

Article

Merit recruitment, professional advancement opportunities and prosocial rule-breaking among public servants in Greece

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Abstract

Public servants have a significant impact on peoples' lives, but we don't have many reliable estimates of how many employees engage in prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB), a form of constructive deviance. We collected original survey data ($N=497$) among a representative sample of Greek public servants and implemented a list experiment to gauge how pervasive PSRB is in Greece's public sector. Greece is a particularly useful setting in which to study PSRB as the euro crisis created strong reform pressure. We find that public servants who were hired via merit competitions are not less likely to break rules, but this is conditional on their beliefs about career prospects and the fairness of the promotion system. They perceive the professional reward system as biased towards those with political connections and compensate for lack of efficiency by doing favours. This finding raises concerns about the quality of EU reform assessments.

Key words: Europe, corruption, institutional change, public administration, public sector reforms, work

JEL classification: P11

1. Introduction

Rule-breaking behaviour among public servants is a central concern in public administration research. The extent to which employees comply with standard operating procedures determines the amount of state resources necessary for service delivery and affects citizens' beliefs in public servants' trustworthiness and the bureaucracy's legitimacy

(Rose-Ackermann and Palifka, 2016). Bureaucratic behaviour crucially affects the quality of service delivery and the nature of democratic competition (Oliveros and Schuster, 2018).

Existing works on the determinants of rule-breaking in the public sector either frame it as a collective action problem, individual incentives/payoffs or institutional punishment/deterrence correlates. Why non-compliance occurs is often assumed but infrequently tested because the discipline lacks works studying public servants themselves. Since they are the ones providing services through day-to-day interactions within street-level institutions, public servants are central actors engaged in favouritism and particularism (Davidovitz and Cohen, 2020).

In this article, we examine the prevalence of prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB), which is defined as a form of constructive deviance, signifying the ‘intentional violation of formal organizational policies, regulations, or prohibitions with the intention of promoting the welfare of the organization or one of its stakeholders’ (Morrison, 2006, p. 8). For example, an employee breaking rules to better service their clients, provide access to goods, assist overextended colleagues or help clients avoid a penalty would qualify as PSRB. The desired goal is not to benefit oneself, but to help others. Survey participants might interpret rule breaking differently due to differences in life experiences and the nature of the environments in which they live. Ignoring such potential complications can lead to wrong interpretations of estimated treatment-outcome relationships (Diaz *et al.*, 2020, p. 1038). However, we define PSRB as the deliberate violation of explicit, active rules to help someone. Violations committed accidentally or out of ignorance, or violations of rules that are not enforced, are not categorized as PSRB behaviours.

But PSRB has a potential negative side. Well-intentioned rule breakers may be unable to recognize a rule’s purpose and importance. Employees could fail to see the ‘big picture’ and inadvertently torpedo the organizations’ mission. Once rule-breaking becomes normalized over time it may compromise public service delivery (Fleming, 2020). Especially in countries where formal institutions impede rather than support basic transactions, favours for some may create an uneven playing field for various actors (Tummers *et al.*, 2015). Thus, PSRB may disadvantage everyone involved, no matter how benign the intentions.

Given their significant impact on peoples’ lives, it is surprising that we do not have reliable estimates of how many public servants engage in PSRB, and why. Our research question therefore is: *How widespread is PSRB among public servants and what motivates their behaviour?* We study this question surveying Greek public servants. Greece is a particularly useful setting in which to study PSRB. The euro crisis strongly raised awareness of bureaucratic inefficiencies, signifying an opportunity for extensive reform. As part of the macro-economic adjustment program, recruitment and promotions in the public sector were supposed to proceed strictly on merit to break the dominance of clientelist practices and move towards neutral competence, with autonomous public servants following standard operating procedures. Employees hired based on skills rather than loyalty are expected to be more rule compliant than those recruited through patronage. EU monitoring of public administration reforms constituted a powerful incentive to overcome reform resistance.

One reason we know so little about the determinants of PSRB in the public sector is that obtaining reliable data about this topic is difficult. Since public servants cannot know whether their behaviour will be judged positively or negatively by the interviewer, we have to account for social desirability pressures in responses. To obtain credible empirical evidence, we employ a list experiment with item count technique that increases the anonymity

of responses and the reliability of the data. We analyse how prevalent PSRB is among public servants, what motivates them and whether the nature of their recruitment (meritocratic or not) is related to their behaviour. We also control for personal dispositions, demographic factors, socioeconomic variables and the workplace environment. By surveying public servants directly, we follow calls for more experimental studies of the bureaucracy (e.g. Oliveros and Schuster, 2018). Providing evidence of PSRB by public servants themselves is more objective than perception-based methods and offers direct insights into the behaviour and incentives of the actors serving citizens every day.

EU reports between 2016 and 2022 indicate that the European Commission was satisfied with Greek reform measures (After years of providing financial assistance, the Commission activated the enhanced surveillance framework for Greece in 2018, to complete structural reforms initiated under the ESM program against agreed deadlines. In 2018, Greece left its third and final bailout program, and in August 2022 it exited post-bailout monitoring). For example, the first Compliance Report (2016) praised the adoption of a law that strengthened merit competitions in the recruitment of public sector managers, prompting the conclusion that ‘the system of appointment in public and private entities has been depoliticised’ (European Commission, 2016, p. 12). Similarly, the third Compliance Report (2018) commends Athens’ efforts ‘to foster (...) meritocracy in the appointment of managerial positions in the public sector (...)’, purporting that the government had successfully tackled clientelist recruitment patterns: ‘This is a very significant change in an area that hitherto lacked a transparent and objective process, and thus was open to interference’ (European Commission, 2018, p. 31). The Enhanced Surveillance Report (2020) applauds officials for strengthening the capacity of ASEP (the Higher Council for the Selection of Personnel) in the areas of merit-based competitions, scoring classification procedures and setting a ceiling on the recruitment of temporary staff (European Commission, 2020, p. 109). While Commission assessments have praised Greek efforts to hire and promote based on merit, our findings indicate that the mere existence of merit legislation is not enough to curb irregular behaviour by public servants.

This article makes three contributions. First, by probing whether meritocratic or patronage hiring are related to PSRB, we engage with the debate on linkages between recruitment mechanism and rule conformity. Influential works on corruption have uncovered evidence that merit hiring limits rule breaking (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016; Oliveros and Schuster, 2018). But unlike corruption, engaging in PSRB means that public servants are *helping* their client, so the effect of recruitment mechanism on rule compliance is less clear. (Definitions of corruption might encompass constructive deviance, but most include a range of self-serving, destructive rule-breaking behaviour). Individuals hired via merit competitions could display more rule conformity, in which case the mechanisms are similar, and skills-based hiring reduces PSRB.

However, Toral (2023) has shown that, in low-capacity settings, networks based on patronage can be a precondition for *efficient* service delivery. Since merit-based hiring disrupts such networks and Greece is a low-capacity setting (Fleming *et al.*, 2020), we might expect that well-meaning public servants seek to counteract efficiency losses by stepping up PSRB to deliver for their clients.

Second, the discipline lacks studies examining how recruitment mechanisms interact with other career incentives. We control for a range of factors known to influence PSRB—work motivation, regulatory complexity, relationship with supervisor, demographic factors

and ideology—more than any previous study. We find that public servants hired through patronage are more likely to break rules than those recruited via merit, but this finding is conditional on their beliefs about their career prospects and the fairness of the promotion system. PSRB in our sample is driven by the perception of an overall rigged system. Public servants believe they deserve better treatment in an unfair system that is biased in the allocation of job rewards and professional advancement opportunities. We found no evidence that economic insecurity, regulatory complexity, ideology or regional disparities (living in poor versus affluent regions) motivate public servants to break rules to help clients.

Third, our research speaks to empirical works examining EU influence in Greece. The European Commission has used pressure, sanctions and monitoring to incentivise policy changes in Greece's public sector. Some have criticised EU-mandated reforms as too focused on austerity (Schmidt, 2020). Since the bailout conditions interfered with peoples' social and economic rights, Kreuder-Sonnen and White (2022) argue that the troika have overstepped legal constraints, compromising legitimacy. However, the Commission—and creditor governments—can also incur reputational costs for under-enforcing policy (Hennessy, 2017). Failure to call out unsuccessful, incomplete or watered-down reforms can lead to citizen protests in affected countries, demanding stronger oversight from the EU. While nobody questions the value of merit laws, our findings indicate that assessing the impact of merit competitions won't yield meaningful results if studied in isolation of other career incentives. The mere existence of merit laws fails to curb PSRB when perceptions of a rigged system dominate. Below, we review how existing studies explain PSRB in the public administration, drawing on prior literature on recruitment mechanisms and career incentives in the public sector to develop testable hypotheses regarding the factors that might motivate rule-breaking. Next, we describe our research design and present the results of the survey experiment. We conclude by summarizing the contributions of the findings, the study's limitations and offer suggestions for future research.

2. PSRB and recruitment of public servants

Existing works found that public sector employees often substitute their own judgments for the unrealistic views of the formal authority: 'Sometimes a client may receive additional and valuable services that are denied to a less valued client, such as the expensive job training provided to the nice lady (...). The police may ignore a crime or a drug stash for a hard-working mother while using a trivial offense to hassle a 'bad guy''. (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000, p. 340). Public servants may justify their discretionary decisions as improvements in policy over formal procedures they consider inadequate. In their own view, violating the formal procedure to help someone obtain a service—or a better, faster service—implies that public servants believe they are acting responsibly. But despite good intentions, PSRB may be detrimental to the organizational mission or procedures. Constructive deviance is risky behaviour because there is the threat that even well-intentioned rule breaking may be punished by superiors. Supposedly charitable, PSRB can be a major problem as the core principle of equity is violated and formal rules and regulations are undermined (Weißmüller *et al.*, 2022, p. 262). The likelihood and magnitude of potential adverse consequences for both the rule-breaker and the organization are incalculable.

How might PSRB be related to the recruitment mechanism of public servants? Two streams of research find contradictory evidence. Schuster *et al.* (2020) confirm that merit

recruitment limits rule-breaking among public servants in developing countries, but not in OECD countries. A cross-national study in post-communist countries demonstrates that merit-based recruitment reduces incidences of rule-breaking in public agencies (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016). Works on corruption also agree that public servants hired through meritocratic means are more likely to maintain professional standards (Dahlström *et al.*, 2012; Charron *et al.*, 2017). These observations motivate H1:

H1: Public servants hired through merit competitions will be less likely to engage in PSRB than those hired through discretionary appointments.

On the other hand, recent works on patronage find that loyalty-based recruitment (rather than merit competitions) can actually lead to *improved* public service delivery in developing countries (Gassner and Gofen, 2018). In some cases, it is political connections rather than meritocracy that allow public servants to fulfil their duties effectively, particularly in contexts where financial constraints are prevalent and human capital is scarce (Toral, 2023). PSRB typically involves the use of connections or a network to complete the transaction. Favours can either benefit a larger set of actors or they can be self-serving to increase the efficiency of the organization and the employee's job appraisal. PSRB may become routinized within organizations so that they are enacted without any conscious thought regarding their appropriateness. Once PSRB becomes embedded within existing structures, new hires may be socialized to tolerate and perform this behaviour (Ashforth and Anand, 2003).

The politicization of the bureaucracy is, of course, a matter of degree. In many northern European democracies, senior appointments are routinely given to loyal supporters. Brierley (2021) finds that, in developing democracies, politicians will support meritocratic hiring for high-skilled positions (such as budget analysts, planning officers and engineers) to ensure successful government performance, which enables incumbents to run for re-election based on competence. Conversely, politicians will favour patronage appointments for low-ranking public sector jobs (such as sanitation officers, security guards and labourers) to reward loyal supporters and sustain party machines.

In Greece, however, partisan appointments in the public sector have occurred both at the top and at the bottom (Pappas and Assimakopoulou, 2012). Appointments of public servants based on 'rousfetia', 'meso' and 'volema' prevent employees from acting as impartial technocrats who carry out tasks based on standard operating procedures ('Rousfetia' means asking for a favour, 'meso' describes a person with political connections who helps someone accomplish a task, and 'volema' means to get into, or remain in, a position that works for oneself without considering others (Chalari, 2013, p. 110)). Instead, employees become 'fixers' who use political connections to help clients they consider deserving, leaving others at a disadvantage.

The roots of favouritism in Greece are long and deep. The state has long been considered the main instrument for reproducing a patronage network channelling influence. Conservatives have often accused left-wing governments of engaging in hiring sprees in the public sector as a means of getting votes, with permanency offered to successive waves of temporary employees who had been hired on fixed-term contracts. The Greek constitution assigns permanency to public servants. Established in 1911 by constitutional amendment, job protection was supposed to insulate public servants from political interference, protect their impartiality and ensure efficiency (Tanaka, 2017). In practice, though, political

interference was widespread, especially during the civil-war (1946–1949) and dictatorship era (1967–1974) (Sotiropoulos, 2004). A change in Prime Minister, or even a minister within a department, elicits the arrival of new personnel: ‘Those in the ancient regime lose their positions (...). Prevailing career perspectives are deeply politicised—dependent on identities and favours—and time bound. Indeed, cultural norms encourage a short-termism in expectations and behaviour’ (Featherstone and Papadimitriou, 2015, p. 17).

EU-mandated reforms were supposed to change such practices and instead provide the foundations of an impartial Weberian administration. Stricter enforcement of meritocratic hiring protocols were intended to discourage favouritism, depoliticise the public sector and create a level playing field.

However, prominent rival accounts find that public servants recruited via patronage can provide *improved* public services due to their political network. Toral (2023) has powerfully argued that public servants may leverage their connections to political officials in higher places (‘upward embeddedness’) to create trust, legitimacy and the ability to coordinate efforts and align teams. His argument is that, in underdeveloped countries, it is political connections rather than meritocracy that allow public servants to fulfil their duties effectively. Repeat interactions with people in the political network create the necessary trust, legitimacy and accountability that are crucial for effective service delivery (Toral, 2023). Thus, rule-breaking that occurs to help clients can be both a positive remedy to solve problems (Weißmüller *et al.*, 2022), but self-serving at the same time as it could lead to positive performance appraisals for the employee and illegal self-enrichment. Although there is no consensus whether Greece should be considered a developed or developing country, it arguably fits the description of a low-capacity setting, particularly the poorer regions where the labour pool is small and financial constraints are dire.

2.1 Economic insecurity

Although PSRB is primarily defined as rule violations that benefit others, there is no reason to think that bribery is never part of a ‘favour’, as works acknowledging the dark side of PSRB have made clear (Fleming, 2020). Empirical evidence for the link between public servants’ perceived economic insecurity and rule-breaking is mixed. Scholars have argued that higher wages (including future wages or pensions) raise the opportunity cost of rule violations for the perpetrator if caught (Becker and Stigler, 1974). From this perspective, rule-breaking is primarily motivated by human greed (Momčilović *et al.*, 2011) and low wages make public servants more receptive to bribes (Vian, 2008; van Veldhuizen, 2013). On the other hand, higher salaries might crowd out prosocial motivation, which could make officials more prone to irregular behaviour (Navot and Cohen, 2015).

In Greece, austerity measures imposed during the euro crisis included a 20% reduction in the level of wages for more than 400 000 public servants. This drastic shortfall could have influenced their behaviour in divergent ways. On one hand, it could have made employees more susceptible to rule-breaking in exchange for bribes because the wage cuts provided them with a strong incentive to make up income losses.

H2: Public servants who are struggling financially are more likely to engage in PSRB.

On the other hand, fear of mass layoffs could have had the opposite effect. Between 2009 and 2015, the number of employees in the public sector was considerably scaled

down, shrinking by more than 25% (European Commission, 2018, p. 12). Those who managed to keep their jobs might have behaved in a more rule conform way to avoid negative performance evaluations. Besides, extorting money from citizens became more difficult in the immediate aftermath of the euro crisis. Discussing rule-breaking in the health care sector, Greece's former inspector general of public administration observed that the euro crisis had dampened demand for *fakelakia* (envelopes stuffed with cash): 'A surgeon who used to ask for €5000 for a serious operation will now settle for €500' (Hope, 2016).

Job satisfaction and rule conformity are also influenced by economic fluctuations. During recessions, public sector workers, whose salaries decrease, are nonetheless more satisfied overall than private sector workers because they enjoy job security (Ravid *et al.*, 2017). In turn, higher job satisfaction should encourage more rule conformity. However, as mass dismissals in Greece's public sector were part of bailout conditionality, it is not obvious whether fear of job loss can be expected to make public servants more or less susceptible to rule-breaking. To gauge public servants' financial situation, we asked public servants how they were personally affected by the austerity measures compared to other Greeks, if they thought the burden was distributed fairly across citizens, and to what extent they agree with the statement that their salary has been reduced.

2.2 Promotion opportunities

Performance-based incentive systems have long been part of public sector organizations, but existing studies have reported mixed results regarding the way in which professional rewards influence employees' propensity to engage in or refrain from irregular behaviour. Becker and Stigler (1974) have highlighted the importance of creating an equitable reward system to reduce PSRB in public sector organizations. Weaver and Trevino (1999) propose that the fair treatment of employees and an open work culture wherein employees can discuss rule violations without fear of retribution all encourage employees to behave more professionally.

Charron *et al.* (2017) find that the belief among employees that hard work, as opposed to luck or connections, contributes to rule conformity in the public sector. They conclude that merit-based promotion incentives can help reduce irregular behaviour. Conversely, if performance of employees is not recognised with appropriate rewards and incentives, employees may rationalize rule-breaking behaviour (Bashir and Hassan, 2020).

Other studies have shown that pressure to break rules might come from the top, wherein supervisors use the professional reward system to entreat employees to aid or abet irregular behaviour. For example, Gingerich (2013) argues that public servants with a chance of a future political career may have an incentive to 'steal for the team'. Likewise, Herron *et al.* (2017) find in a study of Ukraine's administration that merit promotions coexist with rule-breaking behaviour. Meyer-Sahling *et al.* (2018) point out that superiors can use the promise of promotions or favourable transfers to pressure hesitant public servants into assisting with rule violations. These examples demonstrate that the mere existence of promotion opportunities is not sufficient to curb irregular behaviour. Instead, beliefs about the type of actions that get rewarded matter. Based on these insights, we formulate H3:

H3: Public servants who perceive the professional reward system to be unfair are more likely to engage in PSRB.

3. Research design and survey experiment

To analyse how widespread PSRB is among Greek public servants, we rely on original survey data from a poll we conducted in December 2020. The sample includes both street level bureaucrats and public servants employed in government and local bureaucracies, even though the former have more direct contact with citizens and thus more leeway in policy implementation. Including both makes sense as patronage appointments and PSRB have long been prevalent among these two groups (Spanou and Sotiropoulos, 2011) and EU reform demands applied to both: in addition to requests for depoliticizing the public administration, EU officials also demanded reforms in health care and education (European Commission, Hellenic Republic and Bank of Greece, 2015). While patronage in many Southern European countries takes place at higher echelons of the public sector, in Greece it reaches all the way down to the lower levels and is used both as a tool of policy control (at the top) and of electoral reward (at the bottom) (Afonso *et al.*, 2014). While street-level public servants have more discretion than traditional bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010), both are required to follow formal procedures and are subject to accountability mechanisms.

Our nationwide computer-assisted telephone survey covered 497 respondents identified through a multistage sampling process in eleven of Greece's thirteen regions. In the first stage, households were identified in Greece's regions (cluster sampling). Within each region, respondents were asked if they were a public servant (stratified sampling). If they were not, they were asked if anyone else in the household was and would be available for an interview.

Interviews were conducted on fixed telephone lines, which can result in the underrepresentation of the youngest respondents and overrepresentation of female respondents. However, the age and gender distribution in our sample closely match the actual distribution of young and female workers in the Greek public sector. The average age of Greek public servants is approximately 58 years. (<https://www.cnn.gr/ellada/story/145856/gerasmenoi-oi-dimosioi-ypalliloi-stin-ellada-symfona-me-stoixeia-tis-adedy>). Only one percent of teachers are under 30 years old (<https://www.cnn.gr/ellada/story/145856/gerasmenoi-oi-dimosioi-ypalliloi-stin-ellada-symfona-me-stoixeia-tis-adedy>). Similarly, while women make up 47% of the 566 913 regular Greek public servants, this figure also includes the armed forces, which are predominantly male (85% of about 150 000 staff) (https://www.alfavita.gr/koinonia/182429_o-dimosios-tomeas-ypalliloi-ana-kategoria-kai-fylo-kai-apohoriseis, NATO Summary of the National Reports, 2016). The data were collected in December 2020 by the Public Opinion Research Unit of the University of Macedonia Research Institute of Applied Economic and Social Sciences.

The advantage of surveying public servants is that the data come from the primary actors involved in prosocial rule breaking, rather than from second-hand reports from firms or country experts. The average age of our respondents is 54 years old. Age doesn't necessarily represent work experience. New employees are expected to internalize the norms and attitudes of their workplace, while more experienced employees might feel secure and bold enough to challenge, break or reshape rules. Our survey did not ask about years of service. While our study didn't control for the effect of work experience on PSRB, we believe that this omission does not bias our findings. The Greek state, pressed by the troika to cut expenditure, had almost stopped hiring new personnel for 8 years when our survey was conducted (December 2020). Moreover, between 2009 and 2015, the number of permanent

public servants decreased by 18%—that is, 125 994 employees. A substantial number left due to retirement. In 2015, 15 925 employees retired—more than 1000 per month (https://www.alfavita.gr/koinonia/182429_o-dimosios-tomeas-ypalliloi-ana-kategoria-kai-fylo-kai-apohorisei). This exacerbated the aging of the public servant workforce and reduced variation in employees' work experience.

Of all 494 respondents, 336 (68%) are female and 158 (32%) are male. Four hundred and twenty (85% of respondents) are currently employed in the public sector and 74 (15%) are retired. Only 36 (7.3%) of respondents do not have a permanent public servant status and 428 (86.6%) live and work in urban areas. About 384 (77.7%) of respondents have graduated from a university and 134 (27.1%) have completed post-graduate studies or a PhD. And 75 (15.2%) of respondents have completed secondary—lyceum (12 years) education, 31 (6.3%) have graduated from a vocational school, and only 4 have a high school (9 years) or elementary school diploma. About 155 (31.3%) of respondents are located in Attica and 106 (21.4%) in Macedonia, two regions that are home to the largest Greek cities, Athens and Thessaloniki. And 182 (36.8) of respondents perform an administrative role, 58 (11.7%) a technical role and the remainder perform various other roles. Finally, 148 (29.9%) of respondents are educators in the primary, secondary and tertiary sector.

To ensure measurement validity, our survey was pretested prior to implementation to confirm that respondents understood the meaning of survey questions. The questionnaire was developed in English, then translated into Greek and subsequently back-translated between Greek and English to assure congruence.

We conducted a list experiment to obtain truthful answers to our sensitive question. Respondents were randomly allocated to receive either a control list of items or the treatment list containing the control items plus the sensitive item ('break a rule at work to help someone') and were asked only to report what number of listed items apply to them. The question does not ask the respondent to mention specific activities, only how many of them she did in their previous week at work. By asking respondents to tell us only the number of items they did (rather than asking directly which ones), participants are encouraged to reveal their social undesirable behaviour in a way that eludes negative social judgment. The difference between the treatment and control conditions represents the percentage of participants who responded to the sensitive item in a 'socially undesirable' way. Participants can freely admit to the sensitive item because the researcher cannot differentiate sensitive from non-sensitive control items at an individual level. We then use difference-in-means tests between the treatment and control groups to infer the prevalence of the sensitive behaviour.

Control	Treatment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about politics with someone • Try to convince someone of the strengths and weaknesses of some politician • Have a serious fight with someone due to political differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about politics with someone • Try to convince someone of the strengths and weaknesses of some politician • Have a serious fight with someone due to political differences • Break a rule at work to help someone

3.1 Items for control and treatment lists

Public servants who ‘break a rule at work to help someone’ engage in favouritism and particularism. Breaking rules at work (good intentions notwithstanding) is a sensitive issue, even in a country like Greece, which ranks well above the EU average in terms of favouritism among public servants and low public trust in institutions (Alogoskoufis and Featherstone, 2021, p. 319). Allowing respondents to encode their answers to the sensitive item makes it safe to answer the sensitive question truthfully. We decided against asking survey participants further questions about the precise nature of the rule violation or whom it was meant to help (client, colleague, family member, etc.) as they might have perceived this as admitting to corruption (a non-prosocial behaviour). We performed confirmatory factor analysis to guide the decision on which model specification to use (see [Supplementary Appendix](#)).

3.2 Measuring meritocratic recruitment

Because we seek to understand to what extent PSRB is contingent upon the hiring mechanism, a key independent variable is the nature of recruitment of public servants. The recruitment of public servants has always been politicized in Greece. In 1977, just after the transition to democracy, the so-called ‘Metapolitefsi’ period in Greece, the hiring process was overseen by a Central Contest Committee and was characterized by clientelist practices. In 1983 a new point-system rewarded certain social criteria but downplayed credentials such as educational status and expertise. In 1987, a new point system made educational achievements more important (Konstantellou, 2023). The introduction of ASEP in 1994 constitutes a turning point in the recruitment of public servants. The purpose of selecting candidates on a merit basis in a transparent and impartial way—and having the process monitored and regulated by an independent authority—was to ensure the depoliticization of the public sector. But despite rhetorical commitments to meritocracy, in practice, until 2010 when the formulation of new personnel policies aimed at making hiring and promotions transparent, all governments used to handpick their own supporters (Spanou and Sotiropoulos, 2011, p. 729).

There is broad variance in terms of the objectivity of the process. The Selection Personnel Written Contest conducted by ASEP is considered an objective and merit-based mechanism. Individuals either take a written exam or are assessed based on their academic credentials, such as the overall mark of their bachelor’s degree, foreign language proficiency or technical certificates (Spiliotopoulos and Chrisanthakis, 2017).

The ASEP mechanism provides objectivity and ends the longstanding practice of direct appointments based on political criteria (Trantidis, 2016; Papapolychroniadi *et al.*, 2017). According to Greek officials, it is supposedly more difficult now to bypass ASEP via discretionary appointments, transfers or by granting permanency to temporary hires, which was common in past years. Additional merit-based recruitment includes high school teachers who were selected from a closed list that was ranked according to the year of graduation from the university.

The non-merit category includes discretionary appointments, exams outside of ASEP and the Pavlopoulos decree, named after Interior Minister Prokopis Pavlopoulos (of New Democracy). In the latter case, individuals were awarded short-term contracts for specific projects between 2002 and 2004, but later received a permanent position in the public

administration. Such clientelist hiring affected approximately 200 000 contract workers (Kalliri, 2006).

Accordingly, our binary recruitment variable (*bireof*) consists of merit and non-merit components that account for the selectivity of the hiring process. We assign a value of 1 if the respondents were hired based on non-merit criteria and a value of 0 if the hiring was based on merit. Merit-based recruitment includes hiring through ASEP selection, ASEP exams, academic or other public sector schools (e.g. police academies), appointment of academic professors and list procedure for educators. In turn, non-merit hiring includes the Pavlopoulos decree, non-ASEP exams, direct appointments and any other discretionary appointments.

The variable has 313 (65.2%) cases of merit-based hiring and 167 (34.8%) cases of non-merit hiring. We further explore the relationship between non-merit hiring and likelihood to engage in rule breaking by asking the respondents whether they think that having political connections is important to get hired in the public sector. The political connections variable is an ordinal one and has 487 observations. Ultimately, 280 (57.5%) of the respondents believe that political connections are important to get hired, in contrast to 150 (30.8%) who disagree with this statement (Table 1A). The responses of the treatment group are nearly identical to the ones of the control group.

3.3 Control variables

We include several potentially relevant confounders in our models. We first account for employees' intrinsic motivation. We include this control because previous studies have found that rule observance is linked to higher levels of public service motivation among employees (Wright *et al.*, 2016). Bureaucrats with strong public service motivation are less likely to engage in rule violations (Meyer Sahling *et al.*, 2019). Thus, we expect public servants with a strong intrinsic motivation—as measured by the extent to which they feel they are satisfied with their job, put forth their best effort, and contribute to the success of their institution—to show more rule conform behaviour.

We also control for several factors that could influence the overall workplace environment. Even if public servants are committed to following formal procedures, rules may be overly complex or contradictory, causing employees to make mistakes. Measures such as 'long work hours', 'onerous regulations', 'ambiguity over responsibilities' and 'comfortable asking for advice' gauge to what extent public servants feel empowered to fulfil their duties

Table 1A. Belief that having political connections is important to get hired, experiment v. control group

Having political connections is important to get hired	<i>Experiment Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>	<i>Total</i>
Strongly disagree	30	31	61
Disagree	42	47	89
Neither agree nor dis	35	22	57
Agree	95	89	184
Strongly agree	47	49	96
Total	251	236	487

effectively while obeying rules. If resources of expertise or time are in short supply relative to officials' tasks, temptations to cut corners or shirk responsibilities may be high. Shirking reflects officials' hopelessness in the face of a chaotic legal reality (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016, p. 167). Breaking rules to get a task done (or complete it more efficiently) may even be seen as a reasonable way to carry out an otherwise impossible set of tasks.

Dissatisfaction with one's professional relationships could also lead to a higher likelihood to engage in irregular behaviour (Cooper, 2018). This may be the case when public servants feel that their input is not valued by their supervisors, supervisors are not forthcoming when assistance is needed, the relationship with superiors is generally strained, or when supervisors have unrealistic expectations of their employees. We therefore control for employees' perceptions of their professional relationship with their superior. Furthermore, we asked about employees' views on performance appraisals—whether they see them as necessary, and whether they consider the written or verbal feedback they received regarding their performance as fair.

Other control variables include demographic factors (age, sex and education), and respondents' predominant ideology (conservative versus progressive value orientation). We also control for employees' place of employment (wealthy versus poor administrative region), type of job role and their mood during the COVID lockdown (sad, anxious, angry and optimistic).

3.4 Results

To analyse our data obtained by the item-count technique, we used the KICT package by (Tsai, 2019). We first perform diagnostic checks to probe the validity of the item-count technique. It relies on three assumptions: treatment randomization, no liars and no design effects. Our test suggests that treatment and control groups are not significantly different in terms of age, gender, education or years of service in the public sector, indicating effective randomization of treatment. We can also rule out satisficing, wherein participants always select the first or last response option, rather than answering truthfully. Furthermore, the test to check for design effects (Blair and Imai, 2012, p. 64) is not statistically significant; we therefore conclude that the no-design effect assumption holds.

The difference-in-means estimator (Table 1B) shows that 17% of Greek public servants admit to having violated a rule to help someone. As for Gamma cons, it gives a predicted number of affirmative answers to the non-key items—that is, Greek public servants, on average, did non-key items 0.9 times.

Table 2 shows the relationship between hiring procedures and rule violations. Specifically, we investigate how merit-based hiring affects the likelihood of rule-breaking. Additionally, we examine whether public servants who perceive the hiring process as rigged in favour of people with political connections are more likely to break rules than others. In model 1, we only include the variables that capture the perception of a rigged hiring and promotion system. In models 2–5, we also control for respondents' education, support for political parties, personal financial situation, job satisfaction, the impact of the euro crisis on employees and relationship with their supervisor.

The findings suggest that public servants who believe that the hiring and promotion system is rigged in favour of employees with political connections are more likely to engage in PSRB. This variable is positive and statistically significant at the 99% confidence level across all linear models. Counterintuitively, public servants who were hired on non-merit

Table 1B. 17 percent of public servants in our sample admit to rule-breaking. On average, respondents did non-key items 0.9 times

	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Delta_cons	0.1705345	0.1003	1.70	0.089	-0.259376	0.3670066
Gamma_cons	0.9045643	0.0672666	13.45	0.000	0.7727241	1.036405

Table 2. The relationship between hiring procedures and rule breaking

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Political connections	0.225** (0.0785)	0.214** (0.0792)	0.226** (0.0789)	0.215** (0.0799)	0.236** (0.0846)
Recruitment process	-0.423* (0.214)	-0.383 (0.22)	-0.422* (0.212)	-0.426* (0.214)	-0.395 (0.218)
Education		0.094 (0.102)			
Trust in political parties		-0.105 (0.0975)			
Financial situation			0.030 (0.143)		
Job satisfaction			-0.069 (0.114)		
Work hours increased				-0.026 (0.0709)	
Career progression stalled				0.094 (0.0852)	
Comfortable asking for advice					0.079 (0.121)
Superiors value input					0.000 (0.107)
Supervisors' unrealistic expectations					-0.006 (0.0876)
Constant	-0.022 (0.381)	-0.414 (0.782)	0.187 (0.732)	-0.268 (0.508)	-0.407 (0.84)
Statistics					
N	473	467	470	458	465

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

criteria appear to be *less* likely to break rules than those hired through merit competitions. We also did not expect to find that none of the control variables had a statistically significant effect on rule-breaking.

All models were estimated using a linear estimator. In the [Supplementary Appendix \(Supplementary Appendix Table A2\)](#), we document our re-estimation of the models using maximum likelihood. All results remain substantively the same, although the meritocratic hiring variable is estimated with less precision across specifications. Again, the political

connections variable (the perception that the hiring and promotion system is biased in favour of people with political connections) has a positive and statistically significant effect across all models. This provides further support for the hypothesis that rule breaking is more prevalent among public servants who believe that the professional hiring and rewards system is biased.

In Table 3, we re-evaluate the relationship between merit-based hiring and rule breaking by interacting the recruitment process with the political connections variable and promotion difficulties variable. In models 6 and 7, we interact the recruitment process with the political connections variable and use linear and maximum likelihood estimations respectively. In model 6, the interaction term is positive and statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, although the effect is insignificant in the maximum likelihood model, similar to the recruitment process and political connections variables.

However, we do detect a positive marginal effect of the perception that political connections matter on the likelihood of rule-breaking, for public servants hired on non-merit criteria (Figure 1). Somewhat counterintuitively, this effect is estimated at standard levels of statistical significance at low levels of the perception variable (for values 1—strongly disagree; 2—disagree) but is recovered with less precision for higher levels of the variable.

To make sense of this substantively, consider the issue from the opposite end of the scale: respondents are less likely to acknowledge rule-breaking as they move towards *disagreeing* with the notion that political connections matter. Yet this effect is only distinguishable from zero for strongly and very strongly held beliefs. For public servants hired through merit competitions, we cannot establish a statistically significant effect of the belief that political connections matter on rule breaking behaviour (Figure 2).

This finding supports the third hypothesis. Public servants who believe that political connections are most important for recruitment and career progression are more likely to admit to rule-breaking. We control for performance evaluations and feedback in the workplace, the effect of austerity measures on public servants' salaries, and the reputation of Greek

Table 3. Admitting to rule-breaking when interacting political connections and recruitment process

	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Political connections	0.117 (0.0958)	0.151 0.163	
Recruitment process	-1.672** (0.606)	-0.254 (0.959)	-1.382* (0.66)
Interaction: PC*RP	0.364* (0.167)	0.183 (0.26)	0.005 0.117
Promotion difficulties			0.005 0.117
Interaction: PD*RP			0.304 0.186
Constant	-0.093 (0.328)	-1.571* (0.654)	0.269 (0.425)
Statistics			
N	473	473	437

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

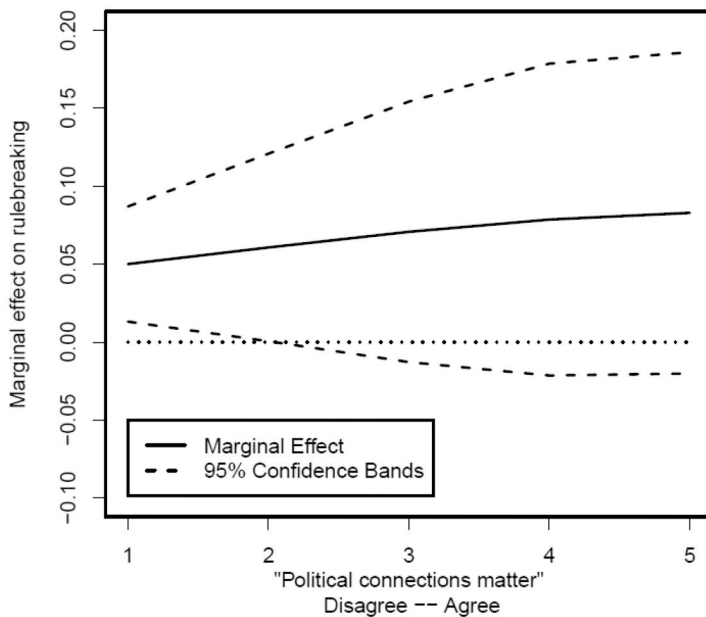


Figure 1. Marginal effects on rule-breaking, for nonmerit hires.

public servants among the public (Supplementary Appendix Tables A6–A8), but the political connections variable still exerts a positive and significant effect on admitting to rule breaking.

This suggests that employees hired through merit competitions compensate for their lack of efficiency by doing favours. Our finding dovetails with work that has linked non-merit recruitment in the public sector with improved service delivery, despite the costs that patronage linkages can have for overall performance (Toral, 2023). If public servants believe that rule-breaking for ‘deserving’ clients, family members or colleagues enhances the effectiveness of their job performance, then even those recruited via merit competitions will be less likely to follow formal rules and procedures. Individuals are more likely to engage in certain behaviours if they believe that others have already done so (Tankard and Paluck, 2016). Once rule violations occur in the open and get normalized, even rule observant individuals may be less inclined to speak up if they witness irregular behaviour, either for fear of retribution or because they don’t expect meaningful change (Fleming *et al.*, 2020).

Contrary to our expectations, we find no support for hypothesis H2. In fact, reporting personal financial difficulties makes respondents *less* likely to admit to rule violations. This finding contrasts with previous studies that have linked public servants’ rule-breaking behaviour to financial motives (Vian, 2008; Momčilović *et al.*, 2011; van Veldhuizen, 2013). Neither did a lack of intrinsic work motivation increase the likelihood of PSRB. We also did not find any evidence that rule-breaking might be related to perceptions of an unsupportive workplace (i.e. regulatory complexity, unhelpful supervisors or unrealistic workloads). We further examine the relationship between unsupportive workplace and rule breaking in Supplementary Appendix Table A4 with additional control variables, but the effect is still

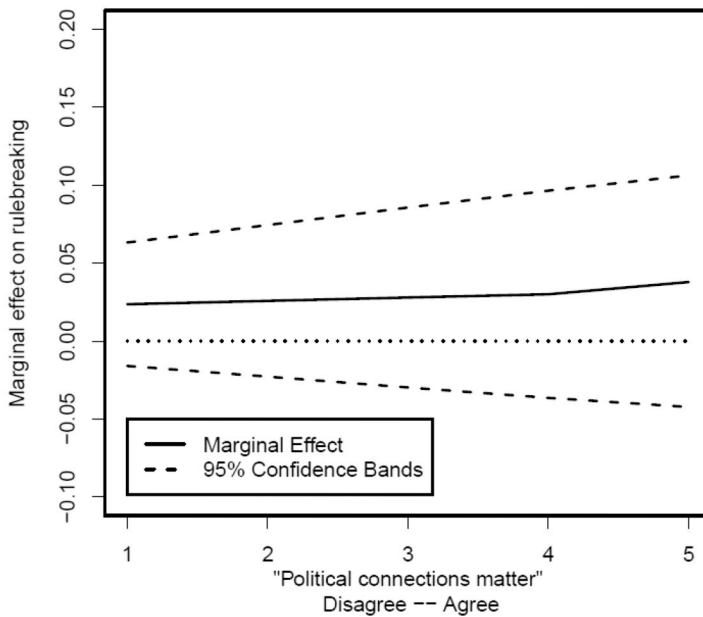


Figure 2. Marginal effects on rule-breaking, for meritocratic hires.

insignificant. This contrasts with accounts that have found a relationship between rule-breaking in the public sector and unsupportive work environment (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016; Cooper, 2018).

In the same vein, generational (age) effects, gender differences or regional disparities (living in a poor versus wealthy region; urban versus rural area) did not increase the likelihood of admitting to rule-breaking, as demonstrated in [Supplementary Appendix Table A5](#). Furthermore, [Supplementary Appendix Table A2](#) indicates that public servants with higher education levels are more likely to admit to rule-breaking than less educated ones, but this effect is insignificant in the linear model and goes away completely when we include all control variables in [Supplementary Appendix Table A3](#). Because only 36 (7.3%) of the respondents do not have permanency status, we do not control for the effect of permanency on rule-breaking.

Since a large part (29.9%) of our respondents is educators, it is possible that this particular profession could be driving the results. Rule-breaking among educators typically takes the form of teachers illegally offering supplementary tutoring for profit. Since exam performance rather than grade point average determines students' advancement in secondary education and entry to tertiary education, demand for private tutoring is high (Katsillis, 2020). Participation in supplementary after-school tutoring of 15-year-olds in Greece is among the highest in OECD countries (OECD, 2018, p. 49/50). While many private service providers offer private tutoring, administrative law explicitly forbids public servants from doing so. Despite self-serving motives, such as financial gain and superior performance appraisals, private tutoring is arguably prosocial: the teacher imparts new knowledge, skills and wisdom that may positively impact the student's life for years to come. In fact, most students

Table 4. Excluding educators from the analysis, 13 percent of public servants admit to rule-breaking. On average, respondents did nonkey items 0.8 times

	Coefficient	Robust std. err.	z	P> z	[95% conf. interval]	
Delta_cons	0.1346729	0.1180741	1.14	0.254	-0.096748	0.3660938
Gamma_cons	0.8362573	0.07963	10.50	0.000	0.6801854	0.9923292

who have made it into higher education attribute their success to extra tutoring rather than to the education received during regular school hours (Kassotakis and Verdis, 2013), even though many Greeks resent the considerable financial costs.

To see if the results are sensitive to the inclusion of educators, we re-ran the analysis without them. In this case, 13% of respondents admit to rule-breaking, compared to 17% in the full sample (Table 4). Without educators, the model is estimated with less precision, but this is expected in a decreased sample size (which was small to begin with).

But as Table 5 shows, the effect sizes are substantively the same, and for all coefficients, the sign is in the same direction. This means that educators are not fundamentally different from other professions in our sample.

4. Conclusion

Competent, rule observant public servants are considered crucial to the provision of day-to-day services, and meritocratic recruitment procedures are seen as paramount to preclude rule-breaking behaviour and ensure quality of government (Dahlström and Lapuente, 2017). To overcome well-known problems of politicized bureaucracies in member states like Greece, the EU has insisted on and monitored the implementation of merit recruitment procedures in hiring and promotions. Commission reports are noteworthy for their lack of criticism and Athens was commended for meeting reform benchmarks.

Our list experiment was designed to determine how prevalent PSRB is among Greek public servants. It revealed that 17% of respondents in our sample admitted to having broken a rule to help someone, a disheartening figure. Our main finding is that a hiring and promotion system that is perceived as unfair drives employees to engage in favouritism and PSRB. Public servants who were hired via merit competitions are not less likely to break rules, but they compensate for lack of efficiency by doing favours. They resemble 'pessimistic perceivers' (Cheeseman and Peifer, 2021) who perceive the professional reward system as biased towards those with political connections. When performance appraisals are used to reward PSRB, employees may conclude that strict rule conformity or blowing the whistle on irregular behaviour might be disadvantageous. In such contexts, meritocratic hiring practices will not eliminate favouritism or contribute to the de-politicization of the bureaucracy. Public servants who feel compelled to override formal rules to do their jobs well, derive feelings of efficacy or obtain satisfactory performance appraisals will continue to engage in PSRB, despite meritocratic hiring procedures.

Contrary to our expectations, we found that economic insecurity was not a meaningful predictor of rule-breaking. Likewise, we found no evidence that lack of intrinsic work motivation, unsupportive supervisors, regulatory complexity or demographic idiosyncrasies

Table 5. The relationship between recruitment process and rule breaking; educators excluded from the analysis

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Political connections	0.267**	0.262**	0.289***	0.252**	0.275**
	0.0876	0.0887	0.0866	0.0884	0.0935
Recruitment process	-0.266	-0.234	-0.270	-0.269	-0.235
	0.241	0.251	0.24	0.246	0.245
Education		0.070			
		(0.111)			
Trust in political parties		-0.128			
		(0.113)			
Financial situation			0.197		
			(0.158)		
Job satisfaction			-0.106		
			(0.129)		
Work hours increased				-0.044	
				(0.0877)	
Career progression stalled				0.065	
				(0.0959)	
Comfortable asking for advice					0.023
					(0.132)
Superiors value input					-0.052
					(0.114)
Supervisors' unrealistic expectations					-0.054
					(0.101)
Constant	-0.421	-0.643	-0.600	-0.500	-0.212
	(0.432)	(0.871)	(0.767)	(0.581)	(0.928)
N	327	322	327	314	321

Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

were related to rule-breaking. Empirical evidence on what drives public servants to engage in PSRB is scarce. This article contributes to this literature by showing how merit recruitment interacts with employees' perceptions about the professional reward system to influence rule compliance.

Our study has two limitations. One, it provides no information about the type of rules that have been violated. Public servants might have meant theft (e.g. scraping fines), granting impermissible access (e.g. to licences or building permits) or increasing the speed or quality of a service for clients they consider 'deserving'. However, asking them to reveal the type of rule violation, or whether PSRB helped a colleague, client or family member might have fuelled suspicions that the interviewer was asking about corruption—a non-pro social interpretation. Even in a country where rule-breaking is seemingly ubiquitous, individuals are prone to social desirability concerns. Two, as a case study of Greek public servants at a time of economic turmoil our research is highly context dependent and therefore limited in the generalizations that can be made about other places and different economic circumstances. But the primary purpose of an experiment is to test theory, not to generalize to different

contexts (Mook, 1983). We believe our study constitutes a hard case: given EU insistence on merit reforms and intense surveillance of reform implementation, one might have expected more rule conform public servants.

Despite these limitations, our results demonstrate that merit legislation on its own is insufficient to curb rule violations. Whereas meritocratic hiring is undoubtedly important to ensure that public servants fulfil their tasks in a competent and neutral manner, little attention has been devoted to understanding how merit protocols interact with other career incentives and beliefs. If the overall professional reward system is considered rigged, it destroys faith in the fairness of the system. The implication is that European Commission reports have painted an overly optimistic account of Greek public sector reforms, raising concerns about the willingness of the EU to enforce its own laws. This comports with Kelemen and Pavone's (2023) finding that the Commission is increasingly reluctant to act as guardian of the Treaties when EU unity is considered more important.

Our research is not just of academic interest as governments are eager to understand how their hiring practices, promotion and career incentives contribute to rule compliance of their employees. Further studies might uncover additional factors that undermine rule conformity in the public sector, assisting governments in devising incentives for public servants to comply with formal procedures. Future research would also benefit from longitudinal studies of PSRB, to see if rule conformity moderates or intensifies as individuals' careers change. How might decades of work experience and concomitant promotion decisions (or denials) affect employees' motives to engage in PSRB? Meaningful change from a low to a high rule-compliance equilibrium won't materialize without committed domestic actors. But it is not possible to solve a problem if nobody acknowledges that it exists.

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Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at Socio-Economic Review Journal online.

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