

Public Opinion and Presidential Appointment Success

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Research Abstract:

A modern democratic government is unworkable without reliance upon an extensive structure of bureaucratic agencies. As the need for bureaucracies increases, a greater proportion of public policy is decided by bureaucratic agencies as opposed to elected officials. Even simple regulatory enforcement powers can have significant implications for what can be created, traded, consumed, or thrown away. To maintain democracy within this environment requires that the actions of bureaucracies be constrained directly by elected officials and thus ultimately by the electorate. Within the American context, there is still much debate about the degree and nature of this constraint.

If the bureaucracy is indeed controlled externally, then the next question becomes: Who controls the bureaucracy? More specifically, research has begun to focus on which branch of government serves as the primary principal to the bureaucratic agencies. Because of the constitutional powers granted to each branch of the American government, the two lead contenders are the President and Congress, with the judicial branch playing a lesser, intermittent role. In an era of oft-divided government, presidential versus congressional control becomes an especially important distinction for making predictions about how bureaucracies will perform; however it remains a difficult question to answer.

While both Congress and the President have means of controlling an agency, arguably the greatest control is obtained by the principal that is most able to direct the appointment process of high-level officials. This appointment process constitutionally entails a direct competition between the President and Congress, with the President offering a candidate who must receive congressional approval before being appointed. Now the question becomes: Who will triumph in the appointment process? To answer I turn to public opinion of the President, which has long been noted to influence inter-branch relations. When the President is popular, he or she is able to “go public” in a way that can affect the outcomes of congressional voting. To test this assumption, I ask whether popular presidents are more likely to get an agency appointment that is closer to their ideal point.