

The Strategic Contexts of Presidential Centralization*

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September 14, 2022

Abstract

Presidents consider a broad array of factors when deciding when to centralize policy creation into the Executive Office of the President. This paper examines how the broader, time-variant political context affects when presidents choose to engage in centralization, based on archival research of 352 policies randomly selected from the Eisenhower through Clinton Administrations. I use these data to test predictions about centralization inspired by an original formal model of the president's centralization-politicization decision. First, I find that Congress clearly impacts the centralization decision, as presidents are more likely to engage in centralization under conditions of divided government or greater ideological disagreement with either chamber of Congress. Within the executive branch, greater centralized staff capacity is distinct from, but associated with, higher levels of centralization. I also find evidence that Republican presidents are more likely than Democratic presidents to centralize governmental reorganization efforts.

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1 Introduction

When Congress passed the Line Item Veto Act in 1996, President Clinton gained the rare opportunity to design a new policy-making process within the executive branch from scratch. One option would have been to create a process built on soliciting suggestions from the affected agencies on how to best use the new power to create a more effective government. Alternatively, he could create a highly centralized process by moving this policy function into the Executive Office of the President (EOP), where it could be carefully managed by his closest aides. On one hand, the agencies knew the intimate details of the budget far better than anyone else and could probably make the best suggestions. On the other hand, those in the agencies may have possessed interests that diverged from the president's, such as seeking to maximize their agency's budget (Niskanen 1971). What did President Clinton and his administration choose to do? They created a completely centralized line-item veto process, whereby staffers in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) created a list of potential line-item vetoes that were then sent only to the "senior economic team" (Haas 1997, 71). This team, in turn, made recommendations directly to President Clinton, who himself made the final decision (Haas 1997).

Presidents have long bemoaned the lack of responsiveness of federal agencies, and long sought to address this lack of responsiveness (whether real or perceived) through engaging in centralization. Centralization, in the presidential context, is 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 (Rudalevige 2015). There is excellent research on many centralization-related strategies, including budgetary and regulatory review (e.g., Acs and Cameron 2013; Wiseman 2009; Neustadt 1954); presidential directives (e.g., Moe and Howell 1999; Howell 2003; Mayer 2001); the use of policy czars (Vaughn and Villalobos 2015); and the insti-

tutionalization of the White House/EOP (e.g., Tomkin 1998; Dickinson and Lebo 2007). In contrast, this paper will focus on centralization as the development of policy within the White House/EOP, since this a key presidential strategy that is particularly difficult to systematically study (Rudalevige 2002, 2009). In addition, the paper will pay particular attention to the distinction between centralization and centralized capacity, as well as the difference between a policy being announced by the President, perhaps even in the form of a presidential directive, and actually being centralized in its creation (Rudalevige 2021).

The first chapter of my dissertation put forth two formal models of presidential centralization and politicization to help answer these questions. In the primary model presented in that chapter, an ideologically motivated president can choose to invest in centralized capacity or delegate to a better informed but ideologically misaligned agency. If delegation is chosen, the president is 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. Meanwhile, Congress, through its statutory, budgetary, and confirmation powers, has the power to veto any proposed increase in politicization made by the president. The model provides new formal justification for some previously hypothesized relationships and uncovers new predictions, as is discussed in greater detail in Section 3.

In this paper, I test the predictions of the model by extending the measure of centralization within the president's legislative program originally presented in Rudalevige (2002). After first determining the president's legislative agenda, 16 policies were selected per Congress. For each of these policies, archival sources from presidential libraries and the National Archives were used to systematically examine the policy creation process and rank it on a four-point centralization scale. This paper focuses on 352 policies randomly sampled from January of 1957 to January of 2001. These data enable the testing of hypotheses whose predictions vary across time, such as the

relationship between congressional ideology and centralization.

The paper begins with an overview of the relevant literature regarding centralization, including how it relates with politicization. In the next section, I present testable hypotheses drawn from my original formal theory of centralization and politicization. This is followed by a description of the various sources of data used to measure centralization across time, as well as the methods employed. Following a presentation and discussion of the results, I conclude with thoughts regarding potential future directions for research.

2 Presidential Use of Centralization

Although centralization is typically considered a tool of the modern presidency, the development of presidential centralization of policy creation has a long history, extending even into the pre-Civil War presidency (Galvin and Shogan 2004). It became a more clearly developed strategy in the Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson presidencies (Rudalevige 2002), and truly became an entrenched and essential tool with the formation of the Budget Bureau in 1921 (Neustadt 1954). These initial efforts toward centralizing became fully institutionalized, as well as expected of presidents, during the Franklin Roosevelt administration and the establishment of the Executive Office of the President (Neustadt 1960).

Undoubtedly, presidential use of centralization gradually increased throughout the first half of the 20th century, but scholars debate whether this growth continued throughout the second half of the 20th century into the 21st. Moe (1985) argues that presidents face an essentially insurmountable gap between public expectations and the power they actually possess, so they work to continually increase their power through centralization and politicization. In response, Rudalevige (2002) examines centralization across much of the second half of the century and finds that centraliza-

tion is not monotonically increasing across time, but instead is strategically employed based on the costs and benefits of centralizing a given policy.

The literature on centralization itself has also developed over the past decades. I will first focus on two common misconceptions of centralization, before moving to the current theoretical and empirical evidence guiding this paper. In some works, centralization is used to describe the growth in centralized capacity. That is, scholars saw the growth in the institutionalization of the EOP and White House as well as the number of staffers working in these offices, and labeled this as centralization. However, I argue that this is better labeled as centralized *capacity*. Centralized capacity is what makes centralization possible; policy-making could not be moved to the EOP unless the EOP has staffers, particularly staffers with the knowledge and skills required to create policy in a given policy area. Centralized capacity is necessary for centralization, but not sufficient. Empirically, the trends of centralization and centralized capacity are far from identical. The EOP experienced several dramatic increases in size and organizational complexity in the immediate decades after it was created in 1939, but has mostly stagnated since the Ford administration (Ragsdale 2014). Nevertheless, overall levels of centralized policy-making have held relatively steady throughout this time period (Rudalevige 2002).

Especially toward the beginning of the 21st century, scholarly attention turned toward so-called “unilateral actions,” such as executive orders and presidential memoranda, as the epitome of centralized policy-making (e.g., Howell 2003; Mayer 2001). However, even policies that may initially appear centralized may, upon closer inspection, be revealed as originating within federal agencies. For example, on January 12, 1998, President Clinton issued a presidential Memorandum on Ending Drug Use and Drug Availability for Offenders, in which he ordered the Attorney General to create legislation for a number of new policies, such as increased penalties for those caught smuggling drugs into prisons. However, while slightly altered by the White House,

“the concepts in the directive were originally proposed by DOJ” and any changes made were also reviewed by the Department of Justice prior to being announced (Kagan 1998, 14).

It turns out, agency-led executive orders are quite common (Rudalevige 2015, 2021). Furthermore, once an executive order is issued, it may or may not be followed (Kennedy 2015). Some scholars now posit that presidential directives may actually be better described as a form of delegation, instead of unilateral, centralized policy-making (e.g., Lowande 2018). Since neither centralized capacity nor presidential directives truly measure centralization, archival work, such as the research begun in Rudalevige (2002), is one of the few ways to truly uncover centralization.

Centralization is employed by presidents for a number of reasons. On the more managerial side, centralization may provide coordination benefits for policies that span a wide variety of topics; centralized staff can be more flexible and innovative than agency-based careerists (Rudalevige 2002, 2015). Accordingly, Rudalevige finds that policies that cut across a greater number of agency jurisdictions and new policies (where the less adaptive agencies also do not have as much of an informational advantage) are more likely to be centralized (Rudalevige 2002, 2012, 2015). On the more political side, 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 (e.g., Nathan 1983; Moe 1985; Rudalevige 2002).

Even beyond policy preferences, centralization can help a president shape policies to improve his or her political outlook. When the Clinton Administration pushed a minimum wage increase in 1999, after having just passed one in 1996, it was not due to economic advice from the Departments of Labor or other agencies. Instead, Senator Ted Kennedy had proposed aggressive minimum wage increases and pressured the White House to support them. This sent White House aids scrambling, as they felt the proposed policy was too much too soon, and therefore wanted to “distract attention”

away from Kennedy's proposal (Sperling 1998). The core economic team presented several options to President Clinton on how to deflect Kennedy's proposal, combining policy proposals and consequences with explicitly political calculations (Sperling 1998). Sometimes, the mixing of policy with politics appears normatively positive, such as the consideration that a proposal to increase the minimum wage "fulfills 1992 campaign promise to have the minimum wage 'keep pace with inflation'" (Sperling 1998). In other words, centralization can increase democratic responsiveness, instead of having unelected bureaucrats make policy decisions. However, the more political process of centralization can also lead to less normatively desirable aspects, such as warnings that indexing the minimum wage to inflation could take away a helpful future campaign issue (Sperling 1998).

However, in contrast to the benefits that can stem from centralization, there are also a few substantial drawbacks. 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). Thus, centralization must be very selectively applied in the face of diminishing marginal returns. Furthermore, centralization almost by definition leads to bureaucratic redundancy, as it necessitates centralized staff to work on policy instead of the federal agency (or, more likely, agencies) under whose domain the policy falls. While there may be strategic benefits to some level of redundancy (Ting 2003), redundancy may also lead to inefficient thickening of the bureaucracy, resulting in lack of clear information transmission and accountability for the organization (Light 1995).

Rudalevige's work is foundational for contemporary work on centralization, though

there remains room for substantial improvement. First, Rudalevige’s framework is not built upon a formal theoretical foundation, but rather a general logic of consistent hypotheses, which I rectified in the first paper of this dissertation. Second, Rudalevige is unable to empirically address the role of agency ideology, or directly compare centralization and politicization. I address both of these challenges in the second dissertation paper. Third, his empirics are increasingly outdated, with a very eventful quarter century having passed since the period covered by his dataset. This paper extends his dataset to (1) test if his predictions continue into the hyper-partisan modern-day presidency and (2) explore new theoretically-motivated predictions.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the American federal government, 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. Politicization fundamentally comes down to a responsiveness-competence trade-off (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 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. Incorporating politicization, with its related but distinct costs and benefits, is essential to understanding the president’s centralization choice. I address this by testing predictions that come from a model that focuses on the president’s joint centralization-politicization decision.

3 Theory and Hypotheses

As mentioned above, the first chapter of my dissertation presents a series of associated models relating centralization with politicization—the president’s primary alternative to influencing policy in the executive branch, and one of the key distinctives that makes the president’s centralization decision different than a general delegation decision (Moe 1985). In this section I go through the fundamental logic of the models and distill from them a number of empirically verifiable predictions, which are tested in the following section.

In the primary model, which focuses on policy creation, the president is faced with a choice between centralizing the creation of a policy or delegating it to an agency with a distinct ideal point. If the president chooses to delegate, she can also select a level of politicization for the agency. There is information about how to best create the policy that is known by the agency but not the president. If the president chooses 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 information about the policy area and create the policy. The cost of doing this increases in the complexity of the policy area. 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 creates 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, bringing the ideal point of the agency closer to her own. However, as politicization increases, agency capacity decreases, causing the agency 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. Thus, the president must weigh the expected utility of investing in centralization to get a policy close to her ideal point 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.

In an extension of the model, I examine the influence that Congress can have on the centralization-politicization decision. I do this by modeling Congress as possessing a veto over new levels of politicization, as in Lewis (2008). Congress may impose a veto on politicization through the appointment process, but also through the appropriations or general legislative process, issuing limitation riders to cap the number of political appointees or changing the requirements of politicization through statute (Lewis 2008). It has previously been thought that centralization is more likely under divided government because an ideologically distant Congress, since it also serves as a principal to federal agencies, would influence agencies to be more ideologically distant from the president (e.g., Rudalevige 2002). However, my theory proposes an additional mechanism for why divided government may be associated with greater levels of centralization: an ideologically distant Congress limits the amount of politicization the president can implement, thus reducing the attractiveness of delegation. Therefore, even excluding the ideological influence that Congress has on the agencies, my theory predicts that centralization should be more likely under divided government.

Hypothesis 1 (Congress): Centralization is more likely when Congress is ideologically opposed to the president.

When examining centralized policy-making it is important to differentiate between centralized capacity and centralized policy-making, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Greater centralized capacity decreases the opportunity costs of centralization, making the president more likely to strategically engage in centralization as staff sizes increase.

Hypothesis 2 (Capacity—Size): Centralization is more likely as centralized

staff grows larger.

It is also important to differentiate between the quantity and quality of staff, as a staffer with extensive policy knowledge and executive branch experience adds much more capacity to the White House than an inexperienced campaign staffer. While it is not possible to measure individual-level staff experience levels across the time frame of the data in this paper,¹ administrations in general gain expertise throughout the course of the presidency. It is well-documented how presidential administrations often start out with shockingly little experience and spend the early days of the administration trying to figure out the White House phone system, for example, instead of creating policy (e.g., Kumar 2015). This is also clear through my own archival work, where correspondences between staffers early in an administration often focus on setting up systems, questions on who to contact regarding a specific issue, etc. Meanwhile, communications later in the administration typically focus primarily on policy-making. Importantly, the notes of each staffer typically get passed to the next who takes the position, providing at least partial continuity in expertise, even amidst turnover. This stands in stark contrast to the complete lack of continuity between presidential administrations (Kumar 2015).

Hypothesis 3a (Capacity—Experience): Centralization is more likely as an administration progresses.

However, like any job, turnover, particularly among managers, should affect the effectiveness of an agency. In particular, the chief of staff is the single person with the most influence over the operations in the White House, second to the president (and maybe not even second to the president in some cases).

1. The White House was not required to publish annual staffing reports until 1995, covering on the last few years of the data. OPM staff databases, such as the BuzzFeed data, do not include the White House. Finally, there are some external options, such as CQ Federal Staff directories, that date back to the Reagan Administration, but this still excludes over half of the data.

Hypothesis 3b (Capacity—Experience): Centralization is more likely as the term of a chief of staff progresses.

Finally, there are different sources of costs and benefits that may be more or less relevant for different presidents. For centralization, these costs and benefits can be grouped into two general categories: ideological and managerial. Ideological costs are those relating to ideological dissonance between the president and the agency. Meanwhile, managerial costs are those relating to things such as opportunity costs, coordination, etc.² Since agencies tend to be somewhat left of center, though fairly moderate, (Clinton et al. 2012; Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2017), these ideological concerns are more likely to be more pressing for Republican presidents than Democratic presidents. One way that presidents can gain greater ideological control of executive policy-making is through reorganization, which can re-create structures to be both more centralized and more easily politicized (Moe 1989). On the other hand, Democratic presidents are typically more aligned with agency preferences (e.g., Clinton et al. 2012) and often have large agendas of federal policies that they are trying to pass and implement. Thus, costs related to coordination across agencies as they seek to implement a large policy agenda are more likely to be relevant to Democratic presidents.

Hypothesis 4 (Ideology): Republican presidents are more likely than Democratic presidents to centralize for reasons of increasing ideological control.

Hypothesis 5 (Managerial): Democratic presidents are more likely than Republican presidents to centralize for coordination purposes.

2. Although a useful generalization, it is worth noting that these are not completely separable. For example, managerial problems can inhibit the agency's ability to implement policy that aligns with presidential preferences.

4 Data and Methods

An additional challenge to studying centralization in particular is that it is difficult to measure. Proxies for centralized capacity, such as the number of staff within the Executive Office of the President (EOP), provide some insight, but to understand where policy decisions are being made, whether by the president's staff or primarily by federal agencies, is a much more challenging task. To this point, the various archival research efforts presented by Rudalevige (2002, 2012, 2015) provide the most systematic picture of centralization of policy creation throughout the second half of the twentieth century.³ Understandably, though, these data are not feasibly extended to the most recent presidential administrations and politicization is only minimally addressed in these works. Furthermore, historical studies are unable to directly account for key factors such as agency ideology, which is considered to be a fundamental predictor of both centralization and politicization.

I evaluate centralization over time by extending an archive-based measure of centralized policy creation originally published in Rudalevige (2002). To the author's knowledge, there are two existing measures of centralized policy creation, both of which come from Andrew Rudalevige's research (2002, 2015). The first measure examines centralization in the creation of the policies in the president's legislative agenda (Rudalevige 2002) while the latter focuses on centralization in the creation of executive orders (Rudalevige 2015). Both involve the exhaustive examination of primary and secondary archival sources to uncover the level of centralization in the creation of sampled policies. Of these two measures, only the legislative program data, which covers 1949-1996, can be extended to more modern times.⁴ Therefore, for the first round of empirical tests, I focus on extending data for the centralization

3. The centralization of legislative proposals measure (Rudalevige 2002) covers 1949-1996 while the centralization of executive orders (Rudalevige 2012, 2015) samples orders from 1937-2004.

4. The executive order data was compiled using Office of Management and Budget (OMB) logs that extend to 2004, beyond which OMB has refused to grant any access.

of the president's legislative program. To this end I am currently in the process of updating these data as much as possible.⁵

The best source of exploring the centralization level of a policy is the OMB bill files from OMB's Legislative Reference Division. It is unclear how available these files are for the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. One source from the National Archives estimated there was a 100-year time frame for them to be processed in their entirety, while another has said that at least the Clinton administration has now been made available for research.⁶ Beyond the OMB, presidential libraries serve as the alternative source of primary documents relating to the centralization of policy creation. The Clinton Library has processed millions of documents from the Clinton administration, both in print and online. I visited the Clinton presidential archives in January 2020 and extended the data through the second term of the Clinton administration. I have not yet been able to make use of the George W. Bush Presidential Library due to a combination of the pandemic and the Presidential Records Act (PRA).⁷

As described in further detail in Rudalevige (2002), this measure of centralization was created by first creating a dataset of the president's legislative agenda as found in the Public Papers of the President, a collection of all speeches, press conferences and messages given or sent by the president as reported by the Office of the Press Secretary. Each message with at least one new policy proposal was included in each Congress that it was mentioned. Once the president's legislative agenda was gathered from these files, 16 messages per Congress were sampled from the agenda. The policy creation

5. This work has been severely hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed most federal archives for over two years.

6. These records are held at the National Archives in College Park, which recently reopened and will be visited as part of my postdoctoral fellowship.

7. The PRA limits access to presidential files until 12 years after the end of an administration, or January 20th, 2021, in the case of the Bush administration. In addition, the Library's archives have been largely closed to the public due to the pandemic from March 2020 until August 2022, recently reopening to a limited number of researchers. I have received funding to visit the George W. Bush Presidential Library later this academic year.

process behind each policy in the sampled messages was then distilled as much as possible through searching primary and secondary archival sources and ranked on a 4-point scale. Items were rated accordingly: 0 - completely or almost completely decentralized, 1 - jointly created with the agency taking the lead, 2 - jointly created with the White House or EOP taking the lead, 3 - completely or almost completely centralized within the White House or EOP.⁸ Across the years, 32 policies did not have enough information available to be able to be effectively rated, leading to an analyzed sample size of 320.

For example, President Clinton proposed a new vaccine initiative in his 2000 State of the Union Address containing a tax credit for vaccine purchases as well as a \$50M contribution to the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). Preceding the announcement of this initiative, Secretary of the the Treasury Larry Summers wrote a memo to President Clinton stating that a centralized interagency group comprised primarily of EOP staffers was working at Clinton’s request to develop proposals related to these topics (National AIDS Policy Office 1999, 109). However, regarding the proposals the president ended up endorsing, Secretary Summers wrote that the tax credit idea “adds a variety of concerns” (110) and with respect to the GAVI contribution, that “no Cabinet Secretary has proposed this item in their budget or as part of their settlement” (110). Furthermore, OMB Director Jacob Lew wrote in his report to the president that “OMB notes that HHS has policy concerns with this initiative [of a \$50M GAVI contribution].” (Office of Management and Budget and Clinton Administration History Project 1999, 39) Nevertheless, despite the apparent apathy—and even opposition—from the agencies, these policies were pushed forward by the administration. Thus, this proposal was ranked as a 3, since it was almost completely centralized within the White House/EOP from start to finish.

On the other hand, the development of Clinton’s proposed \$350M Higher Educa-

8. Following Rudalevige’s later work, I combine the top two categories of “created by the EOP” and “created by the White House” into one category.

tion Act scholarship program to encourage teachers to work in urban and rural communities was almost entirely decentralized. Instead of an EOP-heavy working group, the initiative originated within a Department of Education task force (Department of Education and Clinton Administration History Project 1998). Only after many details of the proposals were formed did the White House Domestic Policy Council and the OMB get involved in reviewing and revising the proposal (Department of Education and Clinton Administration History Project 1998). At this point, the White House did provide some meaningful revisions to the program, thus earning the policy a rating of 1—jointly created but with the agency taking the lead.

In order to test Hypothesis 1, I employ several measures to examine ideological distance between the president and Congress in an attempt to fully test the relationship between congressional ideology and presidential centralization outlined in Hypothesis 4. My theory suggests that centralization should be positively associated with greater inter-branch ideological distance. Since politicization can be constrained by budgetary methods in addition to the advice and consent powers of the Senate, I include both chambers of Congress. First, DW-NOMINATE is used to measure the distance between the median member of both the House and the Senate and the president. Second, I create an indicator whether the Senate and House each are controlled by the opposing party (1) or not (0).

To test Hypothesis 2, I explore several measures of centralized capacity. For Hypothesis 2a, which focuses on centralized staff size, I use EOP staff data collected directly from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).⁹ I present results with both EOP staff and focusing solely on White House staff. For the EOP staff numbers, I exclude agencies not typically considered presidential but technically housed within the EOP, such as the United States Trade Representative and War on Poverty agencies, as well as other agencies that were temporarily housed in the EOP, such

9. These data were missing values for 1957 and 1978. For 1957, I averaged the staffing levels for 1958 and 1959. For 1978, I averaged the staff levels for 1977 and 1979.

as the Office of Emergency Planning (a precursor to FEMA) and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that, on average, Republican presidents tend toward larger EOP and WHO staff sizes than Democratic presidents, though do not centralize at higher rates, reinforcing the difference between centralized capacity and centralization.

For Hypothesis 3(a), I simply use the number of years the president has been in office when the policy was announced [0-8]. Hypothesis 3(b) requires chief of staff experience, which is somewhat less straightforward, as the position only became consistent about halfway through the time frame of this dataset. For Eisenhower, I include Sherman Adams and Wilton Persons, who both held the title of “assistant to the president” rather than “chief of staff.” Presidents Kennedy and Johnson had no official “chief of staff,” so I include their appointments secretaries, who essentially functioned as chiefs of staff. Finally, it is worth noting that President Carter intentionally shied away from having a chief of staff for the first half of his presidency, so no chief of staff is listed for January 1977 through July 1979.

I also extend a number of policy-specific variables from Rudalevige (2002) to account for other factors that we know affect the president’s use of centralization, and some of which I hypothesize should differentially affect Republican and Democratic presidents. First, to account for coordination needs, *Crosscutting policy* measures how many Cabinet departments the policy affects (1-14).¹¹ *Presidential priority*, which should be positively associated with centralization, is measured by whether the policy was mentioned by the president in a State of the Union Address (SOTU).¹²

10. The exact formulation is (White House Office + Office of the Vice President + Office of Management of Budget + Council of Economic Advisors + Council on Environmental Quality + Domestic Policy Council + National Security Council + Office of Science and Technology Policy + Office of Administration + Office of National Drug Control Policy + other small/temporary offices and councils.

11. The data precedes the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002.

12. There is some debate about whether the president’s State of the Union address is a measure of priority or is more haphazardly thrown together. In the evidence pointing toward the SOTU serving as at least a decent proxy for prioritization, a memo regarding the creation of President Clinton’s 2000 SOTU states “Once again I have been asked to help coordinate and put together the policy

Meanwhile, *Complexity* is a three-point measure with a value of 0 if no specialized expertise is required to write the policy (e.g., an extension to existing law), 1 if expertise in one policy domain is required, and 2 if expertise across policy areas is required. Reorganization efforts also typically require a coordinating influence, so *Reorganization* indicates if a policy requires no reorganization (0), there is some reorganization involved (1), or reorganization is the primary purpose of the policy (2). *New policy* (0,1) indicates whether a policy is new proposal or not. Newly proposed policies may not have existing bureaucratic structures and there may not be as large of an expertise gap between the agency and White House, thus taking away some of the advantages of delegation, making such policies more likely to be centralized.

The level of centralization is an ordinal variable, so an ordinal logistic regression model is used in all specifications. The ordinal logit is designed for data with a ordinal dependent variable—that is, data that is categorical but where the order of the categories has meaning, as does the centralization measure used in this paper. Ordinal logit does not assume a linear relationship between the categories, but rests upon what is called the proportional odds assumption, which states that the predictors that describe the relationship between each category is the same for each level. The dependent variable here is the centralization of the creation of a policy, so the unit of analysis i refers to a given policy. Thus, the specification is,

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

where y_i is the level of centralization for policy i , $j \in [0, 3]$ is a given level of centralization, and \mathbf{x}_i is the set of covariates for each policy i , as described above.

book that accompanies the President’s State of the Union. The document lists and describes in one paragraph...the President and Vice President’s top priorities.” (Weinstein Jr. 2000)

5 Results

Table 1 presents results from testing Hypothesis 1 (Congress), which predicts that centralization should increase as the president and Congress become more ideologically opposed. The dependent variable is the 4-point ordinal measure ranking the level of centralization for a randomly sampled policy from the president’s legislative agenda, as described in the data section. Each column incorporates a different measure of ideological disagreement. Column (1) measures the DW-NOMINATE ideological distance between the president and the Senate median, Column (2) looks at whether the presidency and the Senate are controlled by different parties, Column (3) examines the DW-NOMINATE distance between the president and House median, while Column (4) focuses on whether the presidency and the House are controlled by different parties. All other variables remain the same across the models. To be clear, in Columns (2) and (4), the chamber party variables are a (0, 1) indicator for divided government, which means that in each specification, a positive coefficient indicates support for the hypothesis.

From Columns (1) and (3), it is evident that greater ideological distance between the the chamber median and the president is statistically significantly associated with the president engaging in higher levels of centralization. This result also holds for other measures of ideological distance between key congressional players, such as the veto and filibuster pivots. Columns (2) and (4) show divided government between the president and the Senate and House, respectively, is also associated with greater centralization, though the relationship is more marginally significant for the House.¹³

According to my theory, one reason centralization increases under divided government is that the president is more restricted in what level of politicization is allowed. This might lead one to think that only the party of the Senate should affect the

13. The Appendix contains a correlation table of the various Congressional ideology measures.

Table 1: Centralization Across Time

	<i>DV: Policy Centralization</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Senate median	1.317** (0.526)			
Senate party		0.447** (0.212)		
House median			1.162** (0.502)	
House party				0.432* (0.226)
SOTU	0.475** (0.236)	0.468** (0.236)	0.458* (0.236)	0.456* (0.236)
Complex policy	-0.545*** (0.154)	-0.533*** (0.154)	-0.532*** (0.154)	-0.521*** (0.154)
Crosscutting policy	0.294*** (0.052)	0.305*** (0.052)	0.291*** (0.052)	0.297*** (0.052)
Reorganizing policy	0.445*** (0.168)	0.406** (0.165)	0.435*** (0.167)	0.424** (0.167)
New policy	1.389*** (0.255)	1.416*** (0.255)	1.403*** (0.254)	1.417*** (0.254)
Observations	320	320	320	320

Note:

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

president's choice of strategy, since the Senate holds the power to advise and consent on certain presidential appointments. However, the House also can exert power over politicization through the use of budgetary measures, such as limitation riders, as well as statute (Lewis 2008). Thus, it should not be surprising that the relationship holds for ideological distance with the House as well.¹⁴

Congress' influence on the president's centralization decision is substantial. With all other variables at their mean, a shift from the 10th to 90th percentile of Senate medians nearly doubles the predicted probability of a policy being highly centralized,

14. An alternative explanation is that the ideological pressure that Congress puts on agencies leads to greater ideological distance between the agency and the president. As is demonstrated in Table 1, this also should be associated with higher levels of centralization. The presented specifications cannot differentiate between these two mechanisms.

from 0.12 to 0.22. In the House, it increases from 0.14 to 0.23. Meanwhile, when party control of the Senate switches to the opposite party, the predicted probability of a policy being fully centralized increases by a full 50%, from 0.14 to 0.21. The effect size for change of party in the House is essentially the same, 0.14 to 0.20, with a slightly larger standard error.

Throughout all these models, the control variables behave in the expected manner. SOTU measures whether a policy was enough of a priority to be mentioned in the president's State of the Union address and consistently demonstrates a positive association with centralization, which my model and the previous literature predicts. In my theory, this is because prioritization increases how much the president values policy loss, causing centralization to be comparatively more attractive, since a greater proportion of politicization costs are due to policy misalignment costs than is the case for centralization.¹⁵ The complexity of the policy increases centralization costs and thus should be negatively associated with centralization. Crosscutting policies and reorganizing policies both touch upon the coordination benefits that centralization can provide and are positively related to centralization. Finally, the informational advantage held by the agencies should lessen for new policies, causing centralization to be more likely, as observed. The results for all variables are substantively similar if presidential fixed effects are included, each of which are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

Table 2 examines Hypotheses 2, 3a, and 3b, which rely on the prediction that centralization should be more likely as centralized capacity increases. Columns 1 and 2 examine Hypothesis 2a, which predicts centralization is positively associated with staff size. Column (1) includes essentially all EOP staff, excluding those not traditionally considered part of the president's staff, as described in the Data and

15. Interestingly, the interaction between SOTU and divided government is statistically significant. In unified government, being mentioned in the State of the Union address *increases* the probability that the policy is highly centralized. Under divided government, being mentioned in the State of the Union *decreases* the predicted probability of centralization.

Methods section, while Column (2) looks only at the number of staff in the White House Office. Both of these measures are logged to account for decreasing marginal returns to increasing staff size (Nathan 1983). Column (3) looks at the year of a presidential administration, as capacity should increase over time through greater experience and knowledge, even with a given level of staff size. Finally, Column (4) looks at the experience/turnover of the most important non-presidential person in the White House—the president’s chief of staff.

Table 2: Centralized Capacity

	<i>DV: Policy Centralization</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
log(EOP staff)	1.500*** (0.539)		1.643*** (0.546)	1.411** (0.572)
log(WHO staff)		1.434** (0.572)		
President year			0.087* (0.052)	
COS month				0.001 (0.002)
SOTU	0.500** (0.236)	0.538** (0.240)	0.517** (0.237)	0.482* (0.251)
Complex policy	-0.566*** (0.155)	-0.577*** (0.155)	-0.540*** (0.155)	-0.660*** (0.164)
Crosscutting policy	0.288*** (0.051)	0.299*** (0.051)	0.290*** (0.051)	0.298*** (0.054)
Reorganizing policy	0.418** (0.165)	0.386** (0.164)	0.468*** (0.169)	0.453** (0.178)
New policy	1.408*** (0.255)	1.427*** (0.255)	1.438*** (0.255)	1.410*** (0.265)
Observations	320	320	320	293

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

We see in Columns 1 and 2 that centralization is positively associated with both measures of centralized staff size capacity. This supports Hypothesis 2a. To underscore how essential centralized capacity is for centralized policy-making, a shift from the 10th to 90th percentile of EOP staff size is associated in a 155% increase in

the predicted probability of a policy being completely centralized. In column 2, the same percentage change in White House staff is associated with a 79% increase in the predicted probability. Somewhat surprisingly, these results suggest that adding staff capacity to the EOP in general may aid in centralization as much or more than adding capacity to the White House Office itself. Future research on centralized capacity should be sure to include the EOP and not be limited to the White House.

Column (3) examines whether presidents tend to centralize more over the course of their administration, as staff knowledge grows. This result is only marginally significant, though also substantial in its size, as, all else equal at their means, the probability that a policy in the eighth year of a presidential administration is 71% higher than the probability in the first year of the administration. In column (4), there is no discernible relationship between centralization and the chief of staff's length of tenure.

Finally, Table 3 examines the role of partisanship in the centralization decision. As Rudalevige (2002) finds, and also holds true in the extension shown in Column 1, presidential party itself is not associated with differing levels of centralization. However, I hypothesize that the reasons presidents engage in centralization do differ by party. As previously discussed, Democratic presidents may be more likely to centralize for reasons of coordination, as they try to enact large federal policy agendas, while Republican presidents may be more ideological in their centralization motivations, as they fear delegating to ideologically dissonant agencies.

There are two aspects to examine in order to tell if Democratic presidents centralize more for coordination purposes than do Republicans. First, the denominator of crosscutting policies should be examined to see whether Democratic presidents propose more crosscutting policies. If they do, then even if they centralize crosscutting policies at the same rate as Republic presidents, crosscutting policies will be behind a greater proportion of their centralization decisions. In addition, given the

Table 3: Partisan Centralization

	<i>DV: Policy Centralization</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Democrat	-0.189 (0.216)	0.069 (0.386)	0.031 (0.244)
Dem × Crosscutting policy		-0.080 (0.099)	
Dem × Reorganizing policy			-0.647* (0.338)
Crosscutting policy	0.287*** (0.051)	0.322*** (0.069)	0.288*** (0.051)
Reorganizing policy	0.432*** (0.166)	0.428** (0.167)	0.785*** (0.254)
log(EOP staff)	1.403** (0.549)	1.432*** (0.551)	1.291** (0.554)
Complex policy	-0.567*** (0.155)	-0.561*** (0.155)	-0.565*** (0.156)
New policy	1.410*** (0.255)	1.423*** (0.256)	1.413*** (0.255)
SOTU	0.513** (0.237)	0.502** (0.238)	0.465* (0.240)
Observations	320	320	320

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

level of crosscutting, we can also examine whether Democrats are more likely than Republicans to centralize it. First, splitting the sample into Republican and Democratic presidents, it does not seem that Democrats have more crosscutting policies on the agenda. The average number of departments involved in a randomly sampled Democratic policy is 3.38, and 3.13 for policies proposed by Republican presidents. This difference in means is not statistically distinguishable. In Column (2) of Table 3, I tests whether Democrats are more likely to centralize for coordination purposes by including an interaction between Democratic president and Crosscutting policy. Interaction effects are particularly difficult to interpret in logistic regression models, as the coefficient of the interaction term may vary based on the values of the other covariates (Ai and Norton 2003). To provide interpretation, it is most useful to consider the changes in the predicted probability that a policy is completely centralized, with all other variables held constant. In this case, the opposite, though statistically insignificant difference arises, with a 10th to 90th percentile shift in crosscutting leading to a 0.10 to 0.36 predicted probability of complete centralization for Republicans but only a 0.10 to 0.27 increase for Democrats. Thus, I do not find evidence for Hypothesis 4.

Moving to Hypothesis 5, I test whether Republican presidents are more likely to try to gain greater ideological control over the executive branch by centralizing policies that involve reorganization. First, testing the means by party, policies randomly selected from a Democratic administration are slightly more likely to have reorganizing components, with a mean of 0.40 compared to 0.34, but this is not statistically different than zero ($p = 0.40$). Column (3) examines whether Republican presidents are more likely to centralize a reorganizing policy. The interaction is in the predicted direction, though again interpretation of the coefficients is not straightforward. However, the relationship is clear when examining the predicted probabilities of the policy being fully centralized, once again with all other variables held at their mean. Under

these conditions, a Democratic president’s policy that involves some reorganization is essentially no more likely to be centralized than a policy that does not contain any reorganization aspects, with the predicted probability of 0.15 and 0.17, respectively. However, reorganization in a Republican’s administration dramatically affects the probability of complete centralization, from 0.15 to 0.28, an 87% increase. Thus, it seems that the positive relationship between reorganization and centralization is almost a completely partisan phenomenon, driven solely by Republican presidents.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The analyses provided in this chapter continue to broaden our understanding of how presidents strategically engage in centralization based on factors both specific to the policy and the context surrounding the policy’s formation. As for the context of policy creation, I examine the relationship between congressional ideology and centralization over time. In accordance with my theory, which predicts centralization should be increasingly employed as Congress grows in its opposition to politicization, every measure of ideological distance used across both chambers of Congress was positively associated with centralization. This finding is interesting to contrast with Bolton and Thrower (2016), which finds that executive orders are *more* prevalent under united government. This further suggests that executive orders and centralization should be considered distinct phenomena.

The executive branch context matters as well, with both EOP and White House Office staff numbers strongly influencing the probability of centralization. Staff experience also seems to make a difference, with administrations somewhat more likely to centralize as they progress, though chief of staff experience on its own does not seem to make a meaningful impact . Finally, I explored how the partisan context might matter, with Democrats trying to coordinate their large agendas through central-

ization and Republicans tending to use centralization to gain more control over the bureaucracy through reorganization. I find little evidence that coordination concerns affect Democrats more than Republicans, but do find that Republican presidents are far more likely than Democrats to centralize a reorganization effort.

Accountability and election concerns are one clearly missing puzzle piece from the context of the president's centralization decision. Predictions about such matters would be quite easy to test with this dataset; however, the theoretical expectations remain unclear. There are reasons to think that electoral considerations could make centralization either less attractive (Ruder 2014), or more attractive (Judd 2017), to a president. Once there is a formal model of centralization and politicization with accountability, these data can be employed to test it. Relatedly, it is also unclear how presidential popularity might affect the president's willingness to engage in centralization. Finally, since these data stretch from the 1950s into the 21st century, they can be used to examine how the evolving media environment and creation of the 24-hour cable news cycle may affect accountability concerns.

As I extend the time frame of the data into the 21st century, I hope to supplement these analyses by creating a measure of White House staff turnover. I theorize that higher turnover should negatively affect centralized capacity and thus increase the costs of centralization. In the short term, this may be partially completed through CQ Federal Staff Directories, in addition to the president's Annual Report to Congress On White House Office Personnel. These sources cover only recent decades, but will become more relevant as the centralization data is expanded. In the longer term, I am interested in trying to extend individual-level staff data for the White House through working with the presidential libraries and engaging in further archival research. A final aspect of centralized capacity that I hope to examine more deeply is how Congress may constrain centralized capacity. We know that legislative capacity is related to constraining the president's use of executive orders (Bolton and Thrower 2016), while

presidential staff/budget sizes tend to move in alignment with those of Congress (Dickinson and Lebo 2007; Krause 2002). However, the fact that centralized policy-making increases under divided government pushes against the idea of too strong of congressional influence. Digging deeper into these mutual constraints will enable a better understanding of how Congress limits—or fails to limit—centralization.

The president's centralization decision affects who creates policy and how policy is created, which has implications for which policy is made and how likely it is to be successfully implemented. This paper focuses on how the changing contexts of presidential policy-making affect the president's centralization decision. The party and ideology of members controlling each chamber of Congress, the president's party, and centralized capacity can all influence this decision. In addition, policy-specific factors also remain influential, even while taking the broader context into account. This shows how presidents incorporate both micro and macro factors as they strategically decide how to engage the policy-making process.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4: Congressional Ideology Correlation Table

	S. party	S. med. dist.	H. party	H. med. dist.
Senate party	1.00			
Senate median dist.	0.57	1.00		
House party	0.73	0.81	1.00	
House median dist.	0.37	0.94	0.79	1.00

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics: Centralization Over Time

Statistic	N	Mean	S.D.	Min	25%	75%	Max
Centralization	320	1.509	1.056	0	1	2	3
Senate median dist.	320	0.491	0.204	0.134	0.293	0.643	0.801
House median dist.	320	0.539	0.214	0.122	0.332	0.706	0.853
Senate other party	320	0.531	0.500	0	0	1	1
House other party	320	0.681	0.467	0	0	1	1
Policy complexity	320	2.172	0.742	1	2	3	3
EOP staff size	320	1,363	258	927	1,242	1,554	1,940
WHO staff size	320	404	80	263	367	406	606
Year in admin	320	3.444	2.118	0	2	5	8
Dem. President	320	0.441	0.497	0	0	1	1
SOTU	320	0.319	0.467	0	0	1	1
Crosscutting policy	320	3.272	2.476	1	2	4	14
Reorganizing policy	320	0.369	0.659	0	0	1	2
New policy	320	0.744	0.437	0	0	1	1

Centralization Over Time

