A Theory of Presidential Centralization With Politicization*

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Abstract

While the presidential strategies of centralization and politicization have long been considered key tools for presidential influence over federal policymaking, most previous work has studied these strategies informally and/or in isolation. This paper employs a formal model of both centralization and politicization to explore the trade-offs presidents face when deciding how to create policy. The model presents several findings. First, contrary to existing literature, the president's ideal level of politicization is not monotonically increasing in ideological distance between the president and agency, but, after initially growing, is replaced by centralization. Second, Congress can exert substantial influence on the centralization/politicization decision absent visible action and apart from altering agency ideology. Finally, even when the president is able to employ both centralization and politicization, the strategies serve as strict substitutes if both are costly. More generally, the model illustrates how the joint examination of presidential tools affects our understanding of presidential actions.

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1 Introduction

When the Obama administration created Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), a program allowing some parents of children covered by the well-known Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to gain temporary legal status, it coordinated with and relied on political appointees within the Department of Homeland Security to formulate this policy. In particular, DAPA was predominately written by Jeh Johnson, the Secretary of Homeland Security (Palmer, Kim, and Brown 2014). Although an experienced lawyer, Secretary Johnson himself admitted, "I was new to immigration law and policy...when I came into this job" four months prior to being given this policy assignment (Palmer, Kim, and Brown 2014). Why did the Obama administration rely on *politicization*, the use of political appointees to influence policymaking, to create this important policy? On the other hand, the Trump administration predominately relied on *centralization*, the creation of policy within the Executive Office of the President (EOP), when it sought to alter immigration policy. From travel bans to the family separation policy, senior advisor to the president Stephen Miller, known for his extreme views on the topic, directed most immigration policy-making in the administration (Johnson, Karni, and Cook 2018). This approach, which often suffered from lack of coordination with the agencies, among other issues beyond the content of the policies. Considering the pros and cons of centralization and politicization, how do presidents choose which policy-making strategies to pursue?

While it is widely agreed that centralization and politicization are fundamental to the modern presidency, surprisingly little attention has been paid to how these strategies affect one another. Instead, nearly all existing scholarship focuses on each in isolation. However, these strategies are essentially two sides of the same coin: either the president can attempt to influence policy when it is delegated to the agencies, a decision in the U.S. context that always involves considerations of politicization, or she can seek to avoid the downsides of delegation/politicization through centralization.[1]

The president relies on these strategies because presidential power is inherently limited. Although endowed with both formal and informal powers, presidents are constrained in their ability to change policy and are often dependent upon the cooperation of others within and outside of the executive branch (Neustadt 1960). Meanwhile, the expectations placed upon the presidency inexorably expand, creating a gap between the president's perceived and actual power—a gap that presidents want to close, whether for reasons of reelection, legacy, or policy preferences (Moe 1985). In response, presidents turn to centralization and politicization as the two primary strategies to increase their influence over policymaking (Moe 1985; Nathan 1983).[2]

This paper presents two formal models that jointly examine presidential centralization and politicization. These models address two fundamental gaps. First, previous works typically focus on one policy-making strategy in isolation. While there is much to gain from a deep dive into a particular strategy, such work also misses a major piece of the puzzle. It is impossible to fully understand the use of a strategy without considering the other options the president has at his or her disposal. Second, centralization and politicization have primarily been examined informally. This paper models both strategies together in a simple and straightforward manner to see where existing claims are validated, clarify debates in the literature, and bring new hypotheses to light.

First, the baseline model places particular focus on the policy creation aspect of centralization and is therefore labeled the "policy creation game." Building on the

1. Or the president may engage in both, perhaps as a form of strategic redundancy (e.g., Ting 2003). The review of the literature discusses existing research on this question, while the policy implementation model addresses this possibility in a formal manner.

2. Nathan's terminology differs somewhat from current convention, but describes the same strategies. He outlines the presidential choice between the "legislative strategy," in which the White House focuses on centralized policymaking for the president's legislative agenda, and the "administrative strategy," in which the president prioritizes gaining control of federal agencies through political appointees.

structure of delegation of authority models, such as Bawn (1995), and the formalization of politicization in Lewis (2008), this model explores the fundamental trade-offs the president faces in the centralization-politicization decision. Politicization involves delegating to a more informed, but ideologically incongruous, agent while attempting to increase ideological alignment. Meanwhile, centralization attempts to avoid delegation altogether through designing policy within the EOP. Thus, the policy creation model presents the president with the option to either centralize or delegate and, if delegation is chosen, to select a level of politicization (or no politicization at all). Notably, this model shows that politicization is not strictly increasing in ideological distance between the president and the agency, as predicted throughout the previous literature (e.g., Lewis 2008; Richardson 2019). This is because politicization costs increase with ideological distance, while centralization costs are unaffected. Therefore, politicization becomes more expensive relative to centralization as the president and agency's ideologies diverge, causing centralization to replace politicization.

Following the presentation of the policy creation game, I extend the model to explore how Congress may affect the centralization versus politicization decision. This extension shows how Congress can use its veto power over politicization to substantially affect how the president engages in centralization and politicization, even absent taking visible actions. As a part of this general phenomenon, divided government makes centralization more likely, even independent of any congressional influence on agency incentives, the primary source of congressional influence on centralization in the literature (e.g., Rudalevige 2002).

Second, I present another model of the president's centralization-politicization decision that incorporates the implementation of policy, instead of focusing on policy creation. This enables the examination of how potential interdependence between centralization and politicization affects each strategy. Unlike the policy creation game, this model, which I refer to as the "policy implementation game," does not assume whether the two strategies are complements or substitutes, a point long debated in the literature (e.g., Nathan 1983; Rudalevige and Lewis 2005). Importantly, the model provides needed clarification to this debate, showing that when both strategies are costly options, the two strategies serve as substitutes.

2 Review of the Literature

The president's need for centralization and politicization finds its root in the classic delegation dilemma between seeking control over policy outcomes and utilizing the expertise of political agents (Bawn 1995; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). As the head of the executive branch, which consists of over four million civilian and military personnel and more than three hundred agencies (Selin and Lewis 2018), the president experiences the need for and consequences of delegation perhaps more acutely than does any other political actor.

Delegation can be modeled in essentially two ways (Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001). In alignment with Aghion and Tirole's (1997) distinction between formal and real authority, the first category of delegation models can be thought of as those in which the principal delegates real authority to the agent, while in the second type real authority is retained by the principal (Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001). In other words, in the first class of models, if the president decides to delegate to the agent, the agent—not the principal—then possesses the ability to select the final policy (e.g., Bawn 1995; Epstein and O'Halloran 1999). If the principal instead retains real authority over setting the policy, the model typically involves either signaling by the agent to the principal or a screening mechanism set up by the principal (Baron and Meirowitz 2006). The models presented in this paper belong to the first type, with the president delegating real authority to the agency to set policy.

At its core, politicization serves as a specialized case of delegation, adding a competence-responsiveness trade-off to the delegation decision (Lewis 2008). The placement of political appointees into the agency increases the agency's responsiveness to the president's wishes by bringing agency policy preferences closer to presidential preferences. Although the president prefers ideological alignment, all else equal,[3] there is substantial evidence that politicization can both directly and indirectly harm bureaucratic competence. Direct effects come through the lack of experience and expertise of many political appointees as well as the transience of their leadership (Heclo 1977; Krause 2009; Lewis 2008). Somewhat less directly, politicization may lead to decreased effort and morale, as well as to difficulty in retention and recruitment of skilled civil servants (Dewatripont, Jewitt, and Tirole 1999; Lewis 2008; Richardson 2019; Suleiman 2003).

Note, for the sake of brevity, in this paper I frequently refer to the president's centralization versus politicization decision. This may differ from the reader's expectation of a centralization versus delegation decision. Since this model is designed with a particular focus on the United States presidency, delegation is accompanied by the additional considerations of politicization. Thus, I use the term "politicization" to refer to the president's joint decision of delegation and the determination of how much political influence to exert on the delegated policy creation process through the use of political appointees.[4]

Historically, centralization was often equated with centralized capacity, or the institutionalization, staff size, or budgets of the White House. Such research has its uses, but is not sufficient for understanding when and why presidents centralize certain policy areas and not others (Rudalevige 2009). Following this, presidential direct action, such as executive orders (e.g., Cooper 2002; Howell 2003; Mayer 2001),

3. In addition to the president, the public can benefit from closer ideological alignment of bureaucrats with political actors, since responsive agencies can increase the democratic responsiveness of government by allowing elected officials to more effectively implement the agenda they campaigned for and were elected on (Moe 1985; Nathan 1983).

4. Including the selection of delegation without politicizing.

were thought to be the consummate example of centralized policy-making. However, more recent research has shown that, although undoubtedly an important policy-making tool, such presidential directives are far from unilateral, or even necessarily centralized (Kennedy 2015; Lowande 2018; Rudalevige 2012, 2015, 2021). In fact, executive orders suffer from their own delegation dilemmas (Acs 2021; Turner 2020) and may be better understood as a tool of delegation (Lowande 2018).

In centralized policy creation, instead of delegating to imperfectly monitored agencies that often have divergent policy preferences and may be influenced by external actors (such as Congress), the president seeks to centralize policy decisions within the Executive Office of the President (Lowande 2018; Rudalevige 2002). To the author's knowledge, the trade-offs of centralized policy creation have received extremely limited formal attention in the American politics literature. The majority of related works do not study centralized policy creation within the executive branch but related topics (such as those listed above). Furthermore, most works model centralization as a costless option (e.g., Bubb and Warren 2014; Howell 2003) or as an option with indirect costs, such as accountability concerns (Judd 2017) or agency personnel problems (Cameron and Figueiredo 2020). Lowande (2018) serves as an exception, assigning inherent costs to centralization in his examination of the relationship between agency independence and delegation. Despite the limited formal attention in the American politics literature, the empirical literature clearly demonstrates that centralized policymaking itself is not without a variety of costs (Kennedy 2015; Nathan 1983; Rudalevige 2002).

Centralization requires substantial investment to build the capacity necessary to develop policy. The EOP typically contains highly responsive and competent staff who are nevertheless very much limited in number and are often generalists lacking deep expertise in specific policies. Thus, centralization is quite expensive in terms of opportunity costs, as EOP staff can address only so many policies at a time, and these costs multiply as the complexity of the policy area grows (Rudalevige 2002; Tomkin 1998). Furthermore, centralized staff cannot be expanded too much, or they begin to suffer from the same delegation problems that the president was seeking to avoid through centralizing in the first place (Nathan 1983). Thus, centralization should be modeled with substantial startup and opportunity costs, as well as diminishing marginal returns. Of course, centralization is also not without its benefits, providing greater ideological alignment with the president and more perfect observation by the president (Rudalevige 2002).

When it comes to examining centralization and politicization together, there is a dearth of literature, despite the fact that they have long been considered related strategies (Moe 1985; Nathan 1983). To the author's knowledge, the closest model is that of politicization with regulatory review in Bubb and Warren (2014). However, as noted above, this model does not consider costs of centralized review and does not focus on centralized policy creation, but regulatory review. Thus, formal knowledge of how these two strategies relate remains quite limited. In fact, it is up for debate whether centralization and politicization serve as complements or substitutes. Bubb and Warren (2014) conclude they are complements, a perspective that aligns with the informal discussion presented in Moe (1985). On the other hand, Richard Nathan states in his evaluation of centralization and politicization that "Despite the surface appeal of combining these two approaches...these two strategies do not go together" (Nathan 1983, 29). More recently, Rudalevige (2002) and Rudalevige and Lewis (2005) employ a transaction cost approach to evaluate the two strategies, assuming that the president will select whichever option—creating policy "in house" or delegating it to a politicized agency—is cheaper. Thus, they reason centralization and politicization should be considered substitutes. Empirically, there is preliminary evidence that the two strategies are, in fact, substitutes—at least in the creation of the president's legislative program (Rudalevige and Lewis 2005).[5] In response to this evidence, the initial policy creation model assumes they are substitutes, while the policy implementation model makes no such assumption.

3 The Policy Creation Game

This section introduces a simple model that incorporates both centralization and politicization, providing an opportunity to explore some of the fundamental trade-offs between the two strategies. This policy creation model is a classic delegation of authority game in the tradition of Bawn (1995) and also builds upon Lewis' model of politicization (2008). This section will present a simple single-period game in which the president can choose to either politicize or centralize the creation of a single policy, and will be extended in the following section to include Congress. When thinking about centralization in this model, one can envision the president ordering White House staff to devote substantial time and resources to designing a specific policy, perhaps in order to write a detailed directive to an executive agency regarding how to execute an item on the administration's policy agenda (Kagan 2001). For politicization, the reader can imagine the president instead trusting political appointees within an agency to direct the creation of a given policy (such as DAPA), perhaps augmenting the ranks of appointees in that policy area to assist with or oversee the process.

The policy creation game involves two players: the president P with ideal policy p and the agency A with ideal policy a on a unidimensional policy space.[6] Let x_I be the policy selected by player I, and let ω be the state of the world, which creates a policy shock such that the final policy outcome is $\hat{x} = x_I - \omega$. The state of the world

5. While Rudalevige (2002) finds primarily null results when evaluating the relationship between centralization and politicization, Rudalevige and Lewis (2005) utilize more refined politicization data to establish initial evidence toward a negative relationship between the strategies.

6. The single agency can be thought of as the president's best option of agency.

ω is known by the agency but not by the president. Let ω be distributed with a finite variance such that the president never prefers to make policy without knowing ω.[7] Both players in this game are policy motivated, with single-peaked policy preferences over a unidimensional policy space. In general, players' preferences can be expressed by a quadratic policy loss function, where i is the ideal policy for player I. In addition to policy preferences, the president can also invest in centralized capacity, paying a cost $c(m) > 0$, where $m > 0$ is a measure of the complexity of the policy and $c(m)$ is a convex function strictly increasing in m.

$$U_P = -(\hat{x} - p)^2 - c(m) \tag{1}$$

$$U_A = -(\hat{x} - a)^2 \tag{2}$$

Game play proceeds in the following manner. First, Nature selects the value of the state of the world, ω, and the president's and agency's ideal points are exogenously determined. These are each defined relative to the status quo policy, which is set at 0, and let $p \geq 0$ without loss of generality. The president then decides whether to centralize the creation of the policy or to delegate to a politicized agency. If the president decides to delegate, she also selects a level of politicization. The policy is then created, either by the president (under centralization) or by the agency (under politicization), the policy is implemented, and payoffs are realized.

If the president chooses to centralize the creation of the policy, she must pay the investment cost $c(m)$. This cost function can be conceptualized as including both the startup costs of building the capacity necessary for centralization as well as the opportunity costs of devoting limited EOP staff and resources to creating the policy. It can also be interpreted as including errors in determining the correct policy to implement, which are more likely to occur as the policy area becomes more

7. The more specific conditions of the participation constraint will be discussed later.

complex. The cost function is convex in order to model increasing marginal costs of centralization.[8] After paying this cost, the president is able to discern the state of the world, ω, and choose a policy to implement.

If the president instead decides to delegate to the agency, she then selects a level of politicization for the agency, denoted q, $\in [0, 1)$. Note that a choice of $q = 0$ is equivalent to delegation without politicization.[9] The level of politicization q can be thought of as the proportion of managers in the agency who are politically appointed. The agency, which already knows ω, then selects which policy to implement. As in Lewis (2008), politicization has two primary effects on policy outcomes: it brings the agency into closer ideological alignment with the president, but at the cost of reducing agency capacity, making the agency less reliable.

The benefit of politicization for the president comes from shifting the ideal point of the agency to become more proximate to that of the president. Let the agency's new, politicized ideal point be $\hat{a} = (1 - \gamma(q))a + \gamma(q)p$, where $\gamma(q)$ is a concave function strictly increasing in q, the level of politicization. The concavity of $\gamma(q)$ incorporates diminishing marginal returns to adding more and more political appointees. Furthermore, let $0 \leq \gamma(q) < 1$.[10] That is, the politicized ideal point of the agency is essentially a weighted average between the president's and agency's ideal points,

8. While there may be initial economies of scale as the White House creates structures for centralizing policies, Rudalevige (2002, 88), Nathan (1983) provides a convincing picture of increasing marginal costs/decreasing marginal returns to centralization through his description of the Nixon administration, as mentioned above in the literature review. In that case, too much centralization led to a bloated White house that suffered from the re-creation of the delegation dilemmas all over again. Furthermore, Nathan writes, "the supply of talented aides for the White House who understood the substance and processes of domestic policy was limited.... As the White House staff grew, its general caliber declined" (40-41). Also see Krause (2004) for a discussion of how the growth of the institutional presidency has arguably decreased its effectiveness.

9. A scenario of no politicization could look like the promotion of careerists within the agency to the statutorily required appointed positions or otherwise appointing highly qualified individuals based on expertise, instead of political considerations, such that the appointees do not appreciably shift the ideology of the agency to be closer in line with the president's.

10. That is, $\gamma(q)$ determines how much a certain level of politicization affects the movement of the agency's ideal point. Factors such as statutory requirements for appointments (Selin 2015), agency culture, and/or political networks (Carpenter 2001) may affect how independent an agency is from presidential influence and make a given level of politicization more or less effective.

allowing the president to, in effect, tip the scale toward her preferred policies by increasing q.

However, to reflect the loss in agency capacity associated with politicization, higher levels of politicization also affect the agency's ability to determine the state of the world. As mentioned above, an unpoliticized agency knows ω without paying any additional cost, reflecting the expertise possessed by the agency. A politicized agency, however, will make an error ϵ with $\mathbf{E}(\epsilon) = 0$ and $\mathbf{Var}(\epsilon) = mq$ in the determination of the state of the world ω.[11] Note that the variance of the error increases in q, the level of politicization, and m, the complexity of the policy area. Thus, as politicization increases and the required amount of expertise grows, the agency is less able to determine where to best place policy.

The equilibrium concept is subgame perfect. I will proceed using backward induction. It is clear that both the president and the agency want to choose a policy outcome as close to their ideal point as possible, all else equal. This means that the president, if she centralizes, will choose a policy $x_P = p + \omega$ such that the policy outcome aligns with her ideal point $\hat{x} = p$. Therefore, the president's expected utility of centralization is simply the cost of centralization with no policy loss.[12]

$$EU_P(centralization) = -c(m) \tag{3}$$

Alternatively, if the president chooses to delegate and politicize, the agency will select $x_A = \hat{a} + \omega$ so that $\hat{x} = \hat{a}$. The agency has no incentive to create a policy that does not align with its ideal point; since the president has delegated real authority to the agency, she must accept whatever policy the agency recommends.[13] Accord-

11. This can be microfounded by assuming $\epsilon \sim \mathcal{U}[-\sqrt{3mq}, \sqrt{3mq}]$.

12. That is, any policy loss from an error in creating the policy is captured in the cost term $c(m)$.

13. While total delegation of real authority does not perfectly reflect reality, this simplification is not without justification. Unless there is at least a partial delegation of real authority, the agency has little incentive to create any policy.

ingly, the president's expected utility from politicization consists of the policy loss from delegating to the agency plus the cost of the errors resulting from lower agency capacity, or $EU_P(politicization) = -[(1-\gamma(q))(a-p)]^2 - mq$. Following from this, the president will want to select an optimal level of politicization q^* that balances out the policy gains from politicization with the increase in policy errors. By the first order condition, this means that if the president chooses to delegate, she will select a level of politicization that satisfies $(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)^2\gamma'(q^*) - \frac{m}{2} = 0$. Thus, the president's expected utility from choosing to politicize is

$$EU_P(politicization) = -[(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)]^2 - mq^* \tag{4}$$

Note that the president's expected utility of delegation without politicization is simply this equation with $q = 0$.

In the initial step of the game, the president will choose whichever strategy is cheapest.[14] Thus, in equilibrium, the president will choose to centralize whenever $c(m) \leq [(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)]^2 + mq^*$, receiving an expected utility of $-c(m)$, with the agency receiving $-(a-p)^2$. If, on the other hand, centralization costs are greater than politicization costs, or $c(m) > [(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)]^2+mq^*$, the the president will choose to politicize at level q^* with a payoff of $-[1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)]^2 - mq^*$ and the agency will receive $-mq^*$. As is typical of delegation of authority models, the equilibrium outcome is efficient if and only if the president chooses to politicize/delegate (Bendor,

14. Two conditions must be met to exclude the trivial cases of the game where the president is better off by not creating a policy or not investing in centralized capacity. First, the variance due to the uncertainty around ω must be large enough so that it is never in the president's best interest to create a policy without attempting to discern ω:

$$\mathbf{E}\big[max\{-c(m), -[(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)]^2 - mq^*\}\big] > \mathbf{E}\big[-[(x_p-\omega)-p]^2\big].$$

Second, the status quo policy SQ must be sufficiently distant from the president's ideal point so that the president wants to create a new policy:

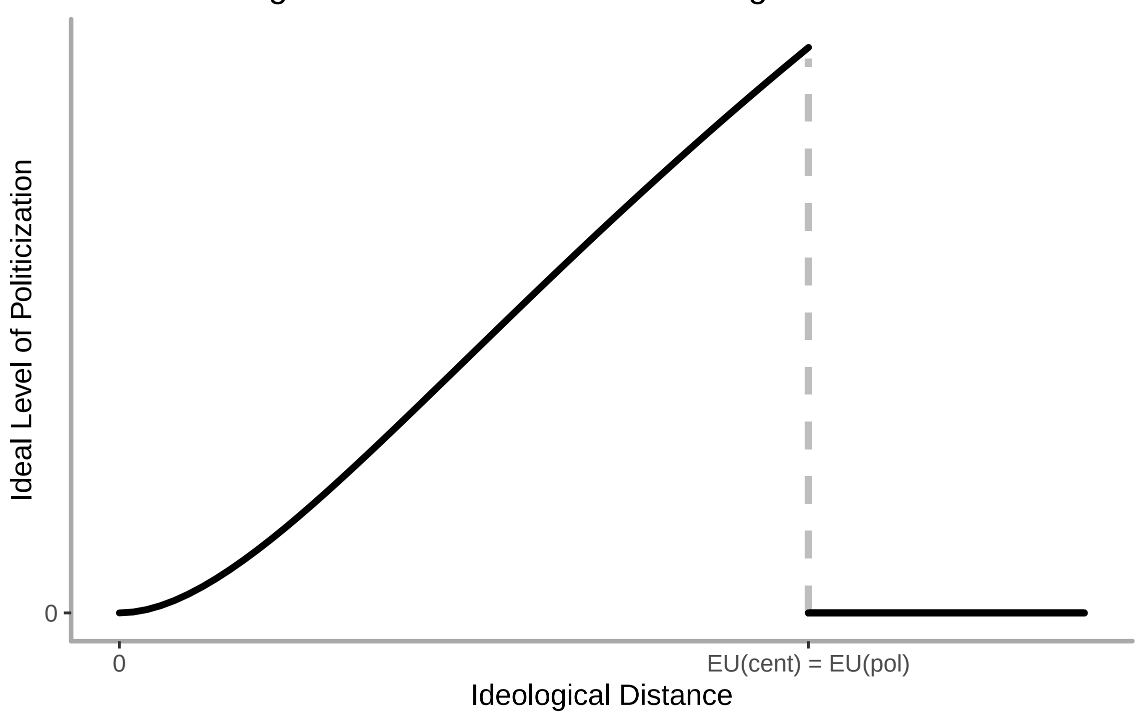
$$\mathbf{E}\big[max\{-c(m), -[(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)\big]^2 - mq^*\}] > -(SQ-p)^2.$$

Glazer, and Hammond 2001).

What does this policy creation model tell us? First of all, the relationship between politicization and agency ideology is more complex than has been theorized in the previous literature, as described in Proposition 1.

> *Proposition 1.* All else equal, as ideological distance between the president and agency increases, the president's ideal level of politicization q^* increases until $EU_P(centralization) \geq EU_P(politicization)$, at which point politicization is replaced by centralization.

Figure 1: Politicization and Ideological Distance



In the existing literature, politicization is always considered to increase as the ideological distance between the president and agency grows (e.g., Lewis 2008; Richardson 2019). In the policy creation model, the optimal level of politicization q^* is increasing in ideological distance between the president and the agency. However, the cost of implementing the ideal level of politicization also grows in ideological distance, while centralization costs remain steady.[15] Thus, as ideological distance grows, centralization will always eventually replace politicization as the cheaper option. In practical terms, this means that instead of pursing extreme levels of politicization, the president may essentially give up on politicizing agencies she strongly disagrees with, moving policy-making functions for that policy area to the White House.

There are a few reasons why politicization becomes increasingly expensive. First, as policy loss due to ideological misalignment with the agency increases, the president is willing to engage in correspondingly higher levels of politicization and put up with higher levels of agency errors. Meanwhile, delegation with low levels of ideological divergence will be quite cheap for the president, since the agency will make minimal errors and enact a policy near the president's ideal point (in fact, $EU_P(pol) = 0$ when $a = p$). In addition, politicization has decreasing marginal returns due to the concavity of the policy utility function, as well as the concavity of $\gamma(q)$.

As for factors beyond ideology, the role of complexity on the president's choice of strategy is less straightforward. All else equal, both centralization and politicization are increasingly costly as complexity grows. Thus, all else equal, both are decreasing in policy complexity. However, which strategy the president selects depends on the relative costs of each and so must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Prior work has also hypothesized that presidents are more likely to centralize their policy priorities (e.g., Rudalevige 2002). This can be formalized in the policy creation model by adding a weight $\beta > 1$ to the president's policy preferences:

$$U_P = -\beta(\hat{x} - p)^2 - c(m) \tag{5}$$

An increasing weight β implies that the president cares more about divergence from her ideal point on policies that she prioritizes. For example, we might expect that

15. See the Online Appendix for additional details.

President Obama cared more about healthcare policies that fail to align with his preferences than policy divergence on agricultural issues. As the president increasingly values policy divergence, politicization costs correspondingly increase, with

$$EU_P(politicization) = -\beta\left[[(1-\gamma(q^*))(a-p)]^2 - mq^*\right] \tag{6}$$

However, the start up and opportunity costs of centralization costs are unaffected. As a result, there are more parameter values for which centralization is the preferred option over politicization as prioritization of the policy increases.

Even in its simplicity, the policy creation model provides new intuition behind the president's centralization-politicization decision. In the next section, I extend the policy creation model to explore the influence that Congress can have on the president's choice of policy-making strategy. Following this, I present a related—yet distinct—policy implementation model to examine how the incorporation of the implementation process alters the roles and trade-offs of centralization and politicization.

4 Congressional Veto

Although the primary goal of this paper is to focus on the president's strategic choices within the executive branch, Congress undoubtedly plays an important role in determining the context in which the president makes these decisions. Congress's power over politicization is particularly noteworthy. Congress can hamper the president's politicization efforts through delaying or failing to confirm appointees in the Senate confirmation process (Hollibaugh and Rothenberg 2018; McCarty and Razaghian 1999), enacting statutory limits on politicization (Selin 2015), or employing limitation riders or other budgetary strategies to cap the number of political appointees within an agency (Lewis 2008). On the other hand, Congress's options for impacting centralization are more limited and primarily budgetary. Namely, since the budget of the EOP is subject to the congressional appropriation process, Congress possesses the authority influence the marginal costs of centralization by increasing or shrinking the EOP's budget. However, due to the longstanding principle of comity between Congress and the White House regarding their own budgets, this does not appear to be a tool readily employed by Congress (Dickinson and Lebo 2007; Krause 2002). However, it is possible that we have witnessed only equilibrium behavior and Congress's power over centralization is primarily hidden, similar to the hidden power of the presidential veto (Cameron 2000).

In this extension of the policy creation model, I focus on Congress's ex-post influence on politicization by allowing it to veto the level of politicization proposed by the president, denoted q_P.[16] In an attempt to reflect reality, the veto is one-sided; it can be used only to reject *increases* in the level of politicization. This is most analogous to Congress using limitation riders to cap the level of political appointees or employing other statutory limits to similar effect. I argue that Congress is unable to restrict reductions in politicization, were the president to desire to decrease politicization to an amount lower than Congress would prefer.[17] As will become evident, even with examining only this limited version of Congress's powers over politicization and centralization, Congress's influence over presidential strategy will be substantial, able to affect both the level of politicization chosen by the president as well as the president's choice of strategy.[18]

In the same manner as the president and agency, Congress (C) has an ideal point c and quadratic preferences over policy $U_C = -(\hat{x} - c)^2$. To accommodate the presence

16. In reality, such a veto is not costless, as Congress's ability to reject increases in politicization consumes congressional time and resources and depends on factors such as congressional capacity and polarization. Since this model focuses on the president's decisions, these costs are left out for the sake of simplicity.

17. The president can take steps to unilaterally reduce politicization through limiting the number of non-career members of the Senior Executive Service she appoints, selecting well-qualified careerists for appointed positions, and reorganizing agency leadership, among other strategies (Lewis 2008).

18. Lewis (2008) also includes a congressional veto over politicization, though it randomly assigns proposal/veto power between Congress and the president and does not consider centralization.

of a veto, the model will also contain an exogenous status quo level of politicization q_s, which can be thought of as being set by a combination of previous presidents and Congresses. Game play closely follows that of the policy creation game. First, Nature selects the state of the world ω, while ideal points a, c, and p are known to all players, as well as the status quo level of politicization in that policy area, q_s. With this information, the president decides whether to centralize or delegate the creation of a policy. If the president selects centralization, she sets the policy. If delegation is chosen, the president selects a level of politicization q_p. In response, Congress chooses whether to accept q_p or veto the proposed level of politicization, keeping q_s, and the agency sets the policy. Once the policy is chosen (by the president or the agency, respectively), the policy outcome is realized and players receive their payoffs.

As with the policy creation model, the equilibrium concept is subgame perfect and so is solved by backward induction. Since the president has complete information about Congress's preferences, there will be no congressional vetoes of the president's proposed level of politicization under equilibrium. However, much like in regular veto politics, the lack of vetoes does not indicate a lack of influence, as players attempt to anticipate the actions of the veto player (Cameron 2000).

Under centralization, the president is the only player with any say in selecting the policy; thus, her choice of policy and expected utility is unchanged from the policy creation model, $EU_P(centralization) = -c(m)$. For politicization, the agency, in the final step, will also follow the same strategy as it did in the policy creation game, choosing the policy that will result in its ideal point $\hat{a}$, while making an error ϵ in determining ω. Meanwhile, in the preceding stage of the game, Congress will veto any proposed level of politicization that it does not prefer to the status quo level of politicization.[19] Congress's expected utility of politicization (whether from the status quo or from the president's proposal) is the sum of the policy loss from the agency's

19. Congress' expected utility under centralization is irrelevant, as Congress cannot make any credible commitment to limit its use of the veto.

policy choice and the errors made by the politicized agency. That is, Congress will accept the president's proposal if Equation 7 holds, and otherwise will reject it.

$$-[\gamma(q_P)(p-a)+(a-c)]^2 - mq_P \geq -[\gamma(q_s)(p-a)+(a-c)]^2 - mq_s \qquad (7)$$

Let q^{**} be defined as the level of politicization that maximizes the president's utility (defined in Equation 4) subject to $EU_C(q^{**}) \geq EU_C(q_s)$. That is, q^{**} is the president's most preferred level of politicization that Congress will not veto. Then the president's expected utility from politicization takes the same form as in the policy creation game, but for the level of politicization q^{**}: $EU_P(politicization) = -[(1-\gamma(q^{**}))(a-p)]^2 - mq^{**}$. As in the baseline model, the president's decision on which strategy to choose comes from solving the utility maximization problem comparing her expected utility of centralization to that of politicization.

$$max\{-c(m), -[(1-\gamma(q^{**}))(a-p)]^2 - mq^{**}\} \qquad (8)$$

Once again, in equilibrium, the president will choose to centralize if the cost of centralization is less than that of politicization and will otherwise choose to politicize.

It is worth noting that Congress can alter the president's preferred strategy from politicization to centralization, but never vice versa, since Congress does not influence centralization costs. In order for Congress to cause the president to switch strategies, a number of conditions must hold. First, the president must prefer centralization to the status quo level of politicization ($EU_P(centralization) \geq EU_P(q_s)$); if not, the president will politicize regardless of the possibility of a congressional veto. Second, there must be levels of politicization the president prefers to centralization ($EU_P(q^*) > EU_P(centralization)$). Finally, Congress must prefer the status quo level of politicization to any level of politicization that the president prefers to centralization ($EU_C(q_s) > EU_C(q^{**})$. Under these conditions, the president, without the influence of Congress, would choose to delegate to the agency and politicize. However, Congress would veto any level of politicization the president prefers to centralization, so the president instead engages in centralization.

Meanwhile, if the president prefers the level of politicization Congress will allow over centralization, ($EU_P(q^{**}) \geq EU_P(centralization)$), then the ideological position of Congress relative to the president and the agency determines the extent to which Congress will affect the implemented level of politicization. With the veto over expansions of politicization, there are three levels of influence Congress can display. An opposed Congress can prevent any increase in politicization, a moderate Congress partially limits the president's desired changes in politicization, and an aligned Congress allows the president to implement her ideal level of politicization.[20]

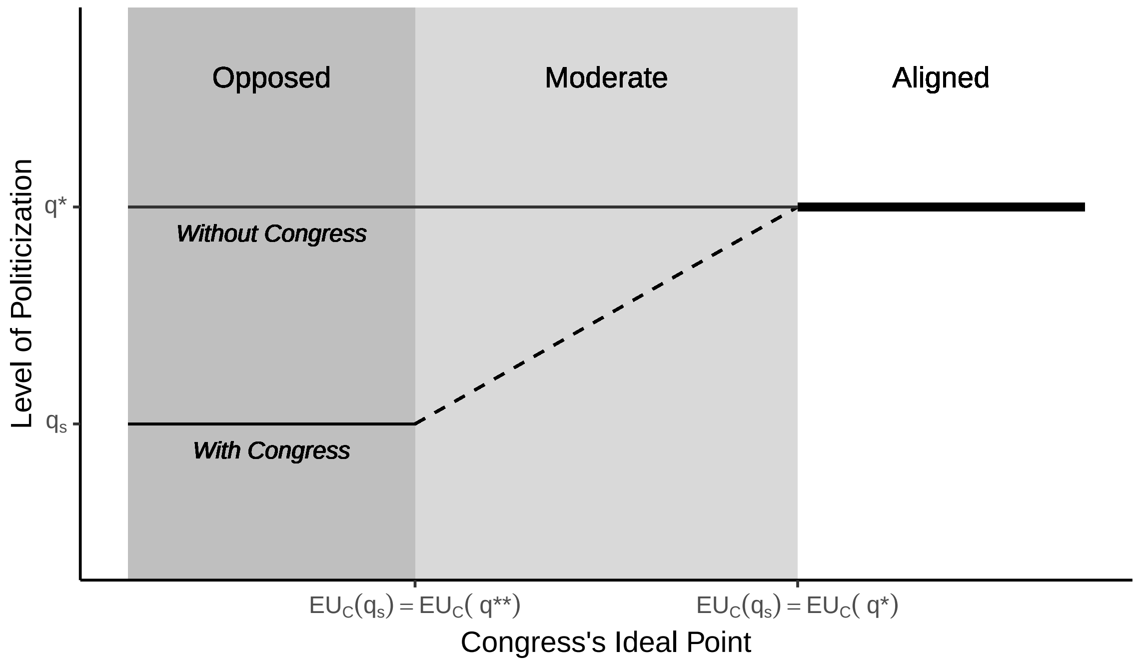
> *Proposition 2.* All else equal, divided government leads to more centralization.

First, whenever the president and Congress are on opposite sides of the agency's ideal point with the status quo level of politicization a_{sq}, Congress is never better off with a level of politicization higher than the status quo q_s. Thus Congress will veto any increase in politicization $q_P > q_s$. In other words, in divided government, when the pivotal congressional actor and the president are likely to be on opposite sides of the agency's ideal point, politicization will be limited to the status quo. Of course, this reduces the appeal of delegation, causing centralization to be comparatively more attractive to the president than in the baseline policy creation game.

If Congress and the president are on the same side of the agency's ideal point, yet Congress is more moderate than the president to the extent that it prefers the status quo level of politicization to q^*, the president will offer a compromise level of politicization. To maximize utility, the president will select q^{**} such that Congress is

20. If the president desires to *decrease* politicization, she can always implement her ideal level of politicization q^*, as in the policy creation game.

Figure 2: Congressional Influence on Politicization
(Under a Moderate Status Quo)



indifferent between the president's proposal and the status quo level of politicization. Thus, even if the president and Congress are somewhat ideologically aligned, for any policy where $q^* > q^{**}$, the president ends up worse off than she would be if not constrained by Congress. Finally, if Congress is aligned with the president and prefers q^* to q_s, the president can enact her preferred level of politicization free of constraint.

Generally, as ideological divergence between the president and Congress increases, the president's ability to enact her preferred level of politicization will be increasingly hampered, leading to more parameter values for which centralization is the preferred option. This aligns with Lewis' (2008) empirical findings that politicization is lower under divided government. It also provides a new mechanism for why divided government affects centralization. In Rudalevige (2002), divided government, or any ideological distance between the president and Congress, shifts agency ideology toward Congress and away from the president, increasing delegation costs as the agency seeks to serve two divergent principals. As a result, centralization becomes comparatively more attractive. However, in the model presented here, divided government can lead to more centralization independent of any change in agency ideology.

Finally, it is worth noting that the equilibrium result is not always efficient.[21] That is, if Congress possessed a credible commitment mechanism by which it could agree to compromise levels of politicization, both players could be better off given certain circumstances. For example, take a situation where Congress desires a moderate level of politicization to centralization, but prefers the status quo most of all ($EU_C(q_s) > EU_C(q_C) > EU_C(centralization)$, for some $q_C > q_s$). If the president prefers q_C to both centralization and the status quo, but prefers centralization to the status quo (that is, $EU_P(q_C) > EU_P(centralization) > EU_P(q_s)$), then the president will choose to centralize. However, both the president and Congress would have preferred some moderate level of politicization to centralization. Thus, if Congress possessed a commitment mechanism in this or a similar situation, the president would select to politicize and both players would be better off.

In sum, this extension provides two important insights. First, Congress can affect the president's choice of centralization or politicization without taking any visible actions. Second, divided government leads to conditions that make centralization increasingly prevalent.

5 The Policy Implementation Game

In the previous sections, the assumption that centralization and politicization are substitutes was baked into the game, in order to focus on centralized policy creation. However, as pointed out earlier, this is simply one brand of the greater centralization strategy. If centralization focuses instead on monitoring policy implementation, centralization and politicization can become interdependent strategies. That is, instead

21. Again, as with the policy creation model, it is efficient if and only if the president delegates.

of necessarily choosing one strategy or the other, the president may employ both strategies to create and implement a given policy. For example, the ideas behind a heavily centralized policy will typically originate in the White House, but the actual language of the statute or regulation will be written by the agency, as will the implementation of any rules. Furthermore, policy implementation suffers from the classic moral hazard problem, in which the president cannot perfectly monitor whether the agency is implementing the policy as desired. In response, and in addition to engaging in politicization, the president can choose to develop and devote centralized capacity to better supervise the implementation of policy.

To be clear, my goal here is not to create another model of regulatory review, but to model when White House staff expend additional time and resources supervising agencies to ensure compliance with the president's policy agenda. Such oversight is not uncommon, nor is it hidden. As Bradley Patterson explains in his description of the National Economic Council (NEC):

> Section 4(a)(4) of the executive order establishing the NEC states that among the "principal functions of the Council" is "to monitor implementation of the President's economic policy agenda." Much like the policy development and policy coordination roles just described, this, too, is a function often centered in the White House staff. (Patterson 2000, 95)

Similarly, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) outlines its mission as "leading and coordinating the development, implementation, and assessment of U.S. drug policy" (The White House 2020), advertising the fact that the ONDCP spends time both developing policy and overseeing its implementation. Finally, in addition to the use of regular EOP offices, White House czars may be tasked with monitoring policy implementation (Vaughn and Villalobos 2015).

In an attempt to capture the implementation-focused aspect of centralization, this section contains a model distinct from the policy creation game. The models are related, including the same players, but with a somewhat altered game play and role of centralization. While the policy creation game sets up politicization and centralization as exclusive options leading to policy creation by either the White House or the agency, this model does not contain such a dichotomy. Instead, centralization and politicization are both tools for ensuring that the agency implements a policy in alignment with the president's preferences. The president selects her preferred level of each strategy, and the agency is always the player who implements the policy.

In this game, let centralization lead to a probability $\alpha \in [0, 1)$ of the president correctly determining the state of the world, ω. As the president increasingly invests in centralization, α grows and she is correspondingly more likely to discover ω. The costs of centralization are strictly increasing in the complexity of the policy area m as before, but also strictly increase in α according to a convex function $c(\alpha, m)$, with derivative $rc'(\alpha, m)$. Let r denote the factors that affect the marginal costs of centralization. Politicization remains identical to the policy creation model.

In the policy creation game, the agency receives full real authority to implement whichever policy it prefers, if the president decides to delegate. In this model, delegation always happens, but the president is able to monitor the agency and punish it for non-compliance with the president's agenda. If the president knows the state of the world ω, she is able to discern whether the agency is complying with presidential directives or not. In other words, if a policy outcome does not align with presidential preferences, a president who knows the state of the world can determine whether this outcome was a result of factors beyond the agency's control, or whether the agency simply did not seek to implement a policy in alignment with the president's preferences. If the president determines agency non-compliance, the agency must pay a penalty ℓ. However, if the president does not know ω, then she cannot discern agency compliance. Assume that the costs for the agency of being caught in non-compliance are sufficiently high for non-compliance to never be preferred to compliance by the agency[22] and the cost of false punishment is such that the president never punishes without reason.

Game play is as follows. Once ω is selected by Nature, the president chooses a certain level of centralization, α, knowing the ideal points of all players. Once the president has decided how much to centralize, she also determines the level of politicization, q, which shifts the ideal point of the agency while increasing the variance of policy outcomes. The president then tries to learn the state of the world and is successful with probability α. Next, the agency learns whether the president was successful or not and chooses a policy to implement. Finally, the president checks the agency for compliance, and the policy outcome and associated payoffs are realized.

Working again through backward induction, the agency always selects the policy, and its choice of policy will be based upon whether the president is able to discover ω. If the president's centralization efforts are successful at finding ω, then the agency will attempt to perfectly comply with the president's preferred policy and propose a policy at $p + \omega$ in order to avoid non-compliance costs. However, if the president does not know ω, the agency can minimize its own policy loss by selecting a policy at $a + \omega$. Thus, the president's expected utility is equal to the probability weighted sum of two situations, as shown in Equation 9. First, that she finds the state of the world and gets her ideal point implemented. Second, that she does not discover the state of the world and the agency's ideal point is instead implemented. Regardless of the success of centralization, the president has to pay the cost of centralization, and the agency will make an error ϵ.

$$EU_p(both) = -(1-\alpha)\left[[(1-\gamma(q))(a-p)]^2\right] - mq - c(\alpha, m) \tag{9}$$

Note that if $c(0, m) = 0$, then the president's cost of politicization without cen-

22. For a non-compliance cost ℓ this means that $\ell > (p-a)^2$.

tralization is the same as in the policy creation game. On the other hand, if the president chooses a politicization level of $q = 0$, the president's expected utility is simply $-(1-\alpha)(a-p)^2 - c(\alpha, m)$.

The president will select the levels of centralization and politicization that maximizes the utility found in Equation 9. The optimal amount of centralization α^* is the value that satisfies the first order condition.

$$[(1-\gamma(q))(a-p)]^2 - rc'(\alpha^*, m) = 0 \tag{10}$$

This means the president wants to centralize to the point that it makes the marginal cost of centralization equal to the policy loss resulting from failed centralization. Likewise, the optimal level of politicization q^* balances the benefit of agency alignment under failed centralization with the errors from politicization.

$$(1-\alpha)(a-p)^2(1-\gamma(q^*))\gamma'(q^*) - \frac{m}{2} = 0 \tag{11}$$

It is important to recall that this model allows the president to choose any level of either centralization or politicization, both, or neither. There is no assumption that they serve as substitutes or complements, or that the president can employ only one tool at a time. However, examining the relationship between the optimal level of centralization and politicization shows that the two strategies serve as substitutes.

Proposition 3. Centralization and politicization serve as substitutes.

First, it is fairly straightforward to consider how the optimal use of centralization decreases as the marginal cost of centralization increases. Formally,

$$\frac{\delta\alpha^*}{\delta r} = -\frac{\frac{\delta c(\alpha,m)}{\delta\alpha}}{r\frac{\delta^2 c(\alpha,m)}{\delta\alpha^2}} \tag{12}$$

Both the numerator and denominator in Equation 12 are positive, since $c(\alpha, m)$ is increasing and convex in α. Thus, as the marginal cost of centralization increases, centralization decreases, and vice versa. All else equal, as centralization (α) increases, politicization must decrease to maintain the president's equilibrium behavior as expressed in Equation 11. Likewise, when the marginal cost of centralization decreases, the president engages in more centralization while politicization is correspondingly reduced. This finding differs from the Bubb and Warren (2014) model of politicization and regulatory review, which finds the strategies are complements. One reason for this distinction, though there are many differences between the models, is that engaging in centralized review does not itself involve any inherent cost in their model. Meanwhile, choosing to engage in centralization is a costly option in my model, and thus must be balanced with politicization.

Moving to other comparative statics, they are generally quite similar, though not identical, to the policy creation game. One slight change comes from the comparative static between centralization and ideological distance with the agency. In the policy creation model, centralization became more attractive as ideological distance increased purely because politicization grew comparatively more expensive. In this game, however, the ideal level of centralization is now directly affected by ideological distance, so the costs for centralization itself are such that it becomes increasingly attractive as ideological distance increases. Intuitively, since the agency gets to implement its ideal point when centralization fails, the president wants to take less and less risk of centralization failing as her views become more divergent from the agency's. Meanwhile, centralization and complexity continue to be negatively related The comparative statics for politicization also remain unchanged from the policy creation model. Namely, the president's ideal level of politicization is increasing in ideological distance from the agency and decreasing in the complexity of the policy area. Additional details for all comparative statics are found in the Online Appendix.

The policy implementation game demonstrates that even if the president is allowed to select any level of either strategy, centralization and politicization serve as substitutes when both are costly strategies with distinct trade-offs. This is a key step in moving forward the debate regarding the relationship between these two strategies. It also establishes a more direct relationship between centralization and agency ideological distance, with the president wanting to engage in greater centralization as this distance increases for reasons beyond rising politicization costs.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Even though politicization has been described as "the other side of centralization" (Rudalevige 2015, 350), the two strategies have rarely been examined together in either a formal or empirical manner. This paper shows how jointly studying presidential strategies of policy influence can provide essential insights that do not arise from examining each tool in isolation. For example, this paper is the first to find a non-monotonic relationship between politicization and ideological distance. The policy creation model shows that as the ideological distance between the president and agency grows, the president should eventually "give up" on politicization and focus instead on centralization. Thus, the president may not seek to politicize agencies that are, in essence, "too far gone." This may provide an explanation for why some presidential administrations do not politicize as much as expected, such as the early days of the Trump administration (Lewis, Bernhard, and You 2018).

In addition, the extension with Congress provides a new reason why divided government should lead to greater centralization. The existing literature had focused on the ability of Congress to influence agencies to be more ideologically distant from the president (e.g., Rudalevige 2002). In the Congress extension to the policy creation model, divided government hinders the president's ability to engage in politicization, thus making delegation a less attractive option and increasing the parameter space for which centralization is preferred.

Finally, this paper provides a formal justification for why centralization and politicization should be considered substitutes, and not complements. Even in the policy implementation game, where the president is able to select any level of centralization and/or politicization, the two strategies serve as substitutes. This is due to each being distinct tools with unique costs that presidents employ to achieve similar ends: greater influence over policy. This paper provides an important step toward more fully considering the costs associated with both options, with more work to be done.

Many fruitful avenues of future research remain. In particular, there is little existing literature on how electoral accountability concerns may affect the centralization-politicization decision. Most relatedly, there is a growing literature on accountability and direct executive actions. Judd (2017) shows how accountability concerns might make presidents more likely to engage in unilateral actions, modeling the incentives the president has to unilaterally create policy in order to show off her policy-making skills. On the other hand, there is some empirical evidence that accountability might reduce the president's proclivity for centralized policy creation, as the president is more likely to be held accountable for policies he or she is more directly in control over (Ansolabehere and Rogowski 2020; Ruder 2014). Furthermore, politicization (Villalobos and Vaughn 2009), as well as some types of centralized policy creation, may face decreasing marginal benefits as the public has a limited appetite for unilateral action by the president (Lowande and Gray 2017; Reeves and Rogowski 2015, 2016, 2018). In sum, the existing literature suggests that accountability considerations may incentivize presidents to either engage in or avoid centralization and politicization.

There also may be situations where the president does not care about agency capacity or even actively seek to reduce it. For example, Republican presidents have oftentimes been accused of having this type of relationship with the Environmental

Protection Agency, and it is not difficult to imagine that a future Democratic president may pursue such a direction with respect to the Drug Enforcement Administration or Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This goes against the assumptions of this model, as well as the rest of the related literature, which generally assumes presidents desire agency capacity. Capacity-reducing behavior seemed to have reached new levels of prevalence during the Trump Administration and is worthy of further research.

These models should also be tested empirically, as they are intended to be applied models. Key predictions relate to agency ideology, politicization, and divided government, each of which have existing measures and so can easily be tested (e.g., Clinton and Lewis 2008; Lewis 2008; Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2017). However, some of the variables are generally more difficult to observe, particularly centralization itself. The primary existing measures of centralization rely on archival work of randomly sampled policies (Rudalevige 2002, 2021), and so do not allow for comparisons across policy areas, or for directly relating with politicization measures. Creating a measure of centralization by policy area would be an important step forward both for testing these models as well as studying executive branch management more generally.

This paper provides a theoretical launching point for futures models of centralization and politicization, and demonstrates the importance of jointly modeling these strategies as costly options, which had not been done in the existing literature. Additionally, the models presented here offer a foundation for future empirical work, given that many of their predictions can be empirically tested. Finally, this paper demonstrates how examining basic trade-offs across presidential strategies can shed new light on presidential motivations and actions, uncovering a non-monotonic relationship between politicization and agency ideological distance for the first time. By enhancing our knowledge of when and why we should expect presidents to influence the policy-making process through centralization or politicization, we better understand who makes policy and how policies are made.

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