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Blog 8

Aldiama Anthony reflects on a study by Anya Bernstein, “Interpenetration of Powers: Channels and Obstacles for Populist Impulses”



Photograph by Ryoji Iwata, on UnSplash.

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Introduction: A study conducted by a Baldy Center research grant recipient, Anya Bernstein, “Interpenetration of Powers: Channels and Obstacles for Populist Impulses,” turns to political pragmatics focused on the people who actually populate the government by drawing on interviews with administrators in the government of two successful but quite different democracies – the United States and Taiwan. The study explores the separation of powers consciousness, the political identity of those who govern, and the separation, interpretation, and executive consolidation of government.

Aldiama Anthony reflects on a study by [Anya Bernstein](#), “Interpenetration of Powers: Channels and Obstacles for Populist Impulses”

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Keywords: Populism, Executive Power, Leaders, Administrative Devices, Political Systems, Decision-making, Power, Government, Democracies, Dictatorship, Political Identity, Populist Leader, Civil Servants, Agency, Political Institutions, Control, Governance, Administrators, Separation of Powers, Public Opinion, People.

When you hear the word "populism," in the context of executive power, what exactly comes to mind? Most times, the term immediately conjures up an image of individual leaders or we often think about a movement, usually in politics, in which a single politician claims to represent the sentiments of the people. Carl Schmitt provides a powerful description of a populist leader's aspirations: "to successfully claim a unique and hyper-legitimate connection to the populace; [\[1\]](#) to not only head a unified executive but, ideally, to unify the entire government under the leader's power."

However, we often neglect the fact that our "individual leaders only accomplish things through administrative apparatuses that enable and support their power. The executive, after all, is a they, not an it; not an individual but an institution."

There is a significant body of research on the interpretation of powers, even more specifically, the executive power, yet little research that focuses on how administrators within that system understand their work and the conditions for its legitimacy. A study conducted by a Baldy Center research grant recipient, Anya Bernstein, "Interpenetration of Powers: Channels and Obstacles for Populist Impulses," turns to political pragmatics focused on the people who actually populate the government by drawing on interviews with administrators in the government of two successful but quite different democracies – the United States and Taiwan.

The study explores the separation of powers consciousness, the political identity of those who govern, and the separation, interpretation, and executive consolidation of our Government. Here are some takeaway points:

1. What truly makes up a populist leader? The people. The idea that a single person can control the governmental apparatus of a populous nation is far from accurate. We must acknowledge the long-term and even recent employees. The political appointees and career civil servants. The people who take active steps to represent the mission, culture, or habits of their agency. These people are the true representation of the power within the state apparatus. Bernstein describes it best in her research, "[t]racking populist (or other) consolidation, then, necessarily involves looking to the complex of institutions and individuals who together create governance—not just at the person who claims to control them."

2. How is power situated in our government? The interpenetration of powers in America remains static and separate. We operate in a divided government system where, “separate nodes bear different kinds of power, and interactions are limited and discouraged.” In fact, the separation of powers in the United States has long been a popular discussion. However, Bernstein’s research sheds light on the critical reality. “Arguments consonant with unitary executive theory present government branches not only as possessing different expertise and fulfilling different central functions. They also present each branch as jealously guarding its powers against the others’ incursions. On this view, America’s system discourages cooperation and coordination, instead assuming that each branch will amass as much power for itself as it can.”

3. How do administrators understand their work and describe the conditions for its legitimacy? American administrators tend to lean towards a rather rigid notion of separated powers. Too much interaction with those outside the executive is seen as a threat to the legitimacy of agency action. It is important to note however that this rigid notion is not necessarily harmful. According to Bernstein’s research, administrators expressed that too much interaction between Congress and the administration could potentially sully administrative decision-making, and while there is much respect for the input of the public through comments, a barrier is also created from being substantially influenced by such public opinion. The ideal of separated, antagonistic powers that underlies American administrators’ descriptions of their work presents potentially hospitable channels for the flow of populist desires.

Bernstein’s research raises our awareness of the role of the executive as a populist but sheds light on the importance and influence of the administration. However, it also leaves the mind to linger on how the interpenetration of powers will affect our nation in 2021 and beyond. With the presidential election cycle the most spoken-of topic across the world today, Bernstein’s research leaves a timely thought behind — how will the nation address the channels and obstacles for populist impulses in the future?