Elections, Ideology, and Turnover in the U.S. Federal Government

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ABSTRACT

A defining feature of public sector employment is the regular change in elected leadership. Yet, we know little about how elections influence public sector careers. We describe how elections alter policy outputs and disrupt the influence of civil servants over agency decisions. These changes shape the career choices of employees motivated by policy, influence, and wages. Using new Office of Personnel Management data on the careers of millions of federal employees between 1988 and 2011, we evaluate how elections influence employee turnover decisions. We find that presidential elections increase departure rates of senior employees, particularly in agencies with divergent views relative to the new president and at the start of presidential terms. We also find suggestive evidence that vacancies in high-level positions after elections may induce lower-level executives to stay longer in hopes of advancing. We conclude with implications of our findings for public policy, presidential politics, and public management.

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