ARTICLE

The Very Best People: President Trump and the Management of Executive Personnel

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To his supporters, one very attractive feature of Donald Trump's candidacy was his prior experience as a business executive. Trump promised that he would run America like a business and would select the very best people. In this article, we evaluate President Trump's approach to managing the executive branch by scrutinizing his approach to personnel. We reference two sources of important new data. We first examine data on nominations to all Senate-confirmed positions during the last three presidencies. We also use data from the 2007, 2014, and 2020 (preliminary) Surveys on the Future of Government Service, surveys of thousands of appointed and career federal executives, to determine whether the president selected the very best people. We conclude by using the survey data to evaluate whether the president's approach led to effective management. A close look at the new data reveals that the president has been slow to nominate officials to key positions. Federal executives rate the persons the president has appointed as less competent than appointees from the Bush administration or civil servants from the current one. The survey data also reveal that the president's approach has done nothing to arrest the decline in the capacity of the public service. We conclude by discussing the implications of the Trump presidency for our traditional understanding of the president as chief executive. Specifically, we discuss whether we should reevaluate common beliefs about presidents caring inherently about the management of the executive.

Keywords: bureaucracy, executive branch, personnel, president, survey

Among his supporters, one very attractive feature of Donald Trump's candidacy was his prior experience as a business executive. Trump promised that he would run America like a business and would select the very best people (Bump 2016). This pledge resonated with many voters (Associated Press 2016). The president's approach to personnel after assuming office stunned

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both his supporters and critics, however. The president left many positions vacant and oversaw the highest turnover in key positions of any modern president (Tenpas 2018; 2020). One critic, reflecting on the president's management, called him "profoundly incompetent," and others weighed in with similar reactions (Boot 2020; Chapman 2017). The president defended his approach in a number of different ways. He blamed Democratic senators for obstruction (Nelson 2017). He suggested that the vacancies and turnover did not matter since he was the decider (Chappell 2017). He also suggested that he preferred positions filled by acting officials since such an approach provides the president with flexibility (Gajanan 2019).

The back-and-forth between the president and his critics raises the more general question of how President Trump approached his job as chief executive. Did he select the very best people and try to get them in place quickly to deliver the kind of results he promised during his campaign? These are important issues since the consequences of failure in the executive can be large for the presidency and for the American public as a whole. Indeed, the administration's response to the 2020 pandemic was rife with internal bickering and delayed testing and response. More than 350,000 souls lost is a painful reminder of what is at stake. There is a long tradition in political science arguing that presidents, due to their position and national constituency, have strong incentives to care about the leadership and management of the executive branch. Yet, President Trump's critics charge that the president neglected his role as chief executive.

What does a careful analysis of his presidency reveal? In this article, we evaluate the president's approach to leadership and the executive by scrutinizing his approach to personnel. We reference two sources of important new data. We first examine data on nominations to all Senate-confirmed positions during the last three presidencies in order to evaluate whether President Trump neglected management relative to other concerns. We also use it to determine whether the slow pace of appointments was due to Senate obstruction, as the president claimed. We then use preliminary data from the 2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service and data on past presidencies from the 2007 and 2014 Surveys on the Future of Government Service, surveys of thousands of appointed and career federal executives, to determine whether the president selected the very best people. We conclude by using the survey data to evaluate whether the president's approach led to effective management.

The data reveal that the president has been slower to nominate officials to key positions than the two most recent administrations, indicating that effective management of the executive branch has not been one of his priorities. Moreover, federal executives rate the persons the president has selected as less competent than appointees from the Bush administration or civil servants from the current one. The president's approach has done nothing to arrest the decline in the capacity of the public service. After discussing these results, we conclude by discussing the implications of the Trump presidency for our traditional understanding of the president as chief executive.

Presidents and Management

There is a long tradition in political science arguing that presidents, due to their position and national constituency, have strong incentives to care about the leadership

and management of the executive branch (see, e.g., Lewis 2003; Moe 1989; Waterman 1989). For good reason. Article II of the Constitution vests the executive power in the president and obligates the president to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed" (U.S. Constitution, Article II, section 3). The president has additional constitutional roles that suggest management responsibilities, including the authority to nominate principal officers. If the job of chief executive means anything, it means effectively directing the activities of the agencies so that laws enacted by Congress and the president are implemented.

Of course, scholars disagree about how much the job of managing the executive is shared with Congress and the courts (Fowler 2015; Jones 1994; Neustadt 1960). Congress, after all, creates and funds all programs and agencies. The Senate approves all high-level appointments. The legislature, not the president, has the power to raise and support armies. And, the Constitution provides Congress with significant power to investigate and oversee agencies and even to impeach civil officers. The courts retain the right to review agency actions for conformity with the Constitution and the laws, and regularly mandates significant changes to agency policies and practices. As presidential scholar Richard Neustadt (1960, 33) famously said, the Constitution sets up a system of separate institutions *sharing* powers. All three branches have a role and an interest in making sure the departments and agencies of government perform well.

Nonetheless, it is presidents who are most clearly held accountable for that branch (see, e.g., Arnold 1998; Lowi 1985; Moe 1989; Waterman 1989; Waterman et al. 2014). This sense of public accountability drives presidents to make the departments and agencies of government function effectively—to direct their programs, resolve conflicts, and secure resources. Our electoral system reinforces this sense of responsibility. Presidents, unlike members of Congress, represent the entire country and are held accountable for all of its issues (Canes-Wrone et al. 2008; Lewis 2003; Moe and Howell 1999; see, however, Hudak 2014; Kriner and Reeves 2015). When some social problem goes unaddressed or there is a systemic failure, voters naturally look to the president. For the last 40 years, scholars have argued that these institutional and electoral incentives work together to shape presidential behavior. Presidents, these scholars have argued, should care deeply about effective agencies and programs because they will be held accountable for their performance (see, e.g., Arnold 1998; Lewis 2003).

This characterization of presidents' incentives and behavior may be true. Nonetheless, and despite the practice of past presidents and the hopes of President Trump's supporters, he has largely neglected his responsibility to lead the executive branch. He has assumed a posture as president but not chief executive (Bernhard et al. 2018; for a discussion of continuity, see, however, Potter et al. 2019; Thrower 2018). While still trying to take credit from time to time for what the bureaucracy has done right, the president has largely distanced himself from the executive, even those officials he selected. He has referred to the departments and agencies of government as the "deep state" and inveighed against their supposed efforts to thwart his agenda. When the president has met resistance in the executive, his response has been to publicly criticize and remove those officials (Dawsey et al. 2020; Sanger and Schmitt 2020). When an agency fails or some social problem goes unaddressed, the president is quick to dissociate himself from the failure, as if he, like a

private citizen, had no responsibility for the actions of government workers (McManus 2020; Oprysko 2020; Shear 2020).

Why Would President Trump Neglect the Executive Branch?

There are a number of different explanations for why the president would take this posture toward the management of the executive establishment—ideological, populist, and institutional. When President Trump's domestic policy advisor Stephen Bannon articulated the president's goal of "deconstructing the administrative state" in 2017, he was echoing long-standing conservative concerns with the actions of federal departments and agencies (French 2017; Metzger 2017; Michaels 2017). Conservatives, at least since the 1970s, and probably back to the 1920s, have expressed concerns about administrative policy making, specifically government regulations (Teles 2012). In this view, bureaucrats empowered with vague statutory mandates from Congress are promulgating rules that infringe on the rights of individuals and groups in violation of the Constitution and good policy (see, e.g., Reuter and Yoo 2016). Legal concerns about agency officials promulgating regulations range from concerns about democratic accountability—that is, unelected officials are setting policy—to separation of powers concerns since Congress has given administrative officials the authority to "implement, interpret, and prescribe law." In addition, many administrative agencies also exercise some combination of legislative and judicial powers, which raises concerns under a strict vision of separation of powers. Along with legal concerns, conservatives prefer (and believe the Constitution imagines) a smaller and more limited national government, which they believe will better foster economic growth and individual flourishing.

Efforts to "deconstruct" the administrative state can occur through a variety of approaches. Conservatives seek to appoint judges with a skeptical eye toward legislative delegation and who oppose judicial deference to agency expertise. They want to appoint executive branch lawyers with similar beliefs about the administrative state (Teles 2009). Conservatives engage in political efforts to limit and eliminate regulations and reduce enforcement of existing regulations. Presidents from Richard Nixon forward have sought to centralize review of proposed regulations (and related activities), and subsequent administrations have imposed additional procedural requirements on new rules (Moe 1985; Potter 2019; Tomkin 1998; Yackee 2019). These efforts often coincide with an agnosticism or outright hostility toward the agencies, programs, and people that comprise the executive establishment. Conservatives see efforts to cut budgets, reduce enforcement, and eliminate personnel as pathways to lessening the reach of the administrative state.

For other scholars, the motivation to deconstruct the administrative state is straight from the populist playbook (Howell and Moe 2020; Rockman 2019). Populists, in an effort to represent their understanding of the people, attack all institutions that stand in their way, including the bureaucracy. Bannon noted that the administration had selected appointees with this goal in mind. In the early months of the administration, the president proposed dramatic cuts to agency budgets, particularly drastic reductions suggested for the State Department and Environmental Protection Agency (Thrush and Davenport

2017). The president issued executive orders that made it harder for agencies to promulgate new rules. He directed agencies to identify cumbersome regulations and make plans for substantial agency reorganizations and workforce reductions (Bernhard et al. 2018; Potter et al. 2019). The president's public statements were equally severe and dismissive of the permanent bureaucracy. Since that initial onslaught, the president has taken aggressive actions to limit the power of government unions, dismantle the government human resources agency, and dramatically expand the number of political appointees (Rein 2018; 2019; Rein et al. 2020).

Of course, the president's actions could also represent an institutional strategy for dealing with a profound problem confronted by all modern presidents. The bureaucracy is massive and a persistent source of bad news. The federal government spends more than $4.5 trillion and employs more than 2.8 million civilians scattered across 250–300 different agencies. These workers perform diverse and difficult tasks, from enforcing immigration law to environmental cleanup. There is no way for presidents to ensure that all of these agencies and programs are doing what the president wants and doing so effectively. Virtually all presidents preside over bureaucracy-related crises during their presidencies, whether a botched response to Hurricane Katrina, a massive oil spill in the Gulf, or a catastrophic pandemic (Light 2014). To make matters worse, media coverage of federal agencies tends to focus on the problems or scandals rather than day-to-day successes (Cohen 2008; Groeling and Kernell 1998). The news out of the executive is persistently bad and the outcomes, intentional or not, are invariably connected to the presidential administration since the president's appointees run these agencies (Lewis 2019).

The traditional responses of presidents, given the centrality of the bureaucracy to their presidency and the nation, have sought to get control of the administration through politicization, centralization, or, in the longer term, reform (Arnold 1998; Ingraham et al. 1995; Michaels 1997; Moe 1985; Resh 2015; Richardson 2018). Some have sought to use personnel to exert control over policy and management in the far-flung reaches of the administrative state (Edwards 2001; Golden 2000; Pfiffner 1996; Weko 1995). They have tried to insert loyal and competent personnel deep into the administrative structure to minimize bad outcomes. Others have tried to bypass agencies altogether and centralize control of management in the White House (Bolton et al. 2016; Hult and Walcott 2004; Vaughn and Villalobos 2015; Walcott and Hult 1995; Warshaw 1995). Presidents reason that, if they are going to be held accountable, they should at least have some measure of control. Some ultimately try to rework the machinery of government to demonstrate action and improve outcomes (Arnold 1998; Zegart 2005; 2007). President Bill Clinton sought to "reinvent government" and President George W. Bush implemented an aggressive management agenda based upon scorecards to measure performance and evaluate programs.

To varying degrees, Democratic and Republican presidents have responded similarly to institutional incentives and have sought to disassociate themselves from problems in the executive. Ronald Reagan famously stated, "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem" (Reagan 1981). During his presidency, Reagan tried to use his position as an outsider to remove civil service and union protections and reduce the size of the federal budget and workforce (Barr 2004). President Trump has publicly lambasted executive officials and agencies, referring to

them as part of the swamp or the deep state, purposefully distancing himself from the people and programs of the executive branch that he oversees. These kinds of claims are easier to make earlier in presidential terms because presidents can credibly claim to have not had a role in a preexisting problem. Presidents can sometimes use evidence of existing problems to justify presidential reform proposals.

Divining as single presidential motive—whether ideological, populist, or institutional—for neglecting the administrative state is difficult, but we can marshal data to evaluate the claim that management of the executive is neglected and to assess the quality of presidential appointees and agency workforces across administrations.

President Trump and Personnel

A complete assessment of President Trump's approach to management is an immense task. The relevant time period begins before the 2016 election, continues through the interregnum between election day and the inauguration, and follows through his 4 years in office. It would include details of his White House staff choices, his use of vacancies and acting officials, and his record levels of turnover. Amidst this complexity, we focus on three key questions. First, has the president neglected management in his approach to personnel? Second, has he selected the very best people, as he promised? Finally, what are the consequences of his choices?

Has the President Neglected Personnel?

One of the areas where outside observers criticized the president was in the area of nominations to Senate-confirmed positions. Critics charged that the president was exceptionally slow naming qualified persons to fill key executive branch positions and noted that such actions threatened the ability of those agencies to effectively implement government programs. Philip Elliott wrote in *Time* that the vast bureaucracy was "largely rudderless" in the summer of 2017 (Elliott 2017).[1] A *Politico* headline invited readers to understand "Trump's staffing struggle: After 3 years, unfilled jobs across the administration" (Cook 2020). While some critics focused on visible positions such as the Secretary of Homeland Security, others lamented the slow pace of nominations to positions focused specifically on management (Katz 2017).

At the start of a new administration, a new president inherits about 1,100 vacant Senate-confirmed positions in the executive branch. The previous administration's appointees depart en masse prior to inauguration day, and acting officials fill in agency leadership positions until the president succeeds in getting a nominee confirmed (Kinane n.d.; O'Connell 2008; 2017). Presidents begin the process of identifying key positions and candidates well before the election, traditionally focusing first on key White House

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1. Max Stier, the president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, lamented the slow pace of appointments in the president's first year and said he was "far behind what's necessary to run as effective government as possible" (Balhaus 2017).

TABLE 1
Positions Requiring Senate Confirmation, Vacancies, and Nominations: First 2 Years of Bush, Obama, and Trump Presidencies

President	Positions	Vacancies	Nominations	Pct. Nominated	Average Days
President Bush	1,358	1,093	835	76	384
President Obama	1,416	1,092	801	73	390
President Trump	1,317	1,132	723	64	466
Total	4,091	3,317	2,359	71	414

Note: These numbers do not include judgeships or positions automatically filled when other Senate-confirmed positions are filled. It excludes nominations to chair positions on multimember bodies that are distinct from nominations to these multimember bodies. Average days are calculated by assuming vacant positions received a nominee at the end of the president's second year.(Specifically, a vacant position is assumed to have been filled on January 20 two years after inauguration [i.e., 2003, 2011, and 2019] and is given a value of 730 days. This underestimates the actual average days to nomination since 24%–36% of vacant positions have no nominee at the end of the first 2 years).
Source: Plum Book 2000, 2008, and 2016; Congressional Research Service Report by Hogue (2003), Hogue et al. (2008), Davis and Greene (2017); nominations data from Congress.gov.

positions, the cabinet, and important national security and economic policy positions (Kumar 2015; Pfiffner 1996). Over time, the process of filling positions has gotten more cumbersome due to disagreements between presidents and opposition party members in the Senate.

How did President Trump do relative to other presidents? To answer this question, we collected data on all Senate-confirmed positions that were vacant on January 20, 2017. Using data from the Senate on Congress.gov, we tracked whether the president identified a nominee for each position, and if so, how long it took.[2] We tracked these positions for 2 years. We repeated this procedure for the Obama and Bush administrations and include these data in Table 1.

There are three patterns in Table 1 worth noting. First, the number of positions and vacancies has been relatively stable across the years. The number of vacancies at the start of these administrations varies by fewer than 40 positions, with President Barack Obama having the fewest and President Trump the most. We would expect the number of Senate-confirmed positions to be stable across time with small variations in vacancies because most are created in statute (creating stability) and some positions have fixed terms that are staggered, meaning the occupants do not leave with the outgoing administration (creating small variation in vacant positions available to incoming presidents).

Second, even after 2 years there are a large number of positions that still have not received their first nominee. When President Trump assumed office on January 20, 2017, for example, there were 1,317 Senate-confirmed positions and of these positions, 1,132

2. The basic data come from the 2016 U.S. government publication *Policy and Supporting Positions* (i.e., the Plum Book) and earlier editions of this publication. We supplemented the data from the Plum Book with information from a Congressional Research Service (CRS) publication that lists all Senate-confirmed positions by committee (Davis and Greene 2017; Davis and Mansfield 2012; Hogue 2003; Hogue et al. 2008). We also supplemented these data with information from Congress.gov, which included some Senate-confirmed positions included in neither the Plum Book nor CRS publications.

were vacant. Over the course of 2 years, the president nominated persons for 723 of the 1,132 positions, or 64%. This means that 36% of positions still did not have a *nominee* 2 years later. This does not account for the fact that many of the initial nominees were not *confirmed*. About 20% of the nominations were withdrawn or returned to the president, meaning the actual success in filling positions was lower than the numbers suggest.

Finally, Table 1 reveals that President Trump has been the slowest of the three most recent presidents to nominate persons for executive positions. If we assume generously that all vacant positions got a nominee on the first day of his third year in office, the average number of days it took him to name a candidate was 466 days, compared to 384 and 390 days for Presidents Bush and Obama, respectively. If we look just at those positions that received nominees during the first 2 years, President Trump took an average of 316 days to send a nominee to the Senate, compared to 277 and 266 days, respectively, for Presidents Bush and Obama. The implications of these delays for management are troubling. Agencies without confirmed leaders must be governed by a series of acting officials, either career professionals or other appointees moved into these jobs on a temporary basis. Acting officials have a number of disadvantages for management. Notably, short-timers have fewer incentives and less ability to do long-term planning, drive change, or effectively engage in interagency work. Temporary officials lack the standing and relationships with key stakeholders necessary to secure resources and cooperation for program implementation.

During his term, President Trump provided a number of explanations for the slow pace of appointments. One common refrain was that the Senate was obstructing the president. President Trump tweeted, "Dems are taking forever to approve my people, including Ambassadors" and "They are nothing but OBSTRUCTIONISTS! Want approvals" (Faulders 2018). Indeed, the evidence suggests that the Senate is taking longer and longer to confirm presidential nominees (Ba and Sullivan 2019; Everett and Levine 2020). Yet, the evidence from Table 1 indicates that the president is also taking longer to send nominations to the Senate. Comparing time to nomination shows that President Trump was less effective at getting his nominations to the Senate, which ensures that agency will be without Senate-confirmed leadership regardless of the speed of Senate confirmations.

If President Trump and his team were focused on getting his appointees in place, two legislative changes during the Obama administration could have helped him get them in place quickly. We can leverage these changes in appointment process to help us determine whether the problem is presidential neglect or Senate obstruction.

Expediting Confirmation: Senate Resolution 116. On June 29, 2011, the Senate passed Senate Resolution 116, which created an expedited process for specified appointed positions.[3] This process would apply to some management and legislative affairs positions and

3. According to Davis and Greene (2017), the resolution allowed these nominations to go straight to the Senate Executive Calendar under a new heading, "Privileged Nominations—Information Requested." The Senate dictated that qualifying positions would stay in this category until the chair of the committee with jurisdiction informed the clerk that the "appropriate biographical and financial questionnaires have been received." The nomination is then moved to "Privileged Nominations—Information Received" for 10 days of a Senate session, at which point it is moved to the nominations section of the Senate Executive Calendar. Senators reserved the right to direct any of the nominees to the committee of jurisdiction during the first two stages.

TABLE 2
Did Expedited Senate Procedures Help? Positions Given Expedited Confirmation Processes

	Positions	Vacancies	Nominated	Pct. Nominated	Avg. Days
Without S. Res. 116 Procedure (2009)	269	160	75	47	537
With S. Res. 116 Procedure (2017)	278	222	60	28	630

Note: Senate Resolution 116 of June 29, 2011, provided for expedited Senate consideration of nomination for specified Senate-confirmed positions. This table compares positions covered by S. Res. 116 before and after its adoption. It calculates the percentage nominated and days nominated for 2 years after inauguration day.

positions on minor boards and commissions. The new process made it easier for presidents to get noncontroversial nominees approved by the Senate. Given that the resolution applied to some positions and not others, we can compare how quickly presidents nominated persons to the same positions before and after the Senate change. If President Trump was quicker to advance nominees granted expedited review, this would suggest a president attuned to getting the "right" people in place to manage federal agencies. If, however, President Trump was no quicker, this suggests that delays were due to presidential neglect.

Table 2 includes details about these positions before and after the passage of the resolution. During the Obama administration, there were 269 positions that would ultimately be affected by the Senate's change in procedure. Of these, 160 were vacant on inauguration day. The remainder were positions with fixed terms. After 2 years, President Obama had nominated people for 75 of these positions (under the old rules). When President Trump took office in 2017, he had the benefit of the expedited process for these same positions. There were 278 positions and 222 vacancies. He nominated candidates to 60 of these positions. President Trump did not propose candidates for these positions in larger numbers or more quickly to take advantage of the expedited Senate process. He actually nominated *fewer* candidates and took *longer* to try to fill these positions even though the Senate procedure was streamlined. This suggests that Senate obstruction was not the cause of President Trump's slow pace of appointments.

Eliminating Confirmation Requirements. In 2012, Congress took a step further and removed Senate confirmation requirements for 170 positions. Among the positions no longer requiring Senate confirmation were management positions like the Assistant Secretaries of Administration in the Departments of Agriculture, Education, and Transportation. The act also removed confirmation requirements for positions such as the Treasurer of the United States and the Commissioner of Education Statistics. Appointments to boards like the National Council on Disability and the National Science Board also no longer required Senate confirmation. After the enactment of the Presidential Appointment Efficiency and Streamlining Act of 2011 (enacted on August 10, 2012), presidents could name appointees to the positions included in the act without Senate approval.

With confirmation requirements removed, how did the president do? Table 3 includes details of these positions before and after the 2012 act. At the start of the Obama

TABLE 3
Did Removing Senate Confirmation Help? Positions with Confirmation Requirement Removed

	Positions	Vacancies	Nominated/ Appointed	Pct. Nominated/ Appointed	Avg. Days
Positions w/Confirmation (2009)	171	97	35	36	305
Positions w/o Confirmation (2017)	140	87	33	38	323

Note: The Presidential Appointment Efficiency and Streamlining Act of 2011 stripped Senate confirmation requirements for specified Senate-confirmed positions. This table compares *nomination* to these positions before the act with *appointment* after the act (since nomination and confirmation no longer required). It calculates the percentage nominated and days nominated for 1 year after inauguration day.

presidency, there were 171 positions that would later have confirmation requirements removed, and 97 of these were vacant. President Obama nominated 35 persons to these 97 positions during his first year. If we assume all positions that did not get a nominee in the first year would have on day 1 of his second year, the average days to nominate someone for one of these positions was 305 days, well into November. At the start of the Trump administration, there were 140 positions (some had been eliminated). Of these positions, there were 87 vacancies and the president appointed 33 people to these vacant positions. He took an average of 323 days to get his people in place. Removing the confirmation requirement did *not* speed up the president's process. After 2012, the president was free to name candidates of their choosing to these jobs. If the pace of selection did not change, this suggests that the source of the delay was in the White House rather than Congress.

Overall, President Trump took longer to make nominations to Senate-confirmed positions than President Obama or President Bush. The evidence suggests that Senate obstructionism was not the cause of the slow pace of appointments, at least not the sole cause and at least not at the start of the administration.[4] This evidence is also consistent with assessments of the quality of management in the Trump administration using other metrics, namely, that the president has had record high turnover in appointed positions and has had more acting officials than presidents before him (Tenpas 2020). While the existing literature on the presidency and American politics suggests that presidents care about management and the effective functioning of the administrative state, the evidence from personnel and nominations suggests that this concern may take a back seat to politics and policy.

Has the President Selected the Best People?

One of the president's claims was that he would select the very best people to run the executive branch. Perhaps despite nominating fewer appointees and doing so slowly, the appointees he did select would be of higher quality than previous presidents. This claim is undercut by his own criticism of appointees he selected, such as Attorney General

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4. The evidence here focuses on the presidents' choices at the start of their administrations. It is possible that Senate obstructionism becomes more important for later decisions on nominations, more out of the public eye.

Jeff Sessions or Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Since it is hard to generalize from a few cases and perceptions what constitutes "the best people" and this differs depending upon who is doing the evaluating, we decided to take a more systematic look by relying on the opinions of federal executives working in government. Federal executives, many of whom work side by side with these appointees, have the access to appointees necessary to evaluate competence accurately. In both 2007 and 2020, we surveyed all high-level appointed and career federal executives, thousands in total.[5] We asked them a number of questions about their experiences working in the departments and agencies of the executive establishment. Importantly, we asked them the following question, "Now thinking about people, apart from yourself, who work in [your agency], how competent are the following [political appointees, senior civil servants, low- to mid-level civil servants, contract employees]?" They rated each group separately on a 1 to 5 scale.[6] Comparing the average responses of these executives from two Republican administrations can provide insight on whether President Trump selected the best people.

Figure 1 includes the weighted averages across the two presidencies, with the responses from 2020 in black and the responses from 2007 in gray. Three interesting features from the figure stand out. First, senior civil servants are rated the highest in both 2020 and 2007. Respondents rate senior civil servants an average of more than 4 out of 5, compared to other civil servants and contractors. Second, there has been a statistically discernible decline in reported competence across all types of workers, except contractors. Federal executives report a decline in the average competence of political appointees, senior civil servants, and low- to mid-level civil servants. This is a worrying trend and provides evidence for a number of scholars writing about the breakdown of the administrative state (see, e.g., DiIulio 2014; Fukuyama 2014; Light 2008; Verkuil 2017). Finally, the decline in perceived competence is largest for political appointees—about 0.4 of a point on a 5-point scale. This is a substantial decline in an average across thousands of respondents. The implication of these simple topline results is that President Trump did not pick the very best people, at least not relative to earlier Republican appointees.[7]

Consequences for Management

A 2020 opinion piece in the *Washington Post* declared, "Dismantling the federal bureaucracy has left us all vulnerable to ovid-19" (Arcadi and Eilbert 2020). The piece draws

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5. We sent the Survey on the Future of Government Service to all federal executives (as listed in the Federal Yellow Book), including Senate-confirmed appointees, members of the Senior Executive Service, Schedule C appointees, and other high-level career employees who ran programs or offices. For details of the 2007 and 2020 surveys, see the Survey on the Future of Government Service website (sfgs.princeton.edu) and mrichardson.info.

6. In each year, the end points of the scale were labeled "Not at all competent" and "Extremely competent." The range of the scale was 1 to 7 and 1 to 5 in 2007 and 2020, respectively. We mapped the 2007 scale onto the 1 to 5 interval using the following formula: $x_5 = (x_7 - 1)(4/6) + 1$, where the subscript gives the number of points on the scale. The 2007 scale allowed each integer to be selected. The 2020 scale was continuous.

7. We focus in this symposium piece on the simple topline results. A fuller analysis would require controlling for differences in respondents and other potential confounders.
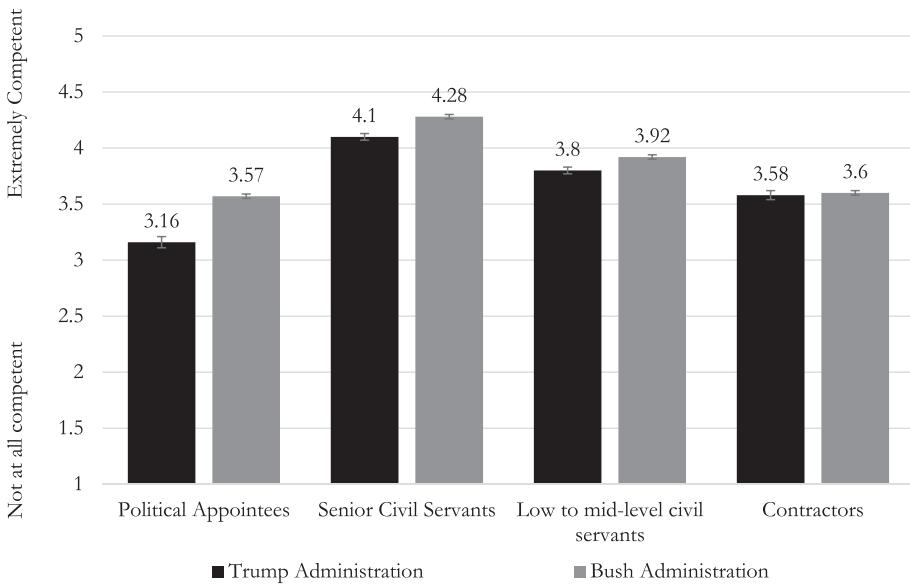
FIGURE 1. Now Thinking about People, Apart from Yourself, Who Work in {Your Agency}, How Competent Are the Following?

Source: 2020 Survey on the Future of Government Service: $N_{appointees} = 866, N_{senior} = 981, N_{low-to-mid} = 981, N_{contractor} = 811$; 2007 Survey on the Future of Government Service: $N_{appointees} = 1,796, N_{senior} = 1,904, N_{low-to-mid} = 1,906, N_{contractor} = 1,514$.

a connection between the president's management strategy and the nation's success combatting the deadly pandemic that defined 2020. Did the president's slow pace of appointments and unconventional approach to personnel influence the capacity of the departments and agencies more generally? Data from the 2020 survey can help us evaluate whether the capacity of federal agencies has improved since President Trump took office. Included in the 2020 survey and a previous version in 2014 was a question asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "An inadequately skilled workforce is a significant obstacle to [my agency] fulfilling its core mission." We also asked: "Does [your agency] have the skills necessary to implement effectively the core tasks given it by Congress and the president [none, few, some, most, almost all, all, do not know]?" The questions attempt to measure in different ways whether the federal workforce has the capacity to implement the core missions given them by Congress and the president.

Figure 2 includes the percentage of federal executives who agreed or strongly agreed that an inadequately skilled workforce is a significant obstacle to their agency fulfilling its core mission, with the results from 2014 on the right and 2020 on the left. It is notable that in 2014, almost 40% of federal executives agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that an inadequately skilled workforce was a significant obstacle to their agency fulfilling its core mission. This 2014 result is high and was a source of some concern when we released those results in 2015.

More notable in the figure is the 20+ percentage point increase in respondents agreeing with this statement in the summer of 2020. More than 60% of respondents
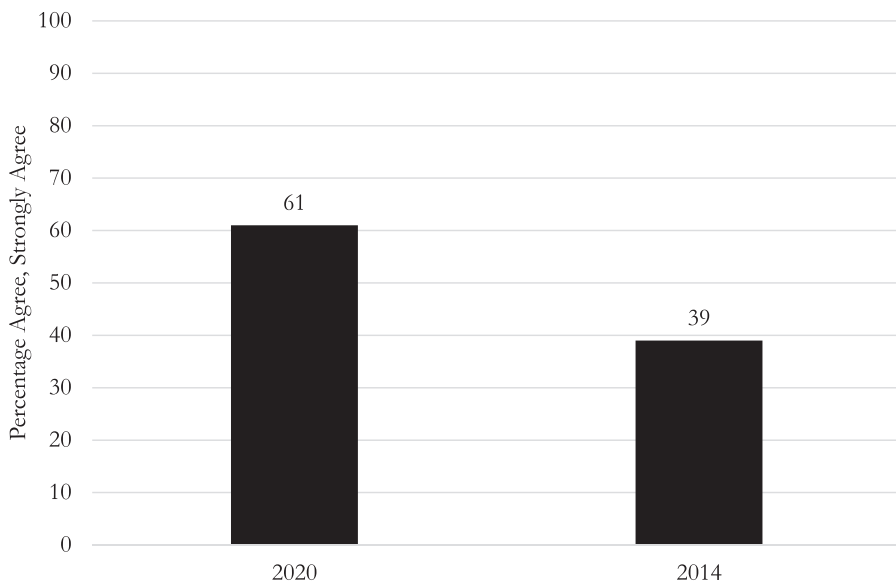
FIGURE 2. An Inadequately Skilled Workforce Is a Significant Obstacle to [My Agency] Fulfilling Its Core Mission.
Note: Survey on the Future of Government Service, 2020, 2014. MoE +/–6.16, 2.6, respectively.

agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that an inadequately skilled workforce was a significant obstacle. When we probe the qualitative comments[8] to further understand this change, respondents report concerns with the length of time it takes to hire and too few resources. One respondent wrote the following:

> Before this administration, our agency had problems that make work less efficient, but it had knowledgeable staff at all levels, people liked the agency and the leadership worked hard because they believed in the mission. The new leadership has "transformed" the organization (illegally in many ways), pushed highly competent people out by using RIFs (also illegal), hired inappropriately, and ruined trust between senior leadership and staff.

Another wrote:

> Most of the political appointees come with ideas and often have no regard for the mission of the organization.… The administration places new missions without increasing your budget to meet the new demands. Agencies are forced to let civil service personnel go to make room for contractors to support their communities.

To be clear, some of the quantitative and qualitative news from the 2020 survey is positive. Survey respondents report that their work is meaningful, and a majority have regard for their agency's senior leaders and report satisfaction with their work and agency. Yet,

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8. These comments were offered in response to the question "What else should we know?"
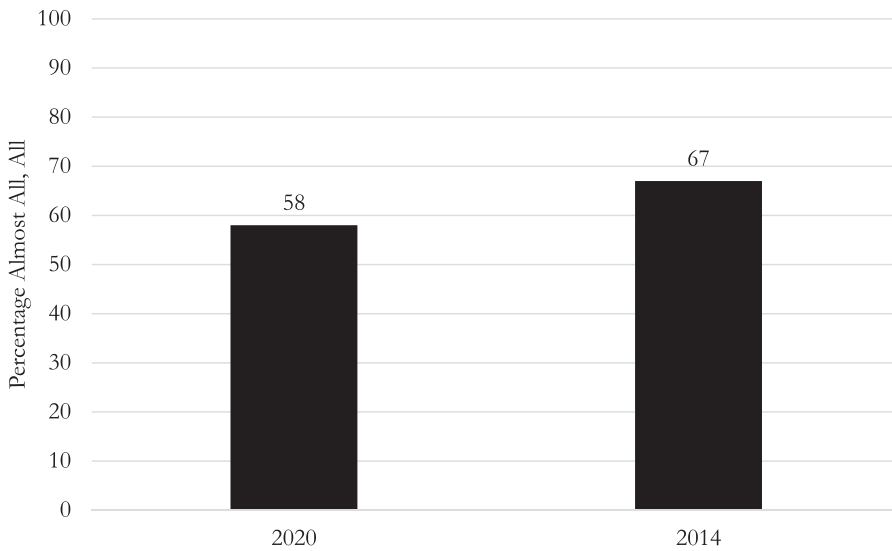
FIGURE 3. Does [Your Agency] Have the Skills Necessary to Implement Effectively the Core Tasks Given Them by Congress and the President?
Note: Survey on the Future of Government Service, 2020, 2014. *N* = 992 and 2,451. MoE +/–3.33, 2.6, respectively.

many are quite concerned about the ability of their agencies to fulfill core missions in the current environment.

In Figure 3, we present results from when we ask the question a different way, focusing on the extent to which skills match mission. In 2014, two-thirds of our respondents reported that they had *almost all* or *all* the skills necessary to implement core tasks. In 2020, this percentage dropped 9 percentage points. Only 58% of respondents could report that their agency had almost all or all the skills necessary to implement the core tasks given them by Congress and the president. The trend again is worrisome. It is hard to tell whether this decline is due to inattention or hostility to management, particularly in agencies whose mission the president opposes. Whatever the cause, the Trump administration has not arrested a decline in the competence of the federal workforce.

Overall, the evidence suggests that there were problems emerging in the administrative state prior to the Trump administration, but these problems have only worsened under his leadership. The president's neglect of appointments, large numbers of vacancies, and controversial nominees likely contributed to part of the problem. At minimum, the president did not arrest the decline in the capacity of the departments and agencies of government.[9]

9. Technically, we only observe two points in time—2014 and 2020. So we cannot say exactly when between these two points in time the decline in agency capacity suggested by the survey responses occurred. The preponderance of the evidence is that staff morale and agency capacity have declined during the Trump administration. Under the most generous (and likely incorrect) assumption that much of the decline occurred before the Trump administration began, the situation has not improved during the 3.5 years that President Trump has been in office.

Discussion and Conclusion

After the 2020 presidential election, President-elect Joseph Biden stood up his transition operation even while President Trump refused to concede. The president's most visible executive actions were to remove key officials from the defense, intelligence, and foreign policy apparatus and replace them with loyalists (Sanger and Schmitt 2020). The White House limited cooperation with the incoming administration and threatened to remove political appointees who showed any sign of disloyalty, including the disloyalty of looking for a job outside the administration.

Reports prior to the election suggested that the president was planning a significant overhaul of the federal personnel system. The president was considering major personnel changes among his appointee team, and prior to the election, the president had taken steps to make the civil service more responsive to his direction in a second term. On October 21, 2020, the president issued Executive Order 13957, which created a new class of political appointees. The order creates a Schedule F, which was to include all jobs of a "confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character" (85 FR 67635). The president's order asked agencies to identify positions to move into the new schedule. Once implemented, a president would be able to remove officials in the jobs in the new schedule and replace them with persons of the president's choosing. Estimates regarding the impact of the order varied depending upon how aggressively the president wanted to define "confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character," with some scholars suggesting a doubling of the number of political appointees to others predicting an effective end to the civil service altogether (Ogrysko 2020).

The president's actions immediately before and after the 2020 election highlight his nontraditional approach to personnel and the continuing professional administrative state. For President Trump, the most important aspect of his tenure is the responsiveness of officials to his direction. The "very best people" are those who do what the president wants. Officials who refuse to carry out the president's orders, whether due to commitments to the law or one of the other coequal branches of government, are in his view not "the very best people." In the president's pursuit of responsiveness, he believes he is fulfilling his promise to select the best people. Whether his voters, and ultimately Americans themselves, agree is another question. Indeed, the president has left positions vacant, he has selected appointees federal executives believe are not particularly competent, and the public service appears to be suffering as a result.

The Trump presidency calls into question the long-held belief that presidents care about the management and performance of the executive. Some scholars suggest that Trump was an aberration and attribute his actions to personal idiosyncrasies (Bernhard et al. 2018). Others suggest something more systematic in the president's approach, an effort to fulfill an ideological vision or pursue a populist agenda (Howell and Moe 2020). One other possibility is that the president developed a new institutional strategy for confronting the unmanageable executive branch—disassociating himself from his role as chief executive (Lewis 2019). The ultimate interpretation of the Trump presidency will depend in part on what comes next.

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