



Bureaucratic Complexity, Economic Inequality and Structural Discrimination: The Dutch Childcare Benefits Scandal as a Case Study

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between bureaucratic complexity, administrative burden, economic inequality, and structural discrimination, using the Dutch childcare benefits scandal (toeslagenaffaire) as a case study. It begins from the proposition that bureaucracy is indispensable to modern governance but that formal equality in administrative rules does not necessarily result in substantive equality in citizens' capacity to exercise their rights. This article first situates bureaucracy historically, demonstrating that bureaucratic administration is neither exclusively Western nor modern. Administrative systems developed independently across Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, South Asia, Europe, Islamic societies, and African states, while colonialism subsequently transformed and interconnected administrative traditions through systems of taxation, classification, surveillance, extraction, and population control. Building on administrative-burden theory, this article analyses how bureaucracies transfer learning, compliance, and psychological costs from institutions to citizens. Although contemporary administrative-burden theory developed primarily within Western public-administration scholarship, the underlying phenomenon is global and assumes different forms across institutional and historical contexts. Western welfare-state systems frequently generate burdens through eligibility criteria, documentation, verification, and appeals procedures, whereas other contexts may additionally involve limited administrative capacity, geographical barriers, intermediaries, fragmented documentation systems, community-based access, and colonial or postcolonial institutional legacies. This article subsequently develops the hypothesis that economic inequality and bureaucratic inequality can become mutually reinforcing. Citizens enter administrative systems with unequal financial, educational, linguistic, digital, social, and legal resources. Resource-rich citizens are better positioned to understand, navigate, challenge, or outsource bureaucratic complexity, whereas resource-poor citizens must absorb a greater proportion of its costs directly. Administrative burden can consequently contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle in which socioeconomic disadvantage increases exposure and vulnerability to bureaucratic difficulties, while those difficulties further reduce the resources available for subsequent interactions with the state. The Dutch childcare benefits scandal illustrates the potential consequences of this process. Strict legislation, fraud-oriented administrative practices, risk profiling, automated decision-making, fragmented institutional responsibility, and disproportionate sanctions interacted with socioeconomic vulnerability to produce severe and cumulative harm. The case further demonstrates how apparently neutral administrative procedures can become structurally discriminatory when selection mechanisms and institutional classifications interact with ethnicity, migration background, nationality, or unequal capacities for legal redress. This article therefore conceptualises bureaucracy as a distributive institution that allocates not only public resources but also time, uncertainty, risk, dignity, autonomy, and effective access to rights. Structural discrimination need not depend exclusively upon explicitly discriminatory intentions; it may emerge through the interaction of historical inequality, institutional architecture, and differential citizen capacity. At the same time, unequal outcomes should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of structural racism, but require empirical investigation of the mechanisms producing them. This article concludes that administrative equality should be assessed not merely according to

whether identical rules formally apply to all citizens, but according to whether people possessing unequal resources can exercise equivalent rights with comparable effectiveness. Administrative simplification, proportionality, accessible appeals, human oversight of automated decisions, monitoring of unequal outcomes, and participation by affected citizens are therefore proposed as important components of proportionate and equality-oriented bureaucracy.

Keywords: bureaucracy, administrative burden, bureaucratic complexity, economic inequality, structural inequality, structural discrimination, structural racism, socioeconomic inequality, Dutch childcare benefits scandal, toeslagenaffaire, algorithmic decision-making, risk profiling, welfare state, institutional inequality, cumulative administrative disadvantage, colonial bureaucracy, citizen-state relations, administrative justice.

BUREAUCRACY AS A POTENTIAL MECHANISM OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Bureaucratic systems are indispensable to modern societies. Governments depend upon administrative organisations to collect taxes, distribute benefits, regulate markets, provide education and healthcare, enforce legislation and guarantee citizens' rights. In the classical Weberian conception, bureaucracy was intended to replace arbitrary and personalised decision-making with rational procedures, specialised expertise, formal rules and predictable administration (Weber, 1978). Bureaucracy should, in principle, therefore promote equality: citizens in equivalent circumstances should be subjected to equivalent rules.

However, formal equality of rules does not necessarily produce equality in citizens' ability to navigate those rules. Contemporary research on administrative burden demonstrates that interactions between citizens and government impose costs that are unevenly distributed across populations¹ (Moynihan et al., 2015; Herd & Moynihan, 2018). This raises a broader question concerning structural inequality: can the architecture of bureaucracy itself become a mechanism through which pre-existing social and economic inequalities are reproduced?

The evidence suggests that it can. Bureaucratic complexity is not simply a technical characteristic of government. Rules determine who must provide information, who is investigated, how much evidence is required, how mistakes are treated, who qualifies for assistance and how easily administrative decisions can be challenged. Consequently, apparently neutral administrative arrangements can have substantially different effects upon citizens with different levels of income, wealth, education, social capital and institutional knowledge.

This argument does not imply that bureaucratic complexity is simply caused by unequal distributions of income and capital. Bureaucracies become complex for numerous reasons, including increasing societal complexity, political compromises, accumulation of regulations, organisational fragmentation, technological development, accountability

¹ The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) has concluded that the expertise of civil servants within the government is vulnerable and faces significant shortfalls. The government frequently fails to achieve its objectives due to a combination of bureaucracy, capacity shortages and high staff turnover. Link: <https://www.wrr.nl/actueel/nieuws/2025/07/08/wrr-sterke-overheid-investeert-in-eigen-deskundigheid>

requirements and attempts to prevent fraud or administrative error. Nevertheless, economic inequality and bureaucratic complexity can become mutually reinforcing phenomena.

ORIGIN OF BUREAUCRACY IN NON-WESTERN AND WESTERN COUNTRIES

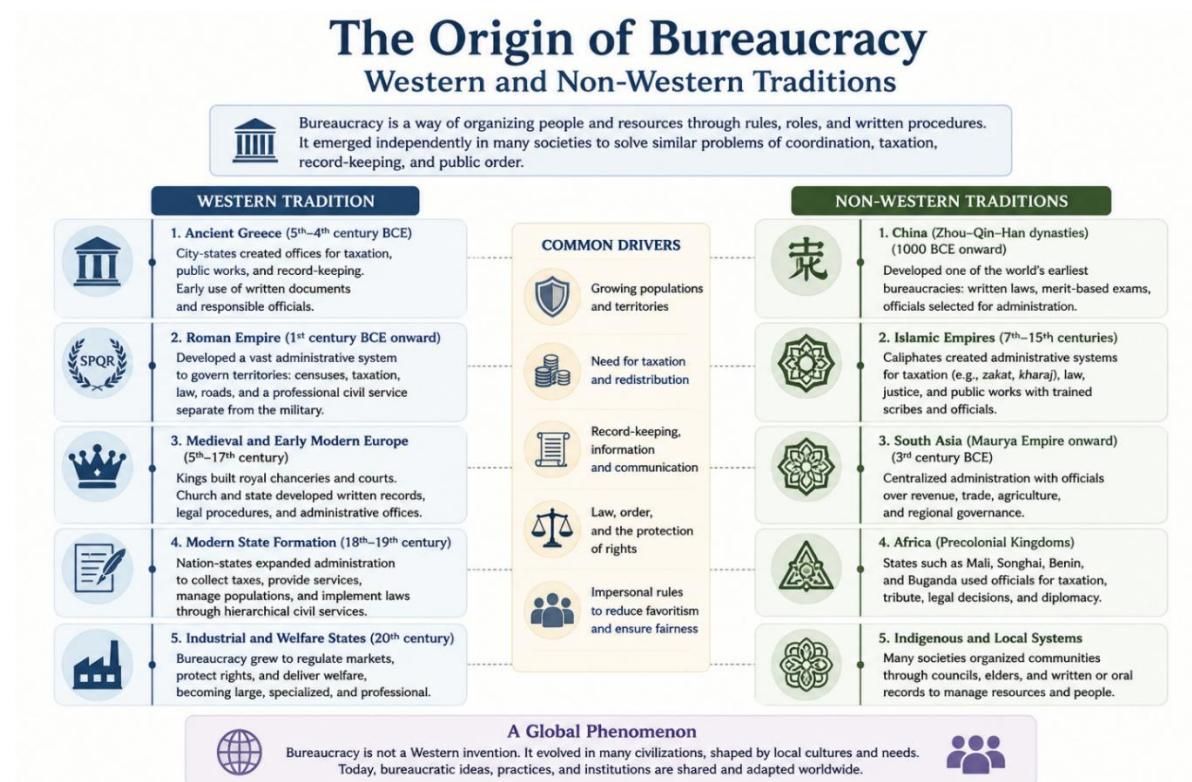


Figure 1: The Origin of Bureaucracy (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

Introduction

Bureaucracy is frequently associated with the development of the modern European state and particularly with the sociological work of Max Weber. Historically, however, bureaucratic organisation is considerably older than modern Europe. Systems involving specialised officials, taxation, record-keeping, written regulations, territorial administration and hierarchical authority emerged independently in several ancient civilisations. Some of the earliest examples can be found in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and South Asia, long before the emergence of the modern European nation-state (Creel, 1964; Scott, 1998; Weber, 1978). Bureaucracy should therefore not be regarded as an exclusively Western invention, but as a recurring institutional response to the problems created by governing increasingly large and complex societies.

The term *bureaucracy*² itself is comparatively recent and should be applied cautiously to ancient societies. Modern bureaucracy generally refers to a relatively stable

² A bureaucracy is a system of administration characterized by a strict hierarchy, clear division of labor, and standardized rules. Originally referring to unelected government officials, the term now

administrative system characterised by specialised offices, hierarchical authority, written rules and records, division of labour, and some separation between the office and the individual occupying it. Weber (1978) identified rational-legal bureaucracy as one of the defining organisational characteristics of the modern state. Ancient administrative systems rarely possessed all of these characteristics simultaneously. Nevertheless, many developed institutional arrangements that can reasonably be described as bureaucratic precursors.

Early Bureaucracy in Mesopotamia and Egypt

Some of the earliest foundations of bureaucratic administration appeared alongside the development of writing and urban civilisation in Mesopotamia. Temples, palaces and emerging states needed mechanisms for recording agricultural production, land, labour, taxation, trade and the redistribution of resources. Scribes consequently became indispensable administrative specialists.

Administrative records from ancient Mesopotamia demonstrate that sophisticated systems of documentation existed thousands of years before modern government. Recent archaeological research at Girsu³, for example, has uncovered extensive administrative archives from the Akkadian period, approximately 2300-2150 BCE, recording commodities, expenditure, professions and other governmental activities. Such evidence demonstrates the close historical relationship between writing, accounting and the emergence of large administrative organisations.

Ancient Egypt similarly developed a substantial administrative apparatus. The centralised state required officials and scribes to administer taxation, agricultural production, irrigation, royal estates, construction projects and the redistribution of grain and other resources. Comparative historical research therefore identifies Mesopotamia and Egypt among the earliest societies in which complex political organisations generated recognisably bureaucratic administrative systems.

These early cases demonstrate an important principle: bureaucracy initially developed not primarily as an abstract philosophy of government, but as a practical response to scale. Once political authorities controlled large populations, agricultural surpluses and extensive territories, memory and interpersonal relationships were insufficient. Information had to be recorded, categorised, stored and communicated.

Bureaucracy in the Western Tradition

Ancient Greece developed administrative offices associated with taxation, public finances, military organisation and public works, although Greek city-states were generally smaller and administratively less centralised than several contemporary Asian and Middle Eastern

applies to any large public or private institution, aiming to ensure fairness and efficiency through formal processes.

³ Girsu (modern name: Tello, Iraq) was one of the most significant and earliest known cities in ancient Sumer. Situated in the southern Mesopotamian region, it functioned as the religious and administrative centre of the Kingdom of Lagash from approximately 5000 BC. The city was dedicated to Ningirsu, the heroic god of war of the Sumerians. The following link provides access to further information on the topic: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girsu>.

empires. Athens combined administrative office-holding with distinctive mechanisms of citizen participation, election, selection by lot and public accountability.

The Roman Empire subsequently developed a much larger administrative structure. The expansion of Roman territorial control required systems for taxation, censuses, law, provincial government, military supply, infrastructure and communication. Roman administration therefore constituted an important precursor of later European governmental organisation.

Following the fragmentation of the Western Roman Empire, European administration became more decentralised. Nevertheless, bureaucratic practices survived and developed within royal courts, municipalities and, importantly, the Christian Church. Medieval ecclesiastical administration maintained written records, hierarchical authority, canon law and geographically dispersed administrative structures.

From approximately the sixteenth century onwards, European state formation increasingly required permanent administrative organisations. Territorial states needed reliable mechanisms for taxation, warfare, diplomacy, policing and legal administration. The development of what historians sometimes describe as the *fiscal-military state* was particularly significant: maintaining increasingly expensive armies and navies required governments to improve taxation, accounting and administrative capacity.

Industrialisation and urbanisation subsequently expanded the responsibilities of European states. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, government administration increasingly encompassed education, public health, social security, labour regulation, infrastructure and economic management. Bureaucracy consequently developed from an institution principally concerned with taxation, war and political control into an important mechanism of welfare-state administration.

It was principally this modern European development that informed Weber's theory of rational-legal bureaucracy. Weber (1978) emphasised characteristics such as hierarchical organisation, clearly defined competences, written documentation, professional expertise, impersonal decision-making and recruitment according to technical qualifications. Weberian bureaucracy therefore represents a particular historical form of bureaucracy rather than the origin of bureaucracy itself.

China and One of the World's Oldest Bureaucratic Traditions

China provides perhaps the strongest challenge to any assumption that bureaucracy originated in modern Europe. Chinese administrative institutions developed over many centuries, with important precursors during the Zhou period and substantial centralisation under the Qin and Han dynasties.

Creel's (1964) classic study argues that ancient China made a major contribution to the development of techniques associated with the centralised bureaucratic state. The Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE) created a highly centralised territorial administration based upon standardised laws, administrative districts and officials accountable to central authority. The Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) further developed this administrative apparatus.

One of the most distinctive subsequent characteristics of Chinese bureaucracy was the increasing connection between government service, education and examination. The

imperial examination system developed gradually and became especially important under later dynasties. Rather than allocating all administrative positions exclusively through hereditary aristocratic status, the Chinese state increasingly recruited officials on the basis of demonstrated mastery of an established scholarly curriculum.

The system was never a perfectly egalitarian meritocracy. Access to the education required for examination success was socially unequal, and elite families possessed substantial advantages. Nevertheless, the principle that administrative office should depend partly upon demonstrated intellectual competence represented a historically significant institutional innovation.

Chinese bureaucracy consequently developed a sophisticated combination of central authority, written records, specialised offices, territorial administration and an educated official class centuries before the development of modern European civil services. The history of Chinese bureaucracy therefore demonstrates that bureaucratic rationalisation followed multiple historical pathways rather than a uniquely European trajectory (Creel, 1964).

South Asian Administrative Traditions

South Asia also possessed important premodern traditions of large-scale administration. The Mauryan Empire (c. 322-185 BCE), established by Chandragupta Maurya and expanded under subsequent rulers including Ashoka, governed an extensive and culturally diverse territory.

Evidence from Ashokan inscriptions, Greek accounts and the *Arthashastra* indicates the existence of numerous administrative functionaries concerned with taxation, trade, agriculture, justice, public welfare and territorial government. Chakravarti notes that the Mauryan administrative system depended upon numerous officials to undertake the practical responsibilities of government.

The Mauryan example is particularly important because it demonstrates that sophisticated administrative institutions were not confined to either Europe or China. Central authority could coexist with provincial and local administrative structures, creating multilayered systems of governance across extensive territories.

Later South Asian states, including the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, developed additional administrative arrangements influenced by indigenous, Persianate, Central Asian and Islamic traditions. The resulting bureaucracies were therefore products of historical interaction rather than culturally isolated administrative systems.

Bureaucracy in Islamic Societies

The expansion of Islamic states from the seventh century onwards created another major tradition of bureaucratic governance. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates governed enormous territories containing diverse populations, languages, religions and existing administrative traditions. Effective government required taxation, correspondence, judicial administration, military organisation, land management and communication between the political centre and distant provinces.

Administrative departments known as *dīwāns* developed responsibility for particular governmental functions. Islamic administration did not emerge in an institutional vacuum. Early caliphates adapted practices from Byzantine and particularly Sasanian Persian administrative traditions while simultaneously developing new institutions appropriate to Islamic political and legal contexts.

The Abbasid period produced increasingly elaborate systems of governmental administration. The postal and intelligence system (*barīd*), for example, performed important administrative and communication functions across the empire. Silverstein's (2007) research demonstrates the sophistication and historical development of these communication institutions within the premodern Islamic world.

Later Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal governments developed complex bureaucracies involving fiscal administration, archives, legal institutions, diplomatic correspondence and trained administrative personnel. These traditions again demonstrate that bureaucratic development resulted from continuous cultural exchange and institutional adaptation rather than from a simple division between Western and non-Western models.

African Bureaucratic and Administrative Traditions

Precolonial African societies also developed diverse forms of administration. The enormous political diversity of the continent makes it particularly misleading to speak of a single "African bureaucracy." Some societies were relatively decentralised, while others developed centralised kingdoms and empires with specialised political and administrative institutions.

States and empires such as ancient Egypt, Aksum, Mali, Songhai, Benin, Kongo, Ethiopia, Asante and Buganda developed different combinations of royal officials, taxation and tribute systems, diplomatic institutions, courts, military administration and territorial governance.

Not all these institutions corresponded to the later Weberian model. Administration could be organised through kinship, courts, tributary relationships, religious authority and oral as well as written systems of accountability. Applying a narrowly European definition of bureaucracy can therefore create an analytical problem: sophisticated administrative institutions may become invisible simply because they were organised differently from nineteenth-century European civil services.

A comparative history of bureaucracy must consequently distinguish between bureaucracy as a universal ideal type and the much greater historical diversity of actual administrative institutions.

Colonialism and the Transformation of Bureaucracy

European colonial expansion from the sixteenth century onwards fundamentally changed the global development of bureaucracy. Colonial powers encountered societies that already possessed political, legal and administrative institutions. Colonialism therefore did not simply introduce administration into previously unadministered territories.

Instead, colonial governments variously destroyed, subordinated, appropriated, reorganised and incorporated existing institutions. This produced a distinctive form of bureaucracy: the colonial bureaucracy.

Its priorities often differed substantially from those of the later democratic welfare state. Colonial administrative systems were frequently designed to facilitate taxation, resource extraction, labour mobilisation, land control, policing, population classification and political domination.

Classification became especially important. Colonial states categorised populations according to ethnicity, race, tribe, religion, legal status, occupation and geographical origin. Administrative categories could subsequently become socially consequential because governments used them to determine rights, obligations, mobility and access to resources.

The colonial history of bureaucracy therefore creates an important connection with contemporary research on structural inequality. Bureaucracy does not merely administer social categories; under particular historical circumstances, bureaucracy participates in creating and institutionalising categories.

Postcolonial states subsequently inherited administrative structures that had originally been designed for colonial purposes. Although these institutions were transformed after independence, administrative continuity could coexist with profound political change.

Western and Non-Western Bureaucracy: Difference or Interaction?

The distinction between “Western” and “non-Western” bureaucracy is therefore analytically useful only to a limited extent. It highlights the existence of multiple administrative traditions, but it risks creating an artificial opposition between two supposedly isolated civilisational systems.

Historically, Bureaucratic Traditions Interacted Continuously

Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian, Greek and Roman administrative traditions influenced one another. Islamic empires incorporated and transformed Byzantine, Persian and other administrative practices. Mughal administration combined South Asian, Islamic, Persianate and Central Asian elements. European states subsequently learned through commercial, imperial and diplomatic interaction, while colonialism imposed European administrative structures upon societies possessing their own governmental traditions.

The history of bureaucracy is therefore better conceptualised as polycentric and interconnected. There was no single moment at which bureaucracy was invented. Instead, similar institutional problems repeatedly generated administrative solutions:

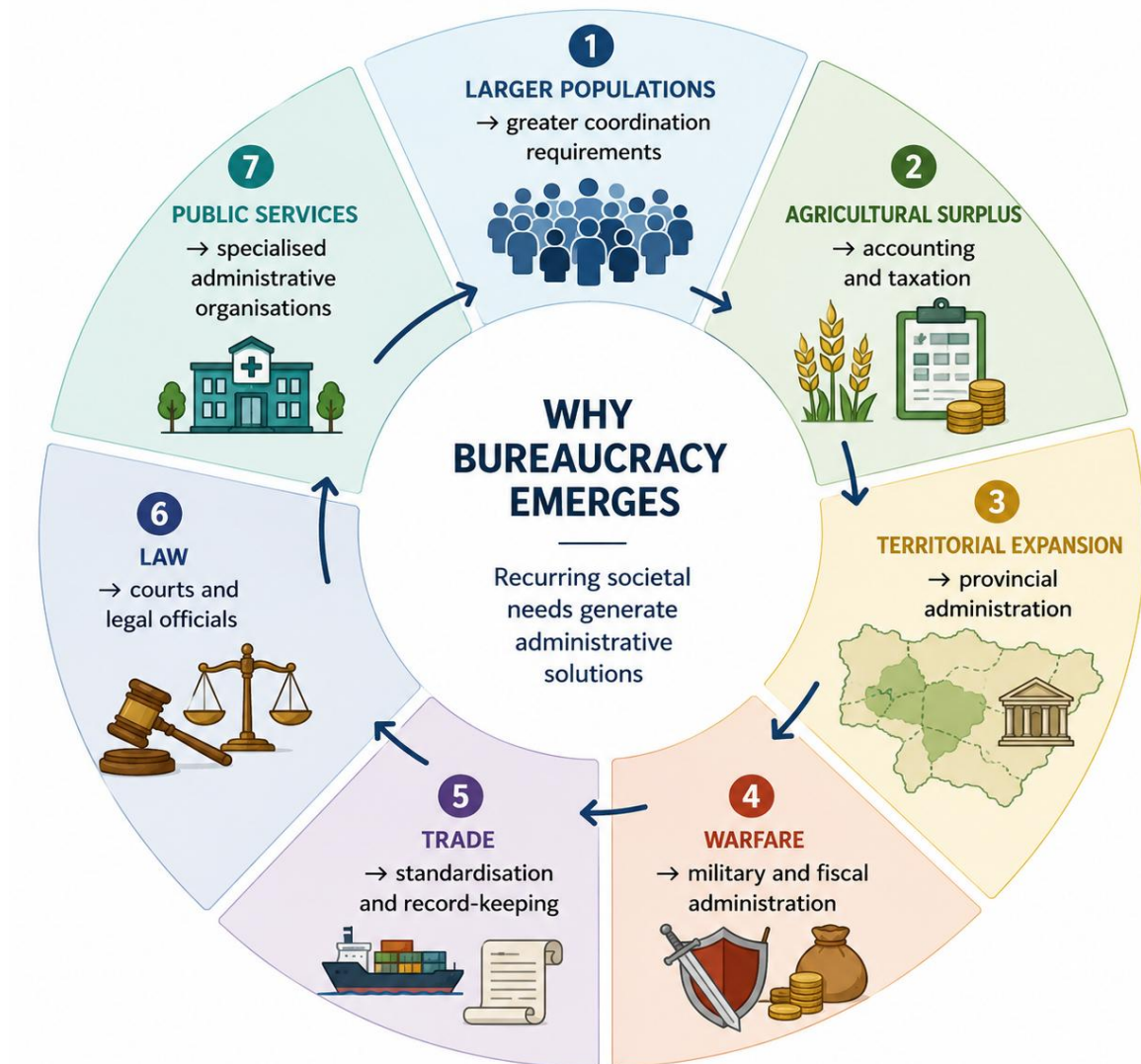


Figure 2: Why Bureaucracy Emerges (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

The precise solutions differed according to political institutions, economic organisation, religion, technology and cultural understandings of legitimate authority.

From Ancient Administration to Contemporary Bureaucratic Inequality

This historical perspective has important implications for understanding contemporary bureaucracy. Modern administrative systems contain several historical layers simultaneously.

1. The first can be described as **administrative bureaucracy**, originating in the need to manage populations, taxation, resources and territory.
2. The second is **imperial and colonial bureaucracy**, in which administration became closely associated with classification, surveillance, extraction and differential control over populations.

3. The third is **modern rational-legal bureaucracy**, characterised by professionalisation, written procedures, legal authority and standardisation.
4. The fourth is **welfare-state bureaucracy**, in which administrative systems determine access to education, healthcare, housing, income support, pensions and other social rights.
5. A fifth layer is now emerging: **algorithmic bureaucracy**, in which databases, automated decision-making, artificial intelligence and risk-profiling systems increasingly mediate interactions between citizens and the state.

These layers should not be regarded as completely separate. Contemporary bureaucracies can simultaneously contain elements of welfare provision, legal rationality, surveillance, classification and social control.

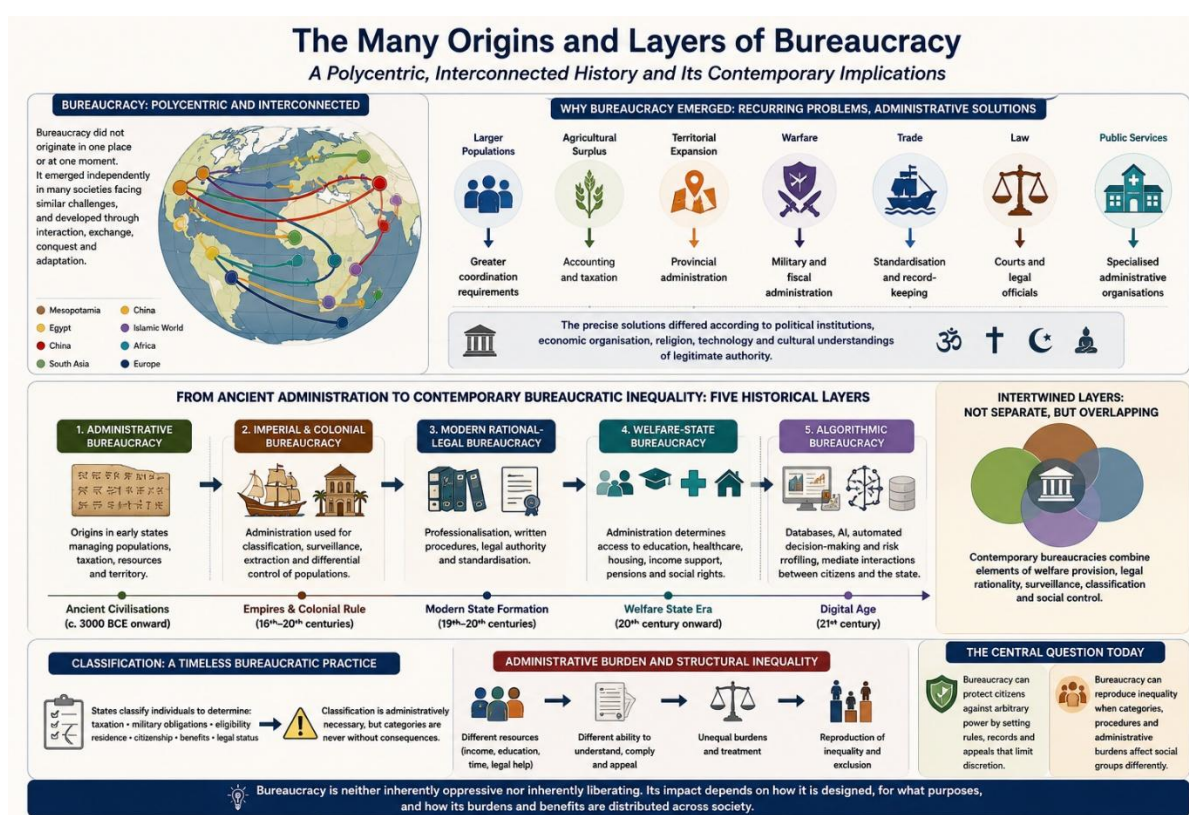


Figure 3: Many Origins and Layers of Bureaucracy (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

This historical continuity is particularly relevant to research on administrative burden and structural discrimination. The fundamental bureaucratic activity of classification has existed for thousands of years. States classify individuals in order to determine taxation, military obligations, eligibility, residence, citizenship, benefits and legal status. Classification is administratively necessary, but categories are never entirely without consequences.

The central contemporary question is therefore not whether bureaucracy itself is inherently oppressive. Bureaucracy can protect citizens against arbitrary power precisely

because rules, documentation and appeal procedures constrain individual discretion. At the same time, bureaucratic systems can reproduce inequality when categories, procedures and administrative burdens affect social groups differently.

Conclusion

The historical evidence does not support the proposition that bureaucracy is an exclusively Western invention. Administrative systems developed independently in numerous societies as political organisations confronted similar problems involving population growth, taxation, resource management, territorial expansion, warfare, law and communication. Mesopotamia and Egypt developed sophisticated administrative systems millennia before the modern European state. China constructed one of history's longest-lasting bureaucratic traditions, including increasingly formalised mechanisms for recruiting educated officials (Creel, 1964). The Mauryan Empire developed extensive networks of administrative functionaries in ancient South Asia, while Islamic empires created sophisticated fiscal, judicial, communications and governmental administrations.

The distinctive Western contribution was therefore not the invention of bureaucracy itself. Rather, European state formation, capitalism, industrialisation and eventually the welfare state contributed to a particular form of highly professionalised rational-legal bureaucracy subsequently theorised by Max Weber.

Colonialism complicated these trajectories by connecting previously distinct administrative traditions under highly unequal conditions of power. Colonial bureaucracies appropriated existing institutions while creating new systems of taxation, classification, surveillance and resource extraction. Many contemporary administrative systems consequently emerged not from a single historical tradition but from interactions among indigenous, imperial, colonial and modern state institutions.

The history of bureaucracy should therefore be understood as multiple, interconnected and global. This perspective also changes the contemporary analytical question. Instead of asking whether bureaucracy is Western or non-Western, research should investigate which historical forms of administration have survived within contemporary institutions, whose interests those arrangements serve, how administrative burdens are distributed, and under what conditions bureaucracy protects equality or reproduces inequality.

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN: WHEN BUREAUCRACY TRANSFERS COSTS TO CITIZENS

Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015) provide an especially useful theoretical framework. They conceptualise *administrative burden* as the costs citizens experience in their interactions with government. These costs consist of three principal components.

1. **Learning costs** arise when individuals must determine which programmes exist, whether they qualify, which institution is responsible, which documentation is required and how procedures operate.

2. **Compliance costs** involve the practical work necessary to satisfy administrative requirements: completing forms, collecting documents, demonstrating eligibility, attending appointments, meeting deadlines and challenging erroneous decisions.
3. **Psychological costs** include stress, frustration, stigma, uncertainty, loss of autonomy and the experience of being treated with suspicion by government institutions.

Learning costs concern discovering that a programme, entitlement or obligation exists and understanding how to navigate it. Compliance costs include completing forms, obtaining documentation, travelling to government offices, waiting, attending interviews and repeatedly demonstrating eligibility. Psychological costs include stress, stigma, frustration, uncertainty, loss of autonomy and the experience of being treated with suspicion.

These burdens should not automatically be understood as accidental administrative inefficiencies. Moynihan et al. (2015) emphasise that administrative burdens can reflect political choices concerning how citizens encounter the state. Requirements concerning documentation, eligibility, verification and fraud control can therefore influence access to public services even without formally changing the underlying entitlement.

Administrative burden can consequently become distributive. Herd et al. (2023) explicitly conceptualise administrative burden as both a source and consequence of inequality: people's ability to overcome bureaucratic obstacles is affected by the resources they already possess, while their success or failure in overcoming those obstacles can subsequently affect their socioeconomic position.

Western and Non-Western Models of Administrative Burden: When Bureaucracy Transfers Costs to Citizens

Introduction

Administrative systems inevitably impose certain costs on citizens. Individuals must learn which rules apply to them, demonstrate their eligibility for public services, provide information, complete procedures and sometimes challenge administrative decisions. The concept of **administrative burden** provides a theoretical framework for understanding these experiences. It refers to the burdens individuals experience when interacting with the state and is commonly divided into **learning costs**, **compliance costs** and **psychological costs** (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015).

Administrative systems as a concept has been developed predominantly within Western public-administration scholarship. Nevertheless, the underlying phenomenon is neither uniquely Western nor uniquely modern. States and administrative institutions throughout history have transferred informational, financial, temporal and psychological costs to the populations they govern. What differs across societies is the institutional form through which those costs are imposed, the groups upon whom they fall, and the resources citizens possess to overcome them.

Consequently, rather than proposing a simple dichotomy between a Western and a non-Western model, administrative burden can more appropriately be understood as a global phenomenon embedded within different historical and institutional traditions.

The Western Model: Formal Rules, Eligibility and Procedural Compliance

Modern Western bureaucracies developed particularly strongly around the principles of rational-legal administration described by Weber (1978). Authority became increasingly associated with formal law, specialized administrative offices, professional civil servants, written procedures and impersonal decision-making.

These characteristics have important advantages. Written rules can protect citizens against arbitrary treatment, while documentation creates accountability and opportunities for judicial review. However, the same institutional characteristics can generate substantial administrative burdens.

The contemporary welfare state provides a clear example. Governments establish eligibility criteria to determine who should receive unemployment assistance, housing support, disability benefits, childcare assistance, healthcare subsidies or other public provisions. Citizens must then demonstrate that they satisfy these criteria.

The administrative logic can be represented as:



Figure 4: Administrative Logic (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

The state consequently transfers part of the implementation process to the citizen. The citizen must understand the system, provide the evidence and comply with its procedural requirements.

Administrative burden scholarship demonstrates that these costs are distributive rather than socially neutral. People with greater income, education, time, digital skills, professional networks and legal knowledge generally possess greater resources with which to navigate administrative complexity (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Herd et al., 2023).

Consequently, a paradox emerges: equal administrative rules can produce unequal administrative burdens.

The Western welfare-state paradox. This creates what may be described as the welfare-state paradox of administrative burden.

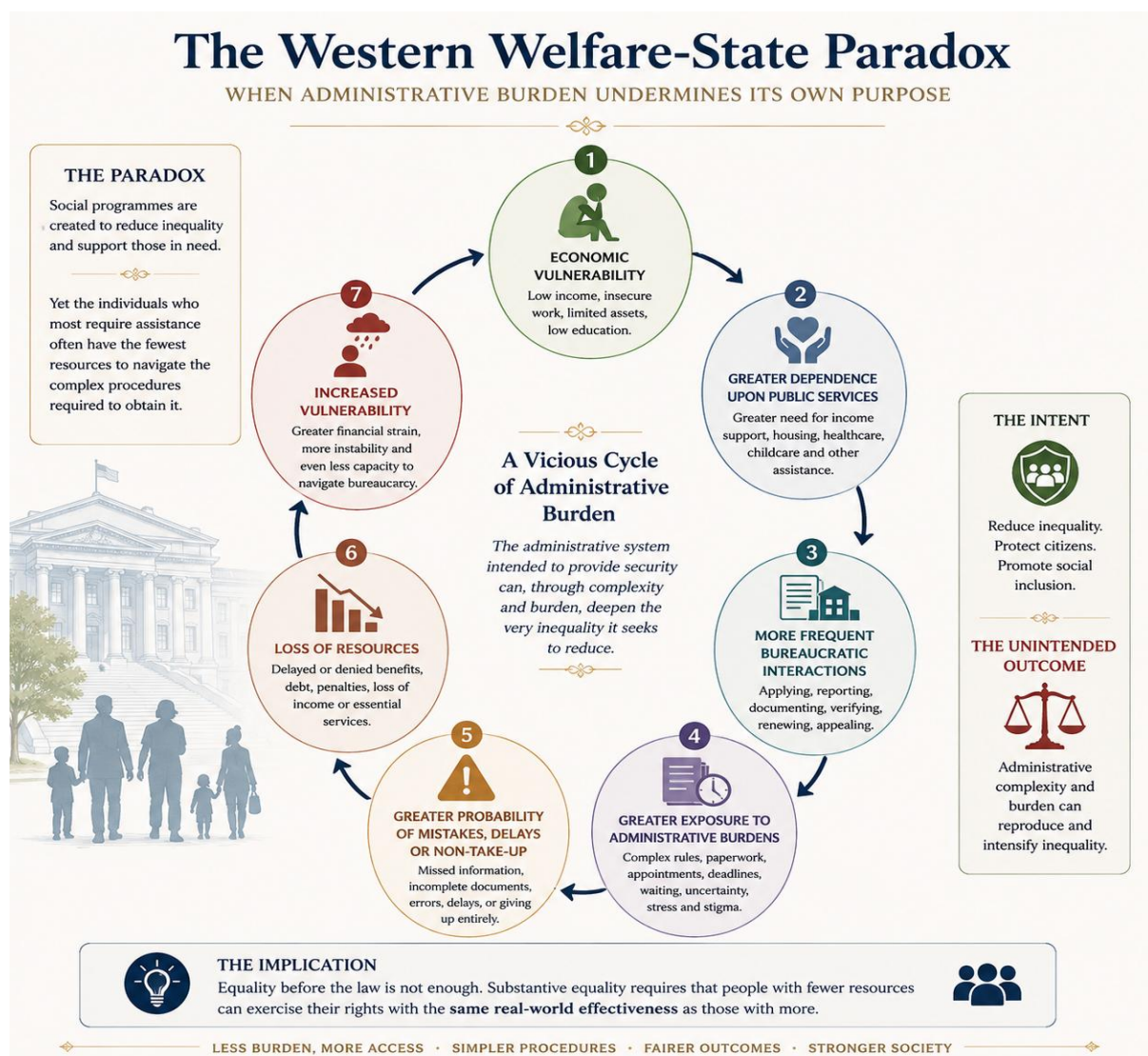


Figure 5: The Western Welfare-State Paradox (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

Social programmes are frequently created specifically to reduce inequality. Yet the individuals who most require assistance may possess the fewest resources with which to

navigate the procedures required to obtain it. This produces a potentially recursive relationship between bureaucracy and inequality.

The Dutch childcare benefits scandal illustrates the potential severity of this mechanism. Rules designed to prevent fraud, combined with intensive verification and risk assessment, generated extremely serious consequences for thousands of families. The case demonstrates how bureaucratic systems intended to administer social rights can become sources of insecurity when fraud prevention, documentation and compliance overwhelm principles of proportionality and citizen protection.

Administrative burden in Western welfare systems can therefore emerge from a tension between rights and control: governments seek simultaneously to provide social protection and to ensure that only eligible citizens receive it.

Non-Western Contexts: A More Heterogeneous Administrative Landscape

Applying administrative-burden theory to non-Western societies requires greater caution because these societies encompass enormously different political and administrative traditions.

There is no single “non-Western bureaucracy.” China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Brazil and Indigenous political systems possess radically different histories of state formation and citizen-state relations.

Nevertheless, several recurring mechanisms can be identified. In some contexts, citizens must navigate combinations of:

A. Formal State Bureaucracy + Local Administration + Family/Community Networks + Intermediaries + Informal Institutions.

The administrative burden is therefore not necessarily produced exclusively through formal government paperwork. It may also involve geographical distance, difficulties obtaining identity documents, language differences, limited digital access, dependence upon intermediaries, or uncertainty concerning which level of government possesses authority.

This suggests that the classical three-part model of learning, compliance and psychological costs remains useful but may require contextual expansion.

B. India: Documentation, Intermediaries and Access to Welfare

India provides a particularly important contemporary case. India possesses extensive welfare programmes intended to provide social protection to hundreds of millions of citizens. Yet the existence of an entitlement does not necessarily guarantee effective access. A recent study of administrative burden in India's welfare system describes citizens facing costs associated with understanding complex requirements, printing and obtaining documentation, paying intermediaries, visiting multiple offices, waiting for applications to be processed and repeatedly attempting to establish the status of claims (Kapoor et al., 2026).

The Welfare Journey in India:

The Administrative Burden Pathway

A recent study of administrative burden in India's welfare system describes citizens facing costs associated with understanding complex requirements, printing and obtaining documentation, paying intermediaries, visiting multiple offices, waiting for applications to be processed and repeatedly attempting to establish the status of claims (Kapoor et al., 2026).



Figure 6: The Welfare Journey in India (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

The Indian example illustrates why administrative capacity and citizen capacity must be analysed simultaneously.

A state may formally establish a welfare entitlement while citizens lack the informational, financial, geographical or digital resources required to access it. Administrative burden can therefore create a gap between: formal entitlement and substantive accessibility.

C. China: Selective Administrative Burden

Research from China provides another instructive example. Wang, Qi, and Liu (2023) examined administrative burdens associated with a public programme intended to facilitate the community integration of migrant populations through free education.

Paradoxically, the programme's intended beneficiaries encountered disproportionate administrative burdens. The authors found that disadvantaged target groups could consequently be systematically excluded from services specifically intended to assist them.

This illustrates an important phenomenon that can be described as:

policy inclusion + administrative exclusion.

A government may formally include a population within a policy while the implementation procedures make actual participation difficult.

Administrative burden therefore acts as a hidden eligibility mechanism.

Officially: "You are entitled to this service."

Administratively: "You must successfully navigate these requirements before you can exercise that entitlement."

The difference between these propositions is fundamental.

D. Colonial and Postcolonial Administrative Burden

A further distinction becomes important in many African, Asian, Caribbean and Latin American societies: the historical influence of colonial bureaucracy.

Colonial administrative systems were frequently designed primarily for purposes such as taxation, population classification, labour mobilisation, policing, land administration and resource extraction rather than universal social citizenship.

This created a particular relationship between administration and population:

classification → obligation → monitoring → extraction/control.

Postcolonial states did not simply erase these bureaucratic institutions upon independence. In many cases, administrative structures, territorial divisions, legal categories, documentation systems and organisational cultures were inherited and subsequently adapted to new political objectives.

This does not mean that contemporary administrative burdens in postcolonial countries can simply be attributed to colonialism. Contemporary state capacity, political institutions, economic development, technology and policy choices are also crucial.

Nevertheless, colonial history introduces a dimension that administrative-burden research should not ignore: bureaucracy historically served not only to distribute rights but also to classify and control populations.

Community-mediated Administration

Some non-Western administrative traditions also reveal an important alternative to the highly individualised citizen-state relationship assumed in much Western administrative-burden research. In many societies, individuals have historically accessed institutions through families, villages, religious organisations, elders, community leaders or other intermediaries. The administrative relationship may therefore resemble:

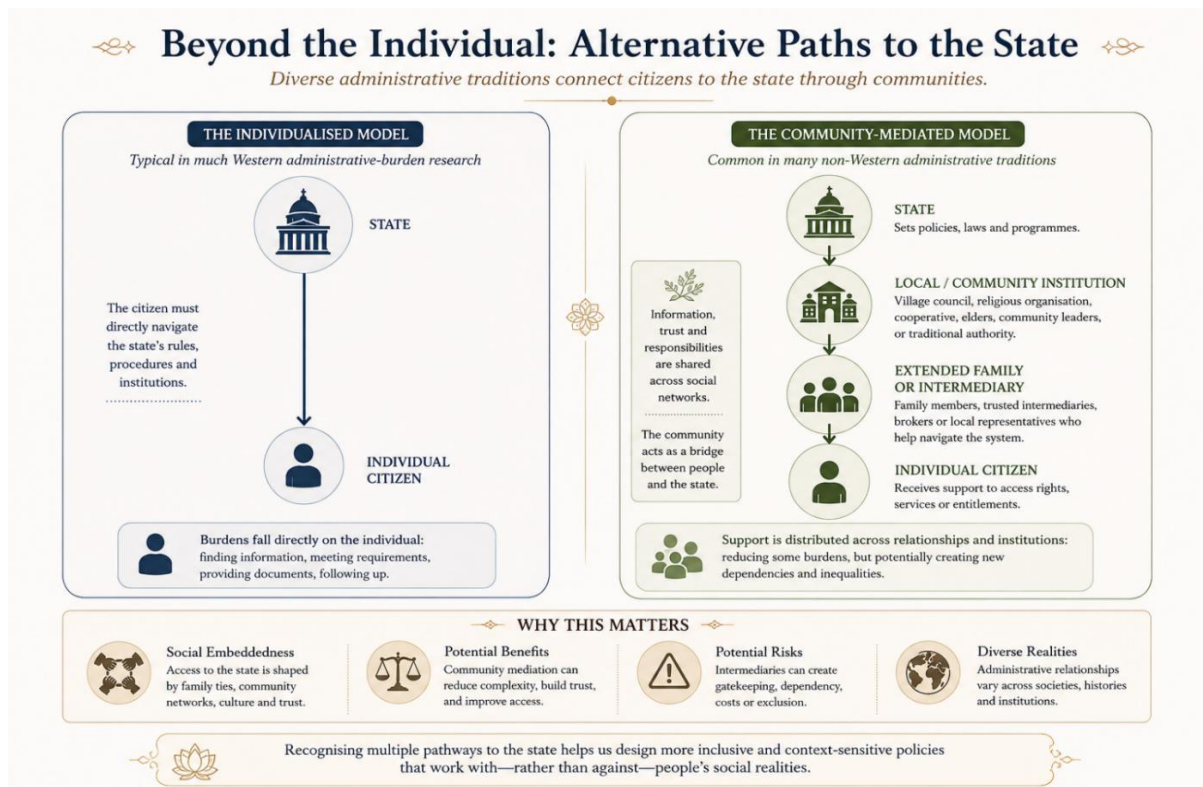


Figure 3: Beyond the Individual: Alternative Paths to the State (AI:
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Such arrangements can reduce administrative burden because knowledge and responsibilities are distributed across social networks.

A family member may help complete a procedure. A village authority may certify identity. Community networks may disseminate information. Local intermediaries may translate administrative language into culturally understandable terms. However, community mediation can also create new inequalities. Access may depend upon social connections, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion or local political relationships.

Thus: community support can reduce bureaucratic burden, while community gatekeeping can create administrative exclusion.

A Comparative Model

Western and non-Western administrative systems should therefore not be conceptualised as opposites. Instead, they can be compared according to how administrative burdens are generated and distributed.

Model 1 – Rational-legal Administrative Burden:

Common in highly formalised welfare states:

rules → eligibility → documentation → verification → decision

Principal risk: procedural complexity excludes citizens despite formal equality.

Model 2 – Capacity-based Administrative Burden:

Particularly important where administrative resources are uneven:

entitlement → limited information/infrastructure → repeated administrative encounters → delay/non-take-up

Principal risk: formal rights exceed the state's practical capacity to deliver them.

Model 3 – Intermediary Administrative Burden:

Where citizens depend heavily upon brokers, families or community institutions:

citizen → intermediary → bureaucracy → entitlement

Principal risk: access becomes dependent upon networks, money, status or local power.

Model 4 – Colonial/postcolonial Administrative Burden:

Historically associated with systems of classification and control:

classification → documentation → surveillance → differential administrative treatment

Principal risk: historically developed categories become embedded within later administrative systems.

Model 5 – Digital/algorithmic Administrative Burden:

Increasingly important across both Western and non-Western societies:

citizen data → database → algorithmic classification → risk/eligibility decision → service or investigation

Principal risk: traditional administrative burdens are replaced or supplemented by digital burdens, data errors, opacity and automated exclusion.

These models overlap. A contemporary citizen may encounter several simultaneously.

Towards a Global Model of Administrative Burden

As bureaucracies digitalise and administrative practices circulate internationally, the Western/non-Western distinction becomes less useful.

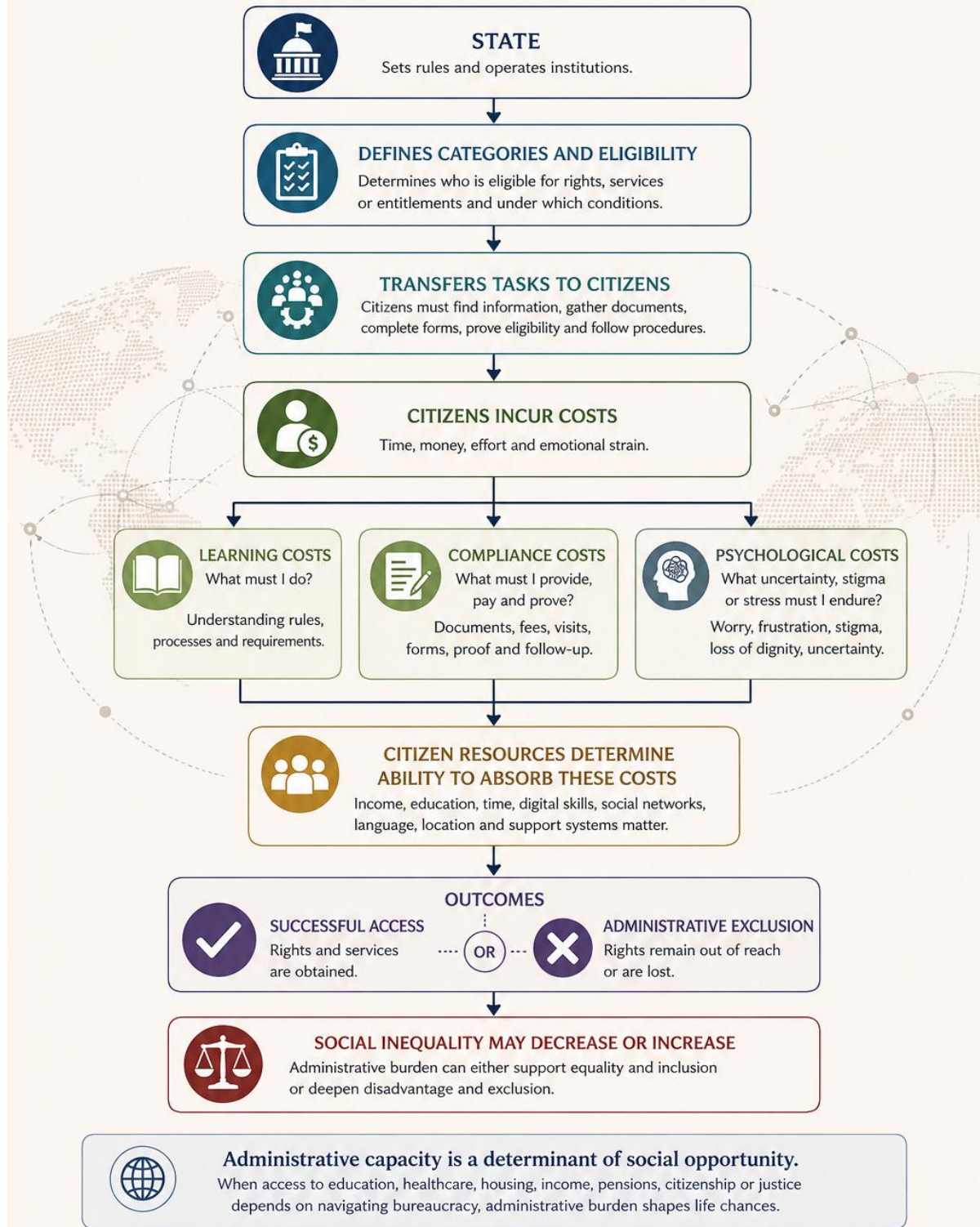


Figure 4: Towards a Global Model of Administrative Burden (AI:
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Towards a Global Model of Administrative Burden

The Western/non-Western distinction consequently becomes less useful as bureaucracies digitalise and administrative practices circulate internationally. This final stage 'Social Inequality may increase or decrease' is crucial. Administrative burden is not merely an inconvenience. When access to education, healthcare, housing, income, pensions, citizenship or justice depends upon successful navigation of bureaucracy, administrative capacity becomes a determinant of social opportunity.

Conclusion

Administrative burden provides a powerful framework for comparing Western and non-Western bureaucratic systems, provided that the concept is not treated as culturally universal in precisely the same institutional form.

The contemporary theory originated largely in Western public-administration research, but the underlying phenomenon is global. Citizens across political systems bear informational, temporal, financial and psychological costs when interacting with states.

Western welfare-state bureaucracies frequently transfer costs through formal eligibility rules, documentation and verification. In other contexts, burdens may additionally arise through weak administrative capacity, geographical distance, dependence upon intermediaries, fragmented documentation systems or inherited colonial administrative arrangements. Research from China demonstrates that administrative burdens can systematically exclude disadvantaged populations even from programmes specifically intended to include them (Wang et al., 2023). Research from India similarly illustrates the substantial time, financial, informational and psychological costs that vulnerable citizens can encounter while attempting to obtain welfare entitlements (Kapoor et al., 2026).

The comparison therefore reveals a deeper principle: Administrative burden begins when the state transfers part of the work required to exercise a right from the institution to the citizen.

The consequences of that transfer depend upon the citizen's resources. A wealthy, highly educated citizen with digital skills, time and professional assistance may experience a complicated procedure primarily as an inconvenience. A poor citizen confronting the same procedure may experience it as an effective barrier to a social right.

The central question is consequently not simply whether administrative procedures are identical for everyone. It is whether people with unequal resources possess a reasonably equal capacity to navigate them.

From this perspective, administrative burden constitutes an important bridge between the study of bureaucracy and the study of structural inequality. Bureaucratic systems do not have to explicitly discriminate in order to produce unequal outcomes. If administrative costs fall systematically more heavily upon populations with fewer economic, educational, linguistic, digital or social resources, bureaucracy itself can participate in the reproduction of inequality.

The appropriate objective is therefore not a bureaucracy without rules, but a bureaucracy in which the cost of exercising a right is not so great that the right becomes inaccessible to those who need it most.

ECONOMIC CAPITAL CHANGES THE EXPERIENCE OF BUREAUCRACY

This literature provides an important connection between bureaucracy and economic inequality. Consider two citizens confronted with exactly the same complicated administrative procedure. One possesses considerable income, savings, education, professional networks and access to lawyers, accountants or other advisers. The other possesses little disposable income, has insecure employment, limited savings and little access to professional assistance.

Formally, both individuals confront the same bureaucracy. Functionally, they do not.

The first person can externalise part of the administrative burden. An accountant can interpret tax regulations; a lawyer can challenge an administrative decision; an adviser can complete an application; financial reserves can absorb delays in payments.

The second person must absorb these costs personally. Time spent completing forms may mean lost working hours. Legal assistance may be unaffordable. A delayed benefit payment can create debt. An incorrect repayment demand can threaten the household's financial stability.

Consequently: formal equality of administrative rules does not necessarily produce equality of administrative burden.

This distinction provides a potentially important mechanism through which bureaucracy can reproduce socioeconomic inequality.

From Economic Inequality to Unequal Institutional Power

A second mechanism operates at the political level. Unequal distributions of income and capital can produce unequal distributions of other resources, including information, expertise, organisational capacity, political access and influence.

The relationship should nevertheless be formulated cautiously. It would be too deterministic to propose: economic inequality → bureaucratic complexity.

A theoretically stronger formulation is: economic inequality → resource and power asymmetries → differential influence over institutions and differential capacity to navigate them.

Economic resources can be converted into organisational and political resources. Corporations, professional associations and affluent citizens may possess greater capacity to employ specialists, lobby decision-makers, participate in consultation processes and challenge administrative decisions. Citizens with few resources may formally possess the same political and legal rights but have considerably less practical capacity to exercise them.

Research on governance similarly stresses that policy is implemented in contexts characterised by unequal power and that these asymmetries can produce exclusion or

institutional capture. Bureaucratic rules therefore cannot always be analysed independently of the distribution of power within the society that created them.

A SELF-REINFORCING INEQUALITY CYCLE

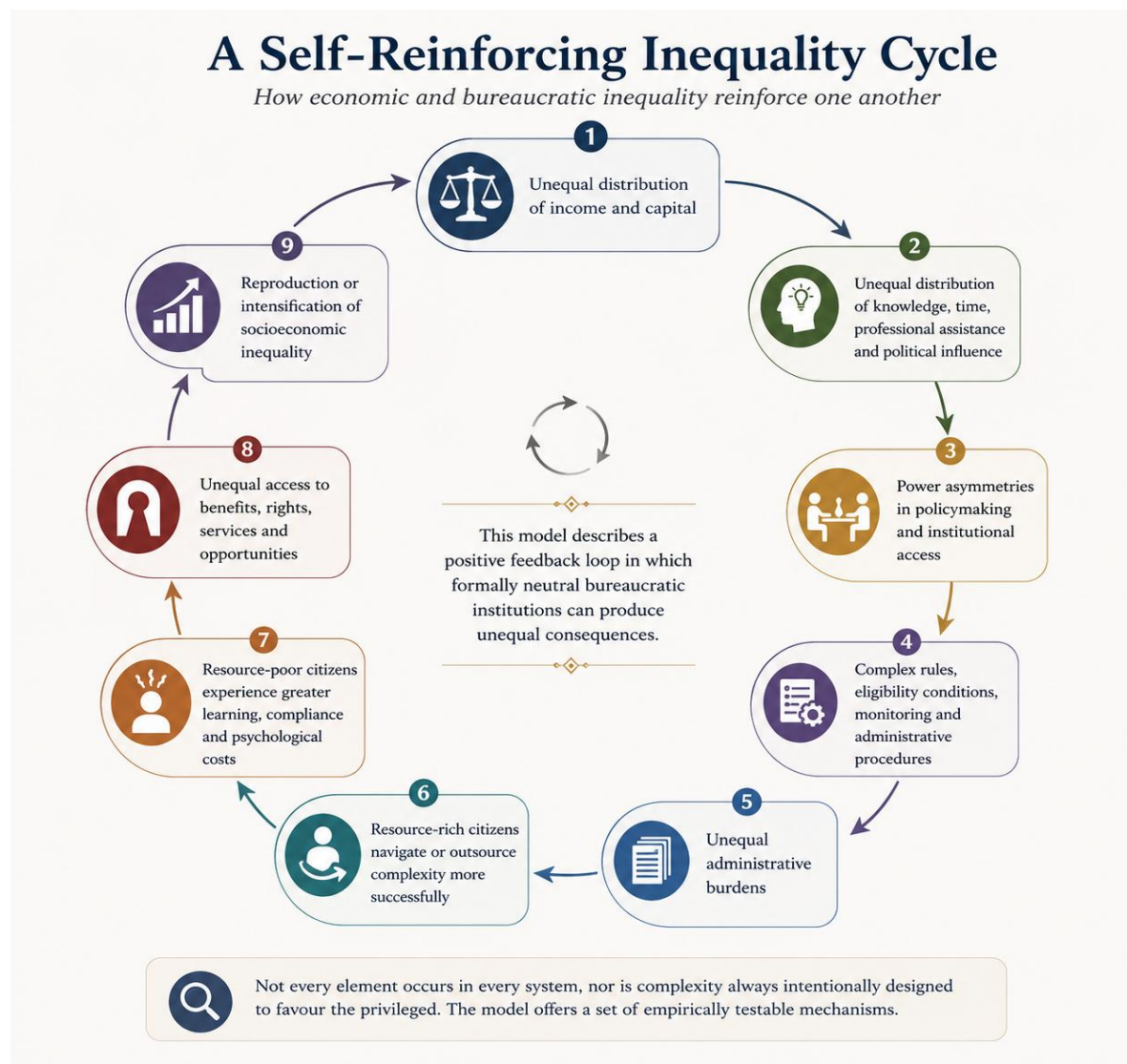


Figure 5: A Self-Reinforcing Inequality Cycle (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

This model does not imply that every element occurs in every bureaucratic system. Nor does it establish that administrative complexity is intentionally designed to favour economically privileged groups. Rather, it provides a set of empirically testable mechanisms through which formally neutral bureaucratic institutions can produce unequal consequences.

This is important because structural inequality does not necessarily require discriminatory intentions. It can emerge from the cumulative interaction of rules, resources, institutional practices and differences in people's capacity to respond to administrative demands.

BUREAUCRATIC FAILURE AND THE DUTCH CHILDCARE BENEFITS SCANDAL

The Dutch childcare benefits scandal (*toeslagenaffaire*) provides an unusually powerful case through which to examine these mechanisms.

The scandal involved thousands of parents who were wrongly suspected of fraud or subjected to excessively severe enforcement practices in relation to childcare benefits. Small administrative mistakes could produce extremely serious financial consequences. Parents could be required to repay large amounts, while opportunities to correct errors or challenge administrative decisions were severely constrained.

The Parliamentary Inquiry Committee concluded that affected parents had suffered an unprecedented injustice (*ongekend onrecht*) and that fundamental principles of the rule of law had been violated. Criticism extended beyond individual civil servants to multiple components of the governmental and legal system.

The case therefore illustrates an important characteristic of structural bureaucratic failure: responsibility can become distributed across an institutional system.

Legislators create strict rules. Ministries translate them into policy. Administrative organisations operationalise them. Computer systems classify cases. Civil servants implement procedures. Supervisors monitor compliance. Courts review decisions. Citizens are required to provide evidence.

Each component may appear individually rational while their interaction produces profoundly irrational or unjust outcomes.

Fraud Prevention and the Institutionalisation of Suspicion

The scandal also illustrates how bureaucratic systems can transform legitimate governmental objectives into damaging administrative practices. Preventing fraud is a legitimate objective. Governments have an obligation to ensure that public resources are distributed lawfully. The difficulty arises when the institutional priority changes from:

“provide eligible citizens with benefits while detecting fraud”

to something approaching: “prevent fraud even at the risk of treating legitimate claimants as potential fraudsters.”

Such a change alters the relationship between citizen and state. Citizens are no longer primarily rights-holders applying for a public provision. They increasingly become objects of verification and risk assessment. This creates conditions in which administrative suspicion can become institutionalised.

The childcare-benefits system employed risk profiling to identify applications for additional scrutiny. Amnesty International’s investigation concluded that nationality was incorporated into risk assessment in ways that resulted in discriminatory treatment and described aspects of the system as discriminatory algorithmic profiling. The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights has likewise identified the scandal as demonstrating how discrimination can arise through state risk-profiling processes.

The significance extends beyond algorithms. Algorithms operate within administrative systems created by human decisions. Officials decide which variables are

relevant, what constitutes risk, what threshold triggers investigation and what consequences follow from being classified as suspicious. An algorithm can therefore institutionalise previous administrative assumptions at enormous scale.

Socioeconomic Vulnerability and Cumulative Administrative Harm

Administrative mistakes have radically different consequences depending upon a household's resources.

An affluent household confronted with an incorrect demand for several thousand euros may experience inconvenience and anger but retain sufficient savings and legal assistance to contest the decision.

For a low-income household, the same demand can become catastrophic.

It may produce: administrative error → repayment demand → income shortage → debt → additional administrative problems → housing or family instability → psychological distress.

The important point is that these are not independent events. They accumulate.

This can be described as cumulative administrative disadvantage: an initial bureaucratic decision changes the citizen's circumstances, which increases vulnerability to subsequent bureaucratic demands.

Administrative burden thereby becomes potentially recursive. The poorer a household becomes, the harder bureaucracy becomes to navigate; the harder bureaucracy becomes to navigate, the greater the probability that administrative difficulties will exacerbate poverty. This mechanism provides a particularly strong theoretical connection between administrative burden and economic inequality.

From Socioeconomic Inequality to Structural Discrimination

The relationship becomes still more consequential when socioeconomic vulnerability overlaps with ethnicity, migration background, nationality, disability, language or other social characteristics.

These categories should not be conflated. Poverty is not racism, and racial discrimination cannot simply be reduced to class inequality.

However, inequalities can intersect. Suppose a fraud-control system disproportionately selects citizens with particular migration backgrounds for additional scrutiny. Suppose these citizens also have, on average, fewer economic resources with which to challenge administrative decisions. The resulting inequality would then emerge from an interaction between:

selection mechanisms + bureaucratic complexity + socioeconomic vulnerability + unequal capacity for legal redress.

No single civil servant needs consciously to intend a discriminatory outcome for this process to become structurally discriminatory.

The Dutch childcare benefits scandal therefore provides a useful illustration of the distinction between individual intention and institutional outcome that is central to theories of structural discrimination. Amnesty International's analysis specifically warned that algorithmic risk profiling in the benefits system reproduced discriminatory patterns and emphasised the dangers of unregulated automated decision-making in public administration.

Bureaucratic Complexity as a Distributive Institution

This leads to a broader theoretical proposition. Bureaucracy should not be understood merely as an administrative instrument that implements distributional policies decided elsewhere.

Bureaucracy is itself Distributive

The design of administrative systems determines who receives resources, how quickly they receive them, what evidence they must produce, whose behaviour is regarded as suspicious, which mistakes are tolerated and who possesses realistic opportunities for appeal. Administrative architecture therefore helps distribute not only money but also:

time, uncertainty, risk, dignity, autonomy and access to rights.

From this perspective, the relevant measure of bureaucratic equality cannot simply be whether everybody is formally subjected to identical rules. A more substantive test is:

Can citizens with different socioeconomic and social positions exercise their rights with approximately equal effectiveness?

If the answer is no, formally neutral administrative procedures may contribute to structural inequality.

Complexity, Economic Inequality and Structural Racism: An Integrated Model

The argument developed here can therefore be integrated with the broader analysis of structural racism.

STRUCTURAL RACISM: THREE INTERACTING LEVELS AND THEIR OUTCOMES

Structural discrimination emerges through the interaction of history, institutions and unequal capacity.

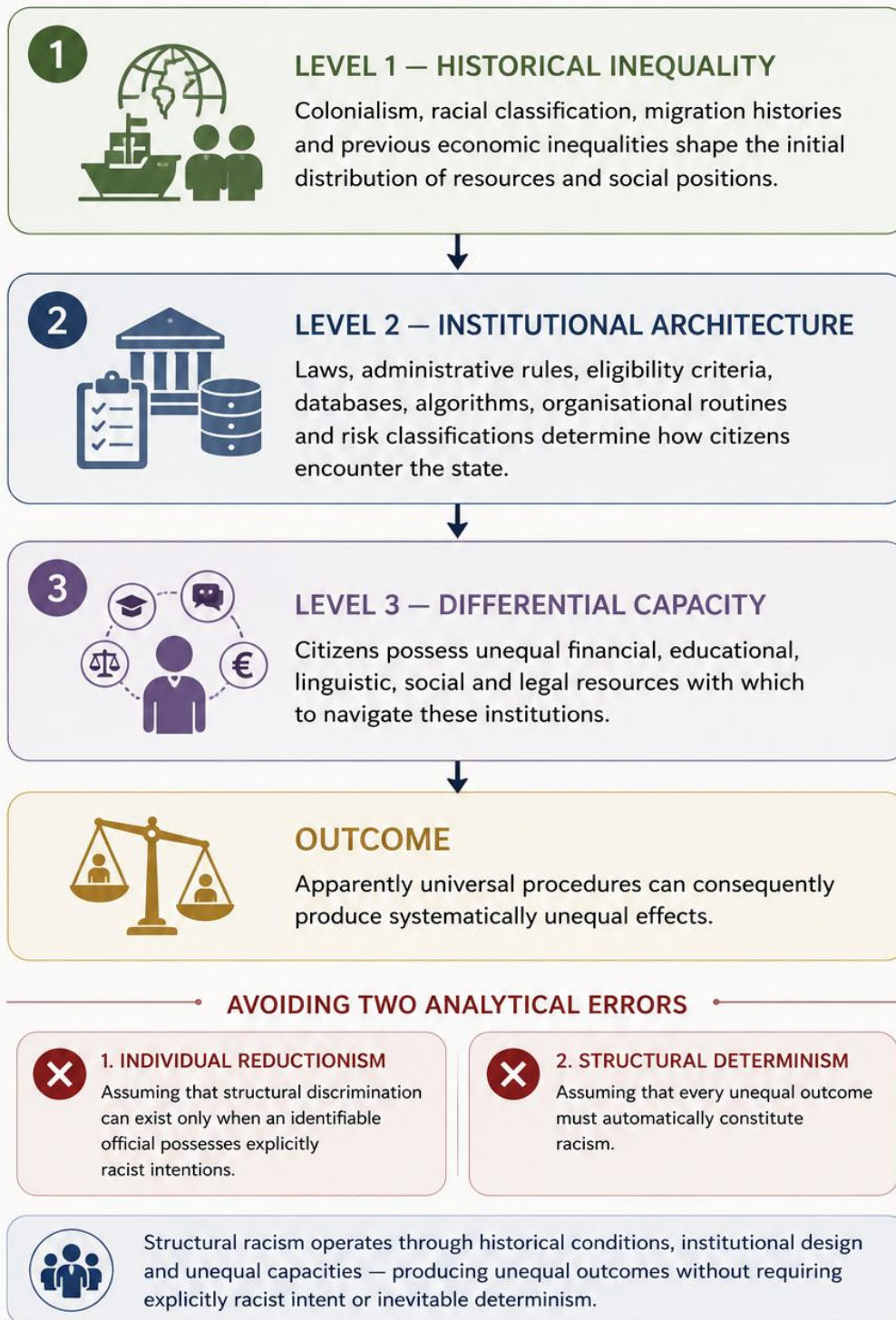


Figure 6: Structural Racism: Three Interacting Levels and their Outcomes (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

Implications for Institutional Reform

If this analysis is correct, combating structural inequality requires more than training individual civil servants against prejudice. It requires administrative redesign.

Governments should systematically evaluate who bears the costs of administrative procedures. This requires measuring not only whether policies are legally neutral but also their learning, compliance and psychological burdens across different social groups.

Administrative simplification is therefore potentially an equality intervention.

Procedures can be designed according to several principles:

- automatic enrolment where government already possesses the necessary information;
- proportionality between administrative errors and sanctions;
- simple and understandable communication;
- meaningful human review of automated decisions;
- accessible appeals procedures;
- monitoring for disparate outcomes across social groups;
- greater discretion to correct obvious injustices;
- independent oversight of algorithmic risk systems; and
- direct participation of affected citizens in administrative redesign.

The objective should not be the elimination of bureaucracy. Complex societies inevitably require administrative institutions. The objective should instead be proportionate bureaucracy: administrative complexity should never exceed what is demonstrably necessary to achieve a legitimate public objective.

CONCLUSION

Bureaucratic complexity cannot convincingly be explained as a simple consequence of unequal income and capital. Its causes are broader and include organisational differentiation, political compromise, regulation, technological systems, accountability requirements, fraud prevention and accumulated institutional rules.

Nevertheless, economic inequality profoundly affects how bureaucracy is experienced.

Citizens do not enter administrative institutions with equal resources. Income, wealth, education, time, social networks, language proficiency, professional assistance and legal knowledge affect people's ability to understand, comply with and challenge bureaucratic decisions. Consequently, formally identical procedures can impose radically different effective burdens.

Economic inequality and bureaucratic inequality should therefore be conceptualised as potentially recursive. Economic resources affect the capacity to navigate institutions; institutions distribute administrative burdens unevenly; these burdens influence access to

economic and social resources; and the resulting inequalities subsequently determine people's capacity to navigate the next bureaucratic encounter.

The Dutch childcare benefits scandal demonstrates the potential severity of this process. It illustrates how strict legislation, fraud-oriented institutional cultures, risk profiling, automated decision-making, fragmented responsibility and socioeconomic vulnerability can interact to transform bureaucracy from a mechanism intended to deliver social rights into a mechanism capable of producing profound harm. Evidence concerning discriminatory risk profiling further demonstrates how socioeconomic and racialised inequalities can become intertwined within administrative processes.

When Bureaucracy Becomes Inequality

How bureaucratic complexity can reproduce social and economic inequality

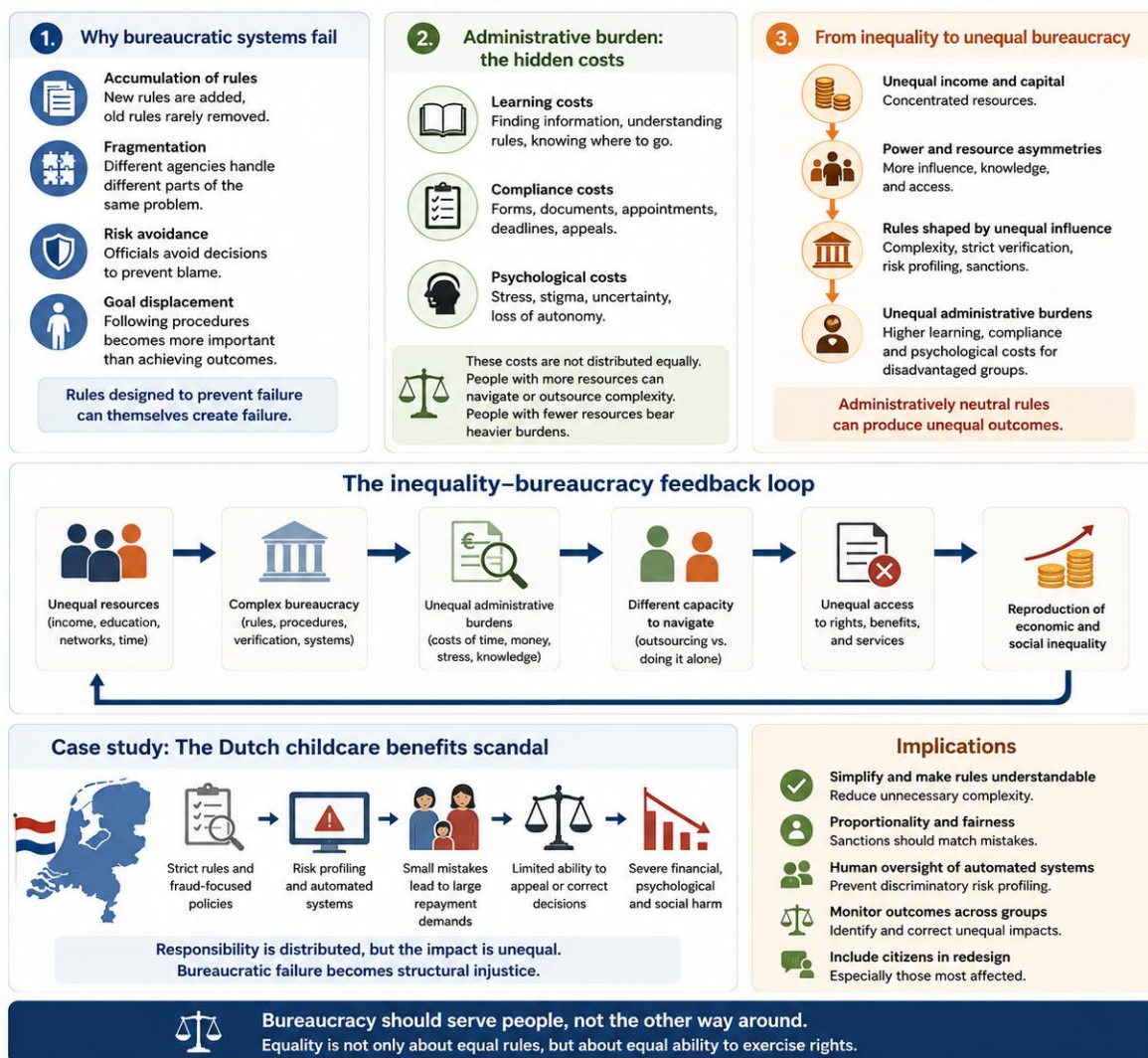


Figure 7: When Bureaucracy Becomes Inequality (AI: <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a797ffa-6574-83eb-859f-4702ddb469fa>)

The central theoretical implication is therefore that bureaucracy should be analysed as part of the structure of inequality itself. Structural discrimination does not reside solely in the attitudes of decision-makers. It may also reside in the architecture of institutions: in

classification systems, eligibility criteria, evidentiary requirements, algorithms, sanctions and appeal procedures.

The decisive question for an egalitarian administrative system is consequently not simply: “Does the same rule apply to everyone?”

It is: “Can people with unequal resources nevertheless exercise the same rights with comparable effectiveness, and does the administrative system actively prevent existing inequalities from determining who succeeds in navigating the state?”

When the answer is negative, bureaucratic complexity can cease to be merely an administrative problem and become a mechanism for the reproduction of structural inequality.

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