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Presidential rhetoric, agency turnover, and the importance of salience to bureaucratic leadership[☆]

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ABSTRACT

What explains the quit rates of federal agencies? Can presidential rhetoric affect quit rates of federal agencies, particularly those that implement salient policies? Although much research examines other ways presidents may affect the federal bureaucracy, absent is a systematic examination of presidential leadership of agency quit rates, despite the importance of personnel turnover to effective bureaucratic implementation. I argue that presidential rhetoric on the size of government can affect agency turnover. This impact is only likely for agencies that implement salient policies, because salience encourages bureaucratic responsiveness to elected officials. The findings reveal that presidents who speak more favorably about government reduce aggregate turnover in the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Education from 1980 through 2005. I conclude with some observations about what these findings mean for presidential control of the bureaucracy.

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1. Introduction

The federal bureaucracy wields considerable influence and discretion over the implementation of public policy. Perhaps because of this, career bureaucrats are often criticized by presidents, other politicians, and the public as being unelected officials who carry out policy consistent with their own views, not the wishes of the American public in a democracy (see Gormley, 1989). Nevertheless, the theory of overhead democracy postulates that federal

bureaucrats will be responsive to elected officials (Redford, 1969). Even though this idea is supported by much research that shows how policy outputs shift in response to simple changes in presidential administrations (Moe, 1982), a more active way for presidents to lead the bureaucracy is through their rhetoric, with some presidents criticizing the federal bureaucracy as unresponsive to democratic values and slow to implement policy that is mired in red tape and excessive regulation. Just as presidential rhetoric affects both the agendas of federal agencies (Whitford & Yates, 2009) and their implementation of policy (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006), one additional impact of presidential rhetoric may be to affect personnel turnover in key federal agencies.

Personnel turnover at federal agencies is relevant to the larger study of bureaucratic politics. Although agencies may also benefit from increased employee turnover (Meier & Hicklin, 2008), turnover increases an agency's hiring and training costs and may reduce institutional memory (Light, 2008) and expertise (Gailmard & Patty, 2013). Thus, presidential influence over agency turnover could not only affect policy implementation by that Agency, but

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also our scholarly conclusions regarding the extent of presidential leadership of the bureaucracy. To date, however, research has not explored the president's potential to affect agency turnover through rhetoric. Most research on agency turnover either focuses on individual intent (Bertelli & Lewis, 2013) or that which does examine presidential influence tends to conclude that presidential leadership of agency turnover is more a function of agency culture rather than presidential influence (Golden, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of the president's public rhetoric on the aggregate quit rates of several federal agencies in which one expects presidential rhetoric to be salient to employees and capable of affecting quit rates. To accomplish this, I argue that the more presidents express support for government through their public rhetoric (Wood, 2009) the lower personnel turnover will be in federal agencies that implement salient policies. Salient policies are those in which bureaucrats are most likely to be responsive to political leadership, to "look over their shoulders" and make decisions based on heightened concern for intervention by political principals when preferences between the two diverge (Gormley, 1986, 598). In quarterly analyses from 1980 through 2005, the results show presidential rhetoric has the expected impact on quit rates in agencies whose mission centers on salient policies (the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Education), but not other policies (Departments of Agriculture and Interior).

Explaining aggregate quit rates in federal agencies as a function of political influence is an important topic for a variety of reasons. First, the federal bureaucracy is responsible for implementing federal law. If presidents severely criticize the work of federal bureaucrats, this may discourage federal employees and decrease the personnel available to implement policy. These costs both decrease an agency's capacity to implement the law and reduce the productivity of federal agencies (see Kraft & Vig, 1984; Wood, 1988). Conversely, presidents who signal a more positive view of the role of government may encourage fewer departures. Either way, the consequences of changes in the federal workforce could be felt broadly across society. Second, modeling presidential influence over agency turnover may shed additional light on the tendency for career bureaucrats to respond to the president. If presidents are unable to influence quits and when, then this limits the extent to which the president can affect democratic responsiveness by federal agencies. This, in turn would limit the applicability of theory of overhead democracy to our understanding of presidential-bureaucratic relations. Third, most research on personnel turnover focus on individual-level intentions to quit (e.g., Bertelli & Lewis, 2013; Lee & Whitford, 2008). Looking at turnover in the aggregate is most appropriate given available data, it builds upon the political control of the bureaucracy literature, and adds a significant feature to this research.

1.1. Political control and agency turnover

A large literature has assessed the impact of political principals on the federal bureaucracy. Although some of this research examines the impact of federal courts

(West, 1995), most of it studies democratically-elected branches of government, but especially the presidency, and how they have shaped the implementation of public policy consistent with the wishes of the American people. Framed as the theory of overhead democracy (Redford, 1969), elected officials have clear incentives to oversee the bureaucracy and ensure that its actions are consistent with the preferences of the voters who elected them. Subsequent quantitative research shows, indeed, that Congress and the presidency both have substantial influence over the federal bureaucracy (Wood & Waterman, 1994; but see Brehm & Gates, 1997).

To date, the political control of the bureaucracy literature falls short of examining whether or not politics affects aggregate personnel turnover in the federal bureaucracy. Instead, research that has sought to explain personnel turnover has focused on two main factors. First, the availability of alternative employment may affect turnover. Whereas private outside employment options may increase turnover intention (Bertelli & Lewis, 2013), Utgoff (1983) argues that employment options are especially important as they concern the trade-off between private and public-sector jobs, and whether the private sector employs more quality workers than the federal bureaucracy. Other research downplays the tendency of federal workers to quit for private employment. Crewson (1997) notes that high quality federal employees are no more likely than others to exit federal agencies. He also finds no evidence that there had been a decline in the quality of workers at the federal level over time or in comparison with the private section and, in fact, quality is higher among those who enter the public than private sector (Crewson, 1995). Moreover, the private sector may not be an attractive option for federal employees because individuals enter the civil service for reasons other than why individuals might work in the private sector. If the motivation to enter the federal civil service is based on different criteria, then it would not necessarily follow that a federal civil servant would quit for a private sector job because a private sector job would be insufficient to satisfy this employee's esprit de corps (Golden, 2000; see also Perry & Wise, 1990).

Second, work environment may affect personnel turnover. Obviously, low pay is a primary determinant of both actual (Lewis, 1991) and intended agency turnover (Bertelli, 2007; Lee & Whitford, 2008). If one does not think that they are being paid appropriately, they are more likely to quit. When this is a systemic problem—perhaps undermined by a lack of presidential support for budget increases—quits are likely to occur agency-wide. Even if regular pay raises are not adequate, both performance incentives (Lee & Jimenez, 2011) and access to family-friendly benefits tend to reduce the intention to quit at the federal (Lee & Whitford, 2008) and state-levels (Selden & Moynihan, 2000). Beyond having higher pay and access to benefits, bureaucrats are more likely to be motivated and satisfied with their jobs when they are part of implementing policies that they deem important (Perry & Wise, 1990), are tied to specific goals (Jung, 2014), or when an agency's senior executives have more say over policy (Bertelli & Lewis, 2013). The latter point extends to characteristics

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