

**The Interpretation of Political Lessons  
Developing a “Cultural” Framework to Understand the Micro-Level  
Dynamics of Political Learning**

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## Introduction

When citizens encounter the public bureaucracy, how does it influence how they form beliefs about the government and their political voice? This is relevant, as bureaucratic encounters are not only a transaction of material benefits. The implementation of policies in these encounters generate “policy feedback effects” by teaching citizens symbolic political lessons about their status as citizens, how the government are likely to treat them, and ultimately whether their political voices will be heard (Lipsky 1980; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Soss 1999). In the policy feedback scholarship, however, there only exist a few studies that elaborate on the micro-level dynamics on how interpretations arise when the citizen encounter the public bureaucracy and the political implications of this (Soss 2000; Campbell 2012). Elaborating on this, however, is of crucial importance, as the meaning citizens draw from their interpretations of these encounters ultimately influence whether policies create policy feedback effects and in turn shape citizens’ perceptions of government and political voice.

Elaborating on the political meaning making that arise in bureaucratic encounters, I expand on the *interpretive* part of the policy feedback scholarship (Pierson 1993; se also Campbell 2012). A number of questions within this tradition are, however, yet to be answered. For example, do citizens interpret these political lessons differently depending on the setting of the bureaucratic encounter (Goodsell 1981). That is, how is it relevant whether citizens draw political lessons in personal face-to-face encounters with street-level bureaucrats in contrast to encounters that rarely feature any personal relationships? Moreover, how do citizens’ insider/outsider positionalities in the bureaucratic encounter influence their interpretations? For example, how do citizens interpret their encounters if they are able to mobilize social resources, such as strong ties to their family and friends, *outside* of their bureaucratic organization? By contrast, how do citizens interpret their encounters if they can only mobilize resources *inside* their bureaucratic organization?

As these questions have not been adequately conceptualized within the interpretive strand in the policy feedback literature, we need to bring in new theoretical insights. To do so, I combine insights from cultural sociology with the literature on policy feedback in order to elaborate on the micro-level dynamics that influence how citizens interpret political lessons. Cultural sociology have extended far beyond the mid-twentieth occupation with norms and values in order to explore the social and political implications of meaning making in everyday life. Far too little of this research, however, have concerned the case of how citizens interpret their encounters with the public bureaucracy, and how it influence their perceptions of political voice. Drawing on insights from cultural sociology and policy feedback, the aim of this paper is to develop a framework that allows

us to answer: *How do citizens interpret the political lessons they receive in different encounters with the public bureaucracy, and how does it influence how they think about government and their political voice*

Rather than focusing on how bureaucratic encounters influence citizens' electoral participation (e.g. Weaver and Lerman 2010) or partisan affiliations (e.g. Campbell 2003), I focus specifically on their perceptions of political efficacy, including; (i) their *external efficacy*, that is to what extent they believe that government will respond to their voices and their (ii) *internal efficacy*, that is their perceptions in their own ability to exert their political voice (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). These two dimensions are important as the democratic society rests upon the assumption that citizens have the ability voice their concerns while the government has the responsibility to respond to them (Dahl 1971).

Theorizing with cultural sociology, I develop a micro-level account of political learning, which unpack how interplays between citizens' private and public positionalities play out within face-to-face bureaucratic transactions as well as its consequences for citizens' political meaning making. I argue that when citizens interpret political lessons through social ties and bureaucratic resources that can only be mobilized *inside* of the public bureaucracy, these lessons become embodied forms of knowledge, and their bureaucratic relationships therefore manifest themselves as the only medium through which they think of government and their political voice. By contrast, when citizens are able to mobilize social resources that exist in both their private and institutional domains, their perceptions of government and political voice will be based on more multi-faceted experiential knowledge. Ultimately, they will be much more likely to deflect the political lessons of their encounters.

To leverage a "cultural" framework, I select two *instrumental cases*, including social assistance and prisons in a Danish context, to unpack how citizens' social resources are mobilized, through insider/outsider positionalities, when they interpret their bureaucratic encounters, and ultimately how it influence their perceptions of government and political voice. Importantly, these cases serve to yield further theoretical insights into the micro-level dynamics of political leaning (Stake 1994, 1995; Pechmann 2018, 62–74), rather than testing an a-prior specified framework. Investigating these cases, through a combination of participant observations and in-depth interviews, I explore how citizens interpret face-to-face bureaucratic encounters very differently. With no exit opportunities, prisoners interpret political lessons only through social resources *on the inside* of the penal system, which I expect to imprint negative beliefs about government and their political voice (Lerman 2013). By contrast, social assistance recipients process these lessons through social

resources *on both the inside and the outside* of the welfare system, which I expect to imprint less antagonistic lessons about the nature of government and their political voice.

Ultimately, the paper will contribute to the *interpretive* strand in the policy feedback literature by elaborating on the micro-level dynamics that influence how individuals draw political lessons from their bureaucratic encounters and how they contextualize them through social resources leveraged through different insider/outsider positionalities.

The paper then offers a review of the existing policy feedback scholarship and specifically the shortcomings in the political learning tradition. Remediating these shortcomings, I propose a new model for political learning that combines insights from political learning and cultural analysis. Finally, I demonstrate how this model best can be leveraged in a qualitative case study of two instrumental cases; prisons and social assistance in Denmark.

### **Review of the policy feedback scholarship**

Policy feedback effects can be defined as the “the process through which policies shape political outcomes, which in turn either reinforce or undermine policy itself” (Lerman and McCabe 2017, 625). As this is a broad conceptualization how policies affect political outcomes, different strands in the policy feedback scholarship have offered different answers to this question.

The historical institutionalist approach exert emphasis on the impact of historical policy institutions on contemporary political decision. Pierson (1993, 1994, 2000, 2004), for example, shows how policies create “lock-In effects” where elected officials, seeking to transform or dismantle certain welfare policies, are likely to face resistance from interest groups and bureaucratic constituencies

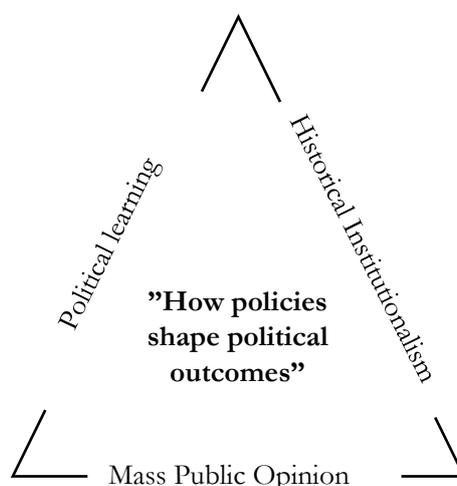
Redirecting our focus back to the citizenry, scholars have explored the “mass policy feedback effects” (Soss and Schram 2007) detecting how policies alter the preferences, beliefs and behaviors of mass publics (e.g. Mettler 2005; Campbell 2003; Mettler and Stonecash 2008). For example, Mettler (2005) shows how the expansion of educational opportunities for men and women who served in World War II enhanced their civic and political participation significantly. These changes typically occur through *resource effects* (Pierson 1993), as policies provide citizens with time and money to mobilize collective political action. Investigating these resource effects, Campbell (2003) demonstrates that the increased income-level of seniors in America, through Social Security, gave them the time and money to enhance their political and civic engagement.

A third strand focuses on the *interpretive effects* of policies (Pierson 1993), that is how individual understandings emerge from experiences with particular types of bureaucratic encounters, and how these understandings are articulated through a web of narratives, explanations and non-verbal cues (Soss 2006, for an analysis, see Soss 1999; 2000). Unlike the resource-explanation, it is argued that policy feedback effects arise, because policies convey different political messages about status and deservingness to different groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993). As Schneider & Ingram (1993) argue, these messages inform citizens “what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which are not), and what kinds of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society.” Subjected to these messages, citizens interpret them as broader *political lessons* about the nature of government and the efficacy of exerting their voice (Soss 1999). In specific, policies foster political learning as:

“Policy designs (...) provide clients with raw materials needed to construct beliefs about how government bureaucracies operate and how one should act in relation to them: it teaches citizens lessons about whether they can be effective in petitioning government and whether they have a standing to act without fear of retribution” (Soss 2000, 153).

In other words, the interpretation of political lessons can be conceptualized as a process of political meaning making; that is a process in which citizens, when they express their political beliefs, draw upon symbolic political messages, from their encounters with bureaucratic organizations, to construct meaning about the nature of government, that is whether government is to perceived as autonomous or responsive to their political beliefs, and subsequently the efficacy of exerting their political voice in a given setting.

Figure 1: Different strands in the policy feedback scholarship



Common to all three stands is their interest in “how policies shape political outcomes” (Schattschneider 1935). The historical institutionalist highlight the political arena and how existing policies affect future political decision making; the mass policy feedback redirect our focus back to the public arena and explore how existing policies affect larger groups’ collective political acts while the political learning approach explore how meaning making and interpretations arise from policies at the individual level. Among the three scholarships in the policy feedback literature, the political learning tradition offers the best analytical framework to explore how citizens interpret political lessons within bureaucratic encounters. Yet, the literature on political learning contain a number of shortcomings, which must be addressed to fully understand how citizens interpret political lessons and the political implications of this.

#### *The setting of the bureaucratic encounter*

First, only few studies theorize how the setting of the bureaucratic encounter influence how citizens interpret their bureaucratic experiences and the lessons they draw from them. In the original target group scholarship (Ingram and Schneider 1991; Schneider and Ingram 1993, 1995, 1997) that gave rise to the idea of political learning, it was argued that individuals interpret political lessons either through “observation of politics and media coverage” or via “direct, personal experiences with public policy” (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 340–41). Yet, this tells us surprisingly little about whether their beliefs about government and political voice are more likely to be influenced if they encounter these lessons through personal encounters or by simply watching the news. Moreover, within the same target group, there can be an interplay of multiple political lessons that individuals must choose among when they interpret their encounters (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010).

The large variety bureaucratic encounters then give rise to multiple ways in which they can be interpreted. Some encounters are initiated by citizens themselves, for example social assistance, while others are initiated by the bureaucratic authorities, for example criminal justice encounters. Some encounters take place through online communication, for example retirement- or educational benefits, while others occur through multiple face-to-face encounters, for example within social assistance or inside prisons (Goodsell 1981; Lipsky 1980; Hasenfeld 1972). More recent studies, in particular, have shown that when there is an absence of personal contact between the citizen and the public bureaucracy, citizens are unaware of the political lessons they are subjected to (Mettler 2011; Patashnik and Zelizer 2013; Jacobs and Mettler 2018). For example, Suzanne Mettler (2011) argues how citizens, who have no physical encounters with their bureaucratic organization, often fail to recognize both the content and the direction of policy

messages in their target group. Bureaucratic experiences then become less salient in citizens' memories and ultimately reduced to the anticipation of a sum of money (Kumlin 2004, 2002). Hence, in order to explore how citizens interpret political lessons, we must theorize how different bureaucratic settings influence citizens' political meaning making and whether some bureaucratic settings are more likely to do so compared to others.

#### *Individuals' social resources and their impact on political meaning making*

Second, there is a lack of theorizing about how individuals' social resources influence how they interpret their encounters. In his seminal study "Unwanted Claims", Joe Soss (2000, 71-86) theorized how welfare applicants drew upon various actors, including family members, friends and neighbors, service professionals, and government personal, before deciding to claim a welfare benefit. For example, he argues how conversations between the potential applicant and his family members "play a pivotal role in defining problems, acquiring information, and deciding to act (Soss 2000, 71). Yet, when he turns to discuss the sources of citizens' political meaning-making, he argues "although there are good reasons to suspect that individual characteristics have some effect on client evaluation, the evidence from this study points to real differences across the two tiers<sup>1</sup> of the welfare system" (Soss 2000, 119). In other words, these characteristics constitute a *selection bias*, which may entail that "findings of policy feedback effects reflect the people who enter the program rather than what the program does" (Bruch et al (2010, 208). Hence, in order to shed light on more general regarding political participation and institutional design, studies of policy feedback have compared citizens across programs while controlling for idiosyncratic demographic- and social characteristics (e.g. Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005; Mettler and Stonecash 2008).

Rather than only reflecting upon the role of social resources, such as family members, friends and neighbors or service personal, in the welfare claiming process, I argue that we must theorize how citizens draw upon their social resources during the process of *political meaning making*. Social ties to relatives or friends may provide citizens with moral support or information (e.g. Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn 1981; Granovetter 1983; Dominguez and Watkins-Hayes 2003) which may enable them to critically reflect upon their bureaucratic encounters in ways that lead them to interpret political lessons differently than intended (see Schneider and Ingram 1997; Cruikshank 1999). Their interpretations also depend significantly on the standards they bring with them from their past experiences with the bureaucracy (Soss 2000, 117–18). Some citizens may have gained significant knowledge about bureaucratic rules and regulations, which similarly enable them to critically reflect

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<sup>1</sup> Social assistance (i.e. AFDC later TANF) as the inferior tier, and social security (i.e. SSDI) as the superior tier.

upon the political messages they are exposed to. It may lead citizens, who are otherwise economically disadvantaged and labeled “undeserving”, to interpret political lessons in a positive fashion. Instead of treating citizens’ social resources as idiosyncratic characteristics” in the process of political-meaning making, I argue that they are best viewed as forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), which can be effectively mobilized within face-to-face encounters in ways that lead citizens to interpret political lessons in other ways than politically intended (Schneider and Ingram 1997; Cruikshank 1999).

*Individuals’ insider/outsider positionalities and its impact on political meaning making*

If these social resources can be leveraged in ways that influence how they interpret the political lessons of their encounters, it is relevant to discuss what happens if citizens cannot mobilize social resources either because they do not exist, or simply if they are unable to exit their bureaucratic organization. In traditional sociological research, scholars have investigated how citizens behave inside “total institutions” (E. Goffman 1961), for example inside prisons or mental health institutions, where citizens are deprived of their identity and social resources *on the outside*. In these circumstances, Goffman (1961) argues that a “conversion” takes place in which citizens take over the staff’s view of himself and tries to act out the role of the perfect inmate or patient. Subjected to such conversion, citizens interpret their bureaucratic encounters through what we can term an *inside positionality* in which their bureaucratic organization offer them the only medium through which to think about government or their political voice.

Although the concept of total institutions have been subject to much sociological- and criminological research, political scientists, however, have failed to reflect upon the political implications of this. Scholars of policy feedback primarily have focused on traditional bureaucratic encounters, such as social assistance (Soss 2000, 1999; Mettler and Stonecash 2008), social security (Campbell 2003), education (Mettler 2005) or health care (Morgan and Mettler 2011). In these encounters, by contrast, citizens interpret political lessons through what we can conceptualize as an *outside positionality*, which enable them to draw upon much more multifaceted knowledge in their interpretations. Yet, to understand how citizens are able to mobilize their social resources through both an *insider-* and an *outsider* positionality, we need to explore how citizens interpret political lessons in other bureaucracies than traditionally research in the political learning scholarship.

To sum up, there is a need to bring in new theoretical insights to understand (i) how different settings of bureaucratic encounters influence citizens’ interpretations of political lessons and (ii)

how their social resources can be leveraged in these interpretations, (iii) through different positionalities.

### **Theorizing political learning with cultural analysis**

Based on the review, there is a need to focus on how individuals interpret and contextualize the lessons they receive in bureaucratic encounters and in what ways it influence how they perceive government and their political voice. I argue that a combination of insights from political learning and cultural sociology allows us to grasp these dynamics in political learning.

Cultural sociology was originally used to understand how values and norms perpetuated over time and ultimately determined how individuals acted towards certain ends (e.g. Weber 2003; Lewis 1959; Wilson 1987). In contemporary cultural sociology, however, it is argued that culture do not determine individuals' actions; they offer them a "tool-kit" of action strategies and ways of investing these practices with meaning in order navigate in the social world surrounding them (Swidler 1986, 2001; Wedeen 2002; DiMaggio 1997). In Ann Swidler's (1986, 284) words, "a culture has enduring effects on those who hold it, not by shaping the ends they pursue, but by providing a repertoire from which they build lines of action". Culture then provides individuals with various scripts for how to organize their everyday activities (Harding 2007; Wacquant 2004), but also ways of "framing" and categorizing broader phenomena (E. Goffman 1974; Young 2004; Small 2002). Cultural sociology similarly acknowledges how individuals may be exposed to multiple forms of culture (Lizardo 2016); some of which become an enduring and even embodied part of individuals' everyday lives (Wacquant 2004); some of which are barely noticed or only reflected upon vaguely.

How individuals use their cultural tool-kit furthermore depends on their positionality in relation to public institutions and private relationships; particular frames are only used in public arenas; for example when individuals encounter the police (Stuart 2016), the courts (A. Goffman 2009) or hospitals (Brayne 2014); others are activated in their private domains when interacting with their partner or with friends (Harding 2007). Ultimately, individuals encounter a heterogeneity of cultural elements, and they all have the agency to contextualize these encounters based on their positionality and social resources (Swidler 1986, 2001). Leveraging these insights enable us to unpack the micro-level dynamics of political learning and address ultimately how citizens interpret their bureaucratic encounters in ways that have significant political implications.

Using cultural sociology to theorize about political learning, I develop a three-fold argument. I introduce a distinction between declarative and non-declarative culture to conceptualize the different ways in which citizens interpret political lessons provided within different bureaucratic settings. This distinction then serve to unpack how some political lessons become an enduring part of individuals' cultural tool kit, and why other lessons do not. Second, theorizing using the cultural concepts of "scripts" and frames", I argue how political lessons encountered through face-to-face bureaucratic settings (*non-declarative culture*), become a form of embodied knowledge (*scripts*) that ultimately influence how they interpret and label the government and their political voice (*frames*). Finally, using Bourdieu's concept of "capital"<sup>2</sup>, I theorize how the process of embodiment is contextualized in relation to both the social resources and knowledge that individuals are able to mobilize through different insider/outsider positionalities in relation to the public bureaucracy.

#### *A distinction between declarative and non-declarative culture*

First, I introduce the distinction between "declarative" and "non-declarative culture" (Lizardo 2016) to conceptualize the different forms of political lessons that individuals acquire during different bureaucratic settings. The distinction is used as it is, so far, the most systematic conceptualization of how different forms of culture become a part of individuals' cultural tool-kit. Individuals acquire declarative culture through explicit symbolically mediated culture (e.g. watching the television or reading the news), and via a relatively small number of exposures. By contrast, citizens acquire "non-declarative" culture without explicit symbolic mediation but through a long-term development of skills or practices (Lizardo 2016, 91–93). In other words, non-declarative culture cannot merely be watched; it must be learned through direct participation of the individual (see Wacquant 2004).

To make it less abstract, I conceptualize the declarative culture of bureaucratic encounters as political lessons conveyed through statements from elected officials about target groups or from official texts, which describe the objective of public policies and the techniques to achieve these objectives. Non-declarative culture includes, by contrast, the political lessons that individuals acquire during their direct face-to-face interactions with caseworkers or during engagements with other clients. Although these are not stated formally, personal interactions in bureaucratic organizations still convey strong political lessons. In personal interactions, citizens pick up multiple cues about how others view them, and how they should present themselves in return (E. Goffman

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu's idea about capital is recognized as being a part of the contemporary cultural sociology tradition (for references, see Swidler 1986; Lizardo 2016).

1959; Blumer 1969). Thus, through interactions with caseworkers and fellow clients, citizens are then subjected to strong messages about the bureaucratic organization's view of them as a clientele (Goodsell 1984; Lipsky 1980) and how they are likely to be treated by government (Soss 2000).

*Accounting for the embodiment and framing of political lessons*

How do these two forms of culture influence how citizens interpret political lessons? I argue that the declarative culture of political lessons, on the one hand, manifests itself as a form of factual knowledge that individuals can use to reason and reflect upon issues. However, as it is acquired without greater personal engagement, these lessons rarely become an enduring part of individuals' personal culture in ways that influence how they view government or their political voice (Lizardo 2016; Patterson 2014). On the other hand, as the non-declarative culture of political lessons are acquired through long-term personal engagement with the public bureaucracy, it becomes a much more enduring part of individuals' personal culture (Patterson 2014). In other words, the image of government and the efficacy of exerting their voice is not something they only hear in the news; it is something they encounter on a daily basis through their face-to-face interactions with caseworkers and fellow clients.

In specific, I argue that the lessons of their personal face-to-face encounters become a part of their "scripts", that is they manifest themselves as embodied ways of organizing their actions and solving problems in their everyday lives (Harding 2007). Stressing the embodiment, rather than solely how bureaucratic experiences manifest themselves as a "stigma consciousness" (Soss 2005, 314)", I argue how long-term exposure to the routines of face-to-face bureaucratic transactions become an embodied "practical sense" (Wacquant 2004, 117).

This embodiment occurs as the long-term engagement with public bureaucracies teach citizens slowly how to wait in the waiting room, how to sit on a chair during consultations with their caseworkers, and how to comply with formal directives. For example, many welfare offices are designed as "dog-kennels" (Goodsell 1984) in which citizens wait for hours in long rows while caseworkers sit behind protective glass barriers all the while guards are detecting the compliance of citizens (Soss 2000, 94–100). Similarly, there is a great deal of routine in these encounters with prison inmates, for example, being required to repeat the same things over and over again during the day (E. Goffman 1961; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Sykes 1958). In other words, as citizens are so frequently confronted with these physical structures while being obliged to frequently participate in very personal consultations with caseworkers, the political lessons of these encounters become embodied by individuals as a script for how to organize their everyday lives.

Ultimately, through this long-term embodiment of their encounters, I argue how these lessons become intelligible to individuals in ways that they invest these practices with broader meaning about the responsiveness of government and their political voice. In specific, these experiences become a “frame” (E. Goffman 1974; Small 2002; Young 2004), that is a distinct way of encoding their everyday scripts and connect them to broader political phenomena (Stuart 2016). In turn, the non-declarative culture they experience during their face-to-face encounter then become a set of interpretive lenses to read the political system and how government are likely to treat them.

In specific, I contend that their personal bureaucratic experiences turn into a frame to interpret the political system, because; (i) the lessons they encounter during their direct interactions with caseworkers or fellow clients operate as their most direct source of information about how government works (Lipsky 1980; Soss 2000); and (ii) this source of information, and the political lessons it contain, is so deeply incorporated into their everyday lives that the connection between their encounters and the government manifest itself as a form of “common sense” and “the way things are”(Swidler 1986; Bourdieu 1990). In sum, the embodiment of the practices and routines of their encounters become the most familiar frame of reference to understand government and their own political voice.

#### *Exploring the mobilization of social resources as forms of capital in face-to-face encounters*

Yet, we have only accounted for the fact that lessons encountered through intense face-to-face bureaucratic relationships (*non-declarative culture*) are more likely to influence how individuals make interpretations about the government and their political voice compared to lessons from de-personalized bureaucratic relationships (*declarative culture*). We still need to account for how individuals contextualize political lessons through social resources that exist both inside- and outside of the bureaucratic organization.

To reduce complexity, I argue that the two most important social resources that influence how citizens interpret the political lessons of their encounters include (i) their social ties (e.g. to families, friends, former colleges) and (ii) their bureaucratic competence (e.g. their knowledge about the rules and regulations that exist in the bureaucracy and their ability to effectively leverage this knowledge during their encounters). I conceptualize both as forms of *capital* that can be leveraged as a resource, which effectiveness depends on the individuals’ positionality in relation to the public bureaucracy and their private lives (Bourdieu 1986).

In bureaucratic encounters, I argue that social ties can be mobilized as a form of “social capital”, defined as “potential resources, which is linked to a possession of durable network (...) [and a]

membership in a group (Bourdieu 1986, 101). These memberships can both be constituted by *strong ties*, that is ties to families and friends and *weak ties*, that is colleges, neighbors etc. (Granovetter 1983; Wellman and Wortley 1990).

Family members or friends can be used as an emotional “protective shield” against the political lessons they encounter (Dominguez and Watkins-Hayes 2003), as they can remind them of the identity they hold outside of their institutional lives. In other words, they offer them moral support to review their experiences in ways that influence how they interpret the political lessons of their encounters. Second, more weaker social ties, such as former colleges or distant family members (Granovetter 1983), provide them with specific forms of information about how to avoid sanctions, handle paperwork or even negotiate better conditions for themselves during their consultations with caseworkers (Lin 1999; Granovetter 1983). This increase their institutional power and their belief in their ability to control the course of their encounters. In turn, as they feel able to exert their voice during their bureaucratic encounters, it may ultimately invigorate their beliefs in their broader political voice. Finally, social ties can be used to create group identities, and a feeling of solidarity, which ultimately can be used to mobilize political action against the bureaucracy they encounter (Mouw 2006; Putnam 2000).

In contrast to social ties, bureaucratic competences have traditionally been treated as a negative phenomenon to describe the behavior of “welfare queens” (in a Danish context, see “Dovne Robert” or “Fattig Carina”) who strategically try to bend the rules of the system to their personal advantage (See Gustafson 2011). Yet, I stress the positive dynamics of bureaucratic competences and argue that it constitute another capital that can be mobilized in ways that enable citizens to contextualize their bureaucratic experiences.

However, citizens’ bureaucratic competences are not particularly social, but indeed more *cultural*. Similar to ability to read sophisticated French literature, bureaucratic competences can be conceptualized as a cultural disposition (Bourdieu 1986, 97), acquired through personal exposure to and investment within the bureaucratic organization that grants the client an ability to “read” the bureaucratic system, including rules and regulations, in ways that improve their subordinate position in relation to their caseworker. As bureaucratic competences cannot be either bought or transmitted, but constitute merely a personally acquired information, it becomes a form of capital that can be leveraged by otherwise socially- and economically disadvantaged clients. Yet, their bureaucratic competence is entirely field-specific, as it can rarely be leveraged in terms of obtaining a job or an education. Thus, rather than mobilizing their social network, their *former* bureaucratic

experiences become the informational backdrop of how to effectively engage within *new* bureaucratic transactions.

Leveraging this information, a bureaucratic competence may improve citizens' ability to effectively engage with caseworkers and negotiate more beneficial conditions for themselves. In turn, this invigorates their beliefs in their ability to understand the public administration, which makes the government more responsive when their voices are heard. In other words, bureaucratic competences may provide otherwise disadvantaged clients with the necessary information to critically evaluate their interpretation of political lessons.

*The utilization of social resources through "insider- and outsider positionalities"*

The utilization of these forms of social capital, however, depends on the positionality of the individual in relation to the bureaucratic organization they encounter. This is where the *inside/outside* dynamics of public bureaucracies come to play in the process of how individuals interpret the lessons they receive and ultimately whether they come to embody them. Individuals' positionality in relation to the bureaucratic organization, however, has so far been neglected in the policy feedback literature. Their social characteristics have been treated as "passive" selection biases (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010), which makes it irrelevant to discuss how they can be mobilized through different positionalities.

While the insider/outside positionalities are neglected in the policy feedback scholarship, it is much reflected upon within the methodologies of ethnography. Here, the notion of insider/outside denotes a task of *reflexivity* in which a researcher steps out of an activity in which one is engaged in order to reflect back upon it (Hammersley 2015, 21). Practicing this reflexivity entails "an awareness on the part of the ethnographer of how her or his personal and social characteristics, feelings or emotions, and behavior may (...) distort the data and the analysis". (Hammersley 2015, 25). Transferring this into a theoretical concept to understand political meaning making within bureaucratic organizations, citizens' insider/outside positionality are conceptualized as a *process of reflexivity*; that is an ability to distance themselves from their experiences *inside* the bureaucratic organization, by stepping *outside* of this organization to critically reflect upon how their social and personal characteristics influence these initial experiences and ultimately how these experiences teach them broader lessons about government and political voice. Citizens' insider/outside positionality then become an ability to contextualize their experiences by viewing them through different mediums, that is through social resources that exist either inside-and/or outside the bureaucratic organization. Ultimately, this influences whether they come to

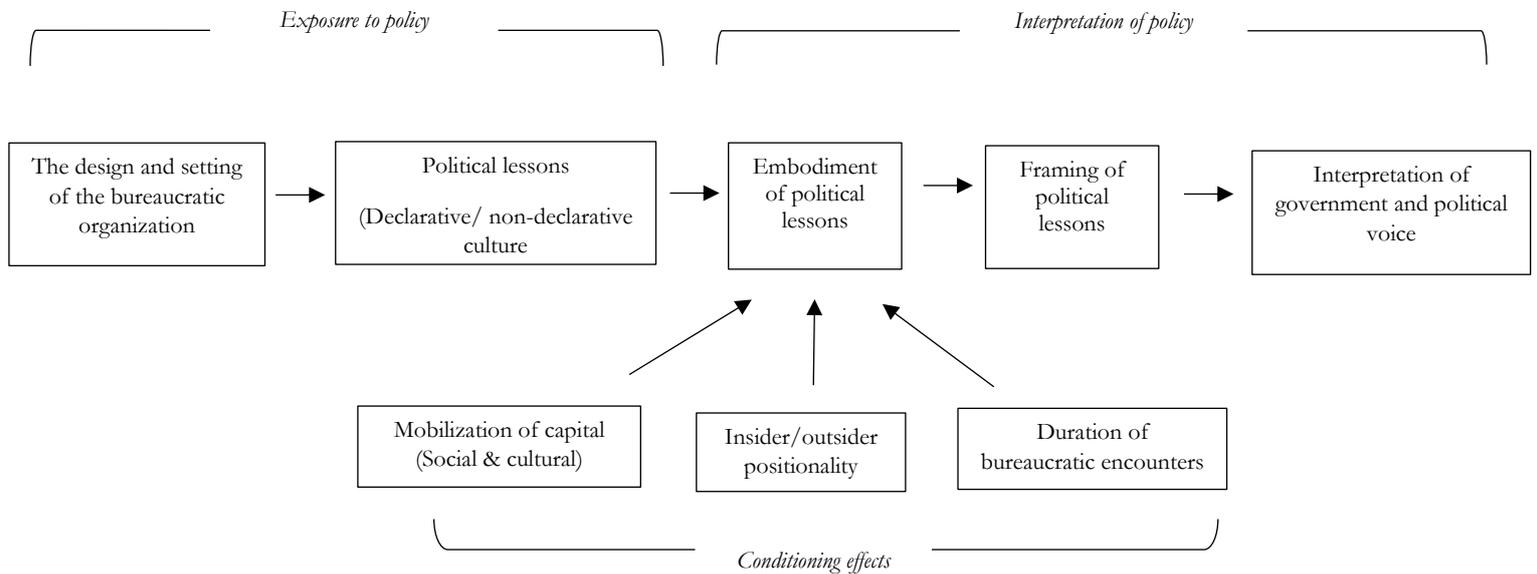
embody the non-declarative culture of their encounters and encode it as source information about government and their political voice.

If citizens are able to step out of the bureaucratic organization, they can contextualize experiences through social resources *on the outside* and use them as an alternative medium to the one provided by the bureaucratic organization (*outsider positionalality*). This may enable them to review their experiences in ways that lead them to interpret their experiences differently than intended (see Schneider and Ingram 1997; Cruikshank 1999). For example, if citizens are able to mobilize capital from the outside (i.e. through families and friends), it enable them to distance themselves from their institutionalized lives, which imply that they can interpret their bureaucratic experiences based on more multi-faceted knowledge. In other words, if citizens can reflect upon their encounters through an *outsider positionalality*, they are less likely to embody the political lessons of their encounters and subsequently use them as the *only* frame to perceive government and their political voice,

By contrast, if citizens are incapable of stepping out the bureaucratic organization, their reflexivity can only be exercised through social resources *on the inside*. This imply that the only medium through which they can interpret their experiences is through the ones provided by the bureaucratic organization (*insider positionalality*). Thus, even though they may be able draw upon social resources on the *inside*, for example by forming companionships inside prisons, these people experience their encounters in the exact same way, which imply that they cannot offer the individual an alternative medium to review their bureaucratic experiences.

The existing literature on prison inmates, for example, has shown how the inability of citizens to reflect upon their bureaucratic experiences through outside “inputs”, imply that inmates are more likely to form countercultures against prison officers (Lerman 2013). Rather than fostering positive political beliefs, these counter cultures increase the likelihood that penal encounters will imprint antagonistic impressions of government and political voice in the minds of inmates (Weaver and Lerman 2010; Lerman and Weaver 2014). Thus, if citizens can only reflect upon their encounters through an *insider positionality*, they are more likely to embody the political lessons of their encounters and subsequently use them as the *only* frame to perceive government and their political voice. I illustrate a comprehensive cultural model for political learning in figure 2.

Figure 2: A cultural framework for the micro-level dynamics of political learning.



Theorizing with cultural sociology, this micro-sociological account of political learning unpacks how interplays between citizens’ private and public positionalities play out within face-to-face bureaucratic transactions as well as its consequences for citizens’ political meaning-making. To sum up, I argue that in order to understand how citizens’ encounters with different public bureaucracies influence how they interpret the government and their political voice, we need to understand, first, in which bureaucratic settings individuals acquire these political messages. If they acquire them through declarative culture without any personal engagements, their bureaucratic encounters do not become an enduring part of their personal culture in ways that influence how they interpret their political efficacy. By contrast, if they acquire these lessons through non-declarative culture via very intense face-to-face encounters with the public bureaucracy, these lessons become a form of embodied knowledge that are ultimately used to frame broader political phenomena. Yet, the embodiment of the non-declarative culture of these bureaucratic encounters depends on (i) whether individuals are able to mobilize social or cultural capital through (ii) their positionality in relation to their bureaucratic organization, and ultimately (iii) the duration of their encounters<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Although not reflected upon, it is an underlying assumption that citizens have to be engaged in a bureaucratic relationship for a significant period of time (e.g. one year), in order to be able to embody the political lessons of their encounters.

### **Cases: Selecting instrumental cases to leverage a cultural framework for political learning**

Scrutinizing the model illustrated in figure 2, one might recommend either a process-tracing strategy for case selection, to closely explore every link in the model and how they lead to different different interpretations (e.g. Beach and Pedersen 2013), or a hypotheses-testing strategy in order to perform a reliable test of the argument. Yet, the aim of case selection in this paper is rather (i) a further development and refinement of the concepts introduced in figure 2, including embodiment, frames, the mobilization of social resources and the insider/outsider positionality of citizens. Doing so, enable me to (ii) make a theoretical advancement of the micro-level dynamics of political learning within *the interpretive strand* of the policy feedback scholarship. Ultimately, this should enable us to unpack how citizens interpret their bureaucratic encounters and the political implications of this.

I argue that the best way to yield these further theoretical insights is to conduct an *instrumental case study* by selecting two “positive” cases, including social assistance and prisons in Denmark. Instrumental cases have been used before in the policy feedback scholarship to advance new theoretical notions about how policy makers strategically design policies to create different policy feedback effects (see Pechmann 2018). Redirecting our focus back to the citizenry, I argue that instrumental cases can similarly be applied to further develop theoretical insights about the micro-level dynamics of political learning.

According to Stake (1994; 1995), a case study is instrumental when the case or case studies are vehicles, that is instruments for a certain purpose. The purpose is not to deductively test a priori defined hypothesis, but to produce novel theoretical implications and yield new theoretical and empirical insights (Pechmann 2018, 63). Cases are then chosen, not by its historical significance or deductive logic of hypothesis, but through careful theoretical consideration of learning opportunities about the phenomenon. As the cultural framework for the micro-level dynamics of political learning are based on, what we can term, “theoretical hunches” rather than deductively specified concepts, an instrumental case study therefore help to further develop these concepts into a well-defined model for political learning.

To do so, I select what are defined as *positive cases*. These cases are particularly well suited to develop new theoretical insights into the phenomenon of interest, (i.e. *political learning*) as well as the assumed potential causes, (*the setting of the bureaucratic encounter*), and mechanisms, (i.e. *embodiment, frames, and the mobilization of social resources through different positionalities*). I argue that the best positive cases constitute social assistance and prisons. When we compare these two cases, we are able to

understand more thoroughly how citizens interpret their bureaucratic encounters through the mobilization of social resources via different positionalities, and ultimately the political implications of this.

In particular, these two cases enable us to capture how citizens interpret bureaucratic encounters that contain a strong non-declarative culture. This non-declarative culture is particularly strong for both groups as they are, in Didier Fassin's (2015) words, placed in the "heart of the state"; that is sites in which citizens directly experience who the state deems as deserving or undeserving of full citizenship. These experiences take place in bureaucratic settings, which entail multiple face-to-face encounters with street-level bureaucrats who yield vast amounts of discretionary power. This means that citizens easily come to embody their bureaucratic experiences in ways that are used as frame to understand government and their political voice. Yet, the prison and the welfare office also offer a natural variation in the ability of citizens to leverage social resources through different inside- and outside positionalities. Thus, social assistance and prisons are ideal positive cases to unpack the micro-level dynamics of political learning and further conceptualize the foundations and mechanisms of the interpretation of political lessons.

#### *Encountering the "heart of the state" within prisons and the welfare office*

The welfare agency and the prison have long been ignored in the study of political behavior, set aside as sites of administration (Soss 2000; Soss and Weaver 2017; Bruch and Soss 2018). This makes sense, as one might say, because the street-level bureaucrats who implement penal or social policies are the "bureaucrats" farthest away from influencing elected officials. Similarly, citizens targeted by these policies are among the groups in society with the least power to influence policies. Yet, although centered at the margins of the centralized political system, a number of the state's exclusive functions find their most complete realization in administration of the marginal populations that inhabit the prison and the welfare office. Prison inmates and social assistance are situated in what Didier Fassin (2015) denounce as the "heart of the state" in which they, in plain sight, get to experience who the state deems as deserving or undeserving. These experiences take place within multiple face-to-face encounters who are granted vast amount of discretion in which they, on the spot, can decide to make significant changes in clients' everyday lives through sanctions or other forms of control (Lipsky 1980; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011b).

These encounters also have a very clear interface. The discretion of caseworkers are not handled online, but within official government or municipal buildings in which citizens are subjected to long hours of waiting (Soss 2000, 94–100; Auyero 2012) or experience being stripped of their

personal belongings (Lerman and Weaver 2014). In other words, the prison and the welfare office, in particular, are examples of places where the core functions of the state is both produced and directly revealed in front of its citizenry (Fassin 2015). The setting of both bureaucratic encounters therefore makes the non-declarative culture policies particularly strong, which I will reflect on below.

### *The non-declarative culture of prisons*

Being inside a prison is probably the most intense bureaucratic experience, citizens may endure. Criminal justice encounters are often involuntary, which situate the inmate within a particularly subordinate position in relation to the street-level bureaucrats they encounter. Citizens have no exit opportunities and only limited agency to voice their concerns, while street-level bureaucrats hold considerable amounts of discretion to alter the everyday lives of inmates (C. B. Goodsell 1981). Moreover, criminal justice workers are also distinguished by uniforms all of which locate their institutional authority within the government (Lerman and Weaver 2014, 93–94). Unlike any other bureaucratic encounter, this make the government particularly over in inmates' daily lives and their encounters feature direct state power that resume responsibility for every private, social and economic aspect of inmates' lives. As Laura Piacentini ( 2015, 81) reflect upon her prisons ethnographies; “the relationship between the prison and the state is a clear mirror reflection of the relationship between the person and the state”. On top, inmates do not only encounter one or two different street-level bureaucrats, as for example in social assistance; during their confinement inmates will, on a daily basis, have to engage in relationships with prison officers, social workers, nurses, psychologist, teacher etc., whose aim is to transform their behavior in order to enable their rehabilitation.

Unlike other citizens, inmates are also particularly vulnerable to the political lessons they receive during these encounters. Confinement often constitute “dramatic crisis events” that involve the humiliation of being searched in public rooms, being physically handled all the while having to manage personal experiences of trauma, including loss homes, jobs and family members. This is likely to make their encounters highly salient and durable memories of state contact (Fairchild 1977). These aspects of the penal encounter make the exposure of citizens to non-declarative culture particularly strong, which enable an embodiment of the political lessons conveyed in these encounters.

### *The non-declarative culture of social assistance*

Although social assistance recipients are able to “go home” from the welfare office, it does not necessarily ease the exposure to non-declarative culture. First, even though social assistance claims are voluntary (C. B. Goodsell 1981) and often based on careful consideration (Soss 2000, 60–90), the perception of exit is typically non-existent. Claims on social assistance often occur after citizens have exhausted all other possibilities for material relief. Similar to prison inmates, this place clients in an indeed hierarchical relationship to the welfare bureaucracy; citizens have little agency to voice their concerns, while street-level bureaucrats possess vast amounts of discretion to control clients during their face-to-face encounters.

Moreover, receiving social assistance also requires great personal engagement from the client. Most clients on social assistance wait for several hours in the waiting room before getting through to the application process or get their case reviewed in meetings with their caseworkers (Soss 2000, 94–96). Subjecting citizens to these long periods of waiting, they become, as Javier Auyero (2012) argues, “patients of the state”, as citizens experience how their claims are unimportant. Besides waiting, social assistance requires that citizens fulfill various educational or work related activities in order for them to maintain their benefit (Peck 2001; Ridzi 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a; Torfing 2004). During these activities, citizens are constantly subjected to being categorized by street-level bureaucrats who, if they fail to fulfill these obligations satisfactory, can deploy sanctions on the spot and ultimately deprive them of their benefit. Similar to encounters inside prisons, this create strong overtness of the state due to the on-going presence of caseworkers in the daily lives of social assistance recipients.

In sum, although the intensity of penal encounters are not to be compared with any of public bureaucratic encounters, there are similarities across the encounters experienced by inmates and social assistance including (i) the vast amount of power that caseworkers hold over clients, (ii) the personal “face-to-face” relationship between the citizens and the street-level bureaucrat, which create a (iii) particular overtness of the state in their everyday lives. This make them particularly suitable as positive cases to explore how citizens interpret the non-declarative culture of face-to-face bureaucratic encounters and how it influence their perceptions of government and political voice. Yet, without accounting for their different abilities to mobilize social resources through different positionalities, we fail to observe how their interpretation may lead to very different perceptions of political efficacy.

*The mobilization of social resources through different positionalities within social assistance and prisons*

The difference in the *insider/outsider* dynamics of their encounters influence how they interpret these political lessons. For cash-benefit recipients, this process is *external*. They evaluate political messages of their encounters through their social ties when they go home, or they draw upon their bureaucratic competence from other experiences with the public bureaucracy. This allow them to critically evaluate their encounters along with others who do not take part in their institutional lives. Moreover, they offer them the essential knowledge about how to negotiate beneficial conditions for themselves in their welfare encounters, which may reinforce their faith in the responsiveness of government and their ability to exert their political voice<sup>4</sup> (Soss 1999, 374–76). Thus, their outside positionality allow the social assistance recipient to step outside of the welfare office to critically reflect upon how their social and personal characteristics influence their interpretation of their welfare encounters.

By contrast, this process is *internal* for prison inmates. As prison inmates cannot exit their institutional lives, they combat the “pains of imprisonment” by forming close companionships to other inmates inside of the penal system (Sykes 1958; E. Goffman 1961; Lerman 2013). This means that inmates cannot use these social networks a second medium to the political lessons provided inside the prison. As inmates blame prison officers for their suffering, studies have shown that social ties inside prisons are mobilized to create oppositional cultures against prison officers. As they see prison officers as an extension of the correctional system, and of the government as a whole, they come to develop very negative perceptions of political efficacy (Lerman 2013; Lerman and Weaver 2014).

Prisoners similarly develop bureaucratic knowledge about the correctional system and beneficial ways of engaging with prison officers (e.g. Sykes 1958; Lerman 2013). However, unlike social assistance recipients, they have no exit opportunities, which mean they cannot leverage their bureaucratic competences to shorten their sentence or to negotiate beneficial conditions for themselves. Similar to their social ties, their bureaucratic competences are therefore used to circumvent the rules of the penal system (e.g. Sykes 1958). Thus, even though their bureaucratic competences may reinforce their beliefs in their own internal efficacy, it rarely foster a positive

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<sup>4</sup> Note that citizens receiving social assistance without the ability to mobilize these resources will most likely not develop positive images of government and their political voice.

belief about their external efficacy. In fact, their bureaucratic competences are used exactly because they believe their voices will not be heard, which creates a negative image of government.

In sum, social assistance and prisons constitute ideal positive cases for further developing a cultural framework for the micro-level dynamics of political learning. They allow us to observe how citizens interpret a strong non-declarative culture “at the heart of the state”, but in ways that are very different due to their ability to mobilize social resources through different positionalities. Ultimately, this natural variation allows us to further advance our understanding of how face-to-face bureaucratic encounters become embodied and subsequently used as a frame to understand government and their political voice.

### *Transferring American “theoretical” notions into a Danish “empirical” setting*

To investigate political learning in these two cases, I focus on social assistance and prisons in Denmark. Although the literature cited above mainly stems from American empirical research, I propose that a cultural model for political learning can still be leveraged in a Danish empirical setting. Important empirical differences, however, must be disclosed.

In contrast to the U.S, which have invested increasingly in punitive policies over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g. Gottschalk 2006; Western 2006; Wacquant 2009; Lerman 2013), Scandinavian countries have been recasts as “exceptional” (Pratt 2008b, 2008a; see also Uglevik and Dullum 2012; Scharff Smith and Uglevik 2017). Most notably, Pratt (2008a; 2008b) argues how a culture of equality, institutionalized in the infrastructure of the welfare state and through a homogenous population sharing social values, explains both the low incarceration rate and the human prison conditions observed in Scandinavia. Yet, prisoners in closed Danish facilities are still kept isolated from their social network while they similarly engage in daily face-to-face encounters with a myriad of street-level bureaucrats, including prison officers, social workers, psychologists, nurses etc. We are therefore still able to explore how they interpret the exposure to non-declarative culture through an *insider* positionality.

Danish social policies similarly are not comparable to those of the U.S in which a dismantling of traditional public aid programs have taken place (e.g. Soss, et al 2007; Soss, et al 2011a; Wacquant 2009). Yet, social assistance in Denmark have still also gone through significant changes, which include a reduction in the size of benefits, more needs-testing and an increase in the amount of obligations recipients must fulfill (e.g. Danneris 2016; Danneris and Nielsen 2018). More than ever, citizens on social assistance are required to wait long hours in the welfare office and

participate in myriad of different educational or work-related courses, which are closely followed by caseworkers.

In sum, I argue that we can still find ideal settings within Danish social- and penal policies to explore how the micro-level dynamics of political learning unfolds. In the next section, I briefly reflect upon which units I select from the two policy domains.

### **Units in social assistance**

Within social assistance, I focus on the Cash-benefit system (*kontanthjælp*), as this scheme represent one of the clearest examples, in Denmark, of a benefit where recipients increasingly are engaged in very intense face-to-face encounters. Being on cash-benefit assistance entail multiple face-to-face meetings with caseworkers, the obligation to fulfill multiple “workfare” obligations all the while having to manage the stigma of being “lazy” (Danneris 2016; Danneris and Nielsen 2018; Hedegaard 2014). I select two units in this scheme, including “the job-ready” and the “activity-ready”. I argue that they allow us to explore how individuals mobilize both forms of social capital, through an *outside positionality*, in ways that inspire positive interpretations of government and their political voice.

The “job-ready” generally have a relatively strong connection to the labor market; most have relevant job skills and have been employed recently before they applied for social assistance. Moreover, compared to the other group, there is a higher percentage of persons with children and spouses, which mean that most citizens have relatively well-established social ties (STAR 2017). Hence, they allow us to explore how recipients may use their strong social ties to family and friends *outside* the cash-benefit scheme as a second critical medium to reflect upon their bureaucratic experiences.

The second unit, the “activity-ready recipients” constitute the most “disadvantaged in the cash-benefit scheme. They have long disease histories, a large majority are single people who have children placed in social care (STAR 2017). Yet, the majority have been circling around in various other social assistance schemes while most maintain their cash-benefit assistance for a relatively long period of time compared to the “job-ready” (KL 2014, 7–8). Thus, they enable us to explore how otherwise disadvantaged clients are able to mobilize their bureaucratic competences *inside* the cash-benefit scheme when they interpret their encounters.

I select case units from the cash-benefit scheme in Copenhagen Municipality. Although cash-benefits recipients have one of the lowest voter turnouts in both the municipal, -regional- and national elections (Bhatti and et al 2013, 2017, 2016), there are also one of the widest range of

different offerings to both the job-ready- and activity ready clients, which enable me to observe cash-benefit recipients in multiple settings.

### **Units in the penal system**

As of 2015, there are 12 penitentiaries in Denmark (four maximum security prisons and eight open prisons) and 37 gaols (arresthuse). Together, they accommodate a total number of 3.422 inmates (Kriminalforsorgen 2016, 13). In the penal system, I focus on a particular unit, the so-called “convicted offender” group (Lerman and Weaver 2014), which consist of individuals convicted of a serious crime, for example assault, rape or murder. This group is mostly placed in closed facilities, which allow me to explore how inmates mobilize social resources during very intense face-to-face encounters through an *insider positionality*.

I select clients from Herstedvester Fængsel in Albertslund, Copenhagen. Unlike any other penitentiary in Denmark, Herstedvester can be characterized as a one of the most closed facilities. This is probably most notable in the physical architecture of Herstedvester. Rather than isolating clients through a barbed wire fence, in which inmates can look beyond the walls of the prison, Herstedvester is surrounded by a five-meter tall concrete wall. This means that the only life inmates get to observe is the one displayed to them *on the inside*.

The penitentiary houses 158 clients whose crimes include mostly rape (33 %), homicide (31 %), other sex offences (16 %), and assault and battery (13 %) with the majority serving long sentences (Herstedvester Fængsel 2018). Herstedvester Fængsel is a closed facility, which means that – unlike open facilities – prisoners are not allowed to leave during the day to conduct educational- or work-related activities. Yet, in “normalafdelingen” citizens, are allowed to partake in social activities with other inmates, such as cooking, playing table football while the majority also perform work- or educational activities inside the prison during the day. Finally, as inmates, unlike the U.S. for example, are allowed to vote, election meetings are arranged inside Herstedvester Fængsel (Lehman 2011). With the approaching national election in 2019, it allow me to observe how they articulate their beliefs about government and political voice during these election meetings.

### **Short note on methods**

I plan to analyze these cases by using a combination participant observations and in-depth interviews. These methods are used from an *interpretive* point of view (Yanow 2006; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), as I exert particular emphasis on how they understand their bureaucratic encounters and what conceptual frameworks they use to make sense of government and their political voice (Soss 2006).

The aim of conducting participant observations is to capture the micro-level mechanisms by which political lessons of their encounters become embodied forms of actions among the two groups. This can only be captured by immersing myself into the culture and everyday institutional lives of the two groups, which allow me to observe how they mobilize their social resources in their encounters and how their positionality affect this process.

Table 1. Participant observations of cash-benefit recipients.

	Sites	Positionality of Researcher	Places & Access
<b>Participant observation of cash-benefit recipients</b>	Three sites: (i) The welfare waiting room, (ii) during client-caseworker consultations and (iii) during courses and lectures.	<u>Welfare room:</u> Complete Observer-as-Participant (Gold 1958).  <u>Client-caseworker consultations:</u> Complete Observer.  <u>Courses and lectures:</u> Observer as participant	To observe the “Job-ready group”, I conduct participant observations at “Arbejdsmarkedscenteret”, Nyrupgade 41, Copenhagen.  To observe the “activity-ready” group, I conduct participant observations at “Center for Jobindsats”, Lærkevej 18, Copenhagen.  Access to both places is gained through the administration of each of the above agencies.

Table 2: Participant observations of prison inmates

	Sites	Positionality of researcher	Places & Access
<b>Participant observation of prison inmates</b>	Three sites: (i) during their work- and educational activities, (ii) during their caseworker-interactions, and during their (iii) leisure time activities	<u>Work and educational activities:</u> Observer-as-Participant.  <u>Client-caseworker consultations:</u> Complete Observer.  <u>Leisure activities:</u> Observer as participant	Observations are done at Herstedvester Fængsel in “Normal afdelingen”.  Access is gained through the administration of Herstedvester Fængsel.

The aim of conducting in-depth interviews is to capture how their encounters manifest themselves as frames to express their beliefs about government and their political voice. I expect to conduct interviews with citizens’ who are just started either serving their sentence or participating in their welfare course as well as citizens who are further ahead in order to see how

the duration of citizens' encounters play a conditioning role (c.f. figure 2). With slight variation, I use the same questions for both social cash-benefit recipients and prison inmates.

Table 3: Themes of interview and questions

Themes of interview	Sample of interview questions
Social background and social resources (i.e. family relationships, work history and prior experiences with the public bureaucracy)	“Do you have a spouse or any children”, “How often do you hang out with friends”, “What are your relationships to other clients?”
Relationship to the public bureaucracy and bureaucratic competences (e.g. number of consultations, relationship to caseworkers and to fellow clients)	“How many consultations do you have each week/month”, “How do you experience these consultations”, “Do your caseworker listen to your concerns”, “How do you react when your caseworker ignore your concerns”. “How well do you know the rules and regulations”
Beliefs about the government and their political voice	“When I say »politics«, what is the first that comes to mind”, “How would you describe the government”, “If you wanted to change something in your neighborhood, how would you go about it”?

### Summary

To understand the importance of how existing policies affect the democratic- and participatory capacities of citizens, we must unpack the micro-level dynamics of political learning. Doing so, I stress the importance of how citizens are “social thinkers” who do not benevolently accept the political lessons they are provided; they contextualize them through their personal histories and social resources in ways that influence their perceptions of political efficacy. Combining insights from political learning and cultural sociology, this paper have then provided a new cultural framework that enable us to understand how citizens contextualize their bureaucratic encounters based on (i) the setting of the bureaucratic encounter, (ii) their ability to mobilize social resources (iii) through different *inside-* and *outside* positionalities. Furthermore, I argue how an instrumental case study of prisons and social assistance allows us to further develop these theoretical insights due to the strong exposure of both inmates and social assistance recipients to non-declarative culture with, however, a variation in their access to outside resources. Ultimately, these cases will allow us to unpack the micro-level dynamics of policy feedback effects and in turn yield further theoretical insights into how existing policies affect citizens' perceptions of government and their political voice.

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