The Media and Bureaucratic Accountability* 

Alex Ruder†

September 5, 2012

ABSTRACT

Arguments relating presidential control over agencies to political accountability are widespread, but little work examines the how the media enable accountability by attributing responsibility for bureaucratic policymaking to the president. I examine how centralized presidential control and policy saliency affect the media’s attribution of presidential control using a collection of nearly 200,000 news articles about government agencies. After showing how coverage differs across Executive Office of the President, the Cabinet, and regulatory commissions, I show that increased presidential involvement in the rulemaking process is related to greater attribution of control in agency news. Finally, I show that policy saliency increases attribution of control, even for politically insulated regulatory commissions. The results provide evidence linking increased presidential control of agencies to greater attribution of presidential control.

*I thank Doug Arnold, Nolan McCarty, Kosuke Imai, Sharece Thrower and Deborah Beim for helpful comments.
†Department of Politics, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 08544. Email: aruder@princeton.edu
Does more formal presidential control over bureaucratic agencies increase citizens’ ability to hold officials accountable for their actions? When presidents make decisions directly, citizens can easily learn about their responsibility and choose to reward and punish them at the polls. When bureaucrats make decisions, however, citizens cannot reward and punish those officials directly, since they are unelected. Some experts claim that placing a bureaucratic agency within the span of presidential control makes it easier for citizens to attribute responsibility to the president, and thus to reward and punish presidents for bureaucratic decisions. By comparison, insulating bureaucratic agencies from presidential control makes it more difficult for citizens to attribute responsibility to the president or to reward and punish anyone.

The attribution of responsibility provides citizens with important information needed to hold governmental officials accountable for their actions (Malhotra and Kuo 2008). If citizens incorrectly assign responsibility—for example, blaming the president for an action taken by an independent regulator—accountability is undermined. This paper examines what factors affect the attribution of responsibility for bureaucratic decisions.

Here I examine the attribution of responsibility for bureaucratic decisions by focusing on how the mass media covers governmental agencies. The aim is to explore what factors affect when the media attributes responsibility for bureaucratic policymaking to an elected official. The media-based approach has two advantages. First, news coverage provides a large dataset that covers multiple agencies with different institutional designs. Second, news coverage captures what information is readily made available to citizens about agency actions. If presidential control works as theory suggests, media coverage of agencies under the president’s formal control should more often attribute those agencies’ actions to the president. Alternatively, agencies insulated from presidential control, such as regulatory commissions, should receive coverage that reflects their independent status. If the media fails to account for varying degrees of presidential influence, or attributes the same level of
responsibility to presidentially-controlled and presidentially-insulated agencies, then more formal presidential control may not empower citizens to know the elected official ultimately responsible for agency policy (Bressman and Vandenbergh 2006).

I argue that institutional design affects when journalists attribute bureaucratic control to the president. Greater formal control offers the president highly visible control mechanisms that journalists can observe. The tools of greater presidential centralization—reviewing proposed rules, budgets, and congressional testimony through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), making public statements taking credit for agency policy, and removing agency officials—help journalists, and the public, to attribute bureaucratic actions to a single elected official (Kagan 2001).

After showing how the media’s attribution of control differs between presidentially-controlled and presidentially-insulated agencies, I develop two alternative accounts to explain variation in attribution over time. First, when presidents intervene more frequently in the regulatory process, the media more frequently attribute control to the president. Presidents become more actively involved in the regulatory state when they promote, block, or change agency rules. If presidents go public to trumpet these achievements, or if journalists or other commentators observe these actions, then media attribution should increase. If greater presidential activism fails to increase media attribution, then citizens lose information connecting an elected official to bureaucratic policy. A failure of attribution thus inhibits accountability, since the citizens cannot easily trace a policy to an elected official.

Second, I argue that when a policy or issue becomes salient, the president, as chief executive and the only nationally-elected leader, engages the bureaucracy in a public way. Saliency drives presidents to intervene in agency rulemaking. But it also drives presidents to intervene in agencies that are insulated from presidential control. During a financial crisis, for example, the president cannot afford to sit aside and let the independent financial regulators work alone. The public demands presidential action, and the president steps in
to steer action and to seem in charge.

To examine the determinants of media attribution, I use a database of nearly every *New York Times* article published between 1987 and 2007. The dataset includes thousands of articles, by year, for agencies within the Executive Office of the President (EOP), cabinet departments and sub-cabinet agencies, independent agencies, and regulatory commissions.

I also examine how regulatory activity and OIRA review affects attribution by matching agency news to a dataset of agency rulemaking activity. Using OIRA records, I have constructed a dataset of all economically significant rules issued annually by agency, at the cabinet, sub-cabinet, and independent agency level. The data include whether or not OIRA formal review resulted in a change to the proposed or final rule. This data allow me to examine agency policymaking (rules), centralized control (OIRA review), and media attribution of presidential involvement.

Three main findings emerge. First, agency design matters. The closer an agency is to the president, in terms of formal control, the more often coverage of that agency mentions the president. Second, when OIRA intervenes more frequently in rulemaking, agency news coverage emphasizes the president more often. These results provide systematic evidence directly relating centralization and rulemaking to the attribution of presidential control in the news. Third, I find preliminary evidence indicating that policy saliency matters. Saliency of economic policy, as measured by the national unemployment rate, leads to more association with the president agency news. Surprisingly, this relationship holds even with presidentially-insulated regulatory commissions.

The paper proceeds in six sections. The first section details some empirical challenges and the proposed media-based approach. The second section discusses theoretical arguments relating agency design, rulemaking, and presidential leadership to accountability. Section three describes the agency news and rulemaking datasets. Section four introduces a statistical model that incorporates data at the agency and year level to provide estimates of how
presidential involvement in rulemaking correlates with attribution of presidential responsibility. Section five examines empirical evidence about the policy saliency hypothesis. The sixth section discusses extensions and concludes.

1 The Proposed Media-Based Approach

While other works focus on Congress and the media (Arnold 2004; Snyder and Strömberg 2010), or the president and the media (Cohen 2009), the media-based approach I advocate focuses specifically on the president and the bureaucracy. Indeed, how presidential control facilitates accountability depends on how visible that control is to the public (Bressman and Vandenbergh 2006). The media’s attribution of control places the president and the bureaucracy in public view.

My fundamental question is what factors increase attribution of presidential control over the bureaucracy. A large literature from public law and political science offers three possibilities that I examine. First, agency design is related to greater clarity of control. The president simply wields more power over certain agencies. Powers such as removing agency officials allow for greater attribution because they are easily noticeable by the press and interested observers.

Second, presidents have labored to increase their control over the bureaucracy and, especially since Reagan, ensure agency policy hews to administration policy. Arguably the most significant development in this period is central clearance of agency rules through OIRA (Cooper and West 1988). But other developments, such as presidential appropriation—i.e., taking credit for bureaucrats’ decisions—are also significant. The prediction from this literature is that greater presidential attention to agency rulemaking—through both OIRA review and credit claiming—leads to greater political accountability.

Empirical work relating presidential control to accountability lags far behind research on bureaucratic responsiveness. In addition, while offering many important insights, extant
works often focus on a single agency, thus missing crucial variation in agency design. Past work also focuses on the transparency of White House involvement in agency policymaking, without analyzing how attribution of responsibility is communicated to the public; rather, they relate officials’ or scholars’ perceptions of political control. Bressman and Vandenbergh (2006) used surveys to measure perceptions of White House involvement and media attention; others have studied how transparently OIRA and the White House intervene in agency rulemaking (Croley 2003). But the important link between White House involvement and attribution of White House involvement remains understudied.

The media-based approach I advocate helps correct both shortcomings. My agency news dataset spans multiple agencies, providing a systematic way to examine how varying institutional design affects the attribution of presidential control. Furthermore, media coverage of government agencies represents the most direct way in which the public learns when and how presidents are involved with agency policymaking. Without the media, the president’s public announcements and public interventions would not be communicated to most citizens.

My central assumption is that media coverage of agency actions helps citizens understand how agencies make decisions and who is ultimately responsible for those decisions. Armed with this information, voters can hold government officials accountable for agency policy that works against their interests or preferences. But when the media inaccurately convey the true sources of bureaucratic power, and falsely reveal the varying degrees of presidential control over agencies, they interfere with citizens’ ability to hold accountable the elected officials with formal control over bureaucrats.

Figure 1 shows the essential role the media play in attributing responsibility for bureaucratic control. Bureaucratic policymaking is messy. Many actors influence the final policy that agencies produce. The media help voters sort through this mess. For political accountability to be possible, voters must learn which elected officials are ultimately responsible for bureaucratic policymaking. The media enable this process by accurately communicating to
voters which politicians are responsible, and which are not.

Figure 1: Attribution of Bureaucratic Control in the News

Figure 1 also illustrates how the media link agency design to political accountability. The president has more formal power to influence cabinet-level agencies (agency policy-making stage). The president appoints the agency’s leadership, reviews the agency’s rules, and can remove the agency’s leadership at will. The president, by contrast, has little ex-post influence over regulatory commissions. The president cannot remove commissioners at will if the commission promotes a policy against the preferences of the president. By making no distinction between cabinet-level agencies and regulatory commissions when attributing control to the president (attribution stage), the media undermines the accountability stage.

2 Theory and Hypotheses

Since the media play a key role informing citizens that the president has formal control over some agencies, the question is when do they do it? Not every news story about agencies mentions the president. Some focus only on policy, or a technocratic decision process (such as the deliberations of an FDA expert panel). But sometimes journalists tie an agency
to the president, helping voters to connect bureaucratic policymaking to the electorally-
accountable official ultimately responsible for those policies. I argue that the institutional
design of agencies, centralization, and policy saliency affect when the media attribute political
responsibility president.

2.1. Agency Design and Presidential Control

One explanation for when journalists attribute control to the president involves agency de-
sign, or how much formal power the president ultimately has over agency policy:

**Hypothesis 1: Agency Design**

The more formal controls a president has over agencies, the more likely journalists
are to attribute presidential responsibility to agency decisions.

At least three mechanisms link agency design to media’s attribution of presidential con-
trol. First, formal presidential control varies by institutional type. The president, for ex-
ample, has extensive formal powers over the Executive Office of the President (EOP), the
Cabinet, and so-called independent agencies. These powers—such as at-will removal, reg-
ulatory review, and budgetary review—are public actions that some journalists may cover.
Second, journalists may simply recognize how presidentially-insulated certain agencies are.
A reporter whose beat is the Federal Reserve, for example, probably knows that the Federal
Reserve chairman and the Federal Open Market Committee make decisions without presi-
dential involvement. Third, presidents may be less likely to go public and claim credit for
the policies of agencies not under formal presidential control. These variations in formal
presidential control imply that the media’s attribution of presidential control also varies.

2.1.1 A Brief Review of Agency Design

The literature on agency design focuses on the conditions that lead Congress to create
agencies that are either under presidential control or insulated from presidential influence
These works generally do not relate agency design to issues of accountability promoted by presidential control theorists.

Lewis (2003) divides agencies into five groups according to the level of political insulation from the president. Agencies located within the EOP (e.g., the Office of Management and Budget) feature the highest levels of presidential control. At the next level are the cabinet departments like Justice and Homeland Security, and their sub-cabinet agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The president reviews budgets, manages personnel, and reviews policy through OIRA and various White House offices. The president also has these powers over so-called independent agencies like the EPA.¹ Policies should hew to the president’s ideal; if the policies stray, the president can intervene or even remove the agency leadership.²

Most insulated from presidential control are regulatory commissions, for which several mechanisms limit the president’s influence.² Barlow (2010). Their multi-member and partisan-balanced commission form restricts the number of co-partisan commissioners the president can appoint. Staggered appointment terms, moreover, often result in serving commissioners appointed by the previous president. The president cannot remove commissioners at-will, only for cause. Furthermore, any rules commissions promulgate are not subject to OIRA review.

2.2. Centralization and Presidential Control

Another explanation for journalists attributing more control to the president involves the application of formal presidential powers:

Hypothesis 2: Centralization

The more frequently presidents intervene in agency decision making, the more

¹The EPA is officially an independent agency, that is, outside the cabinet.
²Evidence suggests, however, that despite the removal power the president’s cabinet is not ideologically aligned with the president. [Bertelli and Grose 2011].
likely journalists are to attribute presidential responsibility to agency actions.

At least two mechanisms link centralized presidential control to media attribution of presidential control. First, if the president intervenes during formal OIRA review, the president or agency officials may be more likely to publicly discuss presidential involvement with the policy. OIRA, for example, often intervenes on significant rules potentially salient to a constituency. Thus, when the rule is in development or complete, the president or a surrogate goes public to inform the constituency of his action on their behalf. Second, to the extent informal and formal OIRA review is transparent, interested scholars and reporters can uncover a direct record of presidential influence on rulemaking.3

Centralization is not all good news. With politicization comes performance loss, as political appointees replace expert, neutrally-competent bureaucrats (Lewis 2007). Nevertheless, many scholars, judges, and legislators (as evidenced by increasing delegation) support cen-

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3Yet, as documented by Croley (2003) and Copeland (2005), a criticism of centralized review is its opacity, with little material to link rulemaking changes to White House influence. If centralized control affects the attribution of control in the media, I expect it to work through the going-public mechanism.
Centralization because it clarifies who is in control of the bureaucracy (Lessig and Sunstein 1994). Alexander Hamilton wrote that “[o]ne of the weightiest objections to a plurality in the executive is it tends to conceal faults, and destroy responsibility” (Hamilton, *The Federalist*). Spreading authority among the president, Congress, and bureaucrats muddles accountability because it creates ambiguity of responsibility and requires more effort for citizens to determine who is responsible (Calabresi 1995).

This discussion reveals that the trade-off between control and performance also entails a trade-off between control and accountability. Yet while empirical work has shed much light on the first trade-off, we know much less about the latter. Work in this area typically focuses on rulemaking. Croley (2003) argues that the extent of presidential involvement in rulemaking remains largely unknown to the public, undermining a key justification for increased presidential control, while others have called for reforms that make presidential intervention more transparent (Copeland 2005).

I do not assume that reporters are searching through OIRA records or checking whether or not the president intervened, before deciding whether to include the president in a story about an agency. Rather, I assume that OIRA intervention is correlated with other behaviors that reporters *are* likely to see: public credit claiming, appointments, removals, and budgetary threats. Reporters, of course, may also observe OIRA intervention through other media outlets such as blogs.

### 2.3. Policy Saliency and Presidential Leadership

But what links centralization to media attribution of presidential control? Why would greater presidential interest in agency policy result in more media coverage tying the president to the agency? One mechanism is what Kagan calls “appropriation,” or the president taking credit for agency policy.
Hypothesis 3: Policy Saliency

The more salient policy is to citizens, the more likely that presidents get involved in the regulatory process and that journalists attribute presidential responsibility to that agency.

The president has at least two reasons to appropriate agency policymaking as part of his own agenda. The first relates to performance-based evaluations of the modern presidency. As one notable presidency scholar wrote, “everybody now expects the man in the White House to do something about everything” (Neustadt 1990). Moreover, the “public expects the modern president to maintain peace, national security, prosperity, and domestic stability.” The president is a “responder in chief” that takes ownership of policies in order to fulfill public expectations of presidential effectiveness. In other words, as responder in chief, the president shows more leadership especially when the public demands it, as in periods of crises or high policy saliency.

The second reason involves simply taking credit for policy. To secure reelection, campaign contributions, or to polish a legacy, the president communicates policy achievements to the public. The president, as chief executive, uses the bureaucracy to unilaterally implement his policy agenda (Moe and Howell 1999). The president then goes public to trumpet agency policymaking achievements—much as the president trumpets legislative achievements. The president, that is, wants to be seen in control.


To examine the validity of these hypotheses, I analyze news coverage of government agencies in the New York Times from 1987 to 2007. Building the Agency News dataset requires several steps: choosing and coding agencies, searching for news coverage, and processing text.
3.1. The Agencies

In building the Agency News dataset, the first step involves searching the *Times* corpus for coverage of all federal agencies. I use two data sources to assemble the list of agency names. The Regulatory Information Service Center (RISC) provides a list of all federal agencies that issue regulations. I check this list with the *United States Government Manual*, which lists federal agencies, as well as their agency design (e.g., regulatory commissions). The final list includes all agencies within the Executive Office of the President (EOP), all cabinet departments, all sub-cabinet agencies and offices that have issued a regulation, and all regulatory commissions.

I assign each agency to an “agency type.” In other words, I code agencies as belonging within the EOP, within the Cabinet, as independent agencies, and as regulatory commissions. The information used to assign agency types comes from the RISC and the *United States Government Manual*. The RISC data also include, for each agency, its “parent” agency, allowing me to disaggregate cabinet departments into their component agencies. Many agencies are units within larger cabinet departments. The Food and Drug Administration, for example, is an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services.

3.2. Searching the *Times* Corpus

The textual data are drawn from the *New York Times Corpus*, a collection of nearly 1.9 million articles—almost every article published between 1987 and 2007 ([Sandhaus 2008](#)). The corpus includes the full text of each article.

I searched the *Times* corpus for articles that mention any EOP agency, cabinet department, sub-cabinet agency, independent agency, or regulatory commission. I then organized the articles into five separate document corpora, corresponding to these agency types. If the article contained the string “Food and Drug Administration,” for example, I copied that

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4I account for agencies that change design during the study period by changing their assignment. Clinton changed the Social Security Administration, for example, from a cabinet agency to an independent agency.
article into the “sub-cabinet” corpus. For an article that mentions the FDA’s parent cabinet department, Health and Human Services, I copied that to the “cabinet” corpus.

Table 2 breaks down the number of news articles by agency type. Note that I list sub-cabinet agencies as a separate category. In terms of agency design, sub-cabinet agencies belong under cabinet departments. I include it as a separate category, however, to distinguish articles that discuss cabinet departments from those that discuss sub-cabinet agencies. Separating into cabinet and sub-cabinet also allows me to control for intra-cabinet agency heterogeneity in the statistical analysis below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Agencies</th>
<th>Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EOP</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6,154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Department</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>92,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Cabinet Agency</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>49,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Agency</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory Commission</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39,484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Number of Articles by Agency Type.

Some articles mention more than one agency, so the categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, an article may discuss the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This case poses no serious difficulties, since the president wields similar formal powers over the sub-cabinet FDA and its parent department, HHS. I assume that mentioning the president in an article that includes both the FDA and HHS ties the president to both organizations. I include the article in both the cabinet and sub-cabinet collections, which creates the non-mutually exclusive categories.

But consider an antitrust article that mentions the Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department. This example poses a problem, since some articles note that the FTC is designed to be insulated from presidential control. Yet the majority of articles do not make this distinction. In fact, journalists regularly make no distinction at all, lumping both agencies together as part of the administration’s antitrust policy. Even when articles make
the distinction, journalists place the paragraph on commission insulation late into the article, where readers are less likely to encounter it. By that point, the article has already mentioned the president along with the agency, meaning that attribution could occur even though the article mentions the commission’s independence.

FTC and Justice represent an extreme case, since they both regulate antitrust policy and thus often appear in stories together. For other agencies that do not share overlapping jurisdictions, articles are less likely to mention more than one agency with either different or the same agency design. For example, 84% of cabinet-department articles are about one department only.

With the articles sorted, I pre-process all textual data, removing stems, punctuation, and numbers. Each corpora also includes meta data, including the articles’ publication year and its subject agency.

3.3. The Agency Rulemaking Dataset

Rulemaking is a major tool agencies use to make policy. Using data from the Regulatory Information Service Center (RISC), I collect every economically significant rule issued, by agency, from 1987 to 2007. The data include only economically significant rules for several reasons. First, the definition of an economically significant rule—having an annual economic impact over $100 million—remains constant throughout time period. Second, rules that are not economically significant are often “routine and frequent” or “information/administrative” rules. Dragu uses similar data, and I largely follow his procedure in assembling the data. But I disaggregate the data to the sub-cabinet level, allowing for examination of within-cabinet department agency heterogeneity.

To measure presidential intervention, I focus on the outcome of OIRA’s regulatory review

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5 An experiment is underway to study how these differences affect citizen attribution of control.
6 Approximately 30% of FTC articles also mention the Justice Department.
7 Since Executive Order 12,866, OIRA review rules deemed “significant.” “Economically significant” is a subset. See GAO report on rulemaking.
process. Formal review begins when agencies submit to OIRA a proposed or final rule. Upon receipt, OIRA has 90 days to complete the review. When the review period ends, OIRA either accepts the rule, proposes changes, or returns it to the agency for reconsideration. The RISC data include the final disposition of OIRA’s review. Specifically, the data indicate whether OIRA deemed the rule “consistent with change,” “consistent without change,” “withdrawn,” or “returned for reconsideration.” Table 3 breaks down dispositions for all economically significant rules in the sample, showing that OIRA disposed over 92% of rules as either “consistent with change” or “consistent without change.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disposition</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistent with Change</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent without Change</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Economically Significant Rules: 1,814

Table 3: Disposition of OIRA Formal Review

If the rule is coded “consistent without change,” then OIRA approved the rule exactly as the agency submitted it. In these cases, OIRA did not intervene in formal rulemaking. Coding “consistent with change,” however, indicates that changes occurred to the rule before approval. Following Dragu (n.d.), I consider that any disposition not “consistent without change” means that the president intervened in the regulatory process. I calculate, by agency/year, the share of proposed and final rules deemed “consistent with change,” “withdrawn,” or “returned,” such that a greater share indicates more frequent presidential intervention in rulemaking. This coding, however, has several weaknesses (Copeland 2005). It ignores OIRA intervention that occurs before the formal review period begins—the so-called informal review; moreover, OIRA returns rules to an agency not simply due to a conflict with presidential preferences, but to the agency’s failure to submit the rule correctly.

Despite these concerns, I argue these data provide a reasonable approximation for cen-
tralized control over a given agency over time. In other words, following arguments stating that presidents use centralized review to influence agency policy, I assume that a key way presidents influence agency rules is changing their content during formal OIRA review. The dataset includes annual rules issued by 34 agencies and cabinet departments. Once disaggregating the cabinet departments, the final dataset includes 83 cabinet-level and independent agencies. OIRA does not review regulatory commission rules, so I omit commissions from the rulemaking dataset.

3.4. Agency News and Rulemaking Data

In order to examine the relationship between centralized control and attribution of presidential control, I merge the agency news and regulatory data into a single dataset. The merged dataset features the annual rulemaking activity of all sub-cabinet and independent agencies in the sample, matched with the news coverage of that agency.

3.4.1 Analysis of Agency News

For the initial analysis, I focus on the frequency that news coverage ties an agency to the president’s administration. The current focus remains on the president but easily expands to cover Congress and the courts. For each agency/year, I count two quantities: the number of articles that mention the president’s name and the total mentions of the president’s name (Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush). I calculate the same quantities for “White House,” since some articles refer to White House offices and agencies (such as the Council of Economic Advisers) influencing agency decisions. I assume that when journalists write “White House” they tie an agency to the president’s administration, just as the do when writing the president’s name in an article.

Why focus on these words? I argue that articles tie agency action with the president when mentioning either the institution or the personal name of an institution’s leader. Consider the quote below from the Washington Post:
A federal appeals court on Tuesday upheld the Environmental Protection Agency’s finding that greenhouse gases contribute to global warming and are a threat to public health, a major victory for the Obama administration and a setback to states and trade groups that oppose government regulations on carbon emissions.

The source article discusses an appellate court upholding an EPA rule to regulate greenhouse gases (Fears 2012). Yet, the text frames the ruling a victory for the Obama administration. This framing, I argue, conveys to the reader that the president is ultimately responsible for EPA policy. In other words, the article’s message would be much different if it framed the court decision as a victory for environmentalists, or for EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson.

4 Empirical Analysis of Agency News

I now assess the three hypotheses about variation in the attribution of presidential control. First, the agency design hypothesis predicts that the attribution of presidential control varies with the formal powers the president can use to influence agency policy. Second, the centralization hypothesis predicts that greater presidential intervention in agency policymaking increases the attribution of presidential control. Finally, the policy saliency hypothesis predicts that greater policy saliency increases attribution of presidential control, since presidents publicly engage the regulatory process when policy is salient. Public expectations for presidential leadership force the chief executive to go public with control over the bureaucracy. More importantly, the presidential leadership hypothesis applies to all agency types. In other words, despite weak formal controls, the president publicly engages even regulatory commissions when public expectations for leadership are high.
4.1. Agency Design and Agency News

I begin by analyzing the relationship between agency type and the frequency that media coverage ties agencies to the president. Figure 2 plots the share of articles that mention the president’s name, by agency type and year. The data provide qualified support for the agency design hypothesis. The media frequently associate EOP agencies with the president, reflecting their position within the White House and under the direct control of the president’s Chief of Staff. On average, 78% of EOP articles mention the president. In contrast, articles about regulatory commissions—the most insulated from presidential control—mention the president 21% of the time.

But analysis of the other agency types offers a more complex story. According to agency design theory, the cabinet departments are under more presidential control than independent agencies. Yet, independent agency coverage more frequently ties the agencies to the president. On average, 43% of independent agency articles mention the president, compared to 39% for cabinet departments. This finding, however, is consistent with arguments that independent agencies are independent in name only. They are independent only in the sense they are not part of larger cabinet departments. The president maintains ample formal control over them, including appointment and at-will removal power.

Sub-cabinet agencies, part of larger cabinet departments, receive even less association with the president (average of 29% of articles mention the president). Why would sub-cabinet agencies receive fewer ties to the president than their parent cabinet departments? One reason is exposure: national media rarely cover many sub-cabinet agencies. The median number of articles per year is 2, compared to 216 for cabinet departments. The coverage also varies across agencies, with a minimum annual articles of zero (Bureau of Industry and Security) and a maximum of 616 (Food and Drug Administration).

Another answer hinges on policy domain, with more technocratic sub-cabinet agencies
(such as the FDA) generating coverage focused more on policy than political oversight. Indeed, focusing on the ten agencies with the lowest percentage of articles mentioning the president supports this explanation. This top ten list includes the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (share of articles mentioning president, 13%), the Centers for Disease Control (15%), and the FDA (16%).

That agencies such as the FDA receive less politicized coverage is notable. The White House maintains significant authority over the agencies, including the power to overrule FDA drug approval decisions. Despite these controls, the media infrequently associate these agencies with the president and, as Carpenter (December 13, 2011) noted in a *New York Times* op-ed, presidents infrequently interfere with them. Only once in FDA history has a presidential administration overruled an FDA decision. So the infrequent appearance of the president in sub-cabinet agency news may reflect a hesitancy to politicize technocratic agency decision-making.

Even within these broad categories, agencies and departments vary in the amount of coverage that mentions the president. In Figure 3 I show that variation by plotting each cabinet department and regulatory commission along with the share of articles that mentions the president. Within cabinet agencies (panel a), more than 60% of articles about the Department of Homeland Security mention the president. In contrast, less than 20% of articles about the Transportation Department mention the president.

The regulatory commissions in panel b show similar variation. The agency with the highest share is the relatively obscure Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission (OSHRC). More than 60% of its articles mention the president. Yet, the commission’s obscurity plays a role in that high number—the average number of articles annually about the OSHRC is 0.24, or less than one per-year. The Federal Reserve (Fed), however, is perhaps the least obscure regulatory agency. Its amount of news coverage reflects that importance.

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8In the appendix, I include figures showing the total number of agency articles that mention the president.
Figure 2: Attribution by agency design. Share of articles that mention the president’s name, by year and agency type. Vertical bars mark presidential administrations.

The Fed receives an average of over 249 articles per-year. Just under 30% of those Fed articles mention the president. By contrast, only 10% of articles about the Securities and Exchange Commission mention the president.

4.2. Centralization and Agency News

The descriptive analysis above provides a clear picture: agency design matters. But agency design does not explain variation of coverage over time. In this section, I explore whether
regulatory activity and presidential intervention in rulemaking have any relationship to how media cover the presidency and the bureaucracy. Specifically, does greater regulatory intervention influence the degree to which media attribute responsibility to the president?

### 4.2.1 Statistical Model

I now present a statistical model of agency-specific rulemaking activity and news coverage. The dependent variable is a count: the number of articles that mention the president’s name, by agency and year. The multilevel structure of the agency news data adds additional complexity: agencies are nested in years, and years are nested in presidential administrations. Because of this data structure, I estimate a multilevel Poisson regression with a data-level variance component to model overdispersion (Gelman and Hill 2006). I also estimated models using the share of all agency articles that mention the president. The substantive results are unchanged.
In order to control for unobserved heterogeneity at the different levels of data, I use both fixed and random group-level intercepts. I estimate fixed effects for each presidential administration. I use fixed effects because the assumption of zero correlation between the administration effects and the covariate of presidential intervention agency rulemaking seems highly implausible, since certain presidents, for idiosyncratic reasons, may be more likely to intervene.\footnote{Nevertheless, the Hausman test cannot reject the null that random and fixed effects estimates differ significantly.}

Also, the low number of groups (4) decreases the precision of the group-level variance estimate, shifting the partially-pooled estimates toward a complete pooling estimate \cite{gelman2006}. I use modeled, random effects for the agency and year-level intercepts. Since some covariates are measured at the year level, I cannot estimate year fixed effects. Random effect estimates allow for year-level data.\footnote{The partial pooling of the year-level unit toward the group-level mean eliminates the perfect colinearity in the data. See Gelman and Hill (2007).} I use random intercepts for agencies due to the sluggish (low within-agency variance) covariates, which results in imprecise fixed effects estimates due to high collinearity with the agency intercepts. Formally, let $i$ index the agency/years in the sample, and define the following model for $Y_i$, year $t$, and agency $j$:

\begin{align}
y_i & \sim \text{Poisson}\left(\exp(\alpha_0 + \alpha_{year}^{t[i]} + \alpha_{agency}^{i} + X_i \beta + \epsilon_i)\right) \\
\epsilon_i & \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\epsilon}) \\
\alpha_{year} & \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\alpha_{year}}) \\
\alpha_{agency} & \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\alpha_{agency}})
\end{align}

where the hyperparameter $\sigma^2_{\epsilon}$ measures the overdispersion in the data, while $\alpha_{agency}$ and $\alpha_{year}$ are agency and year-level random intercepts \cite{gelman2006}.

The matrix $X_i$ contains the variable of interest—total presidential interventions in agency rulemaking. The matrix also has controls that could influence the frequency that agency...
news features the president. First, I control for the president’s year in office, suggesting that journalists more actively cover the president and agencies during the early years in the term, when agencies are beginning to implement the president’s regulatory agenda. Second, I include an annual average of Gallup’s presidential approval rating, as journalists may be more likely to write about popular (or unpopular) presidents.

Not all sub-cabinet agencies are included in the final dataset. Since I am estimating a model to explain within-agency variation, I remove twelve agencies with zero variation in the dependent variable. In other words, I remove agencies that the Times, in twenty years of coverage, never published a single article about the agency that mentioned the president. The final dataset features 20 annual observations for 69 agencies (N = 1380).

Table 4 shows results of the Poisson regression. The dependent variable in Model 1 is the number of articles that mention the president’s name. For Model 2, I use an alternative measure of media associating agency action with the president: the total number of mentions of the president’s name, per agency/year. To examine the validity of the centralization hypothesis, I focus on Total Rules Changed, which counts the number of rules that changed during OIRA review.

The data support the centralization hypothesis. Table 4 shows estimated coefficients and standard errors for the two Poisson regressions. The estimated coefficient for Total Rules Changed is positive and statistically significant in both models, suggesting more rulemaking intervention increases the attribution of presidential responsibility in the news.

Figure 4 offers a more substantive interpretation of the results. For Model 1, every additional rule changed results in a 3.7% increase in articles mentioning the president. The percentage increase is greater in Model 2, with an estimated 5.1% increase in mentions of

\[12\] For an alternative specification, I also estimated a linear regression with the dependent variable transformed using a Box-Cox transformation (\(\lambda = .028\)). Yet another specification was a random effects zero-inflated negative binomial. Both results are substantively similar to the Poisson results presented in main body of paper.

\[13\] I omit 2007 since the Times corpus only has articles published through June 2007.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<td>0.049***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
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<td>-0.089***</td>
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<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.017***</td>
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<td>(0.004)</td>
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<td>1380</td>
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<tr>
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<td>N Years</td>
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<td>20</td>
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Standard errors in parentheses

*** indicates significance at $p < 0.01$

** indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

* indicates significance at $p < 0.10$

Table 4: Poisson regression results. Model 1 shows coefficient estimates for number of articles that mention the president’s name. In model 2, the dependent variable is the total mentions of president’s name. Standard Errors in parentheses.

Looking at the other variables, we see that the frequency that presidents appear in agency news decreases the longer they are in office. The rate at which the news mentions the president’s name decreases by 5.0% each additional year the president is in office. In Model 2, each year decreases the total mentions of the president’s name by 8.0%. Both models estimate small and negative effects for presidential approval.

5 Policy Saliency and Presidential Leadership

Regulatory commissions are designed to be independent from presidential control, leading to a puzzle: why do the media associate the president with regulatory commissions? In this
Figure 4: Percentage change in dependent variable for a one unit increase in the independent variable.

In this section, I present preliminary evidence suggesting that issue salience is correlated with the frequency that news about regulatory commissions mentions the president.

When issue salience increases, the president cannot afford the public costs of inaction. Consider, for example, economic policy. In times of economic crisis, the American public increasingly cares about economic concerns. The president, as the national leader, must take visible charge of the crisis in order to meet public expectations of the office.

Yet, the president’s formal authority over the economy is limited. Economic regulators tend to be regulatory commissions: the Security and Exchange Commission, the Federal
Reserve, the Federal Trade Commission, the Commodity and Futures Trading Commission. The president could simply go public and claim inability to address these economic issues due to a deadlocked Congress and the independence of the regulators. But that is not what modern presidents do.

To see if public issue salience increases the attribution of presidential control—even for regulatory commissions—I focus on economic policy (since most commissions regulate economic policy). The top two panels in Figure 5 show the average number of articles mentioning the president’s name, along with the national average annual unemployment rate. \(^{14}\)

For regulatory commissions (panel a), the two series trend closely together, with a correlation of .59. In other words, when the saliency of economic issues increases, as measured by a higher unemployment rate, the news more frequently mentions the president along with the regulators of the economy—despite the formal presidential independence of these regulators.

The relationship is even stronger for the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), an economic agency within the presidentially-controlled Executive Office of the President (EOP). The correlation, in panel b, is 0.83, meaning that attribution of control for this economic agency closely follows the macroeconomic conditions of the nation.

The correlation for both series holds when using an alternative measure of attribution, though the relationship is slightly weaker. In Panels c and d, I plot the average total count of the president’s name by agency and year. The correlation for regulatory commissions in 0.41, versus 0.68 for the CEA.

In summary, attribution of presidential control increases when public expectations for presidential leadership are highest. More importantly, these expectations apply even to agencies that are outside the president’s formal control. The preliminary data show that attribution increases for regulatory commissions at least as much for the presidentially-

\(^{14}\)As an alternative, I also used the percent of the public listing macroeconomic concerns as the most important problem, with similar results.
Figure 5: Issue Salience and Attribution. Top two panels shows the average number of articles that mention the president and the agency, by year. Bottom two panels show average total count of president’s name. Dashed line is percent of public listing macroeconomic concerns as the most important problem.

controlled CEA.
6 Discussion and Conclusion

Political accountability requires that citizens evaluate the performance of elected leaders in office. In order to do so, citizens must be able to attribute responsibility to the appropriate elected official. Attribution of responsibility is particularly difficult when bureaucrats make policy, since agency policymaking is a relatively obscure process, lacking the visibility and attention of acts like Congressional roll call votes to help citizens assign responsibility to a particular elected official.

Consider the implication if there were no significant relationship between political control and attribution of control. A lack of presidential association in the media implies that agency policymaking occurs in a political vacuum. The president, despite influencing policy directly, could deflect responsibility to bureaucrats or Congress. Alexander Hamilton’s fear would be realized—it would be prohibitively difficult to attribute responsibility to an individual actor and hold that actor to account. Thus, the finding linking intervention to increased attribution of control is normatively reassuring.

Preliminary data also support the presidential leadership hypothesis. When demands for presidential leadership increase—as during economic crises—presidential attribution in the media increases. Consider again the implications if this attribution did not occur. The president’s efforts to control the bureaucracy—or seem in control of the bureaucracy—would not be communicated to the public, which undercuts presidential incentives to offer much-needed presidential leadership during the crisis. Second, the policies that emerge in response to the crisis would again seem to occur in a political vacuum, the result of back-room dealings of unelected bureaucrats. If the policies fail, the lack of attribution may be good for the president, since the president could blame the bureaucracy. But political accountability would fail. If the policy succeeds, the president may have to claim credit ex-post for the policy success, which may be difficult when other actors (Congress) also compete for credit.

This project leaves several questions open for future investigation. First, current mea-
sures of attribution rely simply on counts of the president’s name. Future work should create a more precise way to measure attribution of presidential responsibility. Ideally, the finer measure should distinguish different—or similar—language used across different agency types and presidential administrations. For example, do journalists use different language when discussing the president in regulatory commission coverage than in cabinet department coverage? Second, testing of the presidential leadership hypothesis must move beyond descriptive statistics. Despite the need for future work, the results demonstrate clear relationships between agency design, centralization, and the attribution of presidential control of the bureaucracy.
Appendices

A Results: Linear Regression (Box-Cox Transformation)

In the main sections of the paper, I estimated two Poisson regression models. In Model 1, the dependent variable was the number of articles per year that mentioned the president’s name. Model 2 used the total mentions of the president’s name, per agency/year. The results supported the Centralization Hypothesis.

In this appendix section, I estimate a linear regression model. Since the data are discrete and truncated below zero, the linear regression assumption of normality is invalid. The data, moreover, exhibit a high count of zeros. For the count data to approximate the linear regression model’s assumptions, I transform the count data using a Box-Cox transformation, with $\lambda = 0.028$. The transformation results in a distribution nearly identical to a simple logarithmic transformation ($log(y_i)$).

I present the results in Table 5. As before, the dependent variable in Model 1 is the total count of articles that mention the president’s name, and Model 2 is the total count of mentions of the president’s name. The results are substantively similar to the main results in the paper.
Table 5: Panel a: Linear regression results with Box-Cox transformation. Model 1 shows coefficient estimates for mentions of the president’s name in news coverage. In model 2, the dependent variable is total number of mentions of president’s name. Standard Errors in parentheses.

<table>
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Standard errors in parentheses
*** indicates significance at p < 0.01
** indicates significance at p < 0.05
* indicates significance at p < 0.10

Panel b:

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B Agency News: Cabinet and Commissions

Figure 6: Coverage within the Cabinet and the Regulatory Commissions. Average total count of articles that mention the president’s name, by agency.
References


