

The Politics of Presidential Centralization

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Abstract

Presidential centralization of policy creation is a surprisingly difficult to measure and understudied presidential tool, especially considering its foundational role in presidential management of the executive branch. There are no existing measures of centralization by policy area, leaving at least two major gaps in the literature: namely, how centralization varies across policy areas or how centralization and politicization relate. This paper draws empirical predictions from a formal theory that jointly models centralization and politicization and tests them using the Survey on the Future of Government Service, a large-scale survey of federal government executives. With these surveys, I introduce the first two measures of centralization by policy area to examine how presidents strategically engage in centralization and politicization. Among other results, I show that greater ideological distance between the president and an agency's careerists is associated with increased centralization. Furthermore, politicization is replaced by centralization as ideological distance grows.

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1 Introduction

When presidents face governmental and societal crises, they typically centralize. Consider epidemics and pandemics. In response to the global AIDS crisis, Bill Clinton lead a centralized White House push to fund research for an AIDS vaccine, even against the recommendation of the Department of Health and Human Services (The National AIDS Policy Office 1999). In 2005, George W. Bush strongly centralized the creation of the country’s first pandemic prevention program (M. Lewis 2021). After an initially lackluster response, Barack Obama centralized his administration’s response to Ebola by naming Ron Klain as Ebola Czar (Hirschfeld Davis 2014). Even when Donald Trump faced the COVID-19 pandemic, he initially assembled a centralized response, creating the White House Coronavirus Task Force, though a few months later he shifted primarily to pursuing politicization (Kaplan 2020; Diamond, Cancryn, and Ower Mohle 2020). When encountering the prospect of disease on a pandemic scale, the reactions of this diverse collection of presidents were each fairly aligned: they chose to centralize the federal government’s response.

As these examples illustrate, centralization of federal policymaking from federal agencies to the White House is unquestionably a key presidential tool for managing policymaking in the executive branch. However, surprisingly little is known about even basic facts of centralization, such as which policy areas presidents tend to centralize. In addition, there is almost no empirical evidence examining how centralization and politicization, the other primary tool presidents use to manage the executive branch (Moe 1985), relate to one another. Foundational to these issues is that there has been no existing measure of centralization by policy area or a measure that directly contrasts centralization and politicization, two shortcomings that are rectified in this paper.

Centralization has long functioned as a core presidential strategy, having been

most formally institutionalized in the Franklin Roosevelt administration (Neustadt 1954), but can be dated at least to the Teddy Roosevelt presidency (Rudalevige 2002) or even pre-Civil War (Galvin and Shogan 2004). Despite its common use, centralization is difficult to quantify and the public is often not privy to the policymaking process within the executive branch. When it has been studied, “centralization has been examined more as a structure than a process,” with centralized capacity, such as White House staff or budget sizes, used as a proxy for the level of centralization in an administration (Rudalevige 2009, 15). Such research has its uses, but is not sufficient for understanding when and why presidents centralize certain policy areas and not others (Rudalevige 2009). Notably, Rudalevige provides a useful first step in understanding the process of centralization, examining the centralization process for a number of randomly selected individual policies to show that presidents tend to strategically centralize these policies in alignment with predictions arising from a transaction cost framework (Rudalevige 2002, 2021).

Beyond centralized structures, for a time, the prevalence of executive orders and related tools (such as memoranda and national security directives) were considered to be pure expressions of centralized presidential policymaking (e.g., Howell 2003). However, recent scholarship has revealed a more complicated reality: presidential unilateral actions only sometimes originate from the White House (Rudalevige 2021), may often actually serve as a form of delegation (Lowande 2018), and are often not implemented as desired (e.g., Kennedy 2015). Thus, even studying presidential directives is insufficient for truly understanding presidential centralization.

This paper attempts to address these shortcomings and deepen our understanding of this key presidential strategy through introducing two new measures of centralization at the agency level to test predictions from an original theory of centralization and politicization. Furthermore, one of the new measures is directly comparable with the measure of politicization used in Richardson (2019), allowing for the most di-

rect evaluation of the relationship between centralization and politicization to date. These data are gathered from the 2007, 2014, and 2020 waves of the Survey on the Future of Government Service (SFGS), a large-scale survey of government executives issued once per presidential administration for the past three presidential administrations. Among other tests, I examine the relationships between these strategies and agency careerist ideology, introducing a careerist ideology measure for the Trump administration and presenting the first direct evaluation of the relationship between centralization and agency ideology (Rudalevige 2009).

These data are used to test predictions stemming from my original formal theories of presidential centralization and politicization in the first dissertation chapter. The empirical tests in this paper originate from the first model presented in that chapter, which focuses on centralized policy creation. The game involves an ideologically motivated president who can choose either to invest in costly centralized capacity to receive her desired policy or to delegate to a better informed, but ideologically divergent agency. If delegation is chosen, the president is then able to engage in politicization to bring the agency in closer ideological alignment with the president's preferences, but at the cost of harming the agency's capacity. The model both provides new formal justification for some previously hypothesized relationships and uncovers new predictions, as is discussed in greater detail in the Theory and Hypotheses section.

In alignment with the model, I find strong evidence that presidents engage in greater levels of centralization as ideological distance between the president and agency grows. Beyond this, I also test and find substantial support for a novel hypothesis that politicization is not strictly increasing in ideological distance, but is replaced by centralization. Finally, I examine whether centralization is less likely in policy areas that require greater levels of capacity to centralize. Here, results are mixed, with the direction of the relationship dependent on the presidential admin-

istration and the measure used. To the author’s knowledge, none of these policy area-specific hypotheses had been empirically evaluated prior to this paper.

2 Review of the Literature

Centralization, in the presidential context, is generally used to describe the shifting of policy control and creation from federal agencies throughout the executive branch to those within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) (Rudalevige 2015). There is excellent research on many of the strategies that can fall under the umbrella of centralization, including budgetary and regulatory review (e.g., Acs and Cameron 2013; Wiseman 2009; Neustadt 1954); the use of policy czars (Vaughn and Villalobos 2015); the growth and institutionalization of the White House/EOP (e.g., Tomkin 1998; Dickinson and Lebo 2007); and the creation of policy within the White House/EOP (Rudalevige 2002, 2015). This paper will focus on centralization as the development of policy within the White House/EOP, a key presidential strategy that is particularly difficult to systematically study. As already noted, to the author’s knowledge, there are no existing measures of centralization by policy area prior to this paper.

Like centralization, politicization also has been used to describe a number of political phenomena, typically when discussing topics related to the growth of partisan influence in a given area. Following the primary use of the term in the executive branch literature (e.g., Moe 1985; D. E. Lewis 2008; Richardson 2019), this paper will conceptualize politicization as the placement of political appointees within federal agencies throughout the executive branch in an effort to make agencies more responsive to the president’s policy preferences. A notable empirical challenge of studying politicization is that it is difficult to directly compare with centralization. This paper presents a novel way which to do so, using survey data from careerist agency executives.

Presidents employ centralization as they attempt to manage the gap between the limited formal powers they are endowed with and the desire to manage policy creation in the executive branch (Moe 1985). Since centralized staff are more directly selected and controlled by the president, they are more likely to act in alignment with the president’s policy preferences (Rudalevige 2002, 2015). In principal-agent terms, centralization can reduce both moral hazard and adverse selection. In addition, centralization may provide coordination benefits for policies that span a wide variety of topics, and centralized staff may tend to be more flexible and innovative than agency-based careerists (Alonso, Dessein, and Matouschek 2008; Gailmard and Patty 2012; Rudalevige 2002, 2015). However, the president must also consider the substantial informational and opportunity costs that accompany centralization. First, executive staff size is minuscule compared to federal agencies, and necessarily filled with more generalists. Thus, there may be a loss of expertise when centralizing a policy instead of delegating to an agency. The president may seek to expand White House capacity to narrow the gap in expertise, but enlarging centralized staff too much can remove the very benefits of centralization, as the centralized staff begin to suffer from coordination and control problems (Nathan 1983). Centralization must therefore be very selectively applied in the face of diminishing marginal returns. Finally, centralization can lead to additional bureaucratic redundancy and associated costs (Light 1995).

In the most comprehensive evaluation of centralization to date, Rudalevige (2002) relies upon a transaction cost framework to explain when a president centralizes. That is, the president considers whether it is less costly to create a policy “in house” rather than delegate to an agency and selects the cheaper option (Rudalevige 2002). His work takes an archival approach to address the challenges of measuring centralization, focusing on randomly sampled individual policies from the president’s legislative agenda, as well as executive orders, to place policies on a categorical centralization scale. (Rudalevige 2002, 2021).

In the American federal government, however, the president's primary alternative to centralizing policy "in house" is not merely delegation, but delegation to agencies run by a potentially flexible number of political appointees. Consequently, politicization is considered the other primary tool that presidents use to increase their control over executive branch policymaking (Moe 1985). The delegation decision can never really be made absent considerations of politicization.

Fundamentally, politicization comes down to a responsiveness-competence trade-off (D. E. Lewis 2008). On the responsiveness side, there is little doubt that political appointees are able to bring agencies into closer ideological alignment with the president. This may be helpful both for the president in getting policies closer to her preferences, and also for the public, by increasing the democratic responsiveness of the institutions, as it brings the actions of unelected bureaucrats closer to the electoral preferences of the voting public (Nathan 1983; Moe 1985). However, an overabundance of political appointees can reduce the capacity of the agency, both directly and indirectly (e.g., Hecl 1977; Krause 2009; D. E. Lewis 2008; Richardson 2019; Suleiman 2003).

Little is known about how centralization and politicization relate to one another. The fundamental debate on this topic is whether the strategies of centralization and politicization serve as complements or substitutes (Rudalevige 2009). Some scholars view the strategies as complementary, and so presidents should employ both whenever they are trying to gain further control over executive policymaking (Moe 1985; Bubb and Warren 2014). However, others, including the transaction cost approach, view both centralization and politicization as costly strategies with someone unique costs and benefits, to be employed strategically as substitutes, depending on the situation (e.g., Nathan 1983; Rudalevige and Lewis 2005; Rudalevige 2009). Importantly, these strategies do not have to be implemented administration-wide, but can vary by policy or policy area, since the president evaluates the costs of each strategy and select

whichever option is cheaper, dependent on context (Rudalevige 2002). My theory, which I discuss further in the following section, formalizes the strategic calculations of the transaction cost approach, assigning costs and benefits to each strategy in accordance with the empirical literature on each.

However, the empirical literature that combines centralization and politicization is even more sparse than the theoretical. Rudalevige (2002) touches upon the topic but does not find any statistically significant relationship, perhaps due to lacking a fine-grained measure of politicization. Some of these shortcomings are addressed in Rudalevige and Lewis (2005), which unites Lewis' measures of politicization with Rudalevige's centralization data and presents initial empirical evidence that the two strategies serve as substitutes (Rudalevige and Lewis 2005). However, simultaneity issues make testing centralization and politicization in the same model difficult (Rudalevige 2002; Rudalevige and Lewis 2005).¹ One avenue to overcome this challenge is to create a dependent variable that measures both centralization and politicization, which has not yet been attempted in the literature prior to this paper, to the author's knowledge. Beyond the complements-substitutes conversation, little to no research has examined additional ways that the availability of both centralization and politicization may affect the use of the other.

3 Theory and Hypotheses

As mentioned above, the first dissertation chapter presents formalizations of the president's centralization and politicization decisions. This portion of the paper walks through the fundamental logic of the chapter's policy creation model, distilling a number of empirically verifiable predictions to be tested in the following sections.

In the policy creation model, the president faces a choice between centralizing

1. A weakness that the authors frankly acknowledge. Their analyses assume that politicization precedes centralization, yet the paper also provides descriptive evidence that centralization typically corresponds with, if not precedes, the implementation of politicization.

the creation of a policy or delegating it to an agency with a distinct ideal point.² If the president chooses to delegate, she can also select a level of politicization for the agency (if any). There is incentive to delegate to the agency because the agency knows information about how to best create the policy that is not known to the president. If the president decides to centralize, she can try to create her ideal policy, but must invest in centralized capacity, devoting limited time, staff and resources in order to learn this information about the policy area and create the policy. The cost of doing this increases in the complexity of the policy area, as such policy areas require additional staff resources. Furthermore, the centralized staff may make errors in determining how to best create the policy, and these errors also grow larger as the complexity of the policy area increases.

On the other hand, if the president chooses to delegate, the agency is given full power to create the policy. As a result, the president experiences policy loss according to the divergence in policy preferences between the two actors. To reduce this ideological distance, the president can engage in politicization, which shifts the ideal point of the agency closer to her own. However, as politicization increases, agency capacity decreases, leading the agency to be more prone to make errors as it creates the policy. Thus, while politicization can reduce policy loss from divergent preferences, it does so at the cost of increased variance in policy outcomes due to these error. Thus, the president must weigh the expected utility of investing in centralization with delegating to the agency, selecting the level of politicization that maximizes the competence-responsiveness trade-off. Below, I highlight a few predictions from this model that lend themselves toward empirical testing.

First, as ideological distance between the president and agency increases, the cost of centralization is unaffected, since policy is made within the White House.

2. The theory chapter also includes a model that focuses on policy implementation and does not assume the two strategies are substitutes (or complements). I find that centralization and politicization still function as substitutes even absent such assumptions.

However, the cost of politicization increases in ideological distance, as the president balances ever higher levels of politicization with the policy loss from delegating to the ideologically distant agency. As a result, centralization becomes comparatively more attractive, so we should expect that the president is increasingly likely to engage in centralization as ideological distance increases. While this prediction is not new to the literature, the logic behind it is original to the model and the prediction has never been directly tested, due to the empirical challenges of measuring centralization by policy areas and ideological distance between the president and federal agencies (Rudalevige 2015). Using the data discussed in the following section, this paper overcomes these empirical barriers and directly examines the relationship between centralization and ideological distance.

Hypothesis 1 (Ideology): Centralization is increasing in ideological distance between the agency and the president.

In addition to causing centralization to increase, the fact that ideological distance affects politicization costs but not centralization costs leads to another more specific prediction that pushes against prior literature. Since the president is willing to engage in greater politicization the further away the agency is, as she balances the competence-responsiveness trade-off, the prior literature theorizes that politicization should be monotonically increasing in ideological distance (e.g., D. E. Lewis 2008; Richardson 2019). While this holds true in my model when politicization is cheaper than centralization, the increasing costs associated with politicization mean that it should be replaced by centralization as ideological distance grows.

Hypothesis 2 (Centralization vs. Politicization): Politicization is replaced by centralization as ideological distance between the president and agency increases.

Finally, in the model from chapter 1, the cost to centralize is dependent upon the

staffing capacity required to create policy in a given area. Opportunity costs greatly influence centralization and more complex policy areas take more staff resources and are more prone to error than less complex policies. Relatedly, Rudalevige finds evidence that individual policies that are large and complex are less likely to be centralized (Rudalevige 2002). I hypothesize here that as a policy area generally requires greater capacity and expertise, it is less likely to be centralized. I test this in two ways. First, for policy areas that require significant technical knowledge, the costs of developing centralized capacity may become prohibitive. Therefore, more technically complex policy areas should be less likely to be centralized. Second, certain policy areas may or may not be viewed as complex, but nonetheless may require a particularly high proportion of domain-specific expertise. Centralizing these policy areas would demand significant time for existing staff to gain expertise and/or require the hiring of staff specific to the issue. Thus, centralizing policies in these domains would also be quite expensive.

Hypothesis 3a (Capacity—Complexity): Centralization is less likely in highly complex policy areas.

Hypothesis 3b (Capacity—Domain-specific expertise): Centralization is less likely in policy areas that require a high level of domain-specific expertise.

4 Data and Methods

In order to test these theoretically derived implications, it is necessary to quantify centralization, politicization, agency ideology, and different types of policy area complexity, beyond any control variables. The most noteworthy of these is centralization, which has never before been measured by policy area.

This paper introduces two new measures of centralization, both of which are created using survey responses from careerist executives throughout the federal government and assess centralization by policy area. The Survey on the Future of Government Service is a series of surveys of federal government executives conducted once per presidential administration by the Princeton Survey Research Center. This survey is sent to political appointees, career members of the Senior Executive Service, and other high-level federal executives. There have been three waves of the survey, covering the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, respectively.³ The response rate for SFGS I was 32% (2,398/7,448), 24% (3,551 of 14,698) for SFGS II, and in SFGS III only 9% (1,485/16,232) responded. I limit all analyses presented in this paper to careerists. This provides a maximum sample size of 2,021 for SFGS I, 3,122 for SFGS II, and 1,632 for SFGS III, though sample sizes for each analysis may be smaller due to missingness in survey responses or other variables. Aggregated measures from small independent agencies with fewer than 20 potential and 10 actual respondents on that question were excluded for the sake of accurate measures and protecting respondent anonymity.⁴ Finally, due to lack of availability of control variables, all respondents within the EOP, as well as the United States Postal Service and Tennessee Valley Authority, were excluded from analyses, though these agencies were large enough to meet the respondent cutoff.

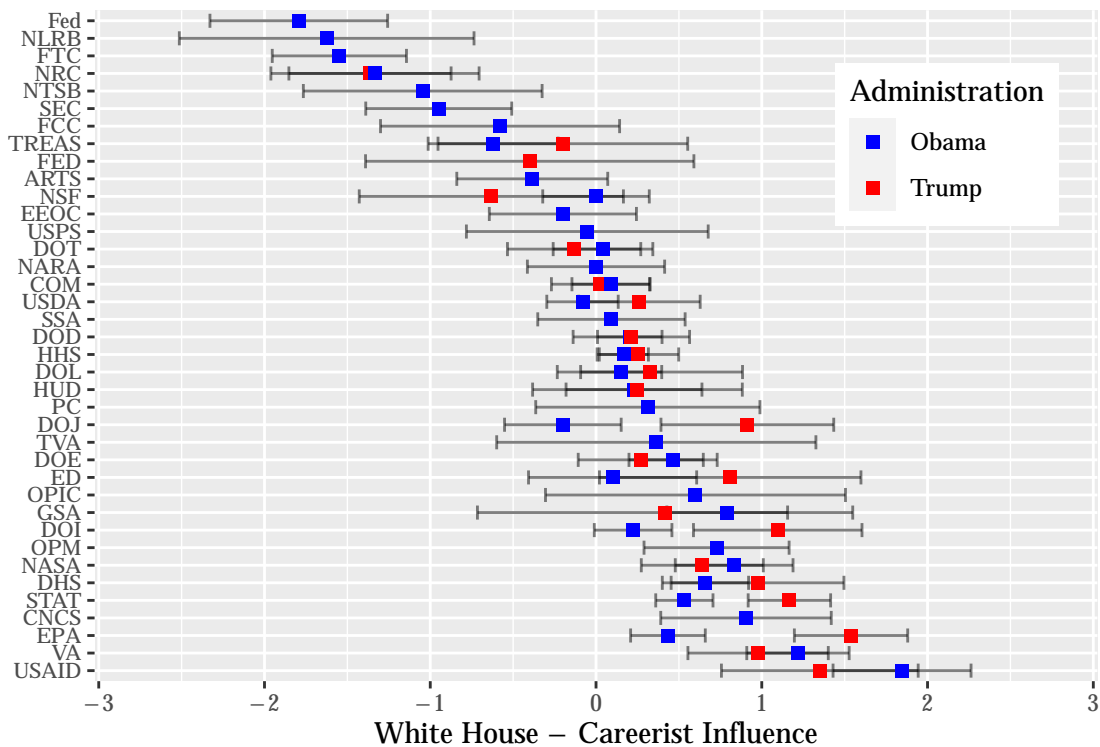
The first centralization measure is derived from a question that appears in all three surveys and asks about the policy influence wielded by various groups and institutions, such as congressional committees, the White House, and the Office of Management and Budget, stating “In general, how much influence to you think the following groups have over policy decisions” in the respondent’s policy area. Respondents answered

3. SFGS I was conducted in the winter of 2007-2008 for the Bush administration, SFGS II was fielded during Fall 2014 for the Obama administration, and SFGS III was administered throughout the second half of 2020 for the Trump administration.

4. For bureau-level analyses, bureaus that did not meet the size requirements were grouped together by department/agency and included if the corresponding aggregation met the sample size restrictions.

on a five-point scale from “None” to “A great deal,” rescaled to be numeric (0-4). The difference between White House influence on policy decisions relative to senior careerist influence was taken, creating a scale from -4 to 4, with -4 indicate maximum agency careerist influence and 4 signifying maximum White House influence. Thus, a higher number on this scale is interpreted as greater centralization. The structure of this measure is quite similar to the measure of politicization presented in Richardson (2019), where the author uses the difference between political appointee influence and careerist influence from the same SFGS question to measure politicization. Figure 1 displays average reported centralization across cabinet departments and large independent agencies for the Trump and Obama administrations.

Figure 1: Centralized Policy Influence Across Administrations



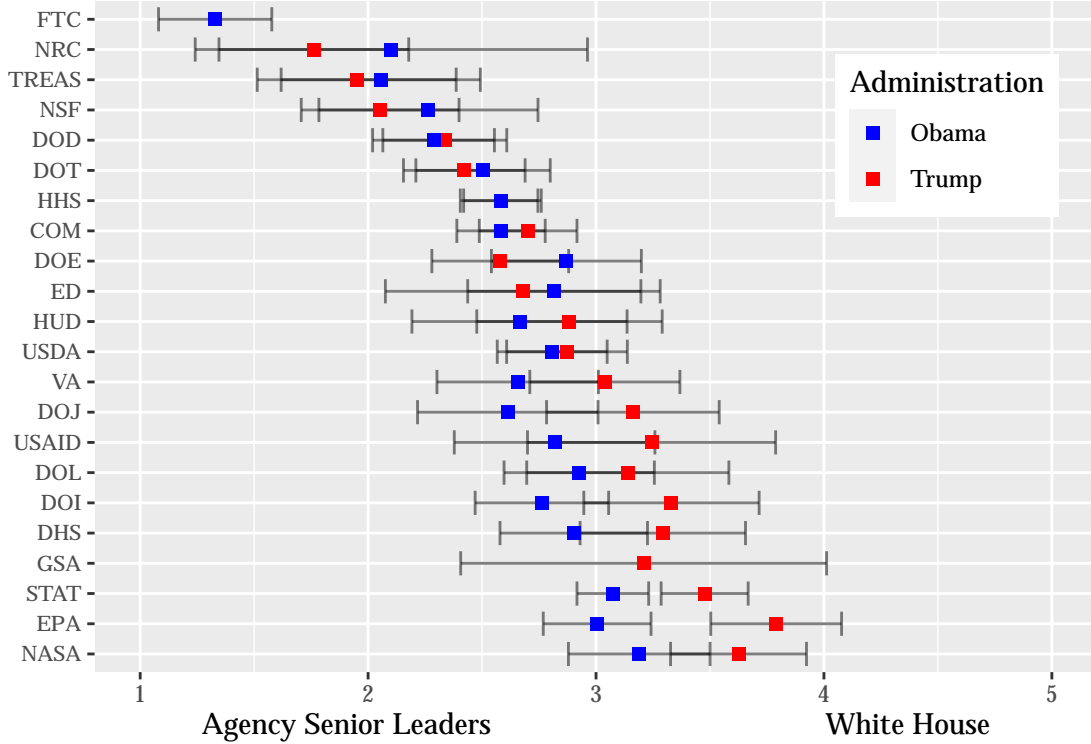
Since this is the first agency-based measure of centralization, it is difficult to directly validate. However, it is noteworthy that this measure does appear to follow several trends that align with reasonable expectations for centralization, lending

legitimacy to the measure. For example, highly technical, statutorily independent agencies, like the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, tend to report the lowest levels of centralization across administrations. Meanwhile, respondents in less statutorily independent departments and agencies that are also perceived to be more liberal, such as the EPA, report higher centralization under the Trump than Obama administrations. Finally, the Obama administration appears to have focused centralization efforts on areas of priority for his campaign/administration, such as public service (USAID; CNCS), or those suffering from scandal (GSA; VA). Additional details, including agency averages for the Bush administration, descriptive statistics by administration, and a screenshot of the survey question, can be found in the Appendix.

The second new measure of centralization comes from the most recent edition of the SFGS. It more directly contrasts centralization with delegation and asks specifically about centralizing the agency’s policymaking agenda. The prompt presents respondents with a sliding scale in response to the question, “In [your agency], who tends to set the policymaking agenda?” The scale places “Agency senior leaders” on one side and “White House” on the other side, with “Equal influence” in between. For those who served in previous presidential administrations, the question was also posed for the Obama and Bush administrations, respectively. The agency averages for the Trump and Obama administrations are included in Figure 2 below.

This measure is similar to the first, but differs in important ways. First, respondents are asked to directly contrast White House and agency influence, while in the previous measure the two avenues of influence were asked separately. This should prime respondents to think more specifically about the centralization-delegation decision. A strong downside to this measure, however, is that it relies on several-year-old recollections, which may cause bias. The proportion of respondents who either were not asked about previous administrations or chose not to respond also substantially limits the sample size, which was already substantially smaller in the most recent sur-

Figure 2: Centralized Agenda-Setting Across Administrations



vey, with over one third of respondents not answering for the Obama administration and over one half for the Bush administration. That being said, it does correlate fairly strongly with the policy influence centralization measure⁵ and once again aligns with reasonable expectations, with independent agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission and Nuclear Regulatory Commission scoring very low in centralization, while the Trump administration EPA is rated as the most centralized agency. On average, respondents in the Trump administration reported higher levels of centralization than those in the Obama administration, 2.85 to 2.68, respectively.

Since the president’s centralization and politicization decisions affect one another, including one as a dependent variable and one as an independent variable in a regression creates simultaneity bias. Therefore, both concepts need to be included in

5. The correlation between the agency averages for the two centralization measures is 0.88 (n = 18) for the Bush administration, 0.75 (n = 21) in the Obama administration, and 0.87 (n = 21) for the Trump administration. The individual-level correlation between the measures is 0.56 (n = 1,124) for the Trump administration.

the dependent variable in order to study how centralization and politicization relate. However, the traditional measures of centralization and politicization are not directly comparable. For example, politicization is often quantified by the proportion of managers in an agency that are politically appointed (e.g., D. E. Lewis 2008) while no measure of centralization at the agency level even exists. Therefore, to measure politicization relative to centralization, as needed to test Hypothesis 2, I employ the original SFGS question regarding the policy influence of various individuals and groups. Specifically, I take the difference between reported appointee influence and White House influence, which were both asked on the same scale as a two parts of the same question. The result is a measure of the reported relative influence of the White House and political appointees. A 4 on this scale would indicate “a great deal” of appointee influence over policy with no White House influence, while a -4 indicates maximum White House influence over policy compared to appointee influence. A zero on the scale marks equal influence, whether both were rated high or low. Thus, the measure does not assume that the strategies are complements or substitutes, but rather observes whether one strategy grows in influence relative to the other or not. It is worth acknowledging that this measure does not perfectly measure politicization being replaced by centralization, but rather the relative influence of centralized versus politicized personnel, which I argue is a closely related concept, and necessary to make centralization and politicization directly comparable.

Agency ideology is a key factor for predicting when a president will centralize or politicize. There are two principal reasons that make agency ideology a particularly difficult concept to evaluate. First, agency bureaucrats do not take any public positions, as do other political actors, whether they be members of Congress, judges, or the President. Second, it is essential that any ideology measure not be post-treatment of politicization. Otherwise, it will not accurately measure the president’s centralization or politicization decision. Thus, the measure of agency ideology must be distinct

from the influence of political appointees. The SFGS has included two approaches to meet both of these requirements, both of which I employ in this paper to similar results.

In the first measure, respondents were asked whether or not they supported a series of high-profile bills that had been voted on during the current or previous Congress, essentially asking them to take votes on bills (albeit in a private setting). This enables the scaling of members of Congress, each survey respondent, and the president onto a single ideological spectrum as introduced in Clinton et al. (2012) for the Bush administration and also found in Richardson (2019) for the Obama administration. I follow the same Bayesian item response theory method as these papers to create ideal points for careerists in the Trump administration.⁶ I define agency ideology as the mean careerist ideal point for agencies with at least 20 potential and 10 actual respondents. As measured by these ideal points, agencies tend to be moderate or slightly left of center, while presidents are more ideologically extreme. The second measure comes from SFGS 2 and asks respondents to rate the latent, stable ideology of various agencies (not their own) across presidential administrations (Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2017). These responses were then scaled using Bayesian item response theory (Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2017). Once again, additional details regarding both variables can be found in the Appendix.

Corresponding to Hypotheses 3a and 3b, the analyses include two different variables to measure which policy areas require substantial capacity. First, for the complexity of the policy area, I use Office of Personnel Management (OPM) data (2019) to calculate the proportion of employees with an advanced degree (defined as Masters or above) in the agency in the quarter the survey was issued. Second, to estimate domain-specific expertise, I employ an SFGS measure that asks respondents to rate the percentage of expertise that can only be acquired by working in the respondent's

6. Ideology measures for President Trump are not currently available through Voteview.

agency. This measure is also converted to a proportion. The agency-level correlation between these two measures is 0.32.

In order to take into account the president's statutory ability to engage in centralization and politicization in a given policy area, all analyses include one or both dimensions of the agency independence measures from Selin (2015), as appropriate. The first dimension summarizes limits on appointment powers, which may inhibit the use of politicization, while the second dimension quantifies the limits on reviewing agency policy creation, affecting the ease of centralized policy influence (Selin 2015). Another factor that may affect the ease of centralizing or politicizing a policy is whether other policies in that area have already been centralized or politicized. In fact, once centralized/politicized capacity and processes have been established, it may even be difficult to undo them and implement a decentralized process or transfer power back to careerists in an agency. Thus, all analyses control for the level of centralization and/or politicization, respectively, reported in the previous survey. This means that the average level of the dependent variable for a given agency in the Bush administration serves as a control for the analyses involving the Obama administration, and Obama for the Trump administration. Since the centralized policy agenda question asks about respondent's memories of the previous administration, I use the policy influence measure taken during the previous administration to serve as the lagged dependent variable for those analyses, in an effort to limit how much the results rely on respondent's recollections. Furthermore, this helps maintain sample sizes, particularly for the Obama administration regressions, as fewer than half of respondents rated the level of centralized agenda setting for the Bush administration. Similar to the ideology data, these measures are only included if there were at least 20 potential and 10 actual respondents within the agency on the question of interest. As with all measures, descriptive statistics are in the Appendix.

For the analyses based on the policy influence question, I use ordered logistic

regression to account for the fact that centralization and politicization are both measured with an ordinal variable. An ordered logit does not require a linear relationship between the levels (that is, that the difference between category 1 and 2 is the same as 2 and 3) like Ordinary Least Squares linear regression (OLS). Instead, it requires the assumption that the predictors that describe the relationship between each category is the same for each level (known as the proportional odds or parallel regression assumption). Thus, the analyses in with a ordinal dependent variable employ the following specification:

$$P(\hat{y}_i \leq j) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\alpha + \mathbf{x}_i \boldsymbol{\beta})}} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

In this case, $y_i \in \{-4, 4\}$ is the influence ranking by respondent i , $j \in \{-4, 4\}$ is a given level of the dependent variable, and \mathbf{x}_i is the set of covariates (agency/bureau ideology, complexity of policy area, domain-specific expertise, statutory limits on centralization/politicization, and the lagged agency mean of the dependent variable) applicable for that individual.

The analyses where the centralized policy agenda measure serves as the dependent variable employ OLS, since the dependent variable is numerical, originating from a continuous sliding scale between 1 and 5. That is,

$$\hat{y}_i = \mathbf{x}_i \boldsymbol{\beta} + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where $y_i \in [1, 5]$ is the rating by respondent i and \mathbf{x}_i is the set of covariates for the individual. The one difference from the set of covariants in the ordered logit analyses is that the lagged policy influence centralization rating from the previous administration is used instead of the agency mean of the same question for the previous administration from the 2020 SFGS. This enables the lagged measure to come from questions asked during the administration in question. Robust standard errors are

used in all analyses.

5 Results and Discussion

Table 1 examines Hypotheses 1, 3a and 3b for the Trump administration, while Table 2 does the same for the Obama administration, with equivalent specifications in each column. To review, Hypothesis 1 states that centralization should increase as the president becomes more ideologically distant from an agency, while Hypotheses 3a and 3b posit centralization should decrease as policy areas require greater capacity, whether through policy complexity (3a) or area-specific expertise (3b). This means that a significantly positive coefficient for agency liberalism in Table 1, and agency conservatism in Table 2, would support Hypothesis 1. Meanwhile, a negative coefficient for advanced education and agency-specific expertise would align with Hypotheses 3a and 3b, respectively.

The dependent variable in the first two columns of both tables is the relative influence of the White House to senior careerists over policy decisions in the respondent's agency, thus both columns show ordinal logistic regressions. The continuous scale contrasting the influence of agency senior leaders to the White House with regard to setting the agency's policy agenda serves as the dependent variable in Columns (3) and (4), which are tested using OLS. Columns (1) and (3) evaluate ideology at the department or independent agency level, while Columns (2) and (4) examine bureau ideology.

The primary difference between the two tables is that ideology is scaled in increasing liberalism in Table 1 and increasing conservatism in Table 2. This means that across both tables, a positive coefficient indicates greater centralization as ideological distance from the president increases. As can be seen, most specifications show a statistically significant relationship between centralization and both agency

Table 1: Centralization in the Trump Administration

	<i>WH - Careerist Infl.</i>		<i>Centralized Agenda</i>	
	<i>(Ordinal logit)</i>		<i>(OLS)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Agency liberalism	2.276*** (0.631)		2.329*** (0.478)	
Bureau liberalism		1.576*** (0.495)		0.973*** (0.345)
Advanced education	-1.717*** (0.504)	-1.546*** (0.497)	-1.619*** (0.328)	-1.225*** (0.322)
Agency-specific expertise	3.039** (1.221)	3.300*** (1.228)	2.806*** (0.849)	3.355*** (0.838)
Lagged centralization	1.044*** (0.117)	1.044*** (0.119)	0.779*** (0.080)	0.742*** (0.082)
Statutory limits	0.169** (0.083)	0.187** (0.086)	0.155*** (0.058)	0.161*** (0.061)
Constant			1.844*** (0.471)	1.317*** (0.451)
Observations	1,181	1,178	1,078	1,076
Adjusted R ²			0.097	0.079

Note: Across all specifications, *lagged centralization* is the department/agency average White House - Careerist policy influence for the Obama administration. Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two-tailed)

and bureau ideology, as theorized. These relationships are substantively significant as well. In Column (1) of Table 1, an agency in the 10th percentile of liberalism has a 0.46 probability of rating White House influence as greater than careerist influence. This grows to 0.56 for an agency in the 90th percentile, a 22% increase. Bureau ideology (Column 2) has a nearly identical relationship, with the same 10th to 90th percentile change shifting predicted probabilities from 0.45 to 0.55. Columns (3) and (4) demonstrate substantively similar results with the centralization of policymaking agenda measure. Here, the same 10th to 90th percentile shift in agency ideology is associated with a 0.39 increase in the centralization scale and a 0.25 increase in centralization in the bureau ideology regression.

In Columns (1) and (2) of Table 2, the relationship between centralization and agency ideology in the Obama administration is even more pronounced than in the Trump administration from Table 1. On the other hand, the policy agenda centralization scale does not have a relationship with agency ideology that is statistically distinguishable from zero. It is worth noting that the policy agenda measure is based upon recollections of the Obama administration, taken in the 2020 survey from careerists who had served in the Obama administration, leading to a smaller sample size, among other differences. In Column (1), a shift from the 10th to 90th percentile of agency conservatism was associated with the predicted probability of greater White House than careerist influence changing from 0.34 to 0.53, a 56% increase. For bureau ideology, the corresponding ideological shift results in a 40% increase in the predicted probability, from 0.35 to 0.49. The results for both Table 1 and Table 2 are nearly identical when the agency ideology measure from Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2017) is used instead, as shown in the Appendix. Clearly, as agencies became more ideologically distant from the president, both the Obama and Trump administrations were more likely to centralize those policy areas.

These tables also test Hypotheses 3a and 3b, which state that policy areas that

Table 2: **Centralization in the Obama Administration**

	<i>WH - Careerist Infl.</i>		<i>Centralized Agenda</i>	
	<i>(Ordinal logit)</i>		<i>(OLS)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Agency conservatism	1.503*** (0.263)		0.291 (0.238)	
Bureau conservatism		1.032*** (0.203)		0.240 (0.208)
Advanced education	1.428*** (0.461)	0.959** (0.423)	0.056 (0.398)	-0.031 (0.380)
Agency-specific expertise	-3.664*** (0.810)	-3.857*** (0.807)	0.192 (0.718)	0.814 (0.748)
Lagged centralization	0.731*** (0.079)	0.726*** (0.080)	0.482*** (0.066)	0.558*** (0.067)
Statutory limits	-0.195*** (0.066)	-0.194*** (0.066)	-0.028 (0.053)	0.017 (0.056)
Constant			2.648*** (0.358)	2.309*** (0.368)
Observations	2,234	2,234	954	885
Adjusted R ²			0.057	0.073

Note: Across all specifications, *lagged centralization* is the department/agency average White House - Careerist policy influence for the Bush administration. Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two tailed)

are more complex or require greater domain-specific expertise, respectively, should see lower levels of centralization. The proportion of agency employees with an advanced degree is used as a proxy for the complexity of the policy area. In Table 1, areas with higher levels of education were less likely to be centralized. This trend is consistent in all analyses for the Trump administration, but surprisingly does not hold for the Obama administrations, with a strong positive relationship between the proportion of advanced degrees and reported centralization in Columns (1) and (2) of Table 2. No discernible relationship emerges in the analyses that required respondents to recall back to the Obama administration.

However, for the second staff capacity hypothesis, I predict policy areas requiring greater agency-specific expertise would also be more difficult to centralize. In these analyses, the relationship is essentially flipped: centralization in the Trump administration was positively associated with greater expertise, while lower levels of centralization in the Obama administration were reported as more domain-specific expertise was required.

Given reports of the Trump administration seeming to target expertise within agencies, such as the Economic Research Service within the Department of Agriculture (McCrimmon 2019), it may be unsurprising that greater agency-specific expertise is associated with greater centralization in the Trump administration. However, it does not explain why the Trump administration was less likely to centralize policy areas with a high proportion of people with advanced degrees, nor why the relationship between centralization and both measures changes direction in the Obama administration. It is possible that at least part of the reason for these results is due to differences in priorities between the administrations, as policy priority is not taken into account in these models, but was found to be a predictor for centralization in (Rudalevige 2002). Regardless, these results raise additional questions worthy of further research. The relationships between capacity, complexity, and centralization

may be more intricate than previously recognized.

Table 3: **Relative Politicization and Centralization**

	<i>Appointee - White House Influence</i>			
	<i>(Trump Admin.)</i>		<i>(Obama Admin.)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Agency liberalism	-2.504*** (0.718)			
Bureau liberalism		-1.551** (0.622)		
Agency conservatism			-1.139*** (0.267)	
Bureau conservatism				-0.856*** (0.198)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,168	1,165	2,231	2,231

Note: Each column includes the proportion of advanced degrees and agency-specific expertise in the agency, the lagged dependent variable, and both dimensions of Selin's measure of statutory agency independence. Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two-tailed)

Table 3 examines the reported relative influence of White House staff and political appointees to test the relationship between centralization and politicization. The dependent variable is appointee influence on policy decisions minus White House influence. Thus, as the variable increases, politicization increases relative to centralization. The specifications in Table 3 are designed to test Hypothesis 2, which states that greater ideological distance between the president and the agency should be associated with politicization being replaced by centralization. A negative coefficient for the ideological distance variables would be consistent with this hypothesis, while a null or positive coefficient would not. That is, a positive coefficient would indicate that politicization is replacing centralization as agency ideology grows, while a null result may indicate that the two strategies are complements, both increasing with agency ideological distance at similar rates. As in the previous analyses, agency/bureau ideology is scaled in the liberal direction for the Trump administra-

tion and the conservative direction for the Obama administration. Columns (1) and (2) evaluate agency and bureau ideology in the Trump administration, respectively, while Columns (3) and (4) examine the Obama administration.

The results in Table 3 consistently support Hypothesis 2. Politicization is decreasing relative to centralization as ideological distance increases across both the Trump and Obama administrations. For the Trump administration, a jump from the 10th to 90th percentile in agency liberalism leads to a decrease in predicted probability of the respondent reporting greater appointee than White House influence from 0.33 to 0.24. For bureau ideology (Column 2), the difference is essentially equivalent: 0.33 to 0.25. The results from the Obama administration indicate an even a stronger relationship. In Column (3), the probability of a respondent in a liberal agency (10th percentile of conservative ideology) reporting greater appointee than White House influence is 0.40. This probability drops to 0.27 for an agency in the 90th percentile, a 33% decrease. Column (4) has a nearly identical drop, from 0.40 to 0.28. I also complete the same analyses with the Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis ideology measure. With this measure, the relationship between relative centralization and politicization and agency ideology is not statistically distinguishable from zero for the Trump administration, while the results in the Obama administration are nearly identical to those presented here.

The previous literature on politicization had posited that politicization is simply positively associated with ideological distance (e.g., D. E. Lewis 2008), with disagreement regarding the relationship between centralization and politicization (Rudalevige and Lewis 2005). To the author's knowledge, no existing work has theorized that centralization should begin to replace politicization as the distance grows. While the specifications here are not a perfect test, they do provide substantial evidence that the relationship between centralization, politicization, and ideological distance is not as straightforward as previously thought and warrant further examination. In fact,

these results challenge the existing literature, providing evidence that centralization and politicization both do not simply increase monotonically as the previous literature indicated. Instead, in most specifications, politicization is replaced by centralization as ideological distance between the president and an agency grows.

6 Conclusion

While presidents have long complained about the responsiveness of federal agencies (or lack thereof), the disconnect that can arise between the White House and the rest of the executive branch has perhaps never been more apparent than in recent times. Understanding the avenues through which the president seeks to influence policymaking in the executive branch continues to increase in importance.

The analyses presented in this paper deepen our understanding of how presidents strategically employ centralization and provide new insight regarding the relationship between centralization and politicization. Using a series of surveys of government executives, this paper is the first to directly test the relationship between centralization and agency ideology, introducing two novel measures of centralization by policy area. Drawing predictions from my original formal model of presidential centralization and politicization, I find consistent evidence that presidents are, in fact, more likely to centralize when the relevant agency is ideologically incongruent with the president. This holds true in every specification that did not rely on respondents' recollections of previous administrations, regardless of presidential administration, centralization measure, and ideology measure. In addition, I use OPM employment statistics and survey-reported agency-specific expertise to explore the relationship between centralization and policy areas that require high levels of capacity. I find opposite patterns across administrations here, with the Obama administration more likely to centralize agencies with high levels of advanced degrees but engaged in less reported central-

ized in agencies more reliant upon domain-specific expertise. Meanwhile, the Trump administration demonstrates the opposite trends, increasingly centralizing as agency-specific expertise increases, but avoiding centralization as education levels grow.

This paper is also the first to test a possible non-monotonic relationship between agency ideological distance and politicization. Anecdotally, there appear to be instances where presidents do not seek to maximize politicization, but instead seemingly “give up” on ideologically distant agencies (e.g., Lewis, Bernhard, and You 2018). More specifically, my theory states that politicization should be replaced by centralization as ideological distance becomes more extreme. Looking at the difference between reported policy influence from political appointees and the White House, I find evidence that politicization decreases relative to centralization as agencies become less congruent with presidential ideology, as theorized.

Future scholars can continue to build on the empirical foundation laid in this paper to answer additional questions regarding how the president uses centralization and how it relates with politicization. For example, further research should consider how accountability concerns affect the president’s evaluation of each strategy. There are reasons to think that electoral considerations could make centralization and/or politicization less attractive (Ruder 2014) or more attractive (Judd 2017), and further empirical work could help untangle these relationships. In a different vein, current research typically assumes that presidents always value agency capacity. However, this does not seem to be the case, particularly in the Trump administration (Pfiffner 2018) but also among left-leaning presidents and agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Godfrey 2018). Might presidents sometimes use centralization and/or politicization to intentionally reduce agency capacity for agencies whose mission they are not aligned with? This question deserves further exploration. Finally, there remain many avenues of potential research examining how additional strategies of presidential influence over policymaking relate to one another and affect

centralization and politicization.

Presidents continually face a complex strategic environment where they expend substantial effort toward how to best manage and influence policy creation, often turning to centralization and politicization to do so. The president's choice of strategy not only affects the president's ability to manage the executive branch, but can have far-reaching consequences for public policy outcomes. Understanding when and why president centralize and politicize is key to understanding the functioning and policymaking of the executive branch.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Centralization Questions

Figure 3: Centralized Policy Influence Question

In general, how much influence do you think the following groups have over policy decisions in $\$(e://Field/Name)?$

	A great deal	A good bit	Some	Little	None	Don't know
Democrats in Congress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
White House	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Senior civil servants	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Political appointees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Private sector or not-for-profit stakeholders (e.g., regulated parties, advocacy groups)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Office of Management and Budget	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Republicans in Congress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Congressional committees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contractors	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 4: Centralized Agenda-Setting Question

Policy making in some agencies is driven by personnel in the White House, including the President or senior aides. In other agencies, it is agency senior leaders that drive policy decisions with little input from the White House.

In your agency, who tends to set the policymaking agenda?

Agency senior leaders 1 2 Equal influence 3 4 White House 5

Don't know



How about in the Obama Administration?

Agency senior leaders 1 2 Equal influence 3 4 White House 5

Don't know



How about in the George W. Bush Administration?

Agency senior leaders 1 2 Equal influence 3 4 White House 5

Don't know



Next

7.2 Bush Centralization

Figure 5: Bush Administration Centralized Policy Influence

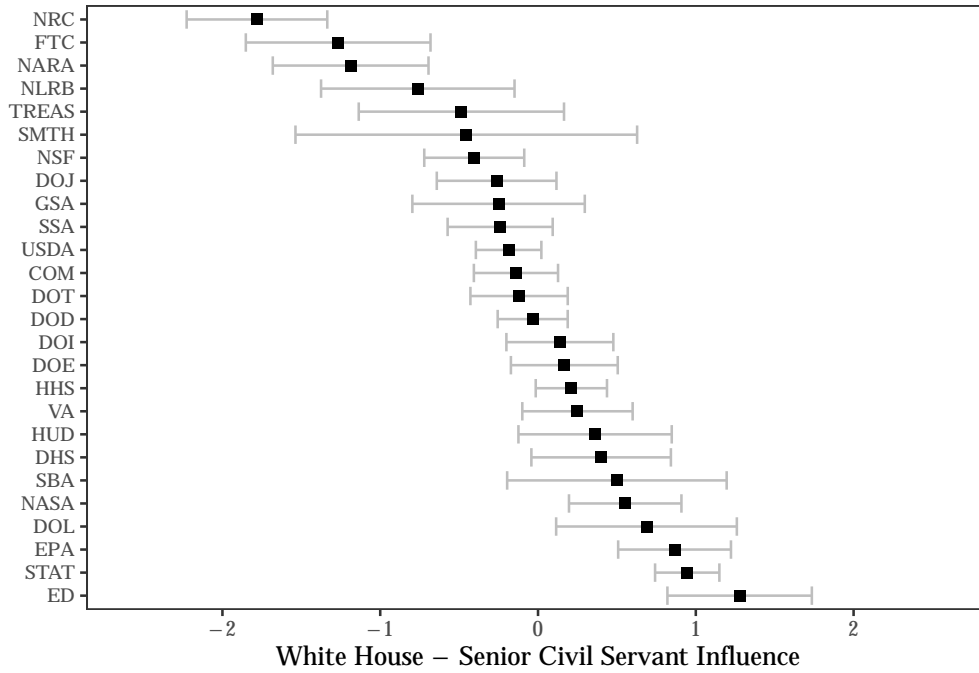
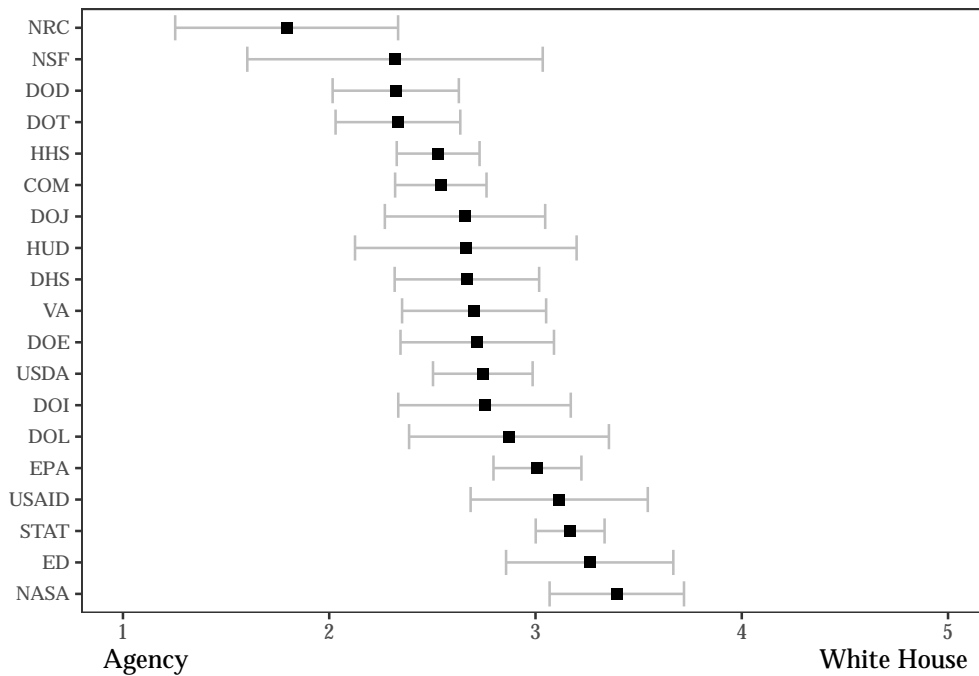


Figure 6: Bush Administration Centralized Agenda-Setting



7.3 Appointee - White House Influence

Figure 7: Trump Administration Appointee - White House Influence

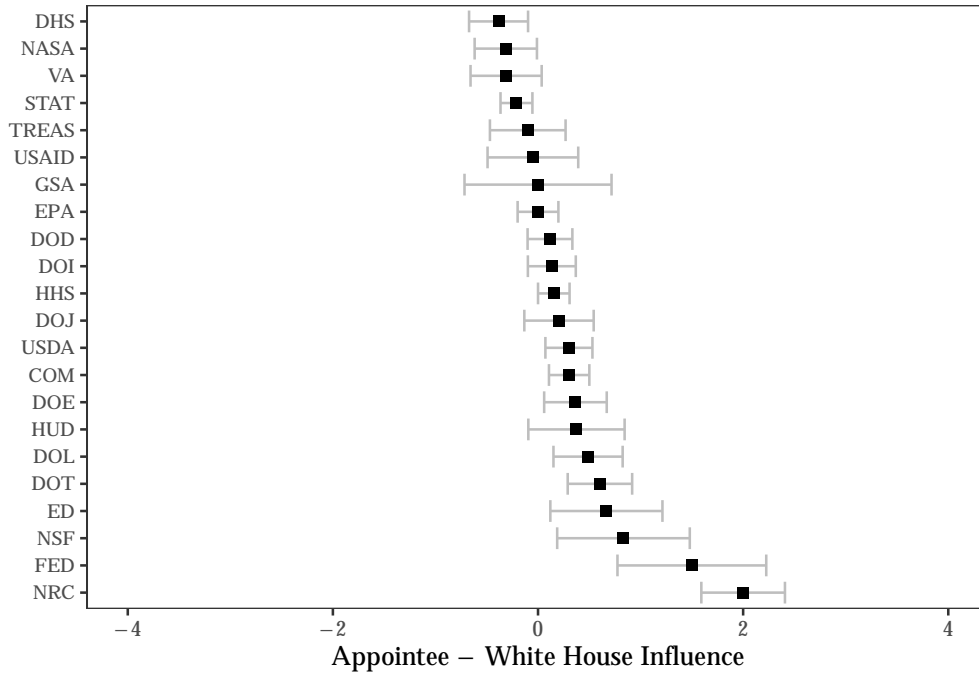


Figure 8: Obama Administration Appointee - White House Influence

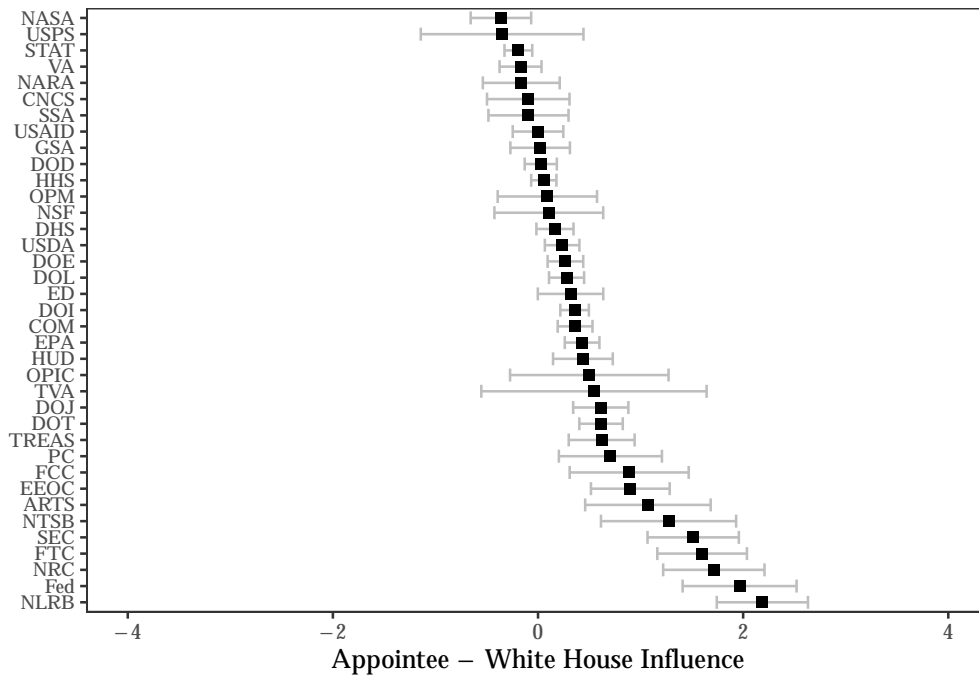
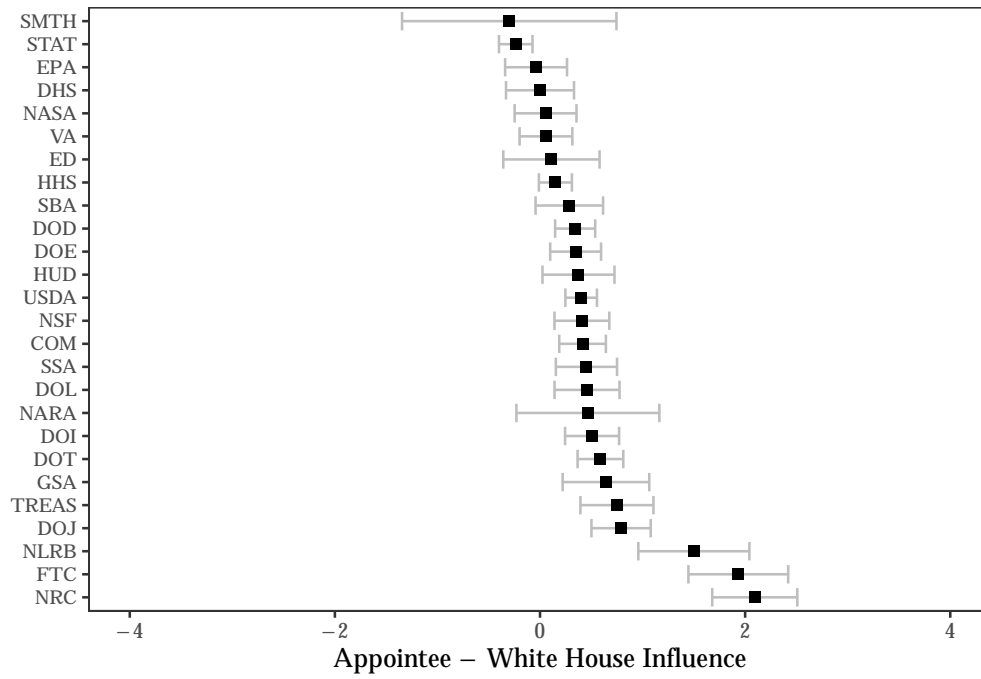


Figure 9: Bush Administration Appointee - White House Influence



7.4 Careerist Ideology

Figure 10: Trump Administration Agency Careerist Ideology

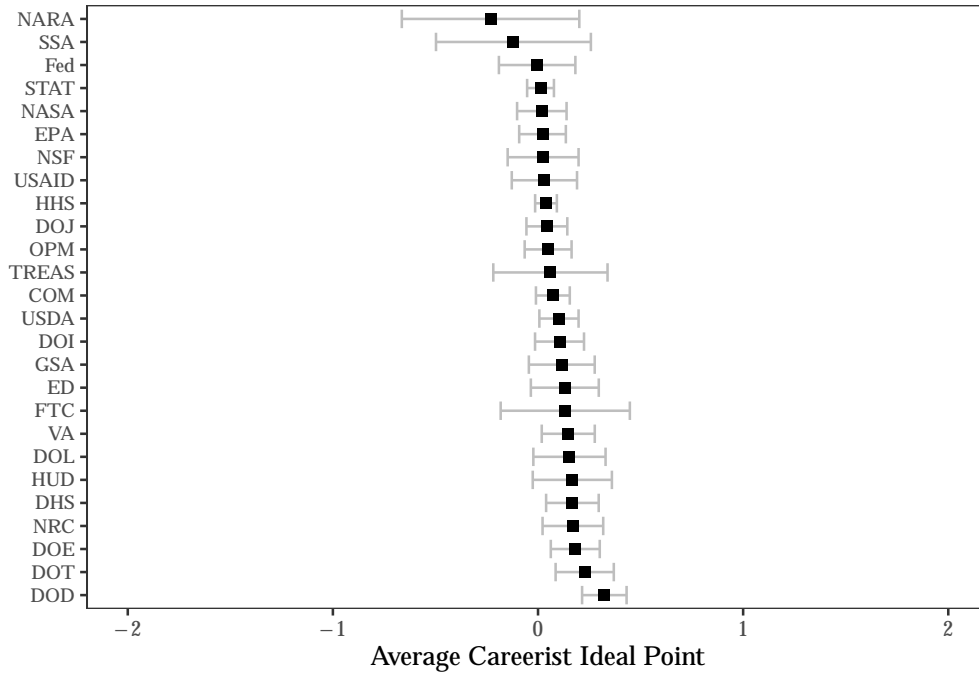


Figure 11: Obama Administration Agency Careerist Ideology

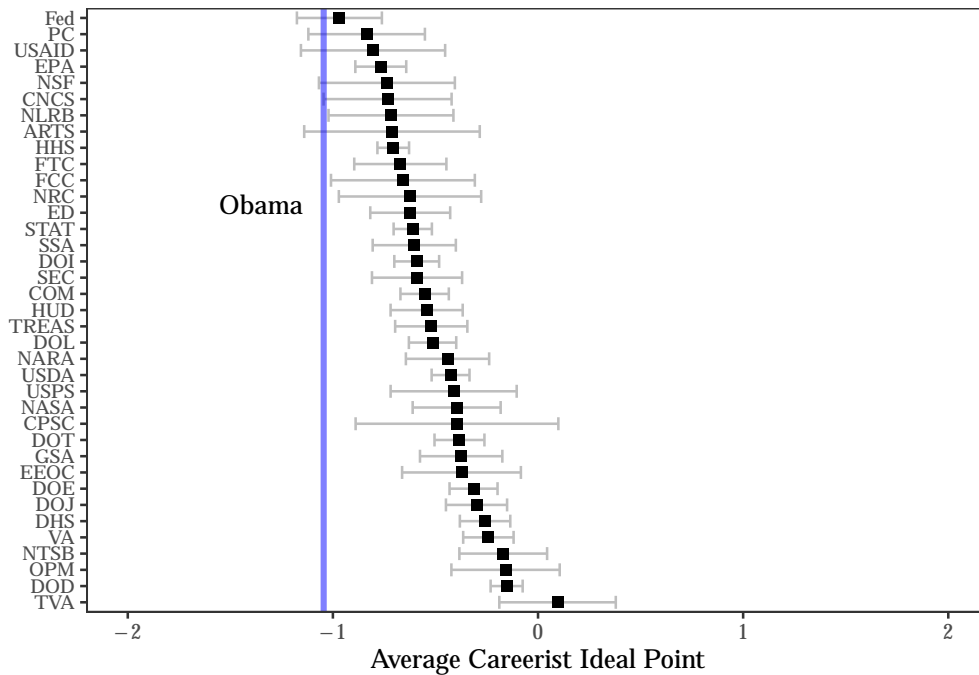
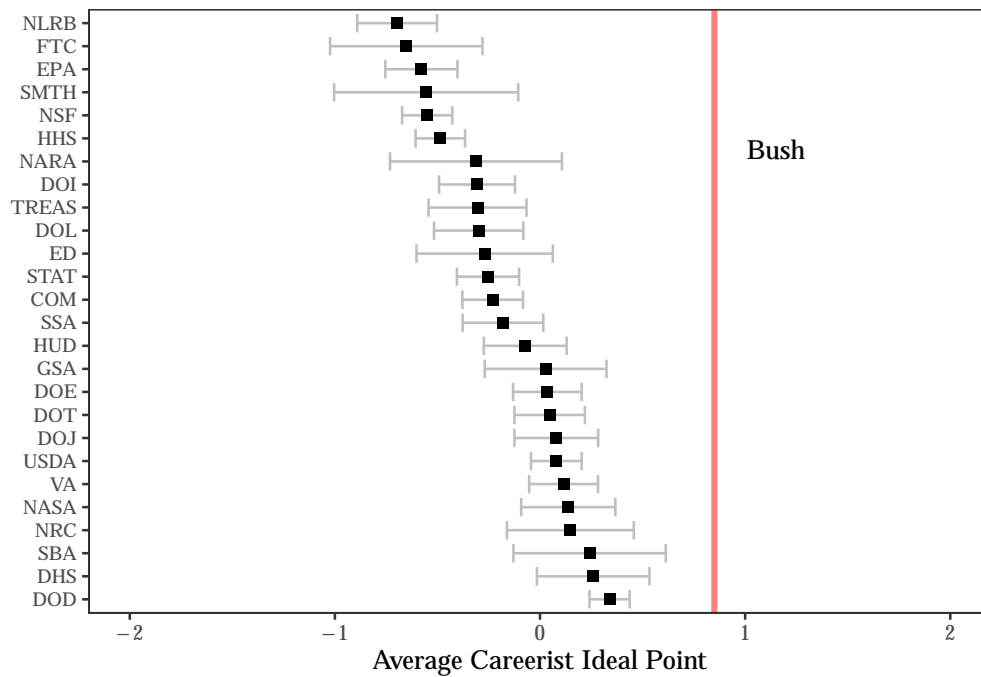


Figure 12: Bush Administration Agency Careerist Ideology



7.5 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4: Trump Administration Analyses Descriptive Statistics (SFGS 3)

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
WH - Careerist influence	1,275	0.445	1.691	-4.000	-1.000	2.000	4.000
Centralized agenda-setting	1,159	2.850	1.212	1.000	1.975	4.000	5.000
Appointee - WH influence	1,260	0.217	1.135	-4.000	0.000	1.000	4.000
Agency liberalism	1,492	-0.105	0.084	-0.317	-0.156	-0.046	0.218
Bureau liberalism	1,488	-0.104	0.103	-0.425	-0.174	-0.035	0.218
Advanced education	1,584	0.287	0.122	0.092	0.200	0.404	0.658
Agency-specific expertise	1,482	0.541	0.043	0.420	0.514	0.560	0.620
Statutory limits (pol)	1,587	-0.235	0.647	-0.845	-0.645	-0.140	2.235
Statutory limits (cent)	1,587	0.233	0.846	-0.534	-0.315	0.416	4.100

Table 5: Obama Administration Analyses Descriptive Statistics (SFGS 2)

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	25%	75%	Max
WH - Careerist influence	2,662	0.125	1.472	-4.000	-1.000	1.000	4.000
Centralized agenda-setting	1,042	2.683	1.011	1.000	1.990	3.328	5.000
WH - Appointee influence	2,665	0.329	1.171	-4.000	0.000	1.000	4.000
Agency ideology	2,936	-0.488	0.198	-0.968	-0.611	-0.314	0.095
Advanced education	2,976	0.238	0.105	0.078	0.145	0.334	0.642
Agency-specific expertise	2,794	0.507	0.052	0.365	0.475	0.533	0.722
Lagged WH - Careerist influence	2,640	0.108	0.527	-1.781	-0.186	0.400	1.278
Lagged WH - Appointee influence	2,640	0.358	0.383	-0.237	0.140	0.458	2.094
Statutory limits (pol.)	3,110	-0.055	0.807	-0.845	-0.605	0.155	2.235
Statutory limits (cent.)	3,110	0.371	1.018	-0.988	-0.332	0.566	4.100

7.6 Alternate Analyses

Table 6: Trump Centralization with Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2017) Ideology

Agency liberalism

Bureau liberalism

Advanced education

Agency-specific expertise

Lagged centralization

Statutory limits

Constant

Observations

Adjusted R²

Note: Across all specifications, *lagged centralization* is the department/agency average White House - Careerist p

Table 7: Obama Centralization with Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2017) Ideology

Agency conservatism

Bureau conservatism

Advanced education

Agency-specific expertise

Lagged centralization

Statutory limits

Constant

Observations

Adjusted R²

Note: Across all specifications, *lagged centralization* is the department/agency average White House - Careerist p

Table 8: Relative strategies with Richardson, Clinton and Lewis (2017) ideology

	<i>Appointee - White House Influence</i>			
	<i>(Trump Admin.)</i>		<i>(Obama Admin.)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Agency liberalism	-0.014 (0.078)			
Bureau liberalism		-0.004 (0.074)		
Agency conservatism			-0.188*** (0.051)	
Bureau conservatism				-0.190*** (0.046)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,168	1,168	2,231	2,231

Note: Each column includes the proportion of advanced degrees and agency-specific expertise in the agency, the lagged dependent variable, and both dimensions of Selin's measure of statutory agency independence. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01