

How Presidents Choose Appointees: Ideology, Expertise, or Patronage?

Whether implementing legislation such as the Affordable Care Act, designing regulations for the finance and mortgage industries, directing cleanup and rescue efforts after Hurricane Sandy, or guiding surveillance activities at the National Security Agency, presidential appointees matter. Appointees develop and implement administration policy

to perform their jobs well, and the connections to provide support for presidents' political and electoral ambitions. But because there is not an unlimited supply of potential appointees who possess all of these characteristics, presidents have to make tradeoffs when choosing the leadership teams for their cabinet departments and other federal agencies. How do they make these tradeoffs? And which considerations are most important when filling different types of positions?

These are the questions at the heart of a forthcoming paper in the *American Journal of Political Science* that is authored by CSDI scholars, Gary Hollibaugh, Gabriel Horton, and David E. Lewis. The authors study where presidents place different types of appointees to guide executive branch agencies. While the article's theory and empirical analysis hone in on the specific question of appointee backgrounds and placements, it also connects to the growing scholarly literature on the importance of presidential personnel decisions for agency performance and overall governance.

In the paper Hollibaugh, Horton, and Lewis develop a theoretical model that illustrates how presidents choose among potential appointees with different backgrounds. Since

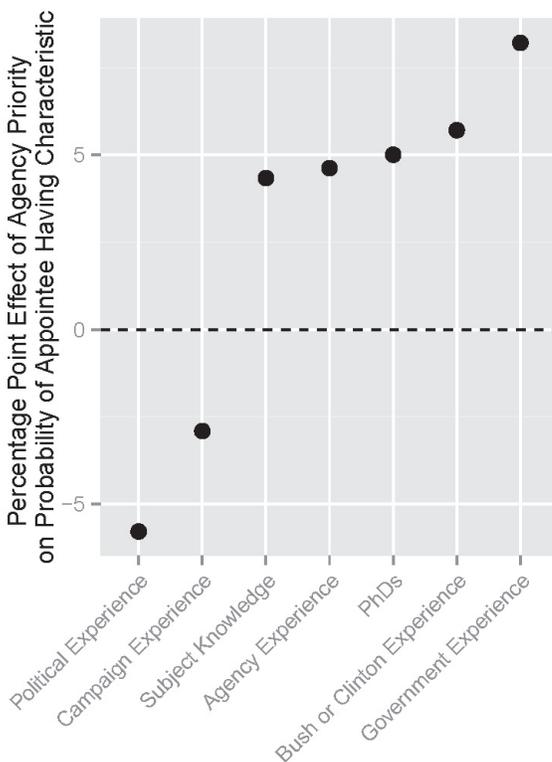
few potential appointees satisfy presidents on all dimensions, in which agencies do presidents prioritize competence? In which agencies do they emphasize loyalty? The authors focus particularly on cases where presidents select patronage-type appointees that may be less competent than other potential appointees and explain where presidents place such appointees. The authors explain why presidents prefer to place patronage-type appointees in agencies off of the president's agenda and in positions where they can have little influence on agency outputs. Presidents also place these appointees in agencies with lower expertise requirements and those that are likely to already want to do what the president wants. So, for example, Democrats place patronage-type appointees in agencies that tend to be liberal and Republicans place them in agencies that tend to be more conservative, all else equal.

To evaluate these claims, Hollibaugh, Horton, and Lewis collected new data from appointments that were made early in the Obama Administration. More specifically, they compiled background data on 1,307 political appointees from 57 agencies named by President Obama from January 20, 2009 to July 22, 2009. These data include details about appointees' education, work history, and political involvement.

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in ways that affect presidents, Congress, and the American people. Thus for new presidents, filling the more than 3,000 appointed positions in executive branch agencies is among the most important tasks at the start of a new administration. Presidents hope to find appointees who share a similar political and ideological perspective, have the requisite skills and experience

The authors find evidence broadly consistent with their expectations. Appointees with lower levels of competence and more extensive political connections were more likely to fill positions in agencies that were relatively low on President Obama’s agenda and agencies that shared President Obama’s policy views. In contrast, those agencies that were high on the agenda were more likely to receive appointees who had more professional experience or subject-area training. As Figure 1 illustrates, as



the level of agency priority increases the average proportion of appointees in that agency with substantive experience also increases. The authors note that these findings bolster the argument that presidents “need appointees who not

only support their initiatives but also have the skills to push for and execute new policies.” The evidence also suggests that President Obama placed appointees with less demonstrated competence and greater political connections in larger agencies that had generally lower requirements for expertise.

Taken together, Hollibaugh, Horton, and Lewis’s results point to how presidents view patronage appointments as needing to strike a delicate balance between

maximizing the political benefits of repaying campaign workers and others who provide political support while minimizing the damage to their own policy agendas and agency performance. By distinguishing among appointee types, agency characteristics, and the influence of different positions, presidents can then place professional appointees in those agencies and positions that are most critical to enhancing presidential control of the executive establishment’s processes and outputs. An unfortunate implication of these results, however, is

that some agencies, particularly those off of the agenda and those that share the president’s policy views, are often staffed by appointees with lower levels of competence, something that can have dramatic consequences for performance.

Although the number of appointments that presidents make to executive branch agencies is far smaller than in the heyday of the spoils system of the 19th century, the possible consequences of presidential patronage are greater now than ever. Because we rely on these agencies to handle many tasks—such as responding to natural disasters, managing the financial and mortgage industry meltdowns, or enforcing our federal laws—presidential decisions about patronage or professional appointees are important far beyond the inside-the-Beltway debates about who gets what after an election. With their theoretical model and empirical evidence, the authors provide critical insight into how these personnel decisions are made, and why the question of loyalty and expertise is important for policymakers, scholars, and the general public.

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The research summarized in this policy brief can be found in CSDI Working Paper 11-2013, “Presidents and Patronage” by Gary E. Hollibaugh, Gabriel Horton, and David E. Lewis.

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/research/CSDI_WP_11-2013.pdf

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