

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

Kiernan, Paul . Kiernan, Paul.

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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

DETAILS

Subject:	Conservatism; Fiscal policy; Presidents; Economists; Public policy; Economics; Congressional committees
Business indexing term:	Subject: Fiscal policy Economists Economics; Corporation: LinkedIn Corp; Industry: 92111 : Executive Offices 92112 : Legislative Bodies
Location:	Texas; United States--US
People:	Trump, Donald J; Antoni, Erwin John III

Company / organization:	Name: LinkedIn Corp; NAICS: 518210; Name: Bureau of Labor Statistics; NAICS: 921110, 923110; Name: Texas Public Policy Foundation; NAICS: 813211; Name: Heritage Foundation-Washington DC; NAICS: 541720
Classification:	92111: Executive Offices; 92112: Legislative Bodies
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y.
First page:	A2
Publication year:	2025
Publication date:	Aug 14, 2025
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	00999660
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	3239236707
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/u-s-news-bls-pick-has-forged-partisan-path/docview/3239236707/se-2?accountid=14681
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Last updated:	2025-08-14
Database:	ProQuest Central

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