

Red Tape Literature in Public Administration

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People often refer to “red tape” to mean cumbersome and unnecessary government burdens, but there’s an extensive public administration literature on the subject. This Insight reviews that literature.

I. Administrative Burdens and Red Tape

A widespread source of administrative costs stems from the ubiquitous presence of “red tape” in regulatory compliance. Most empirical work on red tape is grounded in Bozeman’s (1993) definition of *organizational red tape*, which include “rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden for the organization but have no efficacy for the rules’ functional object.” Bozeman (1993, 284) also identified another form of red tape, *stakeholder red tape*, which includes rules that “serve no object valued by a given stakeholder group.” Additionally, this (now seminal) article established several other theoretical concepts including: a distinction in the origin of red tape (i.e., *internal* vs *external* production) (273), several categories of organizational red tape based on rules’ origin and target (e.g., ordinary red tape, pass-through red tape, interorganizational red tape, external control red tape) (284), and a discussion of various potential *causes* of red tape (286). With regard to the causes of red tape, he distinguished between “rule-inception red tape” (285-286) or “rules *born* bad” (i.e., not created to achieve a legitimate purpose) and “rule-evolved red tape” (287) or “good rules *gone* bad” (i.e., created to serve an originally legitimate purpose but evolved over time into red tape).

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Finally, Bozeman (1993, 279) posited that any definition of red tape needs to carefully distinguish it from instruments covered by the literature on formalization—focused on “rules and procedures, without...assuming any negative implications or impacts.” Pandey and Scott (2002) also posited that efforts to operationalize red tape needed to carefully avoid conflating these bodies of research. Relatedly, Pandey and Kingsley (2000) proposed the use of a different definition—albeit based on Bozeman’s general framing—pointing out that operationalizing the original definition was problematic due to the implicit useful/useless dichotomy required to classify a procedure as red tape (Pandey, Pandey, and Van Ryzin 2017). This definition highlighted the link between managers’ *perceptions* of procedures and observed outcomes.¹ Turaga and Bozeman (2005) offer yet another definition: “burdensome administrative rules and procedures that have negative effects on the organization’s performance.”

Building on the established role of stakeholder perception, Dehart-Davis (2009b, 901) engaged in grounded theory development to propose a categorization of *effective* rules—“Green Tape”—that confirms that “stakeholder perceptions of organizational rules...matter[s] because they alter the extent of cooperation in rule implementation.” Most recently, a broader but related, construct: “administrative burden” is used by scholars to identify areas of policy implementation that result in “onerous experiences” for citizens—usually in the delivery of public services (Herd and Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan, Herd, and Rigby, 2016, 498). Notably, these authors trace their inquiry to Bozeman’s original observations about “rules born bad”—finding that administrative burdens often function as *de facto* barriers to citizens’ ability to receive government services (i.e., a citizen-focused experience of red tape).

Bozeman (2012) offered the concept of “multidimensional red tape” as a necessary expansion to existing, narrowly constructed definitions “if red tape research is to [continue making] a contribution” (253). He posits that earlier/narrower definitions of red tape were valuable because they helped this area of scholarship flourish—particularly by setting it apart from the formalization literature. Bozeman suggests that the subject-dependent aspect of red tape is still valuable but that “rules and regulations may be pathological in some elements and not others, even with respect to the same stakeholder...” (Bozeman 2012).

II. Disaggregating Red Tape

Subsequent work continues to generate more granular definitions to identify specific dimensions or categories of red tape. For instance, Pandey and Garnett (2006) use disaggregated measures of red tape building on the work by Pandey and Scott (2002); these categories were constructed to refine red tape-related questions included in the National Administrative Studies Project NASP- II survey—whose respondents were managers of health and human services agencies at the state

¹ Pandey and Kingsley (2000, 782) defined red tape as “impressions on the part of managers that formalization (in the form of burdensome rules and procedures) is detrimental to the organization.”

level (Pandey and Garnett 2006, 42, Table 1). Pandey, Coursey and Moynihan (2007) conduct an empirical study of red tape using five red tape categories including—human resources red tape, procurement red tape, information systems red tape, budgetary red tape, communication red tape, and information systems red tape—in conjunction with the concept of organizational culture, posited as capable of ameliorating the detrimental effects of red tape (Pandey, Coursey, and Moynihan 2007, 400, 402-403). Other efforts that rely on identifying disaggregated categories of red tape relate to Bozeman’s (2012) observation that red tape scholarship should provide tools to know not only what constitutes red tape but how to go about using empirical findings to create policy recommendations for implementing red tape reform.

III. Measures of Red Tape and its Effects on Outcomes of Interest

As Feeney (2012, 429) notes, Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman (1995) produced “the first empirical measure developed to assess red tape perceptions” using a survey administered by mail to public and private managers (the National Administrative Studies Project (NASP) I). This measure, General Red Tape (GRT), appears in both subsequent survey work (i.e., NASP II and III) and “is a staple measure in the empirical red tape research.” (Feeney 2012, 429). In a more recent review of the red tape literature, Pandey, Pandey, and Van Ryzin (2017, 220) note that most measures of red tape have relied on the use of surveys to generate data. Notably, measures of red tape tend to focus on managers’ perceptions, but other stakeholder groups are sometimes—although not primarily—included in research including red tape facing citizens (Herd and Moynihan, 2018).

Several scholars have attempted to further refine red tape measures—mainly by thinking about how to refine existing survey efforts. For example, Feeney (2012) notes the pervasiveness of GRT as a standard measure in the field and investigates the extent to which the language used in survey questions assessing respondents’ perceptions of red tape might affect their responses—primarily due to the negative connotation associated with the term “red tape” (428). She tests three different variations that implement the standard GRT scale and finds evidence that the wording used in questionnaires affects their results. Specifically, she suggests that future surveys would produce more standardized and valid measures if they eliminated the term “red tape” altogether. Additionally, she suggests that surveys might produce more generalizable measures of organizational red tape if they specify which outcomes respondents should focus on (e.g., accountability, effectiveness, etc.). More recently, Borry (2016) proposed the use of a “Three-Item Red Tape (TIRT) scale”—citing several advantages over the GRT scale including: a more multidimensional measure (Bozeman 2012), a response to Feeney’s (2012) suggestion that “red tape” be removed from survey instruments, and the claim that the TIRT scale improves construct and content validity while still basing itself on Bozeman’s (1993) foundational definition for red tape.

In addition to improvements to existing measures, Pandey, Pandey, and Van Ryzin (2017) posit that greater methodological diversity—in particular, the use of experimental methods—would improve scholarly efforts to analyze the causal linkages between red tape and outcomes of interest. Relatedly, a recent symposium focused on the topics of red tape, administrative burden, and regulation promoted the use of greater interdisciplinary dialogue in a similar spirit (Carrigan, Pandey, and Van Ryzin, 2020). Carrigan et al. (2020) detail the emerging development of “behavioral public administration” as an area of research that combines insights from behavioral economics and psychology—noting this area’s prominent use of experimental methods. The field of regulation is also engaged with the expanded use of new methods to support scholarly inquiry including machine learning, natural language processing, and the general use of textual analyses to generate data from thousands of documents (Calomiris, Mamaysky, and Yang 2020).

IV. Red Tape in Regulatory Policy

The aforementioned development of the field of red tape, the so-called “state of the science,” has measurably improved our understanding of both the effects of red tape and how it operates in different contexts. For example, Pandey and Scott (2002) noted that an early study by Buchanan (1975) purportedly provided evidence that red tape was a greater problem for private managers than it was for public managers, but they argued that this finding was primarily due to an issue of construct validity regarding Buchanan’s survey. In short, it ran afoul of the problem with operationalizing “red tape” in a valid way. Pandey and Garnett (2006, 39) note that subsequent work in the field “has conclusively rebutted this finding”—improving our ability to better understand the contextual differences between public and private organizations. Additional studies analyzing differences between public and private organizations include Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman (1995) and Pandey and Bretschneider (1997).

Scholars have extended red tape inquiries to measure effects outside of organizational performance or in combination with these measures. For instance, Bozeman and Kingsley (1998) found that increased levels of red tape were correlated with decreased willingness to take risks. Pandey, Coursey, and Moynihan (2007) confirmed that red tape is negatively associated with organizational effectiveness, but they also provided evidence that organizational culture was a fruitful avenue of research—namely as operating as a buffer to the pernicious effects of red tape. Moynihan (2017) extended this approach to conduct a case study of the Department of Defense’s (DOD) emergency response in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—producing additional evidence that organizational culture can help public servants overcome red tape (to an extent). DeHart Davis and Pandey (2005) use red tape concepts in combination with constructs from organizational sociology and psychology to investigate the effects of red tape on workplace alienation—which they define as feelings of “powerlessness and meaninglessness” that can affect human resources-related outcomes like job satisfaction (133).

Red tape scholars have engaged in several other areas of inquiry related to red tape including the relationship between red tape and the uptake of information technologies (Pandey and Bretschneider (1997) and the relationship between procurement red tape and organizational effectiveness (Pandey, Coursey, and Moynihan 2007). Studies have also demonstrated that red tape can have substantive negative macroeconomic effects as well. For instance, Klapper et al. (2006) find that red tape in the form burdensome entry regulations of new businesses can have a chilling effect on the number of new entrants into the market. They compare entry regulations in the United Kingdom and Italy and find that substantial barriers to entry in the form of costly red tape reduces the amount of competition faced by large incumbent firms to a degree that negatively affects productivity growth (measured as real growth in the value added per employee). Evaluations of regulatory reforms aimed at reducing the administrative costs of entry regulations have found significant, beneficial effects to both GDP growth and value added per worker (Motta et al. 2010).

To summarize, scholars studying red tape continue to refine their measurement strategies and demonstrate that red tape can be burdensome enough to negatively affect macroeconomic performance, the quality of government services, and create regressive effects relevant when considering the distributional outcomes of regulatory costs.

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