

The Administrative Presidency and Public Trust in Bureaucracy

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ABSTRACT

Bureaucratic agencies occupy a politically perilous position in the American federal government. As agents of both Congress and the president, agencies are responsible to principals who often perceive political incentives to manage them in ways that appear to undermine agencies' policy missions. In this paper, I study how presidents' administrative strategies affect public confidence in bureaucratic agencies. Survey experiments embedded on a national sample of Americans provide evidence that the loss of expertise significantly reduces public confidence in bureaucracy. These patterns are consistent across several agencies, but are relatively stronger among political Independents and weakest among Republicans. Moreover, I find no evidence that other potential mechanisms of presidential control of bureaucracy, including changes in capacity or its ideological composition, affect public confidence. The results provide new evidence about how information and expertise affect Americans' attitudes toward the federal bureaucracy and shape the incentives for criticism and oversight from political elites.

Keywords: Presidential appointments; bureaucracy; trust in government; public opinion

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The administrative presidency gained increased attention during Donald Trump's presidency, with academics, current and former bureaucrats, politicians, and political observers raising a number of concerns about President Trump's approach to managing the federal bureaucracy. While not an exhaustive list, these concerns have focused largely on high vacancy rates within federal agencies,¹ the replacement of experts with novices and political loyalists,² and the nomination of ideologues opposed to the agencies they were chosen to lead.³ To be sure, these administrative strategies and the criticism they have generated are not specific to President Trump (see, e.g., Lewis, 2019); instead, they reflect modern presidents' capacity to exert significant influence over bureaucratic management, both through the appointment power and their ability to affect incentives for careerists by shaping agency priorities and agendas. In turn, this power allows presidents to affect the characteristics of bureaucracies and their personnel in addition to their policy outputs. For some, the Trump administration's approach to bureaucratic management has only accelerated concerns about a growing legitimacy crisis of the administrative state (e.g., Wallach, 2016).

In this article, I study how presidential control over the bureaucracy affects its institutional standing with the public. While an important literature documents the causes and consequences of public evaluations of political institutions and the actors who inhabit them (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson, 1992; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mueller, 1970; Reeves and Rogowski, 2016), the federal bureaucracy has largely been neglected from this line of scholarly inquiry.⁴ This omission is surprising and unfortunate given that, like the federal courts, there is no means of direct accountability between bureaucrats and public. A separate line of scholarship identifies the political incentives for presidents to exert control over bureaucratic structures and personnel (e.g., Lewis, 2008; Moe, 1985) but does not study how these means of presidential control affect perceptions of the bureaucracy. Understanding how the public views the bureaucracy

¹See, e.g., <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/03/11/present-destruction/>, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-trump-top-vacancies-in-cabinet-20190413-story.html>, and https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/its-way-too-many-as-vacancies-pile-up-in-trump-administration-senators-grow-concerned/2019/02/03/c570eb94-24b2-11e9-ad53-824486280311_story.html.

²See, e.g., <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/02/why-donald-trump-needs-the-administrative-state-that-steve-bannon-wants-to-destroy/>, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2019/09/07/the-federal-bureaucracies-were-already-creaking>, and <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-civil-servants-201709-story.html>.

³See, e.g., <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/341923-trumps-war-on-the-state-department>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/climate/epa-buyouts-pruitt.html>, and <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/12/the-zinke-effect-how-the-us-internal-department-became-a-tool-of-industry>.

⁴Hollibaugh (2016) is perhaps the only exception, which focuses on how presidential nominations to bureaucratic positions affect trust in government more generally rather than in bureaucratic institutions in particular.

and identifying the considerations that influence those views are important for characterizing the political incentives for adjoining branches to exercise control over bureaucracy and for understanding the consequences of presidential administration. Rather than studying bureaucratic compliance with political principals (see, e.g., Brehm and Gates, 1997; Gailmard and Patty, 2007), this article focuses on the incentives for principals — here, American presidents — to manage bureaucracy in an attempt to secure their political objectives.

I evaluate how the administrative presidency affects public confidence in bureaucracy using an experiment embedded on a nationally representative survey of Americans. The survey asked respondents to evaluate specific bureaucratic institutions after the first year of the Trump presidency. The key manipulation assigned respondents to different vignette treatments that emphasized various dimensions of the Trump administration's approach to managing bureaucratic personnel. The results provide evidence that the loss of expertise evokes a significant decrease in public confidence and that these patterns are generally consistent across several bureaucratic departments and respondent partisanship. Moreover, I find little evidence that public opinion is systematically responsive to decreases in bureaucratic capacity or changes in the ideological composition of bureaucratic personnel. The results provide new evidence about how information and expertise affects Americans' attitudes toward the federal bureaucracy and shapes the incentives for criticism and oversight from political elites.

Public Opinion, Political Institutions, and the Bureaucracy

Concerns about the public esteem of the administrative state have existed since the American founding. During debates over ratification, Federalists sought to convince skeptics that a strong national government would function more effectively than a confederation of state governments. In *Federalist* 27, Alexander Hamilton argued that the agency relationship between the federal government and citizens would provide incentives for the administrative state to govern effectively. "I believe it may be laid down as a general rule," Hamilton wrote, "that [the people's] confidence in and obedience to a government will commonly be proportioned to the goodness or badness of its administration." A century later, Woodrow Wilson (1887, p. 216) made the Progressive case for bureaucratic reforms and argued that "administration in the United States must be at all points sensitive to public opinion . . . It will not be the creation of permanent officials, but of statesmen whose responsibility to public opinion will be direct and inevitable."

How *do* Americans view bureaucratic institutions? A large literature underscores the importance of citizens' evaluations of and trust in governing institutions (e.g., Chanley *et al.*, 2000; Easton, 1965, 1975; Keele, 2005). These

perspectives characterize citizen evaluations of government as an indicator of the health of democratic systems. Not unlike the judiciary (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson, 1992), institutional trust is particularly important in the context of the bureaucracy because citizens have limited means of monitoring bureaucratic decision-making and do not have any direct means of enforcing the accountability relationship with the officers who work within bureaucratic institutions (Barber, 1983; Kass, 1994; Thomas, 1998).

Public opinion toward bureaucratic institutions, moreover, has important implications for at least three bodies of scholarship that concern the bureaucracy. First, the esteem with which bureaucracies are held may affect bureaucratic performance. According to Kim (2005, p. 611), “successful governance” is dependent on public trust in “the implementation of policy programs.” Without the trust of their constituents, Yates (1982, p. 124) argues that “public employees find it more difficult to perform their tasks.” Under these conditions, constituencies served by the agencies may express increased hostility toward and may be less willing to comply, cooperate, or negotiate with bureaucratic officials (Levi, 1997; Tyler, 2006). These constituents may be domestic, as in the case of federal agencies that provide service delivery, but they may also be international, as could be the case in diplomatic contexts.

Second, public evaluations of bureaucracy may create incentives for political oversight, control, and delegation by adjoining branches of government. For example, to the extent oversight offers opportunities for legislators to receive political benefits, unpopular bureaucracies may be disproportionate targets of legislative inquiries. Moreover, legislators may be more confident delegating authority to agencies that are held in popular regard; following the political logic outlined by Bawn (1995), public trust in bureaucracy may be especially relevant for legislators’ decisions to delegate when the agency’s decisions are important for their voters. Similarly, presidents’ incentives to manage the administrative state may depend in part on the potential public reaction to those strategies. More generally, attitudes toward bureaucracies may also have implications for Americans’ attitudes toward institutional arrangements and the separation of powers (Hetherington, 2001), particularly when changes in attitudes toward bureaucracy are not accompanied by changes in attitudes toward other institutions. In particular, decreased trust and confidence in public bureaucracies could generate increased support for privatized sources of service provision (Lerman, 2019).

Third, understanding the causes of public opinion toward bureaucracies provides insight into the consequences of what Durant and Resh (2010) term “presidentializing” the bureaucracy. Contemporary presidents can exert control over the bureaucratic state through a number of administrative strategies, including through personnel and the use of appointment powers. Accounting for how presidents use personnel powers, Moe (2012, p. 29) argues, “[needs] to be an integral part of the political logic of delegation.” Existing research

describes a number of ways presidents may strategically use mechanisms such as politicization and centralization to bureaucratic procedures and outputs (Lewis, 2008; Moe, 1982, 1985). Consider, for instance, that some presidents routinely promise to contract (or eliminate) or more heavily invest in existing bureaucratic institutions. To the extent presidential strategies can influence how the public views federal agencies, “presidentialization” may enable presidents to help build political support for those goals.

Existing Research on Public Opinion toward Bureaucracy

Despite the importance of public judgments of administration in classic accounts of bureaucracy, relatively few studies provide theoretical perspectives on or empirical examinations about the public’s views of bureaucratic institutions. The lack of attention is somewhat surprising, given important bodies of scholarship that study the nature of trust within bureaucratic organizations (e.g., Resh, 2015), how the public evaluates presidential management of bureaucracy (Miller and Reeves, 2019), attitudes toward public–private partnerships (Boyer and Van Slyke, 2019), and bureaucrats’ responsiveness to public opinion (Brehm and Gates, 1997; Gormley *et al.*, 1983). By comparison, scholars have devoted substantial effort to understanding how the public views legislators and legislative institutions (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1996, 2002), presidents and the presidency (e.g., Mueller, 1970; Reeves and Rogowski, 2016), and judges and the judiciary (e.g., Ansolabehere and White, forthcoming; Rogowski and Stone, forthcoming). The small body of research that documents attitudes toward bureaucracy, moreover, has tended to focus on public opinion toward individual bureaucratic agencies (Alvarez and Brehm, 1998) or government administrators in particular (e.g., Houston *et al.*, 2016; Houston and Harding, 2013) rather than bureaucratic institutions more broadly.

In an important exception, Yackee and Lowery (2005) create a time-series of opinion measures toward U.S. federal bureaucracy and report evidence that attitudes toward bureaucracy respond to meaningful signals about the bureaucracy’s performance related to its management of the budget and media reports of problems in public agencies. In contrast, the authors find little evidence of a correlation between presidential management and attitudes toward bureaucracy; neither presidents’ efforts to reform bureaucracy nor presidential attacks on bureaucracy appeared to meaningfully shift public attitudes toward it. However, as the authors acknowledge, because of the lack of systematic data on public attitudes toward bureaucracy their time-series measure reflects a relatively sparse series of indicators. From a research design perspective, while scholarship in this area has identified several correlates of attitudes toward bureaucracy and bureaucracy, the causal nature of these relationships generally remains unclear. In the research most closely related to this article, Hollibaugh (2016) uses an experiment design to assess how

presidential nominations to bureaucratic positions affect public opinion toward government in general. I depart from this research by broadening the focus of presidential administration beyond high-profile bureaucratic appointments and evaluating the implications for attitudes toward bureaucratic institutions rather than trust in government more generally.

Presidential Administration and Public Evaluations of Bureaucracy

I address these theoretical and empirical limitations by focusing on how three potential consequences of presidential administration affect public opinion toward bureaucratic institutions: institutional capacity, policy expertise, and ideology. These characteristics lend themselves well to manipulation by the president through administrative strategies related to appointments and personnel. Moreover, these three characteristics are roughly connected with themes identified by Moe (2012) as key opportunities for the study of public bureaucracy and political control.⁵ I elaborate each of them in turn and provide a sketch of how they may be theorized to affect public opinion.

Capacity. Due in no small part to personal interactions with bureaucrats, the public often views bureaucracies as slow, wasteful, and inefficient (Brehm and Gates, 1997; Fiorina, 1983; Goodsell, 2004). Dissatisfaction with bureaucratic processes, therefore, could fuel disapproval of bureaucracies. Research in a range of contexts, mostly outside government bureaucracies, find that individuals who perceive that democracy and justice are administered in a fair way are more satisfied with the outputs generated from those processes and the institutions that produced them (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Magalhães, 2016; Tyler, 2006). Canonical accounts emphasize the close relationship between bureaucratic capacity and autonomy. According to Carpenter (2001, p. 14), for instance, “Autonomy first requires demonstrated capacity, the *belief* by political authorities and citizens that agencies can provide benefits, plans, and solutions to national problems.” When bureaucratic capacity is low — for instance, when agencies are understaffed and/or do not have sufficient resources to respond to constituent need — the public may hold relatively dim views of bureaucracy due to their dissatisfaction with bureaucratic performance.⁶ As capacity increases, however, bureaucracy may be more effective at providing goods and services and responding to constituent requests, thereby improving how the public evaluates bureaucracy overall.

⁵This is not to say that these are the *only* dimensions that reflect how presidents manage the administrative state. Nor are they the only considerations that are likely to affect how Americans view bureaucracy; instead, a number of other factors, including performance considerations (e.g., Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003), are also likely to affect public opinion toward federal agencies. Elaborating upon and examining the role of these considerations is an important task for future scholarship.

⁶Indeed, this possibility could provide a resolution to the oft-cited paradox that Americans hold negative views of bureaucracy yet express support for greater service provision.

Expertise. Public opinion toward bureaucratic institutions may reflect, in part, the belief that bureaucrats are policy experts with superior information about the crafting of regulations and implementation of policy. Information plays a key role in elites' decisions to delegate authority to or defer to the preferences of others in a variety of contexts, including from legislators to committees (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1989, 1990), presidents (Howell *et al.*, 2013), and the executive branch (Bawn, 1995; Gailmard and Patty, 2012). Because most voters are not policy experts, their evaluations of bureaucracies may depend upon whether they perceive bureaucrats as well-informed and competent. Therefore, expertise may also be linked to perceptions of professionalism (see, e.g., Carpenter, 2001). Evidence from interactions with street-level bureaucrats indicates that constituents report greater satisfaction with outcomes when they perceive those officials are high-quality (Hall *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, increases in bureaucratic expertise (or perceptions thereof) may improve constituent evaluations of bureaucratic institutions.

Ideology. Americans may also evaluate bureaucracy based on their degree of preference alignment with the bureaucracy and its outputs. A vast literature on accountability finds that the public evaluates political officials more favorably when their behavior reflects constituency preferences (Ansolabehere and Rogowski, forthcoming; Ansolabehere and White, forthcoming; Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010; Christenson and Glick, 2015). Therefore, as the composition of bureaucratic personnel better reflects public preferences, the public may register more favorable evaluations of bureaucracy.

To distinguish the independent effects of the considerations outlined above on bureaucratic evaluations while addressing methodological limitations of previous research, I designed and conducted an original survey experiment, which I describe below in greater detail.

Data

I studied the public's evaluations of bureaucratic institutions using a vignette experiment embedded in a national survey of Americans. The survey was administered by YouGov in Spring 2018 and included approximately 4,000 respondents.⁷ The sample was matched to a target sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and census region and was designed to be representative of the national population.

A vignette experiment is well-suited for studying how the public responds to information about presidential management of the federal bureaucracy.

⁷YouGov uses an opt-in Internet panel rather than a national probability sample, though estimates of treatment effects from survey experiments are generally similar across sampling frames (Berinsky *et al.*, 2012).

By design, the vignette provided all respondents with the same background information about the president’s role in selecting bureaucratic personnel and the potential implications of those choices. Specifically, all respondents received the following prompt:

“As you may know, the President nominates individuals for top-level positions in the executive branch of the federal government, such as the Department of Defense, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Census Bureau. These individuals begin serving in their positions once they have been confirmed by the Senate.

In their positions, these top-level individuals are responsible for leading their department or agency, creating the organization’s policies, managing its programs, and supervising many career employees who perform the organization’s day-to-day operations.”

After receiving the prompt, respondents were randomized to the control group or one of three treatment groups. While respondents in the control group received no additional information, the vignettes used in the treatment groups prompted respondents to consider separate dimensions of bureaucratic personnel in a particular department. All respondents — whether in the control or treatment groups — were then asked to evaluate the department. Therefore, the design holds constant the object of respondents’ evaluations and its attributes, varying only the messages respondents receive about the management of its personnel.

While the experimental design helps provide a high level of internal validity, I also sought to administer treatment vignettes that maximized external validity. To do so, I designed the vignettes so that they asked respondents to reflect upon real-world bureaucratic institutions and the information environment that accompanied them during the first year of the Trump presidency.⁸ Rather than ask respondents to consider hypothetical scenarios, the vignettes used in this study presented asked respondents to consider aspects of personnel management that were live political issues.

Table 1 shows the vignette text that was presented to respondents. As noted above, respondents in the control condition received no additional text after receiving the prompt shown above. Respondents in each of the treatment conditions were shown messages that referenced personnel departures and turnover within the department. Respondents in the *Capacity* condition were

⁸For examples of news coverage of the federal bureaucracy during the early years of the Trump administration, see, e.g., <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/13/the-state-department-is-riddled-with-key-vacancies.html> and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/the-energy-202/2019/06/17/the-energy-202-congress-wants-to-know-when-trump-will-fill-all-the-vacant-positions-at-interior/5d06a32aa7a0a4586bb2db00/> and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/10/27/devos-offers-buyouts-to-shrink-education-department-workforce/>.

Table 1: Treatment vignettes.

Treatment group	Text	(N)
Control	[no additional text]	1,004
Capacity	“Over the last year, staffing levels in the <i>[department]</i> have dropped dramatically, with many key employment positions remaining unfilled. This has caused some people to worry that the <i>[department]</i> does not have the capacity to perform its job effectively.	978
Expertise	“Over the last year, many career employees in the <i>[department]</i> have been replaced by employees who do not have training or background in <i>[policy domain]</i> . This has caused some people to worry that the <i>[department]</i> does not have the expertise and training to perform its job effectively.”	1,001
Ideology	“Over the last year, many career employees in the <i>[department]</i> have been replaced by individuals who have publicly said they disagree with many of the policies and programs the <i>[department]</i> is responsible for. This has caused some people to worry that the <i>[name]</i> cannot perform its job effectively because its employees are ideologically opposed to the <i>[department]</i> ’s mission.	1,017

Respondents were randomly assigned to the *Department of Education*, *Department of State*, and *Department of the Interior*, and values of *department* reflected this assignment. *Policy domain* was *education policy* for respondents assigned to the Department of Education; *foreign affairs* if assigned to the Department of State; and *land management and conservation* if assigned to the Department of the Interior.

shown text that emphasized that the department was not fully staffed, which threatened its ability to perform its core functions. In the *Expertise* condition, respondents were told that policy experts in the department had been replaced by personnel who did not have experience or background in the policy area for which the department was responsible. Finally, respondents in the *Ideology* condition were told that career employees had been replaced by individuals who disagreed ideologically with the department’s core policy activities.⁹ Each

⁹The *Expertise* and *Ideology* vignettes were intended to focus respondents’ attention specifically on bureaucrats’ policy expertise and ideological orientations. It is possible, however, that respondents interpreted vignettes as indicators of the department’s politicization by the president, in which entrenched bureaucrats are replaced by relative novices. I acknowledge that I cannot dispositively rule out the latter possibility (see, e.g., Dafoe *et al.*, 2018). However, each of the three treatment vignettes explicitly reference the removal of bureaucrats who had previously held office, and both the *Expertise* and *Ideology* treatments

of these treatments corresponded to theoretical insights about the nature of bureaucratic performance and reflected contemporary political debates about bureaucratic personnel. As the specific text of the vignettes demonstrates, however, the use of realism comes at the cost of symmetry; that is, each of the treatments concerns decreases in capacity, expertise, and beliefs in the department's mission, but there are no corresponding treatments that increase these parameters. I discuss the implications of this design choice in the conclusion.

The primary dependent variable assesses respondents' confidence in the relevant department. Specifically, the question asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "I have confidence in the [department]." The question wording was chosen in an effort to measure respondents' levels of trust in, or diffuse support for, bureaucratic institutions (see Easton, 1975) and was modeled after similar questions which have appeared on long-running batteries administered by Gallup.¹⁰ Diffuse support is posited to reflect respondents' willingness to defer to bureaucratic officials and support the exercise of the authority granted to them.¹¹ Respondents were asked to provide their responses along a five-point scale, which included a middle option for "Neither agree nor disagree." Overall, respondents did not report high levels of confidence in bureaucracy, as only 24 percent reported that they "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed that they had confidence in the relevant department, while 36 percent "strongly" or "somewhat" disagreed that they had confidence in the department and the remaining 40 percent chose the middle option.¹²

Due to the randomization of respondents to treatment categories and the nature of the dependent variable, I test the effect of each of the treatment

further reference the hiring of new bureaucrats. Therefore, if respondents evaluated the vignettes on the basis of presidential politicization rather than the specific content of the vignettes, I would expect the treatment effects to exhibit little variation across vignettes.

¹⁰See <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>. Gibson *et al.* (2003) report that the confidence measure, when asked about the Supreme Court, reflects a combination of short-term satisfaction with court rulings and longer-term perceptions of institutional legitimacy. To my knowledge this distinction has not been studied in the context of bureaucracy. Given that most bureaucratic outcomes do not generate much public salience, it may be reasonable to assume that short-term satisfaction with outputs play a much smaller role in affecting responses to the "confidence" question in the context of bureaucracies compared with courts. I acknowledge this potential limitation, however; resolving this measurement question is an important task for future research.

¹¹This distinction reflects an important scholarship in judicial politics that distinguishes public approval of judges and the judiciary from their perceptions of the court's legitimacy (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson, 1992; Christenson and Glick, 2015; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Rogowski and Stone, forthcoming).

¹²Though asked on different scales, these descriptive patterns are generally consistent with evaluations of the federal government provided by Americans in other surveys in 2018. For instance, a Gallup poll from 2018 found that 11 percent of Americans had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in Congress compared with 37 percent who had similar levels of confidence in the institution of the presidency.

conditions by comparing the mean level of confidence in each of them with the mean level of confidence among respondents in the control group. To the extent the treatments lowered respondents' confidence in the bureaucracy, I expect levels of confidence in them to be smaller in value and statistically distinguishable from confidence among members of the control group. Survey weights are used in all analyses to generalize the estimated effects to the national population.

As I describe below in greater detail, I examine how the treatment effects are moderated by two sets of conditions. First, the experiment was also designed to evaluate how the effect of the treatment conditions varied across department-level factors. To do so, respondents were also randomly assigned to evaluate one of three different cabinet-level departments: Education, State, and Interior. Importantly, data reported in Clinton *et al.* (2012, p. 349) indicate that political appointees have greater influence vis-à-vis careerists in each of these three agencies, suggesting that the president's management strategy could have particularly stark implications for department outputs. These departments vary along several theoretically relevant dimensions, each of which could moderate the effects of the vignette treatments. Education and Interior address domestic policy arenas, while the State Department is concerned with foreign policy. The State Department may be the most publicly salient, while Education addresses a prominent domestic policy domain and Interior addresses a more regulatory and "submerged" policy area. Estimates of agency ideology developed in Clinton and Lewis (2008) suggest that these departments were perceived as having somewhat different ideological orientations, as Education, State, and Interior were rated as the 15th, 26th, and 62nd, respectively, most liberal departments/agencies out of their sample of 82 entities. To the extent that the treatments interact with respondents' perceptions of the policy domains or ideological perspectives associated with these departments, the treatment effects may vary across them.

Second, I examine how attitudes toward the mission and objective of each of the three departments condition the treatment effects. Each respondent was asked for his or her view about whether they supported "the federal government's involvement in managing the country's natural resources," "the federal government's involvement in promoting and demonstrating democratic values around the world," and "federal policies to promote educational achievement and access to educational programs in public schools." These descriptions were used to characterize the purpose and goals of the Interior, State, and Education departments, respectively. These questions were asked on four-point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To avoid priming respondents to think in terms of these bureaucratic institutions, the questions were presented at the beginning of the survey with additional questions between them and the experimental vignette. To the extent that individuals who support the objectives of bureaucratic institutions are particularly sensitive

to their management, I would expect the treatment effects to be larger in magnitude among these respondents.

Results

I begin by examining the overall treatment effects for each of the experimental vignettes. Among respondents in the control condition, the average level of reported confidence was 2.82 on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. To estimate the average treatment effects, I compare this value with the mean levels of confidence for respondents in each of the treatment groups.

Figure 1 displays the results of these comparisons. The points show the average difference in evaluations of bureaucracy between the control condition and each of the treatment groups described on the *y*-axis.¹³ Positive values along the *x*-axis indicate that the treatment condition *increased* evaluations, while negative values indicate that the treatment condition *decreased* evaluations.

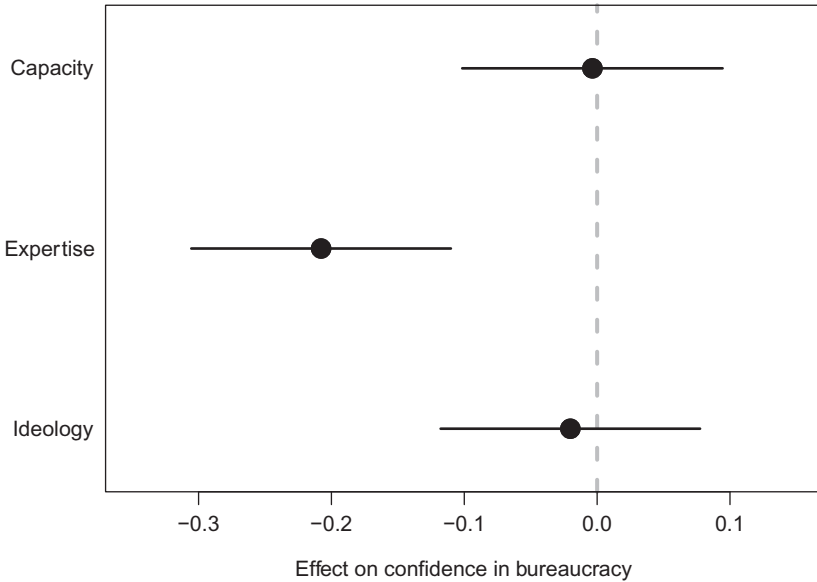


Figure 1: Presidential management and confidence in bureaucracy.

Note: The points represent the differences in mean evaluations of bureaucracy between the control group and each of the treatment groups. The horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals associated with the differences and the vertical dashed line represents the null hypothesis of no difference in means.

¹³Regression-based estimates are shown in Table A.1.

The horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals associated with the mean differences, and the vertical dashed line shows the null hypothesis of no difference in means.

Overall, Figure 1 shows that only the expertise condition significantly affected respondents' reported confidence in bureaucracy. The mean confidence among respondents in this condition was 0.21 lower than for respondents in the control condition ($p = 0.001$). I find no evidence, however, that either the capacity or the ideology treatments meaningfully affected bureaucratic evaluations. Not only are the differences not statistically distinguishable from zero, but the differences in means are virtually zero. Mean confidence in bureaucracy was 0.004 lower among respondents in the capacity condition relative to the control group ($p = 0.955$) and 0.020 lower among respondents in the ideology condition relative to the control group ($p = 0.741$). Moreover, the effect of the expertise condition is statistically distinguishable from the effects of both the capacity and the ideological treatments (both $p = 0.001$), which provides some suggestive evidence that respondents evaluated the vignettes on the basis of their specific content rather than as descriptions of presidential politicization more generally.

The results shown in Figure 1 are robust across a range of additional analyses. First, I find similar patterns when using collapsing the five-point scale into a binary measure, which takes a value of 1 if respondents "strongly" or "somewhat" agree that they have confidence in the bureaucracy, and zero otherwise. Using this measure, respondents in the expertise condition were 0.053 less likely to report having confidence in the bureaucracy ($p = 0.023$) while neither of the other treatment conditions were statistically distinguishable from the control group.¹⁴ Second, the substantive results remain unchanged when estimating the treatment effects in a multivariate framework while accounting for a variety of respondent-level demographic and political controls. Specifically, I estimated a linear regression of the dependent variable on indicators for each treatment group and accounted for respondent gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, family income, partisanship, and symbolic ideology. The effect of the expertise condition continues to be negative and statistically significant (-0.21 ; $p = 0.001$) while the effects of the capacity (0.001 ; $p = 0.987$) and ideology (-0.007 ; $p = 0.909$) remain small in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable from zero.¹⁵ Third, the results are relatively consistent across respondent partisanship. I used the three-point party identification scale to distinguish the treatment effects among Republicans (26 percent of the sample), Democrats (33 percent of the sample), and political independents (41 percent of the sample). The patterns shown in Figure 1 are quite similar across each partisan group, as the negative effects of

¹⁴See Figure A.1.

¹⁵See Table A.1, column (2).

the expertise condition are larger in magnitude than they are for the other treatment groups.¹⁶ Despite the context of the survey experiment in which respondents were asked to reflect among the first year of the Trump presidency, I find no evidence that respondents' partisanship significantly conditioned the effects of the vignette treatments.

Variation Across Departments

As described above, respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate one of the three departments: State, Education, or Interior. These departments vary in the policy domain for which they are responsible and their ideological orientations. Accordingly, I test whether the effects of the vignette treatments varied across them. For instance, if the public perceives that expertise is more valuable in departments that are primarily responsible for making decisions in policy domains on which the public generally is less-informed, then the expertise condition may have a larger negative effect when evaluating, for instance, the state and/or interior departments relative to the Education Department. Likewise, departments that are relatively more politicized may be particularly susceptible to messages about the ideological composition of their personnel. Because the Department of Education is frequently mentioned as a target for elimination by Republicans¹⁷ while Democrats typically endorse a more robust role for the Department of Education, the ideology treatment may be especially important in the context of this department relative to the other two.

Before proceeding, the baseline levels of confidence across each department merit some discussion. Members of the control group had somewhat different levels of confidence across them. Confidence was lowest among respondents who evaluated the Department of Education (2.55) but was considerably higher among respondents who evaluated the Department of Interior (2.91) and Department of State (3.03). The difference between confidence levels in each of the latter departments and the Department of Education is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, any differences in treatment effects across departments should be interpreted with respect to the baseline differences in respondent confidence.

Figure 2 displays the treatment effects of the vignettes relative to the control group for each department.¹⁸ Generally speaking, the results suggest that the treatments had rather consistent effects on bureaucratic evaluations across departments. The effect of the capacity treatment was small in magnitude

¹⁶See Figure A.2 and Table A.1, column (3).

¹⁷See, e.g., <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/ct-republicans-shut-education-department-20180620-story.html>.

¹⁸The full table of regression coefficients that generated these estimates is shown in Table A.2.

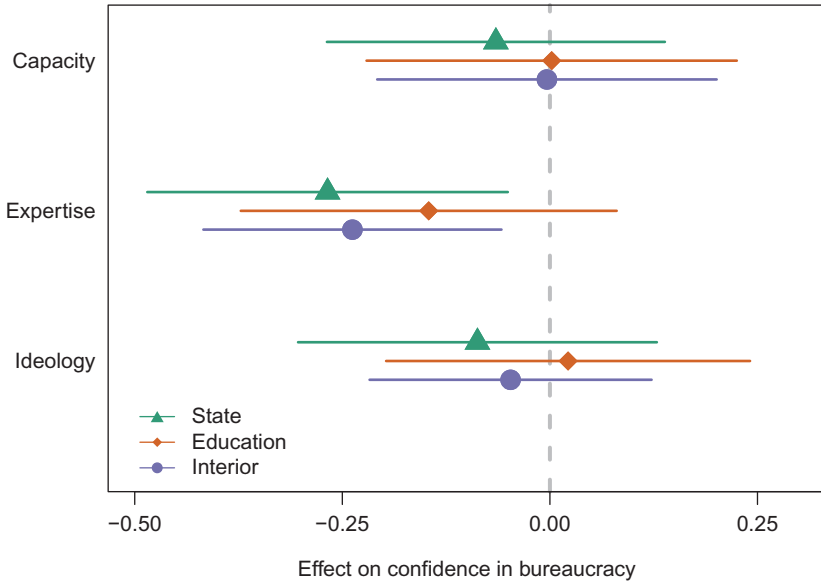


Figure 2: Presidential management and confidence in bureaucracy.

Note: The points represent the differences in mean evaluations of bureaucracy between the control group and each of the treatment groups. The horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals associated with the differences and the vertical dashed line represents the null hypothesis of no difference in means.

and statistically indistinguishable from zero for each department. The largest estimated effect was -0.07 for the State Department, but the effects were considerably smaller for Education and Interior (0.002 and -0.004 , respectively). Likewise, the expertise treatment had similar effects for each department with treatment effects of -0.27 for State, -0.15 for Education, and -0.24 for Interior. The effects for State and Interior are both statistically distinguishable from zero, while the effect is not statistically significant for Education ($p = 0.206$), the effect is also not statistically distinguishable in magnitude from the effects for the other departments. Finally, Figure 2 shows that the results of the ideology treatment are consistently small in magnitude and indistinguishable from zero for each department. On the whole, therefore, the results provide no evidence that the treatment effects meaningfully varied across departments.

The results presented above underscore the importance of expertise as a predictor of public confidence in bureaucratic institutions. The substantive patterns provide tantalizingly suggestive evidence that expertise may be even more important for the public's confidence in institutions that concern issues about which the public is not well-informed — such as foreign or regulatory

policy — as the point estimates are larger for State and Interior than they are for Education. However, I do not wish to push this interpretation too far as the estimates are not distinguishable from each other. The results presented above also provide little evidence that the American public meaningfully evaluates federal bureaucracies on the basis of the ideological perspectives of the personnel employed by them or by their institutional capacity. Perhaps most surprisingly, these results contrast with theoretical perspectives that suggest Americans' attitudes toward political institutions are a reflection of the ideological composition of those institutions; instead, the findings provide some reason to believe that Americans' views toward bureaucratic institutions reflect more fundamental considerations than personnel changes brought about by a single presidential administration.

Mission, Presidential Management, and Bureaucratic Evaluations

I distinguish respondents' support for the mission associated with each of the bureaucratic institutions using the questions described above. Responses were dichotomized to create a binary indicator of support. Overall, 73 percent of respondents supported the mission of the department to which they were assigned. However, this figure varied somewhat across departments, as 65 percent of respondents supported the State Department's mission compared with 82 percent and 71 percent of respondents who supported the missions of Interior and Education, respectively. I use this indicator to evaluate whether the vignette treatment effects varied based on respondents' underlying orientation toward the relevant department.

Importantly, respondents' baseline levels of confidence in bureaucratic institutions are strongly responsive to their agreement with those institutions' missions. Among respondents in the control group, average confidence was significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) for respondents who supported the department's mission (2.92) than among those who opposed it (2.50). This distinction provides some initial evidence that Americans are more willing to express confidence in bureaucratic institutions that are tasked with activities the public supports. Put differently, political disagreements over the role of government in managing various policy areas structure how Americans view political institutions that are created to do so.

Figure 3 shows how the treatment effects of the vignettes varied on the basis of respondents' support for the departments' missions. The points shown in black distinguish the treatment effects among respondents who supported the departments' missions and the points in gray show the effects among respondents who opposed the missions. Among respondents who supported the department's mission, the expertise condition had the largest effect on confidence and reduced it by -0.27 ($p < 0.001$). While the effects were also estimated to be negative for the capacity (-0.03) and ideology (-0.09)

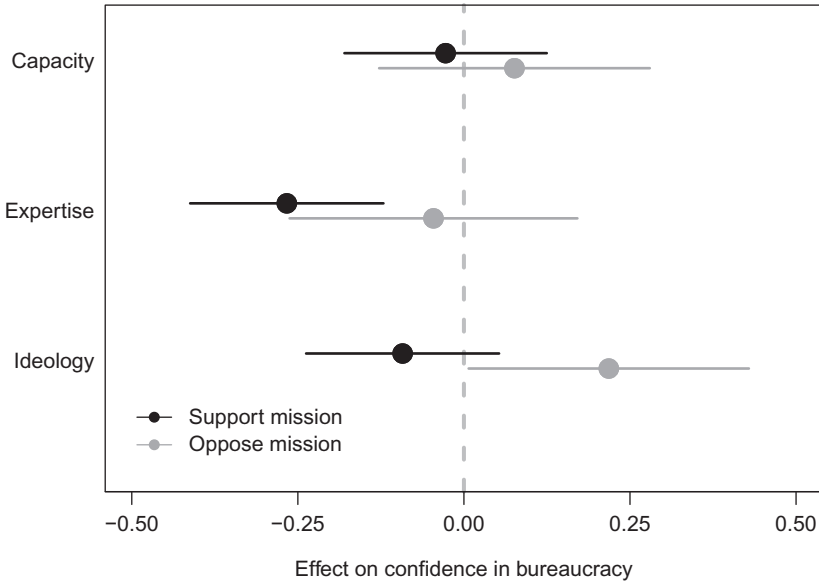


Figure 3: Presidential management, belief in agency mission, and confidence in bureaucracy. *Note:* The points represent the differences in mean evaluations of bureaucracy between the control group and each of the treatment groups. The horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals associated with the differences and the vertical dashed line represents the null hypothesis of no difference in means.

treatment groups, neither is statistically distinguishable from zero. Among respondents who oppose the departments’ missions, however, only the ideology treatment (0.22) is statistically significant ($p = 0.043$). Interestingly, this indicates that the hiring of personnel whose personal ideologies conflict with the department’s mission *increases* respondents’ confidence in that agency.

Overall, therefore, Figure 3 provides some evidence that individuals’ support for departmental missions conditions the effects of the treatment vignettes. These conditional effects are strongest for the ideology and expertise treatments; the difference in the effect of the ideology treatment between individuals who support and oppose the departments’ missions is significant at $p = 0.018$ and the difference in the effect of the expertise treatment is statistically significant at $p = 0.097$. There is an important asymmetry in these effects, however, as the treatments did not generate equivalent opposite reactions among individuals who expressed support for and opposition to the department’s mission. These patterns suggest that members of the public evaluate bureaucratic institutions using different criteria based on their underlying relationship with them. Among individuals who support the bureaucracy’s mission, the loss of expertise serves to undermine their confidence in that institution; however, the loss of

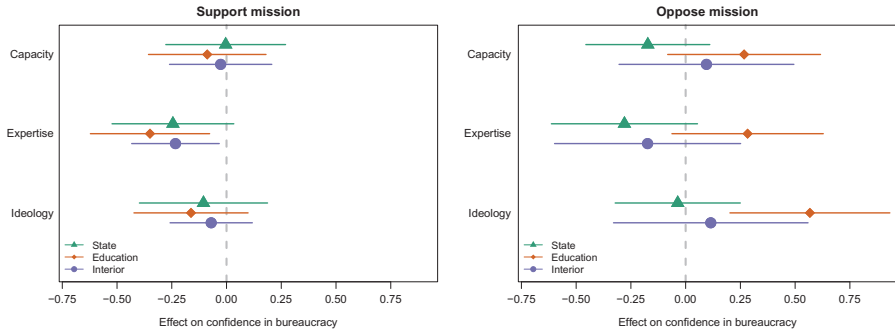


Figure 4: Presidential management, belief in agency mission, and confidence in bureaucracy. *Note:* The points represent the differences in mean evaluations of bureaucracy between the control group and each of the treatment groups. The horizontal lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals associated with the differences and the vertical dashed line represents the null hypothesis of no difference in means.

expertise registers no effect among individuals who disagree with the agency’s mission. Among individuals opposed to the bureaucracy’s mission, however, the hiring of personnel who also disagree with the agency’s mission substantially increases confidence in that institution; interestingly, however, the results do not provide evidence that the shift in ideological composition affects evaluations among individuals who support the mission.

In a final analysis, I explore the relationship among department characteristics, respondent support for bureaucratic mission, and the vignette treatments in a triple interaction whose results are shown in Figure 4. The left plot distinguishes the effects of the treatments across departments among respondents who supported the departments’ missions and the right plot shows the treatment efforts for respondents who opposed the departments’ missions. Among respondents who supported the department’s mission, the treatment effects are largely consistent across departments. For example, the effects of the capacity and ideology treatments were negative and small in magnitude across each department, and none of them were statistically distinguishable from zero. The treatment effects for the expertise condition, however, are larger in magnitude, and two of the three are statistically significant with the effect for the State Department falling short of conventional levels of significance ($p = 0.084$).

The plot on the right shows that the treatment effects are more variable across departments among individuals who oppose the department’s mission. Within each treatment group, the marginal effects are inconsistently signed; moreover, all but one of the nine marginal effects is statistically distinguishable from zero. It bears noting, however, that each of the treatments produced *positive* effects among respondents tasked with evaluating the Department of

Education. To be sure, only one of the three — for the ideology treatment — is positive. However, the patterns suggest that there may be something distinctive about the Department of Education that led respondents to evaluate it more favorably upon receiving information that the Trump administration's approach may have undermined its ability to perform its core mission.

The results presented above provide new evidence about the foundations of the public's evaluations of bureaucratic institutions. Across a number of analyses and subsets of observations, I find that decreases in expertise among personnel significantly reduce confidence in the bureaucratic agency. These results are driven largely by decreases in confidence among individuals who support the bureaucracy's stated mission — precisely the individuals who would express the greatest confidence. I find little consistent evidence, however, that decreases in expertise affect evaluations among individuals who oppose the department's mission, nor do I find that messages referencing the bureaucracy's decreased capacity or ideological composition have any systematic relationship with how individuals evaluate that bureaucracy. On the whole, these results suggest that while the public's views toward bureaucratic institutions may be relatively durable in the short-term, those institutions' claims to information and expertise may be particularly important sources of public confidence in them.

Conclusion

Americans love to hate bureaucracy. And politicians often seem eager — at least through their public rhetoric — to use this basic fact to their strategic advantage by blaming bureaucracies for ineffective and inefficient implementation of policy programs and expressing support for cutting back or eliminating bureaucratic agencies whose work is at odds with their political agendas. Yet, since the early days of the American republic, scholars and observers have recognized the importance for the public to perceive the administrative state as legitimate and have argued that effective governance will establish its claim to authority. But because bureaucracy is a fundamentally political creation, however, its performance depends, at least in part, on how it is managed by actors in adjoining institutions. As head of the executive branch, the president occupies a particularly important role in influencing how the public perceives bureaucratic institutions. Identifying how Americans view bureaucratic institutions and what shapes these views is also important for characterizing agencies' political autonomy and independence; as Carpenter (2001, p. 361) write, "agencies that have stable political legitimacy will be able to resist the control strategies of presidents."

This paper provides evidence that citizens' views of the administrative state are linked, at least in part, to administrative officials' expertise. The

experimental results indicate that survey respondents expressed significantly lower levels of confidence in bureaucratic institutions when bureaucrats were described as having lower levels of policy expertise. These results were generally consistent across a range of analyses and subsets of observations. I found no evidence, however, that Americans' views of bureaucratic institutions were linked either to the personnel capacity of those agencies or the ideological views of the personnel who worked within them. These latter results may distinguish how Americans view bureaucracy from their evaluations of actors in other political institutions, including presidents and legislators. While Americans appear to hold elected officials accountable for their policy views, their views of bureaucracies appear responsive to bureaucrats' policy expertise.

The normative consequences of the findings presented here appear mixed. On the one hand, that the American public may express greater confidence in bureaucracies that are staffed by policy experts may be reassuring. Americans appear poised to defer to bureaucrats on questions of policy implementation when those bureaucrats are perceived as experts, which may produce incentives for bureaucratic management to emphasize these characteristics. Moreover, to the extent that greater public confidence could help insulate bureaucracies from political criticism and interference, this finding may support accounts that argue that expertise is a core mechanism that generates this result. On the other hand, however, the results may raise potentially troubling questions about the incentives for presidential management. The magnitudes of the estimated effects shown above are not particularly large, and neither the ideology nor the capacity treatments had any systematic effects on respondent attitudes.¹⁹ These patterns raise questions about whether the president has a relatively free hand in managing the bureaucracy, given the relative limited capacity of those strategies to affect public attitudes toward bureaucratic institutions. A third possibility, however, is that Americans' attitudes toward bureaucracy reflect considerations more long term in nature than a given president's management strategies.

The findings reported in this paper have important limitations, however, which present opportunities for future research. First, the vignette experiments, though realistic in their design and content, address only one facet of the considerations they were intended to represent. It is unclear, for instance, whether respondents would react differently to changes in expertise, capacity, and ideology if they were operationalized differently. For instance, other vignettes could have employed biographies of specific bureaucrats to convey their attributes and how they may bear on the administrative decisions they may produce. It is also unclear whether *increases* in expertise would have had a positive effect on perceptions of bureaucracy in a symmetric manner as

¹⁹While the lack of statistical significance could reflect insufficient statistical power, the small magnitudes of the estimated effects of these characteristics suggest that even statistically significant results would be substantively trivial in importance.

the vignette which invoked decreased expertise. If perceptions of bureaucracy are only *hurt* by declines in expertise and are not helped by increases in expertise, bureaucracies and their principals may have limited incentives for bureaucracies to invest in accumulating it in greater amounts.

Second, and similarly, additional research is needed to examine how these considerations may affect other aspects of bureaucratic performance. For instance, are respondents more likely to approve of and/or comply with bureaucratic regulations depending on the characteristics of the personnel who fashioned them? Administrative data would be particularly useful for understanding the behavioral implications of public evaluations.²⁰

Third, while respondents were tasked with evaluating the bureaucracy, my study did not examine how a president's administrative strategy affected evaluations of the president. To the extent presidents may incur public wrath for depleting bureaucratic expertise, for instance, such findings could suggest how presidents account for public responses to their administrative strategies. Moreover, the study did not specifically prime respondents with the president's motivation. That is, respondents were not told that the president engaged in personnel strategies specifically because of how those strategies would affect bureaucratic outcomes. Given evidence about how patronage affects both personnel politics and bureaucratic outputs (Hollibaugh *et al.*, 2014; Lewis, 2008; Moskowitz and Rogowski, 2019; Rogowski, 2015, 2016), distinguishing how the public evaluates presidential personnel strategies in particular from the administrative consequences of those strategies is an important opportunity for further research.

Fourth, from a more speculative perspective the findings presented here suggest an important link between expertise and issues of bureaucratic autonomy, reputation, and power (see Carpenter, 2001, 2010). Future research could explore this relationship in other settings and other time periods. For instance, are members of Congress less likely to publicly criticize bureaucratic agencies that possess (or are perceived to possess) high levels of policy expertise? Is the public more likely to accept bureaucratic regulations produced by more expert agencies? Additional research leveraging cross-sectional and temporal variation could shed new light on these underexplored questions.

Fifth, and finally, while the vignette experiments here have relatively high internal validity due to random assignment, they necessarily abstract away from many important features of real-world bureaucracies and the political discussions that accompany them. As such, additional research would be useful to establish that changes in the composition of the bureaucracies are associated with Americans' attitudes toward them. Nevertheless, the research

²⁰For instance, the targeting scandal by the Internal Revenue Service under President Obama (see <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/politics/irs-targeting-tea-party-liberals-democrats.html>) could have affected public perceptions of politicization within the IRS and affected the public's willingness to comply with tax-reporting requirements.

presented here provides an initial step toward understanding how Americans view administrative institutions and the political officials who affect their operation.

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