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A Return to Spoils? Revisiting Radical Civil Service Reform in the United States

Stephen E. Condrey and R. Paul Battaglio, Jr.

This timely report by Steve Condrey and Paul Battaglio on human resource professionals' perceptions concerning the "radical civil service reform" undertaken by the State of Georgia offers an excellent opportunity to ask what lessons might have been learned since Ed Kellough of the University of Georgia and I participated in a 2000 evaluation sponsored by the Georgia Merit System. The State of Georgia is now about a decade into its experiment with a civil service reform package that includes a steady dismantling of the classified service and its replacement with an "at-will" employment relationship.

It is this aspect of the Georgia reform that earns it the label "radical," but it also must be

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emphasized that the reform legislation included provisions that decentralized and deregulated its human resource management structure and process. These changes included the elimination of the Georgia Merit System's longstanding regulatory role and the shifting of control over most human resource functions to state agencies. The declared legislative intent was to create the conditions needed to allow agency management the discretion and performance management tools required to achieve results in an efficient and timely manner. Managers on all levels were to be held accountable for results by agency administrators and elected officials.

Thus, the state's human resource system has been, or rather should have been, an excellent

laboratory for a longitudinal evaluation of the impact of at-will employment on government performance. However, the Georgia legislation did not require systematic program evaluation or provide the resources needed to establish a credible, sustained evaluation regime.

So, what can we conclude about radical civil service reform evaluation in Georgia? Four general lessons emerge: (1) radical civil service reforms in Georgia have altered expectations about the employment relationship in state government; (2) evaluating these reforms in terms of their impact on performance is technically challenging; (3) linking reforms and performance can be politically precarious; (4) only academics appear interested in assessing this link; and (5) over time, "radical" becomes conventional.

The Georgia Reforms Have Changed Expectations and Attitudes About the Employment Relationship

There have been a number of surveys probing the attitudes and perceptions of state workers conducted since Georgia embarked on its reform agenda, and Condrey and Battaglio's study continues in that tradition. In 2000, in association with the Georgia Merit System, Ed Kellough and I conducted a random survey of all state workers. We managed to complete the attitudinal part of the evaluation. But rough-and-tumble intramural politics that I will discuss below closed off our effort to take a look at so-called harder empirical indicators of system performance based on Merit System records and other sources.

Our findings with regard to attitudes and perceptions are described in several journal articles, some of which are cited in the Condrey and Battaglio article (also see Bowman and West 2006; Kellough and Nigro 2006a,

2006b). Taking into consideration the relatively high percentage of state workers holding classified positions at the time, our findings for the most part anticipate those that these researchers report in their article. The focus in Condrey and Battaglio's study is on "human resource professionals" and variables associated with perceptions regarding the impacts of at-will and New Public Management (NPM) reforms on the quality of governance, efficiency and effectiveness, and the treatment of state workers. As such, their research is a needed and valuable contribution to our understanding of how radical civil service reform in Georgia is seen by a key set of actors in the state bureaucracy.

While not surprising in the larger context of state civil service reform efforts across the states, the results suggest that at-will hiring and firing, combined with NPM strategies, have had and will likely continue to have significant effects on workforce attitudes and expectations as well as on public sector human resource policies and practices. More precisely, and as Ed Kellough and I suspected they would, expectations regarding the employment relationship *have* changed along lines favoring individualized differential merit pay, results-oriented management and accountability processes, and minimal long-term commitment (the so-called loyalty factor).

Condrey and Battaglio's findings also confirm that there continues to be widespread public enthusiasm (particularly among elected officials) for the idea that at-will and management-centered human resource management will lead to improved performance and responsiveness on all levels. However, the human resource professionals they surveyed were not at all sure these goals have been realized or that existing trends were encouraging. Measured again against our

findings in 2000, the present study suggests that after seven years, not much has changed in this regard.

As Condrey and Battaglio concede, however, attitudes and perceptions are only part of the evaluation puzzle. The assessments of human resource professionals and other stakeholders, especially taken in the aggregate and over time, are not to be taken lightly as we try to determine the effects of radical civil service reform (or any government reform for that matter). Yet other system performance-related metrics are needed. These include, but are not limited to, so-called hard measures of human resource systems' performance.

This universe of performance indicators should include programs, organizational units, agencies, and, ultimately, the entire state bureaucracy. Any effort to evaluate civil service reforms, in the final analysis, must connect their effects, conceptually and empirically, to what is happening on other levels of organizational activity. Otherwise, the rationale for radical civil service reform that establishes an at-will regime is at best a set of untested and unconfirmed assumptions about causality. It also may be a recipe for yet another round of the sub-optimization and goal displacement associated with a regulatory state merit system, a classified civil service "protected" by rules and procedures, and the "unresponsive bureaucrats" that Governor Zell Miller excoriated in his argument for a new system.

Evaluating Reforms Can Be a Technical Nightmare

Our experience revealed two sets of challenges confronting those trying to reach conclusions about the degree to which radical civil service reform is generating discernible outcomes—anticipated and unanticipated. First, getting anything resembling

agreement among the interested parties about what should be measured and why is not easy. We discovered that stakeholders and interests were divided along vertical and horizontal lines. Within the Merit System, top-level political leadership was looking for one set of outcomes, while the professional staff thought others were far more important from a system performance standpoint. State agencies, long displeased with the regulatory behavior of the pre-reform Merit System, were looking for indicators centered on management discretion, labor market competitiveness, and performance management effectiveness. This set of actors included many human resource professionals. Agency personnel directors were for the most part supportive of NPM-style reform and optimistic about its long-term effects on productivity and responsiveness. They were less inclined to see at-will as a positive development.

Second, there were and certainly continue to be huge technical problems associated with building user-friendly information collection, organization, and analysis systems that allow evaluation of human resource-related data and their relationships to performance indicators across several levels of organizational and administrative activity. Personnel records of various kinds simply are not collected or organized with any form of human resource analysis in mind. Hopefully, and this may be a case of extreme optimism, the state's shift to PeopleSoft will be helpful in this regard.

Nervous Stakeholders Play to Win

After Ed Kellough and I agreed to evaluate the impact of Georgia's reforms on employee performance, our efforts to overcome both sets of technical problems were ultimately cut short by the Commissioner's Office. In effect, they "fired" us after the attitudinal data were collected and analyzed by

an applied research unit of Georgia State University. Even prior to this, and as we prepared a design and worked with Merit System professionals to identify and collect data from personnel records, the Commissioner's Office asserted total control over the evaluation design and interpretation of the results. At the time, the Commissioner's Office and the interests it represented seemed reluctant to risk a less than completely favorable assessment of a major reform sponsored by Governors Miller and (subsequently) Roy Barnes (D-GA).

The Office's effort to control the evaluation process and the dissemination of our results even extended at one point to a demand that we secure pre-clearance from legal staff for any publications or presentations containing any data from the attitudinal survey. We were on the scene long enough as researchers, however, to recognize that even overcoming the political issues would not be enough; human resource data were only minimally useful in their existing formats. To our knowledge, the final product produced by the staff of the Commissioner's Office after we left was never widely shared or used in any meaningful way to establish baselines for future evaluations. This is not surprising. Whether or not these same types of political dynamics and technical obstacles will plague researchers mounting similar efforts in other states is yet to be seen, but researchers should be aware of them before proceeding.

Finally, when Ed Kellough and I began our study for Georgia state government, there did not appear to be much concern or indeed interest in the opportunities for widespread patronage hiring and firing (the state was still in Democratic hands). Condrey and Battaglio's findings indicate that the Republican takeover of state government in Georgia

over the past five years does not appear to have changed that situation. In Georgia state government, at-will has not produced the rampant hiring-and-firing patronage some feared. However, another matter that these authors say is diminishing private-and-public distinctions and contributing to a loss of concern over at-will appointments—viz., contracting and the "pinstripe patronage" of government contracts—is another story that deserves careful study.

Does Anybody Beyond Academia Care?

Despite the seriousness of the potential implications of radical civil service reform in Georgia, there remains little interest in serious empirical evaluation of radical civil service reform within state government. It is no oversight that the references cited by Condrey and Battaglio in their article do not include a single technical report or legislative study of at-will and NPM-driven civil service policies. Neither the executive nor legislative branches of state government seem interested in sponsoring a credible evaluation for use by policymakers.

Why is this the case? One explanation is that there is simply no consequential political constituency asking for such an evaluation. Unlike Florida, for example, Georgia has no effective public employee unions and there is no collective bargaining. Public employee organizations concentrate on pay and benefits issues as they lobby the legislature. In contrast to its almost complete lack of interest in human resource issues and policies, the Georgia Assembly has for some time funded an ongoing public finance and budget analysis function through Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies (Fiscal Research Center). The Fiscal Research Center generates an ongoing series of reports on tax, expenditure, and economic development issues and policies

for the legislature. No equivalent resource exists for the human resource side of the house.

Another factor to be considered is the aforementioned and ongoing blurring of lines between the public and private sectors noted by Condrey and Battaglio. Increasingly, policymakers and elected executives seem to be assuming that the human resource practices of the private sector (or their understanding of them) should serve as the template for those of the public sector. The Georgia reforms are at least nominally designed to make the state administration more "businesslike" and, therefore, more efficient and responsive to executive leadership. If government presents no special issues or challenges that differentiate it from business, then the more it looks like business, the better it is. For better or worse, at-will employment takes government a long way in that direction.

Over Time, "Radical" Becomes Accepted Practice

Finally, as the current research suggests, the sky has not fallen and state government still functions some ten years after the imposition of radical civil service reform in Georgia. At-will is pretty much taken for granted. For younger human resource professionals surveyed by the authors who are working in larger state agencies, reform appears to be working. And from all appearances, bureaucratic performance is at least on par with what Ed Kellough and I saw in the late 1990s. Thus, to date, the demise of the classified civil service and the regulatory Merit System has not signaled the end of professional human resource management in the agencies of Georgia state government. The next ten years should be interesting.

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