Dance Partners Matter: Client Country Bureaucrats and the World Bank

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A large body of evidence suggests that the individual bureaucrats who work for international financial institutions have an impact on their outcomes. Far less attention has been paid to the individual bureaucrats who represent client countries to these institutions. We use a novel source of data to identify the individuals that client countries designate as "contact points" to the World Bank. We show that these bureaucrats, when associated with higher-quality projects early on, are associated with greater numbers of future projects and future projects of higher quality. If development projects represent a dance between donors and recipients, it takes two bureaucrats to tango.

Keywords: foreign aid, bureaucracy, World Bank, recipient countries

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What explains variation in the outcomes of the World Bank? Some scholars have approached this question by focusing on features of the countries in which the World Bank operates (Girod and Tobin 2016). Others have emphasized the geopolitical influence that powerful shareholders wield (Andersen, Hansen and Markussen 2006; Kaja and Werker 2010; Dreher et al. 2013; Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland 2009; Kilby 2009; Clark and Dolan 2021). Recently, more scholars have considered the internal dynamics of the World Bank bureaucracy, associating a project's outcomes with the specific bureaucrat responsible for its oversight (Denizer, Kaufmann and Kraay 2013; Heinzel and Liese 2021; Heinzel 2022).

But while there has been extensive interest in the bureaucrats of the World Bank, relatively little attention has been paid to their counterparts: bureaucrats who work for client countries. This is surprising in light of the limitations of World Bank staff members and the importance of client country governments to the project's success. In the words of one World Bank bureaucrat when asked about his role, "We don't implement the project – we just supervise – it's implemented by the government and we just make sure that every dollar spent is spent correctly."[2] Another World Bank bureaucrat made the importance of working with quality bureaucrats in recipient countries explicit: in finding partners for projects, "We choose winners"[3]. If the World Bank's bureaucrats matter for performance outcomes, surely those representing the client's side must matter too.

Perhaps scholars have overlooked these individuals due to a lack of data. While the World Bank's staff members assigned to its projects can be relatively easily identified and scraped from the World Bank's website, the staff representing client countries are somewhat less visible. Recipient bureaucrats are often noted only in World Bank documents where their names, contact information, and titles are rarely prominently, or regularly, placed. The irregular locations of client country personnel in World Bank websites and documents

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[2]Interview with World Bank Task Team Leader, January 6, 2025.
[3]Interview with World Bank Task Team Leader, May 29, 2020.

makes identifying and tracking the bureaucrats difficult.

We overcome these challenges by using a newly digitized dataset of projects in-progress at the World Bank. The Bank's Monthly Operational Summaries report on projects pre-approval and begin to include information about contacts in client countries in the 1990s. We regularize and extract recipient country bureaucrats' names and titles over time as they associate with different projects. These unique data allows us to examine patterns in the employment of recipient country personnel.

When we associate client country bureaucrats with project performance outcomes, we observe striking patterns consistent with our expectations. Domestic bureaucrats who receive higher project evaluations early on are more likely to staff future projects. Moreover, their future projects also tend to be of higher quality. We interpret these findings as evidence that client country bureaucrats, like World Bank bureaucrats, vary in quality, and that quality appears in the success of the project. The World Bank observes this and rewards good client bureaucrats with more projects. We also consider alternative explanations for these findings.

An important contribution of our work is to highlight the agency of countries who receive foreign assistance. Canonical work in foreign aid disproportionately focuses on donor country preferences and structures in determining the allocation and type of aid provided (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Dietrich 2021; Dreher, Lang and Reinsberg 2024), and the literature on international financial institutions similarly emphasizes the preferences of powerful shareholders (Copelovitch 2010; Dreher, Sturm and Vreeland 2009; Lim and Vreeland 2013). Our work builds on Swedlund (2017)'s observation that recipient countries are not passive actors in the negotiation of development projects, a process she describes as the "development dance." We bolster the validity of this claim at the micro-level by showing how ordinary bureaucrats from recipient countries are critical to the success of international financial institutions and their views and behaviors must be better understood (Masaki et al.

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2021).

Bureaucrats and the World Bank

A growing evidence base demonstrates that bureaucrats in international organizations have a substantial impact on the work their organizations accomplish. Many have taken a "personal biography" (Krcmaric, Nelson and Roberts 2020) approach to demonstrate that bureaucrats' ideas, lived experiences, and identities appear in the policies they write and the reports they generate (Cormier and Manger 2021; Clark and Zucker 2023; Heinzel, Weaver and Jorgensen 2021). Another group focuses on the unique networks and specific knowledge a bureaucrat brings to bear on a project, either through their nationality, location, or prior experience (Eckhard 2021; Honig 2020; Heinzel 2022). We contribute to a narrower group of studies, those that simply investigate a bureaucrat's quality or competence. Researchers have estimated this by examining the joint significance of bureaucrat fixed effects in explaining variation in project performance or country compliance (Denizer, Kaufmann and Kraay 2013; Bulman, Kolkma and Kraay 2017; Limodio 2021; Heinzel and Liese 2021). Most of this literature has focused on Task Team Leaders (TTLs), the individual bureaucrats who are tasked with designing and implementing projects for the World Bank.

World Bank projects vary in a number of ways but each follows basically the same pattern. Projects must initially be requested by the government, not by the World Bank. Bank staff do have the opportunity to influence the agenda of client countries through technical missions in which they call attention to certain areas for improvement, but ultimately, the request comes from the government.[4] At this point, the World Bank considers whether there exists a budget to support the request and prepares a concept note for the project. This begins the design phase, which typically lasts about a year, and culminates in a submission to the Board for approval. After approval, the project moves into the implementation phase,

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[4]Interview with World Bank TTL, January 6, 2025.

and often, the TTL is replaced during this transition. The implementing agency of the government is responsible for implementation, while the TTL makes frequent visits (if not living in the country) to ensure that all funds are spent appropriately and that all safeguards are observed.

Critically, TTLs work closely with their counterparts in the government. A manager of World Bank TTLs commented that norms vary widely country to country and even ministry to ministry, and he considers these personal dynamics when assigning a particular individual to work on a given project. He even recalled one TTL who brought ingredients for his government counterpart's favorite recipe with him when he travelled.[5] These government bureaucrats are truly the ones responsible for implementation; TTLs can help them navigate access to financing and technical advising, and will oversee their behaviors, but the work is ultimately on the client government to execute a project. This leads us to our first (what we feel to be unsurprising) hypothesis, which is that a bureaucrat's quality should be consistently observable in the performance of the projects they work on.

Hypothesis 1. *High-quality bureaucrats are associated with highly performing projects.*

We would also expect the World Bank to respond strategically to the quality of the bureaucrats it interfaces with. Nelson (2017) shows that the IMF treats its clients with greater leniency when they are represented by ministers with educational backgrounds in neoliberal economic thinking. The IMF engages with far more senior technocrats than does the World Bank, which by comparison finances a far larger number of smaller-scale projects. Nevertheless, we should expect to observe in those interactions too some degree of preferential consideration on the part of Bank officials toward counterparts they have relatively more respect for. Specifically, we would expect them to recommend more projects in sec-

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[5]Interview with World Bank practice manager, January 15, 2025.

tors headed by highly competent bureaucrats.

Hypothesis 2. *High-quality bureaucrats will be rewarded with more World Bank projects.*

There is an extensive literature in comparative politics on the bureaucracy of developing countries (Brierley et al. 2023), but it tends not to focus on those country officials who regularly interact with international actors. Efforts to engage this large group of individuals have focused primarily on how donors, IOs, and NGOs set the agenda and influence their policy views (Johnson 2016; Knack et al. 2020; Masaki et al. 2021; Nelson 2017). We do not disagree that international actors can and do try to shape the beliefs of bureaucracies in the developing world, and our argument illustrates why they would care to. But we hope that our finding also opens the possibility that client-side bureaucrats can set agenda too, influencing the funding priorities of international financiers through their competence.

Research Design

We set out to establish a descriptive relationship between recipient country bureaucrats and World Bank project outcomes. We are the first, to our knowledge, to examine patterns of recipient country bureaucrat employment in tandem with aid outcomes.

Data

We rely on newly digitized Monthly Operational Summaries of projects in-progress from the World Bank. These reports, released monthly, give short summaries of projects under construction at the World Bank. Our sample starts in October of 1998 and ends in December of 2014, for a total of 11776 unique projects spanning 16 years. We connect projects across time using string matching and country-sector characteristics. Of these projects,
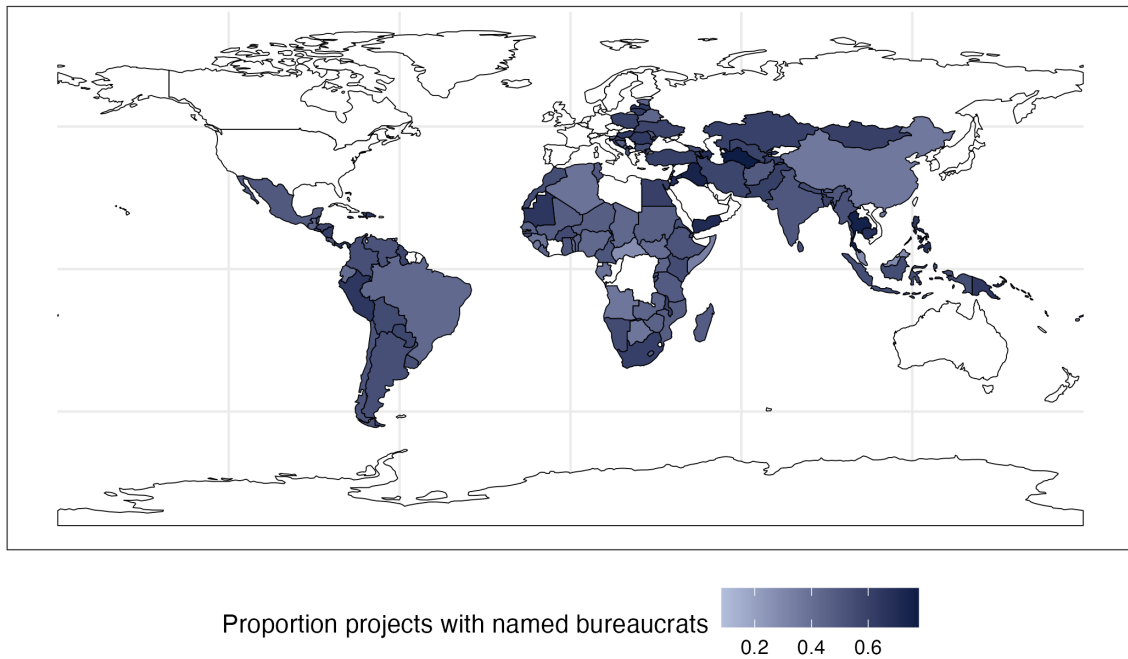
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Figure 1: *Proportion of projects with named bureaucrats by country:* Proportion of a given country's World Bank projects with an associated bureaucrat. Darker hues indicate larger proportions of projects with associated bureaucrats.

5384 projects have contact information for a named bureaucrat when the projects are first introduced while 6233 projects have a named bureaucrat in their last entry.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of projects in a given country that are associated with a named bureaucrat. The country with the lowest proportion of named bureaucrats is Trinidad and Tobago, with only one project out of twelve associated with a specific bureaucrat. All projects are associated with bureaucrats in Czechia and the MENA region (with two projects each during this time period). Seven of nine projects in Turkmenestan have bureaucrats attached; 40 out of 53 projects have bureaucrats associated in Thailand. In total, across countries, 53% of projects are associated with specific bureaucrats.

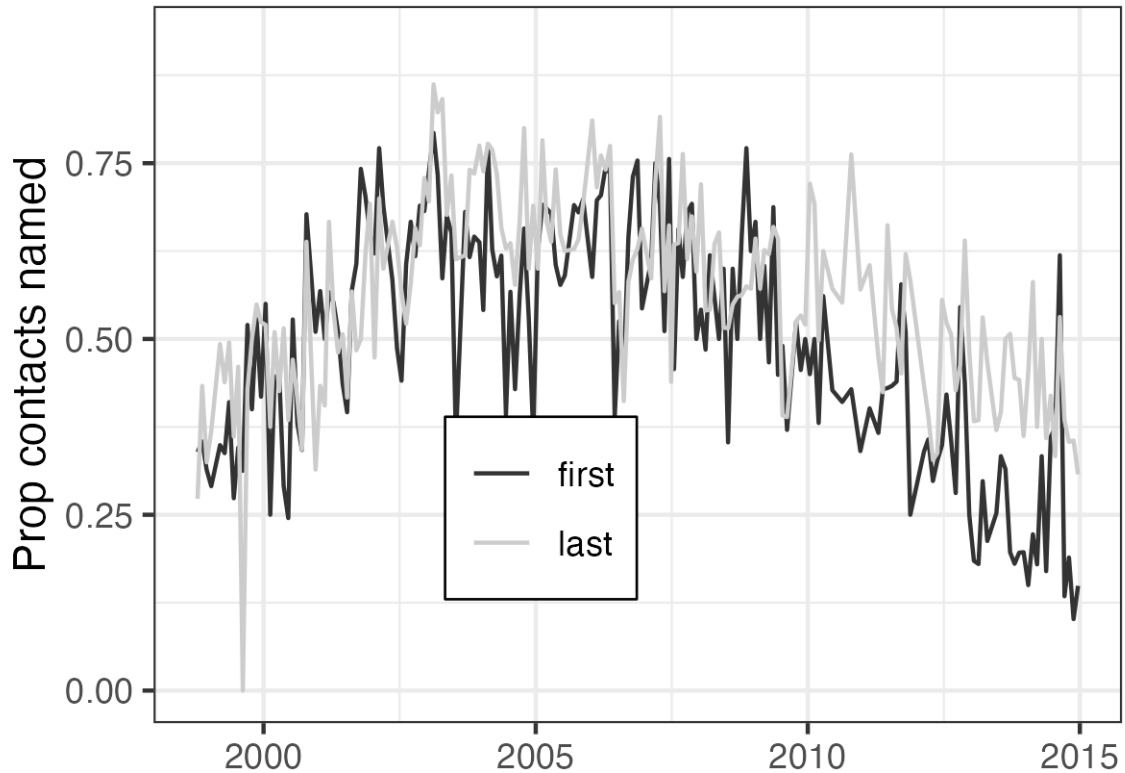Projects may have different bureaucrats associated with them over time. In our sample,

Figure 2: *Proportion of projects on a given date with named bureaucrats:* Proportion of projects from 1998 to 2014 with a named bureaucrat at the time the project was proposed (first, black line) and at the time the project was approved (last, grey line).

4251 projects have the same bureaucrat associated with a project when the project enters the dataset and when it leaves the dataset–79% of all projects with a named bureaucrat in the first month of preparation have the same named bureaucrat at the time of the project's approval; 68% of projects with bureaucrats at the time of approval have the same bureaucrat at the start of the project. Figure 2 shows that, in the aggregate, projects are likely to have roughly the same number of named bureaucrats at the start of the project and when it is approved.

We identify each of the projects in the MOS dataset that have an official project identi-fication number (PID) in order to combine these data with official World Bank records of

projects post-approval. 2036 projects have a PID that is compatible with the World Bank's data.

We combine these data with ratings of project outcomes from the Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG). IEG ratings range from Highly Unsatisfactory (1) to Highly Satisfactory (6). Of the projects with bureaucrats in our sample, the average rating is 4.04–compared to 4.12 for projects without named bureaucrats in our sample. The difference is not statistically significant.

The World Bank and IEG data allow us to measure our main outcomes of interest: the number and performance of World Bank projects. Our project explores whether these outcomes are affected by the quality of the client country's bureaucrat. We identify bureaucrat quality with a crude measure: the project rating of the first project a bureaucrat is associated with in our sample. Bureaucrats may be associated with only this initial project or they may go on to participate in future projects. Of the 936 unique bureaucrats in our sample, 699 bureaucrats are associated with more than one project; 237 bureaucrats were associated with only one project. Figure 3 shows the distribution of bureaucrats associated with one or more projects in the dataset.

Empirical Model

We identify the association between bureaucratic quality and project outcomes in two ways. First, we identify the number of projects a bureaucrat goes on to participate in given their initial project's rating. The intuition here is that bureaucrats who are initially successful are subsequently more likely to be assigned to future projects. Second, we identify the average rating of a bureaucrat's future projects. Again, the intuition is simple: bureaucrats whose early projects are highly rated are more likely to participate in future highly rated projects.

The following OLS model is estimated. For a given bureaucrat k in country i, we investigate whether the rating of their first project is associated with a higher number of
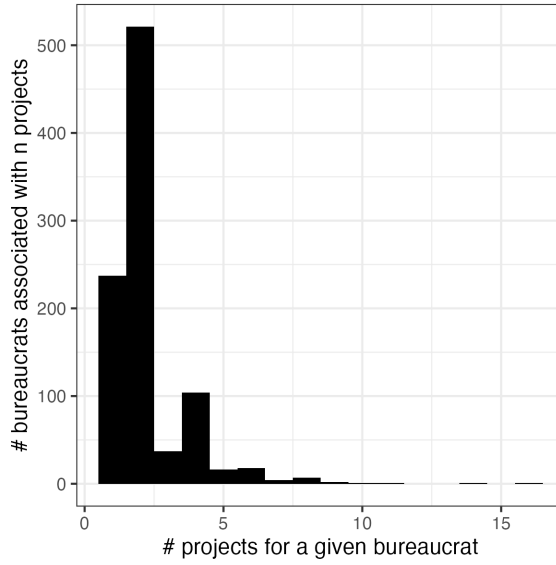
Figure 3: *Histogram of bureaucrats by number of projects*

projects and/or higher-rated projects in the future. We estimate the models with and without country fixed effects (μ_i) and cluster the robust standard errors by country. ε is the error term.

$$Outcome_{ik} = FirstRating_k + \mu_i + \varepsilon$$

The units are country-bureaucrats. That is, for each bureaucrat in a given country, how is their initial project performance related to the number and quality of future projects in that country? The majority of bureaucrats are only associated with a single country: on average, a given bureaucrat is associated with 1.19 countries. 41 bureaucrats are associated with two countries, thirteen with three, and two or fewer with four or more countries. For the outcome related to the number of projects for a bureaucrat, we have a total of 751 country-bureaucrats. We restrict the sample of future project quality outcome to bureaucrats who are associated with two or more projects – we drop out any single-project bureaucrats.

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
	# projects	Avg. rating	# projects	Avg. rating
(Intercept)	2.062	2.366		
	(0.125)	(0.519)		
First proj. rating	0.051	0.451	0.045	0.282
	(0.030)	(0.130)	(0.039)	(0.248)
Country FE	-	-	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	751	64	751	64
R2	0.003	0.201	0.159	0.696
R2 Adj.	0.001	0.188	−0.006	−0.064

Table 1: *Main results*: Association between bureaucrats' initial project ratings and subsequent number (Models 1 and 3) and average rating (Models 2 and 4) of projects. Country fixed effects included in Models 3 and 4. Robust standard errors clustered by country.

Results

Table 1 displays the main results. Models 1 and 3 estimate the association between first project ratings and the number of future projects with and without fixed effects; Models 2 and 4 consider the rating of future projects. Bureaucrats with higher ratings on their initial projects are more likely to be associated with future projects and these future projects are more highly rated. A one-unit increase in a bureaucrat's initial project rating is associated with 0.05 additional projects ($p = 0.09$) and a 0.45 increase ($p = 0.003$) in the ratings of future projects. Within a given country, the substantive association between initial project ratings and future numbers and ratings of projects remains but is no longer statistically significant.

The country fixed effects represent a very conservative estimate of the relationship between bureaucratic quality and future projects. By restricting the analysis to within-country variation, we account for a number of country-level characteristics we might be concerned about — great numbers of highly educated people, good governance, preferences for partic-

ular types of projects that may be more or less easy to implement, etc. The within-country analysis also prevents the results from being driven by variation between countries with high numbers of projects and those without. If a country only has a few projects active in this time period, there is a ceiling on the number of projects any bureaucrat could potentially be a part of.

The use of country fixed effects does, however, limit the inferences one can draw from the models as it relies on within-country bureaucrat comparisons. If a country has a small number of bureaucrats available, there isn't much within-country across-bureaucrat variation to explain. The potential endogeneity problem of countries not getting additional projects *because* of a lack of bureaucratic quality is another challenge to the use of country fixed effects. We cautiously interpret the four models as indicating a positive, but not conclusive, relationship between bureaucrats' initial project ratings and future numbers and quality of projects.

Alternative Explanation

An alternative explanation is that our findings could result from sector-level dynamics. It may be the case that the World Bank prioritizes a certain sector, resulting in more projects to the client-side bureaucrat responsible for that sector. When it does so, it may further demonstrate its commitment to that goal by easing access to financing or other dimensions that may make the project more likely to succeed, resulting in a cluster of a high-quality projects seemingly anchored around one individual.

To address this explanation, we first control for project sector in our analysis, then replicate the analysis within each sector. Here, the unit of analysis is bureaucrat-country-sector; some bureaucrats are associated with multiple sectors and multiple countries. Table 2 shows the results of the main analysis with sector fixed effects. Within a given sector and in a given country, bureaucrats with high initial ratings proceed to lead more projects

	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	# projects	Avg. rating	# projects	Avg. rating
(Intercept)	1.904	2.033		
	(0.139)	(0.465)		
First proj. rating	0.046	0.552	0.046	0.413
	(0.027)	(0.095)	(0.033)	(0.224)
Country FE	-	-	✓	✓
Sector FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	795	95	795	95
R2	0.022	0.453	0.169	0.755
R2 Adj.	0.001	0.365	−0.008	0.178

Table 2: *Sector fixed effects*: Association between bureaucrats' initial project ratings and subsequent number (3) and average rating (4) of projects within a given sector. Country and sector fixed effects included. Robust standard errors clustered by country.

(Models 5 and 7) and higher-quality projects (Models 6 and 8,). Across countries and within sectors, high-quality initial projects are associated with statistically significantly more ($p = 0.09$) and higher quality ($p = 0.000$) projects–within countries, initial quality is no longer associated with statistically significant increases in number of projects ($p = 0.16$) but is significant at the 10% level for future project ratings ($p = 0.09$).

Within sectors, Figure 4 shows that most sectors see an increase in the average rating of projects when the bureaucrat in charge has had an initial high rating. Bureaucrats with high initial ratings are responsible for greater numbers of projects in agriculture, health, and public administration,, but not significantly more (or fewer) projects in other sectors. These results, in line with those in Table 2, suggest that the alignment of the bureaucratic sector is not driving the results. Rather, bureaucrat quality seems to matter within sectors.

Bureaucrats do not often switch sectors. On average, a given bureaucrat is associated with 1.13 sectors.[6] It is unlikely, at least in our sample, that bureaucrats move from sector

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[6]Average number of sectors for bureaucrats associated with two or more projects.
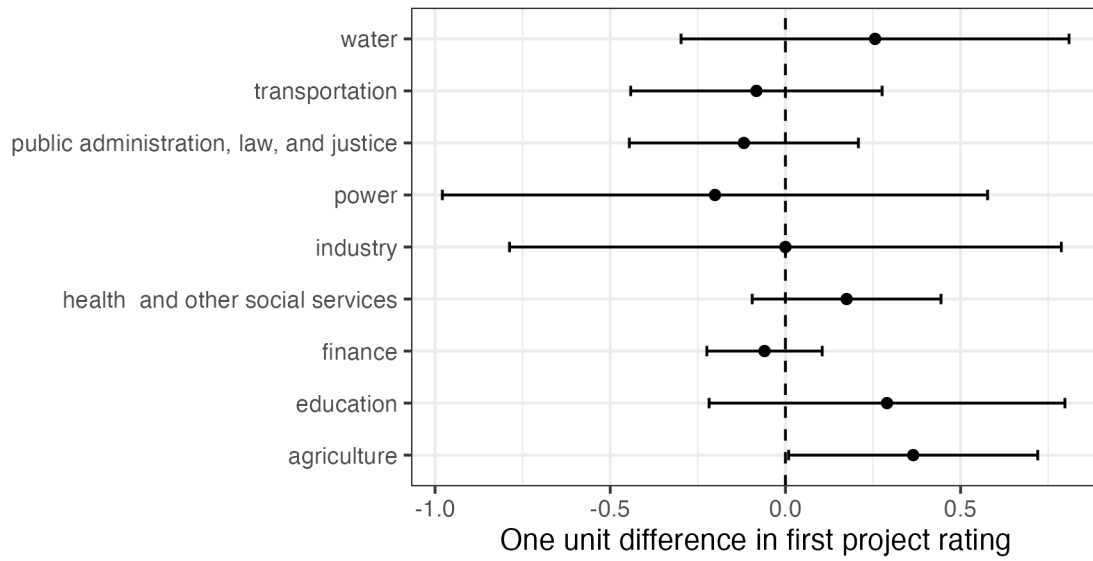
Figure 4: *Bureaucrat quality by sector*: OLS estimates of association between a bureaucrat's first project rating and subsequent number of future projects. Country fixed effects and robust standard errors clustered by country included. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

to sector in response to their early project successes. Thus, the sector-level estimates in Table 2 likely reflect a more precise estimate of our main results.

Robustness

The link between initial and future project quality consistently stronger than that of initial quality and future projects. One potential explanation for this discrepancy is the capacity constraints on a given country. If the number of bureaucratic personnel who are qualified to work on a given project is small, the probability that a given bureaucrat will be assigned to the project is higher regardless of their initial quality. To test this more formally, we interact the total number of bureaucrats associated with projects in a given country with the initial ratings of bureaucrats.

We find that initial project rating is more strongly associated with an increase in the likelihood that bureaucrats will engage with projects in the future when countries have a

larger stock of bureaucrats.[7] A one-unit increase in initial project rating is associated with a 0.019 standard deviation increase in number of projects for a bureaucrat when the total number of bureaucrats available (in our sample) to a country increases by one. With only one bureaucrat available to a country, a one-unit increase in initial project rating leads to a 0.007 standard deviation increase in the number of projects for the bureaucrat.[8] In other words, absent a large number of bureaucrats available for projects, a country is likely to rely on bureaucrats of varying quality.

Discussion

We find a general relationship between past bureaucrat quality and future success with World Bank projects–both in the number and quality of future projects. The evidence that client country bureaucrats affect project outcomes is not surprising given the literature on bureaucratic ties in international organizations. However, it has not been systematically documented until this point. Our results open a broader research agenda that centers the experience and talents of client country bureaucrats in the negotiation and implementation of international aid projects. Connecting recipient bureaucrats to their counterparts at the World Bank, the TTLs, is a necessary next step for understanding how relationships between bureaucrats shape project outcomes. Building on existing work about international bureaucrat characteristics, this paper suggests that individual recipient country bureaucrats similarly vary in quality and could be strategically placed by the Bank or recipient governments to hedge the success of particular projects.

The implications of variation in client country bureaucrat quality are substantial for both researchers and practitioners. Attention to localization by USAID, the World Bank,

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[7]Notably, we measure bureaucrat stock by counting the number of unique bureaucrats associated with projects in a given country during our time period (1998 to 2014). This likely underestimates the total number of bureaucrats available in a given country.

[8]These estimates rely on an OLS model with country fixed effects and country-clustered standard errors–a conservative estimate of these associations.

and other international actors has increased the ownership and control domestic recipient bureaucrats and communities have over project design, implementation, and outcomes. While our data end in 2014 before the most recent push for localization, the potential for higher quality bureaucrats to be given opportunities for involvement in more projects, and for these projects to be more successful, suggests that localization and attention to recipient country characteristics have normatively good payoffs for aid agencies. On the other hand, our results could imply that initial low bureaucratic quality may stymie future World Bank investments in a given country. If low-performing bureaucrats receive fewer aid projects *and* countries have low numbers of qualified bureaucrats, the total amount of aid for a country could decrease as a result of bureaucratic quality. Understanding the relative value of client country bureaucrats enables both donor and recipient countries and organizations to proactively plan for and support aid projects.

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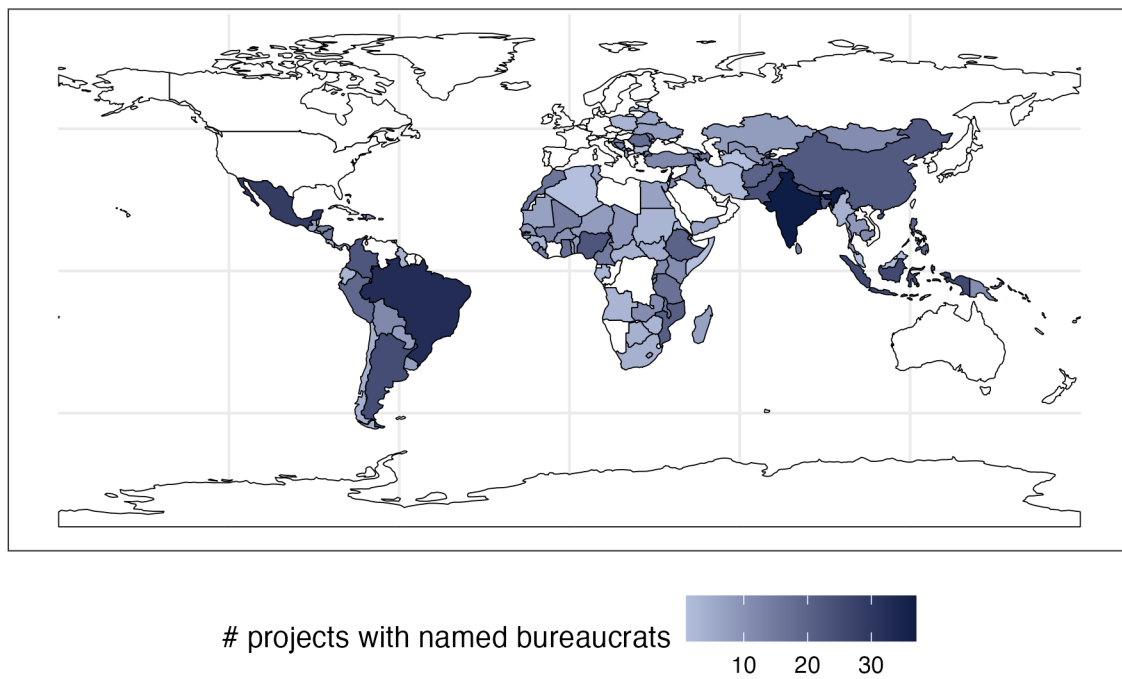
Figure 5: *Number of bureaucrats by country:* Number of unique named bureaucrats per country. Darker hues indicate more bureaucrats.
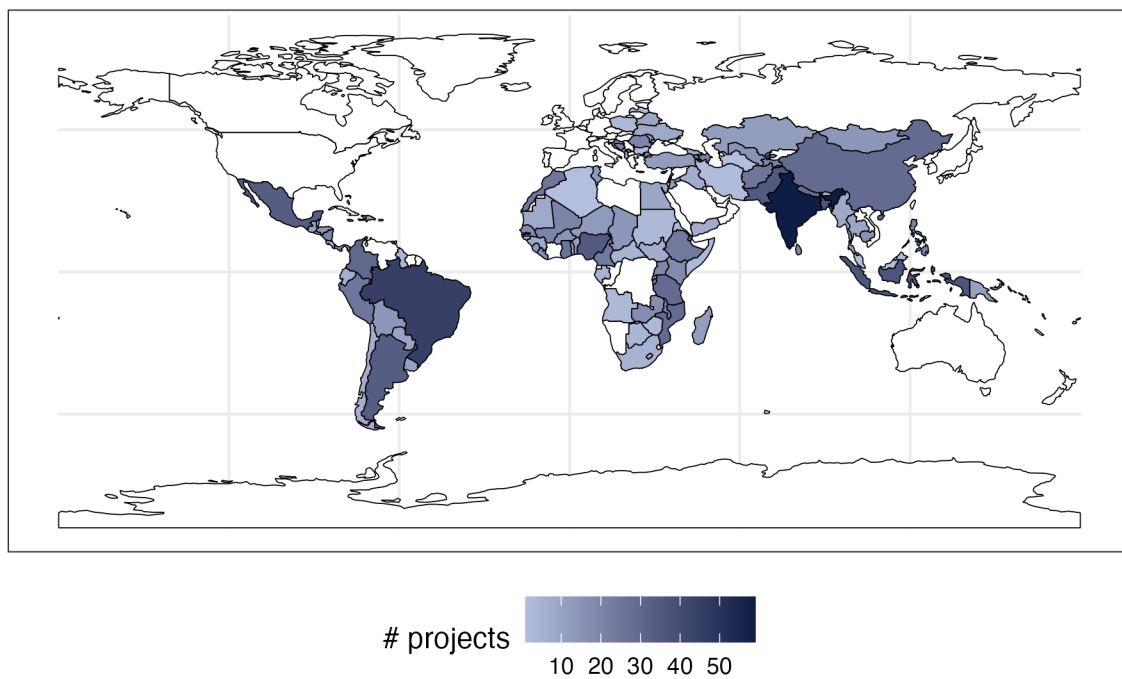
Figure 6: *#projects with named bureaucrats by country:* Number of a given country's World Bank projects with an associated bureaucrat. Darker hues indicate larger numbers of projects with associated bureaucrats.
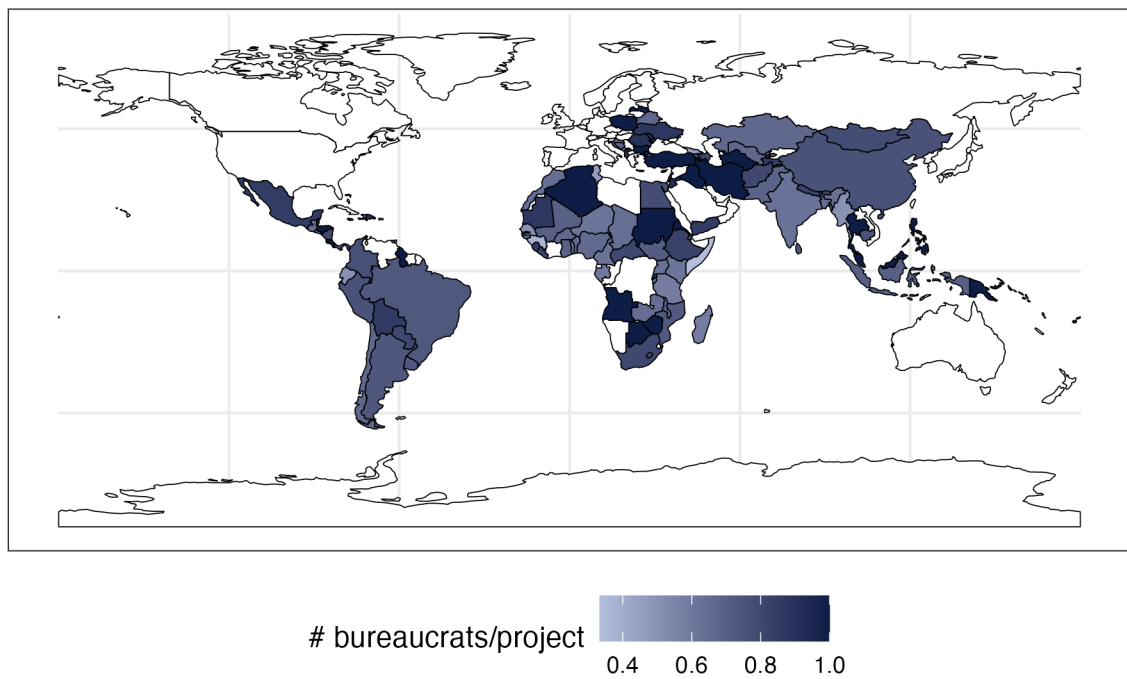
Figure 7: *Proportion of bureaucrats per project:* Number of bureaucrats available per project. Darker hues indicate larger proportions of bureaucrats available per project.