Presidential Investment in the Administrative State

NICHOLAS R. BEDNAR   *Vanderbilt University, United States*
DAVID E. LEWIS   *Vanderbilt University, United States*

*I*n this paper, we explain how presidents strategically invest in administrative capacity, noting that presidents have few incentives to invest effort in capacity building in most agencies. We test our account with two analyses. First, we examine the time it took for the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations to nominate individuals to appointed positions. We find that presidents prioritize appointments to policy over management positions and that nominations occur sooner in agencies that implement presidential priorities. Second, we examine the responses of federal executives to the 2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service to see whether perceptions of presidential investment in administrative capacity match our predictions. We find that federal executives perceive higher levels of investment when the agency is a priority of the president and when the agency shares the president's policy views. We conclude with implications for our understanding of the modern presidency and government performance.

Presidential systems divide the role of policy enactment and implementation between separate institutions. National legislatures respond to the demands of the electorate by enacting programs to deliver benefits to the poor, prevent economic and environmental harms, and defend the country from national security threats. Yet enactment alone does not satisfy the demands of responsive governance. Successful implementation is also necessary. Legislators lack the time and energy to perform the day-to-day tasks associated with implementation. As a result, they delegate implementation authority to the administrative state. Meaningful democratic government depends on implementation of programs by these bureaucratic institutions (Foarta 2022).

Implementation necessitates administrative capacity. Capacity is the ability of an agency to perform the tasks delegated to it (Gailmard and Patty 2012; Huber and McCarty 2004; Ting 2011; Williams 2021). Agencies require expert workforces, appropriate processes and equipment, and efficient management to accomplish their missions and prevent government failures. They cannot generate this capacity alone. The political principals who control appropriations, appointments, and programs must invest time and resources to build and maintain this capacity.[1] In presidential systems,

presidents play a unique role in managing the administrative state and building capacity (Geddes 1994).

Scholars often assume that the bureaucracies in stable democracies have sufficient capacity to effectively implement public programs (Besley and Persson 2009, 1218; McDonnell 2020). In the United States, this confidence is often connected to the belief that presidents, motivated by their electoral and legacy concerns, will work to avoid large-scale government failures (see, e.g., Lewis 2008; Moe 1990). When a crisis befalls the American public or a scandal engulfs an agency, the public usually blames the president (Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Neustadt 1960). As Moe (1990) states, "[a]ll presidents are acutely aware of this, and they respond by trying to build and deploy an institutional capacity for effective governance" (237).

Two phenomena lead us to question the view that U.S. presidents have incentives to invest broadly in building administrative capacity. First, recent work suggests that the health of the bureaucracy is declining and the pace of administrative failure is increasing (Fukuyama 2014; Light 2008; Verkuil 2017). Countless failures—from the mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina to the spread of COVID-19—trace their roots to poor management in neglected agencies. Second, President Trump's vow to "deconstruct the administrative state" suggests that presidents, at times, have political incentives to undermine capacity (Benn 2019; Durant 1992; Parshall and Twombly 2020).

In this study, we explain when presidents strategically invest in administrative capacity given their preference for substantive policymaking over management. Presidents have three choices for managing a particular agency: build, neglect, or deconstruct. The preference for substantive policymaking over management discourages presidents from expending more effort than necessary on building capacity. As a result,

Nicholas R. Bednar ⬡, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University, United States, nicholas.r.bednar@vanderbilt.edu.

David E. Lewis ⬡, Rebecca Webb Wilson Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University, United States, david.lewis@vanderbilt.edu.

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[1] Sometimes capacity building means larger budgets and employee rosters. At other times, it means automation and restructuring, leading to reductions in both budgets and staffing.

neglect—rather than proactive building or deconstructing of capacity—is the norm for most agencies. When presidents do build capacity, they tend to focus on agencies that (1) implement policies central to the president's agenda, (2) share the president's ideological leanings, or (3) face a high risk of experiencing a publicly salient failure. Likewise, presidents are discouraged from devoting time to deconstructing agencies because neglect often proves sufficient to achieve the objectives of presidents with deregulatory agendas.[2]

We test our account with two analyses using novel observational and survey data. First, we examine the time it took for the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations to nominate individuals to appointed positions. We find that presidents prioritize appointments to policy positions over management positions and that nominations occur sooner in agencies that implement presidential priorities. Second, we examine the responses of federal executives to the 2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service to see whether perceptions of presidential investment in administrative capacity match those anticipated by our predictions. We find that federal executives perceive higher levels of investment when the agency is a priority of the president and when the agency shares the president's ideological leanings. We conclude with implications for our understanding of the modern presidency and democratic responsiveness.

AMERICAN PRESIDENTS AND ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY

In the past century, the U.S. national government has responded to the demands of citizens by growing its portfolios of welfare, national security, and regulatory programs. The administrative state has expanded to implement these new programs and is now comprised of hundreds of agencies and millions of employees. The administrative state needs sufficient capacity to implement these programs. By "capacity," we mean the resources, information, and processes an agency needs to prospectively complete its tasks. Capacity cannot be distilled into a single attribute; it is the sum of its parts. Agencies need expert, experienced, and innovative civil servants who understand how to further the agency's substantive policy mission (Bednar 2022; Carpenter 2001; Gailmard and Patty 2012; Potter 2019). They need effective leaders who can invigorate and coordinate these civil servants (Lewis 2008). To perform their jobs, all civil servants need standard office

supplies and many, such as those employed by the National Aeronautics and Space Association or the Centers for Disease Control, need highly specialized technologies. Beyond personnel and material resources, the agency needs the processes, networks, and information to make efficient use of resources. A high-capacity agency exhibits both sufficient resources and management structures designed to use these resources in an efficient way.

Presidential investment refers to efforts by the chief executive to build an agency's capacity. As in other presidential systems, the constitution and federal law entrust a central part of the management of this administrative state to a single, nationally elected executive (Geddes 1994; Linz 1990; Metzger 2015). Accordingly, presidents play a significant role in building and maintaining capacity across the administrative state. Presidents appoint leaders to these agencies (Mackenzie 1981), propose budgets (Pasachoff 2016), and take other actions to improve the management of the administrative state (Arnold 1998).[3]

Although presidents assume the role of manager-in-chief, their motivations rarely stem from an inherent desire to promote "good governance." Instead, presidents want to secure reelection for themselves and their copartisans, enact policies aligned with their preferences, and leave a legacy (Moe 1990; Neustadt 1960). The growth of the administrative state endows presidents with new tools of policymaking that help them achieve these goals (Howell 2003; Inácio and Llanos 2016; Kagan 2001). By steering agencies toward their policy positions, presidents may use agency authority to promulgate legally binding regulations (O'Connell 2008), distribute grants and benefits (Kriner and Reeves 2015), and prosecute violations of law (Kim and Semet 2020). The pursuit of policy encourages presidents to expend greater effort on policymaking and overlook managerial responsibilities.

Presidents' foci on policy *creation* over *implementation* can lead to persistent neglect of agencies that contribute little to presidents' policy priorities. For example, the Affordable Care Act—President Obama's signature legislative accomplishment—necessitated the creation of insurance marketplaces. Yet the Administration invested greater effort into creating the policy than ensuring that the Department of Health and Human Services had sufficient capacity to deliver an efficacious rollout. In the end, the rollout proved disastrous (Herd and Moynihan 2019). Despite periodic investment, administrative capacity writ large has remained stagnant and, in some cases, has receded (DiIulio 2014; Lewis 2019).

Persistent neglect causes poor performance. Increased workloads in understaffed agencies lead to delays in the processing of key activities (Bolton, Potter, and Thrower 2016). Inexperienced leadership

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[2] We focus in this manuscript on departments or agencies as the unit of analysis, but the president might have different emphases within agencies, preferring deconstruction of one part, the building of another, and ignoring other statutory requirements altogether. The focus on agencies has the effect of averaging across these different emphases within an agency. The overall categorization of build, neglect, and deconstruct could usefully be applied to administration approaches within agencies, particularly large agencies with dozens of statutory responsibilities.

[3] In other cases, the White House diminishes capacity by appointing ineffective leaders (Lewis 2008), leaving leadership positions vacant, allowing the agency's workforce to wither (Richardson 2019), and actively dismantling agency capacity (Parshall and Twombly 2020).

prevents agencies from reacting quickly to catastrophe (Lewis 2008). Lack of expertise hinders the attainment of policy goals (Skocpol and Finegold 1982). Even the highest-performing agencies slip into poor performance absent occasional investment. At one time, the Postal Service exhibited high levels of both capacity and performance (Carpenter 2001). But years of decreasing revenues, growing expenses, and cost-cutting measures led to delays in mail delivery (Powell and Wessel 2020). Similar failures and scandals emerge every several years, tainting the reputations of agencies like the Department of Veteran Affairs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Internal Revenue Service.

Widespread neglect poses a puzzle for common views of the presidency. A common assertion is that presidents uniquely care about ensuring high levels of capacity across the administrative state. Presidents occupy a unique position as the only elected officials with a national constituency (Neustadt 1960). Poor government performance threatens presidents' electoral prospects and legacies (Malhotra and Kuo 2008). Although presidents may disagree about how the federal government should perform its job, no president should want the bureaucracy to fail (Lewis 2008; Moe 1985). Accordingly, adherents of this view argue that the president's unique national perspective, electoral concerns, and legacy concerns create sufficient incentives to improve governance (Arnold 1998; Moe 1990; Neustadt 1960).

Under this view, presidents should be attentive to capacity to ensure effective policy implementation and avoid failure. If there is neglect, it would be in the highest-performing agencies because these agencies perform well without presidential attention. Yet this theory fails to account for the neglect that persists across administrations and partisan lines. Moreover, this theory does not adequately explain the deconstructive tendencies of conservative presidents (Durant 1992; Parshall and Twombly 2020).

An alternative view focuses more on deconstructive episodes and suggests that presidents make strategic choices to build (or deconstruct) agency capacity based on ideological and partisan considerations. Presidents will work to increase capacity in agencies implementing policies the president likes and decrease capacity in agencies implementing policies the president opposes (Durant 1992; Herd and Moynihan 2019; Richardson 2019). Republican presidents have the advantage. As Democratic presidents have a stronger preference for expansive government programs, we should observe less willingness to deplete capacity during Democratic administrations. Likewise, we should observe a greater willingness to deplete capacity during Republican administrations due to conservative preferences for small government. This partisan or ideological view draws support from the recent experience of the Trump Administration (see, e.g., Freeman and Jacobs 2021; Skowronek, Dearborn, and King 2021). Like other conservative administrations (Durant 1992), the Trump Administration sought to advance a deregulatory agenda by dismantling the effectiveness of the federal bureaucracy (Parshall and Twombly 2020).

Yet the purely partisan or ideological view lacks the nuance necessary to explain decisions in most administrations. For example, the Trump Administration sought large increases in the employment and budget of the Justice Department's Antitrust Division, which is tasked with enforcing antitrust laws against businesses (Nylen 2020). The Biden Administration sought similar increases (see, e.g., Klar 2022). The Trump Administration increased hiring in border security agencies, such as Customs and Border Protection, but also some social welfare agencies, such as the Department of Veteran Affairs (see, e.g., Katz 2018). By contrast, the Obama Administration largely neglected Veteran Affairs until its 2014 scandal (see, e.g., Nabors 2014). These contrasting examples suggest that presidential investment does not neatly align with ideological expectations.

Both accounts of presidential investment predict that presidents take an active role in building (or deconstructing) administrative capacity. Sometimes these predictions hold true. Yet there is widespread neglect that persists across administrations. Theorizing based on instances of investment and deconstruction selects on the dependent variable. A more comprehensive explanation should explain the regular presence of neglect and *when* presidents have incentives to build administrative capacity.

WHEN DO PRESIDENTS INVEST IN CAPACITY?

We turn now to explaining what motivates presidents to invest time and energy into building administrative capacity. Building capacity requires presidents to invest effort that could be expended elsewhere, such as campaigning or policymaking. Of course, presidents may also expend effort to decrease administrative capacity. Increasing capacity requires presidents and their staff to identify capable leaders, advocate for targeted appropriations, and mitigate procedural constraints that impact performance. Deconstruction may require presidents to find ways to circumvent civil service laws, cut budgets, or flood an agency with busy work (Freeman and Jacobs 2021; Parshall and Twombly 2020; Skowronek, Dearborn, and King 2021). The sheer size of the administrative state prevents presidents from meaningfully investing in every agency.

Presidents want to win reelection for themselves and their copartisans while simultaneously advancing their own policy agendas and legacies. Their policy agendas reflect the policy concerns of voters (Hill 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). Presidents must fulfill some of these promises to win reelection and establish a legacy as a "great" president (Panagopoulos 2012). Therefore, presidents care deeply about enacting substantive policies that satisfy their own personal preferences and the desires of voters.

The achievement of these objectives necessitates responsiveness to voters' policy interests. Most voters have only a vague sense of the operations of the federal government—let alone obscure agencies like the Marine Mammal Commission or the Agricultural Marketing Service (Howard 2007; Mettler 2011). Although voters do not care about management per se, they may punish the president and the president's party when government failures have a traceable and negative impact on their well-being (Malhotra and Kuo 2008). Presidents do not want to be remembered for failed responses to hurricanes, pandemics, and national security threats. But, even then, voters only respond favorably to initiatives that address afflictions currently facing the public; they provide no reward for initiatives that prevent those problems from happening in the future (Healy and Malhotra 2009). Therefore, a tension exists between the president's desire to prevent government failures and voters' inattention to the kinds of investments that would prevent these failures from occurring.

Hypothesis 1. Management: Presidents will invest more effort in substantive policy than bureaucratic management.

Absent ongoing crisis, voters express concerns about specific policy issues rather than something as remote as agency management. This creates incentives for presidents to expend effort in making policies related to salient issues, such as taxes, immigration, and climate change. In general, voters care about policy creation—not the management of the implementing agencies. Voters do not intuitively connect the management of these agencies to policy success unless government failures raise the salience of maladministration. They understand the benefits they obtain from tax cuts but do not see, for example, how replacing the Internal Revenue Service's antiquated computer system would affect their tax returns. Moreover, the public remembers presidents for their substantive policies rather than broad management initiatives. The mass public lauds Franklin Delano Roosevelt for his social welfare programs and victories in World War II. They rarely cite either the Brownlow Committee or the Reorganization Act of 1939 as support for his status as a "great" president.

Presidents face temporal limitations in their abilities to enact policy while simultaneously managing the administrative state. Each of these actions proves costly. Presidents only have 4 years—8 years if reelected—to achieve their objectives. Upon assuming office, presidents must rework the budget, push through nominees, and have a demonstrable record of accomplishment in the first 100 days. Before they know it, presidents face pressures related to midterm elections. While the immediate enactment of policy advances presidents' objectives, administrative capacity is a concern about *future* performance (Williams 2021). Presidents may not realize returns on managerial investments until late in their term or until after they have left office. In this context, presidents are strongly incentivized to prioritize immediate policy accomplishments because voters respond to these accomplishments in forthcoming elections. Presidents rarely win reelection or approval by explaining to voters how they reformed the personnel system inside the intelligence community or implemented new performance metrics within the Department of Commerce (Zegart 2005). Accordingly, presidents obtain greater marginal benefits from investing time and effort into policymaking over management.[4] This focus on policymaking versus capacity is also influenced by presidents' own expectations about what will happen in the future, something we discuss more after reviewing patterns of presidential investment.

Of course, there are cases where presidents' policy objectives and the management of the administrative state are intertwined. If presidents choose to invest, where should they focus their attention? Presidents will invest in capacity (1) to maximize their return from policies that can be sold to the public and (2) to prevent imminent disasters that threaten their electoral returns and legacies. We offer three predictions.

Hypothesis 2. Priority: Presidents will invest more effort to build capacity in agencies implementing policies central to the president's policy agenda.

The marginal returns on investment are highest when an agency implements a presidential priority. These priorities often reflect the policy concerns of the electorate and the party but can also include other items forced onto the agenda by events during the president's term (Hill 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). Presidents may occasionally prioritize management issues—often in response to failures and scandals—but the majority of items on presidential agendas propose to create or amend substantive policies.[5] Presidents tout substantive policies as accomplishments to voters and, therefore, have significant incentives to ensure the success of their priorities. Agencies with insufficient capacity may bungle the implementation of presidents' priorities, marring the president's electoral chances and legacy. Therefore, presidents build capacity within agencies implementing priorities to increase the likelihood that these programs succeed.

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[4] Neglect usually stems from disinterest rather than malice. It is not that presidents disagree with the agency's mission. Rather, presidents may determine that building capacity within these agencies fails to further their electoral goals because voters are relatively disinterested in the agency's policies.

[5] We do not claim that presidents never prioritize management. Rather, the claim is that these kinds of efforts are rare and regularly lose out to other more visible and pressing priorities. In our coding of presidential campaign priorities, only 15% had a management component. That is, they dealt at least in part with fiscal, budgetary, procurement, procedure, or human resources issues or were responding to past management failures. The issues included subjects such as regulatory procedure, veterans' health care, military pay and benefits, Department of Defense (DOD) reform, government ethics, and hiring freezes. If we estimate models with separate controls for these management priorities, they do not change the overall results and suggest that presidents treat management priorities like other priorities in terms of investments in capacity.

Hypothesis 3. Ideology: Presidents will invest more effort to build capacity in agencies that share the president's policy views.

The decision to build capacity also depends on whether agencies share the policy views of the president. Agencies, by virtue of their statutes and histories, have missions that align more easily with the interests of some presidents than others (Downs 1964; Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis 2018). Agency ideologies tend to cluster around the types of tasks that the agencies perform. More liberal agencies tend to regulate and provide social welfare. More conservative agencies provide national security and serve clients in the business community. Because ideology correlates with the policy interests of presidents, presidents tend to build capacity within agencies that share their ideological leanings and implement policies they support.

On the other hand, presidents express ambivalence—or, in some cases, skepticism—toward the policies implemented by ideologically divergent agencies. Presidents find fewer reasons to build capacity in these agencies. This is not to suggest that presidents would never benefit from building capacity within them.[6] However, presidents struggle to ensure that an investment will go toward their priorities. Federal employees in these agencies are themselves unenthusiastic about presidents' efforts to change the direction of their policies (Golden 2000; Potter 2019). Even when presidents prioritize policies implemented by ideologically divergent agencies, presidents may refuse to build capacity in those agencies.

Interest groups play an important role in reinforcing ideologically driven investments. Interest groups mobilize in favor of presidents who protect their interests and against presidents who fail to promote their interests (Arnold 1990; McKay and Yackee 2007). Although individual voters may not care about public management, interest groups understand that achieving their substantive interests requires building capacity within implementing agencies. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons has lobbied for increases in Social Security Administration's capacity to address its "service logjams" (Terrell 2018). At the same time, groups may constrain presidents from investing in ideologically divergent agencies (McKay 2012). Interest groups may interpret an investment as the president taking a position antithetical to the group's preferences. For example, immigration advocates oppose building capacity in Immigration and Customs Enforcement because such investments are viewed as promoting greater enforcement—even if greater funding would improve care for detainees. Presidents have the greatest incentive to cater to ideologically aligned interest groups because these interest groups can animate the president's base through media and get-out-the-vote campaigns.

The interaction of priority and agency ideology may create asymmetric strategies for Democratic and Republican presidents. Democratic presidents require capacity in liberal agencies to promulgate new regulations and expand government programs. Because Republican presidents tend to prioritize deregulation, they may succeed in their objectives by simply neglecting (or deconstructing) capacity within liberal agencies. Reversing regulations often require less capacity than developing new, comprehensive regulations. Accordingly, Republican presidents may have even fewer incentives to build capacity than Democratic presidents.[7]

Hypothesis 4. Performance: Presidents will invest less effort to build capacity in agencies with higher levels of performance.

Beyond priority and ideology, low-performing agencies create liabilities for presidents (Kamarck 2016). Sometimes performance issues break through to the public's consciousness (Malhotra and Kuo 2008). Presidents do not want to enact a program and stumble in implementation. No president wants their electoral prospects or legacy tainted with government failures like those surrounding Hurricane Katrina, the VA Scandal, or the COVID-19 Pandemic. Yet voters provide presidents with few incentives to preemptively build capacity unless they believe an agency is on the brink of failure. Agencies with track records for low performance have a greater likelihood of experiencing a government failure and, therefore, presidents expend greater effort to build capacity in these agencies. In contrast, high-performing agencies have already demonstrated their ability to implement policies without additional investments and, therefore, presidents may trust that these agencies will continue to perform without much attention.

Thus far, we have predicted when presidents are most likely to *build* capacity. What about deconstruction? Voters rarely elect presidents to break government, particularly since most programs and agencies are popular (Gramlich 2017). Presidents may advocate for smaller government, but they seek deregulation through policy change rather than a diminishment of government performance. Two conditions must hold for presidents to actively deconstruct agency capacity. First, deconstruction cannot produce a government failure that would result in voters punishing the president. Therefore, presidents have few incentives to actively deconstruct agencies that protect national security or mitigate disasters. Second, deconstruction must ideologically motivate the president's voters. If

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[6] Presidents often promise to undo the actions of previous administrations. For example, Republicans often campaign to reduce regulations within the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet both regulation and deregulation require agencies to undergo an arduous rulemaking process, which necessitates some level of policymaking capacity (Heinzerling 2018; Potter 2019).

[7] In Appendix F of the Supplementary Material, we test for these asymmetries by examining whether Republican presidents are less likely to invest in regulatory agencies. We find inconsistent evidence and hesitate to draw conclusions from this analysis given its limitations.

the president simply disagrees with the agency's programs, the most cost-effective route is to neglect the implementing agency. Nevertheless, presidents may take an ideological position by deconstructing certain salient agencies.

Presidents' electoral and legacy motivations consistently push them away from broad-based investments in administrative capacity. Presidentially driven management reforms, such as President Nixon's focus on supercabinet agencies or President Clinton's focus on Reinventing Government, have been episodic, partly symbolic, and often short-term in focus. Relative to policy promises, these managerial reforms occupy a small space on presidents' agendas. Instead, when presidents and their teams invest, they focus on a subset of the larger executive establishment, namely agencies implementing policies that are a priority to the president and policies that align with the president's own views.

EVALUATING WHITE HOUSE INVESTMENT: DATA ANALYSIS

Evaluating presidential investment requires observing where presidents build capacity. Observing investments proves challenging. We can observe outputs like budgets or performance, but neither is a measure of presidential effort or attention.[8] Even outputs highly correlated with capacity, such as budgets or hiring, cannot capture the complex definition of capacity. A failure to increase appropriations does not necessarily mean that the president is not investing. Rather than appropriations, investment may come in the form of new leaders or new processes that increase the efficient use of existing appropriations.

Given the difficulty of identifying investment, we perform two separate analyses using novel datasets.[9] First, we track how long it took presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden to send their *first* nominee to the Senate for each vacant position in their first terms. The length of time to nomination is a means of measuring the priority the White House is placing on individual agencies across government, making it a useful way to evaluate where presidents make capacity investments. As certain positions are tied to either policymaking or management, it also provides a way of testing our first hypothesis.

Our second analysis examines whether federal executives perceive presidential investments in a way that

comports with our theory. To assess perceptions of investment, we use the *2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service*, a survey of thousands of federal executives. The survey data provide a unique opportunity to systematically examine the unobserved behavior of the White House from the perspective of those that observe it—agency leaders. Moreover, it avoids the pitfalls of analyzing a single output related to presidential investment.

Presidential Nominations: Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden

The U.S. Constitution empowers presidents to appoint "officers of the United States" with the advice and consent of the Senate. Agency leadership (or the lack thereof) has significant implications for agency performance (O'Connell 2008). Agencies with persistent vacancies or regular turnover tend to perform worse overall (Lewis 2008). But presidents and their staff must invest significant time into pairing the right nominees with the right positions. Accordingly, presidential nominations provide one source of data to examine questions surrounding where presidents invest time into building agency capacity. We assume that quicker nominations reflect greater presidential concern for agency capacity (Kumar 2015; Pfiffner 1996).

We test our hypotheses by estimating the time it takes presidents to nominate an official to a particular position using newly collected data on all Senate-confirmed appointed positions (see Appendix A of the Supplementary Material). Transitions that result in a change of the party in the White House provide a useful way of evaluating presidential priorities since each term begins with more than one thousand vacant Senate-confirmed positions. We examine four periods of transition: 2000, 2008, 2016, and 2020. Prior to the inauguration of the new president, all appointees not serving fixed terms (e.g., a 4- or 7-year term) resign, leaving each new president a clean slate of positions to fill starting on January 20. Presidents must invest time to identify competent leaders who can realize their agendas within each agency. Yet the sheer number of vacancies requires presidents to prioritize nominations to some agencies over others.

Table 1 summarizes the data across the four transitions. When President Bush assumed office on January 20, 2001, there were 1,089 positions available for appointment. Over the course of 4 years, President Bush nominated persons for 948 of the 1,089 positions (87%). This means that 13% of positions vacant on January 20 still did not have a nominee 4 years later. Indeed, if we optimistically assume that positions without vacancies all received a nominee at the end of 4 years, the average position did not receive a nominee until more than 1 year (498 days) after Inauguration Day. Just receiving a nominee is no guarantee of confirmation. About 20% of the nominations were withdrawn or returned to the president, meaning that the actual success in filling positions was much lower.

Our dependent variable measures the number of days it took the president to send the first nominee to a

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[8] In addition, agency outputs and outcomes result from the actions of diverse political actors throughout government and it can be difficult to disentangle the influence of presidents amidst this complexity.

[9] Replication files for the nominations analysis can be found in the American Political Science Review Dataverse (Bednar and Lewis 2023). The sensitive nature of the data limits the public release of replication files for the survey analyses. The combination of variables, such as workplace, pay level, and ideology, makes it possible to identify specific individuals who took or did not take the survey. Therefore, standard principles of human subject research limit the disclosure of these data.

TABLE 1. Positions Requiring Senate Confirmation, Vacancies, and Nominations: Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Presidencies

President	Positions	Vacancies	Nominations	%Nominated	Average days
President Bush	1,337	1,089	948	0.87	498
President Obama	1,401	1,087	924	0.85	520
President Trump	1,315	1,132	839	0.74	678
President Biden	1,312	1,183	710	0.60	349
Total	5,365	4,491	3,421	0.76	509

Note: Average days are calculated by assuming vacant positions received a nominee at the end of the president's second year. Data for President Biden censored at 534 days. *Source*: Appendix A of the Supplementary Material.

given position (Mean 509.41; SD 443.37). The measure ranges between 0 to 1,460 days, where 0 days indicates that the nomination took place on Inauguration Day and 1,460 days indicates that the position did not receive a nomination during the president's term. For nominations during the Biden Administration, the measure ranges from 0 to 534 days because the data were collected during President Biden's second year in office. Accordingly, the data exhibit both left and right censoring. Presidents announce about 2% of their nominees shortly after the election, allowing for smoother transitions come inauguration day. At the other end of the spectrum, some positions (18%) do not receive a nominee within the first term.[10]

Our hypotheses lead to several predictions. First, we hypothesize that presidents invest more effort in policymaking than management. Presidents use appointees to advance their agendas within certain agencies, but these appointees differ in their responsibilities. We include two indicators to test whether presidents prioritize nominees for positions that focus on policymaking versus management. We coded positions that primarily concern legislative affairs, policy planning, or legal as key policy positions (3.8%). In contrast, we coded positions whose functions primarily concern management, finances, acquisition, or personnel as key management positions (3.6%). We expect that presidents will nominate individuals to key policy positions sooner than key management positions. To be clear, the most senior positions such as cabinet secretary or administrator involve both policy and management responsibilities. Neither of these positions is coded as either a policy or management position. The purpose of *Policy Position* and *Management Position* is to identify whether presidents favor policy-only positions and disfavor management-only positions.

Second, appointees play a central role in managing presidents' priorities within agencies. We expect that positions within agencies that implement these priorities will receive nominees sooner than positions in other agencies. To measure presidential priorities, we use the statement by the president that most comprehensively describes the president's agenda nearest to the time of the election (7.8%). We expect that positions within agencies that implement presidents' priorities will receive nominees sooner than positions in other agencies.

Our third hypothesis predicts that presidents invest more effort to build capacity in ideologically congruent agencies.[11] Political actors perceive that some (but not all) agencies have ideological leanings due to their missions and the kinds of personnel they attract. We rely on Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2018) for stable, time-invariant measures of agencies' ideological leanings. Since our data include nominees from both Republican and Democratic presidents, we rescale the measure to reflect ideological distance (Mean 2.0; SD 0.94; Min 0.06; Max 3.93). The larger the value, the further away the agency is from the president. We expect that positions within agencies that align more closely with presidents' ideological preferences will receive nominations sooner. Since the effect of ideology may be influenced by whether the agency implements a policy on the president's agenda, we also include an interaction of presidential priority and agency ideology.

Fourth and finally, in some cases, a lack of competent leadership creates an environment amenable to government failure (Lewis 2008). Seeking to avoid these situations, presidents may nominate individuals to lower-capacity agencies sooner. However, the lack of time-series measures of agency capacity constrains our ability to assess this relationship. Accordingly, we are only able to estimate the relationship between agency capacity and nominations for the Trump and Biden Administrations. To measure the level of agency capacity, we use a measure of workforce skills from Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2018). In 2014 and 2020 surveys, the authors asked federal executives to rate the skills of other agencies and aggregated these responses via a Bayesian item-response model to adjust for differences in the use of the scale by raters (Mean 0.27; SD 0.66; Min –2.53; Max 2.21). Our expectation is that presidents will take longer to nominate individuals to positions in agencies with high levels of existing skills.

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[10] This statistic excludes the Biden Administration.

[11] In Appendix F of the Supplementary Material, we discuss whether priority may be posttreatment to ideological distance and workforce skills. Mediation analyses reveal no significant change to the results.

TABLE 2. Estimated Days to First Nomination: Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations

	Dependent variable Hazard rate of nomination							
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Hypothesized relationships								
Policy position (0,1)	0.63*	(0.14)	0.46*	(0.14)	0.42*	(0.18)	0.35*	(0.17)
Management position (0,1)	−0.25*	(0.12)	−0.43*	(0.11)	−0.39*	(0.19)	−0.52*	(0.19)
Priority (0,1)	0.26*	(0.10)	0.06	(0.11)	0.24	(0.23)	0.28	(0.26)
Agency ideology (0.00,3.87)	−0.05	(0.03)	−0.08*	(0.02)	−0.10	(0.07)	−0.12†	(0.06)
Priority × agency ideology	−0.04	(0.06)	−0.01	(0.04)	−0.04	(0.09)	−0.03	(0.10)
Agency skills (−2.53,2.21)					−0.05	(0.09)	−0.23*	(0.09)
Agency-level controls								
EOP (0,1)	−0.43*	(0.08)			−0.78*	(0.19)		
Commission (0,1)	−0.52*	(0.11)			−0.60*	(0.24)		
Grant giver (0,1)	−0.07	(0.13)	−0.26*	(0.10)	−0.25†	(0.15)	−0.29*	(0.13)
Position-level controls								
Pay level (0–5)	0.30*	(0.03)	0.33*	(0.03)	0.40*	(0.07)	0.50*	(0.08)
Part-time (0,1)	−0.55*	(0.25)	−0.59*	(0.20)	−0.19	(0.38)	−0.47	(0.42)
Administration controls								
Bush (0,1)	0.51*	(0.18)	0.55*	(0.19)				
Obama (0,1)	0.21	(0.13)	0.19	(0.15)				
Trump (0,1)	−0.16	(0.13)	−0.20	(0.14)	−0.25†	(0.13)	−0.35*	(0.14)
Estimator	Cox		Cox		Cox		Cox	
Position-type controls	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Department-level stratified	No		Yes		No		Yes	
Committee stratified	No		Yes		Yes		Yes	
N	3,871		3,871		1,759		1,759	
R^2	0.27		0.19		0.27		0.23	
Wald test, management = policy	22.46*		29.91*		23.82*		21.99*	

Note: *Significant at the 0.05 level; †significant at the 0.10 level in two-tailed tests. All estimates use type HC0 standard errors clustered at the department level. Full model estimates with position-type controls are available in Table B2 in Appendix B of the Supplementary Material.

Other characteristics of agency structure or specific positions may influence the nomination process. We stratify the model based on whether the agency is a subcomponent of the Executive Office of the President (2.3%), part of a cabinet department (67.2%), an independent commission (28.3%), or an independent administration (9.0%). Because presidents may have greater incentives to build capacity in agencies that award discretionary grants (Kriner and Reeves 2015), we include a binary indicator for whether the agency awarded grants in the fiscal year prior to the start of the new administration (17.8%).[12] To account for seniority, we include a control for position pay level using the Executive Schedule, where 0 indicates that the position's pay does not follow the Executive Schedule and 5 indicates the highest level of pay under the Executive Schedule (Mean 0.92; SD 1.31). Relatedly, we include an indicator for whether the position is a part-time position (19.7%). We also include indicators for positions requiring a great number of appointees such as ambassadors (16.4%), inspector generals (2.9%), U.S. marshals (8.3%), and U.S. attorneys (8.2%). Finally, we include indicators for the different presidential administrations.

The time-dependent nature of the dependent variable and censoring necessitates the use of Cox proportional hazard models. We report robust standard errors adjusted for clustering at the department level. We include coefficient estimates in Table 2. A positive coefficient in the table implies a quicker nomination (i.e., higher hazard rate) and a negative coefficient implies a slower nomination (i.e., lower hazard rate). The estimates are interpreted by exponentiating the coefficient, which provides the relative likelihood that a position experiences a nomination at a given point in time. An increased likelihood of nomination indicates that presidents are faster to nominate to that position. Unless specified otherwise, we use Model 2 for interpretation. Where possible, we stratify at the department and congressional committee levels to satisfy the proportional hazards assumption. For robustness, we report estimates from Tobit models in Appendix B of the Supplementary Material.

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[12] We have also estimated models with the logged number of grants and attained consistent results.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we find evidence that presidents prioritize nominations to policy positions over management positions. In all four models, *Policy Position* increases the likelihood that presidents nominate an individual at a given point in time. At any point in time, presidents are 59% more likely (Hazard Ratio 1.59) to make a nomination to a key policy position than other positions. In contrast, presidents are a third less likely (Hazard Ratio 0.65) to nominate individuals to key management positions. In all four models, Wald tests confirm that the coefficient estimates for policy and management positions are statistically distinguishable. This is consistent with our expectation that presidents prioritize policymaking over managing the administrative state. Presidents want their appointees to begin policymaking as soon as possible. Although administrative capacity necessitates support from managers who understand finance, acquisitions, and personnel, presidents do not view these managers as essential to their electoral or legacy goals. Managerial positions, therefore, are a lower priority.

Presidential priority also influences the time it takes a president to nominate an individual to fill a vacant position. Consistent with our expectations in Hypothesis 2, the coefficient is positive in all four models but is estimated precisely in only one. The size of the coefficient varies across specifications, but, in most specifications, the average position in a priority agency is between 27% and 32% (Hazard Ratios 1.27 and 1.32) more likely to receive a nomination than positions in non-priority agencies. Admittedly, the coefficient is the smallest in Model 2. When the model is estimated without observations from the Bush Administration, the average position in a priority agency is 24% (Hazard Ratio 1.24) more likely to receive a nomination. The appointment process has become more costly and dysfunctional over time and, therefore, the Bush Administration may have had less need to focus on positions in priority agencies.

Presidents generally are less likely to nominate individuals to positions in agencies that are more ideologically distant. The coefficient estimates are consistently negative and precisely estimated in the fully specified models. Model 2 suggests that presidents are a quarter less likely (Hazard Ratio 0.74) to nominate individuals to positions in the most ideologically distant agencies relative to positions in ideologically close agencies. For example, President Obama took an average of 134 days to nominate individuals to positions in the Environmental Protection Agency compared with an average of 191 days in the Department of Homeland Security. In contrast, President Trump took an average of 384 days to nominate individuals to positions in the Environmental Protection Agency compared with an agency of 250 days in the Department of Homeland Security. These findings comport with our expectations.

Notably, we find little evidence of a meaningful interaction between presidential priority and agency ideology. Although the coefficient is consistently negative, it is substantively small and imprecisely estimated. If presidents prioritize ideologically distant agencies for purposes of deconstruction, then this deconstruction likely does not happen through the nominations process. Indeed, presidents who want to inflict intentional maladministration upon an agency would benefit from leadership within the agency who can enact cumbersome procedures, redirect resources toward other activities, and prevent civil servants from ignoring orders to deregulate.

Finally, we find evidence that presidents prioritize nominations in low-skilled agencies. Agencies with the lowest skills are 78% (Hazard Ratio 1.78) more likely to receive a nomination than agencies with average skills. Conversely, agencies with the highest skills are 39% less likely to receive a nomination than an agency with average skills (Hazard Ratio 0.61). These findings are consistent with Hypothesis 4 and suggest that presidents pay attention to agency performance when making decisions about where to invest in capacity.

There are other explanations for why presidents would nominate individuals to policy positions quicker, including that there may be more candidates for policy-only positions than management-only positions. While the difference in candidate pools could explain some of the variances, we believe that the lack of White House priority explains most of the variance for two reasons. First, interviews with Presidential Personnel Office (PPO) leaders from six different administrations seem to confirm this interpretation.[13] PPO officials were asked, "Were there any agencies where you had a hard time finding candidates to fill appointee jobs?" While the question focused on agencies and not positions, personnel officials rarely identified a lack of candidates as a big problem for any position. When they did identify positions that were hard to fill, it was usually a position like Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the Department of Education in a Republican Administration or White House science advisor. When the personnel officials mentioned management-only positions, it was to say that they were less concerned about appointing a political person to those positions relative to more policy-oriented positions. We asked a former high-level PPO official in the Obama Administration what might explain the pattern in our data. This official noted that sometimes the pool is the problem, but the White House prioritizes appointments to policy positions. The official explained that policy positions are more important, particularly given that acting career officials often perform competently in "management-only positions."[14]

Second, the candidate pool for management-only positions is often quite deep. The pool includes a large supply of current and former career professionals who have served in these roles across the federal government and state governments. Indeed, generic management skills are abundant in the labor market. While the size of the candidate pool may delay nomination in

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[13] These interviews were conducted for a separate project (Lewis 2008).

[14] Email, personnel official, Obama Administration, July 11, 2022.

FIGURE 1. "How Much Effort Do the Following Groups [White House] Spend to Ensure that [Your Agency] Has What It Needs to Carry Out Its Mission?"
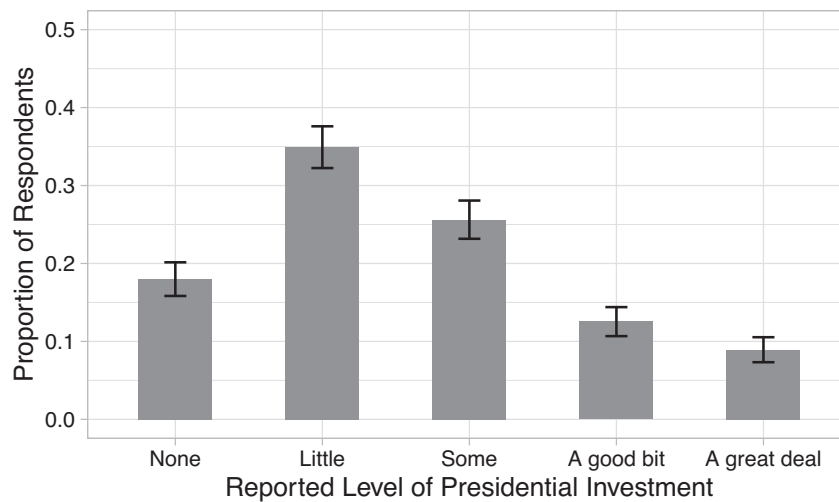
Note: N = 1,216. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Source: 2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service.

some cases, most delays in filling management positions likely have more to do with their low priority rather than the inability of the administration to identify a suitable candidate.

Our analysis of nominations suggests that policy-making drives presidents' investment decisions. Presidents prioritize key policymaking positions over all other positions. Relatedly, they neglect management positions that have the potential to build capacity from within the agency. Ideological divergence appears to increase the time it takes for presidents to nominate an individual, but further research is necessary to understand under what contexts ideology matters. Presidents also feel free to delay filling positions in high-performing agencies. In sum, presidents prioritize nominations to positions that provide them with the greatest utility in terms of policymaking. Beyond nominations, do agency leaders perceive similar trends in investment? We now turn to survey data to help us answer this question.

2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service

To evaluate perceptions of White House investment in capacity building, we use new data from a survey of agency leaders. This online survey, conducted by scholars in collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service, was opened in June 2020 and closed in December 2020. The target population included all appointed and career federal executives in all non-advisory federal agencies. Specifically, it included all political appointees, all career members of the Senior Executive Service, DC-based members of the Senior Foreign Service, and other high-level career professionals with titles indicating key management responsibilities (see Appendix C of the Supplementary

Material). The survey included questions that measure concepts that are difficult to measure with existing data, including presidential investment.[15] The analysis includes survey weights to adjust for differences between respondents and the target population (Keeter et al. 2017).[16]

To measure presidential investment in agency capacity, we use a question that asked respondents, "How much effort do the following groups spend to ensure that [your self-identified agency] has what it needs to carry out its mission?" The response categories were "None," "Little," "Some," "A good bit," "A great deal," and "Don't know." The survey asked respondents about the White House, congressional committees, political appointees, Republicans in Congress, and Democrats in Congress. Figure 1 includes the weighted responses to the question on White House efforts.

Respondents report little White House effort to make sure that their agencies have what they need. More than half of federal executives report that the White House is exerting no effort or little effort to make sure that the agency has what it needs. About 21% report that the White House is doing a good bit or a great deal to make sure that the agency has what it needs to carry out its mission. By comparison, a little more than half of federal executives report that

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[15] The response rate of the survey was 9% (1,485 completed surveys out of 16,232) and 11% participation rate (1,779 complete or partial surveys out of 16,232). This is comparable to most public opinion surveys. Response rates for Gallup telephone surveys average about 7% (Marken 2018).

[16] The survey researchers created post-stratification weights with data on location, appointment authority, and agency using iterative proportional fitting, more commonly called raking (see Appendix C of the Supplementary Material).

congressional committees are exerting a good bit or a great deal of effort. Notably, there is significant variation across the executive establishment. For example, the average response in the International Trade Administration is 0.81 (Min 0; Max 4) compared with 3.51 in the Farm Service Agency. Nevertheless, these descriptive data reinforce the idea that the White House exerts little effort overall.

Our expectation is that the same factors that influence presidential priorities in nominations will be reflected in perceptions of White House investment. We use the same measures of key independent variables for presidential priority (28%),[17] agency ideology,[18] and agency workforce skills as we did in the nominations analysis. We also include agency- and individual-level controls appropriate for analysis of survey data. We include binary indicators for whether the respondent works in an agency in the Executive Office of the President (2%), part of an executive department (78%), or an independent commission (8%). The base category is a respondent working in an executive agency that is not a cabinet department. In some specifications, we also include fixed effects for the executive departments.

Respondents also have individual characteristics that could affect access to the White House and perceptions about the president's efforts. We include an indicator for whether the respondent is a political appointee (9%). We also measure party identification as a continuous variable (Mean 0.74; [0] Democrat: 47%; [1] Independent: 35%; [2] Republican: 18%). Our expectation is that appointees and Republicans are more likely to report White House support for the agency because the survey was fielded during a Republican administration.[19] As the respondent's position and years of experience may shape their perception of White House effort, we also include controls for scope of responsibility for agency management and years of experience. We measure scope of responsibility with a question from the survey that asks respondents whether they "deal directly with decisions" regarding eight different managerial responsibilities.[20] We count the number of "yes" answers to these

questions and assume that respondents with more responsibility will have a greater understanding of the role of the White House (Mean 3.36; SD 1.75; Min 0; Max 7). To measure experience, we include responses to a question asking respondents "how many years, in total, have you been employed" in federal government (Mean 22.95; SD 10.94; Min 0; Max 50).

Given the data structure, we estimate different types of models.[21] First, given the data are ordered and categorical, we estimate ordered logit models. Second, given that the variation of interest is at the agency level, we also estimate models on average agency responses. We report robust standard errors adjusted for clustering on workplace. We have also estimated models excluding political appointee respondents given their uneven distribution across the sample, models only on executive agencies (i.e., agencies with direct hierarchical control), and models with random intercepts at the department level to account for the hierarchical nature of the survey data. These results are consistent with what we report here (see Appendix E of the Supplementary Material).

We include the main model estimates in Table 3. The estimates complement the results from the analysis of presidential nominations. The effect of *Presidential Priority* depends partly on whether the agency shares the president's views about policy. As suggested by the results above, the estimates reveal robust relationships between agency ideology and presidential efforts to build capacity. We cannot reject the null that *Agency Skills* has no influence on presidential investment choices. Thus, the estimates suggest that presidents are strategic in their investments, although not necessarily attentive to the existing capacity of agencies when making their choices.

As a face validity check, we note that the estimates suggest that presidents invest more effort in building the capacity of EOP agencies and agencies giving out grants. They invest less effort in independent commissions. Model estimates suggest that respondents in the EOP are about 14 percentage points more likely to report "a good bit" or "great deal" of White House effort to make sure that their agencies had what they need to carry out their mission. Respondents in grant-giving agencies are about 5 percentage points more likely to report presidential investment. Respondents in independent commissions, however, are estimated to be about 11 percentage points less likely to provide such responses. Appointees, Republicans, and those with the greatest responsibilities perceive the most White House effort. Appointees are close to 18 percentage points more likely to report this level of support from the White House and Republicans by 15 percentage points. Each additional managerial responsibility

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[17] Respondents working in the Office of the Secretary in one of the executive departments were also coded with a 1 if their department or a subcomponent carried out a policy listed in the President's document.

[18] Since we have only one administration, there is no need to recode the original measure of agency ideology from Richardson, Clinton, and Lewis (2018). Therefore, in this analysis, a negative value for *Agency Ideology* represents an ideologically distant agency and a positive value represents an ideologically closer agency.

[19] We have also estimated models controlling for the respondent's self-reported ideology on a 7-point scale and the results are similar.

[20] The responsibilities included in the question are: (1) Information management (e.g., Information Technology and Database Management); (2) Grants to state or local governments, other organizations, or individuals; (3) Deciding what enforcement responsibilities to prioritize; (4) Human resources; (5) Budget formulation/proposals; (6) Setting overall priorities in [your agency]; (7) Procurement and contract management; and (8) Developing Notices of Proposed Rulemaking, summarizing related comments, and writing final rules.

[21] In addition, we note that the scale may be censored since it does not provide a way for federal executives to report that the White House was doing less than nothing to ensure the agency had what it needs to fulfill its core mission (i.e., actively working against the agency). While there does not appear to be any clustering of responses in the end categories, Tobit models confirm the results in Table 3 (see Appendix D of the Supplementary Material).

TABLE 3.   Models of Federal Executive Responses to Question, "How Much Effort Do the Following Groups [White House] Spend to Ensure that [Your Agency] Has What It Needs to Carry Out Its Mission?" (2020)

	Dependent variable					
	Individual-level response				Agency-average response	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Hypothesized relationships						
Priority (0,1)	0.15	0.25	0.38	0.20†	−0.03	0.15
Agency ideology (L-C)	0.47	0.15*	0.70	0.17*	0.28	0.09*
Priority × agency ideology	0.27	0.22	0.38	0.20†	0.23	0.12†
Agency skills (low to high)	0.07	0.12	0.13	0.14	−0.05	0.09
Agency-level controls						
Executive Office of the President (0,1)	0.66	0.35†	0.86	0.51†	0.44	0.18*
Executive department						
Office of the Secretary (0,1)	−0.28	0.35	−0.64	0.49	0.04	0.22
Distinct Bureau (0,1)	−0.72	0.25*	−1.21	0.28*	−0.45	0.12*
Independent commission (0,1)	−0.68	0.41†	−0.71	0.50	−0.41	0.21*
Agency-giving grants (0,1)	0.43	0.22†	0.39	0.25	0.29	0.12*
Individual-level controls						
Appointee (0,1)	1.35	0.36*	1.44	0.36*	0.39	0.53
Party ID (D, I, R)	0.59	0.11*	0.58	0.11*	0.44	0.15*
Scope of responsibility (0–7)	0.08	0.04†	0.09	0.05†	0.04	0.07
Years of government experience	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	−0.00	0.01
Constant					1.21	0.38*
Estimator	Logit		Logit		OLS	
Unit of analysis	Individual		Individual		Agency	
Department-level fixed effects	No		Yes		No	
Sampling weights	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Wald test for interaction (1 df)	1.56		3.52†		3.37†	
N	866		866		140	
No. of groups	143		143		140	
Wald test, F-test (13, 28, 14 df)	91.17*		245.12*		4.82*	

Note: *Significant at the 0.05 level; †significant at the 0.10 level in two-tailed tests. Response categories: none (0), little (1), some (2), a good bit (3), and a great deal (4). All models are estimated with robust standard errors adjusted for clustering on agency. Cut-point estimates are omitted. Model 3 includes an analysis where weighted agency averages are the unit of analysis. These models include both a control for the number of observations that make up the average (coef. 0.006, SE 0.003) and weights by the number of observations. *Source*: 2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service. Full model estimates are available in Table E1 in Appendix E of the Supplementary Material.

is estimated to increase the probability that a respondent gives a "good bit" or "great deal" response by 1 percentage point.

While executives in the departments dealing with the military and veterans reported more presidential involvement, other agencies implementing policies related to presidential priorities did not do so as consistently. Indeed, respondents working in agencies that were presidential priorities reported increased White House support only if the agency was sufficiently conservative (Figure 2). The effect of priority was different for liberal and conservative agencies. If an agency had a reputation for being conservative, implementing a policy that was a presidential priority was estimated to *increase* the perception of presidential investment. By contrast, presidential priority *decreased* perceptions of White House investment for respondents in the most liberal agencies.

This is seen most clearly in Figure 2, which graphs the estimated impact of agency ideology and priority. Federal executives in a high-priority liberal agency (e.g., USAID) are estimated to report about 0.10 *less* White House support than executives in liberal agencies that are not a priority for the president (e.g., Wage and Hour Division). By contrast, an executive in a high-priority conservative agency (e.g., Navy) is estimated to report about 0.60 more White House support on average than a respondent in a conservative agency that is a lower priority for the president (e.g., National Nuclear Security Administration). The interaction of presidential priority and ideology highlights the fact that just because something is a priority of the president does not mean the president wants to build capacity. In some cases, as with President Trump and the Environmental Protection Agency, an agency being a presidential priority meant less support for capacity building rather than more.

FIGURE 2.   Predicted Effect of Agency Ideology and Priority (2020)
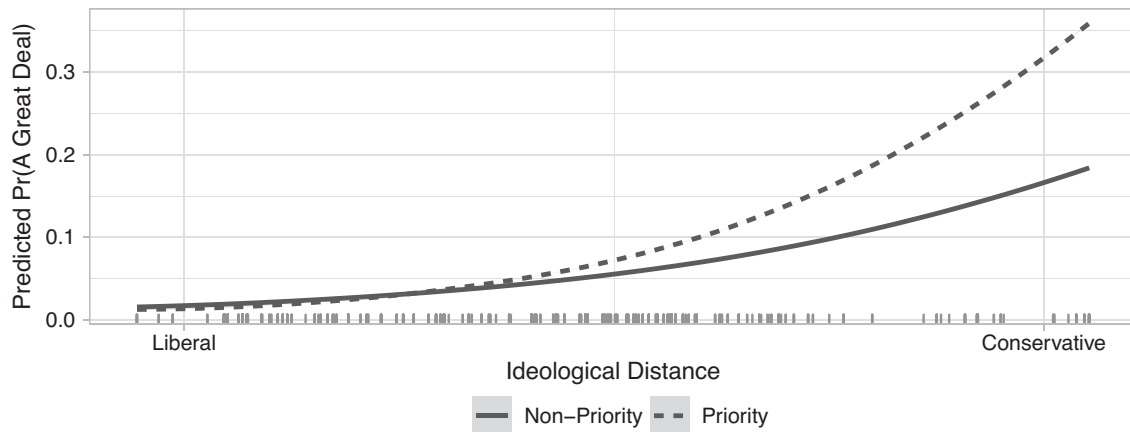
Note: This figure uses coefficient estimates from Model 2 of Table 3 to generate predicted probabilities. Predicted probabilities calculated with all variables are set to mean value.

Our expectation was that presidents' investment choices would be influenced by the overall capacity of the agency when the president assumed office. We find no relationship between *Agency Skill* and White House effort. The coefficient estimates are consistently near 0 and estimated imprecisely. The estimates suggest that investment choices are driven more by political considerations than elite perceptions of workforce capacity. This finding also raises the question of how much the White House itself knows about which agencies are working well or poorly given the poor quality of data on performance and workforce skill collected by the U.S. government (Resh et al. 2021).

Overall, the survey data suggest that the White House is doing very little investing overall. Where they invest depends on the policy views of the agencies and whether the agency is a presidential priority. The impact of getting on the president's agenda, however, differs depending on the ideology of the agency.

DISCUSSION

In the past century, the United States, like other modern democracies, has created an immense administrative state to deliver benefits to the elderly and the poor, mitigate natural hazards, and protect American citizens from national security risks. Managing these programs requires effective leaders, sufficient budgets, and efficient organizations. Presidents are the natural choice to build capacity across the agencies of the administrative state. Overall, however, we find little evidence that presidents spend significant time investing in capacity.

Our empirical analysis suggests that when U.S. presidents do invest, they try to build capacity in the agencies with the greatest chance of contributing to presidents' electoral and legacy goals. Presidents prioritize nominations for policymaking over management positions, suggesting that concerns about substantive policymaking influence presidential

behavior more than general management of the administrative state. Additionally, we observe that presidents nominate individuals sooner in agencies that implement policies related to presidential priorities and in agencies that share presidents' ideological preferences. Federal executives report similar beliefs about where presidents invest time in building capacity. Executives in agencies related to presidential priorities and those in agencies ideologically closer to the president report higher levels of investment. Both sets of findings are consistent with our description of how presidents strategically build capacity when these investments advance their own interests.

Our findings have significant implications for our understanding of the presidency and the bureaucracy. Existing theories predict that presidents broadly care about the health of the administrative state (Moe 1990) or make investments based primarily on ideological considerations (Durant 1992; Herd and Moynihan 2019; Richardson 2019). Our findings challenge these theories by asserting an alternative: Neglect—not investment—is the norm. Of course, certain elements of the previous theories remain. Presidents want to avoid public failures (Malhotra and Kuo 2008) and ideological incentives *do* play a role in whether they exert effort to build capacity within a particular agency (Benn 2019). However, most agencies receive no attention from the White House and, therefore, lack the capacity to implement the tasks entrusted to the executive branch by Congress.

One hopeful interpretation of these results is that presidents invest little time and effort because other actors are attentive to these concerns. For example, do presidents select appointees with an eye toward performance and charge them with securing the necessary capacity? Federal executives do report higher levels of investment from appointees, but the broken appointments process affects investments by these actors. If nominated and confirmed (a big if), appointees have sufficient opportunities to streamline

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processes and advocate for investments within their agencies. Yet we do not observe presidents appointing individuals to the management positions most capable of building capacity. Moreover, appointees prioritize presidential priorities, which are mostly policymaking in nature.

Between budgeting, oversight, and lawmaking, members of Congress have the greatest ability to build capacity (Metzger 2015). But polarization, slim majorities, and regular transitions have diminished the attention that members of Congress devote to capacity building (Lewis 2019). Even if individual members have incentives to build capacity, these members may lack the capacity or clout to advance those investments through the legislative process (Binder 2015; Lee 2015). Growing polarization further limits the ability of individual members to reach across the aisle and pass major structural reforms (Lee 2016).

Another interpretation of these results is that they only capture the Trump Presidency's efforts to "deconstruct the administrative state" because the survey was conducted at the end of the Trump Administration. If deconstruction was widespread and consequential in many agencies, we would expect to observe clustering of responses around a belief that the White House expends "no effort" to provide the agency with resources. We do not observe the type of clustering that would symptomize widespread deconstruction. Moreover, the nominations data test our theory in four administrations. The patterns in those data are consistent with presidential neglect of managerial concerns. Indeed, the nominations data reveal a clear preference for policy positions over management and quicker nominations to agencies implementing policies those presidents prefer.

Building capacity takes time. Investments of effort and attention today will not produce returns until some point in the future. This raises the question of how we should think about capacity investment in the shadow of the future (Benn 2019; Ting 2021). The answer to this question depends on our assumptions about what motivates presidents and what we mean by capacity. Presidents who only care about their own reelection have fewer incentives to build or deconstruct capacity when they are more likely to leave office. This means less investment later in a president's term and less investment in a second term. If presidents care about the future success of their own policies or preventing success for ideological opponents, then this question becomes more difficult to answer. A president wanting to ensure continued success of their own policy initiatives will want sufficient capacity to implement them now and in the future. The legacy of a president depends on their willingness to create lasting and meaningful policy change. The mass public would look less fondly on FDR if Social Security failed in the first year.

Presidents, however, may want to prevent future presidents from using capacity to expand regulations in the future. The decision to deconstruct depends on whether the next president will change policy in a way that the previous president does not like. For example,

Department of Justice lawyers hired to prosecute voter fraud cases may be shifted to challenging policies that limit access to the polls. Similarly, beefed up rulemaking teams can be used to push through new rules that increase or decrease regulation. Yet deconstruction hinders the ability of presidents to accomplish their own goals while in office. Therefore, it remains a tool most easily used by presidents who favor small government, low levels of regulatory enforcement, and the prevention of future regulations.

Theorizing about how successive presidents influence current investment strategies requires greater research. Asymmetric preferences for regulation versus deregulation may influence which presidents pursue deconstruction to hamstring successors (Benn 2019). Likewise, incentives to deconstruct may only extend to capacity related to policymaking (Bednar 2022). Empirical investigation of post-presidency influence on investments would be an exciting avenue for research.

CONCLUSION

As in many presidential systems, the U.S. Constitution vests presidents with the executive power, in part, to ensure that the bureaucracy has sufficient ability to implement programs created by elected officials. Yet our findings suggest that modern U.S. presidents devote little time and effort to building capacity within the administrative state and that many agencies are persistently neglected. Although presidents are the de facto managers of the administrative state, they do not approach governance from the perspective of public management. Instead, presidents regularly use these agencies to advance their own interests. Contrary to the hopes of voters and interest groups who advocate for these programs, agencies remain tools of electoral advancement—not program implementation. Occasionally, the fear of government failure may prompt presidents to invest in capacity. However, this is only one of the many factors influencing presidential investments.

Normatively, the lack of investment raises questions about the role of government and representation. A traditional justification of the state concerns its ability to resolve collective action problems and mitigate harms facing the public. Legislatures and presidents may appease interest groups and the voting public by creating programs that target their concerns, but the passage of these policies is merely symbolic if the implementing agency lacks the capacity to achieve the desired outcomes. Although the existence of a program may create the appearance of protection from a particular harm, neglect and decay within the agency may hinder its implementation in the event of a disaster. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has recently revealed the cracks in national public health agencies. If presidents invest effort into policymaking but not into building the capacity needed to implement these policies, then we may question who presidents truly represent.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000114.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the APSR Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7190/DVN/EAHO3I. Limitations on data availability for the Survey on the Future of Government Service are discussed in the Supplementary Material.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by Georgetown University (Certificate No. 00002441) and Princeton University (Certificate No. 12939). The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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