

Partisan Conflict and Government Reform

The 16-day government shutdown and near breach of the federal debt ceiling in Autumn 2013, which could have resulted in the United States defaulting on its debt, focused the nation on partisan conflict. While sparring over the federal budget or

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“Obamacare” may be the most visible conflicts between the parties, these interactions beg the question: Does partisan conflict, like that between the president and Congress, influence other aspects of governing? For example, might partisan conflict influence the day-to-day management of federal programs? In a forthcoming paper in *Public Administration Review*, Stéphane Lavertu, Assistant Professor at the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University, David E. Lewis, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Political Science and

CSDI Co-Director at Vanderbilt University, and Donald Moynihan, Professor at the Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, find evidence that the likely answer is: Yes. More specifically, partisan conflict may significantly affect efforts by political officials to implement administrative reforms, both because of choices by these officials, and the responses of managers who must implement the reforms.

The authors draw their conclusions from analyses of the George W. Bush Administration’s Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART), a tool for grading the effectiveness of federal programs. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) used the PART to grade federal programs from effective to ineffective, drawing on four dimensions: “program purpose and design,” “strategic planning,” “program management,” and “program results/accountability.” Using data from the 2007-08 *Survey on the Future of Government Service* (SFGS) and a 2007 survey by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the authors explore the perceived administrative burden that was created by PART according to career managers across all federal agencies; and they then attempt to explain observed differences in perceptions

of burden. Given that the PART process placed the burden of proof for documenting performance on the agencies, any claim that managers made about the benefits of a program had to be supported by evidence. Analysis of the responses from both the SFGS and GAO surveys tell the same story: federal managers in liberal agencies were much more likely to perceive PART as being burdensome.

In asserting this conclusion, the authors classified agencies as liberal, conservative, or moderate based on the percentage of respondents to the SFGS that self-identified as Democrats (where moderate agencies are those for which the percentage of Democrats is within one standard deviation of the mean of 56 percent).¹ Given these classifications, the authors found that managers in liberal agencies were more likely to agree to a “moderate,” “great,” or “very great” extent with the statement that “Participating in PART has imposed a significant burden on management resources.” Similarly, liberal managers were more likely to answer a “significant amount” or a “tremendous amount” to the question: “How much time and effort did your agency put into the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) process?” The difference in responses is particularly stark for

¹The authors conducted the analyses with three measures of agency ideology, all of which yielded nearly identical results.

this question, with 85% of managers in liberal agencies perceiving “significant” or “tremendous” effort was expended to comply with PART, compared to only 54% of managers in conservative agencies.² These findings are illustrated in Figure 1, where “Burden” refers to the first question above and “Time and Effort” refers to the second.

Of course differences in perception could be due to factors that varied across agencies or respondents other than partisanship; and the authors considered the effects of three other possible determinants. First, organizational characteristics (i.e., the number of employees, the average program budget within the agency,

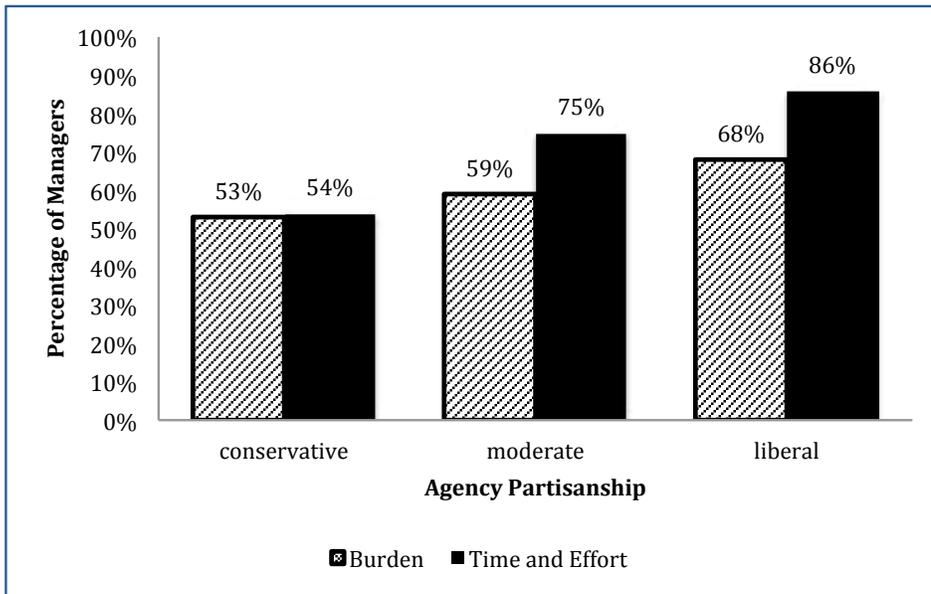
etc.) were accounted for, to capture an agency’s capacity to perform PART-related tasks. Managers in agencies with less capacity to perform PART-related tasks might have perceived a greater burden, all else equal. Next, the objective burden of the PART process for each agency was measured using the number of programs that were subjected to PART review and the number of improvement plans that were required by PART. If an agency had more programs subject to review, then managers at that agency might (quite reasonably) have perceived a greater burden, regardless of partisanship. Finally, respondent perceptions and characteristics, other than partisanship, were taken into account. The SFGS asked managers:

...managers who identified themselves as Democrats reported consistently higher levels of burden than self-identified Republicans, which provides evidence that partisanship had a significant effect on perception, even after accounting for the objective burden.

“To what extent did PART pick up real differences in program performance among programs in your agency?” Managers who believed that the PART program captured *real* differences, meaning that the tool was useful, should have had a different perception of PART than those who did not. Additionally, the authors considered respondents’ positions in the management hierarchy as measured by employment classification (Executive Service, General Schedule, etc.). Managers of lower rank may have performed more of the PART-related tasks, and thus have perceived a greater burden.

The authors’ statistical analyses revealed that the difference in perceptions of “Time and Effort” in Figure 1 is explained largely by

Figure 1: Differences in Perception of PART by Agency partisanship



²The “Burden” question was administered by the GAO survey. The “Time and Effort” question was administered by the SFGS.

objective measures of the PART burden— namely the number of improvement plans that an agency was required to execute. Liberal agencies had, on average, 18 more improvement plans per agency than conservative agencies, suggesting that

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PART (objectively) imposed a greater administrative burden on liberal agencies. Furthermore, managers who identified themselves as Democrats reported consistently higher levels of burden than self-identified Republicans, which provides evidence that partisanship had a significant effect on perception, even after accounting for the objective burden.

In light of these findings, the authors conclude that two political dynamics likely influenced the implementation of PART: the objective burden from above and partisan biases of managers. The burden from above was due, in part, to how OMB defined programs for PART purposes. The authors cite other research that suggests that OMB

officials and agency leadership defined liberal programs more narrowly than conservative programs, so as to permit greater scrutiny of liberal agencies. For example, programs at the Department of Education, a liberal agency, were defined so narrowly that it had more programs than the conservative Department of Defense, despite having less than one tenth of the budget.³ Defining programs in this way appears to have been a deliberate strategy of political appointees in the Bush administration, who were skeptical of the quality of Department of Education programs.⁴ On the other hand, OMB took steps to make PART explicitly non-partisan, such as removing questions that could be perceived as ideologically motivated. So, the degree of politicization from above is not clear. As for partisan biases among managers, liberal managers may have perceived, correctly or incorrectly, that the conservative OMB appointees of the Bush administration were biased, and hence they invested more effort in PART to protect their programs' reputations. Such bias could also cause managers to perceive neutral reforms aimed at improving government as cover for attacks on disfavored programs, causing them not to support the reform initiative.

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biased by implementers. The authors suggest that creating bipartisan support, perhaps by relying on a non-partisan entity to develop the program, may mitigate the negative effects of partisanship on reform efforts. However, they worry that the lack of political support may result in managers believing that the reform is inconsequential. They conclude that “[i]f the ideal recipe for administrative reform involves a mix of credibility based on non-partisan expertise and political support great enough to enable change, it may be a difficult combination to realize in practice.”

—Mark Richardson

Mark Richardson is a CSDI graduate affiliate and a doctoral student in the Vanderbilt Political Science Department.

The research summarized in this policy brief can be found in *Public Administration Review* 73(6):845-57, “Government Reform, Political Ideology, and Administrative Burden: The Case of Performance Management in the Bush Administration.” Stéphane Lavertu, David E. Lewis, and Donald Moynihan.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/puar.12132/pdf>

For further information about this policy brief, please contact Alan Wiseman, Associate Professor of Political Science and Law (by courtesy), CSDI Co-Director. Email: alan.wiseman@vanderbilt.edu.

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³Joyce, Phillip G. 2011. “The Obama Administration and PBB: Building on the Legacy of Federal Performance-Informed Budgeting.” *Public Administration Review* 71(3): 356-67.

⁴Gilmour, John B. 2006. *Implementing OMB's Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART): Meeting the Challenges of Integrating Budget and Performance*. Washington D.C.: IBM Center for the Business of Government, p.16.