

Weber's paradox

Y. Sandy Berkovski

July 2026

The paradox stated

Every few years the citizens of a modern democracy do something odd. They live under a state run by tax inspectors, central bankers, judges, prosecutors, police officers. Then, one day, they choose a single person to sit on top of it all. And they make their choice on the strength of debate performances, a mien, a story, a vague feeling of trust. Nobody interviews the candidate. Nobody regards him as an expert in anything in particular. The head of the modern bureaucratic state, the most rational organization in human history, is placed there by an act of faith.

Writing at the end of the First World War, Max Weber welcomed this very arrangement as a remedy for a fundamental political problem. He argued that, once in place, the rational administrative apparatus is practically indestructible (Weber 1978, 2:987). Unchecked, the indispensable trained officials become the actual rulers. He regarded this condition of bureaucratic rule as a malaise—if not to be cured, then at least kept in check.

Weber's remedy harbors a paradox: the more rational the administration of the state becomes, the more its direction depends on a legitimacy that isn't rational at all. Unsurprisingly, the paradoxical remedy doesn't work, even on Weber's own terms. Before saying why, let's see the problems inherent in bureaucratic rule.

The malaise of bureaucratic rule

What do the officials have that the rest of us don't? First, professional training, whether in law, public finance, or military logistics. Then the service knowledge that settles in the "files" as business gets done. Enveloping both is secrecy, invented and fiercely guarded by bureaucracy (Weber 1978, 2:992). The result is rule by experts.

The first ill is built into the design. A bureaucracy is equipped to find means. Give it an end, revenue to raise or a war to supply, and its effectiveness is often wondrous. On which ends are worth pursuing, it is silent. Direction has to come from outside: even the purest type of bureaucracy requires at its head an authority selected differently from the officials below it (Weber 1978, 2:1123).

Where there is no outsider to control them, the officials govern according to their own, often arbitrary values and preferences. Germany in the First World War shows the effect, a great state governed by its officialdom into catastrophe (Weber 1994b, 145).

The second ill is the negation of freedom. As Weber narrates it in his work on farm labor in East Prussia, the laborers were abandoning the great estates, despite having the most secure material position in Germany (Weber 2019b). They were fleeing the world of masters and servants where their children would forever toil on someone else's land, subservient to the masters' will. Anyone who couldn't appreciate that urge, Weber argued, was oblivious to "the magic of freedom" (Weber 1994d, 8).

As a necessary attribute of rationalization, bureaucratization can't be stopped. Hence two questions remain: how can any remnant of individual freedom be saved? and how can the power of officialdom be controlled? Weber's analytic framework deals with the second (Weber 1994b, 159). The first I'll come back to.

The leader between two machines

The two ills suggest a way forward: the officialdom needs an outsider to give it ends and to keep it in check. Weber's candidate for both roles is the *leader* (Weber 1994e). Genuine *charisma* can fulfil the first role. Weber's model of a charismatic leader is the prophet whose formula is "It was written, but I say unto you" (Weber 1978, 2:1115). His followers place their faith in his unique personal qualities. They gather around ends of his own creation. They don't follow him because he expresses and defends *their* antecedent values most effectively.

In a modern democracy, the popularly elected leader is no such figure. To win, a candidate must articulate preferences *already* in circulation. The contest crowns whoever runs the best election campaign. An elected leader may occasionally pursue his own original goals, but the voters rarely welcome such originality. Whereas the prophet *made* his following, the political candidate *is* made by his. As Weber himself conceded, pure prophetic charisma is bound to "vanish" in a normal electoral process (Weber 1978, 2:1126–27).

The second role requires the leader to check the officials. To check them, he must know what they're up to. Yet everything he knows about the state apparatus comes through other officials. Sometimes these officials are from other departments and ministries. On other occasions, they are drawn from the leader's own power instrument, such as a bureaucratized political party (Weber 1994b, 179). In either case, bureaucratic rules and regulations determine what appears on the leader's desk. The strict rules of secrecy (aka "confidentiality") decide what never appears.

Consider an episode from the First World War. To close British merchant routes, in January 1917 the German admiralty insisted on unrestricted submarine warfare (Offer 1993). Relying on trade numbers and diplomatic reports, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg objected that, while Britain would adapt, America would join the war. When the High Command sided with the navy, the Kaiser yielded to its ostensibly superior expertise. Yet, despite the anxiety they produced, the sinkings didn't starve Britain. But the Americans came, and the war's outcome was all but decided.

The checking role, therefore, comes down to a dilemma. Either the leader's apparatus itself does the checking, and then charisma contributes no control the machinery doesn't already supply (Weber 2019a, 428ff). Or his apparatus is too small or weak, and the leader helplessly faces the knowledge monopoly alone.

The leader's judgement

Control, then, is the machinery's work. One thing might still be genuinely the leader's own: his judgement. Weber tells us that the genuine politician is responsible for the foreseeable consequences of his action (Weber 1994f). But foreseeing consequences calls for causal knowledge of administration, the economy, diplomacy, and war. Where does the leader's foresight come from?

One possibility is common sense, the plain man asking the naive question. But to ask the right question he must know what the files contain, and the files are what he can't see. Forecasting is beyond common sense anyway: questions of diplomacy and military tactics are decidable only by experts (Weber 1994b, 220).

On the other hand, expertise won't do either, for that's the ground the official already occupies. The leader faces the trained official like "a dilettante facing the expert" (Weber 1978, 2:991).

Weber's own answer points in another direction altogether. The leader's distinct characteristic is his *ethic of responsibility* (Weber 1994f). An official must conscientiously execute, as if it were his own, an instruction he personally disagrees with. A leader who did that would deserve contempt: his duty is to resign (which Bethmann Hollweg failed to do). He should instead take responsibility for the consequences of *his* decision and *his* action. This ethic of responsibility can be acquired and polished in the open struggle for power.

Weber's answer is unconvincing, however. The contrast between executing and resigning is a contrast between role obligations. Though it might tell us who should be held responsible for the consequences of a policy, it doesn't say how anyone is to foresee them. A leader willing to accept the blame for a miscalculation is no better placed to avoid it. The struggle for power might teach skills like coalition arithmetic and press handling, practised by the modern party's salaried experts (Breiner 1996). Expertise in winning power,

therefore, differs from that of the administrative official only in its subject matter. True, winning power sometimes includes announcing a “vision” and persuading the public of its attractions. But in the reality of the modern state, such a vision is extracted from the pollsters’ data, tested in focus groups, and revised when it doesn’t click. Since this technical routine applies to preferences already in circulation, it can’t make the candidate a creator of values.

The trouble can be traced to Weber’s fundamental distinction between two forms of rationality (Weber 2012). A judgement about means can be checked against causal knowledge and corrected (Schluchter 1989). A judgement about value can be clarified by criticism, but never made objectively correct. Compare the case of aesthetics. Even supposing that there are no objective facts about beauty, some judges of painting are better than others. That’s because aesthetic discrimination is trained on comparisons, exemplary cases, history of art, material technique and the like. If judgement of political values is formed this way, it’s another rational and teachable competence. Then an economist or a historian should judge better than the elected leader. If it isn’t, labelling value preference “good judgement” at most conveys our approval.

That’s Weber’s view too: when ultimate values clash, each of us must simply “decide which is God for him and which is the devil” (Weber 1994c, 296). What’s left for the leader alone is this non-cognitive, non-rational value choice. In short, where criteria of correctness apply, the charismatic supplement is idle. Where they don’t, no sense can be made of “right” or “wrong” judgements. There are only more or less attractive choices.

Alternative medicine

Weber’s remedy has two problems built into it. The charismatic leader is supposed to master the bureaucratic apparatus. Yet his very capacity to act depends necessarily on the ideas and knowledge of that apparatus. Moreover, the leader’s judgement is supposed to be distinct from a bureaucratic judgement. On a closer look, if it’s a rational judgement at all, it’s a product of inferior expertise.

Here is a different solution with Weberian roots. Following Michael Oakeshott, distinguish two styles of modern governing (Oakeshott 1996). In the *politics of faith*, since governing aims at the good of mankind, no quantity of power is excessive. In the *politics of skepticism*, governing is meant to keep order and maintain the means of redress. The limits on power are severe and easy to overstep.

Weber’s remedy looks like a mixture of the two styles. The skeptical style characterizes the institutions charged with keeping order, like parliamentary committees and courts. The style of faith is reserved for the summit. Only the leader may set exalted ends like society’s improvement. Moreover, the position itself is filled by the followers’ belief in his person. In 1932 Carl Schmitt proposed to purify the mixture toward faith. His recipe was to drop parliamentary legality and let the popularly elected president rule by decree (Schmitt 2004). We know how this played out.

So purify the other way. To begin with control, recall the 1917 submarine episode. The chancellor’s unsuccessful resistance came neither from common sense, nor from esoteric charisma. It was based instead on another department’s data. Official knowledge could be corrected only by *rival* official knowledge. Then we should endorse a varied plurality of rivals, like parliamentary committees armed with the right of enquiry (Weber 1994b, 179), audit offices, courts, ministries watching one another, an independent press that can obtain information of its own. None of this is glamorous or neat. It is the tedious daily work using the apparatus’s own characteristic means, records against records.

Next, reconceive the ballot. It is not a test of judgement. Its purpose is merely to keep the rotation going and to protect the ability to remove dysfunctional leaders peacefully (Weber 1994b, 221–22). Given the history of succession by intrigue and murder, that’s a fine achievement (Palonen 2023).

We should welcome this arrangement not out of inertia or a lack of imagination. Yes, the institutions it keeps are the ones a modern democracy already has. But we should revise our understanding of them and our expectations. On occasion, elections may test “vision” in the sense of a professed set of ends delivered with conviction (what is sometimes misleadingly called “charisma”). What the vote can’t do is assess the vision and its concrete political consequences. Consequences are a factual matter, but the facts are locked in the bureaucratic files the voter will never inspect. And when consequences do get examined, the putatively

expert bodies are entrusted with auditing the manifestos and the promises. It is different with the values themselves. No expert can assess them, since values aren't something to be discovered in the first place.

An election, therefore, beyond deciding who holds office may also register the attractiveness of ends. But it can't certify judgement, and a polity that expects it to would misapply its effort. An electorate that looks for wisdom in its representatives will neglect the committees and, generally, the boring institutions of control. A polity that expects only a peaceful removal has every reason to protect exactly those institutions.

None of this is traditionalism. Traditional authority, as Weber himself argued, rests on the sanctity of custom. The disenchantment of the modern age has broken that spell for good (Weber 1994c). The restraints to be kept may sometimes be "old", but they don't need the spell. Every one is a product of the same rationalization that built the apparatus. What a disenchanted age can't warrant is the act of faith at the summit of the rational machine.

So far I've ignored Weber's other question, the question of freedom. If freedom is to survive, legal statutes, and bureaucratic regulations generally, have a role to play. In the East Prussian exodus, the law let the laborers go, despite the best efforts of the estate owners who pressed for a tax on the move to the city and tried to bind their workers to the soil (Weber 2019b, 110). So a statute can close the door or leave it open.

Another essential element in freedom's survival is, once again, the fact of plurality. Whether in the cities or overseas, East Prussian laborers could gain employment on different terms. A country of rival hierarchies has multiple masters. If workers can't have well-paid employment with the state, they can get hired by a private enterprise. If a particular firm has unfavourable conditions, they can go to another.

The same with political rights and opportunities. A federal state, at least in principle, adds a plurality of political conditions inside its borders. The world of states adds far more outside. Every exit you choose, admittedly, leads you to another bureaucratic state. But so long as the political arrangements in different states are different in substance, that's freedom enough.

Such a plurality is not a historical or economic necessity (Weber 1994a, 69–70). It must be deliberately cultivated. Practical solutions should, for example, keep migration affordable. There should be no tax on leaving, of the kind the Prussian estate owners wanted, or on savings, pensions and qualifications that cross the border with their owner. We should similarly resist the temptation to harmonise legal codes and economic regulations.

All of that, institutions can accomplish. What they can't do is *deliver* freedom. They can't make people resent domination by others, however enlightened it might be. East Prussian families themselves had to yearn for freedom, badly enough to pay for it with their material prosperity and security.

Whether a society keeps producing people who'll choose to sacrifice security and comfort for freedom was Weber's question more than a century ago. His theory of legitimacy never resolved it. It's still the question. Breiner, P. 1996. *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501733512>.

Oakeshott, M. 1996. *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. <https://archive.org/details/politicsoffaithp0000oake>.

Offer, A. 1993. "Bounded Rationality in Action." In *The Economics of Rationality*, edited by B. Gerrard. London: Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203010020/economics-rationality-bill-gerrard>.

Palonen, K. 2023. "Max Weber on Parliamentarism and Democracy." In *The Routledge International Handbook on Max Weber*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003089537>.

Schluchter, W. 1989. *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. https://books.google.com/books/about/Rationalism_Religion_and_Domination.html?id=chTHjge1o08C.

Schmitt, C. 2004. *Legality and Legitimacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://books.google.com.t/books/about/Legality_and_Legitimacy.html?id=O9EpMoZjilsC&redir_esc=y.

Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society*. Vol. 2. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. https://books.google.com/books/about/Economy_and_Society.html?id=MILOksrhrYC.

- . 1994a. “On the Situation of Constitutional Democracy in Russia.” In *Weber: Political Writings*, edited by P. Lassman and R. Speirs. New York: Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/weber-political-writings/9E3059E0DE390B4541EF896954100A20?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark.
- . 1994b. “Parliament and Government in Germany Under a New Political Order.” In *Weber: Political Writings*, edited by P. Lassman and R. Speirs. New York: Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/weber-political-writings/9E3059E0DE390B4541EF896954100A20?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark.
- . 1994c. “Science as a Vocation.” In *Max Weber: Sociological Writings*, edited by W. Heydebrand. New York: Continuum. https://books.google.com.tr/books/about/Sociological_Writings_Max_Weber.html?id=JJq2AAAAIAAJ&hl=en&redir_esc=y.
- . 1994d. “The Nation State and Economic Policy.” In *Weber: Political Writings*, edited by P. Lassman and R. Speirs. New York: Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/weber-political-writings/9E3059E0DE390B4541EF896954100A20?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark.
- . 1994e. “The President of the Reich.” In *Weber: Political Writings*, edited by P. Lassman and R. Speirs. New York: Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/weber-political-writings/9E3059E0DE390B4541EF896954100A20?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark.
- . 1994f. “The Profession and Vocation of Politics.” In *Weber: Political Writings*, edited by P. Lassman and R. Speirs. New York: Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/weber-political-writings/9E3059E0DE390B4541EF896954100A20?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark.
- . 2012. “The Meaning of ‘Value Freedom’ in the Sociological and Economic Sciences.” In *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings*, edited by H. H. Bruun and S. Whimster. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203804698>.
- . 2019a. *Economy and Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://books.google.com.tr/books/about/Economy_and_Society.html?id=wSuFDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y.
- . 2019b. “The Constitution of Rural Labor.” *Grey Room* 76: 98–119. https://doi.org/10.1162/grey_a_00275.