

Harvard political scientist Daniel Carpenter has published a very interesting [book](#) about bureaucracy. Bureaucrats don't often get much credit, but he examines how bureaucrats around the turn of the last century were responsible for important innovations: making the post office efficient (and for a time profitable!), conserving our national forests, creating the parcel post, passing the Food and Drug Act, and creating the agricultural extension service. Analyzing these innovations, he finds that they were not the products of special interest group or political leaders. Rather, they were the brainchildren of mid-level bureaucrats — bureau chiefs — who often succeeded despite congressional indifference or opposition. The key to the success of these bureaucrats, as Carpenter sees it, was establishing networks with important and diverse groups (ranging from farmers to academics to business) based on agency reputations for effectiveness, quality analysis, and public spiritedness.

This research suggests several strategies for environmental agencies that want to develop a capacity to pursue innovative policies:

- Develop a reputation for high-quality science and analysis as a basis for decisions.
- Avoid being labeled as tied to any one viewpoint or political interest.
- Strengthen links with diverse groups such as academic programs (perhaps in environmental engineering, public health, or ecology); environmentally friendly business leaders; environmental consultants or compliance officers; and citizen groups (not just environmentalists, but also advocates for other causes, hunters and fishers, etc.)

At least in large agencies, some of this may take place below the level of the agency itself — for instance, in the air pollution division or the water pollution division.

It would be really interesting to know whether Carpenter's findings bear out in practice today. For example, have state environmental agencies that have successfully innovated followed this path? Are there differences between federal agencies such as Fish & Wildlife, NOAA, and the Forest Service in this regard, or between different divisions of U.S. EPA?

This is all very interesting from a social science point of view, but it's also intriguing to see that those much-maligned bureaucrats are sometimes the unsung heroes of policy improvement.

If readers have any insights into the operation of these agencies or nominations for people who deserve credit for bureaucratic leadership, it would be really interesting to hear about that.