

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Career motives of presidential appointees and agency communication across American states

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Abstract

Do the career motives of presidential appointees affect program administration? To answer this question, I examine the phased development of policy communication of the U.S. Farm Service Agency (FSA) across states from 2002 to 2018 based on an original collection of historical official websites. This is a rare policy context for examining why peer appointees administer the same programs differently. Linking the state-by-state development of FSA newsletters to the career trajectories of state executive directors (SEDs), the presidential appointees who lead state FSAs, I show that SEDs interested in elective office post-appointment are associated with faster institutionalization of newsletters. Examining these newsletters' content, I then show that SEDs interested in elective office or a career in advocacy include more participation-encouraging language in newsletters. These results suggest that appointees' career goals outside the bureaucracy can potentially expedite innovation in program implementation and enhance the delivery of government benefits to the public, with implications for selecting appointees to enhance bureaucratic performance.

KEYWORDS

agency communication, career motives, political ambition, presidential appointees

In May 2003, the Indiana Farm Service Agency (FSA) mailed the first issue of its new color-format state newsletter to agricultural producers in the state, as State Executive Director (SED) John D. Nidlinger announced.¹ Shortly before that, in 2002, that state pioneered the issuing of regular statewide FSA newsletters. Around the same time, the Arkansas FSA also started issuing its own monthly newsletters, called "Scoop." The practice of sending state FSA newsletters spread across states gradually but slowly; in

¹https://web.archive.org/web/20040925180719/http://www.fsa.usda.gov/IN/pdfs/USDA_Newsletter_0803.pdf.

fact, it would take the next 15 years or so for it to spread to all 50 states. Not until as recently as 2017 did the last state FSA start issuing regular newsletters. Vermont, which had long relied exclusively on county FSA newsletters and relaying the occasional national FSA policy alert, finally joined the other 49 states in preparing state newsletters, completing the popularization across states of what is now universal practice.

Active and reliable government communication from government agencies, including the Department of Agriculture (the Cabinet department that contains the FSA), contributes to adequate and equitable delivery of programs and benefits by reducing the public's knowledge gaps and helping people meet deadlines and fulfill other requirements (e.g., Johnson, 2017; Wallander et al., 2017). The development and content of state FSA newsletters, the most important medium of FSA program communication to agricultural producers, offer a rare and suitable setting to examine the influence of officials' private goals on their behavior in office and the quality of government service, which has long been a focus of research on the bureaucracy (e.g., Downs, 1966; Golden, 2000; Teodoro, 2009, 2011) and specifically on presidential appointees (e.g., Gallo & Lewis, 2012; Lewis, 2009). This setting lets us explore why peer presidential appointees approach the same job differently.

I argue that the career objectives of SEDs, the presidential appointees who lead state FSAs, motivate them to manage program communication differently. SEDs' different choices then contribute to the uneven arc of innovation in state FSA newsletters around the country and create differences in the content of these state newsletters. To test this argument, I collect and analyze original data that combine SEDs' career paths and the development and content of state FSA newsletters from 2002 to 2018. By examining the careers of all 190 SEDs in charge of the 50 state FSAs during this period, I infer their likely career objectives while in office; this look into SEDs' pre- and post-appointment career trajectories yields six types: elective aspirants, revolving-door lobbyists, ambitious bureaucrats, experienced politicians, policy experts, and businesspersons.

As explained in detail below, insights from disparate bodies of research on political careers lead me to expect elective aspirants and revolving-door lobbyists to be more proactive and innovative in their leadership of program communication than other SEDs, driven by a pursuit of future voters, employers, or clients (Kriner & Reeves, 2015; Shepherd & You, 2020; Teodoro, 2011). Specifically, compared to other SEDs, I expect that the need to build relationships with FSA constituents motivates elective aspirants and revolving-door lobbyists to institutionalize program communication more rapidly and include more participation-encouraging messaging that urges concrete actions to participate or comply with requirements.

I link SEDs' career objectives to the development of state FSA news during this period, made possible by recovering historical websites of state FSAs. Newsletter development went through four discernible phases at varying speeds across states but ended with the publishing of standardized state FSA newsletters nationwide. After chronicling this history, I conduct survival analysis of state FSAs' likelihood to adopt standardized newsletters, which offers partial support for my expectations. Comparing all SEDs with the "businessperson" category (chosen to be the reference category because I have the weakest prior expectation about it), I show that elective aspirants are associated with at least a fourfold increase in that likelihood, even when accounting for other plausible accelerators of this practice including progress in neighboring states and state-specific agricultural conditions. Revolving-door lobbyists are not significantly associated with a quicker pace of newsletter standardization, however, while policy experts are associated with a much slower pace.

I then examine whether SEDs' career goals matter for the content of newsletters in addition to whether to issue and standardize them. For this analysis, I focus on language within the newsletters that expressly urges producers to take action to enroll in FSA-administered programs and comply with their requirements rather than merely explaining policy. I show that revolving-door lobbyists and, to a lesser extent, elective aspirants include significantly more participation-encouraging language in their newsletters, consistent with theoretical expectations. Overall, the two sets of analysis provide novel descriptive evidence that presidential appointees differ in their private career motives—an under-explored driver of their official actions—and that these differences may influence their delivery of programs to the public, with implications for the selection of presidential appointees for effective governance.

STATE EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS AND PROGRAM COMMUNICATION AT STATE FSAs

The USDA delegates the administration of FSA programs substantially to state and local FSA officials, which include SEDs and members of state, county, and area committees. As political appointees in the Excepted Service chosen by the Secretary of Agriculture, SEDs are the top-ranked officials at state FSAs and responsible for their day-to-day operations (Canada, 2021). SEDs are not always partisan soldiers or loyalists of the president (though many are, as I discuss below), but a look at their tenures in office reveals the strongly political nature of SED appointments. SEDs are typically appointed soon after the beginning of an administration and almost always leave the position when the administration ends.² SEDs' appointee status is critical to inferences about their career objectives.

Two things happened at the turn of the century that modernized the FSA. One was the streamlining of state-level agency operations required by the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994, which, among other things, closed many county and area field offices and consolidated their functions into state offices (U.S. Farm Service Agency, 1999). The other was the dawn of the Internet as a common utility for public administration. By the early 2000s, state FSAs had developed websites. Though varying wildly in style and almost always containing minimal content beyond contact information for state and local offices, these early websites presented a repository of policy information ready for use. To motivated SEDs, these developments presented opportunities for innovation in program administration and communication at state FSAs by lowering the cost.

After the Indiana and Arkansas FSAs made themselves pioneers of sending state newsletters in the early 2000s, just a few other states, including Wisconsin and New York joined their ranks over the first half of the decade. From 2005 to 2007, however, a major wave took place in which the number of state FSAs that issued regular state newsletters jumped from 8 to 23. Meanwhile, nine other state FSAs including Connecticut started posting regular newsletters by county or area offices, consistent with the consolidation of county functions into the state office, but still issued no statewide newsletter. Another large wave of state newsletter initiation spread across states from 2011 to 2014, partly brought about by the government-wide GovDelivery initiative launched in 2012 that turned many government communications into emails (Boerngen, 2019).³ By 2014, every state except Connecticut, Delaware, and Vermont had started issuing regular state newsletters. By 2017, all 50 states had done so.

Official notices like FSA newsletters are vehicles of government communication and serve an important informational function for the public to receive government services, especially agricultural services tailored to regional and state conditions. A professional service firm in agriculture urges producers to heed information from FSA's "electronic newsletters and other direct correspondence" (Farm Progress Network, 2014). A field experiment conducted by Wallander et al. (2017) shows that USDA outreach in the form of reminder letters increased the participation rate for the Conservation Reserve Program, otherwise depressed by producers' negligence. Participation gaps owing to inadequate government outreach have implications for the equitable delivery of benefits to historically disadvantaged producers (Gonzalez & Jeanetta, 2013). Producers have stressed that they need more caring and hands-on program guidance than "here is a link to a resource" (quoted in Boerngen, 2019, 28). Moreover, in Appendix SB, I analyze the payments FSA makes to producers, downloaded from the FSA website,⁴ as a

²Additionally, SEDs serving nonconsecutive terms do so upon appointment by presidents of the same party. There are a few notable exceptions (e.g., Willie Cooper served as SED of the Louisiana FSA for a historic period from 1972 to 2014).

³From 2011 to 2015, the FSA issued several directives to state and local offices to phase in electronic newsletters sent via GovDelivery. Notice INFO-48 (August 2011) announced this plan would launch soon. Notice INFO-51 (October 2011) instructed SEDs to "take responsibility for Statewide GovDelivery management at the State Office" by making specific plans. Over the following 3 years, FSA notices INFO-55 (February 2013), INFO-60 (August 2013), INFO-66 (September 2014), and INFO-67 (April 2015) gave detailed instructions and shared newsletter templates. By 2016, all states that issued state newsletters had adopted the national template (e.g., the trailblazing Arkansas "Scoop" transitioned into the standardized "Arkansas FSA newsletter"). These FSA directives are retrieved from <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/laws-and-regulations/notices/index>.

⁴<https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-room/foia/electronic-reading-room/frequently-requested-information/payment-files-information/index>.

function of standardized state newsletters issued. The results show that, in a given year, each additional month with standardized newsletters is associated with payments made to 240–400 more producers per year (for reference, the median yearly number of recipients in a state is about 1000).⁵

SEDs themselves talk of the importance of state office outreach in general and of the newsletter medium as the primary way to get the word out (Johnson, 2017). In his office's inaugural 2006 newsletter, South Carolina SED Kenneth Rentiers calls this new communication “our attempt to take advantage of the newest technology to most efficiently use the tax dollars entrusted us in keeping the public informed” about “program requirements [...] to successfully participate.”⁶ Iowa SED Matt Russell mentioned “a lot of outreach” on the job in a podcast (Leonard, 2022), and Alabama SED Daniel Robinson (2018) stressed its importance particularly to disadvantaged and less informed producers. Talking about FSA work during the COVID-19 pandemic, Iowa SED Amanda De Jong discussed her office's reliance on webinars and “mailings” when office visits were on pause (Farm4Profit, 2021).

The spreading of state FSA newsletters across states provides a good testing ground for the influence of career objectives on innovation in policy implementation by presidential appointees, who are on the same rung of the bureaucratic hierarchy and doing the same job in different jurisdictions. SEDs have significant discretion over the communication of FSA programs to producers statewide. The state-by-state adoption of newsletters and the standardization of style and format around the country represent deliberate decisions by SEDs to improve program communication. The first wave of rapid standardization around 2006 was not initiated by any order from above. Though the second wave resulted from the aforementioned national FSA directives between 2011 and 2015 to phase in nationally uniform newsletters, states' varying paces of adoption dragged the process out and evidently necessitated strongly repetitive national directives. The content of newsletters also varies across states, which, as I show later, cannot be explained by state agricultural conditions. Both the pace at which different states progressed in the use of newsletters and the differences in their content across states can potentially be explained by the SEDs' career goals.

SED discretion in program communication

Pressure to cut costs by closing offices and conducting business electronically may have come from Congress and the national FSA and been facilitated by the growth of the Internet, but state FSAs decided on the exact manner to do so. The earliest issues nationwide of state FSA newsletters themselves announce their common origin: the decision by state FSAs—through SEDs' discretion—to start making them. In his early newsletter quoted above, Indiana SED John Nidlinger advertises that he is “constantly looking for ways to enhance [his office's] communication with [producers].” Though with less of a personal touch than the Indiana letter, the inaugural newsletter of the North Dakota FSA, issued in February 2006, announces its intent to replace county newsletters to cut costs,⁷ as does South Carolina's inaugural newsletter quoted above.

State FSA discretion extends to what to communicate through the chosen mediums. Recall that the acceptance of a nationally uniform newsletter template had taken hold by 2015, but standardization does not mean identical newsletter content across states.⁸ In addition to being in charge of newsletter creation overall (their names are shown centrally in every issue), SEDs sometimes make their personal input evident. For example, in the July 2022 newsletter, Rhode Island SED Eric Scherer “thought it was timely

⁵Specifically, at the state-year level, I estimate three panel models that explain the number of unique payment recipients with the number of months in each year (0–12) with standardized newsletters issued. The models contain various controls—also used and defined in the main analysis below—and feature state- and year-specific fixed effects.

⁶https://web.archive.org/web/20090110214037if_/http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/scfsanews11i1.pdf.

⁷https://web.archive.org/web/20060927063006/http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/nd_fsanews_200602.pdf.

⁸National FSA guidance emphasizes state-level discretion: the national directives on electronic newsletter distribution such as INFO-51 required state and county offices to “write and edit local news.”

to send” a specific policy announcement to local producers after Hurricane Ida, even adding that he “did a little editing.”⁹ The differences in newsletter content that remained even after stylistic irregularities disappeared provide another ripe opportunity to examine how appointees’ motivation matters. I focus on how state FSA newsletters differ in the amount of participation-encouraging language regarding FSA programs: why might one state not only reference the Price Loss Coverage program more frequently than another state, for instance, but also accompany these references with more urges for producers to sign up by the looming deadline?

To be sure, there are plausible and substantive reasons that have nothing to do with the SEDs for state FSA communication to differ: conditions of agriculture that are specific to each state. Outreach efforts may intensify when agribusinesses and practitioners become more numerous and important to a state—and diminish when the opposite happens. State FSAs may—and arguably should—amp up assistance and outreach when natural disasters like severe droughts impact agriculture in the state. Do these agricultural facts (quite literally) on the ground fully explain the differences in newsletter content across states, or do SEDs’ career motives provide additional explanatory power? If motives matter, then appointees’ motives are worth examining as determinants of their effort on the job and the quality of policy implementation.

Career considerations and SEDs’ program communication decisions

I argue in this article that SEDs’ career motives do help explain program communication decisions. Resting on the fundamental assumption that the individual motives of bureaucratic political actors affect their behavior in office (e.g., Brewer & Maranto, 2000; Downs, 1966; Golden, 2000), I expect SEDs to perform their job responsibilities in ways that serve their long-term career goals—to the extent allowed by the bureaucratic discretion given to them. Regarding program communication on the job, I expect SEDs with different career goals to manage it in markedly and systematically different fashions. But what career goals do SEDs have, and how should program communication relate to these goals?

SEDs’ career objectives

Career goals are real, yet hard to see until acted upon; that is, career goals become observable through the career choices they drive. I infer SEDs’ career goals retrospectively by observing their overall career trajectories. Expected to leave office with presidential administrations—if not during (Wood & Marchbanks, 2007)—SEDs must plan for the next step while still on the job. SEDs’ behavior in their temporary position is inevitably shaped by their future career interests. Schneider (1993) quotes one bureaucrat memorably: “presidential appointees have their own futures uppermost in mind, [which...] generates creeping spinelessness in the executive branch” (331). Brewer and Maranto (2000) similarly note, “political appointees tend to be driven by short-term political or career-advancement considerations” compared to career executives (72).

Thus, inferring SEDs’ career objectives based on the career decisions they motivate suggests the need to gather data on SEDs’ post-appointment career paths. This is because SEDs’ career motives are manifested mainly through what they do afterward, not before (SEDs’ pre-appointment employment still presents valuable information, as discussed below). For the main analysis in this article, I assume that SEDs, while on the job, prepare for whatever employment they end up obtaining or pursuing. In doing so, I dismiss the real possibility that an SED’s career goals while in office—even strongly held ones—may never become manifest and observable through a careful examination of the public record; that is, SEDs are assumed to always carry out their career goals sufficiently for their career paths to reveal these goals

⁹<https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdfiles/State-Offices/Rhode-Island/newsletters/July%202022%20Rhode%20Island%20Service%20Center%20Newsletter.pdf>.

through candidacies launched, appointments announced, jobs held, and businesses founded. Of course, reality often contradicts this assumption: post-appointment career outcomes may not reflect career objectives in office. For example, an SED aspiring for elective office may decide not to run in the end, and one gunning for promotions in the USDA may get passed over. Consequently, I perform supplemental analysis in Appendices [SC.1](#) and [SD.1](#) that draws only on SEDs' pre-appointment experience; the goal here is analyzing how SEDs' existing skill sets—or the type of records leading to their selection—relate to their policy communication decisions. I discuss the results later.

I assemble a full roster of the 190 SEDs in charge of the 50 state FSAs from 2002 to 2018, a time frame that corresponds to the development of state FSA newsletters. The time frame also mirrors the agriculture policy regimes created by three farm bills (2002, 2008, and 2014), providing a context of policy continuity and change. I then collect original data on the SEDs' career paths by consulting many sources, including personnel rosters of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, press announcements of SEDs' appointments, election coverage online and in newspapers, LinkedIn profiles, academic resumes, biographies published by other employers, and the occasional obituary. Inspecting SEDs' subsequent career choices highlights a few types:

1. **Elective aspirants** ($N = 19$) want to enter the arena of elective public office. Successfully or otherwise, several SEDs run for seats in Congress or state legislatures and elective positions in local government after leaving the FSA. Others become campaign managers, chiefs of staff, or district managers for elected officials. Example: Clint Koble (Nevada, 2009–2017) ran for Congress unsuccessfully in 2018 and 2020.
2. **Ambitious bureaucrats** ($N = 33$) hope to advance within the bureaucracy. This includes promotion within the USDA (the modal type of bureaucratic advancement), usually to serve in a leadership position in its headquarters, being appointed to manage a different federal agency, serving in an executive branch agency related to agriculture at the state level, and sometimes holding policy positions in local government. This category also includes SEDs that are reappointed to the same position by a new president. Example: Gloria Montano Greene (Arizona, 2014–2017) later became a Deputy Under Secretary of the USDA.
3. **Revolving-door lobbyists** ($N = 34$) want to find employment in agricultural interest groups like state chapters of the Farm Bureau and trade associations, manage government relations for USDA partners in industry or academia (e.g., universities that do USDA-funded agriculture research), or work as independent consultants or lobbyists in agriculture. Example: John Smythe (California, 1989–2009) went on to work as an agricultural consultant.

But oftentimes SED is the appointee's last job due to retirement or death. Retiring from an SED position might on the whole suggest a lack of future-oriented career goals, but “terminal SEDs” is a large and heterogeneous category. SEDs' prior employment histories add much more information that helps distinguish them from one another in the typology. Examining prior career histories adds the following types of SEDs.¹⁰

4. **Experienced politicians** ($N = 16$) previously worked in national, state, or local organizations of the appointing president's party, managed election campaigns for politicians of the same party, or personally held elective office as a member of the president's party. They likely do not have a significant background in agricultural policymaking in government or interest groups beyond operating a private agribusiness. Example: Bruce Nelson (Montana, 1993–2016) previously managed campaigns for Democratic gubernatorial and congressional candidates and served as chairman of the Montana Democratic Party.
5. **Policy experts** ($N = 61$) include SEDs who previously served in the same office or in a lower position in the USDA. Several SEDs previously served on a county or state FSA committee. Others in this category previously worked in an agriculture-related agency in a state or local government or held a leadership position in an agriculture interest group. Importantly, for SEDs to be classified as policy

¹⁰In the supplemental analysis drawing only on pre-appointment experience, these categories are expanded to encompass all SEDs.

experts, they must not serve in such positions after leaving office: that would put them in the “ambitious bureaucrat” or “revolving-door lobbyist” category. Example: Robert A. Carson, Jr. (Mississippi, 2017–2021) previously served in leadership positions in multiple agriculture organizations, including Cotton Incorporated.

6. **Businesspersons** ($N=27$) constitute the residual category of SEDs. These SEDs’ professional biographies show no record of service in a political or government office—other than their appointment as SED—or any significant active role in an agriculture interest group. They have often been active, however, in private agribusiness or a related industry like agricultural lending and insurance. Example: Brian Wolford (Nebraska, 2001–2007) worked in agriculture and commercial lending both before and after serving as SED.

Linking SEDs’ career goals to program communication decisions

Do SEDs’ career motives drive agency communication decisions and their divergence across states? A test starts with theoretically linking career goals to communication decisions; that is, how should an SED lead program communication if she wants a certain type of job later? To answer this question, I start with a broad expectation that SEDs pursuing some type of future employment should communicate FSA programs more proactively than SEDs who intend to retire from the job. This expectation is grounded in the most universal requirements of professional advancement; someone looking to lengthen his resume is more motivated to prove his accomplishments—and to more people—than someone uninterested in advancement (e.g., Carmeli et al., 2007).

While this broad expectation can be empirically tested (and I do test it, as discussed below), more precise expectations can be formulated: different career goals, all of which motivate SEDs to broadcast FSA programs more intensively to producers than a plan to retire into leisure, can nonetheless create different incentives on the job. SEDs whose desired employment requires positive opinions from constituents of FSA programs should advertise programs and encourage participation by producers more intensely than those whose career goals do not rely on their approval. Specifically, it distinguishes elective aspirants and revolving-door lobbyists from all other types of SEDs in the typology laid out. Much more than others, these two groups of SEDs need to cultivate approval and trust among FSA constituents.

SEDs ambitious for elective office find themselves in a prime position to work toward that goal. SEDs hand out USDA benefits to producers in the state and are physically close enough to the beneficiaries to take credit, all the while maintaining distance from potentially divisive policymaking on those benefits. Elective aspirants can broadcast FSA benefits vigorously to increase program beneficiaries, get beneficiaries to associate government benefits and effective program management with their efforts, and eventually turn beneficiaries into future supporters for public office. This expectation is supported by research showing that politicians can secure votes by delivering targeted material benefits to constituents (e.g., Bickers & Stein, 1996; Kriner & Reeves, 2015). It is also borne out by anecdotal accounts that former SEDs campaign on their performance in office, especially the delivery of FSA programs to their hopeful voters. An endorsement that Clint Koble received during his 2018 run for Congress praised the former SED for having “[overseen] quick, effective relief programs to all Nevada ranchers” and working to “actively engage Native American ranchers and farmers” in particular.¹¹ Koble himself said he helped producers through years of drought by expanding FSA services statewide.¹² Similarly, Judith Canales said at a candidate forum during her congressional run that she “[didn’t] have to wait until this campaign to have provided results for this district” because she delivered federal funds to her district as SED.¹³

¹¹<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2017/11/28/1719126/-Help-Defeat-the-Congressman-Who-Provided-the-Deciding-Vote-for-TrumpCare-in-the-House-Elect-Koble>.

¹²<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/supporting-nevadas-rural-communities-clint-koble/>.

¹³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8usiE7ihbM>; <https://www.epbusinessjournal.com/2017/09/judy-canales-announces-u-s-congressional-campaign-texas-23rd-district/>.

As bureaucrats who want to be politicians, elective aspirants represent a reconciliation between the prototypical mission-driven bureaucrat and the prototypical election-driven politician (e.g., Alesina & Tabellini, 2007).

The revolving-door lobbyists among SEDs are less interested in securing supporters for state or local elective office but nevertheless want to build strong relationships with state and local farming communities. Their constituents to woo are not voters but agricultural interests that can potentially be employers or clients. In this sense, the task of approval cultivation is less demanding for revolving-door lobbyists than for elective aspirants: career goals require revolving-door lobbyists to focus on just a special subset of the constituency needed by elective aspirants. At the same time, the task for revolving-door lobbyists as SED is subtly different from that facing elective aspirants: they need to garner organized interests' recognition that they can function as capable and trustworthy go-betweens for dealing with the federal government and helping secure benefits and ensure compliance. Insights adapted from the literature on the revolving doors suggest that key qualities for future lobbyists to impart include knowledge of the policies, institutions, and people of the USDA (Bertrand et al., 2014; LaPira & Thomas, 2017). I expect that the need to collect such credentials motivates SEDs to more actively advertise FSA programs to producers; the administrative productivity it demonstrates is analogous to the increased legislative productivity associated with future lobbyists in congressional offices with one foot out the door (Shepherd & You, 2020).

The ambitious bureaucrat species of SEDs hope to advance within the organization, similar to Downs's "climbers." Ambition of bureaucratic advancement demands that SEDs, above all, cultivate a reputation for expertise and shared commitment within the bureaucracy, a world of career civil servants that has been called a guild system for promoting professional norms (Aberbach & Rockman, 2001). The FSA's customer-driven organizational mission means that ambitious bureaucrats should provide good customer service, including by creating high-quality newsletters. At the same time, however, a desired career path of vertical mobility within the organization creates less incentive for the official to engage in potentially risky policy experimentation and more incentive to play it safe (Teodoro, 2011). Combining these considerations, I expect that ambitious bureaucrats are unlikely to lead the nation in the standardization of newsletters but likely to follow the herd when a critical mass of states has demonstrated their utility.

Among the "terminal SEDs" with no identifiable career goal other than tending to a private farm and the like, I expect policy experts to behave systematically differently from experienced politicians and businesspersons; they are similar to Downs's "advocates" or even "zealots" in the sense that they have strongly held policy views (Downs, 1966) and can be expected to espouse those views as SED. Consistent with this expectation, existing work suggests that organized interests paradoxically decrease their lobbying activity when one of their own enters government office (Lee & You, 2023), probably because having a known ally in government makes intense lobbying less necessary. In sum, I expect policy experts' interest in effective implementation to make them advertise FSA programs more actively.

In comparison, experienced politicians and businesspersons are more likely to see the appointment primarily as a reward for past work and comparatively lack intrinsic motivation to serve the agency and its constituents. Research on patronage appointments shows that they undermine competent administration, and presidents may reward loyalists with such appointments with this exact trade-off in mind (e.g., Gallo & Lewis, 2012; Hollibaugh et al., 2014; Lewis, 2009). For businesspersons, I have no well-defined prior expectation informed by theory alone—other than to posit, quite broadly, that they should not be particularly proactive in managing and innovating in FSA communication. As my expectations for businesspersons are the least informed, I use businesspersons as the omitted base category for SEDs in regression analysis, against which all other types of SEDs are compared.

Participation-encouraging language

In addition to the decision of whether to make newsletters at all, SEDs' career goals may also influence the content of newsletters, but only up to a point. Without authority to create agricultural policy or FSA

programs, state FSA offices are only empowered to implement FSA programs according to state needs and circumstances. This implies that delegation limits to the margins any potential for SEDs' own choices to influence the content of state newsletters. For example, SEDs cannot simply choose not to advertise direct payments FSA makes to farmers even if they personally disagree with this policy—or if their private career motives for some reason nudge them to de-emphasize these payments in official communication.

With this fundamental limit on potential differences in newsletter content in mind, I examine whether SEDs' career goals drive some to use state newsletters to more proactively encourage producers to participate in FSA programs than others. Even though different SEDs all inform producers about direct payments as their duties require, some SEDs may remind farmers of forms to file and when to file them, as well as upcoming deadlines to report cropland acreages more explicitly and frequently than others. Such instructions are helpful for producers to fulfill their requirements in order to enjoy government benefits. Reminder letters from the USDA increased enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program among even well-informed farmers with expiring contracts for the program (Wallander et al., 2017), and producers need close assistance with fulfilling government requirements (Boerngen, 2019). Experiments involving other government services show a similar effect of reminders in helping eligible beneficiaries meet deadlines and get benefits (Moore et al., 2022). I expect SEDs' career objectives to produce differences in the amount of participation-encouraging language in their newsletters. Mainly, I expect that elective aspirants and revolving-door lobbyists should lead in the initiation of standardized newsletters and include the most participation-encouraging language in the newsletters released.

Below, I introduce my collection of state FSA newsletters from 2002 to 2018, which makes possible both a delineation of the history of newsletter development and standardization across the 50 states and an analysis of newsletter content. I analyze this history in a hazards modeling framework, which models the pace of newsletter development across states as a consequence of SEDs' career goals while controlling for other plausible influences. Then, in a set of panel regressions, I analyze newsletter content—specifically, the relative amount of participation-encouraging language within newsletters—also as a function of SEDs' career goals. Analysis of the two outcomes shows that SEDs' career motives matter and, for the most part but not always, in ways that conform to my theoretical expectations.

ANALYZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF FSA NEWSLETTERS ACROSS STATES

For this study, I have created the most complete collection of state FSA newsletters in known existence. For this data collection, an indispensable utility is the “Wayback Machine,” a digital archive of the World Wide Web founded by the nonprofit Internet Archive (<https://web.archive.org/>). The Wayback Machine allows me to access historical versions of the websites of state FSAs. I used it to access all available historical versions of state FSA websites, going back in time as far as 2000, to record the development status of state FSA news communications over time. I also downloaded all newsletters found in these historical websites.

Chronicling the development of state FSA newsletters

The status of historical FSA newsletter development can be classified into four phases. I describe these phases below, followed by selected historical websites that exemplify each phase shown in Figure 1. In Appendix SA.1, I list all archived website URLs that indicate various phases of development except Phase 0 for each state.

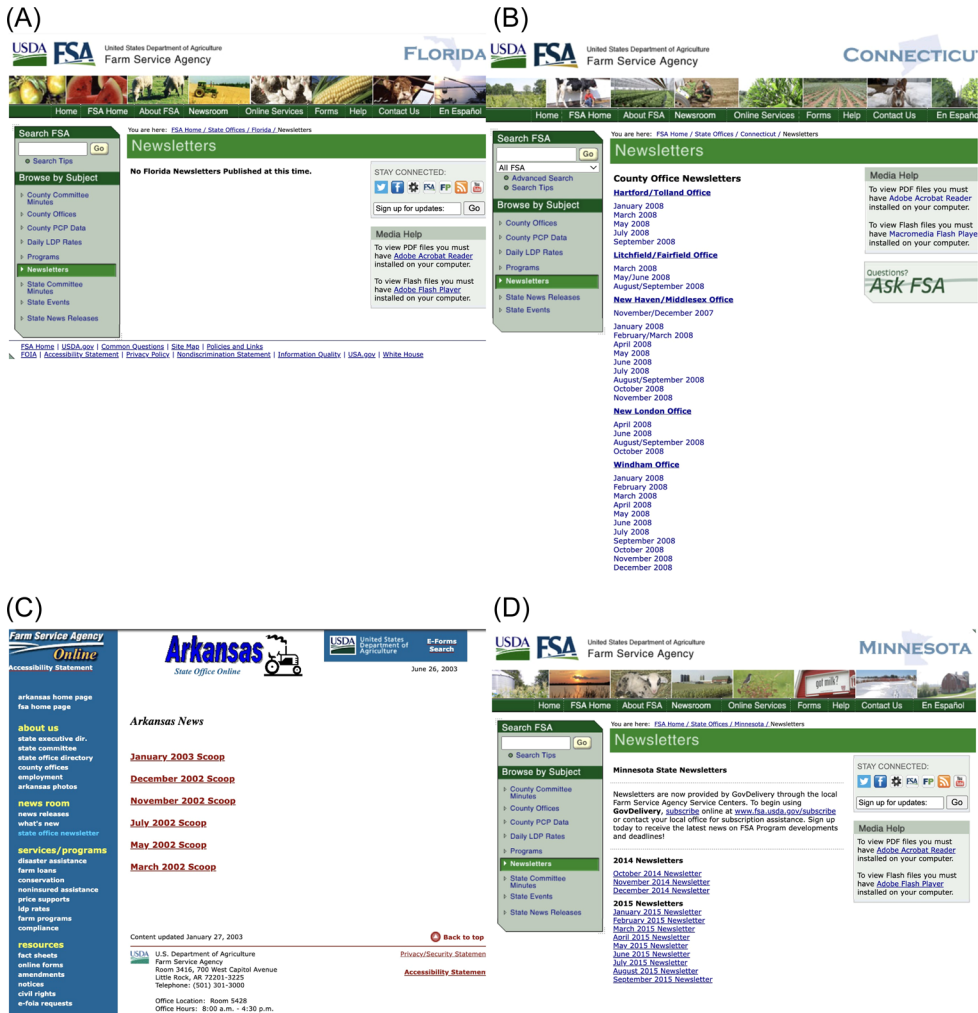


FIGURE 1 Examples of historical state FSA websites at each phase of newsletter development. (A) Phase 0: Florida, archived March 2013, (B) Phase 1: Connecticut, archived January 2009, (C) Phase 2: Arkansas, archived June 2023, (D) Phase 3: Minnesota, archived September 2015. FSA, Farm Service Agency.

1. **Phase 0:** A state FSA publishes no FSA newsletter. Neither does it post any newsletters issued by county FSAs (or, alternatively, area offices or service centers).¹⁴
2. **Phase 1:** A state FSA publishes county or area newsletters on its website at a regular frequency, but it does not publish any state FSA newsletter.
3. **Phase 2:** A state FSA publishes state newsletters, often in addition to county-specific FSA newsletters, at a regular frequency. But the state FSA newsletters issued are irregular and not routinized in style and format, and do not resemble the newsletters published by other state FSAs.

¹⁴Nevertheless, the state FSA website may contain news articles or links to FSA news releases that originate from the FSA national office and are not tailored to the specific state.

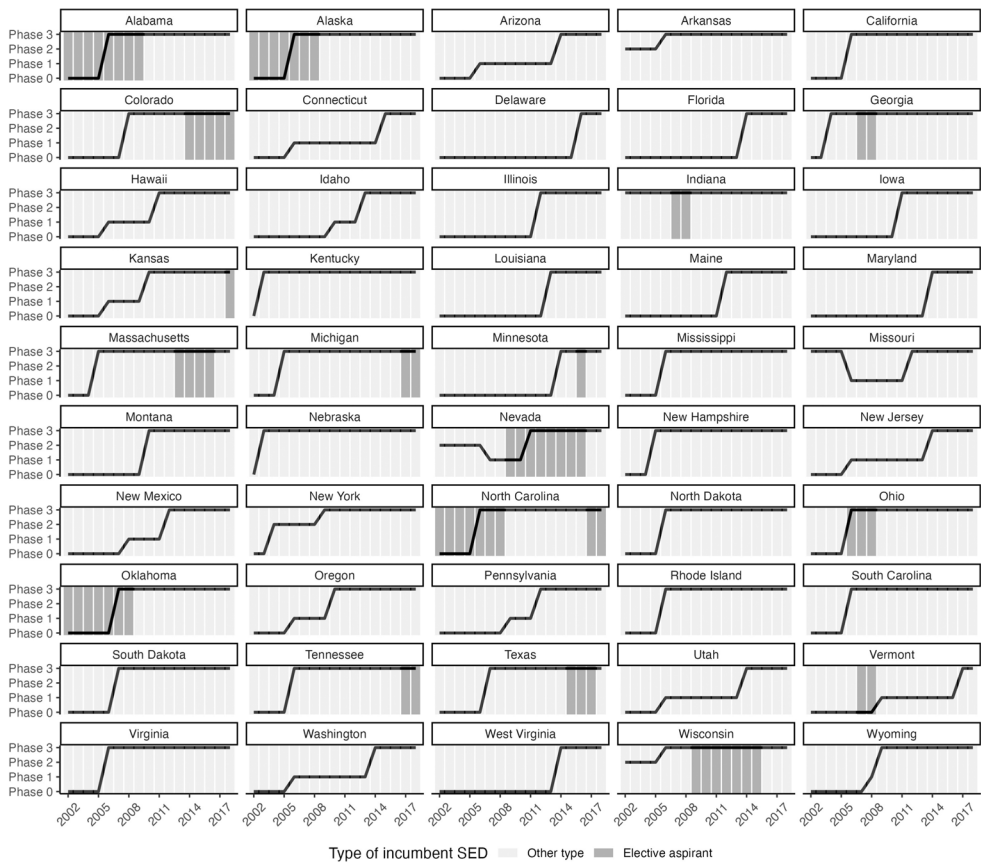


FIGURE 2 Development of FSA newsletters across states, 2002–2018. FSA, Farm Service Agency.

4. **Phase 3:** A state FSA publishes state newsletters, sometimes in addition to county-specific FSA newsletters, at a regular frequency. The state FSA newsletters conform to a nationally uniform and routinized style and format.¹⁵

Many archived websites like these patch together state-by-state histories of FSA newsletter development, which I depict in Figure 2. Readily distinguishable from the pack are the pioneer states of Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, and Kentucky; the last two states started issuing routinized state FSA newsletters that look like today's earlier than any other state, long predating any national FSA guidance. A large group of states relied on county or area FSA newsletters exclusively for long periods of time before starting to make state newsletters; these states include Arizona, Connecticut, New Jersey, Utah, Vermont, and Washington State. And then there are the late joiners to the trend: Delaware, Florida, and West Virginia. Two states briefly went back and forth: the Missouri FSA started issuing regular state newsletters early, but then stopped in 2006 and relied exclusively on area newsletters for a few years before resuming state newsletters with its Summer 2012 issue as GovDelivery ramped up. The Nevada FSA went through a similar backtracking. (To clarify a finding made later, the background shades denote elective aspirants' tenures in office).

¹⁵To illustrate the switch from nonstandardized (Phase 2) to standardized (Phase 3) state FSA newsletters, I display two newsletters issued during each phase by Arkansas and New York in Appendix SA.2.

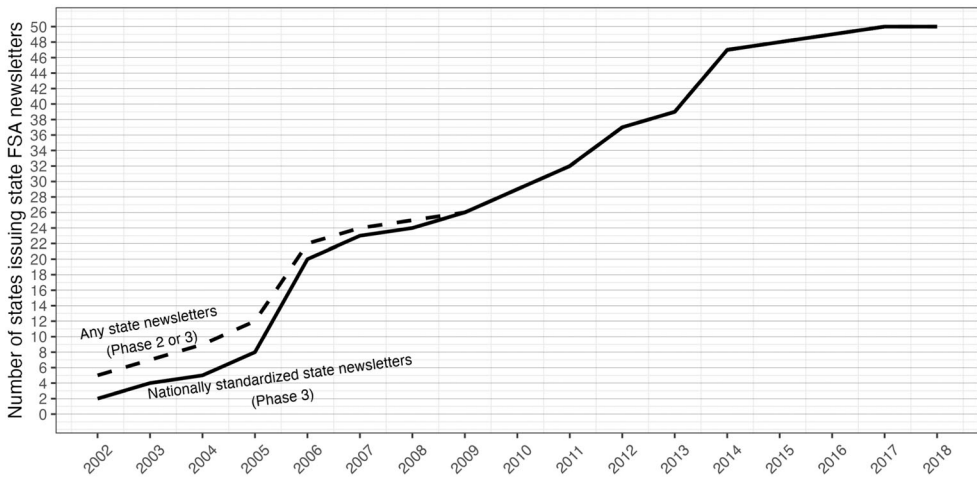


FIGURE 3 Accumulation of regular newsletters by state FSAs, 2002–2018. FSA, Farm Service Agency.

Due to the gradual and phased development of FSA newsletters across states, the use of uniform state newsletters took at least 15 years to become universal around the country. It reached this point remarkably recently, with Vermont in 2017. In Figure 3, I depict the cumulative total number of states, over time, that have started issuing regular state FSA newsletters in their present, nationally standardized form. During the 15-year interval, progress toward newsletter standardization spread across states evenly on the whole, but it was punctuated by the two aforementioned waves of rapid adoption across many states—2005–2007 and 2011–2014.

Survival analysis of newsletter standardization

I conduct survival analysis to examine whether SEDs' career objectives may have contributed to the pattern of newsletter adoption across states. In this framework, I model the “risk” of adoption of standardized state newsletters (reaching Phase 3) in each state in each month as a consequence of various predictors, including SEDs' career goal typology.¹⁶ Organizing the data by state-month recognizes that SEDs often served during part of a year at the beginning or end of their tenures. In Table 1, I show a series of Cox proportional hazards models estimated based on these monthly data on newsletter development across states, structured in “counting process style.” The data set records the status of newsletter development in each month from 2002 to 2018, culminating at some point in Phase 3. Each state leaves the data set when it gets there.

Rather than displaying the raw coefficient estimates for each predictor, for more intuitive interpretation, in the regression table I show the hazard ratios associated with the predictors in correspondence with their p -values. The hazard ratios indicate the estimated change in the risk of newsletter standardization given one-unit increases in the predictors; values greater than one represent increases in the hazard function (quicker to start issuing standardized newsletters), and values less than one represent decreases. All models cluster the standard errors by state to account for non-independence among

¹⁶Choosing Phase 3 for the outcome does not reflect any assumption that reaching Phase 3 is fundamentally different from reaching Phase 2. Nor does this choice have substantial empirical implications because so few states ever went through Phase 2, as evidenced in Figure 3. Replacing the outcome of reaching Phase 3 with reaching Phase 2 leads to negligible differences in the regression results. I treat Missouri, which reached Phase 3 twice in history, as having reached that phase the first time in 2002, thereby ignoring its return to Phase 1 between 2006 and 2012.

TABLE 1 Cox proportional hazards models of state FSAs' adoption of standardized newsletters.

	Dependent variable				
	Adoption of standardized state FSA newsletters				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Elective aspirant	4.70*	4.65*	4.44*	6.16*	6.66*
	<i>p</i> = 0.02	<i>p</i> = 0.02	<i>p</i> = 0.01	<i>p</i> = 0.02	<i>p</i> = 0.01
Revolving-door lobbyist	1.29	0.68	0.84	1.54	1.50
	<i>p</i> = 0.67	<i>p</i> = 0.63	<i>p</i> = 0.83	<i>p</i> = 0.67	<i>p</i> = 0.66
Ambitious bureaucrat	1.09	1.04	0.87	1.15	1.31
	<i>p</i> = 0.88	<i>p</i> = 0.95	<i>p</i> = 0.81	<i>p</i> = 0.82	<i>p</i> = 0.67
Policy expert	0.27*	0.07*	0.14*	0.12*	0.09*
	<i>p</i> = 0.03	<i>p</i> = 0.004	<i>p</i> = 0.02	<i>p</i> = 0.01	<i>p</i> = 0.01
Experienced politician	0.39	0.37	0.39	0.32	0.34
	<i>p</i> = 0.29	<i>p</i> = 0.37	<i>p</i> = 0.39	<i>p</i> = 0.18	<i>p</i> = 0.25
Age		0.98	0.99	1.01	0.99
		<i>p</i> = 0.45	<i>p</i> = 0.68	<i>p</i> = 0.88	<i>p</i> = 0.82
Previous SED appointment		6.86*	5.11*	6.31*	5.64*
		<i>p</i> = 0.003	<i>p</i> = 0.01	<i>p</i> = 0.002	<i>p</i> = 0.005
Adoption rate among bordering states			0.98*	0.98*	0.98*
			<i>p</i> = 0.004	<i>p</i> = 0.003	<i>p</i> = 0.02
Percentage of population in farming				1.80	5.02
				<i>p</i> = 0.59	<i>p</i> = 0.26
Number of farms per thousand population				1.05	0.96
				<i>p</i> = 0.51	<i>p</i> = 0.68
Internet access					1.00
					<i>p</i> = 0.13
Number of declared natural disasters					0.95
					<i>p</i> = 0.34
Observations	4511	4511	4340	4340	4340
R ²	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02
Max. possible R ²	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13
Log likelihood	-299.96	-293.28	-275.04	-265.35	-262.97
Wald test	47.02*	49.55*	51.19*	51.71*	50.03*
LR test	28.21*	41.57*	48.45*	67.84*	72.59*
Score (logrank) test	38.38*	47.65*	53.05*	79.37*	81.35*

Note: Table shows risk ratios associated with predictors. Standard errors clustered by state. **p* < 0.05.

Abbreviations: FSA, Farm Service Agency; SED, State Executive Director.

different years for the same state, as required when estimating Cox proportional hazards models with time-variant predictors within counting process style data (Therneau et al., 2017).

In Model 1, I examine the risk of newsletter adoption on just the career typology of SEDs, with the category of businesspersons as the omitted category reflected in the baseline hazard function. The hazard ratio associated with each type of SEDs displayed is then relative to the change in the risk of newsletter standardization associated with businesspersons.¹⁷ The Model 1 estimates show that elective aspirants are associated with a large and statistically significant increase in the risk of newsletter standardization. Specifically, for a state that has not yet standardized, its risk of standardization is 4.7 times greater if it is led by an elective aspirant than if led by a businessperson. Policy experts, in contrast, are associated with a significant reduction in the risk—by over 70%. Other types of SEDs are not associated with significant changes to the risk in either direction.

The remaining models in Table 1 control for progressively more variables as predictors of a state's risk of newsletter standardization. Besides the professional typology of SEDs, Model 2 controls for their ages and whether they have previously served as SED upon appointment by a previous administration. I control for age because younger SEDs are likely more proactive and innovative on the job than older SEDs since they have more time remaining in their working careers to seek professional advancement based on achievements, either within the bureaucracy or in another profession (Bertrand et al., 2020). I control for previous SED appointments owing to the possibility that reappointed SEDs may innovate more readily than first-timers because they need less time to orient themselves in the position and can more easily hit the ground running—an expectation strongly supported by the coefficient. Regarding the typology of SEDs, the coefficient for elective aspirants is similar in size to Model 1 and remains significant—this effect is robust to this and fuller model configurations.¹⁸ Policy experts remain associated with a large decrease in the risk of newsletter standardization. A possible—though speculative—explanation for this unexpected finding is that the appointment of a policy expert to lead a state FSA, perhaps on recommendation by the state's congressional delegation (Canada, 2021), may reflect contentment with the status quo of program administration.¹⁹

On this basis, Model 3 controls additionally for a well-known set of mechanisms of policy innovation across states: diffusion (e.g., Shipan & Volden, 2008; Teodoro, 2009). When one state SED innovates in policy communication with producers, SEDs in similar states can observe it and consider doing the same. In an agricultural context, the most relevant diffusion mechanism is likely learning from neighbors; geographical proximity suggests similar climate and soil conditions, crops grown, and producers' importance to the state. To account for learning, I control for the cumulative percentage of bordering states that have started publishing regular state newsletters.²⁰ Surprisingly, this variable is significantly associated with a reduced risk of newsletter standardization, though the effect size is small.

Also related to learning from other states, recall my expectation that ambitious bureaucrats should be disinclined to lead the nation in innovation but inclined to follow other states' examples. This suggests an interaction effect between this SED category and existing levels of newsletter standardization

¹⁷In Appendix SC.2, I analyze the simpler comparison between SEDs who pursue any type of employment afterward and those who retire from the position. Consistent with expectations, this analysis shows that retirement is associated with a much lower likelihood of newsletter adoption.

¹⁸It is possible that elective aspirants are statistically associated with a higher risk of newsletter standardization not because of their decisions but because they tend to be in office during periods of rapid standardization across states, particularly the 2011–2014 period of top-down GovDelivery implementation. To check for this possibility, in Appendix SC.3, I run additional regressions that control for two binary indicators that read “1” for the two periods of rapid standardization (2005–2007 and 2011–2014), respectively, and “0” otherwise. The effects of the SED typology are largely unaffected in magnitude or significance, whereas the first of the two period indicators is significant and positive, showing that the timing of SEDs' tenures in office is not responsible for the effects of interest. Figure 2 contains background shades of dark gray for each state to denote elective aspirants' tenures in office. This shows that elective aspirants were indeed significant contributors to the first wave but not to the more top-down second wave.

¹⁹Potentially, policy experts could be associated with a risk reduction simply because they happen to serve disproportionately during times of slow newsletter adoption. But locating the policy experts among sitting SEDs as the background shades in Figure 2 do rules this out: policy experts, the modal type, variously held office before, during, and after the two waves of rapid standardization.

²⁰Only data on the 48 contiguous states remain in models that control for bordering states' status. In Appendix SC.4, I additionally control for the percentage of states in agriculturally defined regions that have started issuing standardized state FSA newsletters, which is compatible with the importance of soil and climate characteristics for agriculture. Alternative controls of diffusion do not affect the results.

nationwide. In Appendix [SC.5](#), I interact the SED typology with the number of states that have already adopted standard state newsletters in regressions. The results suggest that ambitious bureaucrats are associated with a reduced risk of standardization when the existing level of adoption across states is low but associated with an increased risk as the nationwide level rises. Elective aspirants, in contrast, are associated with higher risks of standardization at low levels of adoption nationwide and even more so as other states standardize.²¹

In Models 4 and 5, I control for state-specific and time-variant agricultural facts that may drive SEDs' decisions to innovate in policy communication. Model 4 controls for two variables that capture the importance of farming to a state, constructed based on data from the Census of Agriculture done every 5 years: the percentage of a state's population made up of professional agricultural producers²² and the number of farms within a state per thousand population. All else equal, I expect that the more important agriculture is to a state, the more readily producers' demand for government service pushes SEDs to improve program communication. Model 5 additionally controls for internet access at the state level and natural disasters declared by the Secretary of Agriculture. The former comes from internet access reports published by the Federal Communications Commission and is computed as the total number of high-speed internet connections per capita by state.²³ The latter is provided by the FSA itself for 2012–2018²⁴ and extracted from historical USDA press releases for years before 2012.²⁵ Conceivably, natural disasters like severe droughts could nudge a state FSA enough to institutionalize program communication to broadcast urgently needed information (newsletters frequently mention declared disasters and relevant assistance available), and widespread internet access makes newsletters worthwhile. The additional controls in Models 4 and 5 are largely inconsequential predictors of the risk of newsletter standardization, while the estimates for the SED typology remain unaffected.

In other supplemental analysis, I relax the strong assumption that SEDs always carry out their career goals held in office and, instead, analyze how their pre-appointment work experience alone may affect their newsletter decisions. This analysis, shown in [Table SC.1](#), contains two parts. First, I use pre-appointment experience to classify the SEDs into three mutually exclusive categories—policy experts, experienced politicians, and the residual category of businesspersons. These categories exist in the main analysis, but each now contains more individuals because I ignore their post-appointment career paths. Like the main analysis, the results show that policy experts are associated with a much lower risk of newsletter adoption than businesspersons while politicians behave indistinguishably. Second, I use a pair of binary variables indicating whether each SED has pre-appointment political experience (elective officeholding and positions in party organizations), policy experience (in the bureaucracy or interest groups), or both. The results show that political experience is associated with a higher likelihood of adoption, but the effect is weak. Policy experience is unrelated to the risk of adoption.

ANALYZING THE CONTENT OF STATE FSA NEWSLETTERS

I now turn to examining the potential influence of SEDs' career goals on the content of state FSA newsletters in addition to whether they are issued at all. The basic goal of this analysis is to use the typology of SEDs to explain the amount of participation-encouraging language within the newsletters while taking account of agricultural facts, the political context of the federal government, and unobserved state characteristics.

²¹For this analysis, I leave some controls out of the model because the full specification causes a convergence problem due to overfitting.

²²The specific item in the census data is “principal operators whose primary occupation is farming” before 2017. The term “operators” was replaced with “producers” in 2017.

²³<https://www.fcc.gov/internet-access-services-reports>.

²⁴<https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/disaster-assistance-program/disaster-designation-information/index>.

²⁵I collect secretarial natural disaster designations made in 2005, for example, from press releases at <https://web.archive.org/web/20050923043804/http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/news/default.htm>.

Identifying participation-encouraging language

To measure the amount of participation-encouraging content in state FSA newsletters, I follow a two-pronged approach. In the first prong, I take the full text of the newsletters and identify words or phrases that explicitly encourage participation. These include “deadline,” “last day (week, month),” and variants of the words and phrases “remind,” “encourage,” “sign up,” “enroll,” “report,” and “require.” This method is holistic in the sense that it considers the entire bodies of newsletters but may be overly inclusive in designating relevant content. Newsletters often contain notices and stories that have nothing to do with producers’ access to FSA programs, such as FSA county committee elections, updates about the comings and goings of state and county FSA staff, and job openings. This method does not discard these portions of the newsletters as irrelevant.

As a remedy to this problem, the second prong of my measurement strategy first extracts portions of the newsletters that are about five sets of FSA programs and then identifies participation-encouraging language within these portions. The programs include the Direct and Counter-Cyclical Program (DCP, terminated by the 2014 Farm Bill), the Average Crop Revenue Election (ACRE) Program (it existed under the 2008 Farm Bills), the Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs (created by the 2014 Farm Bill to replace DCP), conservation programs (mainly the Conservation Reserve Program, which has been in continuous existence, and its spin-offs), and various loans and insurance programs (including farm ownership and operating loans and the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program); they cover virtually the FSA’s entire purview. To determine relevant text in newsletters, I use techniques of regular expression to first identify references to these programs and then extract the entire sections containing these references.²⁶

This method enables me to more accurately select the relevant parts of newsletters for analysis and is sensitive to the major changes in agricultural policy that took place from 2002 to 2018. In Appendix SA.3, I exemplify participation-encouraging language in newsletters in the context of each type of FSA program in contrast with language that does not encourage participation, highlighting the indicative phrases in bold. Obviously, the two types of language coexist in newsletters: no newsletter can remind people to enroll without ever explaining the programs. The outcome of interest is the relative amount of participation-encouraging language.

Regression analysis of newsletter content

With the amount of participation-encouraging content measured, I perform regression analysis that predicts this key metric with the SED typology, based on panel data organized by state-year combination. Each observation in the data describes all the regular newsletters one state publishes in one year; in practice, I combine all newsletters by each state in each year into one whole and analyze the content of the “mega-newsletter” assembled to reduce the amount of noise contained in each monthly or seasonal newsletter. For years when an SED office changes occupants, I take care to attribute monthly or seasonal newsletters to the right one. For the SED typology, “businesspersons” again serves as the omitted category as in Table 1; in these panel regressions, the expected amount of participation-encouraging content for businesspersons is reflected in the intercept. All other types of SEDs are estimated relative to businesspersons.

To isolate the relation between the SED typology and participation-encouraging language, I estimate models that control for state-specific fixed effects and, in most models, year-specific fixed effects; these constitute “within” estimators of how the amount of participation-encouraging language changes when a businessperson is replaced by some other type of SED in a given state. I cluster the standard errors by

²⁶By inspecting the newsletters as they appear to ordinary readers against their machine-extracted text, I found that the occurrence of three or more consecutive white-space characters serves as a reliable and consistent separator of newsletter sections. In other words, program-relevant sections are those containing program names and encompassed by three or more white spaces on both ends.

state to account for non-independence across different years in the same state. As I can only analyze the content of newsletters that have been published, there is an inherent selection issue with this analysis; specifically, this analysis draws on 452 state-year combinations corresponding to newsletters issued (containing duplicate combinations for years split between two SEDs in the same state), a subset of the 850 total state-year combinations from 2002 to 2018. I show two sets of panel regressions in Table 2 based on these observations. Models 1–3 pertain to the full texts of the state-year mega-newsletters while Models 4–6 are about the content within the mega-newsletter that relates to the five types of FSA programs.

In Model 1, I regress the amount of participation-encouraging language in the state-year mega-newsletters on just the SED typology (other than the base category of businesspersons) and the total word count besides state- and year-specific fixed effects.²⁷ Two types of SEDs emerge as significantly different from businesspersons in the content of their state FSA newsletters: elective aspirants and revolving-door lobbyists are associated with significantly more participation-encouraging language. More specifically, elective aspirants are expected to add about 41 participation-encouraging words or phrases to newsletters compared to businesspersons, and revolving-door lobbyists are expected to add about 32. As a frame of reference, the mean length of a state-year mega-newsletter is just under 19,000 words, translating the two significant effects into a small 0.2% of a medium-length mega-newsletter. Nonetheless, urging people to sign up 30 or 40 more times per year on average is a considerable difference from businesspersons' average of 130 times.²⁸

In Model 2, I control for the same set of time-variant agricultural facts as used in the survival models in Table 1—the number of professional farmers in a state, the number of farms relative to state population, and the number of months with declared natural disasters. These are inconsequential predictors of participation-encouraging content while the SEDs' classifications as elective aspirants and revolving-door lobbyists are unaffected in predictive power. Model 3 controls for party control of government. Specifically, it controls for the president's party (Republican rather than Democrat) and whether control of Congress is divided between the House and the Senate or, alternatively, whether the party different from the president's controls both chambers of Congress (unified government is the base category). To allow these political controls, I remove the year-specific fixed effects. The estimates for the political controls show that state FSA newsletters tend to contain less participation-encouraging language during Republican administrations than Democratic ones, and more under divided Congress and less under an opposition-controlled Congress compared to unified government. The revolving-door lobbyist category of SEDs remains a significant predictor, but the elective aspirant category now falls short of significance.

I turn to analyzing the program-relevant portions of newsletters in Models 4–6. In functional form, these models mirror the full-text analysis in Models 1–3 but replace the full lengths of the mega-newsletters with just the program references in the newsletters. According to the estimates associated with the typology of SEDs, revolving-door lobbyists include significantly more participation-encouraging language in their state newsletters than businesspersons, consistent with the full-text analysis, except in Model 6. The effect associated with elective aspirants is no longer significant; together with Model 3 of the full-text analysis, this result suggests elective aspirants use more participation-encouraging language on average, but not reliably.

According to the content analysis drawing on the newsletters' program-relevant parts, the revolving-door lobbyists category—the one consistently significant type of SEDs for newsletter content—is associated with about seven more participation-encouraging words within a mega-newsletter. Again, context is key; the mean number of program references in a mega-newsletter is about 100, meaning that

²⁷As with the previous analysis of newsletter development, I simply compare SEDs who hold any job post-appointment with those who retire from the position in Appendix SD.2. This analysis shows that retirement is a negative but insignificant predictor of the amount of participation-encouraging language in newsletters.

²⁸Despite controlling for the overall length of newsletters, it is possible for these effects to still mainly reflect which SEDs issue the longest newsletters rather than capturing participation-encouraging language. In response, I replace the outcome variable with its opposite—language in newsletters that are *not* participation-encouraging—in Appendix SD.3. This analysis yields opposite effects associated with the types of SEDs.

TABLE 2 Linear regressions of the content of state FSA newsletters.

	Dependent variable					
	Number of participation-encouraging words			Number of participation-encouraging references		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Elective aspirant	40.96*	45.70*	36.83	3.35	4.57	4.25
	(20.06)	(21.40)	(20.98)	(2.86)	(2.95)	(3.27)
Revolving-door lobbyist	31.65*	37.11*	30.65*	6.75*	7.65*	6.38
	(10.88)	(11.49)	(12.36)	(3.25)	(3.28)	(3.51)
Ambitious bureaucrat	7.66	11.78	-0.71	-0.07	0.96	-0.42
	(16.86)	(17.40)	(15.37)	(2.78)	(2.69)	(2.82)
Policy expert	7.05	12.59	0.07	1.87	3.08	1.92
	(17.06)	(17.01)	(16.38)	(2.61)	(2.58)	(2.70)
Experienced politician	37.70	43.50*	33.26	-2.47	-0.24	-1.01
	(20.73)	(20.82)	(19.48)	(4.04)	(3.27)	(3.54)
Total number of words in mega-newsletter	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*			
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)			
Total number of program references in mega-newsletter				0.36* (0.02)	0.36* (0.02)	0.35* (0.02)
Percentage of population in farming		-7.40	-11.34		-12.13	-10.46
		(40.87)	(42.57)		(12.45)	(10.98)
Number of farms per thousand population		-9.17	-0.76		-2.47*	-1.63*
		(7.30)	(6.56)		(0.79)	(0.77)
Number of months with declared natural disaster		-2.59	-2.54		-0.51	-0.49
		(2.46)	(2.31)		(0.39)	(0.39)
Republican president			-31.28*			1.23
			(7.80)			(1.60)
Divided party control of Congress			21.55*			-5.55* (2.13)
			(6.18)			
Opposition party control of Congress			-40.52*			2.45
			(13.87)			(2.39)
Constant	-31.81	75.01	28.66	-15.25*	19.31	9.04
	(22.35)	(92.96)	(75.22)	(3.73)	(13.39)	(11.70)
State FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FEs	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Observations	452	452	452	452	452	452
R ²	0.95	0.95	0.95	0.93	0.94	0.93

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Dependent variable					
	Number of participation-encouraging words			Number of participation-encouraging references		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Adjusted R ²	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.92	0.92	0.92
χ^2	1358.36*	1362.92*	1333.99*	1230.78*	1239.52*	1220.25*

Note: Standard errors clustered by state. * $p < 0.05$.

Abbreviation: FSA, Farm Service Agency.

a revolving-door lobbyist is associated with a 7% increase in participation-encouraging language compared to a businessperson. This difference is substantively important: a mention of an FSA program is considerably more likely to come with an encouragement to participate when coming from a future lobbyist.²⁹

Evaluated in combination, the survival analysis of state FSAs' initiation of regular newsletters and the panel analysis of newsletter content yield partly converging and partly diverging findings about the role of SEDs' career motives in program communication. The converging part is that SEDs ambitious for holding elective office tend to carry out program communication in state FSAs more proactively: they were especially responsible for bringing about regular state FSA newsletters when the practice was spreading across the country and, to a lesser extent, tend to use the newsletters to encourage producers to participate in programs more strongly than their peers. The diverging parts of the findings relate to other types of SEDs. Policy experts appear to make newsletter initiation much less likely, whereas revolving-door lobbyists structure the newsletters to encourage participation more consistently than elective aspirants. Together, the two types of analysis suggest the importance of SEDs' career objectives that are both future-oriented and outward-looking for the effort they exert in communicating with producers about FSA programs; that is, post-appointment career moves matter more than pre-appointment ones, and wanting to venture out of the executive branch of government appears particularly motivating.

CONCLUSION

If reelection is the most fundamental motivator of everything members of Congress do, perhaps the unavailability of reelection is an ever-present driver of what presidential appointees do. As soon as they are tapped by a president or an administration to serve (if not earlier), appointees understand they will probably not hold their positions too long and may even wish to leave before they have to (Wood & Marchbanks, 2007). For many appointees, the plan is to retire whenever they leave office, but oftentimes it is not. The world of SEDs of the FSA exhibits such variation: while many SEDs plan to retire onto the same farm or ranch they have owned their entire lives when their appointing administration's lease in Washington expires, many more hope to climb the ladder within the USDA, want to lead a department in state government, or plan to run for elective office. Still others want to make a living helping agricultural interests navigate the government programs they will know more about than almost everyone else. It is inconceivable for career planning not to be a priority for these SEDs.

SEDs find themselves in control of some tools on the job that help them achieve their career goals. The power of designing programs and creating government benefits does not belong to SEDs, but that is not necessarily a bad thing because they also cannot be blamed for bad policy. Instead, their offices are in

²⁹As with the adoption of newsletters across states, I analyze newsletter content with measures of SEDs' pre-appointment experience. The results, displayed in Appendix SD.1, show that policy experts, experienced politicians, and businesspersons do not put significantly different amounts of participation-encouraging language in their newsletters. Nor does the amount of pre-appointment political and policy experience matter strongly.

charge of the delivery of government benefits into the hands of producers, the final link in policy administration that makes beneficiaries associate SEDs with the government services they receive (Canada, 2021). For SEDs looking for certain types of professional success after leaving office, this responsibility presents opportunities. Those trying to cultivate a voter base for winning elective office, as well as those looking to secure future clients and employers as consultants and lobbyists, have an incentive to work harder to inform producers about FSA programs than SEDs without such non-bureaucratic ambition (see Kriner & Reeves, 2015; Bertrand et al., 2014; Shepherd & You, 2020). Nor are SEDs without future career aspirations all the same: the career path leading to the office of SED likely also matters for the kinds of commitments and priorities its occupant exhibits on the job, especially when the appointment reflects presidential patronage (Gallo & Lewis, 2012; Hollibaugh et al., 2014; Lewis, 2009).

Analysis of the gradual development of state FSA newsletters across the 50 states from 2002 to 2018, made possible by original data collection of archived state FSA websites, suggests that SEDs' career goals indeed matter for their leadership of official program communication. The SEDs with ambition for elective office are associated with a much faster pace for state FSAs to start sending regular and standardized FSA newsletters than SEDs with different career goals, while agriculture experts with no clear post-appointment career goals are associated with a much slower pace. Additional analysis suggests that SEDs' career goals may also shape the content of FSA newsletters; in particular, SEDs who later become political advocates or consultants are associated with newsletters containing more participation-encouraging messaging rather than mere explanations.

If this is driven by SEDs' desire to turn program beneficiaries into voters or clients, it might be appropriate to say that, to a certain degree, future legislators turn official communications into campaign flyers and future lobbyists use them as job applications. Also important is which SEDs behave indistinguishably: SEDs looking to advance within the bureaucracy and those with a strong background in elective or party politics rather than relevant policy behave similarly to those with no observable interest in any employment other than private business in the decisions examined. Career aspirations that project outward into society evidently matter most.

So, why are these findings important? Most immediately, they suggest that presidential appointees' private career considerations matter for innovation and effort in street-level policy implementation, which enjoys considerable discretion (e.g., Prottas, 1978), and that appointees' career interest in leaving their present institution can potentially improve the delivery of government service (Shepherd & You, 2020). The findings juxtapose two types of presidential politicization of agencies via appointee selection: affirming existing research, patronage-based installation of the president's loyal soldiers and partisans appears unhelpful for the quality of bureaucratic service (Gallo & Lewis, 2012; Lewis, 2009); in contrast, selecting aspiring politicians for presidential appointments has potentially salutary effects on government service to the extent the president is aware of appointees' political ambitions.

The findings advanced in this study also support the connection documented between the diagonal career mobility of government officials and their capacity for innovation, sometimes by learning from their peers in government (Teodoro, 2009, 2011): diagonal movement from bureaucracy to advocacy and, to a lesser extent, to elective office is singularly associated with innovation. Whether innovation is desirable is certainly context-dependent, but getting the word out to people and helping the eligible qualify are unobjectionable missions of public service. In the case of FSA news, it was the future politicians who most helped bring modernity to the federal government, who also—along with future lobbyists—have worked hardest to sign people up for government programs.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data and code necessary to reproduce the results of this article are available in the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/N5HDKT>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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