

# How does the political appointment of bureaucrats work? Theory and evidence from Brazil

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This note presents a non-technical summary of a research article published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, titled “How patronage delivers: Political appointments, bureaucratic accountability, and service delivery in Brazil.” Only a brief overview is presented here; see the article for more details.<sup>2</sup>

GOVERNMENTS ALL OVER THE WORLD USE POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS to fill at least some bureaucratic posts. This practice is especially important in developing contexts, where civil service systems are less consolidated. How do political appointments impact governance, public service delivery, and development more broadly?

WE TYPICALLY THINK OF POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS AS JEOPARDIZING GOVERNANCE, through two mechanisms – the selection of less qualified candidates and decreases in bureaucratic effort (because of appointees’ connections to those in power). That is often the established position on political appointments, both in academic debates and public discourses about the bureaucracy.

THIS STUDY ADVANCES AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS as an institution that changes not just who enters the bureaucracy or how much they work but also, and critically, *how* they work. I argue that political appointments (and the resulting social and political connections between bureaucrats and politicians) facilitate the monitoring of bureaucrats by politicians, enable the application of sanctions and rewards, provide access to material and non-material resources, align priorities and incentives, and increase mutual trust. In so doing, political appointments can facilitate bureaucratic accountability and effectiveness, not just for rent-seeking purposes but also, in certain conditions, for public service delivery.

I TEST THIS THEORY USING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA ON SCHOOLS AND ORIGINAL SURVEYS OF BUREAUCRATS AND POLITICIANS IN BRAZIL. I focus on Brazilian local governments, a context where political appointments coexist with other modes of bureaucratic selection. I exploit experimental and quasi-experimental designs that allow me to isolate the effect of bureaucrats’ selection mode, and their connections to politicians, from other variables that are frequently correlated with them.<sup>3</sup> I complement these quantitative analyses with qualitative insights from in-depth, face-to-face interviews I conducted

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<sup>2</sup> The article and supporting materials are available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12758>.



<sup>3</sup> For example, political appointments are more common in poorer localities. Any estimates that do not account for that would suffer from bias.

with 121 bureaucrats, politicians, and anti-corruption actors in 45 municipalities across 7 states (Figure 1).

THE EMPIRICAL RESULTS DEMONSTRATE THAT POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS AND CONNECTIONS PROVIDE USEFUL GOVERNANCE RESOURCES, that these resources can strengthen bureaucratic effectiveness, and that politicians hold political appointees accountable for their performance in public service delivery. These often-overlooked benefits of political appointments suggest that politics in the developing world can be a source not only of corruption and misallocations, but also of governance resources that can help overcome development challenges. The advantages of appointments may be particularly useful in contexts where other, more impartial sources of bureaucratic effectiveness (e.g., high levels of human capital and strong bureaucratic norms) remain underdeveloped.

THE ARTICLE ALSO HELPS EXPLAIN WHY POLITICAL APPOINTMENTS ARE SO IMPORTANT TO RENT-SEEKING POLITICIANS. By changing how bureaucrats work—for example, by making them more aligned and more easily monitored and sanctioned—political appointments make it easier for corrupt politicians to use the bureaucracy to their advantage. The versatility of political appointments helps explain why they have proven to be so resilient throughout history.

I DO NOT ARGUE THAT APPOINTMENTS ARE GENERALLY PREFERABLE, BUT RATHER THAT THEY PROVIDE SOME UNDER-APPRECIATED ADVANTAGES that can be mobilized not just to extract rents but also to more effectively provide public services. The net effect of political appointments will depend on the balance between the benefits and costs, relative to those of local alternatives for bureaucratic selection.<sup>4</sup>

*The remainder of this note presents some non-technical details about the empirical analyses included in the article.*

### *Losing political connections makes appointed bureaucrats less effective: Difference-in-discontinuities evidence*

The first empirical design in the article shows that politically appointed school directors (or principals) become less effective at boosting student learning when they lose their political connections to the local government. This suggests that political connections can be mobilized to increase bureaucratic effectiveness.

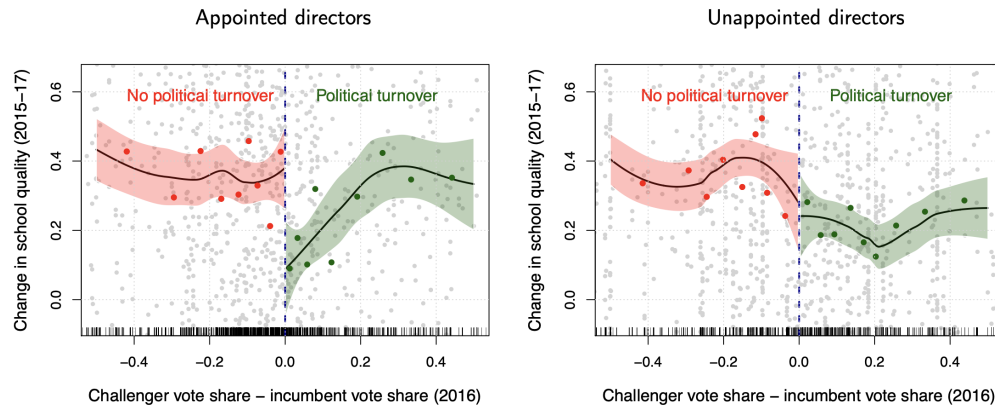
This design simultaneously compares the performance of ap-



Figure 1: Brazilian states where interviews were conducted.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in settings characterized by poverty and remoteness (e.g., most municipalities in Brazil), the alternative to a political appointee is not always the highly capable and committed bureaucrat that we often presume when talking about the civil service.

pointed versus unappointed bureaucrats, after versus before the mayoral election, and in locations where the mayor lost their bid for re-election versus where they were re-elected. I use data on directors of municipal schools, for which the federal government releases a performance metric (called IDEB) every 2 years, based on student test scores and passing rates.



The differential drop in performance for appointed versus unappointed directors (illustrated in Figure 2) isolates the effect of losing political connections on bureaucratic performance. Relative to unappointed directors, appointed ones exhibit a significant drop in performance as a result of the mayor losing the reelection. These results suggest that political connections can be leveraged to improve public service delivery.

### *Appointed bureaucrats are held accountable for their performance in a service delivery indicator: Regression discontinuity evidence*

The second empirical design demonstrates that politically appointed school directors who meet a school quality target are less likely to be replaced. This suggests that politicians consider bureaucratic effectiveness when selecting appointees, and use performance metrics to hold them accountable.

This design essentially compares what happens in schools where the IDEB target<sup>5</sup> is barely met versus where it is barely missed. In schools with appointed directors, meeting the quality target reduces director turnover, as illustrated in Figure 3. Yet in schools with elected or civil service directors, the rate of director turnover is not affected by whether they meet their target. These results support the hypothesis that political appointments enhance accountability.

Figure 2: Effect of political turnover on school quality, by director appointment mode. Close to the discontinuity are schools in municipalities where the mayor barely lost or won the reelection, and thus where political appointees (but not un-appointed directors) barely lost or kept their political connections to the local government.

<sup>5</sup> The federal government established IDEB targets for all schools, based on baseline performance and a mathematical formula.

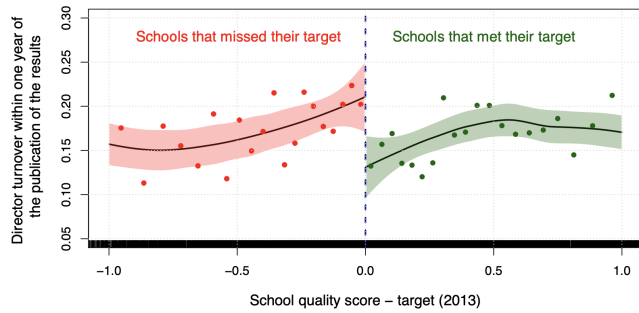


Figure 3: Effect of meeting the performance target on director turnover, for schools with a politically appointed director. Close to the discontinuity are schools that barely missed or met their IDEB target, and thus for which the local government received a negative or positive signal of director performance.

*Local actors perceive political appointments and connections as making bureaucrats more responsive: Survey evidence*

A third empirical component of the article uses original surveys of bureaucrats and politicians to explore the mechanisms through which political appointments can enhance bureaucratic effectiveness and accountability. I conducted a face-to-face survey of 926 street-level managers (school directors, clinic managers, and social assistance center coordinators) in the urban areas of 150 municipalities in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. To evaluate politicians' views, I also administered an online survey of 455 local politicians (mayors and secretaries of five key areas), in partnership with the State Audit Court of Rio Grande do Norte.

Using observational regressions of the bureaucrat survey data, and after controlling for a long set of covariates, I find that appointed bureaucrats have more frequent contact with, higher levels of trust in, and better alignment with politicians than unappointed bureaucrats do (Figures 4 and 5).

The survey also included a *conjoint experiment*. Survey respondents saw four pairs of hypothetical profiles of managers, with different characteristics –including their appointment mode and political connections– which were randomly assigned. They were then asked which one they believed would be more likely to maintain better communication with the government, implement changes requested by it, raise more material resources, and increase the performance of the unit (e.g., the school). I use this design to measure the relative impact of different profile characteristics on perceptions of bureaucrats' ability to perform in key areas of management.

The conjoint experiment results (Figure 6) show that hypothetical profiles of managers with political connections, or who are political appointees, are viewed as significantly more likely than civil service

DV: Logged number of meetings with...

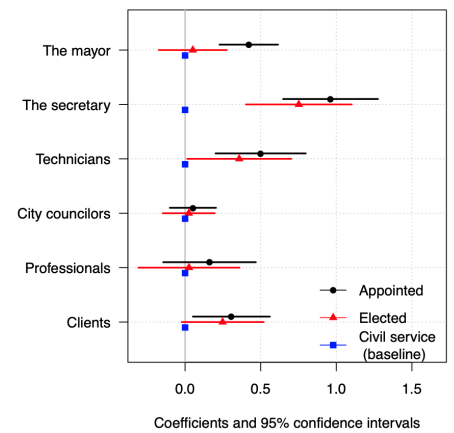


Figure 4: Association between bureaucrats' selection mode and meetings with politicians. Each coefficient and its confidence interval in Figures 4 and 5 correspond to the association between a respondent's selection mode and their responses to survey questions.

DV: Agreement with...

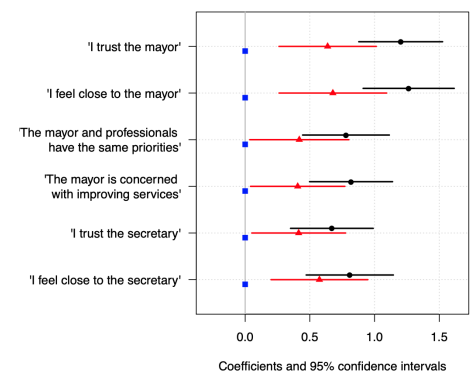


Figure 5: Association between bureaucrats' selection mode and attitudes about politicians.

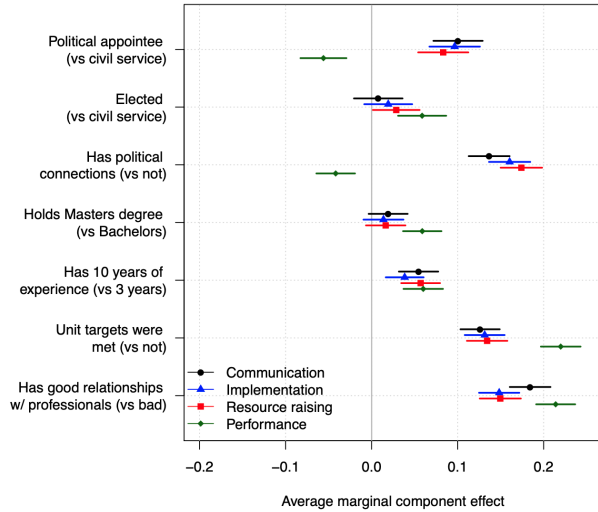


Figure 6: Results from the conjoint experiment with bureaucrats. Each coefficient and its confidence interval in Figures 6 and 7 correspond to the causal effect of a hypothetical manager having a given attribute (e.g., being a political appointee) on respondents’ perception of that manager’s ability on each task.

managers to have better communication with the local government, to implement changes requested by it, and to raise resources for their unit. This suggests that respondents see political appointments and connections as facilitating bureaucrats’ communication with and responsiveness to the local government, as well as access to resources. Yet, politically appointed or connected managers are perceived as less likely to improve their unit’s performance. This draws attention to the costs of political appointments and suggests that, in the net (considering both the selection and accountability mechanisms, which this design conflates) and in this context, they may hinder public service delivery.

The survey with politicians included a similar conjoint experiment, which generated similar results: politicians also perceive political appointments as facilitating bureaucratic effort and responsiveness (Figure 7). This conjoint experiment referenced generic bureaucrats (rather than street-level managers), which is why temporary contracts were used as a proxy for political connections.

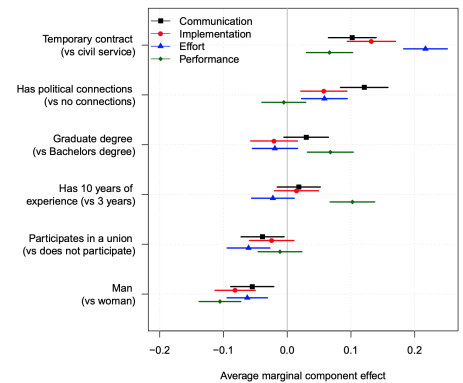


Figure 7: Results from the conjoint experiment with politicians.

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