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Obama appointments studied for patronage

by Jim Patterson (<http://news.vanderbilt.edu/author/patterjm/>) | Posted on Friday, Jan. 17, 2014 — 9:12 AM



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Political patronage is alive and well in national politics with important consequences for campaigns, presidential politics and governance, say researchers from Vanderbilt University.

The scholars studied 1,307 appointments made by the Obama administration in the first six months of his first administration, seeking data about the appointees' education, work history and political involvement. The results will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *American Journal of Political Science*.

Research confirmed their theory that smaller, professionally run agencies dealing with issues on the president's agenda tend to have staffs with more qualifications and fewer connections to the campaign or politics.



David Lewis
(Vanderbilt
University)

On the other hand, agencies not central to the president's agenda, larger agencies with few expertise requirements and agencies that already share the president's views on policy are most likely to receive patronage appointments.

"Persons from the campaign or with a political claim on the administration may be easier to place in larger agencies, where their influence is smaller and their presence is easier to accommodate," write the scholars, [David E. Lewis](https://my.vanderbilt.edu/davidlewis/) (<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/davidlewis/>), William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt; [Gary Hollibaugh](http://www.garyhollibaugh.com/) (<http://www.garyhollibaugh.com/>), visiting assistant professor at the University of Georgia and former postdoctoral research fellow at Vanderbilt; and [Gabriel Horton](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/archived/profile%20pages%20students/horton.html) (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/archived/profile%20pages%20students/horton.html>), a research associate at Vanderbilt.

"President Obama, like President Bush and other presidents, campaigned partly on his ability to govern effectively, to deliver to the American public what he promised during the campaign," write Lewis, Hollibaugh and Horton.

If the personnel process, influenced by patronage pressures, diminishes the loyalty or competence of this team, this can have dramatic consequences for a presidency. "The president's success or failure depends in large part on the actions of the thousands of people managing day-to-day operations. ... If the personnel process, influenced by patronage pressures, diminishes the loyalty or competence of this team, this can have dramatic consequences for a presidency. Many of those selected primarily for campaign or political experience serve faithfully and well in obscurity but others end up causing significant damage to the country and the administration that appointed them. The results are potentially catastrophic for the president and the nation."

A working version of the paper, "Presidents and Patronage," (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/research/CSDI_WP_11-2013.pdf) is available at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions website (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/>).

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