11 Conclusion

11.1 Introduction

The rationale behind this book emerged from the recognition of a fundamental tension in modern governance: While the steady expansion of public policies has been essential in addressing evolving societal needs and public demands, this broadening and deepening of state activity has *not* been matched by a proportional increase in administrative capacities needed for the proper implementation of growing policy stocks. Over the past decades, Western democracies have responded to demographic shifts, economic transformations, technological progress, and pressing environmental and social challenges and crises by adopting new policies, regulations, and programs. Regulations targeting environmental pollution, for instance, have played a crucial role in improving air and water quality, while social policies supporting unemployed citizens have helped cushion the economic fallout of crises and provided vital assistance to vulnerable populations. As a result, the present-day policy landscape is fundamentally different from that of fifty years ago, reflecting the continuous transformation of statehood in modern democracies.

Despite frequent critiques of "over-bureaucratization" and "over-regulation," few would actually argue for a return to the limited policy stocks that still characterized governance in the mid-twentieth century, for example. Instead, the modern policy state, despite its continuous growth and increasing complexity, remains the primary tool for policymakers to address emerging challenges and problems. This development has been particularly striking in the environmental sector, where the average policy portfolio across our six case-study countries grew by 662 percent between 1976 and 2020. This dramatic increase can be attributed to a combination of emerging environmental threats, scientific advancements, and the relatively "young" status of environmental policy as a field of state intervention. While growth in the social sector

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has been more moderate – expanding by 28.3 percent over the same period – it still represents a significant widening and deepening of state engagement in welfare provision.

Policy growth, however, comes at a cost. An increase in the number of policies leads to a corresponding rise in the workload of implementation agencies, which are responsible for translating policy objectives into concrete outcomes (Adam, 2025). More policies mean more permits to issue, more inspections to conduct, more benefit claims to process, and more regulatory compliance to monitor. If implementation is to remain effective, administrative capacities must keep pace with these growing demands. Without such adjustments, implementation bodies become increasingly overburdened, making administrative overload an unavoidable consequence of unchecked policy accumulation (Adam et al., 2019).

Yet, large-scale expansions of implementation capacities have been largely absent. Across the six countries studied, administrative resources in both the environmental and social sectors have, at best, stagnated, and in many cases, even declined (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5 in Chapter 1). Despite this trend, no widespread macro-level governance failure is immediately apparent. However, a different reality emerges when examining implementation at the microlevel. Research on street-level bureaucrats and frontline agencies consistently reveals a chronic overburdening, with staff struggling to fulfill their mandates under growing administrative strain. This contrast – relative stability at the macro-level versus severe pressure at the operational level – is a puzzling observation that has not been sufficiently addressed in existing scholarship.

To reconcile these conflicting observations, this book introduced the concept of bureaucratic policy triage – a systematic framework for analyzing how implementation bodies prioritize, delay, or abandon tasks when faced with excessive workloads at the *organizational* level. Unlike previous studies that focus on either individual policies or broad national-level trends, our approach offers a more nuanced perspective by examining variation across sectors, levels of government, and organizational structures. By applying this comparative framework to the study of implementation bodies in six countries and two policy sectors, we have uncovered significant differences in policy triage.

While no single uniform pattern of policy triage emerges, two overarching trends are evident. First, policy triage is more prevalent in the environmental sector than in the social sector. Second, triage patterns

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differ significantly between central and subnational levels of government. Central agencies tend to exhibit a more polarized triage distribution, with some agencies performing exceptionally well, while others fall short. In contrast, subnational implementers tend to experience more uniform, moderate levels of triage across the board.

At the core of our analysis are three key mechanisms that determine the extent to which organizations need to resort to policy triage. First, triage is less likely when policymakers face strong constraints on blame-shifting – that is, when they cannot easily deflect responsibility for implementation failures onto bureaucratic agencies. When policymakers are held accountable for implementation outcomes, they have greater incentives to ensure that agencies receive the necessary resources and support. Second, organizations with greater opportunities to mobilize additional resources are better positioned to manage workload increases resulting from policy accumulation. Whether through securing additional funding, expanding personnel, or leveraging interorganizational collaboration, the ability to access supplementary resources is a crucial factor in preventing implementation strain. Third, organizations that possess strong internal capacity to compensate for overload – through efficiency measures, strategic prioritization, or flexible staffing arrangements – are less likely to resort to policy triage.

These findings carry important implications for how democracies could balance the need, responding to societal demands more effectively without overburdening implementation agencies and hence undermining policy effectiveness and democratic legitimacy in the long term. Attempts to improve the "sustainability" (Knill et al., 2021b) of democratic statehood could concentrate on the three key mechanisms identified in this study.

We conclude this book by reflecting on recent threats to the public sector, particularly considering the governance challenges posed by Donald Trump's presidency and potential future administrations. We show that these challenges directly relate to our theoretical key factors that ensure the proper functioning of administrative implementation bodies, albeit excessively in the opposite direction aiming at fundamentally weakening and undermining bureaucratic capacity. If our theoretical arguments hold true beyond the specific cases examined, this will have profound implications for democratic governance on a broader scale.

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11.2 Mitigating Policy Triage: Potential Levers Ahead

How can we counteract the continuous erosion of administrative capacities through policy accumulation and thus avoid the need for bureaucratic policy triage? In the political discourse, the standard recipe for a long time has been the periodic and mantra-like repetition of the need to reduce "red tape." In many democracies, these debates have resulted in attempts of governmental self-binding via the adoption of so-called regulatory offsetting or one-in-one-out schemes. Ideally, such schemes would help to stabilize or even reduce the stock of policies and thus also avoid problems of bureaucratic overload. As we discuss later, the prospects of the offsetting scheme are less promising and more challenging to implement than their seemingly straightforward name, "one-in-one-out," implies. Instead, fostering a sustainable change in policymakers' incentive structures necessitates more comprehensive institutional reforms.

11.2.1 Formal Constraints to Policy Growth? The Limits of Governmental Self-Binding

At first glance, a highly intuitive option to avoid bureaucratic overload and resulting policy triage could be to slow down the production of policies or even reverse the trend of policy accumulation. To achieve such constraints on policy growth, many governments adopted regulatory offsetting schemes as an attempt of governmental self-control designed to prevent policymakers from engaging in the excessive production of regulations.

Regulatory offsetting schemes have gained popularity over the past decade. Eighteen democracies have already implemented rule-offsetting schemes, with several more in the planning stages (Steinebach et al., 2024). The UK was the first Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country to formalize rule offsetting as official government policy in 2011, followed by other advanced democracies such as Canada, Germany, South Korea, Spain, and the United States. In 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the introduction of a rule-offsetting program at the European Union (EU) level, aimed at streamlining EU legislation and reducing administrative costs (European Commission, 2023).

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The main rationale for adopting offsetting schemes is to establish a "cap" on the growth of rules. This means that for every new regulation or law introduced, an existing one must be repealed or eliminated (Simonelli & Iacob, 2021). By linking the creation of new rules with the removal of existing ones, the one-in-one-out principle naturally limits the potential for excessive policy growth. These offsetting schemes aim to control and reduce the overall number of policies, preventing bureaucratic excess and ensuring that new regulations do not add unnecessary complexity or cost to businesses and individuals. At the same time, policymakers are incentivized to carefully assess the necessity of new regulations, knowing they must also identify one to repeal, promoting a more "cost-conscious" approach to governance (Donelan, 2022).

However, the effectiveness of regulatory offsetting schemes in curbing excessive policy production is highly questionable for several reasons (Steinebach et al., 2024). First, it is doubtful whether the short-term temptations for policymakers to pursue electoral gains through rule creation can be effectively controlled by self-binding mechanisms. From a policymaker's perspective, short-term benefits often outweigh potential long-term consequences. Policies are usually created to address societal needs and technological advancements (Orren & Skowronek, 2017). Additionally, various rules are often used to facilitate compromises and push initiatives forward (Hurka, 2023). As a result, the idea that a central scheme could reduce or at least limit rule production is essentially an attempt to constrain the primary mechanism that governments use to solve problems. The same criticism applies to the "offsetting" component. Political science has long established that eliminating rules is not simply the "mirror image" (Pierson, 1994: 29) of creating them. Originally observed in the context of welfare state expansion and retrenchment, subsequent research has shown that this phenomenon also occurs in other policy areas (see, e.g., Bauer et al., 2012). Once a rule is in place, it generates stakeholders with vested interests in its continuation (Moe, 2015). While some rules may become obsolete and can be phased out more easily, governments are likely to encounter political challenges when attempting to abolish rules. Deeply entrenched political dynamics are unlikely to be changed by technocratic self-binding mechanisms.

Second, the lack of effective enforcement further strengthens the aforementioned argument. The offsetting schemes implemented in

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various countries are not monitored and enforced by an "external body" with the power to impose sanctions. Instead, the scheme typically relies on government ministries or agencies to oversee their respective rules; however, there is often no external body to enforce or sanction noncompliance. Moreover, the practical application of offsetting schemes suffers from vague definitions. Without a clear understanding of what qualifies as a "rule," inconsistencies in implementation can arise. For example, Nou & Stiglitz (2018) show that US regulatory agencies have found innovative ways to circumvent the regulatory offsetting scheme through "regulatory bundling," where they simply combine more regulatory provisions into a single rule (p. 1179).

Third, beyond the lack of enforcement, the effectiveness of offsetting schemes as self-binding mechanisms may be compromised by the difficulties in accurately evaluating their impact. These challenges arise from the complexities involved in measuring changes in regulatory burdens over time and pinpointing the specific effects of offsetting schemes. The benefits of these schemes may not only appear as a reduction in burdens but can also significantly contribute to stabilizing the growth of regulatory burdens, especially amid other factors that drive regulatory expansion. However, the difficulties in conceptualizing and measuring these effects may increase political temptations to ignore self-binding commitments, as noncompliance actually tends to be hard to detect.

Contrary to the growing popularity of regulatory offsetting schemes and although developed as a device of governmental self-binding, there is considerable potential that the schemes remain merely symbolic in nature. Simply prescribing self-restraints to policy accumulation does *not* alter the underlying drivers of a growing gap between implementation burden and implementation capacities, as they have been discussed in this book. In the following, we therefore concentrate on potential levers for reducing policy triage that directly relate to these theoretical aspects.

11.2.2 Strengthening the Implementer–Formulator Relationship: Vertical Policy–Process Integration

Recent research suggests that instead of capping policy growth, a more promising approach to addressing issues of overload and policy triage is to institutionally integrate the processes of policy production and

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implementation. Vertical policy–process integration (VPI) (Fernández-i-Marín, Knill, Steinbacher & Steinebach, 2024; Knill et al., 2021a, 2021b) affects underlying interests of policymakers instead of merely prescribing formal limits on policy development. VPI directly affects the extent to which policymakers can shift the blame for implementation failure and the extent to which implementation agencies are able to effectively mobilize external resources.

First, opportunities for blame-shifting are linked to the top–down dimension of VPI: The more involved the policymaking level is in policy implementation (top–down integration), the smaller is the gap between implementation burden and available implementation capacities, and hence the likelihood of policy triage. We have seen in this book that in many constellations, the competences for policy formulation and policy implementation are institutionally decoupled. In such setups, there are relatively few barriers to the constant production of policies without corresponding capacity alignments at the implementation level. Policymakers can easily shift blame and attribute implementation problems to the involved agencies, as they are neither formally accountable for policy implementation nor required to carry the administrative costs of implementation.

In contrast, higher levels of VPI can reduce policy triage by minimizing blame-shifting between policymakers and implementers. Institutionalized accountability structures and budgetary responsibilities that hold policymakers responsible for implementation failures reduce their ability to deflect blame onto implementing agencies. This, in turn, incentivizes policymakers to ensure that policies are accompanied by the necessary administrative resources, rather than placing the burden on underfunded agencies. A clear example of this dynamic can be observed in Denmark, where a high degree of coordination between policymakers and implementers ensures that policy initiatives are rarely introduced without a parallel expansion of implementation resources (Knill et al., 2021b). The Danish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for instance, has formalized procedures that require policymakers to conduct feasibility assessments before enacting new environmental regulations, ensuring that these policies can be realistically enforced (see Chapter 4). This contrasts sharply with cases such as Portugal and Italy, where ministries frequently offload implementation burdens onto agencies without providing adequate funding or personnel, leaving them highly vulnerable to triage (see Chapters 8 and 9).

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The bottom-up dimension of VPI, by contrast, captures the extent to which the policy-implementing level can effectively feed its concerns into the policymaking process. It is thus closely related to the opportunities for implementation bodies to mobilize external resources. The bottom-up dimension of VPI refers to the extent to which implementation bodies are systematically involved in the making and design of policies. Yet, managing information flows in highly differentiated politico-administrative systems is a demanding undertaking, and its success cannot be taken for granted. The actual realization of this potential depends on various formal and informal institutional factors that ensure that implementers can make their voice heard in policymaking via established channels of consultation and systematic ex ante and ex post evaluations (Fernández-i-Marín, Knill, Steinbacher & Steinebach, 2024) through which agencies can request for additional funding and personnel when new policies are introduced.

A strong example of this mechanism can be found in Germany's federal system, where sectoral agencies – particularly in the social sector – are deeply embedded in intergovernmental coordination mechanisms that allow them to push for additional funding when workload increases (see Chapter 5). For instance, the federal employment agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*; BA) has a direct institutionalized role in negotiating with the federal government regarding labor market programs, ensuring that its administrative needs are factored into policymaking decisions. In contrast, agencies like the UK's Environment Agency (EA) have faced significant budget reductions while being assigned new responsibilities, a situation exacerbated by the lack of strong institutional channels through which they could advocate for additional resources (see Chapter 6).

By reinforcing bottom-up and top-down mechanisms, VPI aligns policymaking with implementation realities by including actors tasked with the implementation already in the formulation process. This in turn ensures adequate consideration of their administrative feasibility while limiting the introduction of policies solely for symbolic or political reasons. Strengthening these integrative processes thus can help prevent implementation deficits by reducing the need for policy triage and create a more sustainable governance framework. The variation across our case studies underscores the importance of institutionalized coordination mechanisms: In systems where implementers are given a strong voice in the policy formulation process, triage is significantly

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less frequent. Conversely, in systems where policy formulation occurs in isolation from administrative realities, implementers are left to struggle with ever-increasing workloads, ultimately leading to policy failure. Thus, without strong integrative mechanisms between policy-makers and implementers, burden–capacity gaps are likely to grow, forcing organizations to increasingly rely on policy triage.

11.2.3 Enhancing Implementation Bodies' Commitment: Stimulating Entrepreneurial Administrative Styles

At the implementers' level, organizations can take proactive steps to mitigate policy triage risks. An organization's ability to compensate for overload is crucial in this regard. As we theorized, the commitment to overload compensation primarily depends on two key variables: organizational culture and policy ownership. At the organizational level, fostering what Goodsell (2011) describes as "mission mystique" – an ingrained commitment among public servants to make a meaningful impact – can significantly enhance an agency's ability to manage high workloads. When public officials are driven not just by procedural requirements but by a belief in the underlying cause of their work, they are more likely to go beyond routine implementation and actively seek solutions to operational constraints. Mission mystique transforms policy implementation from a technical exercise into a purposeful endeavor, fostering a sense of duty that motivates employees to persist through challenges rather than default to triage. This intrinsic motivation strengthens an agency's internal culture and deepens policy ownership, ensuring that staff members view their responsibilities as part of a meaningful mission rather than as bureaucratic burdens.

Moreover, mission mystique generates broader institutional benefits. Organizations that cultivate an entrepreneurial administrative style, characterized by strong policy ownership, are more flexible in adapting to challenges. They actively experiment with innovative approaches to problem-solving, reallocate resources efficiently, and maintain service quality under increasing workloads. In contrast, organizations lacking such a culture tend to adopt defensive routines, focusing on procedural compliance while deprioritizing complex or resource-intensive tasks. These reactive approaches make triage more likely, as they hinder adaptive capacity and limit strategic decision-making when faced with administrative strain.

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Empirical evidence reinforces this claim. For instance, our case studies reveal that high-performing agencies with low levels of triage, such as the Irish EPA, exhibit strong policy ownership and an entrepreneurial administrative culture (see Chapter 7). These organizations have institutionalized adaptive mechanisms that enable them to navigate increased workloads without compromising implementation quality. By contrast, high-triage organizations, such as Portugal's Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (*Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional*; IEFP), lack these adaptive mechanisms (see Chapter 9). Instead of proactively managing overload, these agencies frequently resort to triage as a survival strategy, with staff disengaged from broader policy objectives and overwhelmed by bureaucratic constraints.

Thus, cultivating mission mystique and an entrepreneurial administrative style is not merely an abstract ideal but a tangible strategy for improving implementation outcomes. Agencies that foster a high level of internal commitment, bolstered by a strong organizational culture and deeply ingrained policy ownership, are better equipped to handle workload fluctuations, sustain high performance, and minimize reliance on triage. Moreover, fostering such a work environment enhances an agency's ability to attract and retain qualified staff, reducing turnover and ensuring long-term institutional stability.

Several factors stimulate the emergence of entrepreneurial administrative routines in organizations. First, the extent to which implementation bodies have what Bayerlein et al. (2020) refer to as "cognitive slack" influences the development of entrepreneurial approaches. Having cognitive slack does *not* necessarily mean that an administration has extensive resources. Yet, at a minimum, it implies that there is some level of flexibility and competence within the organization to explore new solutions and approaches. Second, the degree of epistemic homogeneity characterizing an agency influences whether it can undertake concerted joint efforts toward achieving a common organizational goal. Epistemic homogeneity primarily results from similar educational or professional backgrounds of staff members. These factors could provide promising avenues that guide organizational development and reforms in implementation agencies and might help to improve overall organizational commitment to compensate overload via the stimulation of entrepreneurial administrative styles.

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11.3 Final Remarks

The findings of this book underscore a fundamental challenge in modern governance: Policy expansion without corresponding administrative capacity growth leads to implementation strain and, ultimately, policy triage. As we have demonstrated across our six case studies, the mismatch between policy accumulation and implementation resources is neither uniform nor inevitable, but rather shaped by institutional structures, sectoral characteristics, and the interplay between policymakers and implementers. Where high limits to blame-shifting, opportunities for resource mobilization, and an organizational commitment to compensate overload exist, policy triage is largely contained. Conversely, in cases where those mechanisms are weaker, agencies are left overburdened, forced to prioritize some tasks while neglecting others. The prevalence of these mechanisms varies widely across countries, policy sectors, and levels of government, illustrating that policy triage is not simply a function of state capacity or administrative tradition, but rather a reflection of deeper institutional and political dynamics.

In order to ensure effective policy implementation and decrease the size of implementation defects, governments should adopt a dual approach: on the one hand, strengthening the capacities of administrative organizations by equipping them with the necessary resources, flexibility, and institutional support; on the other hand, recognizing the limits of unchecked policy expansion, ensuring that new legislative initiatives are accompanied by sufficient implementation capacity while curbing excessive rule growth.

Ultimately, the ability of modern democracies to function effectively depends not only on their ability to formulate policies but also on their capacity to implement them. If administrative overload remains unaddressed, policy failures will accumulate, public trust in governance will erode, and political actors with an interest in dismantling the state will find it even easier to justify their attacks on the public sector. We were starkly reminded of this at the time of finalizing this book, as Donald Trump commenced his second term as US President, initiating what is likely the most aggressive assault on the public sector by a democratically elected government in modern times.

The Trump administration's approach toward the public sector provides a striking example of our mechanisms in reverse. Whereas

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in well-functioning systems, constraints on blame-shifting, resource mobilization, and overload compensation serve to protect administrative institutions from collapse, the Trump administration has weaponized the absence of these constraints: Facing virtually no limitations to blame-shifting, government agencies are not merely criticized for implementation deficits but are actively portrayed as obstacles to economic growth and national progress (Tollefson, 2025). Instead of acknowledging the role of administrative institutions in executing policies mandated by *elected* officials, the Trump administration has framed the bureaucracy itself as the enemy – an entrenched "deep state" working against the will of the people.

Simultaneously, resource mobilization mechanisms are deliberately severed. Agencies overseeing regulatory enforcement, social services, and foreign aid have seen their budgets slashed, their staffing levels gutted, and their institutional support structures dismantled. The administration's approach to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), where staff reductions of over 90 percent have effectively rendered the agency inoperable, exemplifies this broader strategy.[1] Even when key programs such as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), a major anti-AIDS initiative administered by USAID, were nominally spared from cuts, the destruction of the payment infrastructure responsible for disbursing funds has made implementation functionally impossible.[2]

Lastly, organizational morale and the capacity for overload compensation are being systematically eroded. Under normal circumstances, agencies with strong policy ownership and an entrepreneurial administrative culture are better equipped to withstand implementation strain. However, when the government itself actively works to demoralize the civil service, the compensatory mechanisms that normally allow organizations to manage overload begin to collapse. Trump officials have openly encouraged hostility toward public servants, with figures like Russell Vought – now director of the Office of Management and Budget – publicly stating that government employees should be placed "in trauma."[3] This calculated attack on bureaucratic

[1] www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-administration-keeping-only-294-usaid-staff-out-over-10000-globally-2025-02-06/.
[2] www.economist.com/united-states/2025/02/13/what-happened-next-at-usaid.
[3] www.propublica.org/article/video-donald-trump-russ-vought-center-renewing-america-maga.

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morale, combined with resource deprivation and relentless blame-shifting, leaves agencies unable to function effectively – not because of inherent inefficiencies, but because they are being intentionally sabotaged.

In essence, the Trump administration's approach demonstrates what happens when our mechanisms are systematically inverted. Instead of fostering a capable and adaptive administrative state, the government deliberately creates implementation deficits, which in turn will serve as justification for further dismantling the public sector presumably. Simultaneously, these failures allow the administration to shift responsibility for governance breakdowns onto civil servants, rather than its own policy decisions.

The developments in the US serve as a warning: Implementation deficits are not always the result of a burden–capacity gap. They can also be manufactured – deliberately – as part of a broader political strategy to erode the state's capacity from within (Moynihan, 2012). Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as it highlights that ensuring a functioning bureaucracy is not merely a technical challenge but an urgent political imperative to uphold democratic governance.

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