Estimating Agency Ideal Points Using Bureaucratic Campaign Contributions

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Abstract: This paper presents a new method of estimating the ideal points of US federal agencies using the campaign contributions of bureaucrats employed by each agency. Ideal points are calculated by examining the Common Space DW-NOMINATE scores of incumbent federal politicians who receive campaign contributions from each agency's bureaucratic personnel. These ideal point estimates exhibit face validity under tests of some basic hypotheses about the partisan control of bureaucratic agencies. The substantive contribution of this paper is to show that the most right-wing agencies under a Republican administration often become the most left-wing agencies under a Democratic presidency. That is, agency ideal points under a Republican president exhibit a negative correlation with agency ideal points under a Democratic administration.

A central question in the study of politics is how institutional actors respond when they interact with other branches of government with divergent ideological preferences. In particular, a significant literature on the separation of powers has analyzed, both theoretically and empirically, how the ideological preferences of US federal bureaucratic agencies might shape the strategic behavior of Congress (eg, Epstein and O'Halloran 1999, Huber and Shipan 2002, Weingast and Moran 1983), the federal courts (Canes-Wrone 2003), and the President (eg, Rudalevige 2002).

However, testing these theoretical predictions across a broad range of agencies and time periods has often been an empirical challenge. Until Clinton and Lewis (2007), scholars did not have access to comparable estimates of bureaucratic policy preferences across agencies. In limited contexts, scholars have previously estimated agency ideal points using the policy preferences of the president who appointed each bureaucrat (Cohen 1986), using bureaucrats' publicly announced views (Bertelli and Grose 2006), and using bureaucrats' votes within a single agency (Snyder and Weingast 2000).

Clinton and Lewis (2007) achieve a significant advance in the empirical testing of theories of bureaucratic interactions. The authors estimate agency ideal points by surveying 37 experts and asking whether each of 82 agencies has tended (during 1988-2005) to be liberal or conservative, thus allowing for comparable estimates of ideology across agencies.

This paper extends Clinton and Lewis (2007) by proposing a method for estimating agency ideal points that are not only comparable agencies but also dynamic across time. Specifically, I track the federal campaign contributions made by each agency's bureaucrats. When these campaign contributions are given to incumbent legislators or to the president, I use

the recipients' Common Space DW-NOMINATE scores to estimate the ideological preferences of the agency's personnel.

I estimate Common Space ideal point estimates for agencies under the George H.W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations. First, I show that these estimates have face validity. The agency Common Space scores correlate positively with the agency preferences estimated by the Clinton and Lewis (2007) survey. Overall, agencies significantly shift in a liberal direction during Democratic administrations and in a conservative direction during Republican presidencies. Additionally, agencies created during periods of unified Democratic government tend to have more liberal Common Space scores.

Second, I show that agency ideal points under a Democratic presidency exhibit a negative correlation with agency ideal points under a Republican administration. In other words, the most left-wing agencies under a Democratic administration often become the most right-wing agencies following a transition to a Republican president. The intuition behind this result is that some agencies are more susceptible than others to high personnel turnover and politically motivated appointments during administrative transitions. These agencies (such as the DOJ, the SBA, and Agriculture) exhibit more volatile partisan swings at upper-level leadership positions. Meanwhile, other agencies (such as NASA, Defense, and Army) are less susceptible to drastic partisan turnover and exhibit little ideological movement during presidential transitions.

Calculating Agency Common Space Scores

The theoretical approach of this paper is to measure the ideological preferences of bureaucrats in order to estimate an agency's overall ideal point. Specifically, we assume that a campaign contribution to a specific politician generally represents a sincere expression of one's

political preferences, rather than a strategic calculation that conflicts with one's sincere political attitudes. Additionally, the size of a campaign contribution varies widely and is generally proportionate to the donor's income, so we assume that contributions from upper-level bureaucrats who wield more influence on agency policy are typically larger than contributions from rank-and-file agency employees.

Given these assumptions, the use of campaign contributions to measure bureaucrat ideology has three advantages. First, many contributions are targeted to politicians who already hold an elected federal office and therefore have a Common Space DW-NOMINATE score. Hence, under the assumption that a contribution generally represents a sincere political endorsement of a candidate, precise ideological affinities may be recovered from contributors' behavior. Second, as bureaucrats are generally free to make contributions based upon their personal political preferences, estimates of agency ideal points based on contributions are less likely to reflect strategic institutional position-taking or other calculated behavior by the agency. Finally, the use of campaign contributions allows for ideal point estimates that are comparable across agencies and dynamic across time. Even though Common Space scores are not directly comparable across Congresses, we can nevertheless compare the relative ideological ranking of agencies across time.

I estimate an agency's Common Space score during a single session of Congress as follows. First, I identify all individuals who: 1) contributed at least $200 to an incumbent elected federal office-holder or to the office-holder's PAC; and 2) self-identify as an employee of a US federal agency. Next, I identify the Common Space score during the current session of Congress for each office-holder who received such campaign contributions from agency employees. Finally, for each individual agency, I calculate the mean Common Space score of the incumbent

politicians who received contributions from the agency's employees, weighted by the dollar amount of each contribution. Hence, larger contributions, which are more likely to come from higher-paid upper-level bureaucrats, are weighted more heavily. I calculate the standard error of each agency ideal point estimate as a sample mean standard error, based upon the total number of contributions delivered by the agency's employees.

Figure 3 plots agency ideal points estimated from campaign contributions delivered during the 2005-2006 election cycle, using Common Space scores from the 109th Congress. Agencies are listed from most conservative (Common Space score of +1) to most liberal (Common Space score of -1), with bars representing the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. The numbers in parentheses at the right of Figure 3 report the number of campaign contributions from each agency's employees used in the calculation of each ideal point estimate. Figure 3 reports only agencies from which at least 25 different employees gave campaign contributions to incumbent federal politicians.

Overall, these ideal point estimates appear somewhat in line with popularly held views concerning the relative ideology of the various agencies. For example, the most conservative agencies include Homeland Security, the Small Business Administration (SBA) as well as most of the military agencies (Defense, Army, Navy, and Air Force). The most liberal agencies include the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Nevertheless, a number of agencies have ideal point estimates that are at odds with popular perception, and it is somewhat surprising that many agencies have moderately left-leaning Common Space scores under the Bush administration. Such left-leaning estimates may result from an over-weighting of rank-and-file career bureaucrats who contribute money to

Democratic campaigns but who have little influence over the policy outputs of their respective agencies.

Hence, a second test of the validity of the estimates is to compare ideal points under Democratic and Republican administrations. Estimates of agency ideal points under the George H.W. Bush (Figure 1), Clinton (Figure 2), George W. Bush (Figure 3), and Obama (Figure 4) administrations are presented. Overall, these estimates reveal that overall, agencies shift leftward in their ideal points during the Clinton and Obama administrations, and agencies shift to the right during Republican administrations. Additionally, these Figures reveal that some agencies (such as the DOJ, HUD, and SBA) undergo significantly larger ideological shifts in response to presidential transitions than other agencies (such as most of the defense agencies).

A third validity test is to compare the ideal points of agencies created during different periods of partisan control of government. Figure 5 sorts the Common Space scores of agencies under the Bush Administration (109th Congress, 2005-2006) with respect to the political environment at the time of each agency's creation. Agencies in the upper portion of Figure 5 were created during periods of unified Democratic control of the White House and both chambers of Congress. The lower half of Figure 5 displays agencies created during all other periods (divided government or control by the Republican or Federalist parties). The right column of Figure 5 indicates each agency's year of creation.

Overall, this Figure suggests that agencies created during unified Democratic government tend to exhibit more liberal Common Space scores, even during the Bush administration. Nevertheless, there is significantly overlap in the Common Space scores of these two sets of agencies. Furthermore, many of the agencies formed under unified Democratic control were created at a time when parties' ideological alignments did not correspond to a modern liberal-

conservative alignment. Hence, comparison of agencies created under Democratic government may not be a valid test for older agencies.

A fourth test of the ideal point estimates is to compare agency Common Space scores to the Clinton-Lewis (2007) estimates of agency policy preferences. The Clinton-Lewis (2007) survey respondents were asked to assess agencies' overall political tendencies without respect to a defined period of time. Hence, I compare the Clinton-Lewis estimates to agency Common Space scores during both Republican and Democratic administrations.

I plot the Clinton-Lewis agency policy preferences against the estimated agency Common Space scores from the 109th Congress (Figure 6) and from the 103rd Congress (Figure 7), representing agencies under the Bush and Clinton administrations, respectively. In each plot, the solid line represents the least-squares regression fit between the two sets of ideal point estimates. Overall, agency ideal points during both administrations correlate positively with the Clinton-Lewis preference estimates, suggesting significant agreement between the two methods. However, there are noticeable outliers in both plots, and these outliers appear to reflect the fact that the ranking of agencies on the Common Space change significantly from one administration to the next.

To explore the dynamics of such administrative transitions, Figure 8 analyzes the ideological movement of several agencies across four administrations, from George H.W. Bush to Obama. In both of the two plots in Figure 8, the vertical axis measures each agency's Common Space score during each of the four administrations. The left plot in Figure 8 displays the four most ideologically stable agencies (NASA, Defense, Army, and Navy) during these four administrations, while the right plot displays four agencies whose Common Space scores

fluctuate significantly during the four administrations (SBA, Justice, Commerce, and Agriculture).

This plot suggests that NASA and the defense agencies are relatively more insulated from partisan-motivated personnel turnover during administrative transitions. It is possible that the technical expertise or specialized training required for upper-level bureaucrats in these agencies may prevent a new president from appointing large numbers of new bureaucrats who are ideologically more proximate to the president. Hence, the Common Space scores of these agencies do not vary significantly with the partisan preferences of the White House.

In contrast, the agencies in the right plot of Figure 8, such as the Justice Department and the SBA, appear to be more easily politicized by the president. Hence, a new administration is able to significantly alter the political preferences of upper level bureaucrats in such agencies, and the ideal points of bureaucrats in such agencies appear to follow more closely the political preferences of the president.

Though the DOJ and SBA are extreme examples, most agencies appear to be politically volatile to varying extents, with Common Space scores that vary according to the current administration. To illustrate a peculiar consequence of this dynamic, Figure 9 illustrates how agency ideal points transitioned from the George H.W. Bush administration (1991-1992) to the Clinton administration (1995-1996). In this plot, the vertical axis represents Clinton administration agency Common Space scores, while the horizontal axis represents Bush administration agency ideal points.

The Figure 9 plot reveals a significant negative correlation between the two administrations' agency ideal points. Moreover, the plot illustrates that this negative correlation results from the many right-wing Bush agencies (during 1991-1992) which became solidly left-

wing agencies under Clinton by 1995-1996. In other words, the most conservative agencies under the Bush administration, such as the SBA and the Commerce and State departments, would become among the more left-wing agencies by 1995-1996 under the Clinton administration. Hence, the upper-level bureaucrats in these agencies are not ideologically stable during administrative transitions. Rather, these politically volatile agencies represent the most politically opportune areas for a new president to appoint bureaucrats who share the president's ideological views.

Conclusion:

Existing literature has argued that presidents pursue a number of goals when making bureaucratic appointments. First, presidents appoint new personnel whom they expect to carry out the presidents' preferred policies. New appointments are therefore designed to move the ideological preferences of agencies closer to those of the president and to increase presidential control of the bureaucracy (eg, Aberbach and Rockman 1990, Golden 1983). Scholars have also observed that presidents are able to alter bureaucratic policy in their preferred directions by making new appointees (eg, Randall 1979, Moe 1985, Wood and Waterman 1991). Together, this literature suggests that the ideological shifts in agency personnel reflected in this paper's Common Space scores represent attempts by the president to shape agency policy through bureaucratic appointments.

However, an important insight in the literature on bureaucratic appointments, originally articulated by Henry (1960), is that the president's bureaucratic decision-making may be motivated by patronage concerns. Hence, as Lewis (2009) argues, politically motivated bureaucratic appointments may represent a form of patronage rather than an attempt by the

president to control the policy outputs of an agency. Under this theory, the ideological shifts in agency personnel observed in the SBA and the DOJ may reflect rewards directed by the president to his political loyalists, perhaps without regard to whether or not such bureaucratic appointments may produce particular policy outcomes.

Hence, a future step in this research is to test whether the ideological volatility displayed by many agencies during administrative transitions actually results corresponding policy shifts. If a change in an agency's Common Space score ideal point reflects a true shift in agency culture or practice, then we might observe the manifestation of such ideological shifts in the agency's policy outputs.

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Figure 1: Agency Ideal Point Estimates (George H. W. Bush Administration, 1991-1992)

Agency Common Space Scores,
102nd Congress (1991–1992)

Agency Common Space Score (1991–1992)

Figure 2: Agency Ideal Point Estimates (Clinton Administration, 1995-1996)

**Agency Common Space Scores,
104th Congress (1995–1996)**

Department of the Air Force
Interstate Commerce Commission
Department of the Army
Department of Defense
Department of the Navy
Department of Veterans Affairs
Social Security Administration
NASA
Environmental Protection Agency
Fed Emergency Management Agency
General Services Administration
Department of Justice
US Agency for Int'l Development
Health and Human Services
Federal Communications Comm.
Trade and Development Agency
Department of the Treasury
Department of State
Department of Labor
Department of Agriculture
Department of Energy
Department of Transportation
Small Business Administration
Department of the Interior
Housing and Urban Development
Department of Education
Department of Commerce
Consumer Product Safety Commission
Equal Employment Opportunity Comm.

−0.5   −0.25   0   0.25

Agency Common Space Score (1995–1996)

Figure 3: Agency Ideal Point Estimates (George W. Bush Administration, 2005-2006)

**Agency Common Space Scores,
109th Congress (2005–2006)**

Agency	N
Small Business Administration	(N=46)
General Services Administration	(N=47)
Department of the Air Force	(N=277)
Department of Labor	(N=142)
Department of Homeland Security	(N=104)
Department of Defense	(N=600)
Department of State	(N=411)
Department of the Navy	(N=380)
Department of the Army	(N=558)
US Agency for Int'l Development	(N=76)
Trade and Development Agency	(N=79)
Department of Agriculture	(N=381)
Housing and Urban Development	(N=79)
Peace Corps	(N=45)
Department of Transportation	(N=177)
Department of Commerce	(N=186)
Department of Justice	(N=590)
Department of the Interior	(N=138)
Department of Energy	(N=280)
Department of the Treasury	(N=166)
Department of Education	(N=251)
Federal Communications Comm.	(N=39)
NASA	(N=162)
Social Security Administration	(N=113)
Fed Emergency Management Agency	(N=35)
Environmental Protection Agency	(N=212)
Federal Trade Commission	(N=56)
National Labor Relations Board	(N=48)
Securities and Exchange Commission	(N=74)
U.S. Coast Guard	(N=28)
Department of Veterans Affairs	(N=128)
Health and Human Services	(N=252)
Office of Administration	(N=68)
Internal Revenue Service	(N=90)
Board of Gov, Fed Reserve System	(N=29)
Equal Employment Opportunity Comm.	(N=27)
Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.	(N=31)
National Science Foundation	(N=28)

−0.25   0   0.25   0.5
Agency Common Space Score

Figure 4: Agency Ideal Point Estimates (Obama Administration, 2009-January 2010)

Agency Common Space Scores,
111th Congress (2009–2010)

Agency	
Department of State	(N=38)
Department of the Army	(N=93)
Department of Transportation	(N=24)
Department of the Navy	(N=61)
Environmental Protection Agency	(N=28)
Department of the Air Force	(N=17)
Department of Energy	(N=21)
National Labor Relations Board	(N=15)
Department of Justice	(N=67)
Department of Agriculture	(N=81)
Department of Defense	(N=46)
Department of Veterans Affairs	(N=19)
Department of Commerce	(N=28)
Social Security Administration	(N=14)
Department of the Treasury	(N=14)
NASA	(N=21)
Department of Education	(N=29)
Housing and Urban Development	(N=18)
Office of Administration	(N=18)
Health and Human Services	(N=19)

−0.5   −0.25   0   0.25   0.5

Agency Common Space Score (2009–2010)

Figure 5: Agencies Created Under Unified Democratic Government

Agencies Created Under Unified Democratic Government

Agency	Score	Year
General Services Administration		1949
Department of the Air Force		1966
Department of Labor		1913
US Agency for Int'l Development		1961
Trade and Development Agency		1980
Housing and Urban Development		1965
Peace Corps		1961
Department of Energy		1977
Department of Education		1979
Federal Communications Comm.		1934
Social Security Administration		1935
Fed Emergency Management Agency		1978
Federal Trade Commission		1914
National Labor Relations Board		1935
Securities and Exchange Commission		1934
Health and Human Services		1977
Office of Administration		1977
Equal Employment Opportunity Comm.		1965
Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.		1934
National Science Foundation		1950

Agency Common Space Score (−0.25, 0, 0.25, 0.5)

Agencies Created During All Other Periods

Agency	Score	Year
Small Business Administration		1953
Department of Homeland Security		2002
Department of Defense		1947
Department of State		1790
Department of the Navy		1790
Department of the Army		1989
Department of Agriculture		1862
Department of Transportation		1790
Department of Commerce		1903
Department of Justice		1870
Department of the Interior		1947
Department of the Treasury		1849
NASA		1958
Environmental Protection Agency		1970
Department of Veterans Affairs		1790

Agency Common Space Score (−0.25, 0, 0.25, 0.5)

Agency Common Space Scores,
109th Congress (2005–2006)

Agency Common Space Scores,
103rd Congress (1993–1994)

**Figure 8: Common Space Ideal Points for Ideologically Stable and Volatile Agencies**
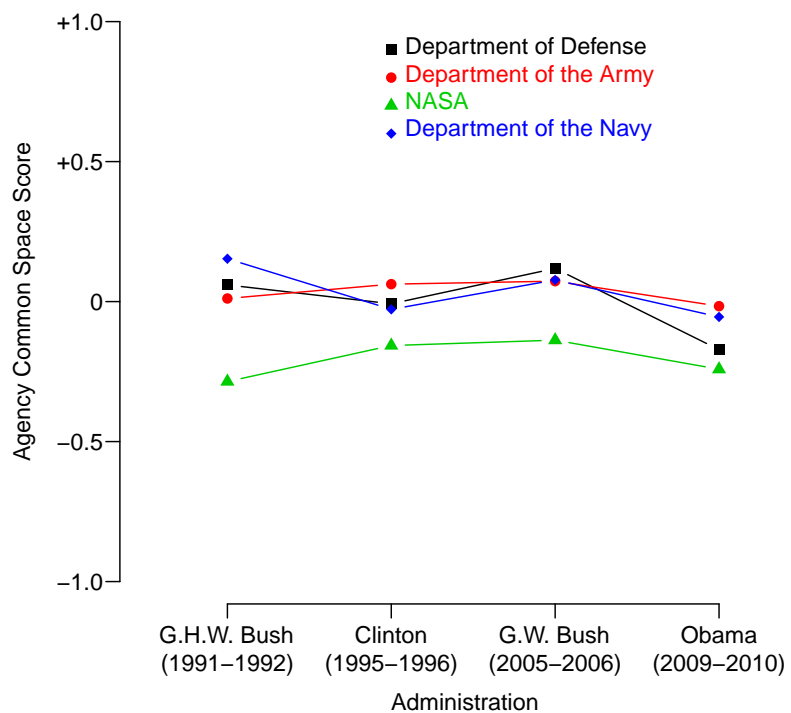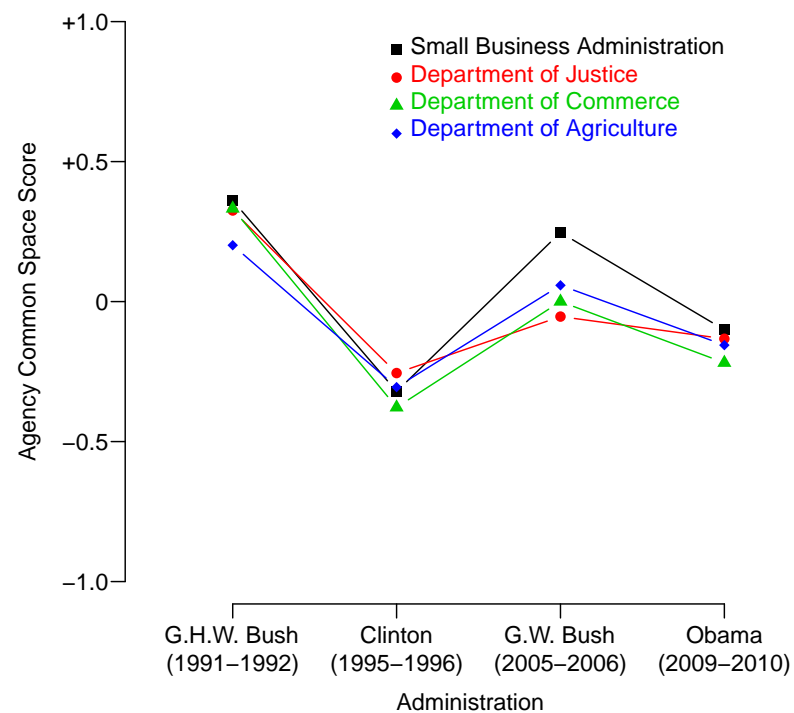
Figure 9: The Negative Correlation of Bush and Clinton Administration Agency Common Space Scores

Agency Common Space Scores,
Bush and Clinton Administrations