Presidential Patronage and the Development of the Federal Bureaucracy

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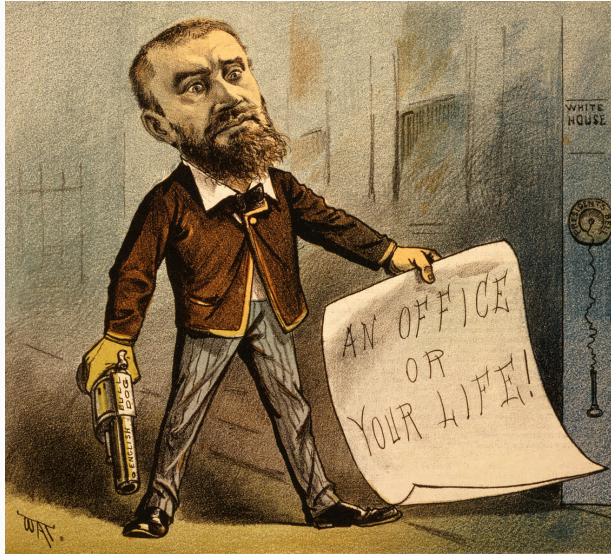
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Harvard University

Guiteau's grievance

Motivation

Spoils system figures prominently in our understanding of nineteenth-century party politics and administrative state

Presidential administration as vehicle for extending patronage opportunities

Politics of personnel as contributor to bureaucratic development

How does presidential patronage affect composition of the federal workforce?

What we do

Map the composition of federal bureaucracy across time

Use granular historical data to generate new empirical facts about federal workforce

Evaluate theoretical and historiographical accounts of executive branch politics

- What we can learn about institutional development from personnel turnover
- Variation across time, agency, and personnel level
- Use variation in geographic origins of personnel to identify links with presidential patronage

Case: Department of Interior, 1849–1905

Established in 1849 as Cabinet-level department

Intended to attend to domestic issues (as opposed to State and War)

Responsibilities across wide range of area; often called "The Department of Everything Else"

Mix of responsibilities with more and less explicitly political character

During period of study: Pension Office, General Land Office, Patent Office, US Geological Survey, Bureau of Education, Census, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Public Buildings

Data

- Data from *Official Register of the United States*
- Biennial publication beginning in 1817
- We collected complete data on Interior personnel from 1849 to 1905
- Approximately 145,000 total positions

Growth in personnel

Employment of US Department of Interior 1849–1905
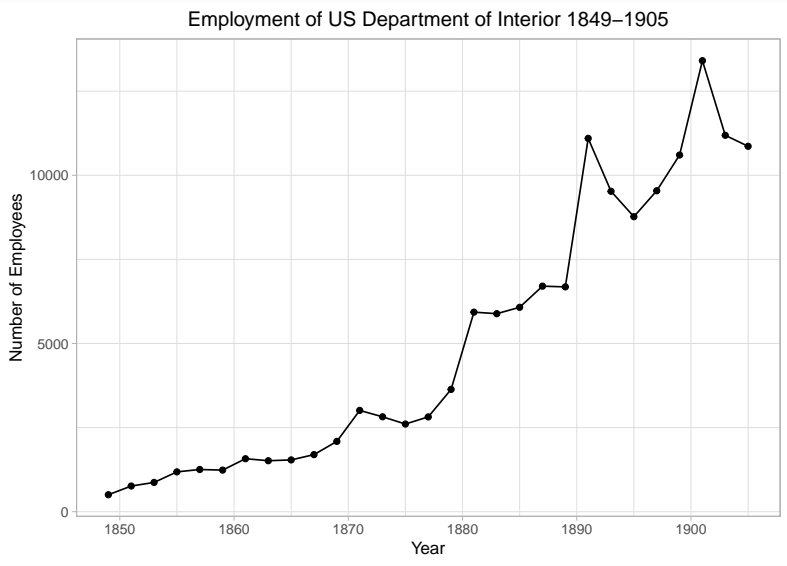
Personnel increased across most every unit

Interior Department Employment by Bureau
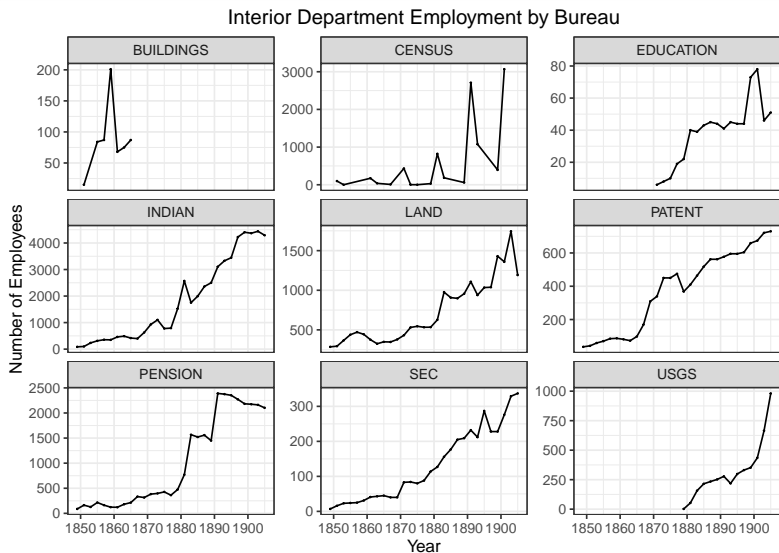
How stable were employment patterns across: time, presidential administrations, institutional changes, and bureaus?

Turnover rates declined substantially over time
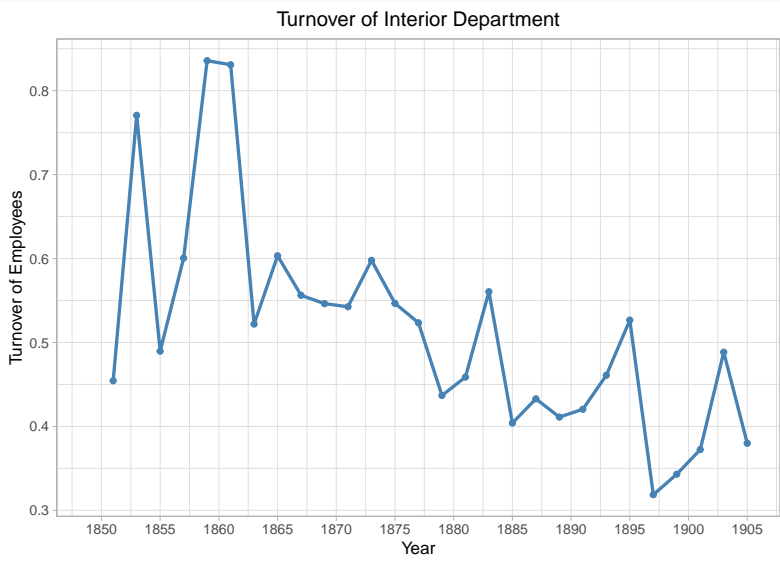
Little variation across changes in presidential administration

Turnover of Interior Department with Changes in Presidency
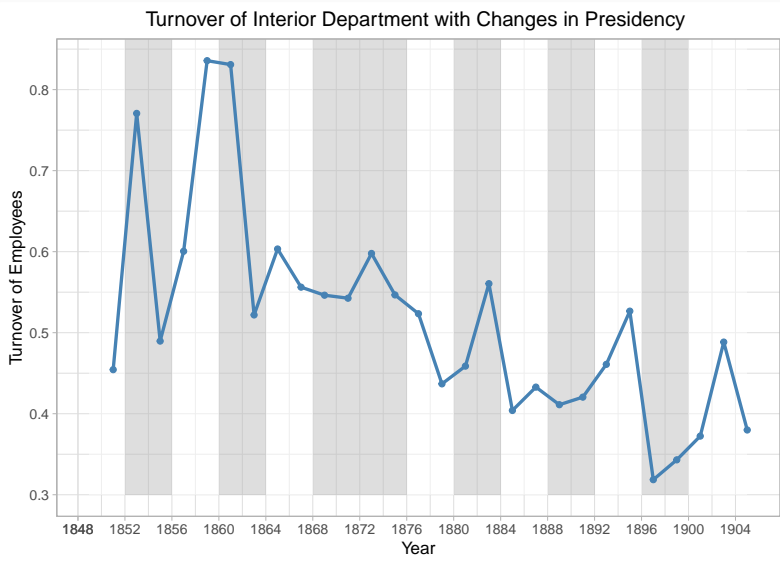
Greater turnover with change in presidential party

Turnover of Interior Department with Changes in President's Party
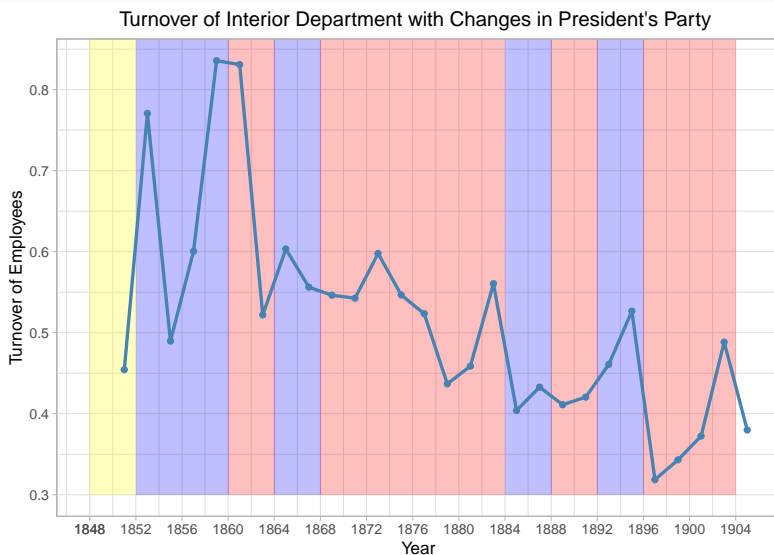
Secular trends and impact of the Pendleton Act

Turnover of Interior Department with Pendleton Act Indicated
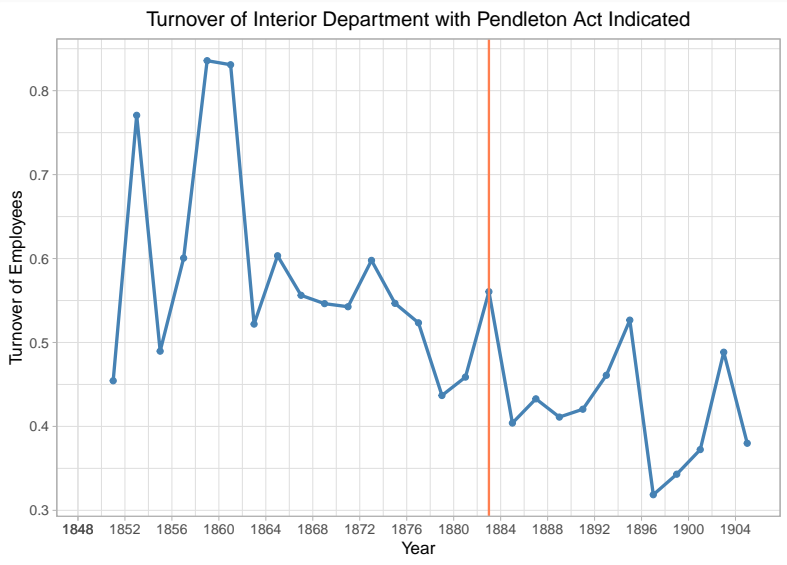
Declining turnover driven by salaried positions

Turnover of Interior Department by Compensation Level
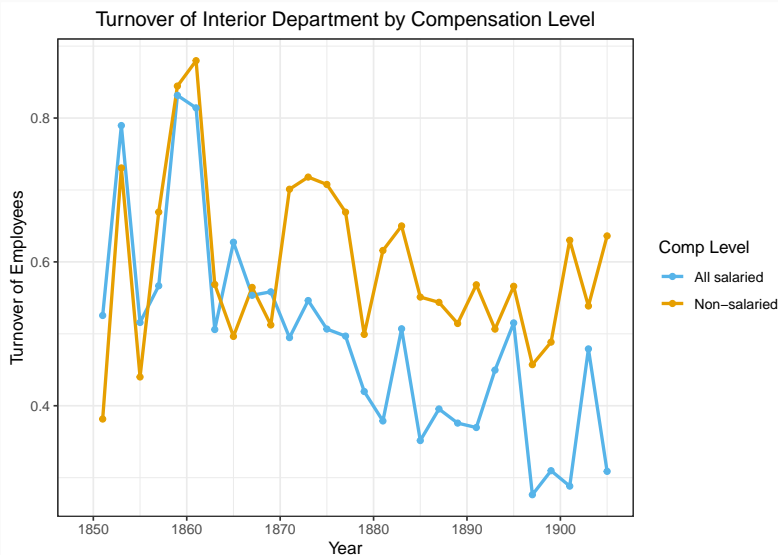
Turnover: Summary statistics

Range of Years	Average Turnover	Observations
All Years	0.52	28
Presidential Election Years	0.52	14
Midterm Election Years	0.51	14
Presidential Election Years with Change in Partisan Control	0.54	8
Before Pendleton Act	0.58	16
After Pendleton Act	0.41	11

Was allocation of bureaucratic positions consistent with partisan/electoral logic?

Employment by state

Appointments per capita (hundred thousands)

16
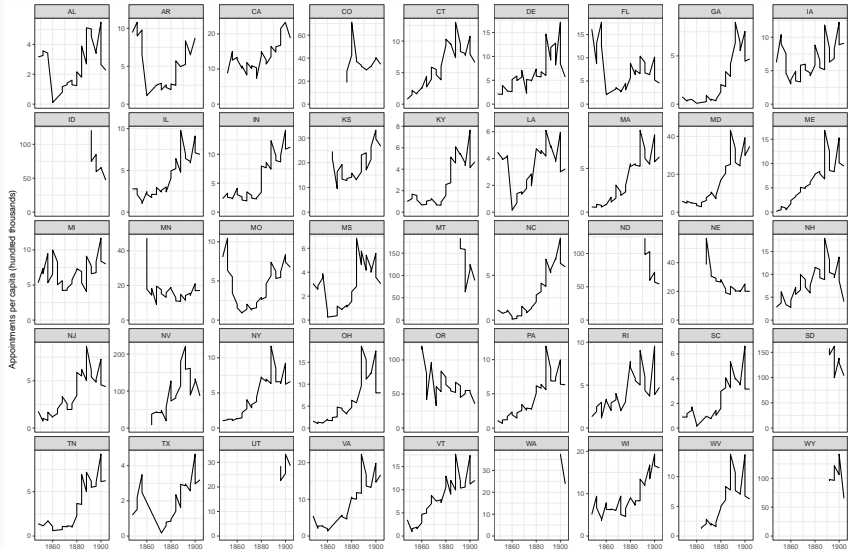
State-presidential alignment and bureaucratic positions

Model biennial (logged) number of positions per state:

$$\ln(1 + \text{positions}_{it}) = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta \text{Presidential alignment}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

- α_i: state fixed effects
- δ_t: year fixed effects
- Presidential alignment: state support in last presidential election (i.e., for 1887, distinguish Cleveland vs. Blaine states)—popular vote share and electoral college win
- Standard errors clustered on state
- Linear and quadratic state-specific trends

State presidential alignment and bureaucratic positions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Popular vote share	0.735*	0.731*	0.725*	0.674*				
	(0.147)	(0.146)	(0.151)	(0.117)				
Incumbent won state					0.187*	0.185*	0.197*	0.209*
					(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.047)	(0.039)
State Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
State trends			Linear	Quadratic			Linear	Quadratic
Observations	980	980	980	980	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022

State presidential alignment and bureaucratic positions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Popular vote share	0.462*	0.480*	0.451*	0.428*				
	(0.084)	(0.081)	(0.062)	(0.076)				
Incumbent won state					0.102*	0.103*	0.093*	0.097*
					(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.017)	(0.016)
State Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bureau Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
State trends			Linear	Quadratic			Linear	Quadratic
Observations	5,428	5,428	5,428	5,428	5,572	5,572	5,572	5,572

Variation across bureaus

	Patent	Pension	Indian	Land	Patent	Pension	Indian	Land
Popular vote share	0.271	0.550*	0.781*	0.483*				
	(0.137)	(0.159)	(0.250)	(0.162)				
Incumbent won state					0.059	0.148*	0.163*	0.104
					(0.032)	(0.039)	(0.037)	(0.069)
State Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Population		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Observations	797	939	811	917	815	971	947	832

Conclusions and caveats

New descriptive evidence about bureaucratic structure and personnel during 19th century

Variety of analyses provide evidence consistent with presidential patronage and document its decline

Lots more to do!

Leverage individual-level data associated with personnel

More fully incorporate role of Congress in contributing to patronage patterns

What else??

Thank you!