

The Politics of Presidential Centralization*

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Abstract

It is no secret that presidents often seek to centralize policy creation and influence into the White House. However, surprisingly little is known about when and why presidents do so. In part, this is because 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, and how centralization and politicization relate. This paper introduces two measures of centralization that vary by policy area based upon the responses of thousands of career civil servant executives in the Survey on the Future of Government Service. With these measures, I test a variety of new and existing hypotheses that were not possible to empirically verify before. 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

Presidents have long bemoaned lack of responsiveness from federal agencies. While the public expects the president to do something about everything, presidents, from Truman’s complaints that “nothing will happen” when he orders the bureaucracy to act (Neustadt 1960, 10), to Trump’s invectives against the Deep State preventing him from carrying out his agenda (Skowronek, Dearborn, and King 2021), find that it is in fact difficult to do something about anything. In response to these difficulties, presidents tend toward two primary strategies to gain a more responsive executive branch (Moe 1985).

The first strategy Moe (1985) points to is centralization, or the movement of policy functions from federal agencies throughout the executive branch to the White House or the Executive Office of the President (EOP) (Moe 1985; Rudalevige 2002). The second is politicization, or the use of political appointees to influence policy-making within the departmental and independent agencies. These two strategies have become foundational to the president’s pursuit of responsive competence, though also raise questions regarding the limits of presidential power.

For example, the Obama White House was known for centralizing security policy-making into the National Security Council to an unprecedented extent, even dictating deployments of bomb-sniffing dogs (DeYoung 2015). In turn, the Trump Administration was known for both extensive centralization and sweeping politicization. Among the more notable examples include the centralization of immigration policy and the politicization of the COVID pandemic response (e.g., Johnson, Karni, and Cook 2018; Diamond, Cancryn, and Ower Mohle 2020).

Despite the enormous impact of these strategies on national policy-making, surprisingly little is known about even basic facts of centralization, such as which policy areas presidents tend to centralize. A primary reason for this is there has been no

measure of centralization by policy area, as centralization is a particularly difficult concept to quantify. In addition, there is very little empirical evidence examining how centralization relates with politicization, in part because there has been no way to directly contrast centralization and politicization.

This paper rectifies these shortcomings by introducing two measures of centralization that vary by policy area. These measures are based on 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 completed presidential administrations (2007, 2014, and 2020). These data allow for an agency-by-agency quantifying of centralization, showing which policy areas each president exerted greater centralized influence over. Furthermore, one measure is directly comparable to the politicization measure presented in Richardson (2019), allowing for the relationship between centralization and politicization to be more directly tested than previously possible.

Drawing from the existing literature, I test how centralization varies by agency ideology, the complexity of the policy area, and presidential priority. Then, I examine more deeply how centralization and politicization relate. I find that presidents are substantially more likely to centralize policies when the relevant agencies are ideologically incongruent with the president. I also find that presidents are less likely to centralize more complex policy areas, as measured by the professionalism of agency staff. The Obama administration was also less likely to centralize policy areas that required high levels of agency-specific expertise, while the Trump administration shows null results. Finally, provide evidence that centralization and politicization serve as substitutes and not complements, addressing one of the biggest debates in the literature.

2 Literature

Centralization has long functioned as a core presidential strategy, formally institutionalized primarily in the Franklin Roosevelt administration (Neustadt 1954), but dating back at least to the Teddy Roosevelt presidency (Rudalevige 2002) and possibly even pre-Civil War era (Galvin and Shogan 2004). Despite its common use, centralization is difficult to quantify as the public is often not privy to the policy-making 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 role, but is not sufficient for understanding when and why presidents centralize certain policy areas and not others (Rudalevige 2009).

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 policy-making (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; Acs 2021). Thus, even studying presidential directives is insufficient for truly understanding presidential centralization.

Notably, Rudalevige provides useful initial steps in understanding the process of centralization, with the most comprehensive works on centralization to date (Rudalevige 2002, 2021). With an archival approach to measuring centralization behind randomly sampled policies, he demonstrates that centralization is contingent, not continuously increasing. Contingent centralization means that presidents carefully consider the costs and benefits of centralization and decide whether it is less costly

to create a policy “in house” rather than delegate to an agency (Rudalevige 2002).

The benefits of centralization are fairly straightforward. 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 American federal government, however, the president’s primary alternative to centralizing policy-making 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 policy-making (Moe 1985). Thus, the centralization-delegation decision can never really be made absent considerations of politicization.

As is well-developed in the literature, politicization comes with its own costs and benefits, fundamentally boiling down to a competence-responsiveness tradeoff (e.g., Heclo 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 regarding whether the strategies of centralization and politicization serve as complements or substitutes (Rudalevige 2009). Some scholars view the strategies as complementary, with presidents employing both whenever they can to try to gain further control over executive policy-making (Moe 1985; Bubb and Warren 2014). However, other perspectives, such as the transaction cost approach, view both centralization and politicization as substitutes with unique costs and benefits, depending on the situation (e.g., Nathan 1983; Rudalevige and Lewis 2005; Rudalevige 2009). Gibson (2022) explicitly models the two strategies together to examine this relationship and finds they they serve as substitutes.

In alignment with that finding, Selin et al. (2022) empirically examine politicization and centralization, albeit *within* executive departments, as opposed to centralizing to the White House, and also find that the two strategies serve as substitutes. 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. 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 would be to create a dependent variable that measures both centralization and politicization, which, to the author's knowledge, has not yet been attempted

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.

prior to this paper.

3 Theory and Hypotheses

This paper will use this novel empirical data to examine a number of hypotheses that have emerged from various strands of the literature but have not yet been able to be sufficiently empirically tested. First, as ideological distance between the president and agency increases, the cost of centralization is unaffected, since policy is made within the White House. 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, 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 examine this in two ways. First, I follow Selin et al. (2022) and Hollibaugh Jr., Horton, and Lewis (2014) in using agency professionalism as a proxy for complexity. Second, certain policy areas may or may not be viewed as complex, but nonetheless may require a particularly high proportion of domain-specific expertise, which is difficult for White House staff to attain. 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.

Finally, since centralization minimizes any sort of delegation to misaligned political actors, which even politicization does not avoid, as a president increasingly cares about policy misalignment, the more likely that centralization will be the preferred method of managing the policy creation process (Gibson 2022). Presumably, presidents care more about policy divergence in policy areas they prioritize than in policy areas that they don't, leading them to tend to centralize their priorities.

Hypothesis 4 (Priorities): Centralization is more likely for presidential priorities.

4 Data and Methods

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.² 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.³ 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

2. 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.

3. Please see <https://sfgs.princeton.edu/reports.html>, as well as the online appendix, for more details on the survey and response rates.

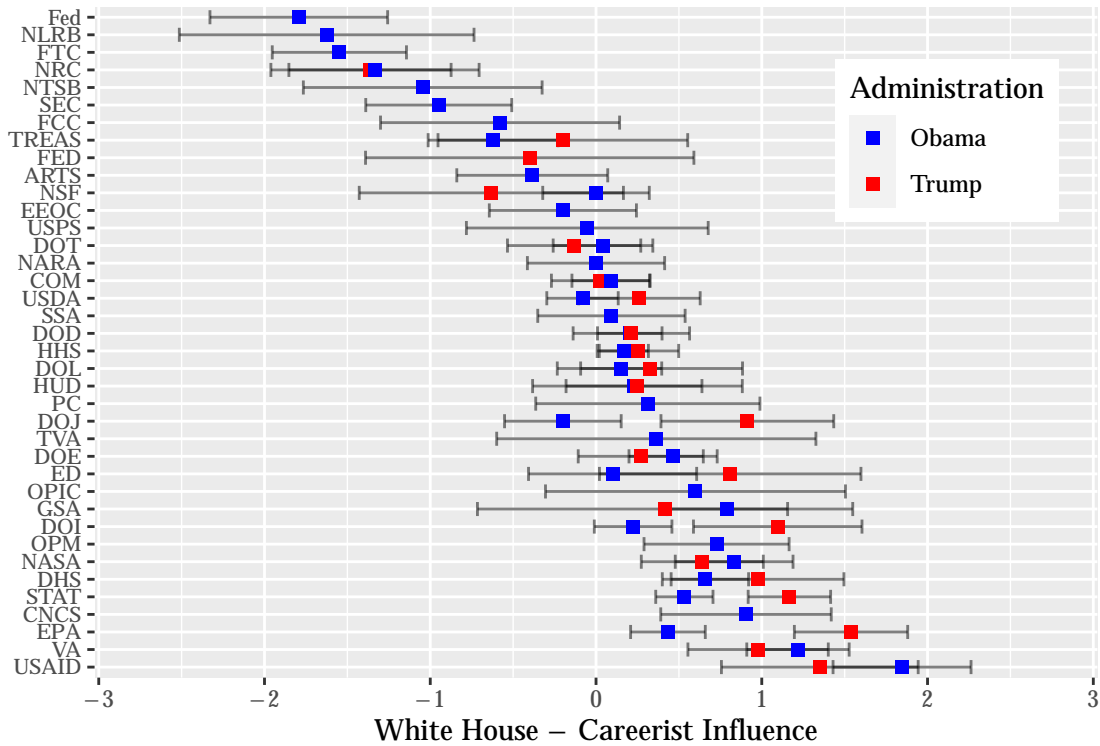
agencies with fewer than 20 potential and 10 actual respondents on that question were excluded for the sake of accurate measurement and protecting respondent anonymity.⁴ Finally, due to lack of availability of control variables, all respondents within the EOP, as well as the United States Postal Service 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 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.

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

4. For bureau-level analyses, bureaus that did not meet the size requirements were assigned its department/agency mean if the given department/agency met the sample size restrictions.

Figure 1: Centralized Policy Influence Across Administrations



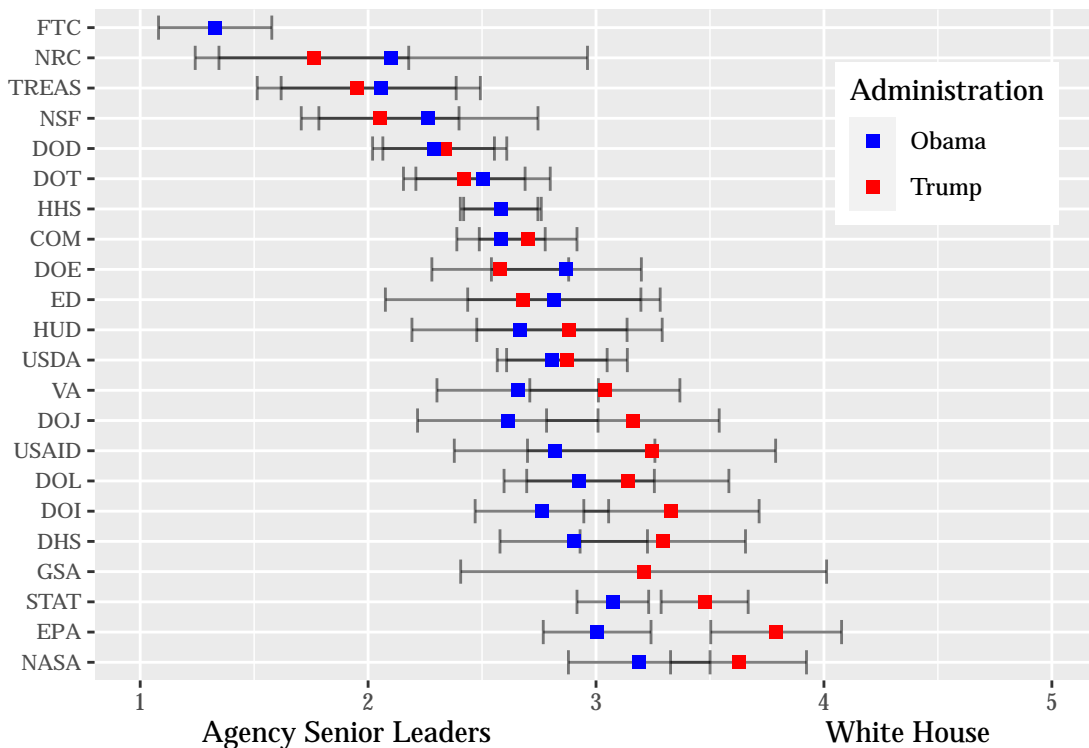
Note: Gray bars indicate 95% confidence intervals (two-tailed)

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). The mean centralization rating in the Obama administration was 0.13, with an average score of 0.44 the Trump Administration. 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 specif-

ically about centralizing the agency’s policy-making 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.

Figure 2: **Centralized Agenda-Setting Across Administrations**



Note: Gray bars indicate 95% confidence intervals (two-tailed)

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 survey, 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 (mean = 2.85) than those in the Obama administration (mean = 2.68).

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. In order to study how centralization and politicization relate, both concepts need to be included in the dependent variable. 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 prior to this paper no measure of centralization existed at the agency level. Thankfully the SFGS question regarding the policy influence of various individuals and groups helps here as well. Specifically, some works have defined politicization as the difference between appointee influence and careerist influence (e.g., Richardson 2019). Combining this measure with the centralized influence measure introduced above, I can examine the difference between appointee and White House influence. The result is a scale [-4, 4] of reported relative influence between political appointees and the White House. A

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.

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.

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, federal bureaucrats generally do not take any public policy 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. I evaluate two measures that fit the criteria, and include another in the online appendix.

The first measure evaluates perceptions of agency ideology and comes from Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2017). In the 2014 wave of the SFGS, respondents were asked 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 to place agencies on a left-right ideological scale (Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2017). The second measure evaluates the actual ideology of agencies in the pattern of Clinton et al. (2012).⁶ That is, respondents were asked whether or not they supported a series of high-profile bills that

6. As well as Richardson (2019)

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. This paper differs, however, in that I do not include political appointees when calculating agency ideology. Instead, 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 and in alignment with the existing literature, agencies tend to be moderate or slightly left of center, while presidents are more ideologically extreme.

Corresponding to Hypotheses 3a and 3b, the analyses include two different variables to measure which policy areas require substantial capacity. Following the literature, professionalism is measured using Office of Personnel Management (OPM) staff numbers, defined as $\ln(1 + \text{proportion of professional employees in agency}) - \ln(1 + \text{proportion of clerical and blue collar employees in agency})$ (Hollibaugh Jr., Horton, and Lewis 2014; Selin et al. 2022). Second, to estimate domain-specific expertise, I employ an SFGS question that asks respondents to rate the percentage of expertise that can only be acquired by working in the respondent’s agency. I take the agency mean and convert to a proportion. The agency-level correlation between these two measures is 0.09.

Finally, presidential priority, as needed to test Hypothesis 4, is surprisingly difficult to measure. Some of the existing literature uses mentions in State of the Union addresses as an indicator of priority (e.g., Rudalevige 2002), presidential campaign statements (**piper’presidential’nodate**) or even all presidential statements (Selin et al. 2022). However, public speeches, especially the State of the Union may also be construed more as a tool of going public or delegation to Congress than priority. In addition to going public concerns, campaign policy statements vary dramatically in form and substance by campaign and fail to take into account any change in

priority across the years of a presidential administration. In attempt to alleviate some of these concerns I use mentions in presidential budget messages. These written messages are sent to Congress along with the president's budget each year, potentially highlighting the president's priorities for that year's budget. Compared with State of the Union Addresses, budget messages have the benefit of receiving much less media coverage and attention from the general public, alleviating some of the concerns of its contents being strategic public positioning instead of prioritizing. However, it does not eliminate all such concerns, and in particular may serve as an indicator of delegation to Congress.

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 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, likely 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 administration. 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 for 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 are 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, agency professionalism, 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 covariates in the ordered logit analyses involves the lagged dependent variable. Instead of using the agency mean of the centralized agenda-setting question for the previous administration, I include the policy influence centralization rating from the previous administration. This enables the lagged measure to originate from the actual prior administration, instead of the 2020 SFGS. Robust standard errors are used in all analyses.

5 Results and Discussion

Table 1 examines Hypotheses 1, 3(a,b), and 4 for the Obama administration, while Table 2 does the same for the Trump 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 as a result of policy complexity (3a) or the demands of area-specific expertise (3b). Finally, Hypothesis 4 states that presidents should be more likely to centralize their policy priorities. This means that a significantly positive coefficient for agency conservatism in Table 1, and agency liberalism in Table 2, would support Hypothesis 1. Meanwhile, a negative coefficient for agency professionalism and agency-specific expertise would align with Hypotheses 3a and 3b, respectively, and a positive coefficient on budget message mentions would support Hypothesis 4.

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 respon-

dent’s agency. Thus, both columns display results from ordinal logistic regressions. The continuous scale directly contrasting the policy agenda influence of agency senior leaders to the White House serves as the dependent variable in Columns (3) and (4), which are tested used OLS. Columns (1) and (3) use careerist ideology from SFGS responses, while Columns (2) and (4) employ the agency ideology measure from Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2017).

Table 1: **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)
Careerist conservatism	0.903*** (0.196)		-0.057 (0.180)	
Agency conservatism (RCL)		0.120*** (0.041)		-0.037 (0.040)
Agency-specific expertise	-2.556*** (0.493)	-2.569*** (0.493)	-0.709 (0.607)	-0.694 (0.610)
Agency professionalism	-0.220 (0.255)	-0.440* (0.249)	-0.565*** (0.212)	-0.594*** (0.209)
Budget message mentions	-0.090** (0.038)	-0.080** (0.038)	-0.087*** (0.030)	-0.087*** (0.030)
Lagged centralization	0.761*** (0.094)	0.772*** (0.096)	0.457*** (0.068)	0.441*** (0.071)
Statutory limits (D1)	-0.112 (0.136)	-0.134 (0.135)	-0.145* (0.088)	-0.139 (0.087)
Statutory limits (D2)	-0.105 (0.080)	-0.114 (0.080)	0.029 (0.063)	0.023 (0.063)
Constant			3.261*** (0.364)	3.284*** (0.356)
Observations	2,250	2,250	926	926
Adjusted R ²			0.076	0.076

Note: Across all specifications, *lagged centralization* is the department/agency average White House - Careerist policy influence for the Bush administration. Budget message is $\log(\text{budget message mentions} + 1)$. Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two tailed)

As can be seen, all specifications that are not dependent on recollections of a previous administration demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between

centralization and both agency ideology, as theorized. In Column (1) of Table 1, the relationship between centralization and agency ideology in the Obama administration is quite pronounced. When all other variables are held at their mean, a shift from the 10th to 90th percentile of agency careerist conservatism is associated with the predicted probability of greater White House than careerist influence changing from 0.35 to 0.48, a 38% increase. For agency ideology, the corresponding ideological shift is also substantively large, resulting in a 24% increase in the predicted probability, from 0.37 to 0.46. The relationship between agency ideology and the policy agenda centralization scale is not statistically distinguishable from zero in either model. It is possible that this is due to the centralized policy agenda measure being based upon recollections of the Obama administration from the 2020 survey, among careerists who had also served in the Obama administration. Beyond the issue of accurately recalling a previous administration, this also leads to a substantially smaller sample size.

Table 2 presents results from the Trump Administration. In Column (1), an agency in the 10th percentile of liberalism has a 0.44 probability of rating White House influence as greater than careerist influence. This grows to 0.55 for an agency in the 90th percentile, a 25% increase. Perceived agency ideology (Column 2) has a nearly identical relationship, with the same 10th to 90th percentile change shifting predicted probabilities from 0.44 to 0.57. Columns (3) and (4) demonstrate substantively similar results with the centralization of policy-making agenda measure. Here, the same 10th to 90th percentile shift in agency or bureau ideology is associated with a 0.23 or 0.44 increase in the five-point centralization scale, respectively. Clearly, as agencies became more ideologically distant from the president, both the Obama and Trump administrations were more likely to centralize those policy areas, a finding that has long been hypothesized but directly demonstrated here for the first time.

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

Table 2: 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)
Careerist liberalism	1.868*** (0.484)		0.980*** (0.325)	
Agency liberalism		0.239*** (0.059)		0.205*** (0.042)
Agency-specific expertise	1.246 (0.891)	1.300 (0.899)	1.418** (0.578)	1.338** (0.572)
Agency professionalism	-1.593*** (0.349)	-1.646*** (0.337)	-0.704*** (0.238)	-0.876*** (0.232)
Budget message	-0.053 (0.058)	-0.053 (0.058)	-0.162*** (0.037)	-0.155*** (0.037)
Lagged centralization	0.941*** (0.109)	0.917*** (0.111)	0.629*** (0.078)	0.615*** (0.080)
Statutory limits (D1)	-0.257** (0.130)	-0.123 (0.135)	-0.273*** (0.080)	-0.175** (0.082)
Statutory limits (D2)	0.260*** (0.095)	0.148 (0.096)	0.209*** (0.066)	0.137** (0.065)
Constant			2.264*** (0.330)	2.220*** (0.315)
Observations	1,181	1,181	1,078	1,078
Adjusted R ²			0.098	0.109

Note: Across all specifications, *lagged centralization* is the department/agency average White House - Careerist policy influence for the Obama administration. Budget message is $\log(\text{budget message mentions} + 1)$. Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two-tailed)

areas that are more complex or require greater domain-specific expertise should experience lower levels of centralization. Staff professionalism used as a proxy for the complexity of the policy area, in order to test Hypothesis 3a. The predicted relationship only weakly holds for the Obama administrations, with the relationship not distinguishable from zero in Column (1), and only marginally significant in Column (2) ($p > .08$). However, this develops into a strong negative relationship, as predicted, in Columns (3) and (4), where the 2020 survey where respondents recall centralized influence in the Obama administration. For the Trump administration in Table (2), agency professionalism is negatively related to reported centralization in every specification. Considering media reports of the Trump administration's disregard for (e.g., M. Lewis 2018) and even targeting of expertise (e.g., McCrimmon 2019) it is particularly notable that both administrations were constrained by agency professionalism in their centralization efforts.

For the second staff capacity hypothesis, I predict policy areas requiring greater agency-specific expertise would also be more difficult to centralize, and thus experience less centralization. This relationship holds as predicted in the Obama administration, though not the Trump Administration, where in some specifications the opposite relationship is statically discernible. In Column (1) of Table 1, a jump from the 10th to 90th percentile of agency-specific expertise corresponds to a 28% decrease in the probability of greater White House than Careerist influence. Perhaps this is the type of expertise that was targeted by the Trump Administration, with an increase from the 10th to 90th percentile of agency-specific expertise associated with an 0.20 increase on the centralized agenda-setting scale.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 predicts that presidents will be more likely to centralize their priorities. Priority is measure by the logged number of policies primarily under an agency's jurisdiction mentioned across a president's budget messages. Here, a positive coefficient would support the hypothesis. The relationship between centralization and

budget message mentions is statistically significant across most specifications, but in the opposite directions as predicted. This may indicate that these mentions are better understood as an indicator of delegation to Congress than presidential priority.

It is also worth noting that in the Obama Administration there appears to be no discernible relationship between reported centralization and statutory limits on agency independence. However, in the Trump administration, limits on appointment powers is consistently negatively related to White House influence, while limits on policy-making is positively associated with centralization. This is the opposite of what was expected. Whether this reflects issues with the data or an intentional targeting of those areas with greater statutory limits is unclear.

Table 3: **Relative Politicization and Centralization**

	<i>Appointee - White House Influence</i>			
	<i>(Obama Admin.)</i>		<i>(Trump Admin.)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Careerist conservatism	-0.817*** (0.189)			
Agency conservatism (RCL)		-0.148*** (0.043)		
Careerist liberalism			-1.549*** (0.540)	
Agency liberalism (RCL)				-0.013 (0.067)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,248	2,248	1,168	1,168

Note: Each column includes agency professionalism, agency-specific expertise in the agency, the logged number of agency budget message mentions, 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 central-

ization. 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 be in alignment. That is, a positive coefficient would suggest that politicization is replacing centralization as agency ideology grows, while a null result may indicate that the two strategies serve as complements, with both increasing with agency ideological distance at similar rates. As in the previous analyses, the ideological measures are scaled in the conservative direction for the Obama administration and the liberal direction for the Trump administration. Columns (1) and (2) evaluate the Obama administration, respectively, while Columns (3) and (4) examine the Trump administration. The results for the full set of control variables can be found in the Appendix.

The results in Table 3 consistently support Hypothesis 2. Politicization is decreasing relative to centralization as ideological distance increases across both the Obama and Trump administrations. The results from the Obama administration indicate a strong relationship in the predicted direction. In Column (1), 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 0.28 for an agency in the 90th percentile, a 30% decrease. Column (2) has a nearly identical drop, from 0.39 to 0.29. For the Trump administration, a jump from the 10th to 90th percentile in agency liberalism is associated with a decrease in predicted probability of the respondent reporting greater appointee than White House influence from 0.32 to 0.25. However, for agency ideology in Column 4 the relationship is not evident.

6 Conclusion

Presidents have long lamented the responsiveness of federal agencies (or lack thereof). From Truman’s complaint of “Do this! Do that! And nothing will happen.” (Neustadt 1960, 10), to Trump’s accusations against the ‘deep state’, the disconnect that can arise between the White House and federal agencies is a continual feature of the executive branch that has perhaps never been more apparent than in recent times. Furthermore, executive policy-making continues to grow in importance, particularly as Congress is characterized by gridlock and presidents come under pressure to fill in the gap. Clearly understanding the avenues through which the president seeks to influence policy-making in the executive branch is perhaps more important than ever.

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. I find consistent evidence that presidents are, in fact, substantially more likely to centralize when the relevant agency is ideologically incongruent with the president. This holds true in every specification that does not rely on respondents’ recollections of a previous administration.

In addition, I use OPM employment statistics and survey-reported agency-specific expertise to explore the relationship between centralization and policy areas that would require high levels of capacity to centralize. I find that the Obama administration generally centralized less as capacity requirements increased. The evidence in the Trump administration is more mixed, with agency professionalism consistently negatively related with centralization, as hypothesized, but a marginally positive relationship between agency-specific expertise and centralization emerges. Future work

in this area may benefit from incorporating concepts of policy uncertainty, which may reduce the informational advantages possessed by an agency.

Beyond capacity requirements, I also examine those policy areas where the president most values policy alignment. I present budget message mentions as a proxy for presidential priority, and find that they are significantly related to centralization, though in the direction opposite that hypothesized. Further work may benefit from the creation of better measures of presidential policy priorities

This paper is also the first to test a possible non-monotonic relationship between agency ideological distance and politicization. The previous literature on politicization had posited that politicization is simply positively associated with ideological distance (e.g., D. E. Lewis 2008), though there was disagreement regarding the relationship between centralization and politicization (Rudalevige and Lewis 2005). 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). Since politicization becomes increasingly costly as agency ideology diverges from the president, this paper hypothesizes that it should be replaced by centralization as ideological distance becomes 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. 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 warrants further examination.

Future work 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 to 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 (Pffiffer 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 policy-making relate to one another and affect centralization.

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 presidents centralize and politicize is key to understanding the functioning and policy-making of the executive branch, and also has important implications regarding constraints on presidential power. If the incentive structures that presidents face naturally constrain them, this may provide a partial bulwark against presidential overreach, filling in some of the gap between norms and statute.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Centralization Survey Questions

Figure A1: 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 A2: 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 Equal influence White House
1 2 3 4 5

Don't know



How about in the Obama Administration?

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

Don't know



How about in the George W. Bush Administration?

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

Don't know



Next

7.2 Appointee - White House Influence

Figure A3: Obama Administration Appointee - White House Influence

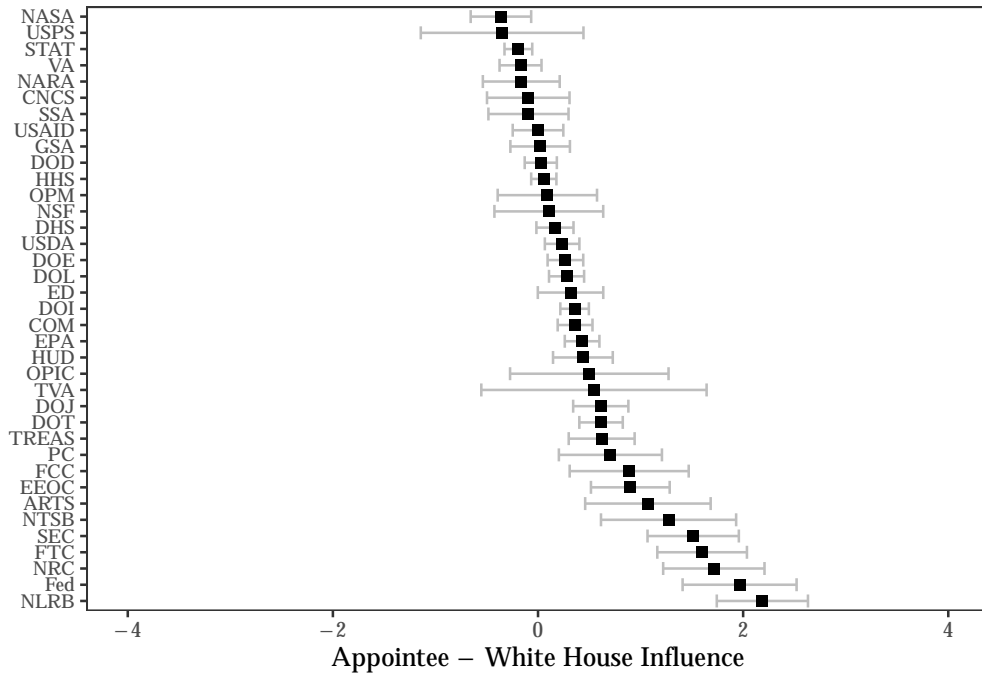
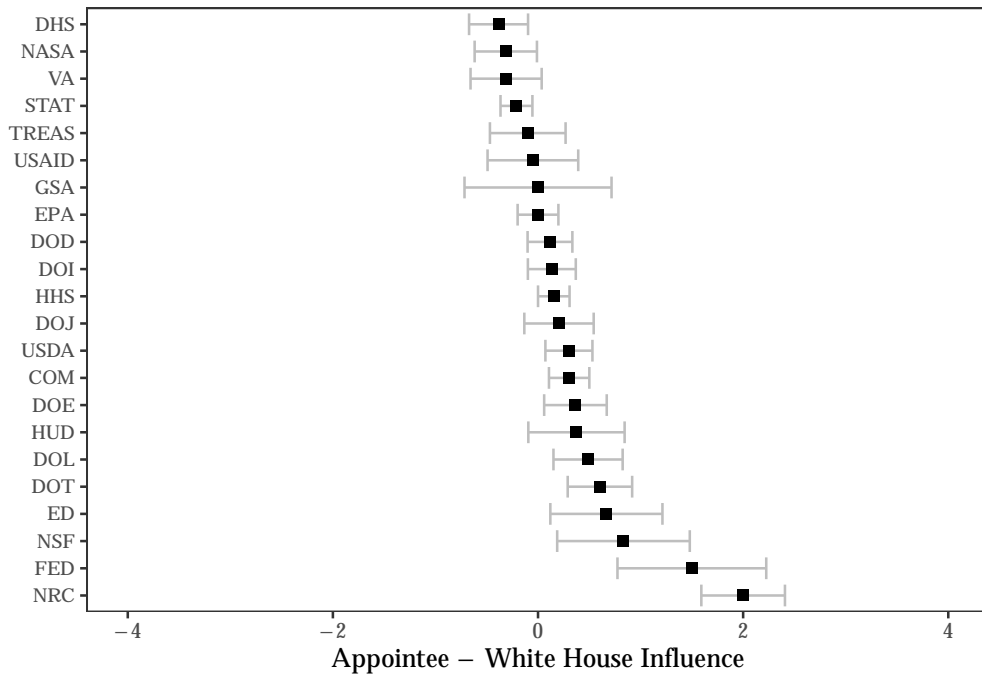


Figure A4: Trump Administration Appointee - White House Influence



7.3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4: Obama Administration Analyses Descriptive Statistics (SFGS 2)

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	25%	75%	Max
WH - Careerist influence	2,578	0.126	1.469	-4.000	-1.000	1.000	4.000
Appointee - WH influence	2,579	0.324	1.163	-4.000	0.000	1.000	4.000
Careerist conservatism	2,889	-0.492	0.229	-1.172	-0.629	-0.341	0.095
Agency conservatism (RCL)	3,007	-0.162	0.981	-1.942	-0.948	0.408	1.934
Agency professionalism	2,971	0.210	0.180	-0.560	0.085	0.358	0.629
Agency-specific expertise	2,747	0.496	0.086	0.288	0.445	0.556	0.801
Budget message mentions	3,026	13.645	13.453	0	0	22	39
Statutory limits (pol)	3,024	-0.084	0.800	-0.845	-0.640	0.083	2.235
Statutory limits (cent)	3,024	0.378	1.017	-0.563	-0.324	0.566	4.100
Lagged WH - Careerist influence	2,624	0.099	0.530	-1.774	-0.157	0.319	1.356
Lagged Appointee - WH influence	2,624	0.352	0.394	-0.500	0.191	0.456	2.038

Table 5: 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
Appointee - WH influence	1,260	0.217	1.135	-4.000	0.000	1.000	4.000
Trump centralized agenda	1,159	2.850	1.212	1.000	1.975	4.000	5.000
Obama centralized agenda	1,042	2.683	1.011	1.000	1.990	3.328	5.000
Careerist liberality	1,492	-0.094	0.117	-0.498	-0.153	-0.019	0.231
Agency liberality (RCL)	1,589	0.351	0.867	-1.934	-0.170	1.082	1.942
Agency professionalism	1,584	0.244	0.168	-0.378	0.126	0.387	0.630
Agency-specific expertise	1,482	0.542	0.060	0.363	0.509	0.574	0.670
Budget message mentions	1,601	3.137	4.269	0	0	6	12
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
Lagged WH - Careerist influence	1,547	0.214	0.517	-1.861	0.081	0.465	1.846
Lagged Appointee - WH influence	1,547	0.245	0.408	-0.350	0.035	0.359	2.188

7.4 Table 3 with all Variables

Table 6: **Relative Politicization and Centralization**

	<i>Appointee - White House Influence</i>			
	<i>(Obama Admin.)</i>		<i>(Trump Admin.)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Careerist conservatism	-0.817*** (0.189)			
Agency conservatism (RCL)		-0.148*** (0.043)		
Careerist liberalism			-1.549*** (0.540)	
Agency liberalism (RCL)				-0.013 (0.067)
Agency professionalism	-0.087 (0.263)	0.047 (0.256)	1.854*** (0.380)	1.585*** (0.380)
Agency-specific expertise	0.083 (0.502)	0.039 (0.508)	0.664 (0.916)	0.397 (0.896)
Agency budget mentions	0.063 (0.040)	0.065 (0.040)	0.004 (0.061)	0.029 (0.061)
Statutory limits (D1)	0.052 (0.132)	0.096 (0.134)	0.055 (0.165)	0.030 (0.170)
Statutory limits (D2)	0.232*** (0.080)	0.225*** (0.080)	-0.146 (0.119)	-0.125 (0.120)
Lagged DV	1.169*** (0.124)	1.187*** (0.124)	1.709*** (0.208)	1.771*** (0.210)
Observations	2,248	2,248	1,168	1,168

Note: Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two-tailed)

7.5 Combined Administration Analyses

Table 7: Centralization Across Both Administrations

	<i>Appointee - White House Influence</i>	
	(1)	(2)
Careerist ideology	0.890*** (0.161)	
Agency ideology (RCL)		0.153*** (0.031)
Agency-specific expertise	-1.642*** (0.407)	-1.662*** (0.407)
Agency professionalism	-0.646*** (0.195)	-0.786*** (0.192)
Budget message mentions	-0.079** (0.031)	-0.071** (0.031)
Lagged centralization	0.802*** (0.068)	0.828*** (0.069)
Statutory limits (D1)	-0.147 (0.095)	-0.133 (0.094)
Statutory limits (D2)	0.002 (0.060)	-0.020 (0.060)
Obama	0.099 (0.106)	-0.182** (0.082)
Observations	3,431	3,431

Note: Robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 (two-tailed)

7.6 Centralization Scores by Administration and Agency