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DEMOCRACY REFORM PRIMER SERIES

The Number of Political Appointees

A Practical Research Guide

by **David E. Lewis**

Department of Political Science
Vanderbilt University

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About the Democracy Reform Primer Series

Narrowing the gap between research and public dialogue, the University of Chicago Center for Effective Government's Democracy Reform Primers responsibly advance conversations and strategy about proposed changes to our political institutions. Each Primer focuses on a particular reform, clarifies its intended purposes, and critically evaluates what the best available research has to say about it. The Primers do not serve as a platform for either authors or the Center to advance their own independent views about the reform; to the contrary, they serve as an objective and authoritative guide about what we actually know—and what we still don't know—about the likely effects of adopting prominent reforms to our political institutions. In some instances, the available evidence may clearly support the claims of a reform's advocates. In other instances, it may cut against them. And in still others, the scholarly literature may be mixed, indeterminate, or altogether silent. Without partisan judgment or ideological pretense, and grounded in objective scholarship, these Primers set the record straight by clarifying what can be said about democracy reforms with confidence and what requires further study. This series is produced with support from Democracy Fund and the Democracy Innovation Fund.

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About the Author



David E. Lewis is the Rebecca Webb Wilson University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. His research interests include the presidency, executive branch politics, and public administration. He is the author of two books, *Presidents and the Politics of Agency Design* (Stanford University Press, 2003) and *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance* (Princeton University Press, 2008). He has also published numerous articles on American politics, public administration, and management in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Public Administration Review*, and *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. His work has been featured in outlets such as the *Harvard Business Review*, the *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*. He is a member of the National Academy of Public Administration and has earned numerous research and teaching awards, including the Herbert Simon Award for contributions to the scientific study of the bureaucracy and the Madison Sarratt, Jeffrey Nordhaus, and Robert Birkby awards for excellence in undergraduate teaching.

About the Series Editor



CEG Faculty Affiliate **Anthony Fowler** is a Professor at the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. His research applies econometric methods for causal inference to questions in political science, with particular emphasis on elections and political representation. Fowler is currently the Co-editor in Chief of the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, and the co-author (with Ethan Bueno de Mesquita) of *Thinking Clearly with Data: A Guide to Quantitative Reasoning and Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 2021). Fowler earned his Ph.D. in government from Harvard University and completed undergraduate studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Summary

Promise of the Reform

There is widespread dissatisfaction with federal agency performance. For some observers, the problem stems from the large number of appointed positions, many regularly vacant because of political dysfunction and others filled with unqualified political appointees who interfere with career professionals. For others, the insulated nature of the career bureaucracy creates performance problems. Since civil servants cannot be fired easily, they have few incentives to work hard and be responsive to elected officials. Reformers advocate cuts or expansions in the number of political appointees to improve performance.

Key Takeaways from the Research

- The United States has an unusually large number of leadership positions filled by political appointees.
- Presidents and their parties have few incentives to reduce the number of political appointees and in many cases have incentives to increase the number.
- Programs run by political appointees and agencies with large numbers of appointees perform worse than other agencies on a diverse set of metrics.
- Performance problems stem from regular vacancies in appointed positions and less qualified leaders in positions filled by political appointees.
- Some degree of political appointee presence is necessary for high performance (and democratic accountability).

Important Questions the Research Does Not Answer

- Several U.S. states have changed to at-will personnel systems, something like all-appointee systems, but we know very little about the effects of these changes.
- If the right mix of appointees and career professionals is necessary for performance, what is the optimal number of appointees?

Introduction

“An agency filled with all political appointees might be responsive to the President, but such an agency might not be particularly effective.”

In the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, Republican presidential candidates have praised a failed effort by the Trump Administration to increase the number of political appointees by an estimated 50,000 positions. The candidates, including the former President, have indicated their intention to try again in 2025. At the same time, good government groups and their allies in Congress are advocating a reduction in the number of political appointees and working to limit the president’s ability to create new appointed positions. Efforts to cut the number of appointees often fail because presidents and their parties benefit from the flexibility appointees provide and trust their own judgment in selecting key agency officials.

The debate over the proper number of political appointees is a longstanding one in American politics. The number of appointed positions influences how responsive government agencies are to elected officials and the quality of organizational performance. We want agencies to follow the directions of people we elect to office and we want agencies to perform effectively, yet these goals often work against one another. An agency filled with all political appointees might be responsive to the President, but such an agency might not be particularly effective.

This Primer reviews the basics of the federal personnel system, clarifying the true number of political appointees, and reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature on the number of political appointees and their effects on government responsiveness and performance.

What Is a Political Appointee?

Modern democratic governments like the United States have two broad types of civilian employees, civil servants and political appointees. (Of course, governments also hire a lot of contract employees to do the public’s work. We know very little about the relationship between the number of appointees and the number of contract employees.)

Civil servants are hired, managed, and fired based on merit rather than other criteria, like personal connections or party loyalty. Merit-based systems provide government employees rights and administrative and adjudicative remedies should they feel these employment rights have been violated. Given the procedural requirements defining merit, hiring a civil servant can be a lengthy process and firing a civil servant is time consuming and difficult.

Introduction

Governments view such procedures as the necessary price citizens pay for ensuring a competent government. Merit systems help filter out unqualified persons and create incentives for potential employees to enter government service and invest their time and effort to become expert once there, free from concerns about how politics might interfere with their jobs and advancement. Ideally, such systems generate stability and professional identity, which also contribute to good performance.

Political appointees are defined by their selection outside this system. There are few restrictions on who can be selected and almost no protections from removal, although a small number are appointed for a fixed-term and protected by explicit limits on suitable reasons for removal. Hiring and firing political appointees is largely discretionary and this makes political appointees more responsive to elected officials. Political appointees serve as agency leaders and political staff, working at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Presidents select the most prominent appointees directly and agency heads select others. Elected officials often chafe against the limits of the merit system, preferring more ease in hiring, managing, and firing to ensure responsiveness. By increasing the number of political appointees elected officials can increase the responsiveness of government agencies.

Prior to the creation of the merit system, the United States had what is referred to as an “at-will” personnel system—i.e., one where employees were effectively appointees. Lower level employees could be hired or fired based on connections or party loyalty, and most were. In 1883, in response to poor federal agency performance and a prominent scandal, Congress enacted the first government-wide civil service law and created the two broad classes of employees we have now. Since the law’s enactment, Congress and the president have struggled to determine which positions should be filled according to merit criteria and which should be filled at the discretion of the president or (politically appointed) agency head.¹

How Many Political Appointees Are There?

Since 1980, there have been approximately 4,000 civilian political appointees in non-advisory roles at any given time. There are four main types, loosely ordered by rank: Senate-confirmed appointees (PAS: 1,340), appointees not requiring Senate confirmation (PA: 500-600), politically appointed members of the Senior Executive Service (NA: 700-800), and Schedule C appointees (SC: 1,200 -1,500). For comparison, other developed democracies have between a few dozen and a few hundred political appointees.²

The most fundamental of all political appointees are those requiring nomination by the president and confirmation by the Senate. Article II of the Constitution mandates that the president nominate and the Senate confirm all ambassadors and principal officers of government. The Constitution does not clarify which positions are principal or what classifies as officer. In practice, Congress creates positions to be filled by nomination and confirmation in law. This means that some positions currently filled by nomination and confirmation do not have to be filled this way.

It also means that such positions can be vacant for lengthy periods since the president and the Senate must agree on a selection. Political polarization has contributed to a slowdown in the pace of nominations and confirmations. The Senate is taking longer to evaluate nominees and presidents are increasingly delaying nominations or making no nominations at all. Scholars estimate that key Senate-confirmed positions are vacant 20-25 percent of the time.³

Given the difficulty getting nominees through the Senate, presidents have increasingly relied on political appointees that do not require Senate confirmation to pursue their goals in the executive branch.⁴

Theoretical Research on the Number of Appointees

“The strategic giving and withholding of government jobs is also an important source of political power for presidents who lack many formal powers.”

Each new president begins their term with a map of where the last administration employed political appointees. They use this map as a starting point for their own personnel operation. They can work to increase the number of appointees by changes in law and through administrative action. Senate-confirmed appointees (PAS) must be created in law, but presidents have substantial legal authority to alter the number of other types of appointees. Presidents can reduce the number of appointees by seeking legal changes to eliminate PAS positions. For other types of appointees, presidents can reduce their number simply by refusing to replace old appointees with new appointees, effectively allowing career professionals to assume those responsibilities.

Substantial political science research examines how presidents make these choices. This work assumes that presidents make choices about the number of appointees based upon their concerns for policy and governance and their role as a political leader. For presidents to accomplish their policy goals and fulfill their campaign promises they must secure control of administrative agencies. The public holds presidents accountable for the actions of government agencies,

meaning presidents need agencies to produce the right policies and operate effectively, or at least avoid big mistakes or embarrassing failures. The strategic giving and withholding of government jobs is also an important source of political power for presidents who lack many formal powers.⁵ They use government jobs as a reward for faithful service and as a way of signaling to others that there are benefits to supporting the president's agenda.

Presidents' concern for policy and governance and patronage lead to three predictable patterns in the numbers of appointments. First, the president's need to control the policymaking apparatus means that presidents will often prefer higher numbers of appointees in agencies that do not naturally share the president's views about policy.⁶ Agencies, by virtue of their policy commitments in law and regulation, the partisan composition of their employees, and their unique histories have views about how agencies should behave and what agency policies should be.

Theoretical Research on the Number of Appointees

Sometimes these views align with the view of the incoming president and sometimes they do not. When they do not line up, something presidents learn through research during the transition, presidents prefer more appointees.

Second, presidents tend to prefer more appointees in agencies that are key to implementing policies on the president's agenda.⁷ While presidents prefer control, they must prioritize in the selection of personnel and the time and effort they will put into agency management. Presidents are particularly accountable for the issues they raised during the campaign and issues that naturally fall under the purview of the presidency. Presidents prefer to have people they trust dealing with presidential initiatives and fulfilling key promises the president made.

Finally, presidents are constrained by their own concerns for performance, seeking responsiveness but also competence.⁸ They worry that too many appointees in some agencies could lead to poorer performance in ways that could damage them. Presidents tend to be more restrained in politicizing agencies where the marginal costs of such actions are high, for example in highly technical agencies or agencies where the costs of agency failure are quite high (e.g., the Federal Reserve). This means that presidents place patronage-type appointees in agencies where the effects of the appointees on performance are hard to observe.⁹

While presidents have a lot of authority over appointments, Congress can operate as a constraint by working to limit the president's use of appointees. Majorities in the Senate can refuse confirmation of presidential nominees. Congress can also constrain the number of political appointees through explicit statutory limits on the number and through budgetary limits.

Appointees' Responsiveness and Performance

There is virtual consensus that large numbers of appointees allow presidents to shift agency policies toward the president's preferred policy, although the amount of change can vary by context. Scholars also speculate that too many appointees might hinder presidents, arguing that too many appointees might make agencies less responsive through added layers and related confusion, but the evidence here is largely impressionistic.¹⁰

Theorizing about how the number of appointees influences performance has led scholars to focus on three aspects of appointee leadership: the qualities and backgrounds of appointed vs. career leaders, the effects of appointee turnover and vacancies, and the impact of appointee leadership on the quality of agency rank and file.

Scholars of all stripes agree that the quality of organizational leaders matters for performance. They also agree that appointed and civil servant leaders can both be of high and low quality. They theorize, then, about the average effects of differences in background and style on performance. There are natural differences between the backgrounds of the two types of leaders. Appointed leaders tend to have a more general background, political savvy, and risk-taking energy to fulfill a specific mandate. Career professionals tend to have more subject area expertise and public management experience. While an appropriate mix is theorized to be best, scholars suggest that political motivations behind appointees mean the United States has more than is optimal for performance alone.¹¹

Theoretical Research on the Number of Appointees

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Some appointee-led federal agencies have been fortunate enough to attract a string of high-quality political appointees. Even in such agencies, however, performance may suffer relative to agencies run by career professionals because of the systemic effect of rotating appointee leaders. When the U.S. government replaces career professionals with political appointees in leadership positions, this inevitably increases turnover and vacancies in leadership positions. The agency must manage more leadership transitions, spend more time onboarding new leaders, adjust to quicker changes in priorities, and work with leaders with shorter time horizons. Appointed leaders focus on short-term accomplishments since they know they will be in office for two-to-three years at most. They have fewer incentives to focus on the long run or do the kind of planning necessary for healthy organizations. Imagine if a company like Apple or Google fired all its c-suite executives every four years. This would have a substantial impact on innovation, product development, supply chains, and customer relationships. Yet, this is what the federal government does.

Political appointments also have an impact on the behavior and quality of the civil servants who work for them at both high and low levels.¹² If civil servants know they cannot be promoted into the top jobs, with the highest pay and seniority, they have fewer incentives to invest in expertise that is useful to the agency, and work hard to secure that promotion. They are more likely to leave the agency for another job or not come in the first place. Politicized agencies take pay and authority away from career civil servants and give it to political appointees and this has consequences for the ability of government agencies to recruit and retain the best workforce.

Summary

The theoretical research on the number of appointees suggests that presidents and their parties are at best ambivalent about reducing the number of appointees because they benefit from the opportunity to fill these positions. Indeed, presidents can unilaterally choose to reduce the number of appointees. Congress, if the parties could agree, could also cut the number of appointees. While concerned about performance, elected officials' choices are not driven solely by performance concerns. Presidents and their parties in Congress are concerned about control and patronage. As a result, the U.S. has more appointees than voters might prefer if they were only concerned about performance. This is why the United States persists with a large number of appointees, even with their expected negative impact on performance.

Theoretical Research on the Number of Appointees

Three clear patterns emerge in empirical research that clarify why the number of appointees varies over time and by agency, and how this matters for responsiveness and performance. In general, there are larger numbers of appointees in three circumstances: where there is a president-bureaucracy disagreement, where there is easier and less technical work, and where there is presidential-Congressional agreement.

“Democrats are more likely to target agencies with conservative missions like defense or law enforcement and Republicans are more likely to target agencies with liberal missions like environmental protection or social welfare.”

In the first of these scenarios, the number of appointees fluctuates with the level of comfort new presidents have with the direction of the existing bureaucracy. New presidents tend to increase the number of appointees when they replace a president from the other party. They also place more appointees in agencies whose natural direction, either due to mission or personnel, differs from the president’s view. Democrats are more likely to target agencies with conservative missions like defense or law enforcement and Republicans are more likely to target agencies with liberal missions like environmental protection or social welfare.¹³

Presidents also choose the number of appointees in an agency partly based upon the impact such appointees could have on the likelihood of costly mistakes. When the addition of appointees can significantly increase the likelihood of visible errors, presidents are more cautious. Agencies with scientific or technical missions, for example, tend to have fewer political appointees than other agencies. On the other hand, agencies whose actions are hard to connect to outcomes are a natural home for patronage appointees.¹⁴

Finally, the number of appointees increases during periods of unified government. Congress is more willing to confirm presidential nominees and they are more likely to approve of presidential efforts to increase the number of political appointees.¹⁵

Empirical Research on the Number of Appointees

Impact on Organizational Responsiveness and Performance

Observing the impact of these appointees is easier for specific policies than overall performance. As can be seen in areas from civil rights to environmental policy to workplace safety to antitrust enforcement, appointees change policy outputs.¹⁶ Appointees also facilitate the distribution of federal funds, shaping the content of grant and procurement outcomes.¹⁷

Measuring the impact of appointees on government performance is more difficult. While the private sector can measure organizational performance using financial outcomes like profit, there is no easy metric of government performance, at least not across contexts. It is difficult, for example, to compare the performance of government agencies undertaking tasks as different as immigration enforcement, patent processing, and democracy promotion. Elected officials also define good performance differently. What is good Environmental Protection Agency performance for a Democrat is likely different than for a Republican. Efforts to connect numbers of appointees to performance have tended to focus on measures that are easily connected to statutory requirements or metrics both parties can agree upon.

Case Study Evidence

Efforts to evaluate the relationship between appointees and performance have examined cases longitudinally, like the history of the Bureau of Land Management or the Federal Emergency Management Agency.¹⁸ These cases reveal the ways that political leaders were often ill-suited for the jobs they assumed, leading to misplaced priorities and mistakes. Turnover and delays in filling positions disrupted long-term planning and frustrated efforts to build relationships between federal and state agencies and among federal agencies. Agency policy choices and failures led to low morale and turnover within the agencies. The focus on specific agencies during specific periods, however, makes it difficult to separate outcomes from individual leaders, personalities, and events.

“Federal employees report fewer behaviors we associate with good management (e.g., clear goals, accountability, communication) and lower regard for agency leaders in agencies with more political appointees”

Empirical Research on the Number of Appointees

Quantitatively Comparing Appointee vs. Careerist Leaders

To compare across agencies and contexts, scholars have used available quantitative measures and found a robust correlation between appointee leadership and poorer performance on several metrics. While the measures—from government management scores to surveys of government employees to objective outcomes—each have limitations, the patterns across measures are generally consistent. Scholars have evaluated comparable programs run by appointees vs. careerists and found lower government management scores in the former, even after trying to account for the underlying differences between programs run by appointees vs. careerists. These effects are largest when the appointees are drawn from the presidential campaign. Notably, the results persist even when accounting for bias in the scores, partly by focusing only on scores high-level executives themselves identify as valid—i.e., separating high from low performing programs.¹⁹

In surveys of federal employees, rank and file employees and executives report fewer behaviors we associate with good management (e.g., clear goals, accountability, communication) and lower regard for agency leaders in agencies with more appointees.²⁰ Greater perceptions of politicization also decrease federal executives' self-reported investments in expertise and increase their turnover intention.²¹

Scholars have also evaluated the impact of appointees on performance on tasks as diverse as requests for information from Congress²² and the public²³, procurement, and budget forecasting.²⁴

These studies have produced two results—a general negative correlation between appointee percentages and performance and evidence that an appropriate mix is necessary. Agencies with more political appointees have slower responses to information requests and more expensive contracts. That said, a mix of at-will and career professionals produced the most accurate state budget forecasts over a 15-year period.²⁵ State budget offices with civil servant leaders and staff produced less accurate forecasts by being consistently too conservative. Budget offices with appointed leaders and at-will staff were inaccurate because they were consistently too optimistic. Offices with a mix of career and at-will personnel at different levels (i.e., appointed leader and civil service staff or civil service leader and at-will staff) appeared to balance natural biases between career professionals and appointees and produced the most accurate forecasts on average.

Several of the claims about how appointees influence performance have been tested by empirical studies. Notably, differences in the average work experience and tenure of appointed and career leaders helps explain differences in observed performance.²⁶ In addition, persistent vacancies in appointed positions (though not always turnover) are consistently correlated with lower trust and poor performance.²⁷ Agencies whose leadership positions are regularly vacant report less long-term planning, lower morale among executives, and less investment from outside groups.²⁸ Leadership vacancies, however, can sometimes improve morale and motivation if it provides lower level employees new job opportunities and authority.²⁹

“In several studies, majorities reported that the change to at-will employment made state personnel more responsive to elected officials.”

Impact of a Return to At-Will Employment in the States

In recent decades, states including Texas, Georgia, Florida, and Tennessee have moved away from civil service to at-will employment for some or all their employees. Proponents of these changes have argued that the reforms would make state employees more responsive and incentivize them to perform at a higher level. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the effects of these changes and the outcome of these reforms is limited. Most of what we know is based upon surveys of human resource managers or employees working in these systems after the change. The surveys rely upon subjective perceptions of the effects of past events and contemporaneous opinions of this controversial policy and its effects. This makes it difficult to determine whether responses accurately reflect performance or are simply expressive.

Unfortunately, the surveys provide no comparison with prior attitudes, and this makes connecting attitudes with changes difficult.

The surveys provide mixed conclusions.³⁰ In several studies, majorities reported that the change to at-will employment made state personnel more responsive to elected officials. There were, however, no majorities suggesting the changes improved performance or incentivized employees to work harder. There was also scant evidence that the changes deterred applicants from working in government. Finally, while there was some evidence that increased flexibility led to instances of patronage, there was little evidence that it deterred whistleblowing or the willingness of civil servants to speak their minds.

Conclusion

Current reform efforts advocate both increases and decreases in the number of appointees to improve agency performance, but there is more evidence to support cuts than increases if performance is the main concern. So, what can we conclude about these proposals?

- The United States already has close to 4,000 political appointees. This generates a lot of turnover and instability in the management of complex public sector organizations.
- Appointees provide presidents and their parties a way to control agency policy making and opportunities for political patronage. These concerns for policy and patronage mean that choices about the number of appointees are not solely determined based on what is good for the health of the organization and its performance.
- Programs and agencies run by political appointees tend to perform worse than other programs and agencies.

“Programs and agencies run by political appointees tend to perform worse than other programs and agencies.”

- Appointee-run programs and agencies experience more turnover, longer vacancies, and leaders with less subject and public management experience than programs and agencies run by career professionals.
- Some appointee leadership appears helpful for accountability and performance.

Former president Donald Trump's idea of making it easier to hire and fire more federal employees has appeal since Democrats and Republicans agree that the federal employment system is broken. But, will it improve performance? There is little evidence to support this claim. The strongest evidence comes from changes at the state level from civil service to at-will systems. Several states have made changes and there has been no catastrophe. There has, however, been no demonstrated uptick in performance either. Unfortunately, research on the overall effects of these changes is limited.

Reducing the number of Senate-confirmed appointees (PAS positions) has a clearer likelihood of improving performance. A reduction will lead previously vacant positions to be filled on a permanent basis since the positions will now be filled by career professionals or appointees not requiring Senate confirmation (PA appointees). A reduction will reduce the workload on the president's personnel operation and the Senate and allow the two branches to focus more attention on the positions that remain. The increase in permanent leadership and the reduction in vacancies should improve agency performance by increasing long-term planning, greater investment, and clearer goals.

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