

THE INDIAN ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE MEETS BIG DATA

MILAN VAISHNAV AND SAKSHAM KHOSLA

India's economy has grown rapidly in recent years, but the country's bureaucratic quality is widely perceived to be either stagnant or in decline. While small, India's elite civil service cadre, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), occupies the nerve center of the Indian state. Unfortunately, the IAS is hamstrung by political interference, outdated personnel procedures, and a mixed record on policy implementation, and it is in need of urgent reform. The Indian government should reshape recruitment and promotion processes, improve performance-based assessment of individual officers, and adopt safeguards that promote accountability while protecting bureaucrats from political meddling.

Key Insights Into the IAS

- For officers early in their careers, exam scores and education are highly predictive of future success.
- Older officers who enter the service as part of larger cadres face limited career prospects and are less effective at improving economic outcomes.
- While initial characteristics heavily shape career trajectories, in the long term, there are clear rewards for officers who systematically invest in training or acquire specialized skills.
- Individual bureaucrats can have strong, direct, and measurable impacts on tangible health, education, and poverty outcomes.
- Surprisingly, officers with strong local ties—thought to be vulnerable to corruption—are often linked to improved public service delivery.
- Political interference generates substantial inefficiency: the best officers do not always occupy important positions, while political loyalty offers bureaucrats an alternative path to career success.
- Counterintuitively, greater political competition does not necessarily lead to better bureaucratic performance.

A Reform Agenda for the Civil Service

- The central and state governments should pass and implement pending legislation that protects bureaucrats against politically motivated transfers and postings. Despite judicial prodding, most states have stalled on such moves.
- The IAS should use data on civil servants' abilities, education, and training when placing officers early in their careers. As officers gain experience, performance metrics can inform key decisions about promotion and allocation.
- The government should consider the proposal that officers deemed unfit for further service at certain career benchmarks be compulsorily retired through a transparent and uniform system of performance review. While the present government has moved in this direction, this procedure should be institutionalized.
- State and central governments should discuss whether state cadres should be given greater latitude to experiment with increasing the proportion of local IAS officers and track their relative performance.
- Further research is needed to better understand the impact of local officers on development outcomes, to develop data on bureaucratic efficiency among officers in senior posts, and to systematically examine the workings of state-level bureaucracies.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Milan Vaishnav is a senior associate in the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Saksham Khosla is a research analyst with Carnegie India and was previously a junior fellow in the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

CONTACT

Tara Medeiros
Deputy Director of Communications
+1 202 939 2372
tmediros@ceip.org

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2016 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

CarnegieEndowment.org

 [@CarnegieEndow](https://twitter.com/CarnegieEndow)

 [facebook.com/
CarnegieEndowment](https://facebook.com/CarnegieEndowment)