How Does Party Control of Government Influence Environmental Enforcement?

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Abstract

Most scholarship assessing parties’ influence on policy has focused on legislative enactments which, while undoubtedly important, make up only a fraction of the work of government. Legislation leaves a great deal of wiggle room for administrative agencies to influence policy implementation and enforcement. We have limited empirical evidence concerning the extent to which the political branches influence these stages of public policy though. This is because much work on political control of the bureaucracy has focused on federal agencies, which provide limited analytical leverage and omit substantively important stages of policy implementation and design. Studying political control of state bureaucracies is challenging though, due to limited comparability between state policy outputs. The environmental case provides a useful framework for comparing states’ activities within a common national framework. To this end, I assess whether the political branches of state government influence environmental agencies’ enforcement activities under the Clean Air Act. I use randomization inference in a regression discontinuity design to identify the effect of party control of governors’ offices and state legislatures over enforcement actions taken under this law. I find evidence that governors influence enforcement activities, but I do not find evidence for influence by state legislatures.

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