

Media attention and strategic timing in politics: evidence from U.S. presidential executive orders

Abstract

Do politicians tend to adopt unpopular policies when the media and the public are distracted by other events?

We examine this question by analyzing the timing of the signing of executive orders (EOs) by U.S. presidents over the past four decades. We find robust evidence that EOs are more likely to be signed on the eve of days when the news are dominated by other important stories that can crowd out coverage of EOs.

Crucially, this relationship only holds in periods of divided government when unilateral presidential actions are more likely to be criticized by a hostile Congress.

The effect is driven by EOs that are more likely to make the news and to attract negative publicity, particularly those on topics on which president and Congress disagree.

Finally, the timing of EOs appears to be related to predictable news but not to unpredictable ones, which suggests it may result from a deliberate and forward-looking PR strategy.

The paper is joint work with M. Djourelova

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