework for what constitutes good recruitment practices in Swedish local government also emerges from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), the employer's organization for local governments in Sweden. Specifically, this organization articulates expectations on the municipalities to base recruitment on competence, conduct hiring through quality-assured procedures, and be guided by principles of equal treatment (e.g. SALAR, 2020b; 2022; 2024). Municipalities' own recruitment guidelines typically communicate the same message.

At the same time, staffing practices in Sweden's local government bureaucracy differ from the centralized, career-based systems often associated with classical accounts of meritocracy in public administration. These organizations handle recruitment locally within a position-based system, and the legal regulation of employment procedures is comparatively flexible. Adherence to meritocracy thus depends less on standardized examinations or centrally enforced rules and more on the exercise of discretion in everyday staffing practices.

Against this background, the remainder of the section proceeds as follows. It first describes the organization of municipal governance and the professionalization of local administrations. It then outlines the structure of the bureaucracy and the relations between political and administrative actors, before turning to staffing and recruitment practices. The section concludes by specifying the bureaucratic hierarchy studied in the empirical analyses. As all three studies are conducted within this same institutional context, the descriptions of institutional arrangements and data largely overlap both across the individual essays and with the information presented in this section and the following section on how I have constructed my dataset from administrative records.

Municipal governance

In each of the 290 municipalities – with between 2,372 and 984,748 inhabitants (Statistics Sweden 2022) – the council (kommunfullmäktige) is the only directly elected body. In Sweden's proportional representation system, seat shares in the councils closely follow the vote shares of the political parties. A governing coalition is formed based on the distribution of council seats. The council board (kommunstyrelsen) is the highest executive body on the municipal level and can be thought of as the local analog of the national government. The council board leads and coordinates the work in the municipality. The chair of the board (kommunstyrelsens ordförande) is appointed by the largest party in the governing coalition, and the remaining board seats are distributed among all parties according to the number of seats they hold in the council. Although the remaining board seats are distributed proportionally among parties, this power-sharing arrangement should not be mistaken for collective leadership. Formally, Sweden employs a system of assembly government at the municipal level (Bäck 2006), but in practice, municipalities are governed by a majority coalition or party (Bäck 2003).

Over the past decades, Sweden's municipalities have undergone a significant process of professionalization. Accompanying this shift, the range and volume of welfare services have expanded, and municipalities have been assigned greater responsibilities since the mid-20th century. In addition to these mandated responsibilities, municipalities have voluntarily engaged in new types of activities, further broadening the scope of operations. The traditional lay administrations have thus gradually disappeared. This transformation was partly accelerated by large-scale municipal amalgamations, completed in 1974, which dramatically reduced the number of elected representatives — from about 200,000 to approximately 36,800 today — while the number of municipal employees increased substantially. Today, municipalities operate with large professional administrations, and many of the tasks that were historically performed by elected politicians are now handled by employees. The expansion and growing complexity of municipal activities — encompassing cross-sectoral areas such as environmental protection, integration, and gender equality — have fundamentally reshaped the demands placed on local administrations.

The Municipal Act (SFS 2017:725) regulates the structure of the municipal government in a very sparse manner. Specifically, the law grants the council considerable freedom in deciding which and how many committees to institute in addition to the council board. While the exact organizational structure can, and does, vary, the vast majority of municipalities have chosen a traditional organization with committees (nämnder) that are responsible for specific policy areas and answer to the municipal council[1]. These committees manage

[1]The organization is also allowed to follow, for example, a geographical (kommundelsnämnder) or purchaser-provider structure (beställar–utförarorganisation). The interest for organizing

day-to-day operations and policy implementation within their area. The committees also prepare issues for the council and can decide directly on smaller matters. The chair of each committee is appointed by the government coalition. The committees have their own branches (förvaltningar) in the municipal administration that are staffed with bureaucrats carrying out their tasks.

Political-administrative relations

Alongside professionalization of the municipalities, the role of employees within the municipalities has evolved substantially. Although politicians are still legally responsible for all operations, in practice, a system has developed where civil servants manage daily operations and implement political decisions with considerable discretion. Extensive decision-making powers have been delegated to employees, as they possess the time, expertise, and specialization required to address the increasingly complex and juridified issues facing municipalities (e.g. Johansson et al. 2018). With the professionalization of local administrations, much of the day-to-day management has been transferred to the employees, both through formal delegation and through actions considered purely executive in nature (Montin and Granberg 2021; Regeringen 2017). Today's municipal workforce is highly differentiated, with specialized competencies required to manage everything from digital infrastructure and EU regulations to complex administrative procedures. This professionalization underscores that municipal bureaucrats, in practice, exercise considerable influence over policy development and that an increasingly competent workforce is crucial for the functioning of local governance.

As already noted, decision-making authority in municipalities is assigned, according to the Municipal Act, to the political bodies — the municipal council and the committees. The law is based on the principle that elected officials are fully responsible for the municipal administration. The Municipal Act contains detailed provisions concerning elected officials, the council, the council board, committees, and auditors. In contrast, it provides remarkably sparse regulation of the roles of the bureaucrats. Only a few provisions regulate the role of employees when assisting elected officials, and employees do not possess any independent decision-making authority. Formally, the Municipal Act only permits them to take decisions of a purely preparatory or executive nature — unless decision-making power has been explicitly delegated to them[2].

While the sparse regulation of local bureaucrats' roles is, in some sense, not surprising — given that at the time of the 1862 municipal reforms there were practically no employees in the municipalities — it remains notable. Al-

committees in these ways was, however, the strongest during the 1990s (following a change in the Muncicipal Act of 1991 which relaxed the rules on how to organize committees) and has weakened considerably since then.

[2]While the Municipal Act does not confer any formal decision-making authority on employees, such authority is in some cases granted by special legislation (e.g., SFS 2010:800 2010)

though the role of employees was made more visible in the 2017 Municipal Act (which replaced the 1991 Act) with the stated aim of clarifying the division of responsibilities between politicians and employees, the regulation remains weak and provides only limited clarification (Erlingsson et al. 2022; Höök 2022). Importantly, the legal framework is not representative of the de facto division of labor and influence between civil servants and politicians at the local level (e.g. SOU 2015; Björkman and Lundin 2011).

The divergence between formal structure and practice underscores the relevance of party politics and ideological conflict in Swedish local governance. These are not marginal features but central dynamics that shape local political life. Over recent decades, party polarization and visible ideological divisions have risen in the municipalities (e.g. Bäck 2000; Bäck 2003; Gilljam et al. 2017). Informal institutions have reinforced these dynamics, concentrating executive power in the hands of top political leaders. The council board chair, while not formally a mayor, increasingly functions as one, with an authority comparable to that of a traditional European mayor (e.g. Bäck 2005; Karlsson 2006; Karlsson 2012). This divergence between formal institutional design and practical executive authority mirrors Sweden's placement in cross-national typologies of local government systems. In these frameworks, Sweden is categorized as having a "collegial" (Heinelt and Hlepas 2006) or a "committee leader" (Mouritzen and Svara 2002) model, characterized by weak formal mayoral powers. Yet the concentration of authority in the council board chair illustrates how power concentration can emerge even within formally collective structures. Moreover, recent empirical studies confirm that the political composition of local governments influences, for example, fiscal and employment policy (Pettersson-Lidbom 2008) and outsourcing (Elinder and Jordahl 2013). These findings reinforce the notion that local governments are not technocratic bodies insulated from ideological preferences, but partisan arenas where political control matters.

Second, while at the national level there is a long-standing tradition of a clear division between politics and the state administrative agencies — often referred to as dualism (e.g. Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2016; Premfors 2009) — no corresponding division exists at the municipal level. Elected officials are responsible for the entire chain of governance, from the municipal council through to the committees' administration, preparation, and implementation of decisions (Erlingsson et al. 2022; Höök 2022). This arrangement, with roots in the lay administrations of the early municipalities established in the 1862 reforms, historically blurred the line between political and administrative spheres (Riberdahl 1995; Strömberg and Westerståhl 1983).

Finally, the higher administrative levels are characterized by a particularly pronounced overlap between the roles of politicians and bureaucrats. Senior bureaucrats, especially Municipal Directors, work closely with top politicians, not only in implementing but also in shaping policy. These officials are deeply involved in the strategic work of the council board and are expected to develop

effective forms of cooperation between political and administrative leadership (e.g. Cregård and Solli 2008; Cregård and Solli 2011; Cregård and Solli 2021).

Staffing and recruitment practices

Sweden does not have a centralized civil service system. Neither at the national nor the municipal level is there a central recruitment authority responsible for staffing. Instead, recruitment is handled by individual agencies and municipalities. Also, these bodies operate under a position-based rather than a career-based model. This means that bureaucrats are recruited for specific posts and not to the service itself.

Legally, the Employment Protection Act (Lag om anställningsskydd) (SFS 1982:80) is the primary law regulating employment in the municipal sector. This is not a public-sector-specific law, but rather the law that also regulates employment in the private sector. It contains no requirement for municipalities to publicly advertise vacancies. Vacancies may be posted publicly – and thus be open to both internal and external applicants – or they may be filled internally without advertising the position. This contrasts with the national level, where the Employment Ordinance (SFS 1994:373) requires agencies to advertise vacancies so that interested individuals can apply.

The combination of it being a post-based system and the municipalities not being legally required to advertise means that the term promotion in the context of the hierarchy in Sweden's local government bureaucracy – or the national government bureaucracy, for that matter – should not be confused with, for example, the types of non-competitive seniority-based promotions that exist in some career-based systems. It also means that, formally, the transitions from a lower to a higher hierarchical level – i.e., the dependent variable that I refer to as 'promotion' – could also be described as 'internal recruitment'. In my data, the dependent variable measures bureaucrat transitions from lower to higher hierarchical levels, irrespective of whether the bureaucrat applied for a publicly posted vacancy or was selected without there being a preceding advertisement for the position.

The Employment Protection Act (SFS, 1982:80) contains no provisions specifying what should count as legitimate merits in recruitment. In this respect—as in the case of requirements for advertising job openings—the local and national levels differ. At the national level, the Public Employment Act (Lag om offentlig anställning) requires government agencies to base recruitment solely on objective factors such as service merits and competence (förtjänst och skicklighet) (SFS, 1994:260). Service merit is typically interpreted as prior work experience, often measured in years of public service, whereas competence refers to relevant qualifications and personal attributes considered important for job performance, such as formal education. The law

further stipulates that competence should be the primary criterion unless there are specific reasons to give precedence to other factors.

Connecting back to the theoretical discussion earlier in this chapter, municipal guidelines and recommendations from SALAR (e.g. SALAR, 2022; SALAR, 2020b; SALAR, 2024) emphasize not only formal education and work experience but also leadership ability and other attributes relevant for managing teams or interacting with citizens. These qualities are viewed as functionally important but are inherently more difficult to assess objectively than formal qualifications. Consequently, they fall outside the scope of the merit measures used in this dissertation. They may well influence career outcomes, but unless they are also correlated with group characteristics such as gender, immigrant background, or political alignment, they do not weaken the interpretation of promotion disparities conditional on qualifications as signs of politicization or discrimination.

The Swedish Discrimination Act (Diskrimineringslagen) (SFS, 2008:567), finally, establishes strong legal protections against unequal treatment. It applies across key domains—including employment, education, healthcare, and social services—and prohibits both direct and indirect discrimination of individuals on seven protected grounds: sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, and age. Direct discrimination refers to less favorable treatment because of a protected characteristic compared to another person in a comparable situation. Indirect discrimination refers to provisions, criteria, or procedures that disadvantage individuals with a protected characteristic unless they serve a legitimate and proportionate purpose. The law does not include any provisions regarding political loyalty.

The bureaucratic hierarchy

For the dataset used in this thesis, I identify the full universe of bureaucrats working with administration and management across five hierarchical levels in Sweden's 290 municipalities between 2008 and 2019. I identify these bureaucrats using labor market variables held by Statistics Sweden and an in-house coding scheme defined by the employer's organization for local governments in Sweden (SALAR) (details provided in the Data section). The coding scheme is called "Arbetsidentifikation" (AID) and it is used to categorize employees with homogeneous tasks and responsibilities (SALAR 2020a). The coding scheme defines three levels of managers (A-, B-, and C-level) and one level of desk officers and clerks. In addition to these four levels, I use the employee salary to separate the Municipal Director from the rest of the A-level managers.

All the managers have responsibilities for operations, economy, and personnel, but the scope of these responsibilities differs. The municipal director

and the other A-level managers have overarching responsibilities for operations, economy, and personnel. The municipal director holds the leading position in the bureaucracy, is accountable to the council board, and serves as the head of the administration under the board. This top bureaucrat fulfills similar functions as a city manager in the United States (Högberg 2007). Among the A-level managers on central functions in the administration under the council board, there is usually a finance manager, an administrative manager, and an HR manager. Like the Municipal Director, these A-level managers are also accountable to the municipal board. The A-level managers who serve as branch heads are responsible for policy areas and are accountable to the corresponding political committee. The B-level managers are intermediary managers who have other managers both above and below them. The B-level managers usually head a specific department within a certain policy area. These managers are responsible for operations, economy, and personnel within their area of operations. The C-level is the lowest managerial level with responsibilities for operations, economy, and personnel. Managers on this level are unit heads and have no other managers beneath them. Generally, these unit heads are the managers of the desk officers and clerks.

Using the AID-scheme allows me to separate a "core" of bureaucrats who administer the municipalities' operations and work in a defined hierarchy, while excluding those who are directly involved in service provision on the street-level (e.g. employees in schools, elderly care homes, or childcare facilities). As the scheme is used to categorize employees with homogeneous tasks and responsibilities, it enables valid pooling of employees on the same level across municipalities, even though the exact organizational structures may vary. As a typical example, the internal hierarchy can be mirrored in the organizational structure as shown by Figure 1 below.

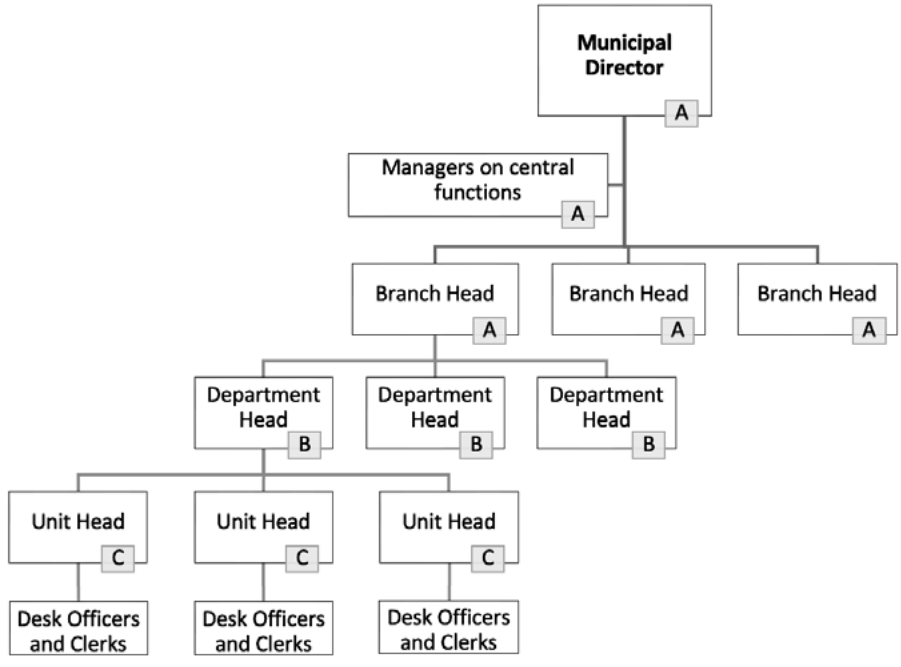

Figure 1. Example of the Hierarchical Structure of a Local Government Bureaucracy

Recruitment for most of the positions under study is conducted within the administrative organization by the upwardly adjacent bureaucratic level, with B-level managers recruiting C-level managers, and so on, typically with the assistance of HR personnel. These recruitment decisions are examples of tasks that have been delegated to the administration, either by the council board or, depending on the municipality, by the relevant committee. While the specific delegation structure varies somewhat across municipalities, the principle remains the same: formally, elected politicians are generally not involved in these recruitment decisions.

At the highest administrative level, the recruitment processes differ somewhat. A-level managers, other than the Municipal Director, are usually appointed within the administrative organization in processes led by the Municipal Director. In these cases, politicians are often informally involved, but their influence tends to be limited, and the involvement is generally not extensive. For the Municipal Director, by contrast, the politicians' involvement in recruitment is institutionalized. Specifically, the Municipal Act (7 ch 1 §) states that the council board should appoint a Municipal Director. This process is typically organized by the council board chair, with other politicians facilitating the process.

Data: Leveraging administrative records

Although both the bureaucratic and political selection literatures have advanced beyond descriptive accounts based on biographical information to more sophisticated empirical designs (Veit, 2020), they differ markedly in how extensively they leverage administrative data. Research on political selection has made substantial use of administrative records to study recruitment and career trajectories (e.g., Folke and Rickne, 2016; Dancygier et al., 2015; Cirone et al., 2021; Gulzar, 2021; Dal Bó and Finan, 2018; Dal Bó et al., 2017), whereas few studies of bureaucratic selection tap into this potential. This asymmetry persists despite growing recognition of the value that administrative data hold for the social sciences (Connelly et al., 2016), and despite explicit calls for public administration scholarship to make better use of large-scale, real-world data (McDonald et al., 2022).

This thesis leverages a context in which the conditions for utilizing administrative data-records originally created by public authorities for registration, transactions, or recordkeeping - are unusually favorable. The administrative data used here exists by virtue of Sweden's long-standing system of population registers and are made available for research through an infrastructure that allows for individual-level linkage across multiple registers. Drawing on these data, the thesis codes a five-level hierarchy of bureaucratic positions across all 290 municipalities (see Figure 1), identifies the individuals working at each level, and links them - via pseudonymized personal identification numbers - to a rich set of merit- and non-merit-related characteristics. The resulting panel, structured at the person-year level, enables dynamic analyses of upward career transitions within the municipal bureaucracy.

I identify the bureaucrats in the hierarchy using labor market variables from the Longitudinal Integrated Database for Health Insurance and Labor Market Studies (LISA) held by the government agency Statistics Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2019). With the industry code (SNI), I identify that a person works in public administration and what policy area the person is working with (e.g. social services, education, and labor market programs). The sector code indicates that a person is working on the municipal level. The occupation codes (SSYK) are 4-digit codes that closely follow ISCO, the International Standard Classification of Occupations. I restrict the population to bureaucrats who have occupation codes that correspond to hierarchical levels specified by SALAR. The coding scheme is used to categorize employees with homogeneous tasks and responsibilities (SALAR 2020a). It is possible to link the categories in the SALAR coding scheme to the LISA occupational codes from 2008 onwards.

All in all, the coding entails that I identify the bureaucrats with administrative and management roles who were employed across five hierarchical levels in the local government bureaucracies of Sweden's 290 municipalities at any

time between 2008 and 2019. The panel consists of 510,508 person-year observations and 117,548 unique individuals.

I add the data on the bureaucrats' sex, age, global region of birth, year of immigration, children's birth years, education level, field of education, and years of previous work experience from the LISA database (the same database that contains the variables used to identify the bureaucrats). This is yearly data for the full adult population of permanent residents from 1990-2019. I further add information on parents' region of birth by linking individuals in the LISA database to their parents using the Swedish Multi-Generation Register and then retrieving the parents' birth region from LISA. I also add high school grades from the National Agency for Education's grade records and scores of cognitive ability and leadership ability from the Swedish military enlistment test from the Swedish Defense Recruitment Agency. I also add data from the political parties' ballots on all candidates that ran for municipal political office during the period 1973-2018. Finally, I add municipal-level data on the party that appointed the chair of the council board. This allows me to identify the years in which the current bureaucrats with past political candidacies were aligned with the political leadership. Details on all variables are provided in the essays.

The outcome variable used in the analyses of promotions measures whether a person who worked at a lower hierarchical level in any of Sweden's local government bureaucracies in the previous year is working at a higher level in the same municipality in the following year. I measure this with a dummy indicator for transitioning to a position on any level higher up in the bureaucratic hierarchy in the next year, and otherwise zero. This means that not only upward transitions to an adjacent higher level are included in the analyses. For example, both transitions from C-level manager to B-level manager and from C-level manager to A-level manager are coded as promotions.

The relevance of the outcome can be demonstrated in two steps. First, Table 1 highlights the relevance of internal career advancement within the municipal bureaucracy by showing where the bureaucrats under study were employed the year prior to reaching their respective levels for the first time. The categories in the table are partially overlapping and differ in both institutional scope and degree of localization. "Public administration" includes employment not only in municipal government but also in public administration at the national and regional levels. "Municipal public administration" restricts this to the municipal level but still includes employees outside the core administrative hierarchy defined by the SALAR coding scheme, and not necessarily in the same municipality as in the subsequent year. "Same municipality, public administration" adds a locality constraint: individuals worked in municipal public administration in the same municipality in the year prior. "Same municipality" is broader still, capturing any employment in the same locality, regardless of sector. Finally, the category "AID-bureaucrat, same municipality" is the most restrictive and directly relevant to the analyses in this thesis. It includes only those

who were already working within the SALAR-defined hierarchy in the same municipality the year before reaching a new level—this is the population for which upward transitions are observed and measured.

Table 1. *Relevance of Internal Career Advancements.*

	Municipal Directors	A-managers	B-managers	C-managers	Desk Off./Clerks
Prior work (%)					
Public Admin.	83.7	75	58.2	48.3	46.6
Mun. Public Admin.	78.4	70.8	55.4	45.3	38.8
Same Mun. Public Admin.	64.8	61.9	50.9	42.4	37.4
Same Mun.	69.1	72.6	75.7	75.4	61.1
AID-Bureaucrat Same Mun.	37.1	39.9	32	27.2	10.7

Note: Shares of bureaucrats across parts of the labor market the year prior to reaching a level for the first time.

As the table shows, internal mobility is a key feature of career progression within the local government bureaucracy. Among those who reached the top level—municipal directors—37 percent were already working in one of the SALAR-defined bureaucratic roles in the same municipality the year before. The corresponding shares are 40 percent for A-managers, 32 percent for B-managers, and 27 percent for C-managers. These figures underscore that a substantial share of advancement occurs through internal transitions, highlighting the empirical relevance of the outcome studied in this thesis.

Table 2 further substantiates the validity of interpreting the five-level hierarchy as a meaningful career ladder within the municipal bureaucracy. It shows the positions held by bureaucrats in the year prior to reaching a given level for the first time. To construct this table, I expand the main sample to include an additional category of "other" municipal employees—those who worked in the municipal administration the year before reaching a level, but not in one of the five defined hierarchical roles. At the same time, I restrict the sample to individuals who were employed in the same municipality in the previous year, thereby aligning with the population identified in the last row of Table 1 ("AID-bureaucrat, same municipality").

Table 2. *Validation of the Internal Bureaucratic Hierarchy as a Career Ladder.*

	Municipal Directors	A-managers	B-managers	C-managers	Desk Off./Clerks
Level (%)					
Municipal Director	–	9.6	.2	.1	.3
A-managers	74.4	–	10.1	3.4	2.6
B-managers	16.4	44.9	–	15.5	7.4
C-managers	5.4	20.5	50.9	–	14.5
Desk Officers/Clerks	2.1	16.8	24	35.5	–
Other	1.5	7.9	14.6	45.4	75

Note: Shares of bureaucrats across levels of the hierarchy the year prior to reaching a level for the first time.

The table shows that the five hierarchical levels in the data capture a career ladder with sequential transitions from lower to higher levels. For each level, the most common prior position is the one directly below it. Among those who became municipal directors, for example, 74 percent had previously worked as A-managers. Similarly, the modal prior roles for new B- and C-managers were A- and B-manager, respectively. This pattern—where the adjacent lower level is the most frequent stepping stone—holds throughout the hierarchy. Because downward transitions are uncommon, upward movements between levels can be interpreted as genuine career progression rather than reassignment or role recycling. Taken together, these patterns validate the use of internal upward transitions as a meaningful measure of career advancement in the analyses that follow.

Methodological reflections: Residuals and alternative approaches

This dissertation examines adherence to the meritocratic principle by analyzing real-world promotion outcomes for three groups: former political candidates, women, and first- and second-generation immigrants. The benchmark is straightforward: if the meritocratic principle holds, individuals with equal merit should have equal promotion probabilities. Systematic differences in promotion probabilities that remain after controlling for legitimate qualifications are therefore interpreted as signs that staffing practices deviate from this principle.

In baseline specifications, promotion probabilities for each group are compared to those of otherwise similar colleagues with the same merit profile, working at the same hierarchical level, in the same municipality, in the same year. Concretely, I fit linear probability models with detailed merit measures and fixed effects so that comparisons are made within tightly defined contexts. Group coefficients are thus interpretable as residual gaps in promotion probabilities net of measured merit.

Two clarifications are essential. First, this outcome-based approach cannot reveal whether any individual recruiter based decisions on gender, immigrant background, or political loyalty, nor can it distinguish implicit bias from structural disadvantage or strategic favoritism. What it captures are patterns of outcomes consistent with politicization or discrimination once observable merit has been accounted for. Second, alternative explanations such as unobservable traits that constitute merit or gaps in career ambition unrelated to discrimination or politicization must be systematically correlated with group membership and strongly predictive of promotion to explain away residual gaps.

The merit measures employed here—education, professional experience, and standardized cognitive and leadership scores—capture key, functionally

relevant, and objectively assessable qualifications. They do not, however, include harder-to-measure attributes that municipalities may legitimately value in leadership roles. Likewise, I do not observe application behavior or career aspirations directly; residual gaps could therefore partly reflect differences in willingness to compete for advancement.

The interpretation of residual gaps necessarily varies across the three individual traits studied in this dissertation. Gender arguably represents the cleanest case with respect to unmeasured ability. There is limited theoretical reason to expect sizable, systematic gender differences in job-relevant capacity that are not captured by the available merit controls. Differences in pursuing managerial positions could matter, but the analysis probes family-related constraints via sensitivity tests restricted to bureaucrats without children; other selection channels (e.g., self-assessed competence) are not directly observable and are discussed as potential limitations.

Immigrant background raises sharper measurement tensions. Some attributes that may correlate with immigrant status—language proficiency, locally specific tacit knowledge, or organization-specific social capital—can be functionally relevant yet difficult to observe. Residual disadvantages among first-generation immigrants who have not completed Swedish schooling may therefore reflect a mix of unmeasured merit and subtle forms of exclusion based on, for example, perceptions about "cultural fit". The interpretation is thus inherently more contingent on what is considered a legitimate proxy for underlying competence.

Former political candidates involve two distinct logics. I test for politicization by examining whether politically aligned candidates enjoy promotion advantages compared to non-aligned peers with equal merit. At the same time, it considers the possibility that public service motivation or political skill—attributes potentially associated with candidacy experience—could confer a general promotion advantage independent of partisan alignment and compatible with the meritocratic framework. It should be acknowledged, however, that such advantages may themselves partly reflect interpersonal rapport or informal connections, raising the question of whether even seemingly meritocratic advantages might indirectly reward characteristics not fully separable from political networks or social capital.

Against this backdrop, one might consider alternative empirical strategies. Correspondence studies—which send fictitious job applications varying group-identifying attributes to real employers—offer strong identification for early-stage hiring discrimination (e.g., Baert, 2018; Carlsson and Rooth, 2007; Birkelund et al., 2022; Neumark, 2018). Yet such studies are ill-suited for studying promotion outcomes: they rely on advertised vacancies, commonly study call-back rates rather than hiring outcomes, and cannot analyze internal career mobility in systems where many positions are filled without public postings.

The observational, control-based strategy used in this dissertation therefore has distinct advantages: it leverages population-wide administrative data covering the universe of municipal bureaucrats over more than a decade, enabling systematic analyses of internal promotions across multiple hierarchical levels. While it cannot isolate mechanisms or intentions, it provides rigorous evidence on whether real-world promotion patterns conform to or diverge from the meritocratic benchmark—evidence that experimental approaches cannot deliver in this institutional setting.

Essays: Investigating meritocratic promotions across groups

This section provides an overview of the three essays included in the dissertation. While each paper is self-contained and addresses a distinct research question, they are united by a common analytical focus on internal career advancement in Sweden's local government bureaucracy. All three essays draw on the same dataset and examine whether a particular individual-level characteristic—gender, political background, or immigrant background—is associated with non-meritocratic promotion outcomes.

Essay I: Former political candidates

The first essay examines whether political connections influence promotion prospects in Sweden's local government bureaucracy and is titled The Party-Affiliated Bureaucrat: Friend or Foe of Government Quality? The study focuses on bureaucrats who have previously stood as political candidates—referred to as party-affiliated bureaucrats—a group largely overlooked in the literature on bureaucratic selection.

The essay begins by documenting that party-affiliated bureaucrats are highly overrepresented in Sweden's local government bureaucracies and that the proportion increases in higher bureaucratic ranks. I then proceed to assess whether this pattern corresponds to substantially interesting cross-sectional competence gaps between party-affiliated bureaucrats and bureaucrats who have not stood as political candidates. In general, this turns out not to be the case.

To assess whether the observed pattern reflects non-meritocratic promotions, I test two competing hypotheses derived from modern principal–agent and politicization theory. The results show no support for the politicization hypothesis—that politically aligned party-affiliated bureaucrats gain promotion advantages once qualifications are held constant. Instead, they support the local public servant hypothesis, which posits that individuals who have stood for local political office may advance faster than other bureaucrats because traits such as public service motivation and political skill are valued in politically steered organizations.

Empirically, the paper provides the first large-scale analysis of promotions among bureaucrats who have stood as political candidates. Theoretically, it highlights the local public servant hypothesis as a useful explanation for understanding the careers and representation of politically connected bureaucrats.

Essay II: Women

The second essay turns to the promotions of women and has the title *Men on a Glass Escalator? Gender Inequalities in Bureaucratic Careers*. I begin the essay by showing that women hold a declining proportion of higher compared to lower positions in Sweden's local government bureaucracy, even though they make up the majority in the workforce overall. The paper aims to identify potential promotion inequalities in women's disadvantage and establish whether gender in itself is the driver behind such inequalities.

To this end, I test three hypotheses that I derive from theory on social roles and social status and empirical work on women's labor market experiences. I test for the 'discrimination' hypothesis by estimating whether women face a lower probability of promotion under control for qualifications. The results show that women have a substantial promotion disadvantage. I then test for two additional hypotheses that take into consideration that family-related work and employment policy area, respectively, may function as mediating variables that are correlated with gender as well as with promotion probability. First, I test for the 'double shift' hypothesis with the same specifications as in the previous test, but I restrict the sample to only include parents with children under the age of 18. Second, I test for the 'glass walls' hypothesis by comparing bureaucrats whose initial position was in the same branch of the bureaucracy. The results from these tests show that women's promotion disadvantage found in the first test also remains robust to controlling for both family situation and policy area.

Taken together, the findings lend clear support to the idea that gender discrimination in promotions is a key factor in the underrepresentation of women in top bureaucratic jobs in Sweden. The paper offers a theoretically informed empirical contribution by demonstrating that gendered promotion disadvantages can persist even within a relatively gender-equal country where there is a clear institutional intention to base bureaucratic selection on impartial assessments of merit. This underscores the need for continued empirical scrutiny of how closely meritocratic principles are upheld, even in institutional contexts that may be seen as favorable.

Essay III: Immigrants

The third essay focuses on individuals with an immigration background and is titled *Meritocracy for Whom? Immigrants' Career Advancement in Sweden's*

Local Government Bureaucracy. I begin by establishing that immigrants are underrepresented at entry into the bureaucracy, and that their representation declines further up the bureaucratic hierarchy.

To test whether the advancements of immigrants reflect adherence to the meritocratic principle, I test three hypotheses that I derive from theory on theory on statistical discrimination, social identity, social dominance, and ethnic hierarchies. These hypotheses predict a promotion disadvantage for the whole group of immigrants and more pronounced disadvantages for non-Western and first-generation immigrants, respectively.

The results show that, on average, the whole group of first- and second-generation immigrants are less likely to be promoted than their colleagues without an immigration background, even after controlling for key qualifications. This gap, however, narrows substantially once I control for whether individuals completed Swedish high school. The same happens for gaps in promotion disadvantages between subgroups of immigrants by generation or global birth region. A more disaggregated analysis of first-generation immigrants without such schooling (62 percent) further reveals a substantial promotion disadvantage for this group, even in models with extensive qualification controls. Importantly, these individuals have already demonstrated competence by securing white-collar bureaucratic positions, making the observed disadvantages worrying from a meritocratic perspective.

Taken together, the findings suggest that informal barriers—such as perceptions of cultural fit—can hinder the advancement of immigrant-origin bureaucrats, even when formal qualifications are comparable. Empirically, the paper advances previous research by providing the first large-scale analysis of internal career advancement among immigrants the bureaucracy. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how meritocratic ideals may be compromised not only through overt exclusion, but also through more subtle evaluative norms related to educational background and cultural familiarity.

Concluding discussion: Meritocracy and its boundaries

This dissertation set out to examine whether internal career advancements in Sweden's local government bureaucracy adhere to the meritocratic principle, understood as staffing based on competence rather than political loyalty, personal connections, or ascriptive traits. By studying promotions among three groups of bureaucrats—former political candidates, women, and immigrants—the dissertation assesses whether political connections, gender, or immigrant background affects promotion prospects once merit is held constant. The findings from the three essays provide both reassuring and troubling evidence. They reveal no promotion advantage linked to political alignment, but a general advantage for former political candidates; a persistent disadvantage for

women; and a pronounced disadvantage concentrated among first-generation immigrants without Swedish schooling.

One key insight is that deviations from meritocratic advancement do not necessarily occur in overt or uniform ways. The absence of a political alignment advantage is reassuring in a system that allows for close proximity between political and administrative actors. That former political candidates do not enjoy a promotion advantage when aligned with the ruling party suggests a degree of insulation from partisan favoritism. Their overall advantage suggests that traits such as political skill or motivation to serve may enhance bureaucratic effectiveness even if they fall outside conventional measures of merit.

The findings for women and immigrants underscore a different set of challenges. The gender gap in promotions, which persists after accounting for a wide range of qualifications and family circumstances, points to structural disadvantages that are difficult to reconcile with a merit-based system. For immigrants, the overall pattern is more encouraging, with only a modest aggregate gap. However, the pronounced disadvantage among first-generation immigrants without Swedish upper-secondary credentials highlights how seemingly neutral criteria may interact with institutionalized norms or social perceptions in ways that disadvantage specific subgroups. In this sense, the results illustrate how the principle of meritocracy can be challenged by subtle forms of exclusion embedded in how qualifications are defined, recognized, and interpreted.

The results also point to the need to move beyond binary judgments of whether a system is or is not meritocratic. As the analyses demonstrate, different forms of non-meritocratic selection can coexist within the same institutional setting, affecting different groups in different ways. A system may resist politicization while still exhibiting gendered or nativity-based disparities. Understanding how meritocracy functions in practice, therefore, requires that we pay attention not only to single attributes, as this risks overlooking important sources of problematic personnel practices.

These findings should also be considered in light of the institutional and normative context in which they are identified. Sweden's local government bureaucracy operates within a high-capacity democratic system characterized by strong and well-established expectations of impartial and competence-based staffing. Against this background, the fact that systematic disparities nevertheless emerge suggests that similar or stronger patterns could plausibly be found in other highly developed democracies with comparable normative frameworks. This underlines the need for caution in assuming the realization of meritocracy based solely on normative expectations or reputational cues.

At a more conceptual level, the results prompt reflection on how merit is defined and operationalized in practice. While the classical accounts of meritocracy in public administration emphasize formal education, professional training, and specialized competence, this is not a fixed list of legitimate merit.

The analysis of former political candidates suggests that traits such as political skill or motivation to serve may enhance bureaucratic effectiveness even if they fall outside conventional measures of merit. At the same time, if political experience enhances perceived competence in ways that are not transparently assessed, even non-aligned favoritism may introduce ambiguity into otherwise meritocratic processes. Similarly, the disadvantage among immigrants without Swedish education raises questions about when educational credentials reflect functionally relevant competence and when they act as proxies for conformity, local knowledge, or social integration. These examples illustrate how the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate criteria is not fixed, but contingent and contestable.

These ambiguities underscore a core tension within the meritocratic ideal. Definitions of merit that are too narrow risk excluding valuable competencies and reproducing inequality; definitions that are too broad invite arbitrariness and weaken the impartiality that meritocracy is meant to ensure. In some cases, relevant skills—such as interpersonal abilities, contextual knowledge, or cultural competence—are difficult to measure objectively, yet important for effective service delivery. In other cases, such attributes may correlate with ascriptive characteristics, making it difficult to distinguish legitimate merit from discrimination. What counts as merit is thus neither self-evident, neutral, nor static, but normatively charged and context-dependent judgments about what kinds of skills, experiences, and dispositions are valued in public administration. Safeguarding meritocracy, therefore, requires not only technical assessments of qualifications, but also ongoing scrutiny of the assumptions that shape how merit is defined.

These findings invite a broader reflection on how local-level idiosyncrasies may obscure the risks of non-meritocratic personnel practices in highly developed democracies. Specifically, municipal staffing in Sweden is governed by relatively loose regulations compared to the national level. Selection procedures are subject to fewer formal requirements and are largely delegated to internal actors, leaving more discretion in the hands of local politicians and administrators rather than embedding meritocratic standards in binding legal rules. While this decentralization may support flexibility and local adaptation, it also introduces discretion that may make this setting more vulnerable to problematic personnel practices. These insights point to the importance of critically evaluating whether current staffing procedures in the municipalities adequately support the meritocratic standard that is widely expected of public administration. In that sense, Sweden's local bureaucracies must be scrutinized on their own terms, with careful attention to how discretion is exercised and constrained in practice. Only then can we credibly assess whether bureaucratic selection is meritocratic and, by extension, whether the bureaucracy is fulfilling its democratic function.

Finally, the findings highlight how meritocratic selection is embedded within a wider set of democratic expectations. While the principle is traditionally jus-

tified with reference to rationality, efficiency, and impartiality, it also intersects with values such as responsiveness and representativeness. These values introduce additional criteria by which the legitimacy of staffing practices may be judged. In the essay on former political candidates, the question of the bureaucracy's responsiveness toward citizens is actualized via the idea that these bureaucrats have higher levels of public service motivation. This is, however, not the only interpretation, as the same background may also facilitate rent-seeking behavior if used to advance personal interests rather than the public good. As such, the paper highlights how tradeoffs can arise when balancing the weight given to different normative expectations on the role of public administration in democratic governance.

The essays on women and immigrants acknowledge the link between meritocracy and representation. While the thesis does not advocate substituting merit with demographic criteria in order to improve representativeness, it emphasizes that flawed meritocracy is especially troubling when it reproduces inequalities along socially salient lines. The studies on women and immigrants suggest that merit-based recruitment and representativeness are not necessarily in conflict, but must be considered jointly in assessing the legitimacy of staffing outcomes. A system that fails to promote qualified individuals from underrepresented groups not only violates the meritocratic principle but also risks weakening the democratic legitimacy of the public bureaucracy via the weakening of its representativeness.

In a related vein, it should be acknowledged that this dissertation only studies individuals who have already secured white-collar employment, i.e. a group that to a high degree have already managed to take part and succeed in the meritocratic competition. As such, the upstream tensions between meritocracy and representativeness do not surface directly in the essays. While aware of the fact that disadvantages stemming from, for example, class background, may very well have led the selection into the bureaucracy to reflect flawed meritocracy - either in terms of unfair access to education or in terms of unfair payoff to education - it is beyond the scope of the thesis to test such patterns directly. Yet these exclusions matter, and they remind us that even well-functioning meritocracy within public administration does not address deeper social inequalities.

In sum, the findings of this dissertation show that even when formal meritocratic procedures are in place, implicit norms, discretionary judgments, and structural inequalities can shape who advances in public administration. These patterns call for continuous attention not only to how merit is defined and evaluated, but also to how staffing outcomes reflect—or fail to reflect—broader democratic values. In a public sector tasked with serving all citizens, merit-based selection cannot be considered in isolation. It must be critically examined in light of its inclusiveness, legitimacy, and responsiveness to a pluralistic society.

Avenues for future research: Quantitative and qualitative

The findings in this dissertation point to several avenues for future research. One important direction concerns the scope of meritocratic selection in the same context. Specifically, while this dissertation has focused on internal advancement among already-employed bureaucrats, future studies could employ a population-wide approach to analyze who gets hired into Sweden's local government bureaucracy in the first place. Examining both entries and advancement within the same empirical framework would provide a fuller understanding of how meritocratic selection operates in practice, as early recruitment patterns shape who later competes for promotion.

Another line of inquiry concerns the payoffs to individual merits. In the present study, merit indicators — such as education, work experience, and leadership aptitude — are included as controls to assess whether group-based patterns remain once observed qualifications are held constant. However, a more direct focus on the returns to these indicators themselves could yield additional insights. In a similar vein, future research could explore whether adherence to meritocratic principles differs systematically across municipalities — for example, between large and small municipalities, or in relation to factors such as political composition or share of residents with an immigrant background. While the present study controls for such potential variation, exploring it in future studies could shed light on the conditions under which meritocratic selection is more or less likely to prevail.

Future research could also engage more explicitly with intersectionality. The essays in this dissertation examine gender, immigrant background, and political background as separate dimensions of difference. Yet many individuals belong to overlapping categories that may interact in ways that amplify disadvantage. For instance, foreign-born women may face "double penalties" in advancement processes, or they may not — and the conditions under which such compounded effects emerge deserve further exploration. Intersectional analyses could help clarify how bureaucratic selection systems respond to complex forms of social stratification.

In addition, future research could examine more closely the role of the recruiting manager in shaping selection outcomes. Local managers are key actors not only in evaluating candidates, but also in interpreting organizational fit and defining what is understood as merit in practice. Their discretionary power in promotion processes means that outcomes may be shaped not only by the characteristics of the candidates, but also by those of the recruiters themselves. Factors such as the recruiter's own gender, background, or political ties could influence how qualifications are assessed or which candidates are seen as suitable. For instance, shared traits between recruiter and candidate may foster perceptions of compatibility, trust, or leadership potential. Future studies could explore how such dynamics operate and whether they contribute to reproducing patterns of advantage or disadvantage in bureaucratic careers.

The thesis also points to several avenues for future qualitative research. Such work could, for example, further investigate the mechanisms that underpin group-based differences in advancement.. For example, in-depth interviews could help uncover how bureaucrats themselves experience and interpret personnel practices — and whether they perceive the system as fair. Such research could also further examine the traits and qualities that are implicitly valued in managerial roles within the municipal bureaucracy.

Qualitative work might also consider how bureaucrats understand their own career trajectories. Beyond analyzing formal promotions, it may be analytically fruitful to investigate how bureaucrats perceive the desirability or prestige of different positions within the municipal hierarchy. Specifically, perceptions of what constitutes a "good" job may differ across individuals and groups. Understanding these subjective dimensions of advancement could help contextualize patterns that appear in administrative data. Taken together, these directions suggest that there is considerable scope to build on the findings of this thesis.

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