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COMMENTARY

Presidential Studies Meets Public Administration: Discussion of "The President and the Bureaucracy in the United States"

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Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman's gracefully written chapter addresses many of the great themes in the study of American executive politics: the tension between leading and managing, the challenge of controlling bureaucrats who serve many masters, the difficulty of structuring organizations to fit presidential goals, the struggle to harness bureaucratic expertise in the face of bureaucratic inertia, and the painful necessity of learning one's goals through imperfect action in a messy world. Many of these themes receive a distinctly "Abermanian" twist, appropriately reflecting the authors' deep contribution to the empirical study of executive politics in the United States and western Europe. Yet the chapter wears its impressive scholarship lightly, never once invoking ostentatious "theory" or lapsing into obscure jargon. The result is an essay that can be read with profit by extraordinarily diverse audiences.

At the same time, though, the essay's silence on the status of the field itself is so insistent—indeed, so stubborn—that it becomes a kind of methodological point. Is the field of executive politics *only* a series of judicious, even wise, observations upon a series of important themes? Or might there be a *logic* to bureaucratic delegation, or to the problem of multiple principles, and so on? Might we view these logics as the core of the field, supplying its theory and the scaffolding for empirical studies?

I strongly favor the latter view, perhaps not surprisingly as I am a committed "rational choice institutionalist" (there is some jargon!). Unfortunately, though, given the current state of rational choice institutionalism in presidential studies, I cannot simply list a group of studies and say "Here they are: these provide the theoretical core for the field." Nonetheless, I can list *some* studies and point to intriguing but underexplored topics suggested by others. Thus, I hope to suggest the outline of an emerging rational choice approach to the presidency and the bureaucracy. Space limitations prohibit more.

The Subject

What is the domain of study? Aberbach and Rockman's essay lies at the intersection of presidential studies and public administration. What sort of terrain is this? The key actors are: the president, the president's own bureaucracy (the

people lodged in the White House and Old Executive Office Building), federal agencies—themselves complex bureaucracies—Congress, the courts (especially the D.C. Circuit), interest groups, and citizens. Needless to say, huge literatures address each of these actors and their relationships. But occupying the intersection of presidential studies and public administration are two activities: (1) Presidential management of the vast executive apparatus, and (2) Presidential management of the president's own bureaucracy. I take these as the relevant domain of study.

Job One: Managing the Executive Establishment

Here, the key issue is: *getting the Washington establishment—the standing bureaucracy—to do what the president wants rather than what the bureaucrats or someone else wants.* This is the fundamental "principal-agent" formulation of the president's job as bureaucratic manager and leader. To some extent, Aberbach and Rockman contest this formulation by questioning whether the president actually knows what he wants. But this is perhaps too preemptory. A powerful analytical move, aimed at the same problem, is to introduce a wedge between *means* and *ends*: the president may have a clear idea about ends (his broad objectives) but a rather poor idea of how to get there. In fact, as shown in Figure 5.1, one can discern three types of means-ends situations, which inevitably grade into one another in practice.

FIGURE 5.1: Presidential-Bureaucratic Relations and Means/Ends Relationships

	Ends Clear, Means Clear	Ends Clear, Means Unclear
	Multiple Principals Micro-man.: Hidden Actions	Delegation Micro-man.: Hidden Information
Ends & Means Both Unclear	Delegation Signaling and Strategic Info Transmission	

Clear Ends, Clear Means

In this case, the president knows what he wants and what the bureaucrats have to do to get him there.¹ Two different situations have received attention. In the first, the goals of the bureaucrats (the agent) are broadly in alignment with the president's but the bureaucrats are subject to the pulling and hauling of other players. These are sometimes called *multiple principals* or *separation of powers (SOP) games.* Second, the goals of the bureaucrats are distinct from those of the president, and the bureaucrats can take hidden actions. These are sometimes called *moral hazard games.*

SOP games are hard-wired into American politics by the Constitution and basic statutes like the Administrative Procedures Act. Understanding SOP games is fundamental for understanding federal policy making. Fortunately, over the last decade or so, political scientists have made substantial progress in analyzing SOP games (Ferejohn and Shipan 1990; Krehbiel 1998; Brady and Volden 1998; Tiller and Spiller 1999). The studies can be quite complex, but all rely on a close analysis of the logic of sequential action. For example, an agency run by a presidential appointee issues a regulation; an administrative law judge may strike down the regulation as incompatible with the agency's statutory authority; a congressional committee may write a bill to overturn the regulation or change the agency's authority; the bill may be modified by amendment on the floor and passed; the president may veto the bill; Congress may override the veto. In this environment, how far can the agency go in devising a sustainable regulation that advances the president's agenda? The models cited above make quite specific predictions, some of which have received substantial empirical support. Recent analyses in this vein make the president a more active player, showing how executive orders effectively change the status quo facing the players (Howell 2003; Moe and Howell 1999).

Appointment games can be seen as a special kind of SOP game. Unfortunately, outside of Supreme Court nominations, theoretical analysis of appointment games remains rather sketchy (the empirical side is far better developed, see e.g., McCarty and Razaghian 1999). Are there conditions when the president must nominate someone who leans somewhat toward Congress rather than himself? When will the president go all out for a nomination? What are the administrative consequences of delay in confirmations? To a large extent, these questions remain theoretically underexplored.

Moral hazard games tend to abstract from the dynamics of the separation of powers system to focus instead on the problem of hidden actions by bureaucratic agents. Consider micromanagement schemes, such as FDR's and JFK's calls to lower level bureaucrats to find out what was really happening in their agencies. When will presidents use this "spot auditing"? When will it be more effective, and when less so? When will presidents instead use systematic reviews, like OMB's review of agency regulations? When will they rely on interest groups to sound "fire alarms"? Unfortunately, congressional scholars have devoted more energy to analyzing moral hazard games than presidential scholars (see, e.g., McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987, 1989). But clearly, the informational problems that plague Congress also bedevil the president. Moral hazard games remain understudied from an executive perspective.

Clear Ends, Unclear Means

The main issue is created by bureaucratic expertise: the president may know what he wants, but only the agents (the bureaucrats) really understand how to make it happen. The result is a dilemma for the president: Should he delegate the task to the agency, in essence trusting them to do the right thing? Or should he try to micromanage the job using his own staff, even if he sacrifices expertise to gain loyalty? Under what circumstances will the president choose delegation over micro-management, and when not? The empirical literature offers relevant studies (e.g., Nathan 1983 plus the extensive literature on executive budgeting), but again presidential scholars have been slower than legislative scholars in thinking through the problem's logic (see e.g., Banks 1989; Bawn 1995; Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Huber and Shipan 2002; for a broader review of the delegation problem, see Bendor, Glaser, and Hammond 2001). But many insights and methods from the congressionally oriented studies ought to transport readily to the executive branch.

Uncertain Ends

In this case, the president is unsure what he should want. Understanding what to want in technically difficult and politically challenging areas, such as health care financing or agricultural policy, may indeed be difficult. In some respects, though, by identifying sufficiently broad goals for the president ("national security and economic prosperity," "a lasting ideological mark on policy," "reelection") this case can be redefined into the previous one: certain goals but uncertain means. Accordingly, the delegation dilemma will reappear: when should the president trust an agent like a cabinet secretary or domestic policy advisor to pick his goals for him, and when should he work harder to define them himself? Also prominent will be problems of strategic information transmission: What information can the president extract from messages and signals sent him, attempting to persuade him to adopt one set of goals rather than another? Again, the logic of how the president should treat policy advice has been underexplored theoretically.

Job Two: Managing the President's Own Bureaucracy

Here, the key issues are hiring, organizing, motivating, and supervising the president's own men and women in order best to serve the president's interests.

These issues are the meat and potatoes of what in business schools is taught as "personnel economics" (Lazear 1998). To the best of my knowledge, though, perspectives from personnel economics have yet to enter presidential studies. Whether they would be useful remains speculative but intriguing (to me, anyway). This observation is not meant to undervalue the extensive empirical literature on presidents as personnel managers (see e.g., Dickenson 2000 and the references therein). Rather, it is to acknowledge that this subject remains largely *terra incognita* for rational choice institutionalists.

Note

1. Given this, the distinction between ends and means is less important than in the next case.