

Police Work and Political Identity

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Abstract

The preferences of bureaucrats are a central determinant of how governments operate. How are these preferences formed? And what is the relative importance of selection into versus the treatment effect of government work? This paper studies these questions in the context of policing. We link civil service exam records to data on voting and campaign contributions to test whether becoming a police officer affects political identity. Using difference-in-differences and regression discontinuity designs, we find that joining a police force increases Republican party affiliation, contributions to Republican campaigns, and voter turnout. Effects are similar across gender but concentrated among Hispanic and White applicants, as well as those who are not Republican prior to applying. We provide evidence that these effects are not explained by a change in income, nor are they due to officers becoming “single-issue voters.” We conduct a similar analysis of prospective firefighters, who are also more Republican than the overall population. We find no impact of becoming a firefighter, suggesting our effects are not general to all public sector jobs or due solely to peer political affiliation. Overall, the treatment effect of police employment can explain around 40% of the difference in party affiliation between officers and the general population. Finally, we show that political affiliation relates to on-the-job behavior: Republican officers make more arrests and use more force than comparable non-Republican officers. Our analysis shows how the experience of police work shapes individuals’ political identity in ways that can matter for their workplace activity.

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