

U.S. News: BLS Pick Has Forged Partisan Path --- Nominee has praised Trump's policies but lacks the experience of his predecessors

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FULL TEXT

Conservative economist Erwin John "E.J." Antoni sometimes jokes on social media that the "L" in BLS is silent. President Trump this week tapped Antoni to run the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the agency whose data and methodologies he has long criticized, especially when it produces numbers that Trump doesn't like. Antoni recently proposed suspending the monthly jobs report, one of the most important data releases for the economy and markets. On Tuesday, a White House official noted that Antoni made the comment before he knew he was going to be chosen and that his comments don't reflect official BLS policy.

If confirmed by the Senate, Antoni would run a 141-year-old agency staffed by around 2,000 economists, statisticians and other officials. The BLS has a long record of independence and nonpartisanship that economists and investors say is critical to the credibility of U.S. economic data.

According to a commencement program from Northern Illinois University, Antoni earned a master's and Ph.D. in economics from that school in 2018 and 2020, respectively, and a bachelor of arts from St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. Antoni's LinkedIn profile says he attended Lansdale Catholic High School outside Philadelphia from 2002 to 2006.

According to the profile, Antoni went to work in 2021 as an economist at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank in Austin that has sued the federal government to overturn climate-change regulations. The following year, he joined the conservative Heritage Foundation as a research fellow studying regional economics. He is now the foundation's chief economist and an adviser to the Committee to Unleash Prosperity, a group of conservative economic commentators.

Past BLS commissioners have had extensive research experience, and many have climbed the agency's ranks. Antoni doesn't fit that profile. He doesn't appear to have published any formal academic research since his dissertation, according to queries of National Bureau of Economic Research working papers and Google Scholar. Much of his commentary on the Heritage website praises Trump's policies and economic record. He frequently posts on X and appears on right-wing podcasts such as former Trump adviser Steve Bannon's "War Room," where he criticized the economy under President Joe Biden and lauds Trump's economy.

The Heritage Foundation declined to make Antoni available for an interview and didn't respond to questions about his background.

While Antoni's LinkedIn profile says his Ph.D. concentration was in fiscal policy and labor economics, the dissertation on file at Northern Illinois principally analyzes fiscal policy: the "crowding out" effect of deficit spending, the effect of state taxes on domestic migration, and what he called the irrelevance of credit ratings on municipal debt yields.

According to Google Scholar, Antoni's paper has earned one citation, by the Texas Public Policy Foundation in 2021, while he worked there. Publications by Erika McEntarfer -- the BLS commissioner whom Trump ousted on Aug. 1, midway through her term -- have been cited 1,327 times.

Trump fired McEntarfer after a report showing significant downward revisions to prior months' job growth.

"It's not a matter of making the numbers look good, it's a matter of them being accurate," Antoni said on Bannon's Aug. 1 show after McEntarfer's dismissal. "The models and the methodologies need to be revised."

Antoni told Fox News Digital in an interview on Aug. 4 that "BLS should suspend issuing the monthly job reports" until it changed methodologies. Such a move would be unprecedented, leaving the public and markets without a vital source of information on the economy's health.

His commentary on the data has been partisan. During Biden's final year in office, Antoni argued the consumer-price index was understating inflation. In July 2024, he said its monthly rent data was "stale" and the real costs wouldn't show up until after the election. In fact, while BLS data showed rents rising more slowly than private data in 2021-22, by 2024 the reverse was true: It showed rents up 5.2% that June from a year earlier, compared with 3.2% for Zillow. On Bannon's Aug. 1 show, he wrongly said that Biden had removed McEntarfer's predecessor, Bill Beach, whom Trump appointed in 2019. In fact, Beach remained in the job until his four-year term expired in 2023, something Beach has said he was "very grateful" for.

Conservatives praised Trump's choice. "EJ Antoni is one of the sharpest economic minds in the nation -- a fearless truth-teller who grasps that sound economics must serve the interests of American families, not globalist elites," Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts said in a statement.

But several independent economists said he is unqualified. "There are a lot of competent conservative economists that could do this job," said Kyle Pomerleau, a senior fellow at the right-of-center American Enterprise Institute, in a social-media post. "E.J. is not one of them."

Sen. Bill Cassidy (R., La.), chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions said in a statement, "We need a BLS Commissioner committed to producing accurate, unbiased economic information to the American people. Chairman Cassidy looks forward to meeting with Dr. Antoni to discuss how he will accomplish this."

Move Could Backfire If Data Are Seen as Unreliable

Installing a partisan as the commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics could prove counterproductive to President Trump, said Renaissance Macro Research economist Neil Dutta.

If E.J. Antoni prods the agency into producing statistics that flatter the administration, the data would either not be seen as credible or would likely delay interest-rate cuts by the Federal Reserve.

"Neither of those scenarios actually works to the president's benefit," Dutta said.

Bill Beach, the BLS commissioner appointed during Trump's first term, said Antoni's suggestion of suspending publication of the monthly jobs report would be a bad idea for shoring up trust in the data.

"I think you fix these things while you're also publishing and make that extremely transparent," Beach said. Antoni, he said, "has to be the buffer between the White House and the agency."

By Paul Kiernan

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FULL TEXT

Erika McEntarfer, commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, was having a routine morning a couple of weeks ago at the new BLS headquarters in Suitland, Md.

The federal agency had just published the monthly jobs report, a release that business executives, Wall Street traders and Federal Reserve officials spend weeks anticipating. The figures showed that July hiring was below forecast. But the more striking news: BLS said it had overestimated May and June job creation by 258,000, revealing that the U.S. labor market was much weaker than previously thought.

McEntarfer went on with her day, Aug. 1, mingling with staff and complaining to one colleague that construction on Washington's Metrorail was going to disrupt her commute. She didn't know then that her trip home that evening would be the final leg of a two-decade career in the federal statistics system.

At the White House, Trump's economic advisers had briefed him the day before about the jobs report, disclosing the revisions that upended what the president and his team had previously promoted as political wins. The president wasn't happy.

Trump privately aired one of his longstanding complaints that the federal agency producing the data was dysfunctional, according to a senior administration official. A White House official said the president was upset about the revisions and alleged data inaccuracies but declined to comment on Trump's private discussions.

"President Trump believes businesses, households and policymakers deserve accurate data when making major policy decisions, and he will restore America's trust in this key data," White House spokeswoman Taylor Rogers said. After the BLS released the number, Trump's aides appeared on financial cable channels to voice a positive spin. The president wrote on social media that the agency's numbers had been rigged for years and people there were out to damage him politically. Trump demanded his staff fire McEntarfer.

At 1:36 p.m. that day, the agency leader became another labor statistic, one of the nation's unemployed. At 2:09 p.m., the president announced the firing on social media.

Trump offered no concrete evidence the BLS had manipulated the jobs numbers, either by mistake or design. The agency performs one of the government's least political tasks: collecting data and compiling statistics. The president and his aides said in interviews that the proof of wrongdoing was the significant change from previous jobs reports. Economists defended McEntarfer and said that revisions, even large ones, are evidence of the system's integrity.

Trump said on Monday he planned to nominate E.J. Antoni, the chief economist at the Heritage Foundation and a longtime critic of the agency's handling of jobs data, to lead BLS. The position requires Senate confirmation.

The BLS, part of the Labor Department, and its partner agencies in the Commerce Department operate largely out of public view. Yet the weekly and monthly cadence of reports is practically sanctified by business executives and investors who depend on government data that tracks inflation, hiring and other economic metrics to steer companies and capital through America's \$30 trillion economy.

Despite its importance, the agency has struggled to modernize a system that relies on phone calls and in-person visits. A federal hiring freeze has made it more difficult to keep pace with staff losses while collecting comprehensive economic statistics.

Dozens of well-known economists sent a letter to Congress on July 29, warning that the government's statistics system was approaching a breaking point. They said the responsible agencies needed a budget that supports new

data techniques in parallel with current practices.

"Without focused and funded efforts to modernize how these essential statistics are collected and produced, the quality and quantity of the system's output are at risk," the economists wrote.

During a budget squeeze last year, the BLS narrowly avoided cutting the number of households it calls for the survey that sets the unemployment rate. The agency this year struggled with its most labor-intensive survey -- gathering tens of thousands of prices each month to calculate its main inflation measure. Staff shortages forced the BLS to skip price checks in three of 75 cities.

BLS acting commissioner William Wiatrowski sent an email to the agency's staff, assuring them that the agency's mission was unchanged.

On Thursday evening, Trump met with Stephen Moore, an economist at the right-leaning Heritage Foundation, who presented his own, more upbeat economic statistics.

As Trump looked on, Moore flashed a set of charts in front of TV cameras and told reporters that he had used yet-to-be-published Census Bureau data to determine that household income had risen by more than \$1,000 during Trump's second term so far.

There isn't yet any official data on household income during Trump's second term because of the lengthy time it takes to collect surveys from 75,000 American households.

"I called the president up because I had some very good news from some new data that we've been able to put together that no one has ever seen before," said Moore, who didn't reveal how he obtained the unpublished data.

Trump had briefly nominated Moore to the Federal Reserve Board during his first term, before broad opposition led Moore to withdraw his name.

Those who have worked for the BLS in recent decades share a common memory. Early in their training, they were shown a video recounting how in 1971, former President Richard Nixon grew paranoid that a group of BLS employees sought to undermine him by presenting falsely unfavorable labor-market figures. Nixon ordered them demoted.

The message was that BLS employees must maintain unimpeachable integrity because elected officials unhappy with statistical findings might accuse the agency of malfeasance, said Andrew Cohen, a former BLS employee who saw the film in 2003. "It was, 'Watch your words, because people out there will sometimes try to twist your words and accuse you of fraud,'" Cohen said.

BLS operations have changed little over the past decades, relying on some of the world's largest surveys to ask people and businesses about their economic lives. The agency tabulates the unemployment rate, for example, by calling 60,000 households and asking job questions over the phone. The agency has looked into switching to an internet survey, but accuracy and reliability are seen as so critical that its stodgy workhorse of a system still appeals to many experts and data users more than a modern, untested replacement.

Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, a newcomer to politics after a career running a Wall Street brokerage, swept into Washington this year ready to shake up the statistics system. Two weeks after his confirmation, Lutnick mused publicly that the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis would remove government spending from the calculation of the size of the U.S. economy -- known as gross domestic product or GDP. Such a change to the nearly century-old measure of the nation's economic health would be about as drastic as taking sugar out of a cookie recipe.

Like many outside of government, Lutnick also expressed astonishment about the timeworn, analog fashion that BLS workers collect data. They "literally call to Lincoln, Nebraska, and ask what the price of cargo pants is," Lutnick said in a magazine interview last month.

The truth is, there isn't anyone checking prices in Lincoln anymore.

Lincoln is one of 75 locales in the U.S. where the BLS checks prices in person to calculate inflation, a job that until recently was chiefly handled by two local agency employees, Deborah LaPlante and LynnAnn Scharf.

The two women spent their days working independently, driving to auto dealers, medical offices and clothing stores around Lincoln, where they recorded the prices of various goods and services including SUVs, doctor's visits, shirts and pants. Over the years, Scharf befriended store managers on her rounds and taught one how to use published BLS

data to learn about the economy. She and LaPlante always tried to meet for lunch, she said, but it was hard to find time.

Scharf left the BLS in June last year, and now, in her 60s, works as a horticulturist for the local parks department, a lower-stress job. LaPlante died in September, Scharf said. The BLS would typically have hired replacements. But on the first day of his second term, Trump ordered a government hiring freeze. By June, price checks ground to a halt in Lincoln, Provo, Utah, and Buffalo, N.Y.

The BLS's other 72 price-checking zones also face staffing shortages. In those places, the agency is missing about 15% of the prices it would normally aim to collect, the agency said. The BLS is now getting only about 80% of the price data it used to, according to Omair Sharif, founder of analysis firm Inflation Insights.

Turnover is high among front-line agency price-checkers, who earn, on average, about \$45,000 a year. In the past, the BLS hired roughly the same number of price checkers as those who left, according to records reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. Yet between October of last year -- the start of the government's fiscal year -- and mid-June, the agency's inflation-data staff lost substantially more workers than it added.

The BLS recently said it planned to discontinue 350 data series from the producer-price index, eliminating data on wholesale prices for such items as leather goods, lawn furniture and candles.

The resource squeeze has been under way for more than a decade. In inflation-adjusted terms, the agency's spending power -- based on annual budgets of around \$650 million -- fell by about a fifth over the past 15 years, according to The Friends of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a BLS advocacy group.

For the coming fiscal year, the Trump administration asked Congress to reduce the BLS budget by about 10%, saying the cuts would be made up from cost savings in its plans to merge the BLS into the Commerce Department. The economists who wrote to Congress warning of a crisis -- who included former BLS commissioner Erica Groshen, former Federal Reserve Vice Chairman Alan Blinder and Nobel winner Paul Romer -- begged lawmakers to, at worst, keep funding unchanged.

While the number of workers shrinks, the task of asking individuals and businesses to volunteer their data has become a tough sell.

The response rate for the monthly survey used for unemployment statistics has dropped below 70% from nearly 90% a decade ago. When businesses are asked how many workers they employ, more are late to reply. That means the BLS's initial report on monthly job creation, on the first Friday of the following month, is more of a guess than ever, and big revisions are more likely as tardy data trickles in during the next weeks and months.

Last year, while McEntarfer was commissioner, the BLS published one batch of stats about a half-hour late and on another occasion published a set of figures a half-hour early -- high-stakes mistakes given that traders collectively bet billions on what they predict the reports will say.

Carson Markley joined the BLS in Dallas in 2022, shortly after finishing a master's degree in international relations. He was assigned to survey companies for the producer-price index, the key gauge of inflation for wholesale prices.

The job was sometimes frustrating because of a limited staff and a large workload, said Markley, who had to get company managers on the phone or catch them in person. Many businesses were reluctant to participate, worried about the time spent or that the government would leak or misuse private data, Markley said. Some he contacted thought it was a scam.

"From what my older colleagues told me, they used to be able to get data easily. They could get dozens of companies a week to sign up" to join surveys, Markley said. "Nowadays, everything's so politically divisive that we weren't able to."

Markley said he was glad when he landed a new job in Chicago outside the federal government.

At a news conference last month, before McEntarfer was fired, Fed Chair Jerome Powell said the central bank was still getting the data it needed to make sound decisions on interest rates but emphasized the need to keep the stats system healthy.

"People in the economy, they use this data a lot," Powell said. "It's very hard to accurately capture in real time the output of a 20-plus-trillion-dollar economy. And the United States has been a leader in that for 100 years, and we