

Does the Messenger Matter?

Testing the Effect of “Presidentializing” Bureaucratic Policy on Public Support

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Abstract

A large portion of administrative actions are accomplished through departmental, rather than presidential, directives. This paper examines the consequences for public support when the president appropriates, or “presidentializes” a bureaucratic action by claiming it as his own. Using a series of survey experiments, I test the relationship between the identity of the policy actor and public approval of policy. Contrary to expectations, the results suggest largely no effect of the president on public support. Instead, respondent partisanship dominates assessments of policy.

Question

What is the effect on public opinion of the president claiming (or not claiming) a bureaucratic policy as his own?



vs.

AMERICA

Trump Administration Quietly Decides — Again — To Allow Elephant Trophy Imports

March 6, 2018 · 7:17 PM ET

COLIN DWYER



Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP/Getty Images

How might this choice affect public opinion?

- The public lacks political knowledge or stable attitudes about policy (Zaller, 1992; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964)
- Party – and particularly presidents – are important heuristics for judging policy (Cohen 2003, Lenz 2012).
- In Congress, presidents are “dividers not uniters” (Lee 2008).
- Partisanship dominates assessments of executive action (Christenson & Kriner 2016).

“Presidentializing” a bureaucratic policy should polarize support for the policy.

- Increasing support among copartisans.
- Decreasing support among members of opposite party

Experiment Design

Three experiments shown to 1,000 respondents on 2017 CCES.

Respondents were shown vignettes from three different policy areas.

- DACA (Obama)
- Revoking transgender bathroom guidelines (Trump)
- Increasing CAFE standards (Bush, Obama)

Three conditions: Federal government, agency, president.

Results

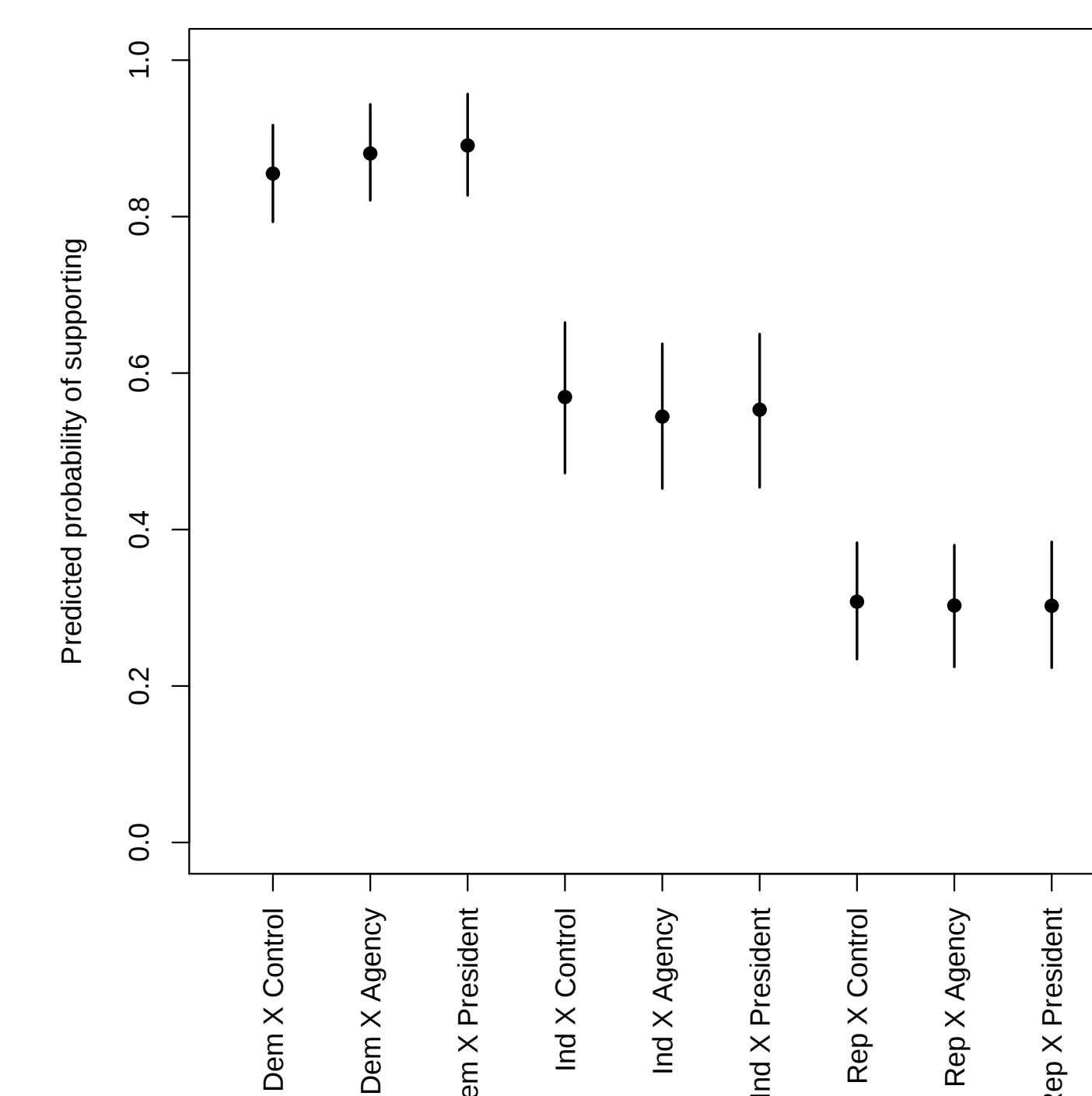


Figure 1: Support for DACA by party

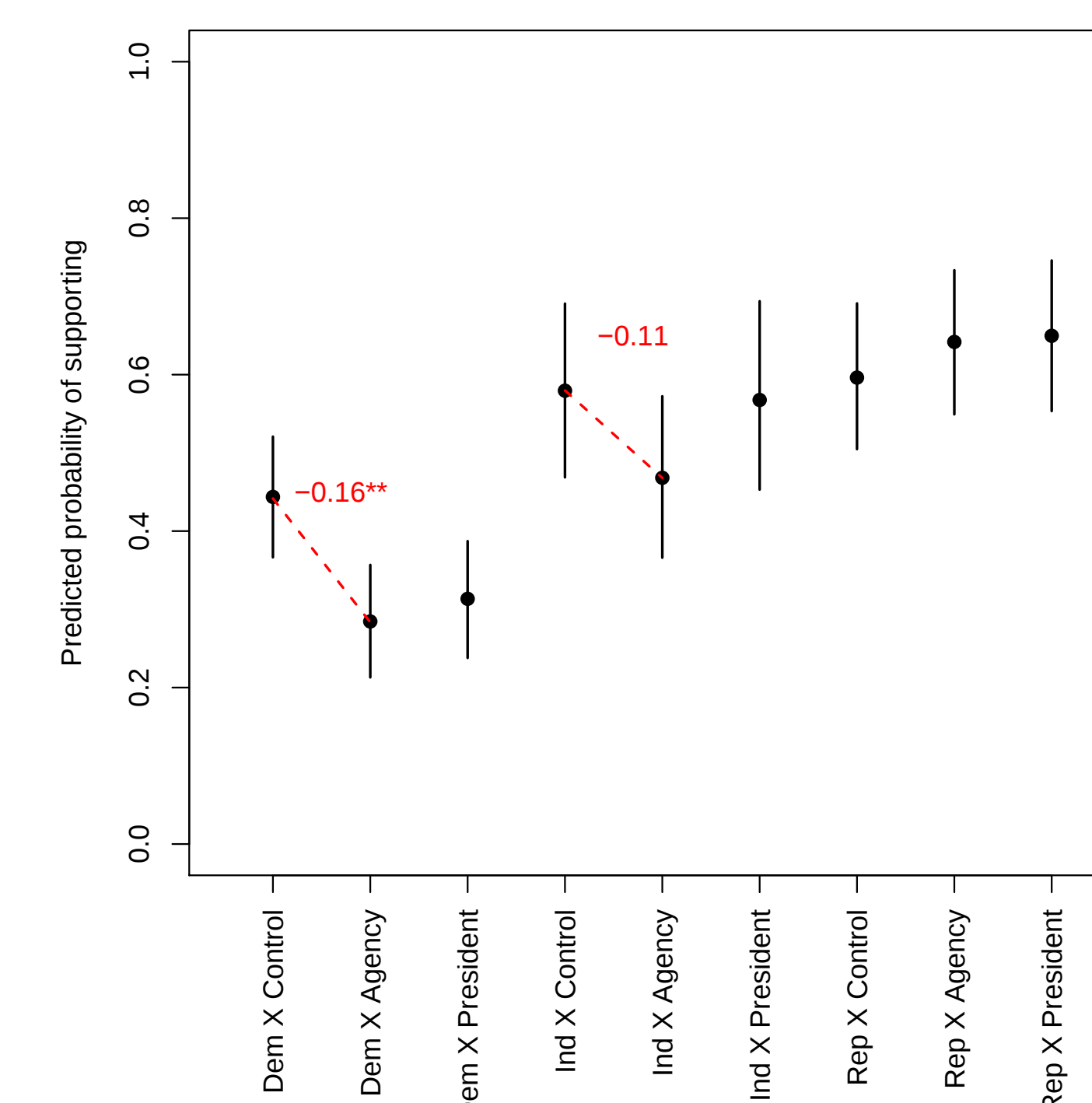


Figure 2: Support for revoking trans guidance by party

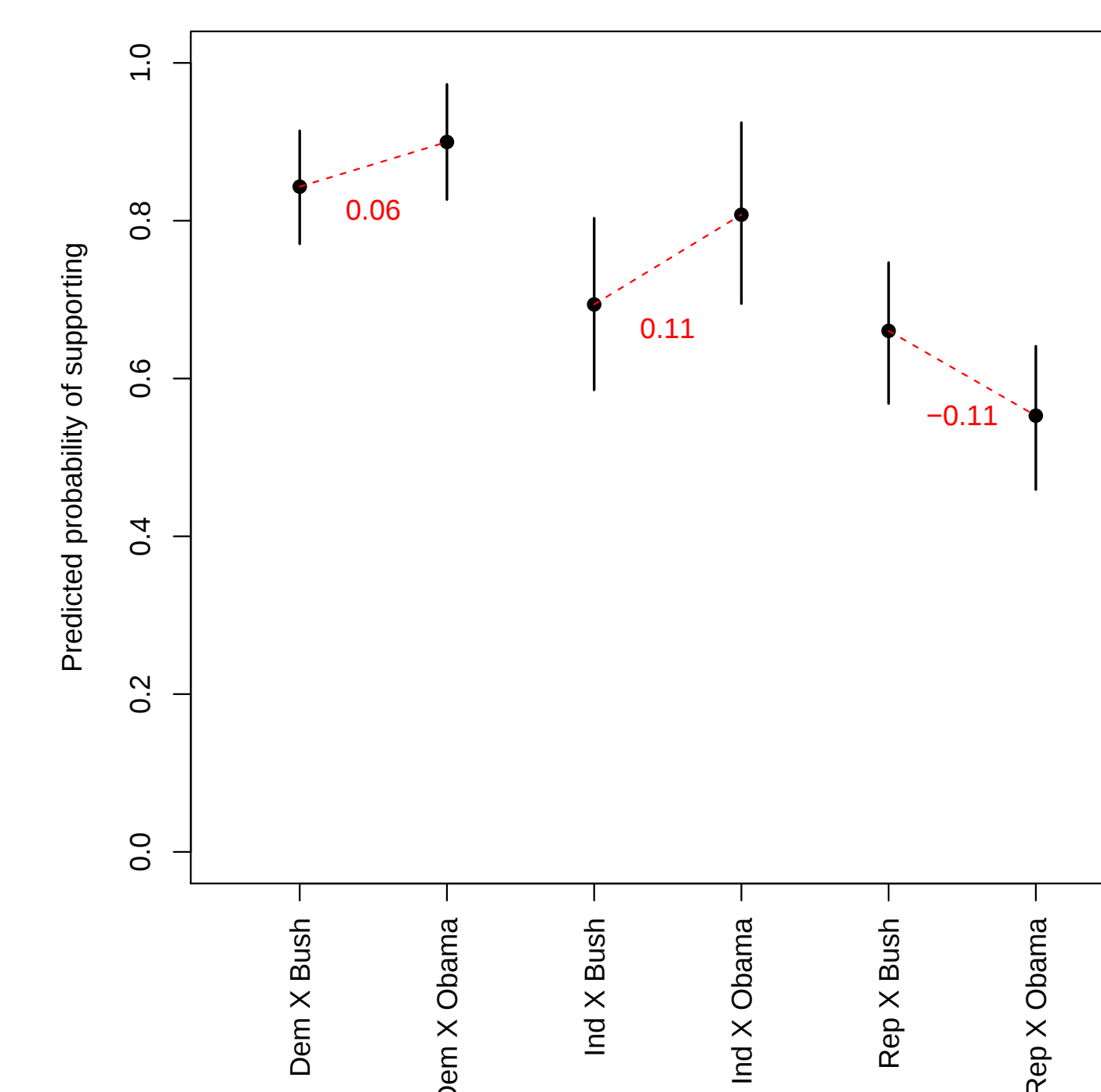


Figure 3: Support for CAFE standards by party

Conclusions

These are surprising findings in a world where presidents often polarize support. The results affirm the importance of prior policy positions in shaping public support for policy and the limited ability of the president to manipulate credit and blame for the actions of his administration.

- Partisans differ on policy.
- Relatively little ability for presidential association to shift support.
- The issue matters.
 - More salient issues leave less room for presidential effects. Possibly greater ability to shift opinion when issue is economic or otherwise more divisible.
- This is a hard test of the theory.
 - Usually argued as a good thing. Hard to interpret if hypothesis not supported.
 - Realistic test. Other experiments showing public opinion cost for unilateral action compare much bigger changes, i.e. executive order vs. legislation. In reality, president has limited room to move.
- Shifting opinion is even harder in real world, when president must compete with other messages.

Going Forward

- This study should be extended to additional issues that vary in salience and complexity, to determine if some areas allow for greater presidential manipulation.
- Research should examine important downstream effects of “presidentializing” like driving media coverage, which in turn could affect public opinion.
- If presidents can do little to shift public opinion, research should examine why else they vary their credit claiming of bureaucratic action.